



National Quality Education Conference: A Great Return on Investment!

by J. Jay Marino, Ed.D.

Every year hundreds of educators attend the National Quality Education Conference (NQEC), which is hosted by ASQ and supported by the Education Division. For the past 12 years, I've had the fortunate opportunity to attend the conference as both a participant and a presenter. There hasn't been a year that I've questioned the return on investment for me as a professional or for the educational organization that I was representing.

As the new superintendent of the Dunlap Community Unit School District No. 323 in my first year (2009), I was looking for a strategy to expose teachers and administrators to the world of quality in education. A key initiative in the district strategic plan was to embed continuous improvement practices throughout the organization from the boardroom to the classroom. I found myself reflecting on the key question any leader asks: "How do I take the system from where it is today to where we want it to be tomorrow?"

Rather than discuss the concept or have employees read about quality in education, I chose to bring 15 people—including central office personnel, building administrators, frontline teachers, and the teacher's union leadership—to the premier conference focusing on quality in education. Our group had a dynamic experience at

NQEC, networking with other educators, learning best practices, and hearing dynamic presenters share their frontline experiences with continuous improvement. We used the experience not only to build our team, but to also build a vision of how continuous improvement practices could impact our district.

We returned to Illinois different than when we left. We had experienced how educators around the country were improving student achievement and creating 21st century educational learning environments. We were sold! We drank the Kool-Aid! We were inspired to take what we learned and implement it in our school system. Immediately upon returning from NQEC, our team regrouped to debrief the experience and determine our next steps. Unanimously, our team suggested that we begin immediate implementation of the continuous improvement process and tools that we learned from our experience at NQEC. Enthusiasm was high and much synergy had been created from our dynamic experience.

Within a few months of the conference, 50 teachers participated in the first round of training to learn the tools and techniques for creating a classroom learning community focused on 21st century learning. Can you guess who the first participants in the training were? Every teacher and administrator who attended

NQEC chose to participate in five days of training to learn how to implement the continuous improvement classroom practices learned at NQEC.

The rest of the story is history. Out of the first group of teachers who were trained, about a dozen teachers stepped forward to serve as "continuous improvement trainers" in Dunlap schools. Within the first year of its respective teachers attending NQEC, Dunlap schools had more than 50 percent of its teachers participate in the continuous improvement classroom training, which was led by those who had attended NQEC.

During the course of our first-year's journey, we began by building teacher and administrator capacity for continuous improvement practices. The district created a stakeholder-driven, five-year strategic plan with a key focus on continuous improvement and 21st century learning. A district balanced scorecard was developed to measure the five key strategic goals. Schools are now writing school improvement plans with SMART goals that support district strategic goals.

School leadership teams are driving continuous improvement in their schools through the modeling of teamwork, collaboration, and shared leadership. Capacity is being developed for the implementation of professional learning communities throughout all

schools. Classrooms have empowered students through the implementation of classroom mission statements; the creation of ground rules; a focus on SMART goals through the classroom data center; differentiation of instruction through student data folders; innovation and creativity via student-led classroom meetings; application of quality tools and the plan, do, study, act cycle in the classroom; and accountability through student-led conferences.

Continuous improvement has become the focus of our journey from good to great. Stakeholders are involved in our transformational efforts, and all employees have been empowered to drive improvements within their area of responsibility. Most importantly, students are involved in their learning and are empowered 21st century learners.

I'm pleased to tell you that the story I described is not an isolated incident. I've served as a central office administrator in four separate school systems in the past 14 years. In each of the four school systems, a continuous improvement approach was adopted in an attempt to increase student achievement. What do all four school systems' journeys have in common? In every situation, NQEC was used as a catalyst to bring a team together to formulate a vision for continuous improvement that could be brought back to the system for implementation.

To use the example of a popular credit card commercial:

- Sending 15 administrators to a random out-of-town professional development workshop: \$15,000.

- Implementing change top-down with outside consultants: \$30,000.
- Sending your own representative team to NQEC to bring lasting change to your system: PRICELESS!

Learn more about the continuous improvement journey in the Dunlap Community Unit School District No. 323 in Peoria, IL, at <http://www.dunlapcusd.net/>.

About the Author

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