

items are weeded from the collection—something Durant's present system can't do. "We have 11 high schools, and it's not uncommon for students to move around among two or three of those schools," he explains. "Right now there's no easy way to check whether those students have textbooks out, or library books."

Durant estimates that it will cost approximately \$300,000 to convert to a new system that will manage each media center's collection, as well as the district's textbooks and 8,500 videos. Library staff members will each need about six hours of training on the new system, and media specialists will need another three or four months to get teachers and students up to speed. But Durant thinks the benefits of an ILS far outweigh its considerable cost and the hassle of converting to a new system. Having the most current collection information at library users' fingertips will save everyone a lot of time, he says.

But switching to an ILS has a dark side. "If you're looking at a new system, you'll end up with a more complex system, whether you want one or not," cautions Jane Prestebak, program director of the Robbinsdale (MN) Area Community Education Center, who has seen many districts update their antiquated systems. Not every educator enjoys moving to a massive, centralized system, she says—especially media specialists who are migrating from an individual-building system to a district-wide one for the first time.

The biggest problem, adds Prestebak, is an individual's feeling of loss of control, or freedom, over the way a collection is managed. "When you join a system with hundreds of libraries sharing one system, the group has to make hundreds of decisions, and sometimes those decisions have been already made for you," she says. For example, some media specialists may allow their students to have three books overdue before they're prohibited from checking out more titles; while other librarians may tolerate only one or two overdue titles. But with an ILS, all of the district's media specialists must agree on a single set of rules.

Web-based Systems and Thin Clients: Unlike the earliest text-based automation software, the current crop is, of course, Web-based and graphic in nature, enabling students to navigate through hyperlinks from record to record, and hop easily from one type of material to another, such as from reference books to VHS tapes. Since the new automation systems require only a Web browser, they're not tethered to any particular kind of hardware, which means they work equally well on a Windows PC or a Macintosh. But some au-

tomation companies, such as Follett and Dynix, are now promoting the use of their software on thin-client terminals—an inexpensive alternative to full-fledged computers. Thin clients are simple devices that are driven by a server and have no hard drives or software of their own (see "Stretch Your Network," August 2002, pp. 52–53).

Web and Database Searches Accessible from the Catalog: Since students often rush right to Google, instead of searching for books and other library materials, many vendors are offering the option of including recommended

SAVY SHOPPING TIPS

Since integrated library systems cost as much as \$50,000, you'll want to make sure you do your homework before purchasing one. Bill Groth, head of library technical support for the Baltimore County (MD) School District, knows all about what goes into shopping for an ILS, having helped his district recently set up one. Here are some questions he thinks are worth asking an automation vendor:

- Will the system give our district the ability to meet state report criteria, such as age-of-collection reports or any other statistical document we need?
- How is the importing of MARC records handled? Will extra software, such as MARC Magician or EZCat, be necessary to make cataloging smooth?
- Will a few people be able to handle the cataloging in a timely manner?
- How easy is it to password-protect catalog records, so that only approved staff members can edit MARC records?
- Is there a broad-based search feature that lets users search the catalog, subscription databases, and a collection of Web sites?
- Do error messages appear in simple English, or in an inscrutable mix of numbers and letters?
- Is it easy to create databases of nonprint items, such as laptops and audio-visual equipment?
- Does the system handle the circulation of textbooks? Do we want the textbook database and the library catalog to be able to share data?
- Are users able to handle things themselves as much as possible, without making a lot of calls to tech support?
- Can help files be tailored to the individual district's procedures? Can I write my own custom PDF files, so they can be printed out as "cheat sheets"?
- Is there an interface available that's appropriate for primary-grade students?
- Does the database utilize a Structured Query Language format that allows staff members to customize reports, overdue letters, and other documents?

Web sites in their automated catalogs. Follett, for example, has created WebPath Express, a subscription database of Web sites for K–12 students (\$595 per school). The company provides MARC records for the selected Web sites, and links to the sites will appear on students' search-results

AUTOMATION SOFTWARE

Companies, Products, and Major Features

Vendors	Major Automation System Product	Broad-based Single-search Product	Platforms	Special Features	Report-generating Capabilities
Book Systems Inc. 721 Clinton Ave., Suite 11 Huntsville, AL 35801 (888) 289-1216 www.booksys.com	Concourse for schools and small districts *Atrium for large districts	Curriculum Education Resource Finder	Concourse: Windows Atrium: Windows 2000, Linux	Customizable interface in HTML	About 25 customizable report templates; reports can be exported to Excel or Word
Brodart Automation Division, 500 Arch St., Williamsport, PA 17701 (800) 233-8467, ext. 6772 www.brodart.com	AmLib for schools and districts	To be released in 2004	Windows, UNIX, Linux	Net OPAC interface is customizable	Includes a variety of report templates; data may be exported to an Excel spreadsheet
COMPANION CORPORATION 1831 Fort Union Blvd. Salt Lake City, UT 84121 (800) 347-6439 www.companioncorp.com	Alexandria for schools and districts	SearchALL	Windows, Macintosh	Alexandria Explore interface for primary-grade students	Includes hundreds of default reports, plus a customization tool that exports reports to Excel
Dynix 400 W. Dynix Dr. Provo, UT 84604 (800) 288-8020 www.dynix.com	*Horizon for schools and large systems	Horizon Information Portal	Windows, UNIX (Linux to be certified by December 31, 2003)	Kids Information Portal interface for primary-grade students	Offers two report-generation tools: ReportSmith (for those who know SQL) and EasyAsk (for those who don't)
Follett Software Co. 1391 Corporate Dr. McHenry, IL 60050 (800) 323-3397 www.fsc.follett.com	Circulation Plus/Catalog Plus for schools or districts *Destiny for districts	Find-It-All	Windows, UNIX, Linux	Destiny is browser-based, with customized help files in PDF, HTML, or Word	Destiny includes a custom-reports generator
Insignia Software 400 10020 101A Ave., Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T5J 3G2 (877) 780-7769 www.insigniasoftware.com	Insignia Library System for schools and library systems	To be released in 2004	Windows, UNIX	Kiosk search for primary-grade students, supports Arabic, Chinese, Spanish and other languages	Supports Crystal Reports; about 100 report templates available
Mandarin Library Automation Inc. P. O. Box 272308 Boca Raton, FL 33427 (800) 426-7477 www.ml solutions.com	Mandarin M3 Core for schools *Mandarin M3 Complete for larger systems	M3 Web OPAC Deluxe	Windows	Bulletin Board feature lets educators post help files and lists	Report generator provides 900 default reports; custom reports available as part of maintenance fee
Sagebrush Corporation 3601 Minnesota Dr., Suite 550 Minneapolis, MN 55435 (800) 328-2923 (952) 656-2999 www.sagebrushcorp.com	*Accent for districts Athena for schools Spectrum for schools and districts	Pinpoint	Accent: Windows NT/2000 and UNIX Athena: Windows only Spectrum: Windows, Mac	All systems have customizable interfaces	All systems have built-in reports; custom reports may be created to save as Excel documents or other reporting software
Softlink America Inc. 5482 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1540 Los Angeles, CA 90036 (877) 454-2725 www.softlinkamerica.com	Softlink Alice Jr. for schools Softlink Alice for schools/small districts *Softlink Oliver for larger districts	Alice & Alice Jr.: NA Oliver has a customizable search portal	Windows, plus an ASP model is available for Oliver for Mac users	Softlink Alice offers choice of four interfaces; Softlink Oliver is Web-based with customizable interface	Alice & Alice Jr. offer 700 prepared reports. Oliver includes custom report generator; custom reports available at no extra charge

* Denotes a large-scale, district-wide integrated library system with a centralized union catalog.

pages, alongside listings for books and other library materials. Carrie Jo Parmley, a media specialist at John Tyler High School in Tyler, TX, says that she and her students like WebPath Express because "the process eliminates extra searches —and time."

Librarians, of course, often want magazine and newspaper articles from their subscription databases to appear in a catalog search, and Follett's Find-It-All (\$1,398 with two services, One Search and Knowledge Links) and Sagebrush's Pinpoint (\$825 the first year, for schools with 500 students) do just that. Both software products enable students to search through everything available to library users—including the library catalog, Web sites, and subscription databases—and it's even possible to add other library catalogs, such as the local public library's or a nearby college's, to your own catalog.

Centralized Cataloging: Since an ILS requires that the same titles bear the same Dewey numbers and identical catalog records, library materials are now being cataloged centrally. But agreeing on the best method isn't as simple as it sounds, says Prestebak, because individual libraries often have their own way of doing things. For example, Esther Forbes's *Johnny Tremain* was originally published in 1943, but today most—but not all—libraries include a catalog record of only the 1998 hardcover edition, or perhaps one of the paperback or cassette editions. Every library, says Prestebak, must decide how many separate records it will create for a title, and its system must reconcile records that were created at various times by different librarians. "For a new system, the learning curve can be incredible," she says. "Training people and cleaning up data are your biggest expenses."

Generating Special Reports: Older versions of automation software had a tough time creating special statistical reports. For example, trying to create a report describing the age of your collection (sorted by copyright date, and the average age of titles in a particular Dewey category) usually required specialized—and often expensive—technical support from the vendor. But now, in response to numerous requests from districts and states, integrated library systems typically make it a cinch for librarians to create special reports. Dan Ritchie, a librarian at Kirkland Junior High in Redmond, WA, uses Follett's Destiny system to create sophisticated sets of statistics on the age and usage pattern of items in his library's collection; the system can also automatically generate letters and overdue notices that are then mailed to students' homes.

The Future of School Library Automation Systems: Technology, of course, never pauses, and the move toward inte-

grated library systems is only one step in the journey. Automation vendors have plenty of proposals for the future of library systems. Follett, for example, has issued a white paper that proposes that someday each district will install and maintain its automation software in a single centralized location. Access to the catalog, circulation software, and system options, for both staff and students, would be through a standard Web browser. Thus libraries, which rarely need more than a browser to access their catalog, databases, and Web sites, would be able to function easily with a thin client, a desktop PC, a laptop, or even a handheld device, such as a Palm. The basic motivation for centralization, says Follett, is to cut maintenance costs, and let the system run effectively with the least amount of technical support.

Dynix, in a white paper of its own, says access to future versions of its Horizon Information Portal will one day be available through everything from hardwired workstations to cellphones. System users would simply type their requests into a new search tool, which would feature spell checking and a thesaurus in English, Spanish, and other languages. Dynix says that future versions of its products will enable users to rate resources, similar to the way that Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble's Web site let visitors offer their comments and reviews. Dynix is now working on a search tool that "will run two orders of magnitude faster than the current engine" with added search features, such as the ability to specify which catalogs to search first.

Will these systems of the future lead to automation nirvana? Don't hold your breath, says Bill Groth, head of technical support for the Baltimore County (MD) School District. "Is there such a thing as a perfect automation system?" asks Groth, rhetorically. "It hasn't been invented yet, but we're making strides in that direction."

Walter Minkel is SLJ's technology editor.

THE BENEFITS OF
an integrated library system
far outweigh its considerable cost
and the hassle of converting
to a new system.



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