

Education
The Journey To Excellence
A Quality Issue
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Twelve years ago, the Aldine School District began a quest for excellence in quality management. Aldine ISD is a suburban school district of almost 59,000 students with all the characteristics of a large urban city school district. The district serves 65 campuses and six administrative sites with over 8,000 employees. Although students were performing academically, alignment of all of the parts of the district around a common vision and mission was missing. Departments operated in isolation, focusing only on the work of the department, without connecting the department to the work of the district. All of the parts of the whole did not support the work of the whole.

The journey began when the district was chosen to be part of the Baldrige in Education initiative in Texas. The introduction to the Baldrige criteria provided the method for aligning all of the parts of the district to a common vision and mission. Training with the American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) provided a systems perspective, process development, and process mapping. Combining the Baldrige criteria and the APQC training delivered a framework of excellence for the district. A new vision and mission were developed, sixteen goals became four objectives with three to four goals and a balanced scorecard. Targets were set and action plans developed to deliver the goals of the objectives. Progress was monitored on a quarterly basis and, at times, actions were adjusted and changed if results were not delivered.

Deciding to implement a quality continuous improvement program based on leadership; strategic planning; student, stakeholder, and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; faculty and staff focus; process management and results was an easy decision. Much of the criteria was in place – the language and vocabulary were different. It was evident that the Baldrige Quality criteria would make a difference in the product the district produces – a student who is The Nation's Best – A Critical Thinker, A Problem Solver, and a Responsible and Productive Citizen. These students are competitive for the best scholarships, the best colleges, and the best jobs. Quality districts embrace accountability for student achievement, know the skills students need for success, use many strategies to ensure children master learning, expect that learning will occur at high levels, monitor learning through results, and adjust strategies when learning occurs. The Baldrige criteria for Performance Excellence provided a model to restructure the way we did our work and implementation became a reality.

The district's quest for excellence began, not only in the academic achievement of its students, but also in the management and operation of the district. The goal was to become the most effective and efficient in how work was done. The implementation of a quality system became the focus of the district leadership team. It was important that district leaders understood the quality process, the language of the process, and the tools of the process. District leaders not only had to "talk the talk, but walk the walk" in each of their areas of supervision. If we could not adopt a better way to do our work, how could we expect others to do so? The leadership team worked for a year and it was painful. Old habits are hard to break. It became evident, as we worked through the change process, positive changes in operational results and efficiency were emerging. Success made believers of most and improvements in operational efficiency continued. Even the most resistant became pro quality improvement.

The next four years, the quality process cascaded throughout the school system. As the way we had operated merged with the quality framework for excellence, commonalities were found and change became much easier and accepted. District Improvement Plans became action plans with targeted results that were measured and monitored. Campuses, grade levels, subject areas, and individual teachers began to develop teams that met collaboratively to plan and develop action plans to accomplish goals set by the team. These action plans targeted academic achievement, attendance, behavior, or management processes such as bus loading procedures. Grade levels of teachers and individual teachers developed action plans to move learning forward. The next step involves students developing action plans to move their own learning forward.

Operational departments conducted assessments that identified strengths and opportunities for improvement that led to action plans for changing processes. Processes across the district were evaluated, revised, and re-evaluated. Process maps identified many areas of duplicity and again change occurred for the better. Training was provided in effective team meetings, how to run a successful meeting, and how to handle team members during a meeting.

Peer Assessments were conducted on each campus and in each of the departments in the district to determine progress levels. Again, these assessments were based on the Baldrige criteria for performance excellence. Each campus revised a score in each of the seven quality categories. Strengths in each category were identified along with opportunities for improvement and best practices. Opportunities for improvement will provide the basis for next year's action plan or adjustments to this year's plan. Each campus or department is on a three-year cycle of improvement and assessment for growth.

Last fall, the district applied for the Texas Award for Performance Excellence through the Quality Texas Foundation. Spring brought a site visit and the award winning announcement. Aldine ISD had received the Texas Award for Performance Excellence. Has the quest for excellence and the journey to the Texas Award for Performance Excellence changed the way we do things? You bet it has. It has focused the district – both the instructional and the operational houses of the district on the vision and mission of the district. Each department understands the role it plays to support the academic achievement of students. All work is centered on the customers we serve and their progress toward becoming the nation's best. Processes are aligned across the district and the journey continues to more efficient and effective management.