



Managing Processes Instead of Having Them Manage Us

by JoAnn Sternke and Mark Hansen

Show me a school district that doesn't desire to improve. Show me a school district leader who doesn't believe in continuous improvement. The challenge facing us as educational leaders isn't one of commitment or desire. We all want to get better! The fundamental question is, "How do we get better?" For the Pewaukee School District, the *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence* is how. Our mission statement—"Opening the door to each child's future"—is why.

The Pewaukee School District, located near Milwaukee, WI, has been on a quality journey for over 20 years. The school district has successfully employed a strategic planning process to guide its direction since 1992. However, it was in 2006 that have made the "how" happen using the Baldrige criteria, a comprehensive framework with seven distinct categories focusing on achieving performance excellence. Information on the Baldrige criteria can be found [here](#).

While we have reaped many benefits from our commitment to using the Baldrige criteria, the most easily overlooked benefit is that we now have a better understanding of how we do our work. This article focuses on how we accomplish that work. In the Pewaukee School District, we call this "process management."

Prior to utilizing the Baldrige criteria, we were like so many organizations that simply repeat the same processes over and over without giving thought to their effectiveness. We were caught in what we've come to call a "replication trap" because we were so busy doing, that we didn't take time to reflect on how well we were doing it. We recognized that our processes were managing us instead of us managing the processes. By using the Baldrige criteria, we developed a systems approach that focuses on process management. We took charge of our processes, and no longer blamed people when things didn't work. Now, our first question is, "What went wrong with the process that caused this to happen?" It's a very different mindset concerning process.

We began to better understand process management when we read the book *Process Management in Education* by Robert W. Ewy and Henry A. Gmitro. We then brought Ewy to our school district to build capacity with our administrative team concerning process improvement.



We have now created process flowcharts for all 10 of our identified key work processes along with an additional 25 supplementary processes.

Tips for process management

Here are seven tips about process management that may benefit your school district:

1. Commit to analyzing processes throughout your school district. In a May 2009 article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Frederick Hess and Jon Fullerton wrote that successful organizations monitor their operations extensively and intensively. The article goes on to say that while industries outside of education often analyze processes and utilize efficiency measures in many facets of their organizations, schools are primarily only “data-driven” with regard to student achievement.

While this is a bold statement, it is fair to say that those of us in education do not utilize as rigorous of data-driven analyses in key areas such as human resources, instructional technology, operations, communications or data management. Due to this gap, we miss the opportunity to truly be data-driven when we evaluate these departments and programs. More importantly, we miss the opportunity to *proactively* diagnose problems and manage process improvement. In the Pewaukee School District, we made a decision to be process- and results-driven throughout our organization, in all departments, and in all schools.

2. Identify key processes. We began by asking a fundamental, yet previously unasked, question: What processes are most important to making our school district function optimally? In simple terms, what is our work? To answer this question, we looked at items such as our strategic plan, key tasks we perform repeatedly, and our organizational chart. From this analysis, we identified two key work areas: an academic and nonacademic work system. Each possesses unique work processes. Our academic work system houses those processes that directly impact student achievement, and focus greatly on teaching and learning. Our [curriculum renewal and design process](#) is an example.

Our non-academic work system houses those processes that support our academic work system, but are usually one step away from direct contact with students in the classroom. These include our budget, hiring and performance evaluation processes. As each school district is unique, you will undoubtedly identify your own key work systems and processes, but the Pewaukee School District’s are identified in our [schoolhouse diagram](#). Identifying key work



processes is a fundamental step in process management. It begins by asking, “What are the most important things we do?”

3. Identify the key process owner. We’ve learned that it is best to clearly identify who is in charge of process design, measurement, deployment and improvement of each process. Often, the selection of the process owner is obvious, but sometimes it’s not as clear. Identifying a process owner is especially important when a process is integrated into multiple parts of the organization and many people share in its implementation. We’ve learned this the hard way. Invariably, when a process breaks down in our organization, we realize that we were not clear on identifying the process owner. For example, we recently deployed online student registration. Our IT department, business department and each school were key to bringing this process to fruition. In retrospect, it would have gone a bit smoother if we had identified one person—regardless of department—to guide the entire process. Process ownership is an often overlooked key step, and it is the root cause of many process implementation glitches.

4. Understand the user requirements. This step focuses on why we do the process. As Ewy so aptly put it on p. 24 of his book, “Processes are designed to create a specific kind of outcome or result.” Schools are complex organizations, so it is important to view the process through the lens of all possible users, including the student, teacher and parent. What does each user group rely upon the process to do? We modeled our process flowcharts using those published by Community Consolidated School District 93, and have a section on each flowchart titled “Stakeholder Connection,” which identifies users and user requirements. To see an example, [click here](#).

5. Flowchart how the process works. Warning: This may seem tedious but it is worth the effort! The next step is for the process owner to create a flowchart listing the key steps. Our flowcharts create a picture of the sequence of steps and, if needed, a timeline. Once drafted, we seek input from users to refine the flowchart. The benefit of flowcharting is getting everyone on the same page with a clearer understanding of the process itself. Ultimately, this reduces variation in how the process is performed—and that is the goal. Flowcharting has made our processes more clearly understood, efficient and sustainable. Here is a sample flowchart of our [teacher evaluation process](#).

6. Determine and collect results to measure how the process is working. Process management must focus on how well the process itself is working. For example, how do we



know our hiring process is working? How do we know how well we are serving our users of instructional technology? To analyze operational efficiency, we have created dashboards for each of our departments that measure items, such as as cycle time, productivity, service levels, or cost. This focus on results data has been transformative for our organization. We analyze these dashboards regularly to determine performance levels and trends. To see our IT service dashboard, [click here](#). All school and department dashboards are available on the Pewaukee School District website, including [Workforce Engagement & Development](#), [Communication & Community Engagement](#), [Facilities & Operations](#), [Teaching & Learning](#) and [Instructional Technology](#).

7. Structure time to analyze the process and its results. Remember that replication trap referenced earlier? Making certain you make time to analyze the process itself and look for process improvements is vital. We consciously “calendar-ize” a time to review all key work processes. At our administrative team, cabinet or senior advisor meetings, we now use plus/delta tools on a routine basis, and systematically use other quality tools to evaluate and improve processes. We make time for what matters—and this matters because it drives further improvement. We’ve found we solve problems at a deeper level since we became committed to this evaluative phase of process management.

Our commitment to process management has improved how we function. We have seen dramatic improvement in our operational efficiency. Most importantly, though, it has allowed us to direct more resources into the classroom and better meet our mission to open the door to each child’s future. That’s the best success story of all!

Resources

Community Consolidated School District 93, Process Flowcharts.

Ewy, R. W. & Gmitro, H. A, *Process Management in Education: How to Design, Measure, Deploy and Improve Educational Processes*, ASQ Quality Press, 2010.

Hess, F. M. & Fullerton, J., “The Numbers We Need: Bringing Balanced Scorecards to Education Data,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, May, 2009, pp. 665-669.

The Pewaukee School District was a national Baldrige applicant in 2010 and 2011. The Pewaukee School District was honored to be the first educational institution recognized with

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