



## **Achieving and Sustaining Excellence in Education**

*By Dori Bisbey, Christine Davis, William Hall, Stephen Muzzy and Karen Schafer*

The holiday season in December 2007 was a joyful time for Brevard Public Schools' (BPS) teachers, students, staff, parents and community partners. The district was basking in the glow of receiving the Governor's Sterling Award for Performance Excellence by the Florida

Sterling Council.<sup>1</sup> BPS became only the second school district to receive this honor at the district level and the first district in Florida to receive the award in more than 15 years.

More than 500 community leaders, elected officials and others joined Gov. Charlie Crist at a special luncheon to share this honor. Immediately following the luncheon, Crist simulcast a message to all BPS students and teachers, thanking them for their outstanding accomplishments and for being first in Florida in student achievement. Specifically, the governor congratulated BPS for having 96% of all schools earning an A or B grade, having a 92% graduation rate and for keeping its commitment to excellence.

The recognition luncheon was a signature moment, capping a long journey that started in 2000 when then-superintendent Richard A. DiPatri. He introduced a bold vision: to be first in Florida in student achievement with a

mission to serve every student with excellence as the standard. BPS led the state in many key performance areas, including graduation rate, school district GPA, percentage of students meeting high standards in math, number of students winning science research awards, number

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### *About Brevard Public Schools...*

*44<sup>th</sup> Largest School District in the U.S.*

*10<sup>th</sup> Largest of 67 Districts in FL*

#### *Student Population*

*- 73,000*

*- 36% Economically Disadvantaged*

#### *Employees*

*- 9,000*

#### *86 Schools*

*- 58 Elementary (K-6 grade)*

*- 12 Middle (7-8 grade)*

*- 4 Combination (7-12 grade)*

*- 12 High (9-12 grade)*

*In 2008-09, 98% of schools received either an A or B grade by the FLDOE*

*In 2008-09, BPS received an overall grade of A from the FLDOE for the 6<sup>th</sup> consecutive year*

#### *2007 FL Governor's Sterling Award*

*-1<sup>st</sup> district in 15 years to be recognized*

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of students in dual enrollment programs, percentage of dollars dedicated to the classroom and music demonstration schools.

In addition, BPS was the only school district in the country the AARP selected as the Best Employer for Workers over 50.<sup>2</sup> Customers and stakeholders were also highly engaged and satisfied based on leading performance in areas such as parent/client overall satisfaction rates of 92%, more than 300 business partners, and more than 1 million volunteer hours averaging more than 17 hours per enrolled student.

### **Keys to success**

Achieving and sustaining performance excellence in today's challenging K-12 environment is difficult. While bordering on cliché, Jim Collins' quote, "Good is the enemy of great" rings true.<sup>3</sup> Good is the enemy of BPS. Achieving and sustaining greatness in the public education sector requires a systemic and aligned approach that involves an engaged and supportive governing body, leadership team, workforce and community to achieve the learning and organizational goals outlined in BPS' strategic plan.

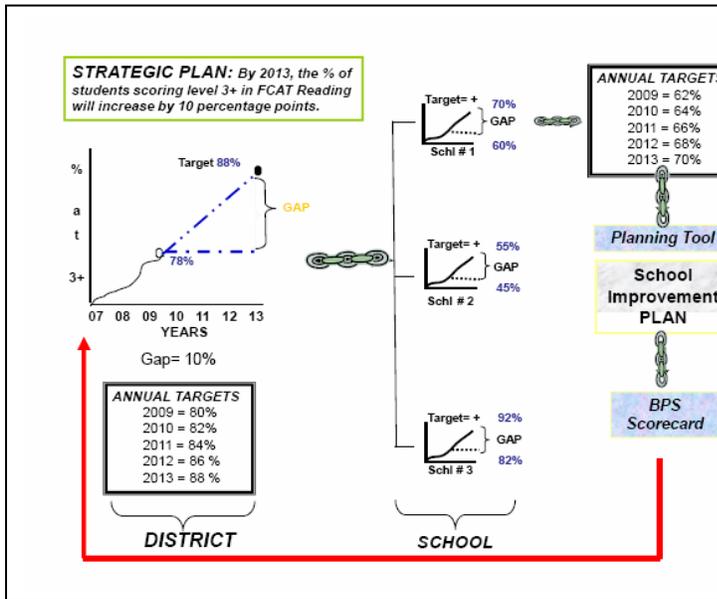
For BPS, the strategic plan is much more than a document that sits on a shelf; it is a living, breathing reference tool that provides organizational focus and consists of the priority goals, objectives and strategies necessary to achieve high performance in all areas relevant to the district's mission. School improvement plans (SIPs) are directly linked to the goals and objectives outlined in the strategic plan. Accountability for results is measured through the innovative BPS scorecard, which is available on the district's website ([www.brevardschools.org](http://www.brevardschools.org)).<sup>4</sup>

Each performance indicator on the BPS scorecard contains a description of the measure, a reference to the strategic plan and a comparative benchmark. The scorecard—a tool that measures overall success in BPS—lists indicators related to school and district performance and gives a by-the-numbers approach to information. The scorecard also provides a common basis for discussion regarding success toward the goals outlined in the strategic plan. Progress on achieving desired results is monitored frequently through the BPS scorecard and action plans located on collaborative, web-based workspaces.

An example of how the district links strategic plan objectives to school improvement plans and to the BPS scorecard is illustrated in Figure 1:



Figure 1: Strategic plan, SIP and scorecard linkage



### Process management and continuous improvement

Perhaps the most critical component of the BPS' integrated management system is its systematic commitment to continuous improvement. Extensive training and deployment of improvement methods have evolved over the last several years in the district—all rooted in the principles of the plan-do-check-act (PDCA) cycle, a continuous improvement model. Since the early 2000s, BPS leaders and instructional personnel have been trained in the district's by-the-numbers and beyond-the-numbers programs that stress PDCA principles. This training and application of the methods have resulted in differentiated instructional practices aimed at the needs of individual learners, and improved efficiencies and effectiveness of organizational processes.

In 2006 and 2007, senior staff, district leadership and functional managers were trained in the systematic implementation of process management and improvement methods to design and improve work processes and systems. In 2008 and 2009, principals and school leadership also were trained.

Today, the district has adopted a seven-step process management system using Six Sigma's define, measure, analyze, improve and control (DMAIC) approach to improve and innovate work processes. More than 100 priority processes have been identified with defined process control systems. The district believes that a key to sustaining success in organizations



is to transfer dependency from a few superstars (the hero mentality) to a system of process management and continuous improvement.

The implementation of this system has enabled process owners to answer the following key questions:

Question	Answer/tool
What do you do, and what needs are you meeting?	Process name and description.
How do you do it?	Process flow chart.
How do you know you are doing a good job?	Status of outcome measures.
How do you monitor the process to ensure you meet or exceed the requirements of the customer?	Status of in-process or predictor measures.
How do you improve?	PDCA, DMAIC and by-the-numbers.

This simple yet powerful approach that creates an institutionalized and systemic method to continuous improvement has proven to yield increasingly superior results.

### **Using the Baldrige criteria**

The direction for BPS is shaped by a combination of leadership, strategic planning and an unfaltering focus on the core organizational value that all decisions are made in the best interest of students. Coupling this with a concentration on employee involvement and excellence, process management, continuous improvement and a management-by-fact approach has enabled the district to achieve and sustain superior results. Using the Baldrige Education criteria is highly recommended due to the criteria's ability to provide substance and clear guidance on what excellence looks like in these areas.<sup>5</sup>

The criteria are a critical framework to assist an educational organization on its journey to excellence. Going one step further, BPS has deployed and integrated a Brevard Public Schools performance excellence resource manual, which serves as a practical guide for  
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achieving and sustaining excellence throughout the district.<sup>6</sup> This unique resource was developed through a three-year partnership with Robert Seemer, COO and president of Electronic Training Solutions in Cocoa, FL.

### **Challenges in today's economy**

After receiving the Governor's Sterling Award, the entire BPS community felt a huge sense of pride and accomplishment. Admittedly, achieving this milestone involved a tremendous amount of difficult work. The adage about nothing great comes easy could not have been more accurate. Some organizations, having reached such a pinnacle, might have elected to take a collective breath and relax—not BPS.

Once the district achieved the vision of “first in Florida,” it set its sights even higher. DiPatri introduced a new, bold vision—to be the first in Florida in student achievement and among the top five in the nation by 2013. The district identified key performance indicators and strategies to achieve the stretch goals and targets.

Academic achievement, graduation rates, fiscal performance, community engagement and customer-based accountability measures have all continued to improve through the most recently completed school year, in spite of a negative budget climate not seen in Florida since the 1970s. Employee engagement and satisfaction rates continued to be exceptional, even with increased workloads and a lack of employee pay raises.

BPS, unlike any neighboring central Florida school district, was able to completely avoid layoffs during these difficult budgetary times. The value and belief in the district's greatest resource—its people—was demonstrated through deeds versus words. There is a strong belief that all employees must work together as a team to accomplish our mission.

Brian Binggeli, the district's new superintendent, has been embraced readily through a unanimous vote from the school board and with the full support of district employees. These successes are due to a culture of excellence and leadership, as well as a proactive, preventive approach to managing processes and delivering results.

The systemic approach to continuous improvement and quality through using tools such as the *Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence* has played a large role in helping Brevard meet the strategic challenges in the last year and will surely be instrumental to success in the future.



## References

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2. AARP Global Network, "2008 Winners," [www.aarp.org/money/work/best\\_employers/articles/brevard\\_public\\_schools.html](http://www.aarp.org/money/work/best_employers/articles/brevard_public_schools.html).
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4. Brevard Public Schools, [www.brevardschools.org](http://www.brevardschools.org).
5. Baldrige National Quality Program, "Education Criteria for Performance Excellence," [www.quality.nist.gov/Education\\_Criteria.htm](http://www.quality.nist.gov/Education_Criteria.htm) (case sensitive).
6. Robert H. Seemer, *Brevard Public Schools Performance Excellence Resource Manual*, 2009.

For more information about Brevard Public Schools, located in Viera, FL, visit [www.brevardschools.org](http://www.brevardschools.org).

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