

DRESSING UP SCHOOLS

Districtwide improvement program paying dividends for Cedar Rapids district

By Diane Heldt

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CEDAR RAPIDS — A chance to dress up as a judge, doctor, astronaut or scientist has cut the rate of absenteeism at Polk Elementary in half this year.

The school, at 1500 B Ave. NE, was averaging 18 absent students daily, a "terrible" number for a school of about 200 students, said Principal Bill Freeburg. School leaders made absenteeism a focus of their "Plan, Do, Study, Act" continuous improvement process, a new push this year in all Cedar Rapids schools.

Polk's "Got Smart" program recognizes students who attend 10 days in a row. They have their pictures taken in costumes representing various jobs. The pictures are posted at school and copies sent home to parents.

The program has cut average daily absenteeism to six to 10 students, Freeburg said.

"We really feel the program has had an effect," he said. "It's become part of the culture of the building, and the kids love it. It communicates how proud we are."

Other schools have seen similar positive results using the Plan, Do, Study, Act process to tackle issues.

Johnson Elementary has seen a dramatic decrease in office referrals for discipline



Cliff Jette/The Gazette

Fifth grader Jimmie Maclin puts a hat on first grader Jasmin Rosales on Wednesday at Polk Elementary in Cedar Rapids. They were getting ready for pictures as part of a reward program for attendance. Students with 10 consecutive days of attendance dress up as professionals and have their photos taken. Wednesday's theme was Master Gardener.

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On the Net

■ For more information, go to the school district Web site at www.cr.k12.ia.us and click on "continuous improvement."

Schools/All employees involved

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issues since the program has teachers highlight a social skill each week.

Grant Wood Elementary used the process to come up with ways to cut down on fighting and behavioral problems at recess.

Every school has three "Action Research Teams" that implement the Plan, Do, Study, Act improvement process in the areas of math, reading and social/emotional/behavioral. Every building staff member is on one of the teams. Also, each building has a trained "quality liaison" — the source in that school for questions about the plans.

Some schools have used the improvement process for a few years, but this is the first year it's in every building. The idea is to align each school's improvement plan to the district's overall strategic plan.

The Cedar Rapids district has 33 schools, more than 2,800 teachers and staffers and nearly 18,000 students. Setting goals and implementing improvement strategies in such a large organization can be challenging, which is why a unified effort is important, officials said.

"Imagine we have a big weight, and we throw it out there to all the schools. We want everybody to grab hold of the rope and pull in the same direction to move this 18,000-student district ahead," Associate Superintendent Jay Marino said. "That's the whole theory behind how con-



Jay Marino

Associate superintendents



Chris Rauscher

tinuous improvement works — everybody is working on the same goals."

Implementing the process was a key focus for Superintendent Dave Markward, who is finishing his second year with the district. Marino, who has led much of the staff training, and Associate Superintendent Chris Rauscher joined the district last year; both have backgrounds in continuous improvement.

The district plan is a work in progress, an effort in the beginning stages, said school board President Mary Meisterling. She likes the gradual way the process was rolled out by Markward.

The strength of the plan is that "there's no question about the direction of the district," said Meisterling, who added she looks forward to seeing the results of district and school scorecards that measure how people are using the concepts and if

they're producing results.

"In the past, we always wanted to improve, but it wasn't the main thrust and focus of district business," she said. "Really what it's all about is, 'How can we impact teaching and learning, classrooms, curriculum and the environment to increase student achievement?'"

The Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence provides the framework.

Baldrige is a national quality improvement model that relies heavily on data-driven decisions. It's a popular model for business and industry and is becoming more widely used by schools.

Baldrige is big with schools in Illinois, from where Markward, Marino and Rauscher all came. A few schools in Iowa are dabbling in it, but Cedar Rapids is likely the first to implement the program fully, officials said.

"If you have buy-in from the top down, you see great results with this program," said Scott Montgomery, chief operating officer for the Council of Chief State School Officers.

One strength of the Cedar Rapids plan, Marino said, is the involvement of every employee, from teachers and classroom associates to bus drivers and janitors.

"Ninety-five percent of our staff, when we surveyed, said, 'This is wonderful — it's nice to have direction.'" he said. "We've got everybody speaking the same language."

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Mary Meisterling

School board president