

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

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The Opportunity

Over the last 7 years, NCLB (No Child Left Behind) legislation has focused teachers, school and district administration on student achievement – particularly as measured by state annual standardized tests in different subject areas. Despite dedication and hard work by educators, many schools find the achievement of their students short of where they want or need to be. NCLB requires that 100% of students in all population sub-groups meet the proficient or advanced levels of their standardized tests by 2014. Although I believe that NCLB has the proper goal, it, like many improvement efforts, violates Dr. Deming's point to stay away from exhortations to do better. Herein lies the opportunity for ASQ members – to provide what NCLB lacks - the methods, processes, tools, and structure to allow school and district and subject matter experts (teachers, administrators, students) to solve problems, analyze data, create processes, and implement plans successfully to improve the education outcomes for their students.

Ground Rules

These ground rules are tips/suggestions. They are from ASQ Section Members who present a positive tone when appropriate consideration is given to respect for the culture and climate of schools.

One ASQ Section member found it was important, when thinking about helping local schools, to consider both short-term limited success and/or long term systemic change. Members anticipating dramatic results and heroic actions will likely be disappointed. It works out better when scale and feasibility are carefully considered. It is not uncommon for business-oriented advisors to walk away from school-improvement efforts angry within one year uttering unkind words about the lack of immediate results from their advice.

Another ASQ Section member offered this list of attitudes and successful approaches for working with schools. Other ASQ Section members wanting to work with schools might find them useful as well. Successful initiation and sustained engagement with schools and districts can be as challenging as it is rewarding.

- **Partner with your schools.** While ASQ Section members are rarely K-12 school teachers they are all interested parties in education. All attended school and all pay taxes to support their local schools. Some serve as school board members or as volunteers. Some teach in workshops, training sessions, or as part time instructors. Members are a part of the education process. Members can bring skill and experience in quality. They are not expected to be subject matter experts or experienced in educating children.
- **Facilitate.** You are at your best when you facilitate by asking questions — including the tough ones and suggesting ways to approach issues define problems — and implement programs.

This often includes reliable and valid methods and tools for planning and data analysis based on your personal experience. The goal is for educators to find their own answers and grow their capacity to act on their own.

- **Be positive.** Education never has a shortage of negative press. You want to be warmly welcomed as a positive community member engaging them, valuing them, and helping them succeed.
- **Be an eager learner.** You should expect difficulty at first understanding their issues, accepting their methods and processes, determining why they do things, their requirements and evaluating new requirements. Expect it to take time and effort to translate quality terminology into the language of educators and for you to translate education terminology into quality/business terminology. You will find that terms like conformity, quality, requirements, management, audits, standards, standardization, and effectiveness have very different and often negative connotations in schools. Patience is a necessity.
- **Pace yourself.** Improving education is a longer term commitment. A single tool application (Flow Chart) can be done in a few hours. However, system changes often require developing relationships, trust, and confidence. It is about maintaining a consistent, helpful, patient presence. Be prepared to use vacation time if necessary.
- **It's their choice.** Statements and other phrasing that open the door for questioning and exploring involves them in the decision and creates ownership of the process. For example, "let me suggest ..., How about this.., What if it were done this way..., What do you think..., Do you think this might help...) These phrases avoid the "you should" statements and demands which might put people on the defensive.
- **Focus on facts.** This helps you and them maintain objectivity and promote open discussion. Schools live in the public eye and are concerned about confidentiality issues with student-specific data. Be sensitive to this as you work with them. Ask about any policies on confidentiality as you view individual student data.
- **Timing is critical.** School schedules have their own seasonal ebb and flow. Their timetable is public knowledge and often on their website. Learn it, accept it, and plan accordingly. Make arrangements for follow-up discussion by phone or email. It is seldom a burden and can save meeting time.
- **Profit is illegal.** Schools are non-profit organizations and subject to different levels of politics: federal, state, departments of education, school boards, district, union, principals, leadership teams, and school governance councils. Inadvertent references to "bottom line" or "ROI" are likely to do more harm than good
- **Focus on what you do well.** School people will recognize and accept you for what you are and what you can do for them. You in turn can accept the school for what is and for what it can do for itself. Assist in the vision of where they could be. Work to get them to take the next step, step after step. This is their journey. They can get entangled in the day-to-day issues. Focus on their progress and keep them keeping on.

Getting Started

Do some research; find out some schools that section members have their children attending. The first step is the most difficult. Schools welcome everyone, as a public institution must. They also are skilled in avoiding additional commitments. Much time and effort can be wasted preparing to work with schools that

are not able to work with you. Research can help in finding a school where you can make a difference. You have more skill and knowledge than many schools can internalize. Finding a good working relationship often requires extra effort.

- **Do some research** Inquire from your Section members what schools their children attend. From the members, get a feel for the openness and whether the school is trying something new. Follow up by going to the school's website.
- **Form a team.** Identify section members who are interested in working with schools and can follow the ground rules above.
- **Find time.** Have the section volunteers approach their employers to find out if there is flexibility to be gone during the day, leave early, or come in later to be able to volunteer with schools.
- **Get help.** Volunteers with flexibility are the best candidates for direct contact and on-site work with the schools. The other volunteers can provide valuable support for research, data analysis, section committee to discuss and plan the approach - next steps with the school(s).
- **Involve the Section.** Form a Quality in Education Committee within your section. Add your goals to the Section's Business Plan. Determine which committee members are doing what. Get a budget approved by the section leadership team. Include the expenses to have at least one person from the committee attend NQEC, National Quality in Education Conference that ASQ puts on in November each year. Join ASQ's Education Division. If you are a committee of one so be it.
- **Gather data.** Research the performance of the students on the state standardized test at the list of schools gathered in step 1. This is available on your state department of education's website. There is likely to be other information about the school there. Look at the school's and the district's websites. This will provide contact information and other valuable information. Often there is a school report card on one of these sites. Check for past newspaper articles about the school, district, and school board.
- **Locate resources.** Find reports on what is being done at schools using quality methods and tools. Make contact with other ASQ members working to improve education. Determine the areas in which the committee members are competent. Skills that schools benefit from are the following: basic project management and planning; strategic planning; determining and deploying best practices; data analysis to turn data, including surveys, into actionable information; learning the PDSA problem solving/continuous improvement method and its associated tools; facilitation of teams in applying the above; basic leadership; and meeting management skills.

School teams that members could volunteer to be a part of are the Leadership/Learning Teams (preferred), or School Governance Councils (principal, teachers, parents, community members – this is the slot members can fill.) Create an action plan for the next steps — determine the presentation of what you want to do, what you can offer, why you want to do this, and what you know about the school (or district). Create the presentation that will be used at meetings with school principals and their school leaders.

Determine how many schools the section's Quality in Education Committee can support. I would suggest starting with one school and learn by doing there before going to multiple schools or the district level.

First Contact and Initial Activities

The first contacts with schools can be frustrating. It's best to find the right door to enter and have a pre-determined insider meet you at the door. Here are some lessons I've learned on ways of doing it.

1. **Start at the top.** The school Principal is most likely and most busy. I often start with a Section member who has a child at the intended school. I give the Section member a short version of the presentation and ask him to arrange a meeting with the principal and any members of the school's leadership team the principal feels is appropriate. The agenda typically includes the Section's presentation, an overview of the school, and how we might work together. A discussion follows on where the section can help. The next steps establish responsibility, due date(s), and close with an exchange of contact information.
2. **Listen more than talk.** You are there to help and to know what that help requires. The relationship is more important to develop at this point than a specific plan. However you need to be prepared to act on what you can support. The ground rules apply here as you bring up ideas and ask questions.
3. **Follow through.** Act on commitments and follow where this leads — much like an audit trail. Be alert, be flexible, and know your limits and resources. Stay in regular contact with the school and your section committee members through phone calls, email, and scheduled meetings.
4. **Have fun!!** Test your patience by taking the long term view. Enjoy the dedicated and delightful people you will meet and the successes you will share!

Resources Available to ASQ Sections

- [ASQ Education Division](#)
- [ASQ Quality in Education Marketing Web site](#)
- [National Quality Education Conference and Leadership Summit](#)
- [Education Division Discussion Boards](#)
- [ASQ Education Division Library](#)

Questions, Comments, Need Experienced Help?

Contact the ASQ Education Division K12 Education Committee Vice-Chair Rossi Wittlinger at rossianwitt@netscape.net