

KEY SURVEY IMPROVES IOWA AREA EDUCATION AGENCY 267'S EFFECTIVENESS

Why Key Survey?

Iowa has ten Area Education Agencies, and their purpose is to provide services to the local districts: interlibrary loans, assistance with special programs (such as for gifted and talented children), and professional development for teachers. AEA 267 covers a hundred and sixty-five schools, both public and private, in eighty-five districts across an eighteen-county area.

“And just like any district,” said **Beth Kuehl, AEA 267's Development and Design Supervisor**, “we always continually collect school improvement data, from our community survey to parents, to teachers and student data.”

It was obvious, when the need came for a surveying tool, that the tool would have to be completely web-based. Something that could be administered centrally but distributed to all the local districts without any effort involved in installing software on every one of potentially hundreds of computers. AEA 267 did their due diligence, looked at the market – and chose Key Survey.

“We decided on Key Survey after extensive research. I liked the reports feature and being able to filter,” Kuehl said. “We've continued with Key Survey because it's been very fluid – it's always been updated with new features that make the product even better.”

“And Key Survey was able to create new features to meet our needs,” she said. Her main request, the autofill feature, was programmed in – for her and for all other Key Survey customers, enabling them to pre-populate survey forms with data that can be invisible, fixed or changeable by the respondent. “They gave us the functionality we wanted.”

How the AEA uses Key Survey

AEA 267 conducts surveys of their own – directly (and extensively) to their five thousand teachers. A lot more surveying is done by the districts – 267 has Key Survey Enterprise, which lets them create an individual sub-account for each of their sixty-one public-school districts to use at the local level.

Sara McInerny is **AEA 267's Director of Improvement and Strategic Planning**, responsible for making sure that the AEA delivers unified, comprehensive services. She's also in charge of the AEA's accreditation plan and special education compliance.

"We use Key Survey for everything from work attitudes to data collection within the agency," she said. "Right now, we're collecting customer feedback information from our 61 public school districts. We use it to collect data around professional development and we use it as an evaluation tool for our clients to evaluate the instructors or presenters, as well as a follow-up tool when we follow up with professional development. So we have a ton of uses for it."

One way that the AEA uses Key Survey is when they need to collect data from their 1,100 employees. "With that many people, you can't just go out and talk to them."

Another use they've found for Key Survey is to determine if teachers are implementing the strategies they've learned in professional-development classes. "We use it as a log – we've created basically a data-collection tool around the implementation of those strategies. How many times they're implementing it, what strategies they've implemented that they've learned, so we get some idea if it's been carried out in the classrooms. We're asking students if they're seeing it and we're asking the teachers who've participated in the training."

"Outside of Key Survey, we used to use pen and paper," said McInerny. "Nobody does that any more."

How the districts use Key Survey

"We use Key Survey to find out what people are thinking about a lot of different issues in our district," said **Sharon Miller, public relations specialist at Waterloo**, one of AEA 267's larger school districts. "All the way from every employee asking them about what would be meaningful to them in the way of employee recognition, to specific features at certain buildings asking them about the professional development needs they might have for an upcoming training session."

Most of the Waterloo district's surveys are distributed by email, but not all of them. Sometimes – for example, when they're surveying parents – some respondents don't have email. With Key Survey that isn't a problem; they can distribute the survey by hard-copy, on paper, and merge the results with the responses from people who answered electronically.

"We've used the information especially to evaluate programs," Miller said. "To see what kind of a difference we're making, for example, with our parent-involvement program."

We want to know parents' attitudes; we want to measure their attitudes over time so we'd expect to see growth and positive attitudes about the school."

The Waterloo district also uses Key Survey for their own professional development programs – gathering information to determine the content of a session, or how they're going to structure their staff recognition program.

By law, Iowa school districts are required to conduct community surveys every five years, to assess how the community thinks the district is doing – whether there's any needs that aren't being met.

"Nobody does it by paper and pencil any more, as they used to," Sara McInerny said of that survey. "They all use Key Survey.

Districts are also required to do follow-up surveys every three years, asking former students how well their high school education prepared them for whatever they're doing post-secondary. There, too, Key Survey has benefited AEA 267's districts – many of them use Key Survey to conduct that survey electronically, sparing themselves the labor of mailing and data-entry.

"It gives us valuable information at many points along the process," Waterloo PR Specialist Sharon Miller said, "for planning, implementing and evaluating our programs and initiatives."

The Key Survey experience

AEA 267's Key Survey users are administrators, not techs. They needed a product that was easy to use – they wanted results. And that goes double for the district administrators, who are part of smaller organizations. They didn't have the time for a surveying product with a long learning curve. With Key Survey, that wasn't a concern.

"The learning curve was very easy," said Beth Kuehl, administrator of AEA 267's 149 accounts.

It doesn't hurt that Key Survey has unlimited, free technical support. Any time any user has a question, they can email, phone, or online-chat with Key Survey support staff and get their problem solved. Freeing up Beth Kuehl to advise her sub-users on larger things, such as which questions to ask.

"I think it's been very user-friendly," said AEA 267 Communications Director Beth Strike. "Before our recent merger, I used Zoomerang, and I just transitioned to Key Survey

when we merged. It's much more advanced than Zoomerang in terms of what it can do, especially the reporting functions."

"I've found it to be very easy to use and I like that, because I'm usually the person who tries to encourage the school district to use it in their needs assessment, and if it wasn't easy to use, I wouldn't feel good about just telling them to get in there. That's important because those are folks – most of them are superintendents – who don't spend a lot of time in front of their computer. They don't have a whole day to figure things out; they want it to be easy."

"You know," said Sharon Miller of the Waterloo district, "I think it is a great tool. I started with it a couple of years ago, I think, maybe three years ago. I think I had an initial training or two and then of course some support from the AEA. I thought it was a very easy tool to use. It's intuitive, it's very logical, I've been really pleased with it."