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Features

Boardroom to Classroom: Continuous Improvement in Cedar Rapids

The district uses what it calls a 'Plan on a Page' to create ownership stock for reaching a common goal

By Dave Markward and J. Jay Marino

The Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Community School District has long been recognized as a strong school system, educating many of its students to the highest levels of learning. However, like many others across our state and nation, the district also enrolls students whose potential is not being realized. For ours to become a great school system, we needed to change.

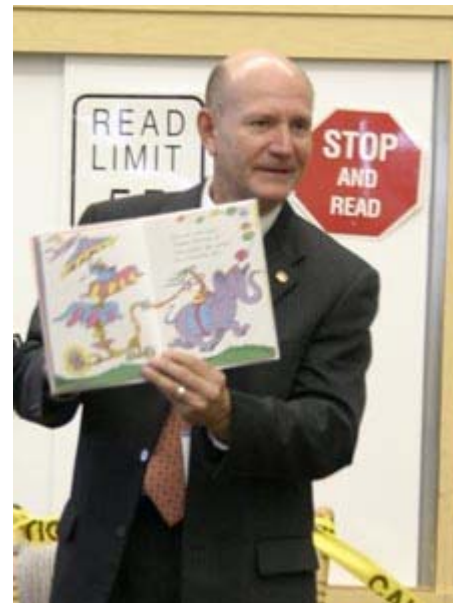
Before we launched any systemic reform, we asked ourselves: Can Cedar Rapids be a great school system? Do we know what it will take to become a great school system? Will we do what is necessary to become a great school system?

We answered the first question with a quick and confident yes. We have the desire and commitment to be a great school district. The answer to the second also was an immediate yes and the basis for our comprehensive approach to system change. Our answer to the third question was, "We'll see, but there is evidence the district is moving in the right direction."

Journey Begins

The Cedar Rapids district operates 34 schools with a hard-working staff nested in a community with a long history of support and high expectations for education. While we saw pockets of excellence within the system, our wish to accomplish the district's vision of excellence for all students was little more than a well-intended hope.

In 2004, the district had no mission statement, core values or defined goals and was operating without any overarching philosophy or set of guiding principles. Also conspicuously absent was an identified and embraced strategic plan to lead the way toward what our



Dave Markward

district could and should be.

Using the Malcolm Baldrige Performance Excellence framework as a guide, district leaders earnestly launched a continuous improvement journey at the start of the 2004-05 school year. Although it is still early in the process, indications are that the district is undergoing a systematic and systemic transformation. We are "improving on purpose."

Plan on a Page

Colleagues and experience have taught us that systemic transformation requires a well-defined plan and people who are committed to accomplishing it. In our case, the development and deployment of a district strategic plan was the basis for systemic reform from the boardroom to the classroom.

Parents, community members, staff members and students all have unique perspectives to contribute to a well-rounded and widely accepted transformation plan. Through community and staff forums, focus groups and individual solicitation, district leaders asked internal and external stakeholders questions such as, "What are the key challenges our district faces to provide an effective education?" and "What are the most important skills our students will need to be world-class learners?"

The district's senior leaders summarized feedback from these surveys and focus groups and identified several key themes, such as develop world-class learners; focus on customer satisfaction; promote diversity in the workforce; operate with fiscal integrity and efficiency; improve student academic performance; and enhance the social development of students.

These key ideas became the foundation for the school district's first strategic plan for systemic reform. This plan identifies the vision, mission, core values, goals and guiding philosophy that summarize the core components of the district strategic plan. We created a portable and visual depiction of the plan, a "Plan on a Page," which helped communicate direction to stakeholders and employees. It is posted in every school, district building and support facility. Each employee has a letter-sized copy of the plan, and we've developed smaller cards that we distribute to anyone and everyone inside and outside the school district.

Ownership Stock

From the outset, the plan was intended as a decision-guiding document. It is the backbone of Cedar Rapids' improvement effort, constantly reminding everyone of what is necessary to achieve success. Yet the Plan on a Page is only worth the time and effort if it stimulates action that produces results. The document can't simply collect dust on the shelf.

Because so many people from various sectors of the district and community participated in the planning process, the district stakeholders were able to make the plan their own. We also built ownership and increased effectiveness by asking individual schools, departments and work groups to create their own Plans on a Page.



J. Jay Marino

School and department staff, including staff from transportation, food service, human resources, maintenance and other support services, participate in leadership training designed to empower leadership teams in the change process. Using strategies they learn in these leadership training sessions, these devoted frontline leaders set the stage for action

and empowerment by establishing clear and common focus within their circles of influence.

As schools and departments create their own Plans on a Page, they share them with stakeholders and employees to articulate a course of action. The individual plans include clear and measurable goals written in SMART format (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time bound) to focus efforts and produce results.

For example, the district's special services division crafted a SMART goal that reads: By November of 2008, the special services division will document a 3 percent increase in the number of special education students in grades 5–9 demonstrating greater than one year of growth as measured by Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading comprehension scores.

The SMART goal in health services states: During the 2007-08 school year, health services will provide students and families access to consistent health information as measured by 100 percent participation of the district's schools in publishing health articles in their newsletters quarterly.

The technology department's SMART goal reads: 20 percent of staff will report an improvement in their technology skills from reading monthly *Technology Tricks and Tips* newsletters as reported in a staff survey to be sent in June 2008.

Leadership teams monitor the goals through in-process measures, gathering data frequently to guide midcourse changes. Charts and graphs include formative measures to determine progress; summative data provide a reliable measurement of progress over time.

Classroom Role

The process plays a key role in our classrooms as well. Teachers post the school's Plan on a Page in their classrooms and talk with students about its meaning and purpose. Teachers then work with students to create a classroom Plan on a Page using specific SMART goals that align to the school improvement plan.

For example, a 3rd-grade classroom goal might be to increase vocabulary skills as measured by a 15 percent reduction in vocabulary usage errors in the weekly classroom writing assignments. A classroom behavior goal might read: During the 2007-08 school year, our class will increase the respect shown in the classroom as measured by a 20 percent reduction in office referrals due to disrespect.

Students and teachers monitor goal progress in classroom data centers and use charts and graphs to measure progress and identify opportunities for improvement within the classroom. Students also track and monitor their individual progress in data folders and compare their own performance to the class performance. They share these folders with their parents during student-led conferences.

Support service employees, schools, classrooms, teachers and students all work toward accomplishing their customized Plan on a Page. By aligning everyone's efforts, systemic transformation occurs gradually over time. (View school and department Plans on a Page online at <http://quality.cr.k12.ia.us>.)

A Beating Pulse

We anticipated some resistance to our quest for change and minimized it somewhat by involving stakeholders in all stages of the plan's development. Helping employees understand the change process, clearly setting and communicating direction and purposely engaging

stakeholders in the transformation process develops critically needed support. Celebrating early successes and sharing evidence that the effort is working encourages staff to continue moving forward.

Gathering stakeholders' feedback about their perception of the change process is a powerful way to gauge the pulse of the system. We regularly survey stakeholders to determine their level of satisfaction and commitment to the change initiatives, asking them to respond to such statements as, "I understand and support our district's continuous improvement efforts" and "I understand my role in contributing to the plan's success." We also use survey results to make midcourse corrections to the plan and respond to specific concerns.

In a recent survey, more than 95 percent of employees agreed that the district is moving in the right direction. A similar percentage is committed to doing their part in accomplishing district goals.

Obstacles are inevitable in any reform initiative, and creating a common direction in a large, comprehensive organization with nearly 18,000 students, 2,800 employees, 34 schools and constantly changing demographics can be difficult.

Two challenges to systemic change that our staff frequently has shared with us are time and know-how. Specifically, teachers want to know when the time will be provided to develop plans. Additionally, they want to know when time will be given to implement the new initiatives and how progress toward goals will be measured and evaluated.

We know that failing to address these concerns would likely increase resistance and decrease chances for true systemic change. Therefore, we established clear plans to support employees throughout the change process and provide time for them to work on initiatives.

We also understand the necessity of letting go of ways that do not support the new direction. For example, we discontinued the manual requisition process and replaced it with e-procurement; eliminated the traditional 30- to 40-page school improvement plan and replaced it with a Plan on a Page; dropped assessments that have been given for years, but weren't generating useable data to inform instruction. We also began to use the mission and goals as a filter for making decisions about new initiatives.

Assessing Progress

Since we began the systemic transformation process three years ago, we have seen heartening progress. We know the importance of communicating these successes throughout the continuous improvement journey.

Cedar Rapids' schools and support service departments have created Plans on a Page that align to the district strategic plan. As a result, students and staff have a better understanding of our district's vision, mission, core values, goals and guiding philosophy of continuous improvement. The school board developed goals and accompanying action plans to guide its work and district administrators developed a defined set of measures to monitor the progress of district goals.

There is also greater focus on our work and tangible evidence of improvement. For example, 5th graders in 2004 increased their proficiency on the state test by 6.9 percent as they progressed to 8th grade in 2007. This same group of students increased their reading comprehension proficiency by 9.6 percent within the same timeframe as measured by cohort trend data.

In addition, during the past two years we've been able to increase the percent of students scoring at or above 20 on the ACT by 3.7 percent and have increased the percentage of minority employees by work group. Other recent data show an increase in the number of national board-certified teachers and an increase in the number of compliance targets met within the six-year plan for special education. Progress toward goals is tracked on the district's balanced scorecard and is made available online for staff, students, parents and the community to review.

Looking Ahead

The culture of the Cedar Rapids Community School District is changing. There is a growing sense of urgency to become better today than we were yesterday and better tomorrow than we are today. There is a greater commitment to the district's mission to develop world-class learners and responsible citizens. Discussions are being transformed to actions that will best prepare students to be successful in the 21st century and keep them and our nation competitive globally.

Systemic transformation occurs only through a collaborative process of shared leadership, the establishment of a common focus, the setting of clear direction at all levels, the creation and monitoring of measurable goals and the involvement of everyone creating their own Plan on a Page.

The power of systemic alignment is realized when all employees, stakeholders and students understand how their own work contributes to the top district priority: improving student learning.

Will we do what is necessary to become a great school system? We will. Although we know it will take much more time and effort, we believe what we are doing now will give us an appreciable chance to make the transformation a reality.

Dave Markward is superintendent of the Cedar Rapids Community School District in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. E-mail: dmarkward@cr.k12.ia.us. Jay Marino is the district's associate superintendent for organizational effectiveness and accountability.

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