Standard of Learning

by F. Craig Johnson

During a sabbatical year in England, I was asked to join a research team that was studying quality control and quality assurance in non-advanced continuing education. Not knowing what these words meant, I accepted.

I soon learned that in a group of 10 people, there are usually 12 definitions of quality. My task was to find a definition appropriate for quality management in education organizations. I found "fitness for purpose" in a paper written by a college dean and called him.

During our conversation, the dean told me about his experience working with faculty on quality issues. He used the example of a faculty member who sent him a 10-page memorandum telling the dean what to do to improve quality at the university. The dean did not know what to do with the faculty member's memo. He waited three months to reply. He consider saying, "I am sorry for the delay, but I just could not find the words to express my gratitude for the time you took away from your job to tell me how to do mine." The dean thought better of it and decided to just send a thank you note.

What follows is not intended to tell experienced administrators how to do their jobs. During the past 25 years after my year in England, I worked with over 450 education administrators from over 50 countries to develop *ASQ/ANSI Z1.11:2011 Requirements for education organizations*, which is 19-pages long and may be worth your time.

What's in it for me?

Z1.11 is an American national standard that can help you measure and manage the degree to which your planned activities are realized and planned results are achieved. This enables your organization to fulfill requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the *Education Criteria for Performance Excellence*, achieve AdancED accreditation and meet state requirements. The standard can even be applied in education organizations outside of the United States.

The quality management principles of Z1.11 relate directly to the 2,756 quality-related requirements outlined in NCLB, which includes:[1]

- 157 leadership requirements.
- 228 data requirements.
- 157 system requirements.
- 90 process requirements.
- 74 people requirements.
- 142 partnership requirements.
- 558 improvement requirements.
- 1,350 student, parent and other stakeholder-related requirements.

Z1.11 gives education organizations the freedom to develop their key guiding principles and values so that they are aligned with missions and visions. The organization's processes, however, should meet the educational requirements and enable excellence based on the following quality management principles outlined in Z1.11. The principles are:[2]

1. Students. Quality in education is the degree to which educational requirements are fulfilled by students. Standards specify what students are expected to know and accomplish. Performance standards contain coherent and rigorous content for fulfilling students' learning requirements and for encouraging performance excellence.

Educational organizations establish or apply existing federal and state student performance criteria by grade level and proficiency levels within grade levels. Student learning is continually evaluated to identify opportunities for improvement. Higher education student learning requirements, performance standards and skill acquisition are established by academic disciplines and professional performance standards. Planned student learning results are achieved by planned education activities, by application of appropriate technology, by refined teaching methods and by designed curricula.

 2. Leaders. Senior leaders establish unity of purpose, direction and an internal environment to direct and control school activities. Results are validated for consistency with relevant, nationally recognized academic and professional performance standards. Senior leaders' performance is evaluated by school board members, by peer reviews or by external advisory boards.

3. Value of faculty and staff involvement. Capable people at all levels are fully involved in activities designed to benefit students. Qualified faculty and staff members work with students and interested parties to ensure that all students have a fair, equal and sufficient

opportunity to attain performance excellence. Accountability systems, faculty preparation and training, curriculum design and instructional materials are aligned to achieve planned academic results.

4. Process. Planned academic results are achieved with adequate resources provided at the time needed. Instruction processes follow approved procedures to achieve effective and efficient learning. Instructional processes are designed to ensure value for students and improve educational effectiveness. Process information includes specific requirements, planned learning activities and planned results. Processes for student achievement depend on flexibility, innovation, knowledge, skill, communication and information flow. Process management requires a safe and supportive work climate.

Strategic objectives are converted into action plans to accomplish learning objectives. Strategies are successfully deployed and planned results achieved. Systematic planning identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, as well as the ability to manage the system. Resources are optimized to ensure that skilled and competent people can work effectively and efficiently.

5. Continual improvement. A permanent objective of education is continual improvement. Systematic methods are in place to evaluate and improve learning and support processes. Analysis of effective transitions between education levels may require multilevel teams and transfer agreements to maintain continuity of students' learning requirements.

6. Factual approach to decision making. Effective decisions are based on the rational analysis of objective data and information. Local school service agencies provide assistance in analysing data to identify and address problems in instruction. Colleges and universities may have institutional research offices for planning, analysis and performance review to enable decision-making based on relevant information. Planned activities and their planned results address critical needs and provide an effective analytical basis for decisions. Data are verified and validated to add value for students and interested parties.

7. Mutually beneficial public and private supplier relationships. Schools establish requirements for suppliers, partners and collaborators at the design stage. Efficiency and effectiveness factors are taken into account. Education organizations have a primary purpose of improving students' learning ability. Education organizations and their suppliers establish mutually beneficial relationships to create value for students.

Why should I listen to you?

Z1.11 was written by education administers who walk the talk, have been there and done that, and continued on their quality journey. Their backgrounds include executive leadership of community colleges, college presidents, school district superintendents, school principals, teachers, quality system managers and quality auditors.

A school that uses Z1.11 is prepared to plan and realize the following results:

- Mission statements.
- Goals and measures.
- Action plans.
- Standards for performance.
- Assessments of performance.
- Completed self-assessments.
- Internal quality audit reports.
- Data on the effectiveness of students' learning processes.
- Correlations between required and acquired knowledge, skills and behavior.

Administrators of schools that follow Z1.11 requirements are empowered to do the following:

- Act to solve problems and take necessary corrective action.
- Judge objective evidence that maintains public confidence in education.
- Exchange experience with leaders on how they meet their review responsibilities.
- Monitor data to identify the most frequent difficulties.
- Report evidence of effective corrective and preventive action.
- Evaluate quality problems on a constantly changing landscape.

Why should I do it now?

Getting a head start brings positive results more quickly. An education quality management system is not a quick fix or a flavor of the month initiative. It takes years to build a quality system tailored to meet quality requirements within an education organization. Early in the journey, many administrators will say that they might not have adopted the standard if they knew how long it took to implement and much work it was. They also say, after the system proves to operate well, that they would never go back to the old way of meeting requirements.

What is the downside?

The language used in Z1.11 and other quality management standards was written by quality professionals from around the world. The good news is that they used a technical language in which each technical term is defined by an approved definition reached by a consensus process. The bad news is that schools, colleges and universities do not always use technical terms in the same way.

Examples of a few of the terms and definitions used in Z1.11 follow:

- **Quality.** The degree to which student's academic ability and performance fulfill educational requirements, and exceed stakeholder expectations.

- **Quality systems.** Interrelated educational activities focused on setting objectives for learning, specifying process for achieving learning objective and assessing the degree to which learning requirements are met.

- **Assessment.** Systematic, independent and documented processes for obtaining evidence of learning and evaluating it effectively to determine which learning objectives have been fulfilled.

- **Accountability.** Assessment of student performance results provided for verification.

- **Stakeholders.**
  - Students who receive instruction through public or private institutions.
  - Companies whose employees receive instruction either from internal training departments or from external suppliers.
  - Communities that elect school boards or trustees to hire teachers, staff and administrators to benefit students and society in general.
  - Standards bodies for curriculum, testing and trade unions.
  - Bodies for certification and licensure of students and accreditation of programs.
  - Government agencies and employers.
  - Parents and other legal guardians.
  - Administrators, teachers and staff.
  - Society.

- **Instruction.** The process of planning and providing the time, order, place, materials and experiences for intentional learning required for students to meet learning requirements.

- **Learning requirements.** Written program or course information made available to students or parents. Requirements may include the following:
  - Title of program or course.
  - If credit, a diploma, a degree or a certificate is offered.
  - Time required.
  - Intended learning goals.
  - Student entry skill and knowledge.
  - Performance objectives and standards.
  - Major concepts and content.
  - Process by which instruction is developed.
  - Classroom, laboratory, internet or shop activities.
  - Measures or self-assessments of student competence.

- **Instructor.** Educators who are typically under contract with an educational institution (professor, trainer, course designer, educational material teaching modalities, developer, consultant and training department personnel).

How can my educational institution use standards to measure and manage quality?

There is no simple answer. Every organization is different in terms of culture, history and resources and uses different measures to evaluate effectiveness of their education system. It takes years of continual improvement for the system to mature.

So why bother?

Because quality management in education works and it is supported by a proven track record.

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Notes and references

1. Analysis by the Z1.11:2010 writing group.
2. American Society for Quality, *ASQ/ANSI Z1.11:2011 Requirements for education organizations*, 2011.