

Modern Logistics Practices at Work
In the
Educational Assessments Industry

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The Scenario

A leading test publisher is wrapping up a statewide test distribution and sends the pickup agent to the school districts to collect completed materials to return to the scoring center. All goes well until the scoring center advises that one of 50 boxes expected from one district is missing. The district's test administrator is adamant that she handed off all boxes to the pickup agent, so the fault is not at the district. The scoring center insists that only 49 were received, so the fault is not at the scoring center. The only other player is the transportation company who managed the pickups. The transportation company's records may point the guilty finger at the district or it may point at the scoring center. Or it may be that the one box was misdirected in transit, placed on the wrong pallet, off-loaded at a warehouse, or any number of other possibilities. No matter who last saw the errant box, the test publisher is facing fines, negative PR, and lost business unless that box is found quickly and routed to the scoring center. At this juncture blame is the least of its worries.

It may be easy to underestimate the complexity of a test booklet distribution, so let's look at the numbers in just one state: Georgia. Within its 385 school systems are 1,284 elementary schools, 450 middle schools, and 415 high schools. In grades 3, 5, and 8, there are more than 375,000 students, all of which are given annual mandatory student assessments. Graduating high school seniors are also tested bringing the number of students tested to over half a million. The number of test booklets and boxes of test booklets quickly tops hundreds of thousands with a total weight measured in tons. The complexity of the distribution then doubles with sometimes separate pickups for scorable and non-scorable materials. With 385 separate school systems from which to retrieve so many pieces, the transportation company faces a daunting task that must be completed within a narrow time frame and with a high degree of accuracy.

The Solution

By taking advantage of technology, the problem of the missing box of tests can be preempted at the school system's dock. Hand-held scanning devices solve a number of problems routinely faced by test publishers:

1. Scanning offers the ability to verify piece count at the pickup site.
2. It provides chain of custody documentation.
3. It can alert the scoring center one to two days in advance of arrival of specific tests.
4. It provides a map of a given pallet down to the specific school and box level.

With color-coded labels affixed to boxes, identifying districts and schools becomes a much more simplified process. Separating scorable from non-scorable, early return or calibration materials is easier and saves time, manpower and money at the scoring center. Scanning at origin and again at destination amplifies the integrity of the test distribution and provides an unprecedented level of accountability to all the test stakeholders. By employing the use of reports generated via bar code scanning the scoring center can virtually see inside a specific classroom.

Logistics vs. Transportation

High stakes assessments require test publishers to press their transportation providers for a superior level of service and accountability, but not all transportation companies are equipped to step into the assessment distribution industry. The selection of a specialist then becomes the optimal choice. Look for a transportation company that embraces the technology and processes required to be successful in an increasingly complex industry. The right transportation company must provide not just the physical capacity to move thousands of pallets of tests, but the agility to adapt quickly to changes, work closely with the test publisher, understand the needs of school districts, and keep clear and open lines of communication throughout every distribution.