

The Baldrige Program:

SELF-ASSESSMENT FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

By constantly focusing on seven indicators of quality, schools can strive for excellence in every area of leadership and performance.

Sandra Byrne and Christine Schaefer

In Palatine, Illinois, first graders monitor their progress with individual file folders that contain a wealth of data related to their learning.

In the sprawling, mostly remote school district of Chugach, Alaska, teachers build their skills through 30 inservice days each year, with emphasis on leadership training.

And in New York's Pearl River School District, principals collaborate with other school leaders, teachers, and community members in continuous improvement efforts.

IN BRIEF

The Baldrige National Quality Program, originally designed to promote excellence in American industry, has been successfully adapted to education. The Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, organized into seven Categories, provide a series of questions that allow education organizations to conduct self-assessments and serve as a guide for systemwide excellence. The article describes how three disparate school districts have used the Criteria to improve their performance and win the coveted Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

The Baldrige Education Criteria

The Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence consist of key questions in seven categories. What follows is a sampling that does not include a number of questions in various subcategories.

Leadership:

How do senior leaders guide and sustain your organization?
How do senior leaders communicate with faculty and staff and encourage high performance?

Strategic Planning:

How does your organization establish its strategy and strategic objectives?
How does your organization convert its strategic objectives into action plans?

Student, Stakeholder, and Market Focus:

How does your organization determine the requirements, expectations, and preferences of students, stakeholders, and markets to ensure the relevance of your educational programs, offerings, and services?
How does your organization build relationships to attract, satisfy, and retain students and stakeholders; increase student and stakeholder loyalty; and develop new program and service opportunities?

Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management:

How does your organization measure, analyze, align, review, and improve student and operational performance data at all levels and in all parts of your organization?
How does your organization ensure the quality and availability of needed data for faculty and staff, students and stakeholders, and suppliers and partners?

Faculty and Staff Focus:

How do compensation, career progression, and related workforce practices enable faculty, staff, and the organization to achieve high performance?
How does your organization's education, training, and career development build faculty and staff knowledge, skills, and capabilities?

Process Management:

How does your organization identify and manage its key processes for creating student and stakeholder value and maximizing student learning and success?
What are your processes for budgetary and financial management and continuity of operations in an emergency?

Organizational Performance Results:

What are your current levels and trends in key measures or indicators of student learning and improvement in student learning?
What are your current levels and trends in key measures or indicators of budgetary and financial performance, including measures of cost containment?

Although these three disparate public school districts are meeting the needs of their diverse students and communities through varying structures and practices, they share a common framework for realizing their goals: the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence, the heart of the Baldrige National Quality Program. They also share the distinction of having received the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award.

A Program Dedicated to Excellence

The Baldrige National Quality Program, based in the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology, was established by an act of Congress in 1987 to recognize high performance by firms in the private sector. The Baldrige Award is based on the applicants' responses to seven essential Criteria composed of acknowledged indicators of organizational excellence.

When it subsequently became clear that organizations in the education, health care, and nonprofit sectors could also adapt the Baldrige Criteria to assess and improve themselves, Congress in 1998 expanded award eligibility to include these organizations. The first education recipients—the Chugach and Pearl River school districts—were selected in 2001, and the Palatine Community Consolidated School District 15 received the Baldrige Award in 2003.

Measuring Educational Excellence

The Education Criteria for Performance Excellence (*see sidebar*) provide a structure for any public or private institution that offers teaching and instructional services to students. Within each of the seven Categories, a series of questions are designed to enable organizations to look at themselves both externally (*i.e.*, at their students, parents, communities, providers of their students' future education, and their results) and internally (*i.e.*, at their leadership, faculty and staff, planning, processes, measures, and their results).

EDITOR'S NOTE

The 2005 Baldrige Award recipients, which were announced after this article was written, include the Jenks Public Schools in Jenks, Oklahoma. Information about Jenks may be found at the district's Web site, www.jenksp.org.

Since the principal goals of education organizations are teaching and learning, the Criteria help education organizations focus on well-conceived and well-executed assessment strategies; year-to-year improvement in key performance indicators—especially student learning; and demonstrated leadership in performance improvement relative to comparable organizations and appropriate benchmarks.

Excellence in Illinois

Community Consolidated School District 15 in Palatine, Illinois, serves a diverse population of 13,000 students in kindergarten through eighth grade. More than one-third of the students are of minority backgrounds and many live in poverty. Educators throughout the system began using the Baldrige Criteria to measure and improve performance in 1998.

Today, the district's use of the Baldrige framework for self-assessment is systematic and the positive impact can be seen in the results of academic assessments. According to Kevin Jauch, principal of Central Road Elementary School, "We've been using quality tools for so long that I don't know how we'd learn without them." He cites as an example students' tracking of their performance by using data folders.

"Each student has an individual file folder which has a copy of their classroom mission statement and/or their personal one, run charts with spelling scores, holistic assessment scores, reading level, number of books they have read and demonstrated proficiency on, academic and sometimes behavioral goals, and any other pertinent data that the teacher and student can use to drive classroom instruction."

Over the course of the school year, often weekly, teacher and student meet to discuss the contents of the folder and the student's progress. "Goals are discussed and evaluated, and new goals are set," says Jauch. "Although the teacher and student do this as a team, it is very empowering for students, giving them ownership of their education."

Chugach: Baldrige in the Bush

The Chugach School District of Alaska is unique in that while its central office is based in Anchorage, its 30 faculty and staff serve 214 students in sites spanning 22,000 square miles of largely isolated south-central Alaska.

Chugach Superintendent Bob Crumley says his district chose Baldrige because of a need to build accountability into its system. "Baldrige really gave us a framework to measure our entire system rather than just look at student test results on a couple of content areas."

Doug Penn, principal of Chugach's three school sites, recalls how the district began using Baldrige as a quest "for an outside benchmark to see how we were doing." Penn explains that "the district was already doing things in the seven areas of the Baldrige Criteria, but we were not seeing the alignment."

Chugach's other principal, Ty Mase, who oversees several special programs, adds that the retreat-style training for all staff in the Baldrige Criteria helped establish the framework's use in the district's daily activities. Today "it's so embedded that we use it every day without knowing it's Baldrige."

Pearl River: "Good Is Never Good Enough"

The Pearl River School District is located in Rockland County, New York, approximately 20 miles north of New York City. Like other organizations that benefit from the Baldrige Criteria, Pearl River has adapted its use of the framework to its situation: "We have taken what we have learned about the Baldrige model and customized it to our environment, developing a system of continuous improvement," says Sandra Cokeley, district director of quality and community relations.

Margo Furst, principal of Evans Park Elementary School, explains that Pearl River principals use Baldrige for continuous improvement by "always looking at assessment data, modifying as

necessary, not just annually but also quarterly and more often."

Ellen Raffman, principal of Lincoln Avenue Elementary School, points out that Baldrige prepared her district to meet requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. "NCLB was easy for us," she says, "because we had so many things in place." Those things include a standardized testing and improvement process, and the commitment of one hour each day at all three district elementary schools in which no new learning is introduced so that students can hone their reading and math skills.

Carla Silberstein, principal of Franklin Avenue Elementary School, sums up how the district's three elementary schools all use data to drive performance. "We're continually measuring our progress," she says. "It's a never-ending process. Good is never good enough." ■

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WEB RESOURCES

To read more about the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recipients or to download the Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence and other resources of the Baldrige National Quality Program, visit the Baldrige Web site. www.baldrige.nist.gov

The American Society for Quality, the administrator of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, describes common quality issues in education on its Web site. www.asq.org/education/why-quality/commonissues.html