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**A Baldrige Success Story:**

**Continuous Improvement Defines**

**Jenks Public Schools**

*By Pamela Wong*

When Jenks Public Schools (JPS) in Oklahoma received the Baldrige Award for education in 2005, the school district was recognized for a variety of strengths. These included academic performance at the top 1 percent of the state, a turnover rate for teaching staff that averaged half that of the national level, and innovative programs, such as student exchanges with schools in Chengdu and Shenyang, China.

Today, seven years later, JPS continues its commitment to excellence for its 10,000 students. With academic performance indices (APIs) of 1,273 for mathematics and 1,209 for reading, the district surpasses the state benchmarks of 1,074 (math) and 1,060 (reading). In addition, JPS students in all grades score higher than the state comparisons for students scoring proficient and above in math and reading. Lisa Muller, assistant superintendent of curriculum and school improvement, attributes the school district’s performance to its culture embedded in continuous improvement.

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Lisa Muller, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and School Improvement,

Jenks Public Schools,

2005 Baldrige Award

Recipient

Lisa says that JPS’s continuous improvement journey began in 1997 with its involvement in total quality education. The district’s continuous improvement leadership team (CILT) began working on redesigning its processes. Then, in 1999, the Baldrige Program established the award for education organizations. JPS noticed when, in 2001, the Pearl River (New York) School District and the Chugach (Alaska) School District became the first k-12 schools to receive the award. The district continued its focus on continuous improvement and applied in 2005, when it also received the Baldrige Award.

Today, JPS remains active in continuous improvement, Lisa says, building category teams that use the Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence. “We focus on one to two categories, depending on what the CILT decides is our greatest need. Lately we’ve worked on categories 2, 4, and 5. We spent a lot of time this year looking at employee engagement rather than employee satisfaction, which was the focus in 2005.

“Use of the Criteria helps us identify [opportunities for improvement] (OFIs) and has given us greater understanding across different segments of the workforce.”

The Criteria have also guided JPS in identifying and strengthening its core competencies, which were introduced in the Criteria in 2007. One of the school district’s core competencies is fiscal stability—especially important in light of the reduction in state funding that JPS (and many other districts) has faced in recent years. When JPS experienced a significant economic downturn in 2002-2003, it developed a fiscal stability process that begins with the chief financial officer’s forecast of the district’s financial state. When necessary, the school district uses the process to identify ways to reduce spending.

“Due to the downturn in the economy, we recently were forced to make [workforce] reductions, but they were accomplished through attrition rather than a reduction in force,” Lisa says. “We do our best to keep downturns away from the classroom, and we’ve had fewer reductions than the districts with whom we benchmark.”

A measure for JPS’s fiscal stability is its funding obtained through bond issues. For more than 40 years, the district has passed an annual bond issue, which under Oklahoma law requires at least a 60 percent majority. The bond issue task force, which comprises internal and external stakeholders, including parents and community members, meets annually to consider spending requests. The task force decides which budget requests will be presented to the school board, and task force members serve as ambassadors, communicating on the bond issue’s importance to the community at large. The most recent bond issue passed, even amid the recession, with a 62 percent majority.

“Baldrige provides a proven, nationally recognized set of Criteria that we use to drive our continuous improvement journey . . . ,” Lisa concludes. “The Criteria are helpful to us, because the bar continues to rise.”

The journey continues.