

## **Demystifying Baldrige: Lessons Learned by an Urban Public School District on its Journey to Performance Excellence**

by Dave Markward and J. Jay Marino

Dave Markward, superintendent of the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Community School District (CRCSD), recalls the first time he encountered the Baldrige criteria for Performance Excellence at an educational conference in Chicago about 10 years ago.

After listening to the presenter he recalls, "I was ready to run from those criteria as fast as I possibly could." There was difficulty connecting Baldrige to the educational setting because of the initial overwhelming complexity and detail of the criteria. Baldrige was essentially and primarily designed for businesses, and there were few examples of educational organizations embracing and using the framework as an improvement system.

Over time, there were occasional encounters with school leaders who were working with the criteria and getting some impressive results. Individuals in districts implementing a continuous improvement approach encouraged taking it slowly, interacting with those from other organizations using Baldrige criteria and committing to the process over the long haul. They described their journeys as marathons, not sprints. The education examples were just what were needed to demonstrate how employing the criteria could improve every aspect of organizational performance.

### **Challenging First Steps**

Implementing the Baldrige framework as a comprehensive improvement model in an urban school district has its challenges. The CRCSD is a pre-kindergarten through grade 12 system, embracing a wide range of diversities including multiple religions, ethnicities, socio-economic status and languages. Nearly 120,000 people reside in the 121-square mile boundary of the CRCSD. With 34 schools, more than 2,800 employees and nearly 18,000 students, the district is the second largest in the state. Thirty-eight percent of students receive waivers for free or reduced priced meals. Enrollment includes 2% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 1% Native American and 13% African American students. English is not the first language of many students, with more 40 different languages spoken in the students' homes across the district.

These characteristics, similar to other urban school districts, demand that educators develop the very best educational and support systems possible. The use of Baldrige criteria as an organizational framework and the implementation of quality tools and processes for the work done “in the trenches” are dynamic responses to those challenges.

The key organizational challenge in the early stages of the Baldrige journey is ensuring that all senior leaders believe in, understand and use the important principles of continuous improvement. There was significant understanding of the use of action research—referred to as the plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycle—and involvement of data teams in decision making before introducing Baldrige to the district more than two years ago. Honoring the past, and building on previous work, provides a solid basis for implementing the concepts of Baldrige into the organizational culture.

To optimize results, a consistent application across all departments and schools is essential. In years past, many schools had strong ties to site based management principles and enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. To transition to a more systemic and standardized way of operation is a task needing constant attention. Recently, a veteran elementary school principal commented, “I really appreciate the vision, direction and knowing where we are heading.” Comments such as this have been common among staff. As with the implementation of most major paradigm shifts, progress is slow but evident.

### **Looking To Past Winners**

After the initial attraction to the Baldrige criteria, district administrators began digging into applications of national Baldrige and state quality award winners to look for best practices. Visits to school districts where the criteria were applied with integrity and fidelity validated the continuous improvement approach to organizational effectiveness. Each visit to model educational organizations reinforced the belief that utilizing the framework would yield better results in every corner of the district. An early lesson learned demonstrated that continuous improvement was not something to move down the hall for someone else to address. Senior leadership—including the superintendent, the school board and other top school officials—must be visibly involved and help demonstrate how quality tools and processes can be deployed in their own work.

To learn more about the criteria, administrators participate as examiners in the Iowa Performance for Recognition for Excellence (IRPE) Awards program. Participation

not only supports the state's version of the Baldrige award program, but also helps evaluators become local experts with great knowledge of the criteria and the important links between them. Examiners have opportunities to observe effective processes implemented by organizations as they review applications and conduct site visits to qualifying groups both in and out of the educational setting.

Continuous improvement efforts in the CRCSD are validated through invitations to present at regional, state and national conferences. Inquiries from other school districts interested in learning more about the continuous improvement journey are equally as rewarding. Staff members enjoy sharing the successes, trials and tribulations of implementing continuous quality improvement and find satisfaction in telling their stories to help others interested in traveling a similar path.

More important, employees and stakeholders benefit from district initiatives and innovations like the standardization of school improvement processes, strategic plans on a page for the school, department, task force and classroom, and meaningful data on walls of all facilities including the board of education meeting room. A school board member recently commented, "I have a much better understanding of what we are trying to accomplish. Publicly sharing direction and measures of progress are great ways to demonstrate accountability to the public."

### **Satisfied Stakeholders**

Positive feedback, both formal and informal, from internal and external stakeholders indicates high satisfaction with the continuous improvement route. At a recent professional development workshop, a middle school teacher said, "Continuous improvement just makes sense. The impact this approach has on the climate and culture of the classroom is amazing. I have noticed a greater sense of accountability, responsibility and ownership from my students than I've ever seen before."

Additionally, the use of quality processes and tools by stakeholders and the visual enhancement of student achievement help reaffirm commitment to the continuous improvement journey.

Systemic alignment harnesses the efforts of every employee, stakeholder and resource available to the district. Systems thinking ensures that actions are not taken in isolation and focuses on decisions that will most positively influence the system as a whole. A first step in systems thinking is to establish a clear and explicit strategic plan. Embedded in a process of shared and participative leadership, a unifying vision,

mission, core values and goals serve as the compass points to guide alignment of all other aspects of the improvement journey.

Often, support service departments of educational institutions are overlooked in continuous improvement initiatives. Most of the focus and attention are on the academic work of schools and classrooms. Regardless of position or rank, all employees must understand how their work directly contributes to the vision, mission, core values and goals of the district to ensure optimal, systemwide improvements. The degree to which these are known is directly proportional to overall organizational success.

It is important to ensure that school improvement plans are aligned to the district strategic plan. To accomplish this, schools set and communicate direction through the use of a standardized template to create a well articulated school improvement plan in which all staff understands the few critical goals and how their work contributes to accomplishing these goals. Using a systems approach, school plans are tightly aligned to the district strategic goals. It isn't enough, however, to simply align school improvement plans to the district plan.

### **Student Involvement**

To strengthen the alignment process, schools make certain that classroom goals are aligned to the school improvement plan. Classroom goals are developed in student-friendly language and posted in the classroom where progress is monitored by students and teachers. Through collaboration with students, classroom goals provide focus and direction for continuous quality improvement efforts on the front lines where the real action is taking place.

Also true to a systems approach, efforts are made to connect every student to the goals of the school improvement plan. When students set individual goals they understand how their work connects to the goals of the classroom, which are aligned to the school improvement plan which is aligned to the district strategic plan. In classrooms that use a continuous quality improvement approach, students monitor and track their progress toward goals in the student data center and in their data folders. During a recent visit to a third grade classroom, one student stated, "I'm doing better this month than last month. I like recording my progress in my data folder to see how I'm doing. I also like comparing my graph to the class run chart."

To build internal capacity and support for continuous quality improvement and to sustain progress, a variety of structures were created. Stakeholders and employees

participate in a variety of continuous improvement groups such as building leadership teams, department leadership teams, action research deployment teams and the quality liaison network. To provide precise direction for continuous improvement, the four quality levels further define outcomes. This document is a blueprint that serves as the standards and benchmarks for quality. It is especially valuable in communicating systemwide expectations for the use and implementation of continuous improvement principles.

As with any change initiative, it is critical that stakeholders not only understand the goals of the strategic plan, but also have ownership in their development. Ownership leads to accountability, which, in essence, facilitates buy-in from staff. Helping employees understand the change process, sharing how continuous quality improvement is research-based and involving them directly in the initiative helps reduce resistance and develop critically needed support.

To truly gauge the level of acceptance among internal stakeholders, an annual survey is conducted requesting stakeholders to specify their level of understanding and support for continuous improvement efforts in the district. Recently, more than 95% of employees agreed that the district is heading in the right direction. Employees indicated that they are committed to doing their part in accomplishing district goals.

On the continuous improvement journey, the district finds support in the Iowa Quality Center, the sponsoring organization of the Iowa Recognition for Performance Excellence Award (IRPE) program. This program recognizes organizations achieving positive results through the implementation of the Baldrige criteria. Applying for the state quality award program helps keep the continuous improvement efforts a priority and gives the district a valuable opportunity for an assessment by external evaluators.

In 2005, the district made its first application for IRPE recognition at a tier two level. Tier two evaluation is designed to demonstrate an organization's dedication to and progress toward the Baldrige criteria. The application addressed the categories and items of the Baldrige criteria in a 20-page written document. In 2006, the district applied at a tier three level in which a 50-page application allowed the district to demonstrate progress in building sound and reliable processes as measured against the Baldrige criteria.

## **The Results**

Based on the application submitted, the district was notified in October 2006 that it had qualified for a site visit in which a team of trained examiners verify and clarify

areas that weren't clear in the application. Following the site visit—in which evaluators determine the appropriate award recognition level—IRPE announced that the district scored high enough to qualify as the first school district in Iowa recognized in the state's quality award program. Recognition at the bronze level provides further external validation of progress and reinforces the continuous quality improvement journey for both internal and external district stakeholders.

Although formal recognition is appreciated, the detailed, written feedback report provided by the examiners as part of the recognition process is most influential and helpful. The report delineates strengths and opportunities for improvement (OFI) in the district and provides focus to areas in need of further development. Next steps in the district's quality journey are to systematically review and address the OFIs identified in the feedback report, strengthen performance relative to each area of the Baldrige criteria, and apply for recognition at the tier three silver level of the state quality award program next year. Over time, the district will strive for the highest level of state recognition, eventually applying for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

Continuous quality improvement has a tremendous impact on organizational results as demonstrated in several recognized school districts around the country. The power of systemic alignment is realized when each employee, stakeholder and student understands how his or her work contributes to the primary district focus—improving student learning. School districts are encouraged to explore the possibilities of organizing their improvement efforts using the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Educational Excellence. It is a powerful framework for implementing continuous quality improvement.

For more information or to find specific information referenced in the article, visit the Cedar Rapids Community School District continuous improvement website at <http://quality.cr.k12.ia.us/>. Educators can seek assistance in continuous quality improvement from various resources, such as ASQ, the Baldrige National Quality Program, [www.quality.nist.gov](http://www.quality.nist.gov), and the Quality in Education blog hosted by ASQ and authored by Jay Marino [www.asq.org/blog/](http://www.asq.org/blog/).

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