

## **Beginning the Journey: Turning the Vision Into Reality**

*By Patrick Murphy, assistant superintendent of accountability, and M. Teresa Caldwell, coordinator of educational planning*

One of the challenges for today's schools is to do more within an increasingly diverse and competitive environment that addresses a multitude of priorities. Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), in its mission to ensure that all students graduate with the 21st century skills necessary to succeed in a knowledge society, has undertaken a governance initiative and established expectations for sustainable, continuous improvement.

The question that arises from the initiative is how to accomplish it in a system of 167,000 students spread throughout more than 235 schools. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award has provided us with the criteria by which we can begin to measure the progress of our journey toward providing every child the opportunity to realize his or her fullest potential.

The office of educational planning (OEP), in collaboration with cluster assistant superintendents and principals, has developed a school improvement planning document and resource guide to steer schools as they work through the process of continuous improvement. The process focuses school and district improvement student performance efforts and concentrates planning efforts on school district priorities of three goals that look at the development of the whole child.

Goals address three priorities: academic achievement, essential life skills and responsibility to the community. The school district has adopted a planning process for building school and district capacity for high-quality planning and by bringing together all stakeholders to collaboratively plan for continuous improvement to successfully achieve these goals.

The FCPS school improvement plan (SIP) serves two purposes:

1. It is a tool that assists school staff in their continuous school improvement efforts.
2. It fulfills district, state and federal requirements, including requirements for schoolwide Title I, targeted assistance and adequate year progress/needs improvement plans.

Initially, OEP offered a series of workshops and seminars on quality tools to assist schools in analyzing data and information, facilitating group decision making, understanding relationships between variables, prioritizing, establishing cause and effect, identifying root cause and improving the quality of end products.

These tools are the foundation for the development of the school improvement template and resource guide. The quality tools provide a process for schools to use to determine areas of need and to set priorities. Concurrently, the school district began to research other systems and their approaches to continuous improvement. The research led central office and school staffs to read *Charting Your Course: Lessons Learned During the Journey Toward Performance Excellence*,<sup>1</sup> and subsequently, to offer a series of continuous improvement workshops centered on this school district's journey.

### **Using Baldrige criteria**

The premise of the workshops was structured around the understanding and use of the Baldrige criteria for continuous improvement: leadership, strategic planning, student, stakeholder and market focus, workforce focus, process management and results. It is critical that a framework be identified and used as a way to guide and facilitate the work of continuous improvement to both anchor and monitor a course of action.

The framework ultimately provides a method for measuring student performance, thereby improving results. The application of this approach by participants began with an understanding of each school and an analysis process to determine priorities and areas of improvement.

Participants learned the five whys relationship diagram, which aligned with their major instructional improvement goals: learning how to determine the root cause of the problem and putting an end to the buying of unnecessary items, addition of programs and problem fixes until the root cause of the achievement deficit has been identified. Planning for change based on need, not reaction, was emphasized.

Participants began developing school improvement plans using the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) model, analyzing and exploring in-depth first and second-order change. They began asking questions, such as "What do high achieving principals do?" and "What does the research say are their practices?" These workshops provided a foundation for school-based administrators to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the alignment between the planning criteria, in this case Baldrige, and its relationship to their business as instructional leaders.

A series of follow-up workshops and leadership seminars incorporated and reinforced the concepts identified in many of the successful school districts that have earned the Baldrige award for education. The workshops included discussions using the

books, *Charting Your Course*, and *Malcolm and Me: How to Use the Baldrige Process to Improve Your School*.<sup>2</sup> *Malcolm and Me* provides another example of how a school division used the Baldrige criteria to improve student achievement. The criteria provided us with a framework to ask the essential questions to help guide us on the path of continuous improvement.

### **Framing it in**

While we used a host of tools to accomplish our goal, all were tied to establishing a framework and using a process to guide and facilitate the improvement plan. The reward is the journey as each milestone and measure of achievement is accomplished along the way. Each school and school division will take a different path. There must be framework, however, that provides the direction and foundation for work. In the case of the two successful Baldrige award recipients—Community Consolidated School District 15 in Palatine, IL, and Jenks Public Schools in Oklahoma—the same process was used, each using different means to achieve success and accomplish their goals.

We have undertaken several initiatives to reinforce the application of quality tools inherent to the planning process. In doing so, we have identified some of our schools where diverse populations of students are demonstrating exceptional academic performance and closing the achievement gap.

Using the quality tools and the PDSA design to investigate what these schools are doing, we have learned these schools use and analyze student performance data, both formative and summative, to inform classroom instructional decision making. It is more than data analysis—it is informed decision making and the application of appropriate instructional strategies based on student needs that are making the difference.

Lao-Tzu, a Chinese philosopher, once said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins beneath one's feet." Rather than emphasizing the first step, he regarded action as something that arises naturally from stillness.

As FCPS begins its quality journey, we are deliberately and intentionally reflecting on where we are and where we want to go. We are continuing to learn and expand our repertoire and more fully develop a comprehensive and integrated systems perspective for managing our organization to achieve the FCPS performance excellence goal of turning the vision into reality—child by child.

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**References**

1. John C. Coyers and Bob Ewy, *Charting Your Course: Lessons Learned During the Journey Toward Performance Excellence*, ASQ Quality Press, 2003.
2. Sandra Cokeley and Richard Maurer, *Malcolm and Me: How to Use the Baldrige Process to Improve Your School*, ASQ Quality Press, 2003.