

A Baldrige Success Story:

A Vision to Be Among the Best

*By Pamela Wong and Dawn Bailey*

In 2002, the leadership of Iredell-Statesville Schools (ISS) in North Carolina decided it was time to improve by using the Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence. The district was especially concerned about its dropout rate of 6½ percent and its graduation rate of 61 percent. Although the district ranked 55 out of 115 districts in the state, ISS’s vision became to reach the top ten.

When ISS won the Baldrige Award in 2008, it had achieved that goal and more. Although the district’s per-pupil operations expenditures were among the lowest in the state, its graduation rate had increased to nearly 81 percent; performance gaps for African-American students and students with disabilities had been cut in half; and SAT scores had risen from 57th to 7th statewide.

“Our district's commitment to quality has served us well.   
This is particularly true in the wake of the recession. In spite of draconian budget cuts, and the loss of 11% of our workforce, our students' performance continues to improve. I attribute this to our focus on the Baldrige Criteria   
and our commitment to   
continuous improvement.”

Brady Johnson,

Superintendent,

Iredell-Statesville Schools,   
2008 Baldrige Award Recipient

Currently, despite massive budget cuts, ISS ranks among the top 25 percent of school districts in the state, and its SAT scores, writing scores, and graduation rate are among the best.

Its current 2011-2012 data include a graduation rate of 87.1 percent (14th in the state), a drop-out rate of 1.99 (13th in the state), and SAT rankings that are 13th in the state. At the same time, the district’s funding level for 2011-2012 was 107 out of 115 (historically, ISS has been in the bottom three–eight-funded school districts in the state, while having results in the top 20–25 districts). The district’s free/reduced lunch rates have also risen from 35 percent to over 43 percent.

ISS is a district of 36 schools in North Carolina’s southwest piedmont region. Located in Iredell County, ISS consists of three distinct parts: in the south, a bedroom community near Charlotte where less than 20 percent of students on average qualify for free/reduced lunches; the central area, which includes the county seat of Statesville and at least 80 percent who qualify for free/reduced lunches; and the north, which is a rural, farming area.

“By using the Criteria and putting our processes in place, examining and tightening up those processes, we have been able to meet some of the challenges,” said Dr. Melanie Taylor, ISS’s associate superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

To turn around its high dropout rate, ISS developed innovative programs to keep students in school. One of these is an early-college program that targets students who would be the first in their families to attend college. These students attend for five years and graduate with an associate’s degree; they have the district’s top end-of-course performance rates. Another solution is a differentiated diploma, which permits at-risk students to graduate by completing the state requirement of 21 credits instead of 28, which ISS generally requires. These students end up with a stronger diploma than the general education diploma (GED).

Another challenge has been ISS’s budget. When the recession hit, ISS lost $10 million in state and local funding for the 2008-2009 school year. Its area still has unemployment rates of 11‒13 percent, above the national average, and the district has lost 287 staff positions, including 80 teachers and 120 teaching assistants.

At ISS, it’s all about a system of continuous improvement that has enabled the district to continue its performance despite the severe budget cuts.

“We’ve been above 80 percent for the last three years, which is the highest performance level in the history of the district,” Melanie says. “Graduation rates have continued to increase, dropout rates have continued to decrease. . . . If we’d not had very clear processes in place, if we’d not had the structures that the Criteria provided us, we wouldn’t have been able to sustain those results.”

In 2010, ISS applied for and received a highly competitive five-year grant through the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). The district has used the funds to increase teacher effectiveness and to improve academic achievement of high-need students and of students with disabilities and limited English proficiency. To receive the grant, ISS had to gather $1 million in community matching funds within 30 days. ISS was also the recipient of a $19.9 million dollar Race to the Top District (RttD) federal grant from the DOE. The focus of the RttD grant will be to incorporate blended learning opportunities into the classroom to increase student engagement and continue to close achievement gaps.

“The Baldrige Criteria and processes we have in place really helped set us up to be competitive for both of these grants,” Melanie says. “Less than a generation ago, public schools had no real competition. Maybe there was a private school here or there, but that option was only available to parents with the means to pay the tuition. Today our public schools are competing with privates and charters. Our graduates are not just competing for spaces in college programs and jobs with the graduates in the neighboring county but with graduates around the world. If our education system is not looking to move forward and continually improve and find ways to be more effective with our students, then our education system is moving backward. There is no standing still.”

The journey continues.