Notes from a Meeting with Larry Fruth, Executive Director, Schools Interoperability Framework, 10 August 2005, Washington, DC

Publisher's Note: Because of schedule, Mr. Fruth was unable to received these notes for accuracy.

Summary

- SIF membership is shifting from software suppliers to districts, schools, and state agencies.

- SIF is accommodating open source with a separate and less burdensome certification.

- Version 2 of the SIF specifications includes data processed by colleges and universities and included in software development (e.g. grade and grading representations).

- Actions by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice may affect—and likely expand—directory information at colleges and universities.

Background

Originally a project of the Software and Information Industry Association (SIIA), the "Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) is a non-profit membership organization comprised of over 100 [now 325] software vendors, school districts, state departments of education and other organizations active in primary and secondary (K-12) markets, who have come together to create a set of rules and definitions to enable software programs from different companies to share information." For the first time, SIF has more school and district members than software suppliers.

There are two "points of contact" with higher education: Electronic transcripts used in college and university admissions, and increasingly enrollment data for students enrolled in college courses in high school that provide credit both for high school graduation and for college graduation.

This meeting was originally scheduled for Bryan Williams, "lead" Moodle learning system partner. He was unable to attend. Jon Allen, instructional media + magic, attended. Because Moodle is increasingly being used in colleges and universities, Bryan Williams wanted Moodle to be able to support both SIF And PESC standards. Because Moodle is being integrated with uPortal, this requires support of both SIF and PESC data standards. The Sakai grade book also benefits if data representations are consistent with the SIF and PESC electronic transcripts.

Discussion

Software developers and standards – In my experience software developers will comply with standards if they know they exist; typically they are unaware of the standards. Larry said this was not an issue for SIF; in the beginning it was software vendors developing the standards and all of them did use the specifications. Recently some districts and schools have developed SIF-compliant software, some as open source. They follow SIF because it was recommended by the U.S. Department of Education and state departments or agencies, or, more recently, because SIF compliance is a state law (Oklahoma). The availability of district or school-developed software required SIF develop a certification program that could be accomplished with local resources.[1]

Membership interests – The original focus of SIF and still a major effort, is the development of specifications to achieve interoperability. Most of the representatives were software developers. Now the emphasis is on implementation of SIF-compliant software. SIF provides limited technical support for implementation to members. Because of these interests, the SIF conferences will have two separate tracks—developers and implementers.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security – The Department is participating in the NIEMS (National Information Exchange Model) project that would use and extend the GJXDM (Global Justice XML Data Model) to all of the U.S. government departments and agencies. Larry said he would be talking with the Department of Homeland Security about this tomorrow. Based on early interest, it is likely NIEMS will require major extensions to campus directory information in order to comply with federal requirements. Although Education is not listed as a NIEMS collaboration, likely the U.S. Department of Education would be required to comply with any NIEM specification.[2] In any case it would apply to foreign student reporting. Larry will share his conversation with us.

Electronic Transcripts – Recent press releases from companies suggest (1) there are many different transcript specifications and a method of converting transcripts from one format to another is needed, (2) exchanges of data requires encryption, and (3) exchanges of messages require logging with real-time access to the logs. One company proposes a central data "convert-store-forward" approach similar to those found in early EDI efforts. We discussed the implementation of WS-Security to meet these needs. WS-Security was recommended at the June WSRP Implementation Roundtable.

Further Actions

The transcript specifications of SIF Version 2.0 will be provided to the Sakai and uPortal developers when available.

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[1] This "certifies" the software to meet state regulations; this certification is not sufficient to sell the software as "SIF Certified."

[2] This would be a departure from the past, but reflects the new power structure in the Federal government. The U.S. Department of Education has been developing its data models under an exception from NIST standards for about a decade.

Information about the NIEMS project will be shared.