



## **New Problems Require New Solutions**

*by Betty Ziskovsky*

Public educators today are faced with challenges that are unprecedented. We must provide expanded services with greater performance outcomes at higher accountability levels in competition with other education providers, such as home, charter and private schools. Adding to those challenges are financial instability problems—per pupil unit (PPU) dollars that are as transient as the students to whom they are assigned, and dwindling funding sources from a slow economy.

School budgeting has become highly imprecise since 2008. If your own district has not endured a legislative “take back,” then you know of one that either had promised funding reduced mid-year, or was required to refund previously received legislative monies. The overall challenge of the “new normal” boils down to one thing: survival requires developing the expertise to do more with less.

Educators have never backed down from a challenge. Meeting challenges is the essence of what we do in academics and operations. However, our traditional problem-solving methods and tools are proving as ineffective on this new generation of challenges as traditional antibiotics are on the new generation of superbugs. When budget-cutting has gone visceral to include not only program loss, but teaching faculty layoffs, the quality of the education delivery service cannot help but be compromised.

We cannot continue to use our traditional problem-solving methods to meet this new generation of challenges. They are ineffective. It is no longer sufficient to strive to be an institution of academic excellence. In today’s world, academic excellence can only be made possible by schools and districts striving first to become institutions of operational excellence (OE)—organizations that have developed the operational viability and capability to deliver academic excellence. It’s a challenge from which we dare not back down.

What is OE? It is a state of organizational achievement and cultural development in which every employee:

- Engages in systems thinking.
- Focuses their work on meeting the needs of the customer.



- Understands the essential contribution their work makes within the system to meet those needs.
- Is empowered to optimize the processes of their work.

The laser-like focus of OE is engaging every person within the organization on continuous improvement.

OE requires an organization's leaders and workers to learn to see and think differently. It is based on two fundamental and logical understandings:

1. Outcomes are produced by processes.
2. Improved processes will produce improved outcomes.

The first step in shifting our paradigm to OE is to switch from utilizing an outcomes-based management approach—the traditional method in education—to one of process improvement and management (PIM). In fact, OE and PIM are so closely aligned that the terms are often used synonymously, and will be for the remainder of this article.

The notion of processes, while not totally foreign, is not a pervasive understanding for educators. We acknowledge that we use processes in our work. What we don't do is think of all work in terms of processes. Education is the term used to collectively describe the system of processes involved in providing and supporting the development of knowledge, skill, and reasoning in a student or student community. Every job in education—student through superintendent—is defined by the processes of that individual's responsibilities. Processes make up the education services we provide, whether they are instructional or supportive, for example, food service, facilities, transportation, administration or IT. If the key to improving outcomes is improving processes, then a shift to a process mindset is essential to attain the outcomes we want. Bottom line: Solving outcome improvement problems must start with identifying and understanding the process(es) that generates that outcome, and improving the process(es). It's simple cause-and-effect logic.

Improving processes is straightforward. Any process is made up of a series of discrete steps that include a defined beginning step, a defined end step, and multiple steps between the two. This series of process steps yields an intended result (product or service) that is desired (valued) by someone (the customer.)

The relationship among the customer, value and process is an important one in the PIM philosophy: the value of any process or process step is determined by the customer of the



process through his/her willingness to pay for it in time or money. Process improvement logic is based on the simple maxim: if a process step doesn't add value, it shouldn't be done.

The second step in shifting to the process-based paradigm is to acknowledge that all processes can be improved. Is an existing process efficient? Is it still as relevant as it was when the process was first designed and implemented? Research findings indicate that more than 80% of the steps in any process are unnecessary. Waste, therefore, exists in every process. It is important to note that in the PIM philosophy, waste exists in the process, not in the people. Getting rid of waste, therefore, does not equate to getting rid of people.

What is waste? Any process steps that don't add value are considered waste. There are nine types of waste in education processes:

1. **Time:** idle time created when information, people or equipment are not ready.
2. **Motion:** movement of people or transportation of things that does not add value.
3. **Processing/handling:** unnecessary steps, approvals, requirements; confusion.
4. **Assets:** more inventory, physical resources or information than is needed, or their misuse.
5. **Defects:** work that contains errors, or is incomplete and must be adjusted or redone.
6. **Overproduction/effort:** generating more of something than is needed right now, such as duplications or unwarranted change.
7. **Talent:** not fully utilizing or developing the skills and passions of all workers.
8. **Knowledge:** recreating existing knowledge.
9. **Capacity:** failure to reach potential.

Any waste has associated costs. Eliminating a waste eliminates those associated costs, and the cost of waste (and thus the cost savings that are realized from eliminating it) can be substantial. Consider some examples:

1. Denver Public Schools in Colorado recovered \$1.5 million in one year by streamlining one process—free and reduced lunch application.
2. Mt. Lebanon Public Schools in Pennsylvania reduced their supply procurement process from 29 steps to six, saving \$81,000 the first year and adding a \$15,000 per year revenue stream.
3. Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation's Transportation Department in Indiana streamlined their processes to successfully cut a required \$1.3 million from their 2011



budget without lowering the quality of service, reducing their bus fleet or laying off personnel.

4. The Facilities and Maintenance Department of Mayfield Public Schools in Ohio reduced its annual operating budget by \$15,000 by streamlining and standardizing its custodial processes and products.

These examples represent cost savings totaling over \$2.8 million. Consider your savings/improvement potential—how many thousands of processes are inherent in your education operation?

Eliminating waste can also impact student learning. For example, Holy Trinity Middle School in Minnesota identified 116 hours of recoverable instructional time per teacher in one year by streamlining the special events scheduling process. The net effect was the equivalent of retaining teaching staff for an additional month of instruction at no additional cost, plus the student learning benefit from an additional month of schooling.

As indicated in the above briefs, PIM provides organizational benefits that include performance improvement, increased efficiency, reduced costs and higher morale.

Shifting focus to PIM provides a new and powerful set of problem-solving tools. Processes, especially those involving information and knowledge transformation, can be difficult to see. Process mapping tools are effective in making processes visible. They can also identify hidden waste in those processes. This is true not only for the more visible processes of support services, but also for the often-invisible processes of instructional services.

An example of a PIM tool that can be used to improve instructional and learning performance is the Classroom Strategic Plan. This tool provides a teacher the means of successfully delivering his or her assigned curriculum within the school year in a way that ensures student mastery. That achievement is rarely accomplished by the vast majority of instructional staff. The domino effect of those compounded yearly failures compromises the quality of a school/district's education program. It also has the same effect on the learning achievement of a student over his or her 13-year career of study.

Change is never an easy decision to make for any individual or organization. It is more comfortable to stay with what we know. However, the decision to survive and thrive cannot be a function of ease. It must be based on what will successfully lead to desired outcomes. In education, we have two bottom-line challenges:



1. Live within our financial means.
2. Increase student learning performance.

We have ample proof that attempting to manage outcomes first hasn't worked. National Assessment of Education Progress scores have been flat-lined for years. Dropout rates continue to hover just over 30%, and double that in major urban areas. Public support for continually increasing education funding has waned. Legislative funding is both dwindling and unstable. Still, costs continue to rise.

Albert Einstein once defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting a different result. It is time we embraced a more effective management model—that of PIM. The only way our schools and districts are going to preserve or attain academic excellence is by first focusing on becoming institutions of operational excellence.

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