

Cedar Rapids Community Schools

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Kaizen Process Introduced as Part of Continuous Improvement Effort



The team works to map out the "current state process".

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A team of District custodial staff members is working toward their Plan-On-A-Page goals by boosting productivity through the participation in a Kaizen event. The professional development activity is designed to improve work effectiveness by creating a more efficient process for cleaning District restrooms. This is the first Kaizen activity for the District and supports the District's guiding philosophy of continuous improvement.

Kaizen is a Japanese term meaning "to change for the better." It involves making small, incremental improvements over a long period of time. A Kaizen "event" is a rapid and focused version of the process used to make a specific change in as few as several days.

"A Kaizen event brings together front line employees to tackle work issues that are in need of improvement," explained Jay Marino, Associate Superintendent for Organizational Effectiveness and Accountability. "The process works because the suggested improvements come from the people who are doing the work. Staff members are motivated and empowered when they know their ideas are not only being listened to, but implemented."

A team of 13 individuals, representing all levels of the District, are spending several days engaged in the current blitz. They are being led by John Helbling, a Six Sigma Black Belt and Kaizen facilitator from Alliant Energy.

"Having a skilled facilitator is important," explained Marino. "Without the expertise of a trained facilitator, there can be a tendency to wander off task or focus on issues that are out of the scope of the area identified for improvement."

The Kaizen process starts by identifying a specific problem to solve or issue to address. Once an area for improvement is targeted, members of the team roll up their sleeves and get to work.

The first task is to analyze the existing process or current state. The group then defines the goals. Each goal must be small, specific, and achievable. In this case, the goal is to better standardize the cleaning and evaluation process of restrooms to ensure consistency and save time. The District has approximately 525 restrooms located within 36 buildings. Some 110 custodians are responsible for maintaining these areas.

"It was enlightening to study a process that we do everyday and map it out with input from various people and their unique perspectives," explained Bryan Anderson, custodian. "Kaizen allows us to approach our work with fresh ideas and helps us generate new solutions to identified areas of improvement."

"Kaizen provides an opportunity to be viewed as equals in the improvement process. Positional authority doesn't exist when we work together as a leadership team to solve problems," added Marshall Clemmons, Engineer and Union President. "Overall, the process had helped me feel more appreciated, empowered and valued as an employee."

Other steps in a Kaizen event include: mapping current processes, determining what's most important to the customer, identifying root causes of problems, brainstorming solutions, creating in-process measures of effectiveness, and finalizing an action plan to follow after the event.

"Kaizen is not a once a month or a once a year activity," explained Marino. "It is based on making small changes on a regular basis and on consistently working to improve. Future Kaizen events will be conducted in other support service departments in the near future."

To wrap up this kaizen event, group members will share their process and results with District leadership teams at a future Board of Education meeting. This presentation will involve the entire team.

"Sharing the results of the Kaizen process helps communicate best practices and organizational knowledge throughout the District," said Marino. "In addition, we want everyone to have a better understanding of a process that can help accomplish the goals of the support service department plans on a page."

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