



Where Are They Now?

An update on one school district's performance excellence journey

by Amanda Hankel, past editor

In October 2010, Shellie Johnson, communications director for Keller Independent School District in Keller, TX, and Paula Sommer, owner of Dynamic WorkSystems in Arlington, TX, began documenting the district's journey in using the Baldrige framework to guide systems alignment and improvement. In a series of articles in ASQ's *Journal for Quality and Participation*, Johnson and Sommers shared success and struggles with readers as they traveled the road to Baldrige in education. You can read their series of articles in this issue of *Primary and Secondary Education Brief*.

In January 2012, the authors proudly reported the district had been recognized by the Texas Award for Excellence at the commitment level. This milestone, while significant, was just one step in the district's quality journey.

Recently, we caught up with Johnson and Sommer to see how the district is doing today. Here, they discuss additional successes the district has achieved since its recognition, the challenges it still faces, and what its leaders have planned for the future as it continues down the path to performance excellence.

***Primary & Secondary Education Brief*: Since the last update, which ran in January 2012 announcing Keller Independent School District had been recognized at the commitment level by the Texas Award for Performance Excellence, what progress have you made in your journey? Did you apply again?**

Johnson and Sommer: We have focused our efforts on implementing continuous improvement at the next level. Through the top-down model, we are now implementing directly at the classroom level and positively impacting our students. By using Baldrige tools, teachers are



helping students see measurable results in how they are performing. We are not focused on applying for the next level of recognition at this time.

Primary & Secondary Education Brief: Since embarking on this journey, what have been some the biggest or main benefits you've realized? What changes have been made throughout the district that have made a positive impact?

Johnson and Sommer: Learning the importance of collecting and analyzing data has helped us identify areas in need of improvement. All the changes related to the Baldrige journey of continuous improvement are milestones: learning to ask the right questions and using the appropriate tools to guide us, allowing the data to drive decisions and the use of our resources, and understanding the need for a 360-degree implementation of customer service.

Primary & Secondary Education Brief: What would you say have been some of the biggest challenges to sustaining change and continuing to move forward with your quality journey? How have you overcome them?

Johnson and Sommer: Change in and of itself is a challenge because we are all creatures of habit. But after the processes and systems are put into place, the day-to-day operations run much more smoothly, which allows time to assess and analyze real-time data and make slight improvements along the way, rather than a major overhaul that can overwhelm a system. With best practices and processes in place, there is time to develop a five-year or ten-year plan, look at long-term goals and determine the measures necessary to help achieve actionable results.

Primary & Secondary Education Brief: How has the Baldrige criteria served as a framework for continuous improvement, even now that you're farther along in your journey?

Johnson and Sommer: Through Baldrige, we've learned how to determine needs, identify holes and know what measures to use to ensure we're on track. Data tells the story. It provides a factual account of activity and ensures that decisions being made regarding the allocation of resources and the deployment of staff are on target. Continuous improvement serves as the

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soul of the comprehensive, yet systemic, Baldrige framework.

Primary & Secondary Education Brief: For other educators and districts reading your story, what advice could you offer them for getting started on their own process improvement project? What have been the most important elements for success?

Johnson and Sommer: The top-down model is extremely effective and helps implement improvements throughout the layers of an organization. The school board establishing it as the policy of the district is essential. Bringing the board along in the learning enables districts to better weather the change in culture. Our best advice would be not to rush it. It is not intended to produce an overnight makeover. There are key strategic initiatives involved, each rich in content and all results-driven, so chew slowly, savor every bite and take time for everyone to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Primary & Secondary Education Brief: What are the district's plans for the future in terms of quality and performance excellence?

Johnson and Sommer: We are continuing our efforts to improve and focusing now on the critical importance of customer service and closing the loop (follow up and reporting positive change). We aren't targeting an award; we're on the infinite journey of performance excellence and never-ending improvement.