



## North Carolina Schools Laud SafeData for Online DR Solution

by Alex Woodie

School may be out for summer, but that doesn't mean that learning has stopped. For the folks in the IT department at the North Carolina's Department of Public Instruction (DPI), for example, the summer months will provide time to learn more about the benefits of the new online disaster recovery solution from [SafeData](#). The installation at DPI is only a few weeks old, but so far, SafeData has gotten a gold star for its efforts.

From its headquarters in Raleigh, the North Carolina DPI is responsible for overseeing all 115 primary and secondary school districts, or local education agencies (LEAs), in the state. While each LEA has an OS/400 server on site, the DPI's iSeries Model 820 acts as the central hub that stores human resources, payroll, and other financial data from all 115 AS/400, iSeries, and System i servers supporting the state's education system.

Up to this point, the DPI didn't have a disaster recovery plan, says Jeff Merritt, IT operations manager for the DPI. While the organization used tape to perform backups, a serious disaster--such as a hurricane, a flood, or a tornado--had the capacity to knock out the data center and take the DPI offline. If that happened, it would put a serious crimp in the department's capability to pay its workers and hire new teachers, among other effects.

That scenario didn't sit well with Peter Asmar, who recently took the CIO position with the DPI. Asmar was across the street from the World Trade Center on 9-11, Merritt says, and had a front-row seat as our generation's biggest disaster unfolded. One of Asmar's first actions as CIO was to institute a disaster recovery plan for DPI, and he tasked Merritt with the job. "We've never had a disaster here, but I think 9-11 made us aware that it could happen," Merritt says.

Merritt's first inclination was to set up a hardware-sharing arrangement with another state or local agency that used the iSeries server, and then replicate data between the two sites. But the restrictions--including the need for both organizations to have nearly identical hardware--put a crimp in those plans before they got off the ground. Likewise, the additional hardware requirement of a full high availability (HA) solution was deemed too expensive.

Next, Merritt considered using one of the hot site providers, such as [SunGard](#) or IBM Business Continuity and Recovery Services (BCRS). While SunGard and BCRS are large and experienced operations that can solve a wide range of data processing needs on short notice, the fact that the DPI would need to get its own technician to the hot site to recover its iSeries environment from tape left something to be desired.

"They would give us space, hardware--everything we need to do the job. But we'd have to do it ourselves," Merritt says. "We'd need to get people to that location, but the airports could be down. If we have a big disaster, we'd want to stick around our families."

Then he heard about the online vaulting solution for OS/400 and i5/OS servers offered by SafeData, which is based in Warwick, Rhode Island. With SafeData/DR, incremental backups on iSeries and System i servers are performed over the network and stored on SafeData's servers (using [E-Vault's](#) OS/400 backup agent and a Windows 2000

machine to store the backups). If the customer declares a disaster, SafeData will load the customer's applications and data onto a physical iSeries server run by SafeData in its data center. The customer then will remotely log into the iSeries server. SafeData guarantees all this will be performed in 10 hours or less. (SafeData also offers a high availability replication option that brings a guaranteed two-hour turn-around time, but the DPI wasn't interested in HA software.)

The SafeData/DR solution piqued Merritt's interest, so he inquired about it through [Strategic Systems](#), a local VAR based in Holly Springs, North Carolina, and a demo was set up. "We were told about vaulting, but it was one of those things where we needed to see it to believe it," Merritt says.

Tod Kisner, Strategic Systems' CEO, came out to run the demo, and soon some of DPI's files were being sent across the network to SafeData's servers. While the process of sending out files worked, it didn't strike Merritt as particularly remarkable. But what really struck Merritt as cutting-edge was the process of recovering the files. With SafeData, recovering files to the iSeries it's just a matter of dragging-and-dropping icons on a Windows interface.

Merritt realized he could hit two birds with one stone. "We were looking for DR, but we found out we could use this as a backup solution," he says. "We were using tapes and sending them offsite. If someone wanted something that was more than two days old, [the request was relayed to the service, and] hopefully they bring the right tape."

Once Merritt saw SafeData's drag-and-drop recovery process in action, he knew it would be hard going back to the tape vaulting and delivery service. "Once you're used to doing business that way, and now you can find a file and recover it by dragging and dropping, it's almost too good to be true," he says. "It's literally that easy."

The DPI implemented SafeData six weeks ago, and so far Merritt is happy with nearly everything about the solution. In addition to getting a guarantee to recover the DPI's OS/400 applications in 10 hours or less, he will also save an estimated \$16,000 per year in DLP tape media costs. The organization will still use the DLP tape drive for month- and year-end backups, but the nightly backups are all done over the wire now, dramatically reducing tape usage. The full benefits of the solution will become evident this fall, when a full test, including a role-swap to SafeData's iSeries server, will be conducted.

SafeData's support has been good so far, according to Merritt. "They put a little project team together and then we went live. They've been great," he says. The only issue relates to the cost of DPI's subscription. SafeData charges for its disaster recovery services based on the amount of data that's sent over the pipe to its servers. When DPI signed up, it was billed on an estimated rate. Since then, SafeData has calculated the exact amount of data sent over the wire, which has resulted in DPI's bill going up.

If all goes well with SafeData/DR on the iSeries, Merritt could start using it to simplify the backups of DPI's Windows servers. For now, though, the North Carolina DPI has a plan of action to keep schools' back-office functions running should a disaster ever strike, keeping students on the learning track and teachers getting paid, and that's good news for everybody.