

LEARNING TO

LEAN

Using the LEAN Six Sigma system to drive continuous improvement in school leaders and staff

Patricia Greco, Ph.D.

The School District of Menomonee Falls (SDMF) is engaging all staff members in applying the principles of quality improvement into their work. The core mission of every public school is to ensure strong learning outcomes for children. School board members and school leaders spend thousands of hours discussing how to improve the context for learning. Learning to lead “LEAN” builds the capacity for improvement among all staff members and all divisions across the school district. It creates the conditions for staff members to

problem solve more effectively together. The focus is to learn to think, problem solve and trouble shoot more effectively so the core mission of student learning can be realized across the entire system.

The concept of *continuous improvement* rests in every planning and improvement process. The major difference in a system committed to LEAN Six Sigma is the depth of skill development among all leaders and staff. The difference rests in knowing how to apply specific tools to the problem-solving process. The SDMF staff members and leaders are

learning to think and respond differently to the problems faced on a daily basis. Through LEAN, we are multiplying the brain power of all of our staff members to improve our core processes, customer care, and the overall results of our work.

School districts are complex organizations. We often focus on the skill development of our teachers to improve instruction. Rarely do systems focus on specifically improving how all staff members problem solve together. By infusing specific skill development to problem solve across all staff and divisions,

“I feel the continuous improvement process has given the entire district something to focus on and rally around. We are able to speak the same language. I find myself having conversations with others in the district and notice, even though we do completely different things, we are talking the same talk and using the same tools, it’s really cool.”

— Gwen Husslein, accounts payable accountant, School District of Menomonee Falls

we are building the capacity to work together and align resources more effectively. As a result, we can better align our resources to our core mission of student learning and service to our community.

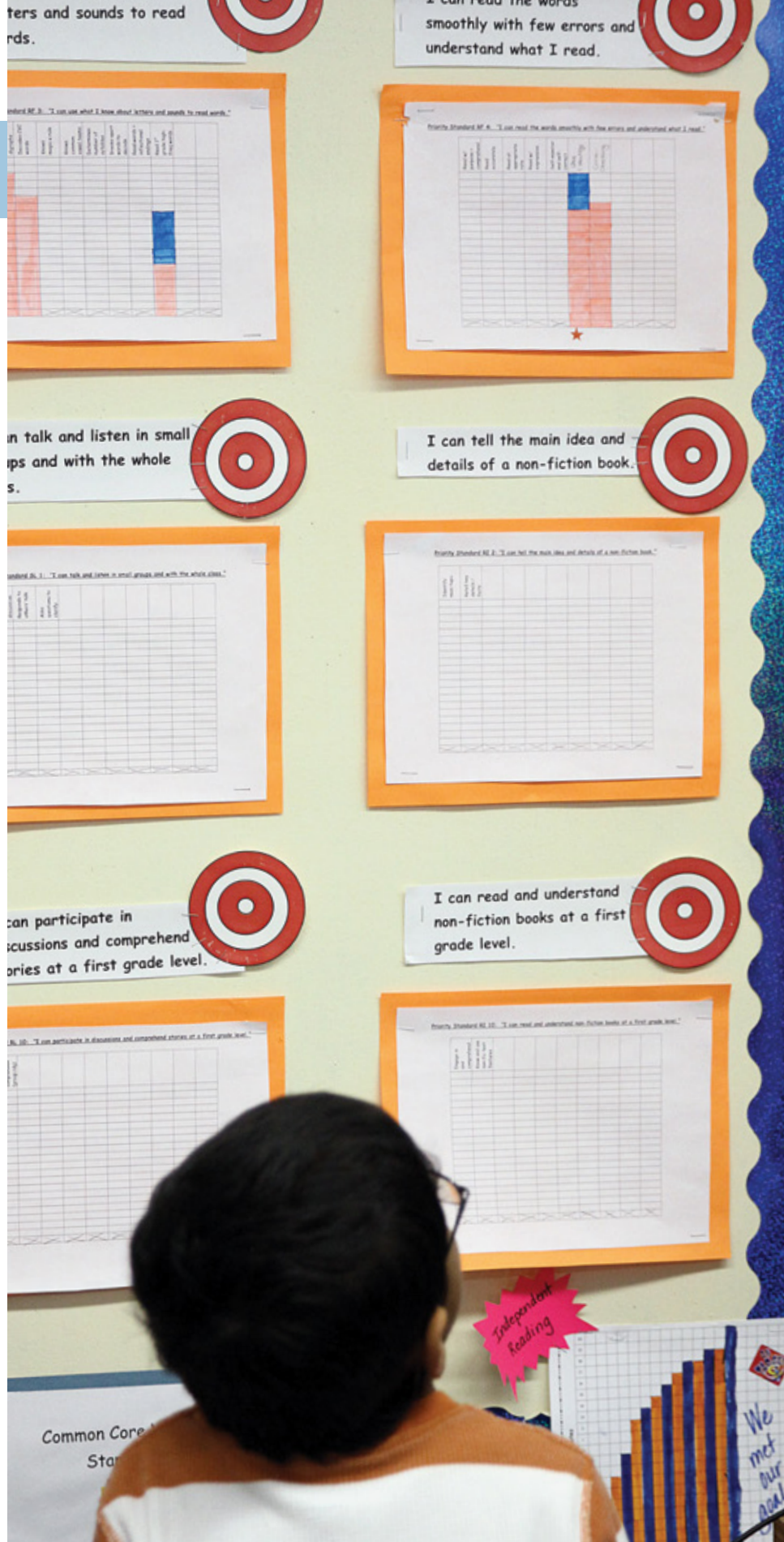
■ The Improvement Process in Action

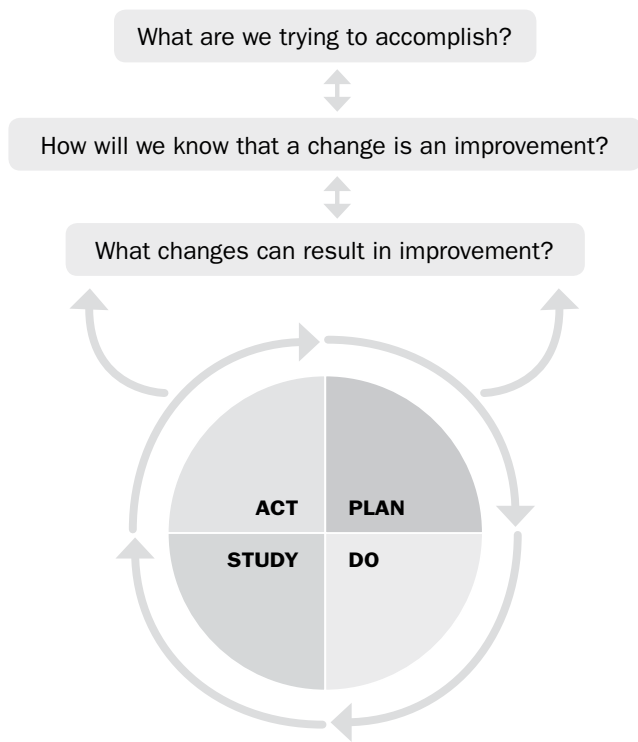
Our administrative assistants and support staff members actively engage and take the lead in the problem-solving process. In most school districts, support staff members are rarely involved in professional development. Yet, these individuals are most often the staff members working most closely with district data and budgets, and are usually on the front end of experiencing where current processes are breaking down. By developing their skills to examine current processes and learning how to apply the problem-solving skills, the overall capacity of the system improves.

Half of most district employees are not teachers or leaders. In most districts, half of the employees are custodians, food service workers, educational assistants, administrative assistants, and professional technical team members. The process of LEAN involves the staff closest to the work in improving the core processes of the system. Through LEAN, we are tackling our need for redoing work when the process breaks down the first time. This saves on staff time and allows us to refine our efforts to the priorities of the system. We can take on priorities and efficiently align our staff members rather than adding staffing to tackle new challenges to the system.

■ Plan, Do, Study, Act

In a system committed to quality improvement, the Plan Do Study Act process is used as the primary method





for our improvement process. Team members examine current performance. They “plan” key action steps the team believes will likely produce improved results. Members commit to “do” the action plan within a concentrated period of time; usually 45 days. Together they “study” the impact of their action steps. Finally the team determines how to “act” based on the results to improve the process and plans going forward.

The Next Level — DMAIC

About 5 percent of the time, system challenges need a deeper level of analysis and problem solving. The team members then apply the more robust tools of the Lean Six Sigma training. This process used most often is referred to as DMAIC (define, measure, analyze, improve, control).

Again, team members work together to clearly define the current problem. They will typically flowchart the current process to understand in

detail how the process currently works and where potential breakdowns may be occurring. They measure current performance, timeframes, delays, and/or errors that may be occurring. Members closely involved in the work analyze the data to determine specifically where breakdowns may be occurring within the current processes across the system. The action team identifies and then implements specific agreed-upon changes to determine if these steps actually improve the outcomes or results of the process. Once improved results are clear through the data collected, the team works to consistently implement the changes across the system to better control the future results.

Benefits of Engaging All Staff in the Improvement Process

In very real terms, the School District of Menomonee Falls is improving as an entire system.

- Student performance is at an all-time high.
- Custodial operational costs have decreased while cleaning scores and employee satisfaction have improved.
- Food service operational costs have decreased and student feedback is being used to increase lunch participation rates.
- Student and parent satisfaction data for our district is high.

“All of the different departments and schools are going in the same direction as an organization and leadership team. We are sharing the same goals and knowledge of best practices. The facilities staff is feeling great about our role and contribution to the system. We are focused and excited to provide excellent service levels to help enhance the educational growth of our students and staff members. I really feel valued from our district leaders and staff members. I am truly blessed to be working with such high-quality people.”

— Rick Fechter, director of facilities, School District of Menomonee Falls



Learn More

About Menomonee Falls' Continuous Improvement

Staff and school leaders from the School District of Menomonee Falls will hold a panel presentation at the 94th State Education Convention that will describe the LEAN Six Sigma projects completed by different divisions of the district. The process brought consistency to the steps, tools, and analysis of district data to determine improvement.

“Training and Realizing Results Using LEAN/Six Sigma Quality Tools Across District Divisions”

Jan. 22, 8:45 - 9:45 am
Wisconsin Center, 102AB

The district will also be holding a “Journey to Quality” site visit scheduled for March 26 and 27, 2015. For more information, visit the district website sdmfschools.org or contact Pat Greco at greccpat@sdmfschools.org.

- Tens of thousands of dollars are being redirected from our operational costs to our instructional budget because our operations are becoming more effective and more efficient.

By including all staff in our quality tools, training and process improvement, we are improving results and building a stronger

climate for improvement across the system. Our staff members are engaged and focused on building a quality system for our students and our community. The key is a deep level of training in the specific skills of quality process. ■

Patricia Greco, Ph.D., is the superintendent of the School District of Menomonee Falls.

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