



Establishing a Senior Leader's Baldridge Network **Benchmarking Education At Its Best**



Laura Longmire
Strategic Quality Initiatives

Now into its second year of implementation, a group of high performing public school districts implemented a network of senior leaders who wanted to network and learn from one another. Superintendents and senior leaders of public school districts have a desire to continually grow and become role model leaders for their districts and communities. But as a superintendent it is difficult to acknowledge that you may not have all of the answers, cannot confide in leaders that report to you (appearance of favoritism), and may not be as far along the quality journey as other leaders. By establishing a network of senior leaders that are or want to be using the Performance Excellence Criteria, senior leaders are able to meet and learn from one another.

The *Baldridge Network* for Texas public school districts began in September 2009. Superintendents of districts known to be using the Baldridge criteria in their districts were contacted about their interest in joining a facilitated network of senior leaders who wanted to learn and share knowledge with each other. Of course, being a public entity, senior leaders want to know: 1) what's in it for me/my district, and 2) what does it cost to belong?

The “what's in it for me” was readily answered when each district has the opportunity to present and learn about a process, method or tool that is delivering good to high performing results in another district. With each network meeting, the districts select a topic that is a “burning issue” or strategic objective that they would like to learn how others are doing this process or if they have a promising practice/process that they would like to validate with the other districts. At each networking meeting, each district prepares a one to three page handout that answers “how” or “what” they are doing around the issue or objective. All districts have a chance to present and learn from one another. As in most network meetings, evidence of the process, practice or tool is shared with the other leaders. Each district has the opportunity to ask questions to clarify how the other district has developed and implemented the approach. By the end of the networking meeting, all districts go home with 5-15 documented approaches that they can use to either validate their own approach or innovative ideas that they can “adapt” to their district's needs. During the September 2010 networking meetings, the topic was “the complaint management process in your district.”

Being good stewards of the taxpayer's money, the “what it will cost” question is really important. The cost to a district is minimal. Each participating district will host a network meeting usually providing lunch. The other districts that participate are on their own for travel expenses. These meetings are usually hosted in either the Dallas/Ft. Worth, Houston or San Antonio regions. The network meetings begin at 9:30 am and end by 1:00 pm enabling a district to drive or fly to the meeting without missing a full day of work out of the district. The Baldridge facilitators give their time and travel expense pro-bono to accelerate the changes wanted/needed in public school districts. There are no dues or association costs, however, the district leaders feel they get more out of the networking meetings than they do from most state and national leadership conferences.

This network is effective due to several key enablers:

- * All meetings have a focused topic for continuous improvement
- * All meetings are held within a district's facilities
- * All meetings are facilitated by senior Baldridge examiners/judges

- * All meetings have deliverables/handouts that are shared with all participating districts even if they cannot come to the session
- * All meetings have time set aside to discuss and network with other district leaders

The Texas public school districts that are participating in the Baldrige network are: Aldine ISD (TAPE and Broad Award winner), Amarillo ISD, Burleson ISD, Fort Bend ISD, Hurst Euless Bedford ISD, Judson ISD, Katy ISD, Keller ISD, Mesquite ISD, Rockwall ISD, Victoria ISD, and Weatherford ISD.

At the end of each networking session, the sessions are evaluated for effectiveness and opportunities for improvement. As a result of this input, the following improvements have been made to the networking meetings:

- * Meetings are focused on one key approach or process to gain ideas or best practices
- * Districts that are in the early stages of an approach may elect not to present but to learn from districts that are further along in their journey
- * Meetings have been increased in time due to the value of the knowledge presented
- * Summaries of best practices of quality award winners both in education and outside of the education sector are shared and discussed
- * Districts that are hosting the network meeting now have the opportunity to present a tour of a “best practice” or innovation

The ability to tour a facility helps each district see the practice in work and gain tacit knowledge of how the approach works. Judson ISD shared a very successful English Language Learning program and Keller ISD shared two new innovations in facility design. At Keller ISD participating districts toured a middle school that is designed to be “green”, provides for project-based learning in small learning communities, and has integrated technology infused teaching/learning processes.

The next networking session is scheduled for November at Burleson ISD. If you or your district has an interest in learning about the Texas Baldrige Network, please contact Laura Longmire (longmire@aol.com), Joe Muzikowski (joe.muzikowsk@gmail.com), or Paula Sommer (texaspaula@aol.com).