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DMGROUP IN ACTION

# DMGroup's A-ROI Institute

*How Two Member Districts Are Leveraging the A-ROI Approach*

*by Simone Carpenter*

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*The A-ROI Institute has put us ahead of other school districts in understanding how money is best allocated.*

# DMGroup in Action

## DMGroup's A-ROI Institute

*How Two Member Districts Are Leveraging the A-ROI Approach*

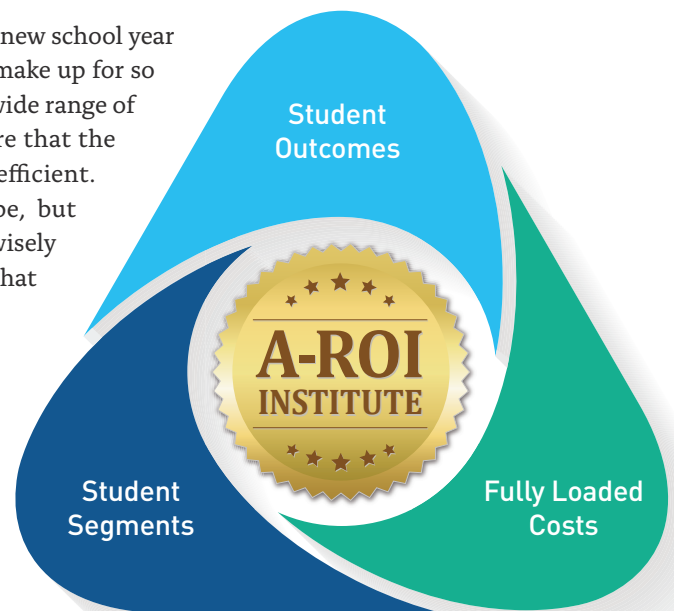
*Simone Carpenter*

**A**fter more than a year of disruptions to learning, the new school year cannot be a return to normal. Schools will need to make up for so much lost learning time and will need to address a wide range of student needs. More than ever, districts will need to ensure that the programs and initiatives being applied are effective and efficient. Additional federal funding on the horizon provides hope, but district and school leaders will need to utilize these funds wisely and strategically, and direct them to support programs that have the greatest impact for students.

A common and long-standing challenge for school districts has been trying to determine which programs and initiatives are most efficacious and most cost-effective. In District Management Group's years of work with districts on budgeting and resource allocation, we have found that in many districts, large numbers of programs and initiatives have been introduced and layered in over the years, and districts have difficulty assessing the following:

- **Which programs are achieving the intended outcomes?**
- **Which students are benefiting most from a given program? Which students are deriving little or no benefit?**
- **How cost-effective is each program?**

DMGroup developed the idea of Academic Return on Investment (A-ROI) to help districts answer these questions so they can bring data-driven decision making into their resource allocation process (*Exhibit 1*). The A-ROI approach examines student outcomes, student



segments, and fully loaded costs to gain a clear understanding of what works best for which groups of students and at what cost. With this information, districts can then ensure that student needs are being met most effectively and resources are being used most efficiently.

To help district teams learn about the A-ROI approach and how to apply it, DMGroup created the A-ROI Institute. Launched in the 2017-18 school year, this year-long program consists of three workshops, a self-assessment, and individualized coaching sessions with each participating district. Districts participate as a team; together they learn about the A-ROI framework and process, and apply their learning in real time to assess a specific program or

initiative in their district. The combination of instruction and hands-on learning helps district teams build skills, work through challenges with the support of coaches, and develop the confidence to leverage this approach in their districts after attending the Institute.

Here we share examples of how two districts that participated in A-ROI Institutes are leveraging what they learned.



## Aligning Resources to Instructional Goals at Saratoga Springs City Schools District (NY)

Saratoga Springs City Schools District (SSCSD) joined DMGroup’s 2019 A-ROI Institute as the district was embarking on an effort to update their budget process; the district wanted to better align their budget to programs and initiatives that deliver for their students. The effort was being led by Superintendent Dr. Mike Patton; Assistant Superintendent for School Business Tim Hilker; and Director of Budget and Program Integration Dr. Joseph Greco, who after almost twenty years on the academic side had joined the budgeting team to help build the connection between the business side and the academic goals of the district.

## Getting Started

At the first A-ROI workshop, the SSCSD team selected the program to assess: universal literacy screeners. At the time, the district was using two different universal screeners to evaluate elementary student reading: the Reading Inventory and iReady. iReady had been piloted at one of their six elementary schools and the program was being considered for expansion to all schools. Before rolling it out, district leaders wanted to verify that iReady was in fact a better indicator than Reading Inventory for how students would perform on the NY State Assessment, as improving outcomes on the state assessment was one of the district’s strategic priorities.

## Evaluating and Comparing A-ROIs

Over the course of the next 10 months, the SSCSD team attended the A-ROI workshops and designed and conducted their evaluation. They worked together to gather, compile, and analyze student segments, student outcomes, and financial data. With the support of the DMGroup A-ROI coaches, the team uncovered the following findings:

- Reading Inventory was a far better predictor of scores on the NY State Assessment than iReady. Reading Inventory had a 72.3% correlation to success on the NY State Assessment, whereas iReady had only a 6% correlation.

## DMGroup’s A-ROI Approach

### Leverage Data to Determine What Works

The A-ROI approach analyzes student achievement by student segment and examines fully loaded costs. This analysis provides insight into what works best for which students and at what cost so that your district can ensure that student needs are being met most effectively and resources are being used most efficiently.

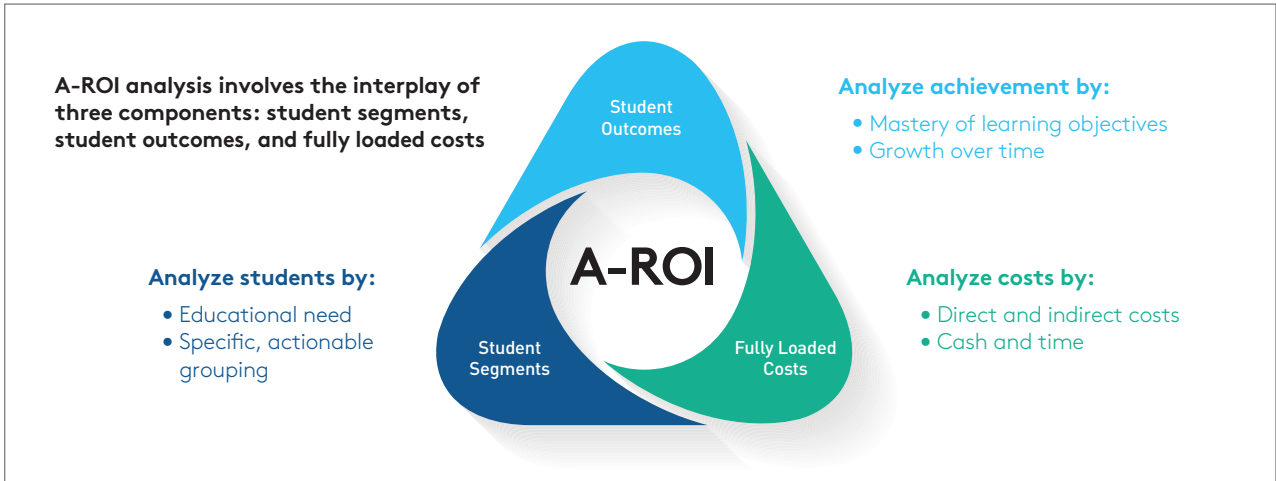


*Which programs drive student achievement?*

*Which programs should be expanded to serve more students?*

*Are there programs that should be eliminated?*

*Exhibit 1* ACADEMIC RETURN ON INVESTMENT (A-ROI) FRAMEWORK



Source: DMGroup.

- At a cost of \$4 per student, Reading Inventory was less expensive than the iReady assessment, which cost \$16 per student.

Because there had been a great amount of enthusiasm about iReady during the pilot program, these findings came as a surprise to the team. District and school leaders got together to review the analyses and discuss the findings. Based on the findings, the district paused their expansion of iReady to other schools and has worked to define a universal assessment that will be used in all six elementary buildings. This analysis saved them from rolling out a less effective yet more expensive program, and proved the value of the A-ROI approach.

### Embedding A-ROI

SSCSD’s work on A-ROI did not end there. The evaluation taught them some lessons greater than just the efficacy and cost-effectiveness of reading screeners. In doing this exercise, the team realized that the data structures and systems to support this type of A-ROI analysis were lacking at the district level.

SSCSD has started to revamp their system of data management and coordination to make it easier to access the type of data needed, and the team is now working to embed an A-ROI approach in all budget decisions from those at the school level up through those of the Board of Education. The finance team developed a rubric to frame budget conversations about what programs they want to expand, keep, modify, adjust, or sunset. “A-ROI is now built into the way we have our budget conversations with our leadership team, our bargaining units, and our Board of Education,” noted Superintendent Patton.

Perhaps the largest shift in Saratoga Springs has been the way the district makes decisions about new programs, initiatives, and course offerings. The team established a new program proposal form that asks anyone proposing a new program to answer the following questions:

- Why is there a need for the program? Do you have data to demonstrate the need?
- How does this program fill the need?

### FAST FACTS

SY2018-19 for demographics  
SY2017-18 for fiscal data



SARATOGA SPRINGS CITY  
SCHOOL DISTRICT (NY)

**6,341** students      **8** schools

- **89%** White
- **3.6%** Black
- **3.7%** Asian
- **1.9%** Hispanic/Latinx
- **11%** Students with a Disability
- **22%** Economically Disadvantaged

Per Pupil  
Expenditures:

**\$18,765**

Total  
Expenditures:

**\$121,390,000**

Source: New York State Department of Education; National Center for Education Statistics



***A-ROI is now built into the way we have our budget conversations with our leadership team, our bargaining units, and our Board of Education.***

– Dr. Mike Patton

Superintendent, Saratoga Springs City Schools District

- What does implementation look like?
- What is the definition of success for this program?
  - What data will be used to assess and track the success of this program?
  - What is the timeline for seeing results?

The individual proposing any new effort must make the case for their program, define success upfront, and ensure from the start the data collection to track results. “We’ve established everything we need in the beginning to take the ‘cheerleader’ out of the program,” said Director of Program and Budget Integration Greco. “We now can be much more strategic and focus on what is working and what isn’t. And we can be courageous enough to get rid of things that aren’t working.”

initiatives, but too often felt they did not have sufficient information to assess the true need or whether the new request would indeed result in better outcomes for students, staff, and schools.

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the district had made the decision to participate in the 2020 A-ROI Institute, and its team had already identified that they wanted to use their time at the Institute to tackle evaluating their math program. But, once the pandemic shuttered schools across the country in March 2020, the scheduled March kick-off of the 2020 A-ROI Institute was pushed back. When the 2020 A-ROI Institute launched in the fall of 2020, the district shifted gears and decided instead to focus on credit recovery. Superintendent Dr. Eugene Schmidt noted that credit recovery “will be a challenge for years to come. The district needs to identify and prioritize the best methods for recovering credits, and which programs work best for which students.”

## Assessing Credit-Recovery Strategies at Farmington Municipal School District (NM)



Farmington Municipal School District (FMSD) registered for the 2020 A-ROI Institute wanting its team to learn how to better incorporate data into their budgeting practice. Like many other districts, FMSD faced the challenge of fielding many requests for new positions, programs, and

## Getting Started

The district has a variety of credit-recovery strategies in place: in-school credit recovery, night school, online programming, and alternative programming. Ultimately, the district hopes to learn which strategies are most effective, which are most cost-effective, and which students learn best from which model. With this information, they feel they will be able to better match students with the most effective strategy and help them both recover credits and recover learning.

### FAST FACTS

SY2017-18



FARMINGTON MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DISTRICT (NM)

**10,417** students **21** schools

- **32%** White
- **27%** Hispanic
- **38%** Native American
- **12%** English Language Learners
- **13%** Students with a Disability
- **58%** Economically Disadvantaged

Per Pupil Expenditures:

**\$9,879**

Total Expenditures:

**\$114,926,000**

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

## Moving Forward with an A-ROI Approach

FMUSD is currently in the midst of its year-long participation in the A-ROI Institute. With the support of DMGroup’s A-ROI Institute experts, the district team is collecting, reviewing, and analyzing data to assess its credit-recovery programs.

While FMUSD is still in the early stages of the work, the team is energized about embedding the A-ROI approach in district decision making. “Having a team from FMUSD participate together in the A-ROI Institute means we have a team versed in, trained on, and supporting making this approach part of how we do business in the district,” said Nicole Lambson, executive director of curriculum, instruction, and federal programs. “The A-ROI approach will help create a truly equitable funding and spending model for years to come,” Lambson added. Superintendent Schmidt commented, “The A-ROI Institute has put us ahead of other school districts in understanding how money is best allocated.”

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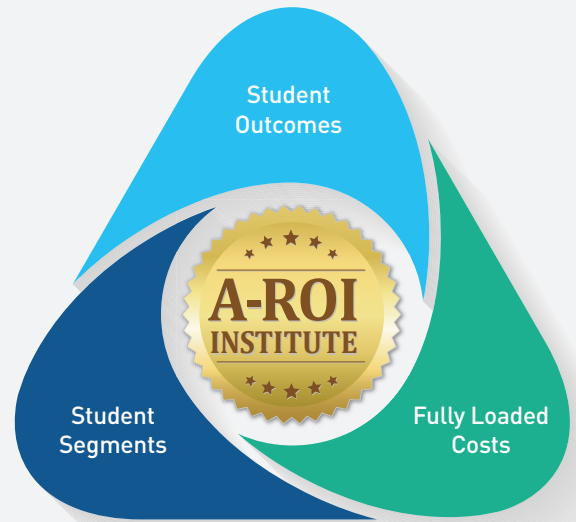
– Dr. Eugene Schmidt  
Superintendent, Farmington Municipal School District

## Conclusion

While district leaders face many questions about the effectiveness of their investments, the A-ROI framework can help them make thoughtful decisions about what works, for which students, at what cost; as a result, district leaders can target limited resources toward the most effective supports. SSCSD is now well on its way to embedding the A-ROI approach. And FMUSD is energized about the work it has done this year and is now starting to dramatically alter the way it approaches budgeting. ♦

# DMGroup’s A-ROI Institute

Develop Expertise to Measure  
What Works Best for Students



District teams learn to employ Academic Return on Investment methodology to determine what works and at what cost.

- ✓ Ensure resources are being deployed for maximum impact
- ✓ Build the skills to improve resource allocation

Learn more about the A-ROI Institute and DMGroup’s other structured professional development programs at [www.dmgrouk12.com/services/dminstitutes](http://www.dmgrouk12.com/services/dminstitutes)



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