



ASQ Higher Education Brief

21st National Quality Education Conference:

Creativity and Innovation Take Center Stage

by Megan Schmidt, editor

This month, I attended the premier event focusing on quality in education, improving student achievement and educator development—the 21st annual National Quality Education Conference (NQEC). The conference, held Nov. 17-18 in Milwaukee, brought together more than 200 educators, administrators and subject matter experts—some from countries as far away as Sweden and Argentina—for two jam-packed days of idea sharing, networking, and learning and development opportunities.

With more than 30 concurrent sessions, NQEC offered attendees plenty of opportunities to learn from real-world examples of continuous improvement at the classroom, school and system levels and garner ways to promote innovation and creativity in their schools and communities—the theme of this year’s event.



Day one keynote

The conference kicked off over breakfast with a keynote address from Wisconsin’s 2013 superintendent of the year—JoAnn Sternke of the Pewaukee School District. The energy of Sternke and the crowd was electric. Sternke had special news to share with attendees: Just a few days before NQEC, it was announced that the Pewaukee School District was recognized

with the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award—the United States’ highest honor for quality and performance excellence that has been doled to only six other public school districts (watch for more on the district’s Baldrige journey in future issues of *Education Brief*).

Sternke reflected on the school’s Baldrige journey and explained that its use of a systematic approach actually made the school more innovative. “Improvement is not enough. We need to get better and also become different,” Sternke said.

She emphasized that creativity and innovation aren’t education’s newest buzzwords. The ability to think critically, solve problems, innovate, collaborate and communicate have become mandatory skills that those



in the 21st century workforce are expected to possess. She said the education system was designed to produce students for the industrial age where characteristics like conformance and compliance were sought. But we live in the conceptual age and schools need to change how they prepare students for their future, she said.

Innovation and creativity starts with culture, Sternke said. There are a number of things schools and systems can do to create environments that embrace innovation and creativity instead of stifling it:

1. **Create a context.** Help people see why they should commit to doing something differently.
2. **Change the field of perception.** Don’t pigeon-hole yourself into one sector or improvement method. Be curious, break the replication trap, find diverse information sources and get outside of your comfort zone for improvement ideas and inspiration.
3. **Embrace dissonance.** Conflict is part of the process of addressing mediocrity. Welcome conflict and make it productive.
4. **Collaborate.** Good ideas often start as hunches that mature by getting attached to other hunches and the ideas and hunches of others. The only way for good ideas to mature is through open communication, teamwork and divergent thinking.

Sternke's powerful session emphasized that every school must embrace innovation and creativity and endeavor to create the world's future innovators and creators.

Day two keynote

What does singer Aretha Franklin, the day of Barack Obama's presidential inauguration and mosquitoes have in common?

Attendees of the second and final day of NQEC began their day with this interdisciplinary lesson led by keynote speaker Alan Blankstein, president and founder of the HOPE Foundation and author of the award-winning *Failure Is Not an Option: Six Principles that Guide Student Achievement in High-Performing Schools* and *The Answer Is in the Room: How Effective Schools Scale Up Student Achievement*.



Blankstein began his keynote session by playing Aretha Franklin's "Respect" before asking attendees to share what they remembered about Obama's inauguration. Someone in the crowd inevitably remembered the enormous hat that Aretha Franklin wore. Then, Blankstein tied together connected the presidential inauguration with Franklin, who performed on the inauguration stage that day.

Then, Blankstein's presentation took what seemed like a sharp left-turn—to the mating habits of mosquitoes. The interaction of the male and female wing-beat sounds creates a harmonizing overtone, he said. The interval between the male's tone and the female's creates what musicians would call a perfect fifth. Blankstein, a former music teacher, explains that many love songs start use perfect fifths.

Educators who present lessons with several "hooks," will reach more students. I also think his interdisciplinary lesson illustrated one of his session's main points: that education must present multiple ways for students to learn and to build confidence.

He also shared case studies from across the country that focused on how school teachers and leaders can succeed with virtually every student, create high-performing teams and build school cultures that close performance gaps.

During his session, Blankstein frequently mentioned his own troubled background—including the years he spent in a group home for boys and a past history of drug abuse—which helped illustrate that good teachers and schools really can have a positive impact on their students' lives.

Sessions galore

After the keynote sessions concluded on both days, I was faced with a good problem to have: I fretted over which sessions to see and which sessions to miss. Each session I attended was engaging and informative, but the most memorable was “Design Thinking: Creativity and Innovation at the Heart of Continuous Process Improvement,” led by the Park City School District in Atherton, CA.

The presenters explained a framework for design thinking, which is a learned skill that can help educators improve their ability to think creatively and generate innovative ideas. It's also an approach that can help educators better meet students' needs, the presenters said, because design thinking follows an iterative process: empathize, define, ideate, prototype and test.

After we watched [“Design Thinking Can Be Learned,”](#) a video produced by *BloombergBusinessweek* featuring David Kelley, the founder of the innovation firm IDEO and founder of the Institute of Design at Stanford University, we were charged with putting what we learned about design thinking into practice. First, we learned how three middle schoolers liked to spend their free time. Then, teams were tasked with creating a model of the students' dream hangout space using construction paper, popsicle sticks, tape, pom-poms and other assorted craft supplies—with no limits on cost or technology—using the design thinking process.

My team created a hangout space that was partially inside and partially outside and equipped with a pool, a time machine and a helicopter that would fly students anywhere. While each team's creation was extravagant and futuristic, the exercise was a great way to illustrate the use of design thinking to listen to your students (or customers) and unleash creativity.

Save the date

One of my favorite parts about NQEC was that the speakers—even the keynote speakers—were so accessible. I felt privileged to meet several leading subject matter experts in education quality, like Jim Shipley and Lee Jenkins, and I interviewed numerous presenters and attendees on how they are fostering innovation and creativity and using continuous improvement. Watch for these interviews in upcoming issues of the *Education Brief*.

I would highly recommend attending NQEC next year Nov. 16-17 in Milwaukee. Perhaps Sternke, who attends NQEC every year, said it best: “When you’re at NQEC, you’re with kindred spirits who are doing a lot of great work that you not only learn from, but with.”