Process Management: A Critical Component of Continuous Improvement
By Sharon Frys, assistant superintendent of instructional and student services, Community Consolidated School District 93

To deliver performance excellence and sustainability, organizations must have key work processes systematically defined, fully deployed and repeatedly delivered throughout the organization. Leslie Steer defines process management as "how work gets done, in what sequence, by whom, and to what requirements."[1] Processes within organizations should be aimed at what the stakeholder considers important, and employees should be able to deliver processes at high levels of achievement as they engage to do it better on an ongoing basis.[2]

Development and implementation of key work processes contribute to increased consistency and reduced variation in deployment. The overall goal in developing work processes is to create an environment based on continuous improvement of key processes so that high quality results become predictable.

Community Consolidated School District 93 (CCSD 93) in Carol Stream, IL, has experienced a great deal of change and growth during the past decade through the use of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria and framework for continuous improvement. Changes occurred in shared decision making, data-driven decision making, improvement in instruction and stakeholder satisfaction. District trend data illustrate improvement in student, staff and community satisfaction, and student achievement based on the Illinois SAT.

CCSD 93 identified process improvement as a critical component in its continuous improvement efforts. Implementation of key processes within the district has reduced variation in how tasks are accomplished. Staff members spent several years working on the development of critical processes within the organization. Stakeholder input, alignment to the district's strategic plan, policy and legal requirements, along with best practice research, define key work process requirements.

The district developed an electronic template that employees use to document and graphically represent all key work processes. First, text is entered to describe the process, which includes stakeholder connections, improvement cycles and the relationship of the process to the district's strategic plan. Any forms or procedures used in the process are described, and actual forms and procedures are included in the document. Then, a flowchart of the process is developed.

Table 1 provides examples of some of the identified stakeholder needs and the processes that have been developed to address those needs.

Table 1

Identified need	CCSD 93 quality processes
What steps are taken to recruit students for the band?	Band recruitment
How do teachers use standards in their teaching?	Curriculum: teaching to a standard
What are the steps in the certified staff evaluation process?	Certified staff evaluation
What are the steps in hiring new staff members?	Certified staff hiring
How does the district address stakeholder complaints?	Complaint management
What are the steps taken to develop curriculum in the district?	Curriculum development
What are the steps to pursue rental of facilities within the district?	Facilities use
What are the steps to refer a child to receive intervention and support services within the district?	Bilingual program referral English Language Learner program referral K-2 literacy programs Intellectual Development Enrichment Alternative Services (IDEA) level 2 identification IDEA level 3 (gifted) identification Math intervention program Reading services grade 3-5 Section 504 referral and evaluation procedure Student referral for special education services Student referral for acceleration Student referral for special education Services (parentally placed private school children with disabilities) Summer school
What are the steps that staff members need to take to report possible child abuse?	Mandated reporting procedures

The use of common processes and a standard template have helped increase consistency and productivity. Staff members know what is expected in the delivery of key work processes. Cycle time and associated costs in the development of processes have also been reduced, due to the predictability of process development. Figure 1 is a sample of one process within the district that has been implemented to address customer requirements and increase consistency in the steps taken to register students.

Figure 1
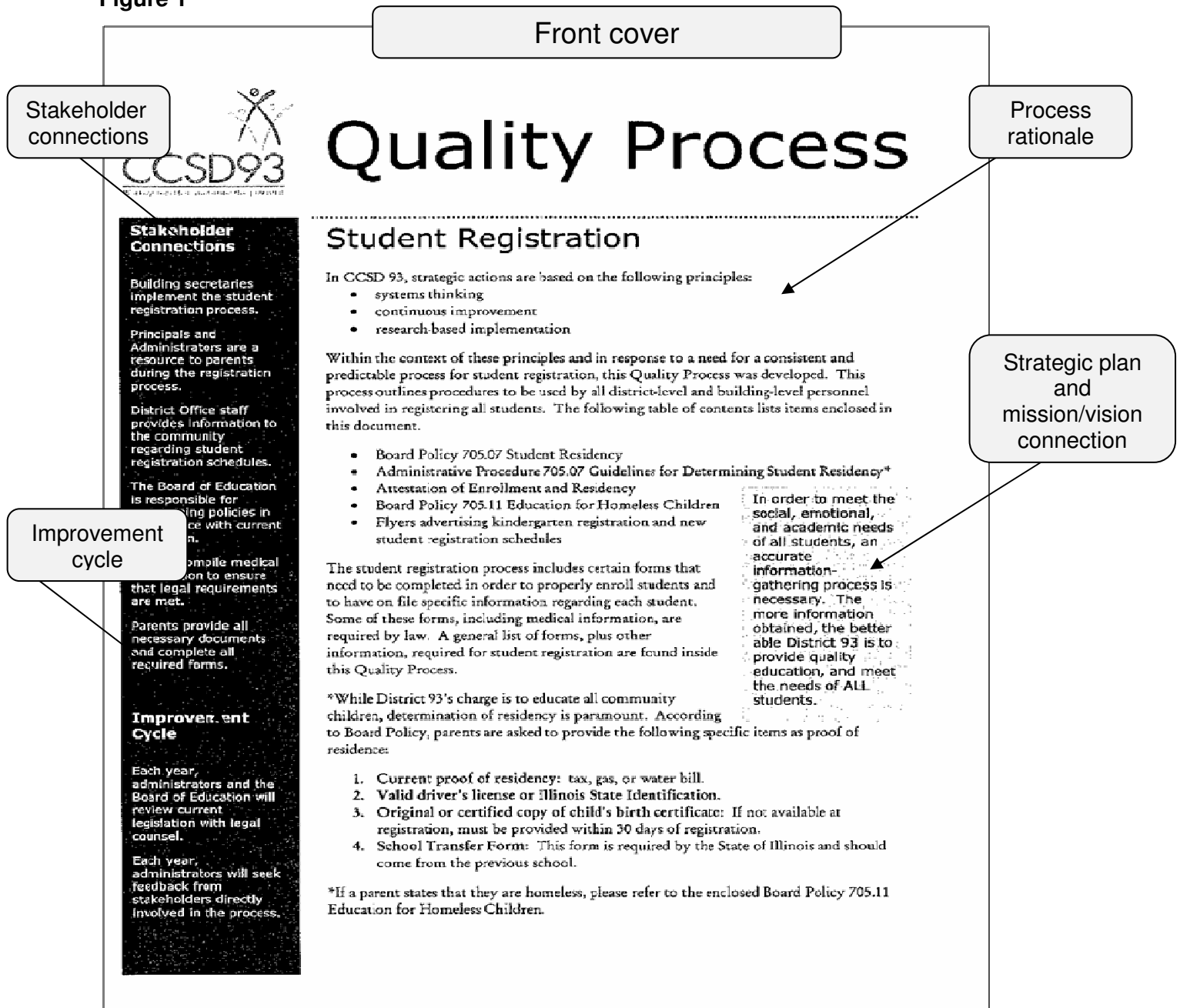
The template used to detail quality processes identifies the key components that must be included. Each position has a particular purpose. The document design requires that the description be concise.

The cover section provides policy and legal requirements, along with best practice research and might include policy information that drives the need for the process. It may be

historical information as to why the process has been determined necessary. The cover contains these three sections:

- **Connection to strategic mission/vision:** Indicates how the process aligns with the district mission and vision statements. If the process does not align, it lacks purpose.

- **Stakeholder connections:** Identifies who the customers are, what their roles are and what they require of the process. This may include administrators, teachers, staff, parents and organizations to whom the district outsources services. A brief description defines what each stakeholder group requires from the process. For example, customers in the kindergarten registration process may include the principal, and parents, but they each have different requirements. Principals may desire accurate demographic and registration information necessary to enroll the student, while parents may desire a process that is expedient and provides them with the necessary information as new consumers to the school district.

- **Improvement cycle:** Describes how the process will be monitored and indicates what data points will be collected and analyzed. These data points are derived from the requirements of the stakeholder. In the previous example of kindergarten registration, principals who require accurate demographic information might be surveyed to determine if the necessary information is available for student enrollment and the estimated time element involved. Parent satisfaction surveys could provide information regarding the expedience of the process and receipt of the necessary enrollment information.

Process flowchart

Each quality process within the district contains a process flowchart, which sequentially outlines the separate steps in the process. Elements that can be included are decisions to be made, steps in the process, materials to be completed and timelines or particular time of year that steps should be taken. The district uses the oval shape to indicate the first and last steps in the process, a diamond to depict a decision to be made and a rectangle to indicate a step. The intent of the flowchart is that all users follow the same process implementation steps.

The content on inside pages of each of several processes is individualized relative to the process. Information might include key resources, a glossary of terms or any additional information necessary to the process implementation.

Lee Jenkins contends that variation is the enemy in the educational system, meaning there is such widespread disparity in how tasks are accomplished that it becomes impossible to

pinpoint where the processes break down.[3] Awareness of the dispersion within a process provides a clearer understanding of the variation in a process and whether it is stable. Improvement in a system is defined as "moving the average toward the aim and reducing the dispersion around the aim."[4]

Reducing variation in the implementation of processes is critical to process management. A system is predictable if the variation within the system is in control. It is unpredictable if it is not in control. The factor of unpredictability makes it more difficult to improve, and negates the possibility of accurately defining opportunities for improvement within the process. An example of process variation in the school setting might be how teachers teach reading. If there is consistency among teachers regarding the process of teaching reading, schools can examine the results and determine the effectiveness of the process. If there is extreme variation, the cause of student achievement or lack of progress becomes difficult, if not impossible, to examine. Continuous improvement in a systems approach depends on moving the average and reducing variation of processes.

Process management can be considered the single most influential component for sustaining improvement efforts and monitoring change.[5] The determination of which quality processes to develop and which components are critical for successful communication and application of the processes are unique to each organization. Processes should be reviewed to determine effectiveness. Analyzing data collected regarding the process guides the improvement plan. As districts move forward in their continuous improvement efforts, focus on process management is a critical step. CCSD 93 continues to pursue improvement of current processes to identify future processes required to address stakeholder requirements and to reduce variation in how work is accomplished across the district.

References
1. Leslie Steer, "Process Ownership: Great Concept, But What Does It Mean?" *The Human Element*, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 44.

2. Mark L. Blazey, *Insights to Performance Excellence in Education 2007: An Inside Look at the 2007 Baldrige Award Criteria*, ASQ Quality Press, 2007.

3. Lee Jenkins, *Improving Student Learning: Applying Deming's Quality Principles in Classrooms*, ASQ Quality Press, 1996.

4. Ron Warwick, *Beyond Piecemeal Improvement*, National Education Service, 1995.

5. Steer, "Process Ownership: Great Concept, But What Does It Mean?" see reference 1.

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