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The Pursuit of Excellence: An “Inside-Out” Approach to Continuous Improvement

By Dr. Brian R. Miller, Dr. Kristen Justus and Rachel Hathhorn



About the Authors: Since 2013, **Dr. Brian R. Miller** has served as the Superintendent at Pine-Richland School District (PRSD) in Pittsburgh and is in his 26th year in education. PRSD is recognized as a high-performing school district across all indicators receiving the Mid-Atlantic Alliance for Performance Excellence (MAAPE) Mastery Award in 2020 and the MAAPE Excellence Award in 2021. In addition, Dr. Miller is entering his 10th year as a senior examiner with the Baldrige Performance Excellence national program with five years as a team lead.

Dr. Kristen Justus is in her fifth year in her role as Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education and Curriculum at PRSD. Now in her 18th year in education, she has also held positions as principal, assistant principal and German teacher. Dr. Justus has served one year as an examiner regionally for MAAPE and one year at the national level.

Rachel Hathhorn serves as the Director of Communications at PRSD. Her career spans 22 years in communications in education. Most recently, she has served three years as an examiner for MAAPE and is president-elect for the Pennsylvania School Public Relations Association.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to **introduce the Baldrige Excellence Framework** and share how the framework was used to drive action (and thinking) at Pine-Richland School District (PRSD). “Inside-out” refers to both people and processes. We know that meaningful change in any organization requires the collaborative effort of staff and stakeholders. We also know that sustained change is built on the underlying foundation of key work processes and systems. At either the district or building level, **a continuous improvement mindset is critical to performance excellence in education.**

In late November 2021, the Mid-Atlantic Alliance for Performance Excellence award program (MAAPE) program announced that **Pine-Richland School District has been named a 2021 Excellence Award recipient.** The Excellence Award is MAAPE’s highest award level. “Notably, Pine-Richland School District will be only the seventh organization to earn the Excellence Award in the past 15 years and the first education sector excellence award winner,” said Bob Bitner, MAAPE president and CEO. MAAPE, a 501(c)3 organization serving Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, is focused on helping organizations achieve improved levels of performance by identifying and recognizing role-model organizations and sharing their best practices and strategies. **MAAPE is one of 31 state and regional Baldrige-based award programs across the country.**

PRSD is located in the northern portion of Allegheny County, and serves 4,550 students K-12 through 500+ staff. Composed of the Township of Pine and Richland Township, the school district covers 31.4 square miles in a community of approximately 25,000 residents and has experienced continuous growth since the early 1990s. Pine-Richland is noted for having a strong academic reputation, a community that values the importance of education, a wide range of educational programs, first-rate facilities, strong financial practices and a systematic approach to communication and engagement. Pine-Richland is also known for diverse opportunities in the arts, athletics and other co- and extracurricular activities. This article will share examples of the impact of the Baldrige Excellence Framework on Pine-Richland School District.

Baldrige Background

Beginning in 1987, through the U.S. Department of Commerce and National Institute of Standards and Technology, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recognizes exemplary U.S. organizations and businesses that demonstrate an “*unceasing drive for innovative solutions to complex challenges, visionary leadership and operational excellence*” (nist.gov/Baldrige). The Baldrige Award is the highest level of national recognition for performance excellence that a U.S. organization can receive. The Baldrige Excellence Framework is a tool that has helped our district improve. This article is designed to tell the story of how the framework made an impact at Pine-Richland. The framework is not prescriptive. Instead, it is designed to ask questions. It is up to each organization how to address those questions. Examples include:

- How do you conduct your strategic planning?
- How do senior leaders create a focus on action that will achieve the organization’s mission?
- How does your organization ensure responsible governance?
- How do you determine educational program and service offerings?
- How do you build and manage student, parent and other customer relationships?

It is helpful to see how these questions develop from basic to more detailed. Here is a simple example of that progression of questions:

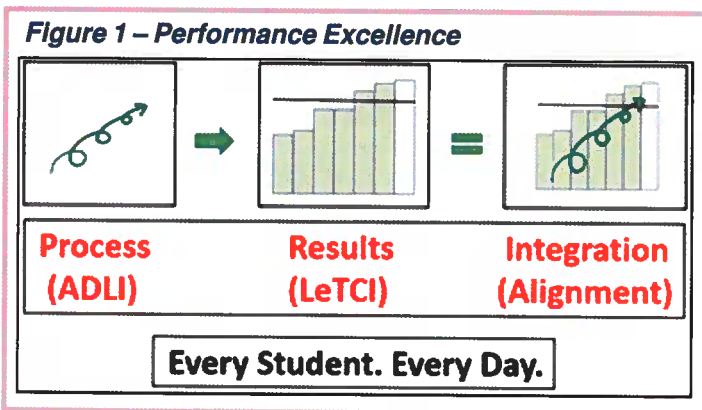
- How do you develop strategy?
 - How do you conduct your strategic planning?
 - What are the key process steps? Who are the key participants? What are your short- and longer-term planning horizons?

In response to the questions, there are two key acronyms used in the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (BPEP) that help organizations evaluate performance. **The process acronym is ADLI, and results acronym is LeTCI.**

Pine-Richland

At Pine-Richland, we have translated those acronyms into images that help us consider growth (**Figure 1**). The PRSD mission is to **focus on learning for every student every day**. The green “continuous improvement” loops illustrate that improvement is not usually a straight line. Per Baldrige Performance Excellence (BPE), **ADLI stands for approach, deployment, learning and integration**. Is there a systematic (repeatable) approach? Is it deployed to relevant areas? Has it been refined through cycles of learning? Does it integrate with areas important to the organization? For a practical example, let’s look back at the questions above. *“How do you conduct your strategic planning?”* Is there a systematic approach or set of steps (**A**)? Has that approach been refined or improved over time (**L**)?

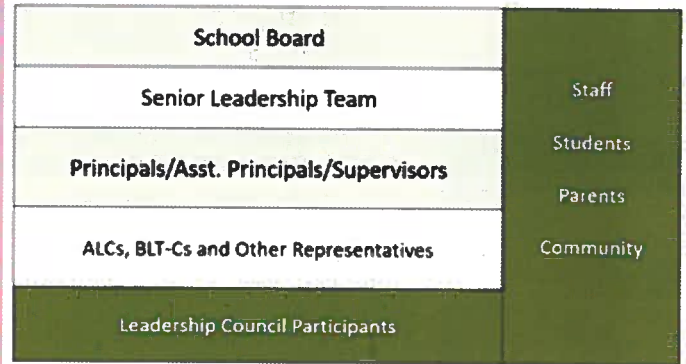
The results histogram provides a visual way to evaluate performance. Per BPE, **LeTCI stands for levels, trends, comparisons and integration**. Whether it relates to student achievement or parent satisfaction, we need to understand how we are doing (**L**). When we evaluate results over time, we are beginning to understand trends (**T**). When we evaluate our performance against some form of benchmark, we have started to identify relevant comparisons (**C**).



Which is more important...process or results?

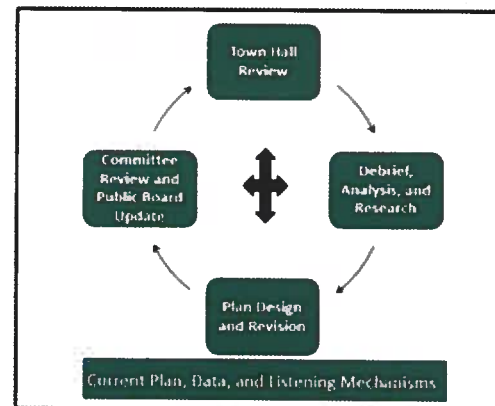
We often ask this question during interviews for leadership positions. Even more than the answer to this “trick” question, we are interested in hearing the thought process of the person. We would respond to that question by saying, “it depends on the maturity of the organization.” Even though we do not talk about ADLI and LeTCI too much in everyday language in our schools, we do use the images to illustrate the concept. At Pine-Richland, we used the concepts to build strong, sustainable processes and systems from the “inside-out.” We started with people and a leadership system that promotes alignment of key staff and stakeholders (**Figure 2**). Our department and grade level chairpersons are known as the Academic Leadership Council (ALC). Our Building-Level Technology Coaches are noted by **BLT-C**. Other leadership councils are formed based on topic (e.g., Healthcare, Transforming the Future and Technology).

Figure 2 – Leadership System



We will build on the strategic planning questions shared earlier to illustrate how we used the framework at Pine-Richland. In **Figure 3**, we see the strategic planning process used to develop the four-year, long-term plan. We had more than 400 people participate in at least one town hall meeting over the five-month period used to develop our plan. We say that our mission, vision and values (MVV) are our compass. The strategic plan is our map. We used the Baldrige Excellence Framework questions to help us determine “how” we would accomplish this important work. Different school districts – or organizations – can approach strategic planning in different ways. This is why the framework is “not prescriptive.” The important part is that effective organizations are intentional about strategic development.

Figure 3 – Strategic Planning Process



- Step 1: Use gallery walk to revise SPP with input from key leaders
 - Step 2: Review current plan/results; environmental scan
 - Step 3: Review/affirm MVV; confirm SPP with BOE
 - Step 4: Communicate process, timeline and invitations to all stakeholders; specific invitations to key stakeholder groups
 - Step 5: Hold town halls organized into small table groups to maximize input. Gain consensus on MVV and long-term goals. Gather initial input regarding short-term actions.
 - Step 6: SLT reviews input and refines the draft SP.
 - Step 7: Review progress with BOE and update SP documents placed on the district website for transparency.
 - Step 8: Superintendent updates all stakeholders on progress (ongoing).
 - Steps 4-8 repeat a total of 3 times over a 5-month period.
- As an example of engagement and inclusion, more than 400 people participated in at least one TownHall.

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To learn more about this example, we invite interested readers to visit our website at www.pinerichland.org. On the main landing page, you will see a channel for Strategic Plan. Embedded in that location are a **series of short podcasts** that describe our MVV (mission, vision and values), strategic planning process and the pursuit of excellence. We have other examples, such as the in-depth program review process on the website, that gives you an idea of how ADLI translates into action for students, parents and staff. Some staff member reflections of this work include:

"Over the past several years, I have witnessed a shift from a focus on individual improvements to an overall emphasis on core processes in our school system," said Principal Steve Smith. *"This shift has kept us away from creating a 'flavor of the month' process improvement program to truly developing a culture that embraces continuous improvement."*

"This award is significant and results from our administration's sustained intentional effort to work collaboratively and cooperatively with all stakeholders to solve short-term and long-term challenges," said Pine-Richland Education Association (PREA) President, Chris Vins. *"As a third-grade teacher and the president of PREA, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to be a part of our district and this unique process."*

Getting Started

At Pine-Richland, one of the first places we started was to consider our organizational profile. The organizational profile is a "snapshot" of our organization and strategic environment. The questions asked us about the following: educational programs and services; mission, vision and values; workforce; major assets; regulatory requirements; key relationships with suppliers, partners and collaborators; and the competitive environment (nist.gov/baldrige/baldrige-organizational-profile).

For school districts or universities, there are many people who may not be familiar with the Baldrige program and framework. These potential barriers are worth addressing. Examples include:

- **Awareness**...of the framework
- **Understanding**...requires time and commitment
- **Complexity**...the full framework can feel overwhelming
- **Buy-in**...of senior leaders and the school board
- **Stability**...turnover of senior leaders and/or board
- **Discipline**...to sustain focus
- **Commitment**...to the investment
- **Time**...process before results requires patience
- **Deployment**...throughout the leadership system and organization in relevant ways

As we know from many years of hard work, the framework is the opposite of an "educational fad or shiny object." Performance excellence is a journey built on disciplined action and time. However, the pursuit of excellence also leads to some of the most rewarding improvements for student, parents and staff. Each of the authors of this article have received training as examiners through either BPE and/or MAAPE. **We would be glad to share more information with you.**

Conclusion

The Baldrige Excellence Framework is a tool that has helped our organization improve. It is not prescriptive. At Pine-Richland, we appreciate the feedback from the MAAPE process about district strengths and our opportunities for improvement. The framework is not a magic wand or quick fix. Instead, it provides a set of questions and a way of thinking about continuous improvement that can help deliver sustainable results. **For more information, please visit the BPEP, MAAPE and/or PRSD websites via the reference list below.**

References

- Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. <https://www.nist.gov/baldrige>
- Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. (2021). *2021-2022 Baldrige Excellence Framework (Education): Leadership and Management Practices for High Performance*. Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. <https://www.nist.gov/baldrige>
- Mid-Atlantic Alliance for Performance Excellence. www.midatlanticape.org/
- Pine-Richland School District. www.pinerichland.org

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