The Voice of the VENDORS:

Futures in School Library Automation, Part 1

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SINCE I'm always interested in new and forthcoming technology to share with my university students, I was delighted to be asked to visit with school library automation vendors for this article. The four vendors I spoke with—Follett, Sagebrush, Companion Corp., and Dynix—have been gracious in making time for me and in providing information for the article. (Note that I'll be speaking with another group of automation vendors for their perspectives in Part 2 of this story.)

My introduction to school library automation came in the late 1980s. The school district I worked for was attempting to select an automation system. We looked at and tried out every system available, but we did not select a system until 1994. Systems have come a long way since the MS-DOS, green screen, text-only programs of the 1980s. Today's school library automation system is pleasing to the eye, easy to operate, and capable of data management not even thought of 20 years ago.

Representatives for the four vendors interviewed for this article agreed that the library automation market is mature. The legacy systems—the older automation programs—established the basic functions expected in an automation system. These functions have become standard in all of the new generation automation systems. So what does a mature market today mean for the school library media specialist?

According to the *Digest of Educational Statistics*, data collected for 1999–2000 indicates that nearly 73 percent of public school libraries have automated catalogs. A slightly higher percentage has automated circulation systems. This data supports the vendors' view that the automation market has moved from being primarily con-

cerned with initial automation to a market of replacing obsolete systems.

Migration from stand-alone and early district systems to new centralized systems is a growing trend. Each of the interviewed companies has a centralized option for schools (see Figure 1 on page 30).

Coming Soon

A summer 2005 upgrade to Follett's Destiny will include ease-of-use enhancements and expanded functionality for the browser-based Library Manager, Textbook Manager, and subscription services.

Sagebrush is nearing release of not only a centralized solution with Accent, but also a decentralized solution (where the individual libraries maintain control) with the option to have centralized infrastructure. This new release combines the best of the Sagebrush Spectrum and Sagebrush Athena systems. Recognizing that centralization is not for every district and site, Sagebrush is giving schools and districts more options. They are focusing on making the technology system easier to implement and maintain and on controlling hardware costs.

Acknowledging that Web functionality often provides less speed than client functionality, Companion Corp. is working on enhancing Web functionality in the Alexandria program. It is also providing the options of Web, client, or both versions of the program. As Companion makes changes to Alexandria, it is considering ease of maintenance, required technical support, and hardware upgrades in an effort to manage customer costs.

Dynix is offering the Horizon Information Portal or HIP. This application gives librarians the ability to customize the OPAC screen for each segment of their users. It would be possible to have a custom screen for each grade level, subject area, or other grouping of patrons. HIP also provides media scheduling. Horizon and HIP are accessible from any workstation—Mac, PC, Linux workstation, etc.

Dynix has partnered with Epixtech to provide application service provider (ASP) service for the Horizon automation software. ASP houses the application server and software at Epixtech, where it is managed while the owning library accesses the software via Citrix application server software. This service provider plan provides predictable budgeting for operation of the automation program and a lower upfront capital investment, and it eliminates local technology support. (See Marshall

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Breeding's April 1, 2004, article, which is cited at the end of this article, for more detailed information.)

Coming Within 5 Years

Looking into the future of technology is always a risky task. Marshall Breeding (June 2004) made the observation, "Our key automation issues revolve around dealing with information overload and providing users with tools to effectively search a vast array of information resources."

The vendors echo this concept. Follett approaches the future by watching emerging technologies and examining possible automation synergies that can benefit schools and districts.

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COMPANY	PRODUCT
Follett www.fsc.follett.com	Destiny
Sagebrush www.sagebrushcorp.com	Accent
Companion Corp. www.goalexandria.com	Alexandria
Dynix www.dynix.com	Horizon

Figure 1

Sagebrush predicts the arrival of more products that will link public and school library automation systems, resulting in more access to more resources. This resource sharing will lead to reducing the burden of gathering and paying for books, databases, and other resources. Products and features will continue to evolve as technology advances.

Content and content delivery (data integration) is a major focus for Companion Corp. in its Alexandria system. Developing a software solution that provides the best of both the Web and the client automation systems is in its future. Another concern is strengthening the role of the school librarian by improving his or her ability to access and control information. Companion's goal is to provide tools within the Alexandria system to help gather accountability data. This could yield increased data on reading and readers, improved Lexile functionality, and data to monitor information literacy skills.

Dynix is working on tighter integration with other vendors via interoperability protocols such as SIF and LDAP. These protocols enable the sharing of information between proprietary data systems. While maintaining the key functionality of the library automation system, Dynix wants to make it easy to work with other vendors who are experts in their respective areas.

Integrating New Data Sources and Emerging Technologies

All of the vendors expressed interest in interfacing with new technologies and data sources as these become more prominent in the schools. Library automation systems seem to be the likely portal to a wide variety of data sources for school patrons 24 hours a day. Most automation systems already allow integrated access to free Web sites through MARC records; many systems allow access to subscription databases.

Follett automation solutions currently break down the library walls by seamlessly incorporating—through subscription services—cover images, state standards, reading program information, and educator-approved Web sites into the bibliographic records.

The summer 2005 release of Follett's Destiny Textbook Manager will include the ability to manage e-textbooks. Follett is actively examining possible automation synergies that can benefit schools and districts.

An upcoming Sagebrush product release will make adding e-books and Web sites a snap without the need to purchase any add-on products. The product is browser-based, so with the URL in the MARC record, you can easily go to the site without leaving the system.

Dynix looks at technology and data source innovations as a path to partnerships. Leveraging the strength of partner companies, Dynix is able to provide the best solutions to library customer needs. Dynix representatives feel Web integration using application program interface (APIs) or Web Services is currently the best way to do this.

Like Dynix, Companion Corp. has a large partnership program. Through Alexandria, libraries have access to many partnership services. In addition to the existing partnerships, a relationship with Bowker is being developed. More partnerships will evolve as needs become evident.

Emerging technologies—such as RFID (radio frequency identification), DOM (digital object management), SFX service, and citation links—are being watched by all automation vendors. How and when new technologies are added to library automation systems will be determined by how the needs of school libraries evolve.

Trends to Watch

There is still some consolidation going on in the library automation industry. The vendors view consolidation as a good thing for schools. Vendors that remain in the market are the ones that have earned the right to be there by providing superior products and customer service.

The move to consortia, regional, and state systems continues. When discussing the growing trend of multilibrary cooperative automation systems with Companion Corp., company representatives responded that they view this is an evolution rather than a problem and the industry will adapt as needed.

Dynix also embraces this trend. Dynix software has been designed to allow librarians to form consortia and still be as integrated or autonomous as they would like

to be. Dynix is ready to assist customers in making consortia arrangements work.

The consortia movement will be good for the users because all of the systems could be linked together for better access to information, in Sagebrush's view. Prices should decrease as well since the vendors will have lower costs in selling, implementing, and servicing. However, this may drive a continued and exaggerated narrowing of the vendor field due to the larger purchases, in effect reducing the size of the overall market.

Follett looks at consortia as new prospects and new opportunities; its representatives see this development as an opportunity to evaluate current product offerings and capabilities as they fit the needs of the emerging consortia groups.

Consortia currently operating in many states will provide models for implementation. I was once associated with a consortium of multitype libraries in Minnesota. As a school person, I found there were many advantages to the consortia model. It is encouraging to know the school library automation vendors also see this model as a viable force for the future.

The role of school library media specialists may be changing. One vendor sees the advent of media specialist as CIO. With the interoperability that allows data systems to merge with one another, the library media specialist should be a key player in obtaining and reporting data in a data-driven, decision-making environment. Vendor representatives alluded to this role change as we discussed the increased direct linking of automation and multi-information sources.

Personally, I look forward to the future. Today, school libraries and automation provide services that were just a wild dream when I entered the field. I am still waiting for the day when every child, in every school, succeeds, and where the school library media center is a major player in that success.

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A BRIEF DISCUSSION

FEDERATED SEARCHING with SAGEBRUSH (Pinpoint) and FOLLETT (One Search)

How is your federated search tool being received?

Both companies say library media specialists want a federated searching product because students and others in the school environment are not making good use of the available electronic information sources. They feel their products are being well received because students and school staff are getting better results and are pleased with the enhancements in the federated search technology since the first releases.

What does federated searching cost?

Follett is utilizing a new pricing schema based on the number of schools in a district for integration of One Search within Destiny. Sagebrush, counting students in grades 3 and up, has a license fee and an annual subscription fee with a minimum fee, discounts, and volume pricing.

Some feel this is expensive for content-free software.

Both Sagebrush and Follett feel this software provides a solution to growing needs. Most school media specialists recognize many students are not making good use of research resources provided by the school. Instead they are opting for the general Internet with questionable results. The federated search technology not only leads students to quality materials, but also provides the library media center with use data that is difficult to collect. This data is valuable in decision making. The cost of federated searching is low when looking at the cost of underutilized subscription databases and loss of productive student learning.