

# A NEW CONTINUOUS-IMPROVEMENT MINDSET

## San Bernardino City Unified School District

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An APQC Education Case Study  
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San Bernardino, California  
[www.sbcusd.org](http://www.sbcusd.org)

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- ◆ 50,000+ students
- ◆ Ninth-largest school district in California
- ◆ 73 school sites and centers: 50 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, 9 high schools, 1 early college high school, 1 adult career education center, 1 special education pre-school

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*— Harold Vollkommer, Deputy Superintendent, SBCUSD*

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**Like many school districts in California and across the United States, San Bernardino City United School District (SBCUSD) desires to maximize every dollar received.**

With 50,000 students spread across 73 school sites and centers, managing the district's many administrative functions – from hiring and groundskeeping to procurement and beyond – was a large endeavor. District leaders wanted to make the most of an infusion of new state dollars and create long-term efficiencies at the district level, while boosting productivity and enhancing student achievement.

Having studied the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award criteria, the district leadership was intrigued by the concept of continuous improvement through process management. Recognizing that the award was the brainchild of APQC Founder and Chairman Emeritus Jack Grayson, the superintendent invited APQC Education to present to the school district's board of trustees.

"We had not taken a deep look at our district systems in terms of consistent, continuous process improvement for some time," says Harold Vollkommer, deputy superintendent of SBCUSD. "We decided APQC would be a great resource to learn from and create a process-improvement mindset for our district."

Deciding to invest in improving both its systems and the process brainpower behind them, SBCUSD enlisted APQC Education in 2014 to kick off a districtwide effort. The administration hoped that this focused initiative would teach employees to approach system breakdowns as learning experiences and opportunities for improvement, get teams talking to each other, and solve problems to improve people's jobs and student experiences.

"The initiative wasn't about saving money or even offsetting costs," Vollkommer says. "It was about creating a mindset that we need to continually be learning, analyzing, and identify the best way to do things. Not just a better way. With this focus, justifying the cost was easy."

The first step was a one-day strategic overview, in which SBCUSD leaders learned about APQC Education's unique approach to process transformation. To select the district's first projects to tackle, Vollkommer reviewed APQC's list of common school district processes, selected the top 10-15 most pressing, and prioritized the top three with the district's executive cabinet.

Teams were formed to bring together the stakeholders in these initial projects, and those employees participated in five days of training, during which they learned how to deploy APQC's DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control) framework for process management. The team members practiced using this approach to understand the process and internal customers, pinpoint performance issues, analyze root causes, create solutions, and sustain the gains.

Once the teams were equipped with the tools they needed to make high-impact changes on their projects, APQC Education provided coaching and support as the teams began work.

## WAVE 1, 2014-2015

- ◆ **Management Onboarding.** While a thorough, four-week onboarding program once existed for principals, the training had fallen by the wayside in the busy, expanding district. SBCUSD aimed to create a better orientation and enculturation program for principals and certificated management employees. Using their newly acquired DMAIC approach, the team documented a two-week, intensive onboarding program, focused on data analysis and key personnel meetings that clearly lays out expectations and arms district leaders with the information they need to excel. Originally developed for incoming principals, this program has since been expanded to all certificated management employees. Ultimately, the district plans to provide onboarding services for all incoming employees.
- ◆ **Purchasing/Procurement.** The approval process for purchasing averaged 17 days, often delaying materials needed to teach students. Aiming to shorten approvals to an average of seven days, the team mapped the process from requisition to order placement, identifying bottlenecks such as employees leaving on vacation without a backup and outdated approval requirements. Redundant and unnecessary steps were removed, and a system was established that gave staff no more than three days to approve requests before automatic approval. Rather than creating additional procedural layers as an overreaction to potential abuses of the system, the district places more trust in staff and learns from problems as they arise. Having achieved a seven-day approval process, SBCUSD is examining ways to reduce turnaround time even further.
- ◆ **Enrollment Management.** With more than 50,000 students in the country's second-poorest large community, where socioeconomic instability causes high student mobility, the district's total enrollment projections were accurate within .07 percent. Yet, individual school site enrollment projections were off by as much as 28 percent, causing reworking of schedules and disrupting continuity of student learning, teacher and staff allotments, and site budget allocations. Aiming to create a process that would predict student enrollment at 100 percent accuracy, the district documented its processes to determine the many factors and people at play, from decades-old magnet programs to special programs and student requests for changes. By streamlining these moving parts, solidifying and moving back timelines, and coordinating multi-office functions, the district has been able to improve site enrollment projections. The team continues working to ensure that every student and staff member is in the right place on the first day of each school year.

*“With PPM, our systems are integrated and facilitate learning for our students.”*

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## WAVE 2, 2015-2016

- ◆ **Classified Hiring.** In a state where districts compete for top talent, speed in hiring matters. In part because San Bernardino City Unified School District has an adopted system that requires a third party to oversee hiring of classified employees, the district was burdened by a complex, time-consuming hiring process, taking so long that many applicants were lost to other job offers. The district was left with 260 job vacancies, and students were under-served. To attack this challenge, SBCUSD created a project team that brought together the third-party organization and its internal staff involved in hiring. Together, they mapped the process from end-to-end and determined what steps were necessary, who was involved, and what function each person was responsible for. Working together to better understand and define roles and responsibilities, the teams strengthened their relationship and significantly improved the hiring process, removing waste and elapsed time. The district reduced vacancies by approximately 25 percent and is using Scrum diagramming to develop the process further.
- ◆ **Grounds keeping/Mowing.** After the district added 15 schools, budget cuts prompted a reduction in grounds keeping staff, resulting in overtime expense and unkempt lawns. Bringing together administration with maintenance supervisors and groundskeepers, this project team sought to determine if hiring nine additional personnel would resolve the issues. The team thoroughly assessed and mapped the existing process, finding that each day began with an inspection of aging equipment, often followed by repair efforts, the discovery that parts weren't in stock, lost labor hours, and a delayed start. A spaghetti chart analyzing the grounds keeping routes revealed that crews traveling from school to school didn't always take the shortest route, wasting time and fuel. With a new "loop" route, equipment inspection at the end of the day, an improved parts inventory process, and new mowers that covered more ground, crews could get an earlier start and mow more campuses each day, while mechanics could ensure that equipment would be ready by the next morning. The district has been able to keep up with grounds maintenance while adding only three groundskeepers, and the crews are more invested in the processes developed with their input.
- ◆ **Program Evaluation/External Contracting.** Like many school districts, SBCUSD needed to ensure that contracted programs and services were delivering promised results, helping students, and providing adequate return on investment. The team included people from purchasing, information technology, accountability and educational technology, directors from educational services, and principal leaders from elementary, middle, and high schools. This team set out to establish a program that would continually evaluate program effectiveness, so the superintendent's cabinet and the board of education could choose or maintain programs aligned to student needs and strategically abandon ineffective programs. The team created standardized operating definitions for key terms, reducing the possibility of misinterpretation – an effort that was so successful, APQC Education has included these definitions as examples in its own training materials. The team also used surveys to collect Voice of Customer data from principals, directors, assistant superintendents, and the board to refine the instructional evaluation process. A process was built to accurately measure, monitor, and evaluate program effectiveness, and training was provided for employees.

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A **“How to Do Business with SBCUSD”** document was created for vendors. The process ensures that contracts are structured so that payment is tied to results, performance data are captured, and existing contracts are only renewed if results are deemed valuable and vendors have delivered what they promised. By the start of the 2016-2017 school year, the district expected to have 100 percent of its external instructional programs following this monitoring and evaluation process.

## THE CULTURE SHIFT

By creating a continuous improvement culture and mindset, the district is empowering employees to find creative solutions to recurring problems. At the district level, the mindset has shifted toward better serving the schools with systems that improve student learning.

*“People who have been through the improvement projects differently.”*

“People who have been through the projects think differently,” Vollkommer said. “It takes concerted effort over time. We need to be as diligent about the learning of the people involved as we are about the outcome of the process. It’s not about just getting from 17 days to seven for purchases or making the lawns look good, but learning the skill and transferring it. We’re asking, can we take what we learned about mowing to painting or carpentry? From certificated onboarding to classified onboarding?”

As the district continues its process improvement journey, the teams are working to quantify and measure the impact of changes. Vollkommer also plans to create a PPM website where district employees can gather ideas and access process documentation and information.

“The PPM system gave us a framework and mindset to continually look for better or more efficient ways to do business so that our systems are integrated and facilitate learning for our students,” he says.

## ABOUT APQC EDUCATION

APQC helps organizations work smarter, faster, and with greater confidence. It is the world’s foremost authority in benchmarking, best practices, process and performance improvement, and knowledge management. Since 1996, APQC has been helping education leaders capture, scale, and sustain transformation to improve student outcomes through the implementation of Process and Performance Management methodologies and the identification of best practices. Among other things, we help educators redesign outdated or inefficient processes and break down functional silos to save time, money, and empower people. Learn more at [www.apqc.org](http://www.apqc.org).