



LEADing Your School to a Quality Future

by Amanda Hankel

When it comes to implementing quality and continuous improvement in K-12 schools, leadership is essential. That was the message in a recent presentation at the National Quality in Education Conference (NQEC) on building a quality culture in your school.

According to Tami Miller, one of the presenters and leadership development coordinator for the Greenville Chamber of Commerce in Greenville, SC, leadership is often the missing component in a school's implementation of quality. Miller is a former school teacher who has spent the last four years of her career managing the Greenville Chamber of Commerce's Center for Excellence, which provides professional development to area schools on the fundamentals of quality and continuous improvement.

"We know leadership in implementation and fidelity of quality is a missing factor for a lot of schools," Miller said. "If the leadership is not solid, the implementation will only go so far."

Brenda Byrd, principal at Bethel Elementary School in Greenville, SC, for six years, presented with Miller at NQEC and is one of the administrators in the Greenville area who has worked with the Center for Excellence to implement quality in her school. Byrd also realized that leadership is a key piece to its success.

When she became principal at Bethel, the school already had a long history of academic excellence in place. But it needed to align its priorities and develop a common language for the school, Byrd said.

"There were arrows going in many different directions," Byrd said. "We had great things going on, but it wasn't consistent across our school community. We felt implementing quality concepts would be a great opportunity for our school to build a common language. Also, we liked the idea of making students more responsible for their learning—more engaged and aware of their progress."



So, about five years ago, third-grade teachers at Bethel piloted the project of implementing quality in the school. Then, the school spent a year assessing that experience and eventually decided to move forward with it as a school-wide initiative.

Since implementation, Bethel has realized progress and continuous improvement on multiple fronts—from higher test scores to reduced tardiness to a better emergency evacuation plan. Miller and Byrd’s presentation at NQEC highlighted how they have achieved their success and what other schools can do to follow in their footsteps.

“We wanted to share with attendees the important role of the leaders in a school in promoting a culture of quality,” Byrd said of her and Miller’s NQEC presentation. “We have built our school’s vision around the principles of continuous improvement. It’s the foundation, structure and framework for our school. Everything we do is continuous improvement. It guides all that we do with students and staff.”

L-E-A-D the way

To demonstrate the role leadership plays in quality implementation, Miller and Byrd outlined four key principles that served as a framework to support the continuous improvement Bethel has achieved.

1. Leadership. For Byrd, gaining staff buy-in, setting clear expectations and establishing school and class mission statements were crucial to her role as the leader in building a quality culture at Bethel.

“When I came into the school five years ago, I knew this was something I did not want to force on the staff,” Byrd said. “This was something I could support, but it was also equally important to me to have my staff agree with me on that and come together on this as something that would be the vision for our school.”

After the initial pilot project by the third grade, staff at Bethel spent the next year focusing on what quality was and worked with the Center of Excellence to learn the principles of quality. After a period of time, each individual teacher was given the opportunity to talk with Byrd about



whether he or she thought it was a fit for the school. In the end, staff members decided to support the journey toward quality.

In addition, Byrd said setting clear expectations for staff and students has been important during their journey.

“It helps define our purpose and to know what we are all working toward,” she said. “Students appreciate those clear expectations as well.”

Each year, the school reviews its mission statement, and individual classes create their own mission statements. This, Byrd said, helps students understand why it’s important for them to be in school.

Students also keep data notebooks where they record goals, strategies and progress throughout the year.

“The data notebook provides a clear expectation and framework of the year,” Miller said. “Instead of getting isolated assignments, students can, through that data notebook, see how their learning journey is weaving throughout the year.”

2. Example. An important part of leading a quality effort is practicing what you preach. At Bethel, the administrative team uses the same quality tools that teachers use in their classroom. For example, the school used the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle to reduce student tardiness. When the school noticed an increase in tardiness, which contributed to a loss of instructional time and more class interruptions, the administrative team used the tool to help solve the problem.

Another example Byrd described involved using quality tools to change the building’s evacuation plan for fire drills. After making changes to its traditional method, the school has been tracking the amount of time it takes to safely complete fire drills, and has seen a significant decrease in time and improvement in the overall process.



3. Attitude. “We believe in taking risks together,” Byrd said. “Not just any risk, but we need to take risks to find positive changes. And, we take time to recognize results. We love to celebrate successes.”

Recognizing and celebrating accomplishments is a way school leaders can keep students and staff motivated to improve. For example, Bethel students record their Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) test scores for the spring and fall in their data notebooks, and set goals for the next tests. They also record specific strategies they want to implement to meet their goals, such as practicing math, reading 20 minutes each night or learning more test-taking skills. As recognition, students who meet their goals on the MAP tests sign their name to a special wall display in the school.

Bethel also has achieved increased reading scores through using the PDSA cycle and recognizing success. When the school recognized that its reading scores were not commensurate with its math scores, the school sought to increase reading outside of school.

Now, it conducts a yearly PDSA cycle to set goals for the number of books and pages students in each class should read. The data is displayed on a bulletin board for students to track their progress. If the reading goal is met, the administration will do something to recognize their accomplishment. One year, the entire administration team worked on the roof of the school for a day. Another year, the administrators rode motorcycles while students watched. This year, administrators have agreed to be slimed if students meet their goal. As a result of this effort, the school has increased reading scores.

4. Deployment. Byrd said it’s important for school leaders to foster collaboration and professional development for staff to share best practices in quality.

“It’s my responsibility as principal to provide quality professional development,” Byrd said. “Teachers are at different points of the continuum of quality. It’s important to also monitor the effectiveness of what teachers are doing and what tools they’re using.”

It’s also important for teachers to not only collaborate with colleagues but also other schools. This is where the Greenville Chamber of Commerce can come in Miller said. As more



schools are now taking off with their quality progress, the chamber and its Center for Excellence are transitioning to more of a support role in providing schools with the resources to continue to improve. It's also looking at the larger picture of what implementing quality in schools can do for the entire Greenville community.

“Our mission is to help our community grow and to be that force to support our community,” Miller said. “We need to keep talent here, we also need to foster talent and foster the skills that make great employees. It's a direct connect between what Brenda and the teachers are doing in schools to provide students with skills to problem solve, make decisions, think at a higher level and enter the workforce more prepared to handle high expectations.”

Creating a culture

Having made great strides in terms of quality in the five years since initial implementation, Byrd said Bethel still has plenty of work to do—but that's all part of the philosophy of continuous improvement. Her school's experience does confirm, though, that leadership is a key component to creating a quality culture in schools.

“The principal sets the tone and creates the vision for a school,” Byrd said. “The administration is responsible for helping students and staff envision what a quality student, a quality teacher and a quality school is. As a leader, I like to be involved in what is going on in my building. I don't think you can just sit back and watch, I think you have to be actively engaged.”

Miller attributed much of Bethel's success to Byrd's ability to not only leading teachers and students in implementing quality, but also implementing it herself.

“Brenda has done an excellent job of not expecting more from her teachers and staff than she does of herself and administrative team,” Miller said. “It's the way they work. It's not, ‘Here, I want you to try this tool and see how it works.’ She's living it in her interactions with the teachers.”

In the end, the leadership instilled at Bethel has allowed the school to not only implement quality concepts, but also truly create a culture of quality for the school's staff and students.



“I hear our staff say a lot that they think our school is a better place because of what we are doing with continuous improvement,” Byrd said. “We are creating responsible students who are actively engaged in the learning process.

“Our teachers are not the keepers of the data. Our students take ownership of their data and progress. It’s great to see children get excited about mastering their multiplication facts or learning about the 13 original colonies. We look forward to continuing this journey with our school community.”

Tami Miller is the leadership development coordinator for the Greenville Chamber of Commerce working with the following leadership development programs: Leadership Greenville, Opportunity Greenville, Youth Leadership, PULSE Young Professionals and Leadership Greenville Alumni Association. Tami also has worked with educators providing training, coaching and related services in continuous quality improvement through the Center for Excellence, a chamber educational outreach program. She continues to serve as education liaison for the Greenville Chamber, providing continuous quality improvement resources and consulting to educators. She holds a master’s degree in secondary social studies education.

Brenda Byrd is the principal of Bethel Elementary School. She holds a master's in administration and supervision from Clemson University in Clemson, SC. Byrd has 23 years of experience as an educator in South Carolina.