

How Quality Professionals Worldwide Can Work to Improve K12 Education

Keeping with this issue's international theme, we are presenting actions that we, as quality professionals, have taken in support of K12 Education in United States schools. We put these forward knowing that there is wide variation in the K12 Education System in countries around the world. The System in the United States is very decentralized with significant control and funding at the State and Local levels and much less so at the Federal level. Individual readers need to take their culture, customs, and K12 Education System design into account when evaluating how our actions could be applied by them. Our goal is to stimulate quality professionals worldwide into action using their often unique skills, knowledge and experience to improve K12 education outcomes for their country's children. And this, after all, we believe is the true goal of education, and a key building block of a sound economy and effectively, functioning country.

Quality Professionals have many skills that can benefit K12 Education from the classroom through districts on to the federal level. The skills we have found most applicable are:

1) Data Analysis to turn data, which is abundant at all levels in the United States, into actionable information. This also includes data collection, sampling, and organization as well as comparative statistics to test for significance. Data analysis supports planning and data based decision making.

2) Accomplishing Goals in which we include a broad scope of activities: Planning and goal setting – short and long term, action plans and project management to achieve the goals, constructive leadership, organizational alignment, teams and their effective functioning and management, and how to develop professional relationships that foster effective communication and cooperation.

3) Problem Solving/Continual Improvement which includes a method for solving problems - PDSA or PDCA (Plan – Do – Study or Check – Act) works well, the multitude of problem solving tools starting with the 7 Basic Quality Tools and expanding from there, and all with a concerted focus on getting to root cause determination of why things are the way they are. This provides a structure and common language to support data based decision making and an approach that allows them to move from where they are to their goals.

4) Process Creation/Standardization includes procedure writing and process flowcharting as a way of deciding on best practices, as they know them at the time, documenting them, communicating and training others in them, maintaining continuity as people enter and leave the organization, and to provide a method to hold the gains achieved through improvement efforts.

Where we have applied the skills is in working with school staff to reduce incident referrals, preparing school improvement plans and the analysis of relevant data, coordinating the combination of two schools, training in problem solving method and tools, decisions on grade level looping, coaching principals, etc.

A starting point for individuals or groups either as part of a professional society like ASQ, a social organization, or on your own or with colleagues, friends, and other concerned community members, etc., is:

“A Guide for ASQ Sections: Initiating and Sustaining Engagement with K12 Schools and Districts”

It is located on the Education Division website at http://www.asq.org/edu/sections_edu/index.html

Although written for sections, it is equally useable by other groups or individuals – in fact that is how it was developed. It is the documentation of the lessons learned by the author, Phil Schmidt, from his success working initially as an individual to improve K12 Education.

Besides bringing the skills listed above to working with schools, their staff, and with administrative structures, the following is an additional list of opportunities we have been involved in or are aware of: facilitating the involvement of university students studying quality with improvement projects in schools, work with specialty programs at the schools or activities focused on increasing math, science, or engineering such as construction or other trades, robotic teams, teams participating in science or engineering competitions.

In closing, we trust that the ideas we have presented provide the spark for you to get involved in improving K12 Education in whatever country or region you find yourself as a Quality Professional. We would greatly appreciate hearing about your experiences and to provide support or assistance as you initiate and sustain your own K12 improvement efforts.

About the Authors: Phil Schmidt and Rossi Wittlinger are Co-Vice Chairs of the K12 Education Committee of ASQ's Education Division. They are also involved in improving K12 Education through various ASQ national efforts and in the Milwaukee Section. They are independent consultants facilitating growth solutions for sustained organizational greatness.