The Road to Continuous Improvement

An Unrelenting Focus on Improving Student Learning

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Executive Summary

Continuous improvement is a concept that is guiding Polaris Career Center in a focus on improving student achievement. This drive for quality in education is accomplished through accountability of all staff members and students for student learning. The district is guided by Baldrige Criteria for excellence which include leadership, strategic planning, student and stakeholder focus, information and analysis, faculty and staff focus, process management, and school performance results.

A district-wide reorganization aligned staff members and students in instructional teams based on career clusters. Administrators and teachers learned group problem-solving and decision making tools to deeply involve teachers in creating a vital and powerful learning environment. A Task Force with diverse stakeholder representation developed a Continuous Improvement Model to assure leading edge curriculum offerings. Core Groups of teachers in each team stepped into the continuous improvement process to test the model. Teachers became fluent in new strategies of continuous improvement by incorporating easy-to-use “tools” in their classrooms in project-based lessons and in classroom management.

As students have experienced this drive for continuous improvement, they have become more aware of their own responsibility for their personal learning. They, too, have learned “tools” that empower them with the desire and responsibility to manage their own learning. Student accountability is a key component in quality education. Although the staff of Polaris are at a novice stage in their improvement efforts, capacity is building in our school and the logic and power of continuous improvement have led teachers to form a Quality Network within the district to support and nurture their efforts.

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Foundational Principles
Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), US Department of Labor, 1996

SCANS is a report that was published by the US Department of Labor which describes the basic competencies and skills that young people need in order to find and hold a good job. The skills include: (1) resources, defined as the efficient use of time, money, materials, and people; (2) information, the ability to acquire, evaluate, organize, interpret, and communicate available information; (3) interpersonal, defined as the ability to work with diverse groups of people as a team member, teacher, leader, and/or negotiator; (4) systems, defined as understanding of the interrelationship of how the parts of a whole work together, and (5) technology, as the understanding of the need for tools, machines, materials, and technology in the work place.

The Polaris Career Center continuous improvement process incorporates these SCANS skills as a foundation for the process change. For example, the traditional means of programme evaluation on a 5-year cycle did not exemplify the most efficient use of resources or information, nor did this practice address our school and its programmes as a part of a well-functioning system. Likewise, we felt that the education of students in career-technical skills lends itself to a team structure, and that SCANS interpersonal focus supported our desire to change. As well, teaming had to go further than a re-organization into similar career-technical groups; it had to become a core process of interpersonal functioning mirroring the demands of the work place in the 21st century.

Baldrige in Education Initiative
The Baldrige in Education Initiative uses technology and process tools to apply to education the “total quality management” principles of former U.S. Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige. The goal of this initiative is to encourage school administrators to learn to use technology to get instant feedback about student learning, make better decisions about curriculum, and improve school performance. Baldrige is a set of criteria. It is a framework to guide continuous improvement. It is a way to align organizational systems for the result of continuous improvement.
Continuous improvement focuses on seven primary categories that are pervasive in quality organizations. These categories include:

1. Organizational Leadership
2. Strategic planning
3. Student and stakeholder focus
4. Information and analysis
5. Faculty and staff focus
6. Educational and support process management
7. Organizational performance results

Organizational leadership emphasizes the role of senior leaders in setting directions and creating an environment for educational excellence.

Strategic planning includes steps in describing strategic objectives, developing and identifying action plans to address the organization’s strategic objectives, identifying key performance measures to track progress, and deploying action plans and performance measures.

Student and stakeholder focus places the emphasis of an organization upon the satisfaction of programming, as well as the enhancement of student and stakeholder relationships.

Information and analysis emphasizes organizational performance measurement and analysis based upon data and information gathering.

Comparative and benchmarking information and data are utilized for an effective performance measurement system and for an alignment of performance throughout the organization. This review function is a central role of senior leadership.

Faculty and staff focus includes education training and development necessary for an organization to meet the needs and demands of its stakeholders.

Education and support process management addresses the important partnering processes associated with student transitions into and out of schools and from school to work.

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The last category, organizational performance results, integrates all key dimensions of performance, e.g. student performance, student and stakeholder focus, budgetary and financial, faculty and staff, and organizational effectiveness into a summary result that demonstrates an organization’s focus toward enhancing learning and/or the achievement of organizational effectiveness.

The difference between a traditional good organization and an organization within a quality framework of continuous improvement is in student performance. At Polaris we believe that maximizing student performance results from embracing SCANS and Baldrige principles and integrating them into our foundational beliefs which drive our procedures. We have begun to align our energies and efforts of continuous improvement with our mission of teaching the career, technical and life skills necessary to gain meaningful employment, add value to the workplace, and advance in a career.

**Quality Principles into Practice**

Polaris began the process of transformation through a comprehensive needs assessment. As a result, 14 areas of performance were delineated as focal points for improvement. One of these areas, and our starting point in the new endeavor, was to define what we should be teaching at Polaris. It was to be a year-long investigation of what we are currently teaching, what we should retain as part of our curriculum, and what should be dropped from our career-technical training programs. As we began identifying how to approach our task, we came up with five components of our work: career-technical; academic; special needs; technology; and assessment of our performance outcomes. We formed five research and development groups to study these component areas. We also identified our key stakeholders in our educational efforts, those being business and our Advisory Councils, our Associate Schools, post-secondary education and training institutions, students, and parents. Our charge became that of using all of our resources to determine what we should be teaching at Polaris and how we should be evaluating our educational programs.

A project plan was used as a guide for formulating an outline of forthcoming work. This project plan incorporated the following questions:

What is the project?
What will be the final product(s)?
What events must occur?

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What is the timeline?
Who is responsible?
Who is involved?
What are the projected costs?
The project at hand was identified as “How will we find out what we should teach?” The group had been taught the rules and process of brainstorming, one of the quality tools. The group brainstormed 8-10 pages of ideas and hung them on chart paper around the room. An affinity process was used to establish groups of like items. Group consensus was used to develop a heading for each group. Six categories of ideas were identified. From this point, volunteers took on the challenge of investigating the particular areas, e.g., local industry needs, state department of education recommendation, instructor input, and Associate School input. What transpired was a turning point in our process. Research of these sources as to what we should teach became a never-ending process. It became apparent that we were again perpetuating a process that ultimately we were going to recommend be eliminated. Information, individually gathered but lacked a system of utilization. We were generating good ideas, but they were random acts of improvement. Likewise, the need for research was overwhelming. What we needed was one vision that everyone would work toward. We needed a quality process. The group talked about the results of our work over the past months and concluded that we should take the categories and use them as a part of a continuous improvement model.

The research and development group designed a model for continuous improvement. The model consisted of five distinct parts, the overall goal, data collection tasks, research tasks, recommendations, and implementation. Data collection included sub-topics such as: (a) identifying sources of baseline data, e.g., enrollment, job placement, and employment upgrades; (b) surveying consumers, e.g., students, further education, checking existing surveys; (c) collecting information from our Associate Schools, e.g., graduation requirements, enrollment projections; (d) examining test results, e.g., proficiency, Work Keys, OCAPS; and (e) responding to the Program Report Card. Researching tasks included identifying trends, visiting reputable programs, attending to State Department of Education directives, developing feasibility committees comprised of practitioners and stakeholders, and developing articulation agreements between high school, adult education, and higher education institutions. Recommended tasks were broken down into goals, measurable short-term objectives, identification of links between high school and adult education, recommended changes, projected costs, and approval by Business Advisory Committees. Lastly, implementation tasks

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included establishing a timeline for recommendations, implementation, evaluation, and ongoing refinement of the process. With the model in place, the group could begin to address the information already gathered and fit it into the model in an organized form. Again, group discussion and consensus led to the model that to this day guides our continuous improvement process.

Equal to the task of formulating a model of continuous improvement was the process by which our work was to be done. Quality improvement tools, derived from Langford Quality Learning, were employed as a means of gathering, prioritizing, and organizing ideas. Quality learning techniques are based on current understanding of the theories, processes, and tools of continual improvement.

Now that we had a model - a Program Planning Continuous Improvement Cycle - the question became how we could activate it. We needed real people and our existing programme instructors to start the process. One group on each instructional team was selected to begin the process. Each group was comprised of members from our High School programmes and Adult Education. Our initial teams were Culinary Arts, Information Technology, and Auto Technology. We sent these three groups back into the Program Planning Continuous Improvement Cycle to personalize all of the delineated steps to their career-technical programme needs.

We are in the stage of saying, “What Next?” We continually send staff to quality learning workshops to further their understanding and excitement in our continuous improvement efforts. We continually plan-do-check-act. Now we are blending continuous improvement and quality into terms that are synonymous in our school. The pattern of learning has flowed among administration and teachers and students in an effort to truly move our organization into a continuous improvement process exemplifying the principles of both SCANS and Baldrige. Our growth and our successes will be continuous. We will continue to plan, do a small version of our plan, check to see how it’s working and make necessary adjustments, and act – meaning fully implement. This process will hold us accountable to our mission and will guide our decisions as we move through the continuous process of being a quality organization.

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