



Quality Network News

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Leading the Charge

The Two-Edged Sword of the Baldrige Education Award

By Lewis Rhodes

Soon, America's schools and communities may be offered a Baldrige National Quality Award. Whether this turns into an opportunity or a dilemma may be determined by who will wield this two-edged sword.

Congress is considering President Clinton's request for funding to expand the highly successful Baldrige program to education and health. This would seem to be good news for schools interested in continual systemic improvement, right? The answer is perhaps, because through no fault of its own, the significant nature and benefits of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award program are frequently obscured by two words in its title.

One is "award," an important motivator for participation but which, for many, creates a perception that those who don't win are losers. The other term, "quality," is a diffuse characteristic applied to outcomes, as well as to the

means or processes for producing them.

Despite this perception, the program has developed what has proved in the private sector to be a significant organizational improvement strategy. This strategy has been particularly useful for today's dynamic work settings in which people must continually reassess:

- Why they need to do something.
- What and how they are going to do it,
- To what extent they did it, and
- How they will do it better.

The Baldrige process contributes to enhanced performance and results by facilitating learning and continual improvement through ongoing organizational self-assessment. Both "winners" and "losers" report how the Baldrige process provided them with a self-assessment infrastructure that served as a way to see and act on the total system.

Could the Baldrige Help Schools?

One would think that a generalized improvement process like the Baldrige could easily be applied to schools, which suffer from increasing criticism of the quantity and quality of their results, as well as the methods used to attain them.

But the Baldrige holds little potential if participating in the process is seen as draining resources from direct services to children, and if it creates winners and losers in a fragmented environment with critical needs for collaboration not competition.

On the other hand, as a com-

munity-based process, a Baldrige award for education could offer a rich dialogue and re-thinking on the fundamental issues of how to organize all of a community's resources in support of the learning results they want. Moreover, the unique challenges schools will face in applying Baldrige processes suggest why this re-thinking must go beyond the walls of schools and be embedded in the local community:

- A fuzziest system framework exists in K-12 education because the school system is seldom empowered to function as a system in improvement strategies. Instead, most people view a school or classroom as the system with first priority for resources. Resources put into infrastructure development [e.g., training, productivity tools, process improvements] are considered a drain on classrooms. Thus, with training and support limited to fixing people, instead of the processes, it becomes impossible for school systems to develop sustainable, organizational capacity.
- The Baldrige process is based upon recognition that continual improvement requires the ongoing generation and use of information. School systems traditionally generate data for accountability judgments by their external stakeholders. This increasingly time-consuming process overrides the more immediate needs of those within the system for data to affect daily results.

■ The Baldrige framework assumes that the work of everyone in the organization influences the organization's results. Schools are generally work settings of disconnected, isolated practitioners, each held accountable for results of

processes over which others share control.

■ Schools have become institutions in which society seems concerned only for ends, not the means to ensure them. In the current national debate on standards and how to deploy them from the top down, process standards are seen as intruding on local prerogatives.

A Bridge to Opportunity

For these reasons, and because of the transitory nature of both elected and selected leadership, the application of Baldrige strategies must be embedded in the community.

The timing is right. The process can be driven by an emerging and significant shift in society's understanding about learning. As the popular press increasingly highlights new brain research about how children learn, a new discussion is occurring inside and outside schools.

Parents, policymakers, and practitioners are recognizing that traditional school practices and structures often limit, rather than encourage, learning. They realize that the pervasiveness of these practices requires schools and their stakeholders to re-think how to realign and refocus a school system's resources on the learning process. Putting the Baldrige sword in the hands of the community would enable them to become co-learners with their schools, and could provide an essential tool for understanding and operating schools as learning-centered systems. ▲

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