

A Huge Leap Forward for Chicago Public Schools



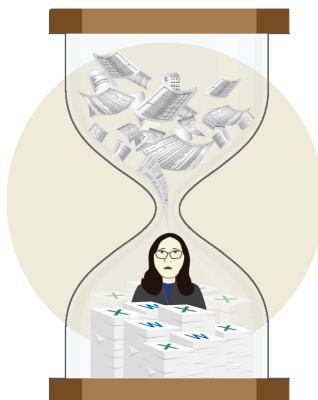
Population:
636 Schools with
340,658 Students

Solutions:
Workiva



The Challenge

Dongmei Li, CPA, CPFO, CGFM, MA, Deputy Controller, joined the staff at Chicago Public Schools (CPS) as Assistant Controller–Corporate Accounting in December of 2019. That year, as in previous years, the district had been forced to file for a deadline extension for submission of its Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR).



The next year, Dongmei recalls working for 30 hours straight to finish the report in time for the district's board meeting. Her team put in **more than 1,000 hours** that year to produce the report on schedule. There were changes coming in from the controller, an external auditor, and a consultant, right up until the last minute. "So many team members were working evenings and weekends," Dongmei said.

The Solution

Prior to her role at CPS, Dongmei had been involved in system upgrades for many years, as financial manager for Montgomery County Government in Maryland. She understood the benefits of automation and advocated for a system change in Chicago.

"One problem for the whole country right now... is a shortage of staff and maintaining staff. One solution is automation. If we reduce unnecessary work, we don't have to rely on so many staff...using this kind of high level technology can help us—not resolve it—but can relieve some pressure for us."

Dongmei set out to find the best solution for her district's needs. "We asked other organizations what they had purchased, the pros and cons. I asked former

colleagues. Our biggest concern was making it easy for [my team] to make adjustments and additions based on [the district's] special situations."

She also knew the value of robust implementation and follow-up support. "We can't control the speed of outside parties, and some of our deliverables have critical deadlines," she said. With budget in mind, Dongmei sought a solution with reliable and timely tech support built in, at little to no additional cost.

Her team considered offerings from Gravity, Caseware, OneStream, and a few smaller companies. In the end, they chose **Workiva's Wdesk** for report writing and **Wdata** for data management. "Workiva has the combined features that meet our requirements, our unique situation," she said.



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The Implementation

When Dongmei started the procurement process to obtain the new software, she never imagined that its implementation would go so smoothly. "It was a shock. Usually there are technical issues. With so many different departments, it's complicated. I didn't have such high expectations," she said.

Having witnessed the value FHB brings to software implementation in Montgomery County, Dongmei made the decision to partner with FHB. Throughout the project, she and her entire staff were delighted with the experience and expertise of the FHB team. "FHB brought major players with strong experience," she said.

"Darryl is the best consultant I've seen in my whole career. He's an IT expert and knows the accounting side. I'm a CPA and a Certified Public Finance Officer, but I think he is a level above me," she said.

[Darryl Parker, CPA, FHB Director of Solutions Design & Architecture] not only guided Dongmei through the Workiva implementation, "He gave great training to the entire team and answered all kinds of questions

for basic users," she said. "Darryl and Workiva's supporting team were all very strong," she said.

In terms of the solution itself, Dongmei's was most impressed with its linkage capability. CPS has, "...many financial statements and supplemental schedules. There can be as many as 100 pages, with all the tables and schedules," she said. One set of "budget to actual" figures can populate in 40 different locations, for example.

"Now we do one report, and all the schedules are done. It's like a miracle happened. It saved so much time, headache, and it improved accuracy. It really impressed our managers."

Process change can be challenging, especially when it requires the buy-in of multiple users. Dongmei is pleased by her staff's acceptance of their new tools. "There have been no complaints. To have zero complaints with [the implementation of] complex software is amazing." The district's auditor is also impressed. "The auditor found no issues," she said. "It's a high-quality report."



Before Workiva

- Manipulated data in Excel, Word, and compiled into a PDF.
- Checked and updated figures manually, in multiple places.
- Lots of room for error.
- Difficult, time-consuming formatting challenges.
- Needed external third-party consultant to help compile and finish the report.
- Still struggled to produce the report on time.



With Workiva

- ✓ Saved hundreds of hours.
- ✓ Can manage the product in-house without a third-party consultant.
- ✓ Greatly improved accuracy.
- ✓ Saved marketing team (designer's) time formerly spent formatting.
- ✓ "Saved my life." —Dongmei.



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The Greatest Gift

"Last year, for the first time, I was able to enjoy the Christmas holiday. I finished the ACFR and the Popular Annual Financial Reporting (PAFR) before Christmas. [In prior years], I had to work through the whole week of Christmas break," Dongmei said.

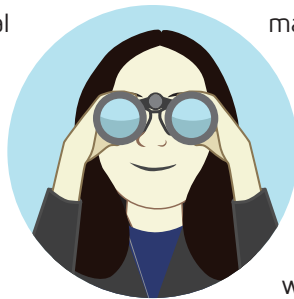
With the gift of time, she was able to collaborate with the district's designer to format and perfect the final ACFR. "The report is very pretty," she said. "Before, we just rushed to get it done before the deadline."

"Our new CFO has lots of plans. This is just the beginning for us."

What's Next?

As her team builds expertise and acclimates to the full functionality of their new financial reporting tools, Dongmei anticipates reducing overtime by another 50% in 2023.

Now that they've seen Dongmei's team successfully improve processes, CPS district leaders have confidence in their ability to expand efforts toward automation. "We set the right tone for the



whole department. We had an idea, set a goal, and made it happen," she said.

In the coming months, Dongmei and her staff will work with FHB to implement Workiva tools for financial control—including compliance and internal auditing. Once finished, CPS will "have a 'robotic' system," said Dongmei. Finance reporting and auditing will be integrated, further eliminating manual processes and duplication.



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