



In Their Own Words: Feedback from the Leadership Summit

Following the June [ASQ Leadership Summit for Superintendents](#)—in which 10 school districts from across the country were represented and about 50 people attended—*Primary and Secondary Education Brief* asked attendees to answer questions about their experiences and how what they learned translates into changes for their districts.

These questions addressed systemic improvement, the challenges their districts faced, best practices and their thoughts on the leadership summit. Here is what they had to say:

Mark Keen, superintendent, Westfield Washington Schools, Westfield, IN

How has your district determined its key work systems and key work processes that align to its mission, goals and action plans?

We've done this in a variety of ways, including survey work, focus group discussions, key partner feedback and systematic planning. We've tried to remain disciplined in our commitment to alignment by ensuring that our systems are designed to meet the priorities (mission and vision, for instance) of the district.

What do you think is the most important thing in driving systemic improvement?

The two-step process of establishing the clear priorities of the district and then creating processes that reflect an unwavering focus on those priorities.

What challenges related to systemic improvement does your district face, and how does what you learned help you address those challenges?

There are many "balls in the air" with systemic planning. The district's infrastructure must be organized in such way that everyone considers alignment as they plan and improve processes. We've become much stronger in creating structures that allow those who play dual roles to manage alignment. Smaller districts struggle with this when they have central office personnel working as leaders of departments and also working on a district leadership team and monitoring progress. It is a continuous struggle.

What best practices related to systemic improvement did you see from other districts that you could apply to your own district?

At the 2008 National Quality Education Conference (NQEC), we learned how to use the Visio program to delineate responsibilities in a process. While we haven't fully realized our potential in this area, we are pushing toward that end. An additional example would be our work in driving plan-do-study-act cycles to the classroom level. Until that process reaches every individual student, it is difficult to say that things are really changing.

What are some best practices within your own district you would like to share with others?

We are striving to develop a stronger conceptual understanding of the Baldrige criteria in our organization. To monitor our progress, we are using a bi-monthly checklist that asks



our district leadership team to place a quantifiable rating on our status in each component within the seven criteria categories. We monitor our growth and we can see exactly where we need additional focus and improvement. This is done at the central office level, but it is also a catalyst for the work those leaders take back to their individual departments.

Why would you recommend others attend the summit?

I would recommend others attend the conference for two reasons:

1. There are always people there you can gain ideas from and bounce things off of, such as best practices, as well as networking time.
2. It's a great time to get a team together and get involved in dialogue on topics for improvement and for building a stronger team.

Dan Stiffler, assistant superintendent for personnel and chief quality officer, Haysville Public Schools, Haysville, KS

How has your district determined its key work systems and key work processes that align to its mission, goals and action plans?

We are working with a consultant to write a district five-year strategic plan. We expect that our key work systems and processes will emerge as a result of the strategic planning process.

What do you think is the most important thing in driving systemic improvement?

Strong leadership is essential. The leaders set the vision and hold high expectations for staff.

What challenges related to systemic improvement does your district face, and how does what you learn help you address those challenges?

It is never easy to change cultures in an organization. Many of our teachers and staff members understand the need to improve and want to participate in our quest for excellence, but there are those who are reluctant to get on board. We've learned to set the appropriate work processes and systems in place so that systemic thinking and behavior is continually reinforced.

What best practices related to systemic improvement did you see from other districts that you could apply to your own district?

Best practices we wish to implement include professional learning communities, plan-do-study-act cycles and cross-functional teams.

What are some best practices within your own district you would like to share with others?

A districtwide, multi-tiered system of supports, which provides instruction and intervention for students academically and behaviorally.

Why would you recommend others attend the summit?

The presentations were exceptional, as was the one-on-one access to nationally known experts in quality education practices. It was an amazing opportunity to learn.

Any additional advice?

It's a never-ending journey.

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Terry Holliday, superintendent, Iredell-Statesville Schools, Statesville, NC

How has your district determined its key work systems and key work processes that align to its mission, goals and action plans?

We have partnered with American Productivity and Quality Center to do this type of work with school systems across the nation. The foundation of our work has been Michael Hammer's "Reengineering Organizations."

What do you think is the most important thing in driving systemic improvement?

A district strategic plan that is aligned to the worker level.

What challenges related to systemic improvement does your district face, and how does what you learn help you address those challenges?

Changing the culture is always the thing. People resist change and educators resist change more than most. Teachers want autonomy, not systemic and systematic processes that reduce variation in classroom learning results.

What best practices related to systemic improvement did you see from other districts that you could apply to your own district?

From other districts, we have copied strategic planning process and process improvement strategies.

What are some best practices within your own district you would like to share with others?

Our strategic planning process, teacher and principal evaluation, data analysis process and our professional learning communities product-driven team matrix.

Why would you recommend others attend the summit?

It's a good chance for networking and provides the time to work with your leadership team.

Any additional advice?

Stay the course. Go slow to go fast. Board support is essential.

**Cheri Dedmon, director of strategic planning and assessment, Dalton Public Schools
Dalton, GA**

How has your district determined its key work systems and key work processes that align to its mission, goals and action plans?

Another colleague and I attended the summit after being introduced to ASQ at NQEC last November. By the end of NQEC we were hooked on the common-sense, systemic approach to building capacity within the districts that showcased their work. Our district had just completed a balanced scorecard process with an external partner, and it did not find the results to be a good match for our desire to transform our organization. We didn't want to stop short by creating a strategic plan alone; rather, we wanted to build capacity for strategic thinking.

What challenges related to systemic improvement does your district face, and how does what you learn help you address those challenges?



ASQ is the only organization that we have found with the resources and training to get us there. That said, there is some new learning that we left with from the summit. Our district has just transitioned to a new superintendent from another state. We are struggling with how to keep the momentum and focus and not lose everything we have been working on for the last 18 months.

What best practices related to systemic improvement did you see from other districts that you could apply to your own district?

All of the presenters expressed a key learning for them in their role as leaders. Unless this work is understood, implemented and modeled by the board of education, we are all susceptible to the revolving-door pattern of many districts with key leaders coming and going.

Any additional advice?

Leadership is everything, and it starts at the top with the board. The need to align philosophy with action was another key to organizational excellence. We have much work ahead of us, but at least we know the path to follow to increase our chances for successful outcomes for students and their families.