Culture Shift

How one school is using Baldrige to improve education, meet the needs of its students

by Amanda Hankel

When Ackerman School, an elementary school in Florissant, MO, began a continuous improvement push four years ago as part of a districtwide initiative, the effort required more than showing teachers how to use quality tools—it meant changing the culture.

It's safe to say culture change is a tough task for any organization. Getting away from "we've always done it this way" and adopting new processes—even if they are better—requires buy-in from stakeholders, education and training for staff, and the ability to overcome barriers to change.

In primary and secondary education, changing a culture can be even more challenging because not only are a school's leaders talking about creating change among staff, but they must also include students and their families in the transformation. At Ackerman School, the change process was even more unique because this school is not a traditional elementary school.

Ackerman School is part of the Special School District of St. Louis County, a public school district for special and technical education. According to Principal Kelly Grigsby, Ackerman School serves students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade with a variety of severe needs. Some students have significant behavioral and emotional challenges, while others are medically fragile, severely physically impaired or have limited cognition.

"Prior to our push toward continuous improvement, I would say that while the school provided academic instruction to students, many staff placed greater emphasis on meeting students' social and personal needs," Grigsby said.

After that realization, the question, "How do we make sure kids are learning?" became a driving force in the school's continuous improvement journey, Grigsby said.

"The reality is, the students we have are going to have the needs that they have regardless of what we do," Grigsby said. "We can teach students with emotional concerns to cope, but we still have to give them access to an education and make sure that they have the best academic skills that can help them have one less strike against them as they grow up."

Staff members could ensure students are safe and teach them the highest level of independence possible, Grigsby said, but they also need to ensure students are learning in a way that meets their needs and helps them to excel academically.

For example, because many students have autism, one important component of their education is helping them figure out how to tolerate their environment and how to interact with it, while at the same time teaching them reading, writing and math—whether it's purely academic or a more functional approach.

After making these discoveries about Ackerman School and other schools in the district facing similar challenges, the district committed itself to looking at different ways to improve using a continuous improvement framework. Since the beginning of this effort, Ackerman School has realized some remarkable achievements, including better student assessment scores, increased student and family engagement and improved attendance, not to mention a true shift toward a quality culture.

Baldrige is the answer

As part of the districtwide initiative, Ackerman School began its journey working with Jim Shipley and Associates, a consulting firm that has essentially taken the Baldrige framework and worked it into more user-friendly language for schools, Grigsby said. Ackerman School began using the Baldrige criteria as a guide in its improvement initiatives. Grigsby presented on Ackerman School's use of the Baldrige criteria for continuous improvement at the 2012 National Quality Education Conference in Louisville, KY.

"We don't look at the Baldrige criteria everyday and say, 'Oh, we are doing this,' or, 'That falls in line with this,'" Grigsby said. "We have done a lot of planning using the criteria, but we have embedded it throughout our day to day, which helps us guide our actions."

The first year, the focus was on the school as a whole and strategic planning, Grigsby said. Teachers and administrators redefined the school's mission, vision and core values, and ensured everyone, including students, had a voice. This laid the foundation and charted the path to where the school was headed, and defined why the school was doing what it was doing and what was important.

"We've spent a lot of time training our staff on continuous improvement, but also working on morale and relationships," Grigsby said. "Process management is a huge part of the Baldrige criteria. So, we looked at processes, aligned them and started getting rid of things that had maybe been here for 20 years and we were doing them because they were the 'sacred cow.'"

The school also developed a leadership team that was representative of the school's staff in the school. Key leaders and administrators began basic work to learn what continuous improvement meant and what it would look like for the school.

Next came spot training and piloting of the Shipley model of "Classroom Learning Systems"—engaging students in regular and frequent evaluation and improvement of classroom learning processes using a systematic plan-do-study-act (PDSA) approach.

"That's where we really worked hard on aligning our structures, working on our processes, and teaching our students, staff and families why we do the things we do and what's driving what we are doing as far as accreditation and expectations for progress," Grigsby said.

In year two, the initiative branched out and, according to Grigsby, that's when the school's new Classroom Learning Systems took off. Teachers, paraprofessionals, students and families each played a role in the learning process. Students talked about what works for them, and decision making became driven by data and student input. The PDSA process was used to examine instructional behaviors and progress.

This year's emphasis became about sustaining the growth being achieved, Grigsby said. Administrators worked with coaches, who were brought in to support the process, and leadership and expectations at the district level were set to ensure that growth was maintained.

Now in year four of implementation, Grigsby said it's no longer just about what is expected, but moving past compliance and integrating continuous improvement initiatives into all areas of learning.

"Now, we are focused on making sure we have a shared common knowledge and language that we use around continuous improvement that we've integrated into all of our systems, including our data teams, goal teams, school leadership teams and at the classroom level," Grigsby said. "We've also added Teacher-Student Partnerships, another component of Shipley's program, in which the teacher sets direction in order to engage students in a partnership to produce high quality learning."

Unique barriers

Barriers to improvement are a given in any organization, and Ackerman School was no exception. But the school's leaders didn't really know what the barriers were until they started the process Grigsby said. However, one of the biggest barriers was student engagement.

"We have students with a range of cognitive ability in our school—anywhere from two months of age to all the way up to post high school," Grigsby said. "We have students and we have students who, if we can get them to make eye contact with us, are making growth. So, one of the barriers to student engagement in continuous improvement is figuring out how we can get kids engaged in the process of improvement. What does that look like for our students who can't say, 'This helps my learning, I want this, this is working, this isn't,' and how we can measure their input and make changes based on that?"

Overcoming that barrier meant collecting real-time data as learning was occurring to see how students were engaging. Were they smiling? Were they disinterested? Had they gained a skill? Did they attend an activity? Staff then took those data and had conversations to make sure changes were made based on student engagement.

The other major barrier involved deciphering the roles of the staff population. According to Grigsby, Ackerman School has 100 staff members, including teachers, therapists (social

workers, occupational therapists, physical therapists and speech/language pathologists) and paraprofessionals or teachers assistants, which make up about two-thirds of the 100 members.

"Just because you have more bodies in a classroom doesn't mean those systems are working any more effectively," Grigsby said. "We had to figure out what are the roles and how are we going to work together to make sure we were supporting each other."

Seeing results

Since starting this journey, Ackerman School has seen several changes. Attendance is up, Grigsby said, and students want to be in school.

"That's been a huge cultural shift," Grigsby said. "Seeing students more interested in coming to school and learning better has given our staff and students more encouragement to be in school and to be learning."

Families are participating in school events and in conversations around student learning at the highest levels the school has ever seen.

"One of the biggest points of feedback from teachers has been the amount of support in our activities and classroom events coming from family," Grigsby said. "Before, I think we had a mentality that families were good at home and school was good at school. When you ask teachers to host an event for families year after year, and you only get a few families, it's discouraging for them. We've seen a dramatic increase in family involvement."

Ackerman has also seen a dramatic increase in moving students out of the lower levels of achievement testing and into higher levels. More students are reading and working on math at grade level.

"Students have an active voice in their learning, meaning they make choices about how they learn and what's working for them," Grigsby said. "We're looking at data not just because we've been told to collect data, but also because it is meaningful. Teachers have been given the

autonomy to decide what those data sources look like and how it's meaningful for their students. If it's not meaningful, they've been given the opportunity to change things.

"There is a lot of shared decision making," she continued. "It's not a top-down situation where we are making decisions and students and teachers are being forced to implement and live with the decisions that have been made. Rather, it's shared decision making by parents and families, students, teachers and support staff all the way up to administrators."

Grigsby said these improvements have resulted in a shared language in the school and the district, and a shared culture of high expectations for student learning.

"Our instruction is better directed and planned ," she said. "It's based on what students need, where they are and what happens next."

Finally, Grigsby said the buy-in among staff has been remarkable.

"When we started on this journey, I thought it was going to be a hard sell," she said. "I really thought if we get to a point where people are posting data on student performance, we'd be doing well."

But instead, Grigsby said continuous improvement and quality methods have become so integrated into the way teachers work, they no longer consider it a new or added effort. During the last set of meetings in which Grigsby and the assistant principal talk with teachers about how things are going, they found they weren't getting a lot of feedback about the continuous improvement efforts the school was implementing. But when Grigsby did a walk-through in classrooms, she realized teachers could no longer talk about continuous improvement in isolation—it had become so integrated into the day-to-day work in the classroom.

"That was a huge benchmark," Grigsby said. "It wasn't a named benchmark, but to see the integration and buy-in from some people who were very resistant in the beginning has been pretty amazing."

Next steps

In addition to sustaining and maintaining where the school currently is, Grigsby said in the future she'd like to create more teacher-leaders to lead continuous improvement efforts. The school also has more processes to improve, and it is working to train new teachers and implement quality initiatives at higher levels. A focus also has been on having students share their progress with their family.

On a regular basis, Grigsby said she reminds herself this process is a journey, not a destination.

"I'm a big time, 'Let's 'quick start' and get this implemented and then move on to the next initiative,'" she said. "What this process has taught me is this is going to take a lot of time. It's a journey."