

# North Carolina School District Overcomes Admin Turnover, Budget Cuts to Fuel Improvement

by Melanie Taylor

### At a Glance...

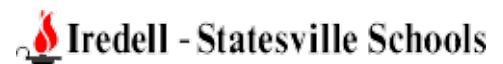
- After working for more than five years to meet its quality success goal, Iredell-Statesville Schools (North Carolina) was named a Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recipient in 2008.
- But when a key administrator left his job soon after and the national economic recession clamped tight on public money coming into the school district, the staff's commitment to continuous improvement was challenged more than ever before.
- Firmly committed to the PDSA cycle and other quality tools, staff have streamlined processes, saved hundreds of thousands of dollars, and helped students achieve more in the classroom than ever before.

The last decade has brought many changes to Iredell-Statesville Schools (I-SS) in North Carolina. In 2002, the district embarked on its journey to continuous improvement by using the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence. Since the district [received the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 2008](#), the district has seen a change in superintendent and a decline of more than \$7 million dollars in state and local funds, which led to a reduction of more than 300 positions districtwide.

Despite the drastic changes, some things have stayed the same. The district's strategic plan and core values still guide the work of the board, departments, and schools on a daily basis. Over this same time period, the district has continued to see student performance and graduation rates increase. The district consistently performs in the top 10 to 20 percent of school districts in North Carolina for student performance measures, while it consistently ranks in the bottom 5 to 10 percent of districts in the state for per-pupil funding.

How has the district been able to maintain and grow student achievement throughout all of these changes? Its unwavering focus to ignite a passion for learning for all students.

### About Iredell-Statesville Schools



Located about 40 miles north of Charlotte, NC, Iredell-Statesville Schools serves more than 21,000 students in 36 schools. Forty-three percent of the school district's students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals. There are 44 different languages spoken by 2,273 students, with 1,015 students having limited English-language proficiency throughout the district.

### Improving Despite Decreasing Means

During times of declining budgets, increased diversity, and competition from charter schools, I-SS has continued to grow. The district has added opportunities for students that include middle years and International Baccalaureate diploma programs, a dual language immersion program, early college options, an AP Academy, Leader in Me schools, and career programs leading to nationally recognized certifications. I-SS is also the only school district in the nation to receive both an Investing in Innovations (i3) grant of \$5 million (2010) and a federal Race to the Top District grant of \$19.9 million (2012).

## Investing in Innovations Grant

- The \$5 million Collaborative Organizational Model to Promote Aligned Support Structures (COMPASS) grant was one of 49 federal i3 grants awarded in 2010
- COMPASS aims to help teachers identify students' academic needs and target areas where students are struggling by providing educators with support and resources to ensure that students are on track to achieve their learning goals through response to instruction (RTI)

## Race to the Top: District Grant

- The Innovative Methods for Personalizing Academics, Complemented by Technology (IMPACT) grant for just under \$20 million was one of 16 awarded in December 2012
- IMPACT is directed at making improvements in learning and teaching through a 1:1 initiative that will improve student achievement and educator effectiveness using personalized learning environments aligned with college- and career-ready standards

## Back to the Beginning With Baldrige

In 2001, Iredell-Statesville Schools faced a \$2.5 million budget deficit. The superintendent and finance officer were facing allegations of mismanagement of district funds. Based on all academic standards, the district was performing at mediocre levels and public confidence was at an all-time low. The board of education recognized strong leadership was necessary to turn the district performance around and increase public support.

The I-SS Board of Education selected Dr. Terry Holliday as superintendent in fall 2002. With Dr. Holliday came the implementation of the use of the Baldrige Criteria to help move the district forward. "There were too many decisions coming out of a site-based management system," recounts Holliday. "There were plenty of initiatives aimed at improving this or that, but there was very little alignment throughout the district to ensure the success of those initiatives. And the worst part of it all was that the expectations for the entire district—from its leadership to the performance of its students—were extremely low."

Over the next six years, the district drafted a strategic plan, core values, vision, and mission that became the driving forces for improvement in the district. All levels of the organization—from the board of education, to principals and teachers, to custodians, down to the students—were trained in the use of plan-do-study-act (PDSA) as a model for improvement. The district saw unprecedented growth in student achievement and was named a 2008 recipient of the Baldrige Award.

## A Change in Leadership Puts Improvement at Risk

Less than a year after the district was hailed as a top-performing Baldrige organization in the nation, something occurred that put all of the district's improvement efforts at risk—a change in leadership. The superintendent, who had brought the Baldrige Criteria and focus on continuous improvement to Iredell-Statesville Schools, left the district to take a position in a different state. The district was at a crossroads. Should staff continue on the same journey they had traveled for nearly seven years, or take a new path?

During the next few months, the district held listening sessions in each of the five high school feeder zones to get input from the public. Feeder zones encompass the elementary and middle schools whose students will attend the specific local high school. The sessions focused on recognizing the great things that were working in the district and identifying areas for improvement that a new superintendent would need to concentrate on.

While members of the community and staff were in agreement on the positive—the district's student performance was improving—not all were in agreement on how staff and students were getting there.

While some felt the district needed to change its approach and look at other options, school board members and district administration felt strongly that the schools were headed in the right direction. They said improvements in graduation rates and student achievement were tied directly to the district's focus and use of the Baldrige Criteria. In 2009, the school board took a stand: The district would continue on its current path of continuous improvement. Without conducting any external search, the board named Brady Johnson, formerly the district's deputy superintendent, as the new superintendent of Iredell-Statesville Schools. This helped set the stage for the district to continue on its journey of improvement.

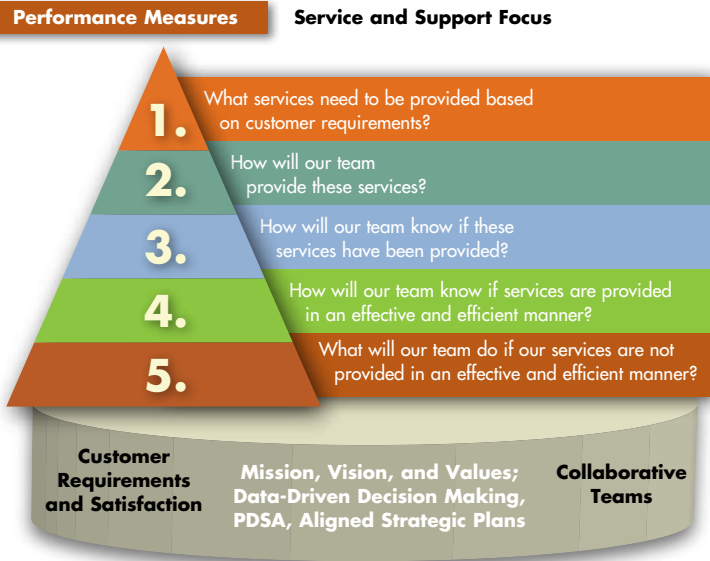
## Doing Things the I-SS Way

The I-SS model centers on the district's two triangles. The Model for Aligned, Effective, and Efficient Operations, as seen in Figure 1, and the Model to Raise Achievement and Close Gaps, in Figure 2, guide the district's operations and curriculum. (See page 3.) Both of these models contain five questions that drive the work of the departments and are grounded on the district's mission, vision, core values, data-driven decision making, and use of PDSA.

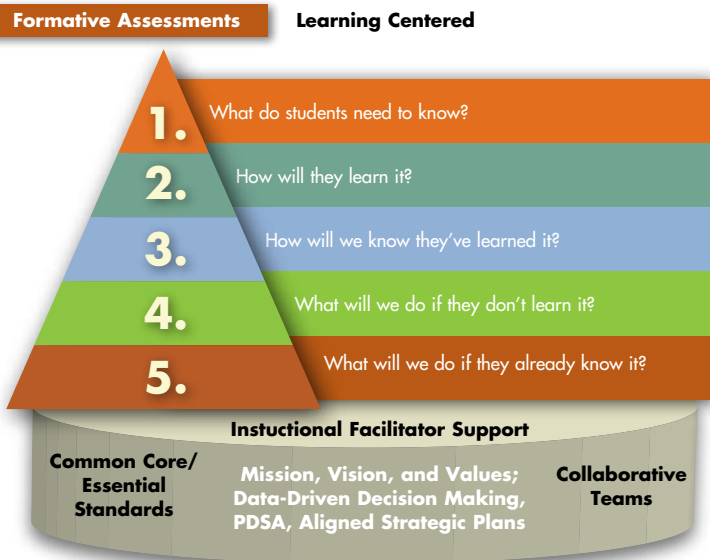
The district's strategic plan sets the course for where the district is headed in five areas. Staff within each school and department then develops improvement plans that are aligned to specific gap areas in the district strategic plan. The PDSA cycle is used for all levels of organizational improvement. (See Table 1 on page 3.)

Large-scale district plans are monitored on a 90- to 100-day cycle to determine if progress is being made toward identified goals. More frequent monitoring of school- and department-level data occurs as data are received by the organization. This frequent monitoring allows for midcourse changes to be made if needed.

**Figure 1 — I-SS Model for Aligned, Effective, and Efficient Operations**



**Figure 2 — I-SS Model to Raise Achievement and Close Gaps**



**Table 1 — PDSA cycle**

<b>Plan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validate the need for improvement</li> <li>• Clarify purpose, goals, and measures</li> </ul>
<b>Do</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adopt and deploy an approach to continual improvement</li> <li>• Translate the approach to aligned action</li> </ul>
<b>Study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyze results</li> </ul>
<b>Act</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make improvements</li> </ul>

Curriculum review week (CRW) is a decade-long PDSA, improving resources that help guide instruction in the classroom. The first CRW was held in summer 2005. At that time, 50 self-selected K–5 teachers from across the district were brought in to help develop curriculum guides and quarterly predictive assessments. These would be used by teachers districtwide. Feedback was gathered on the curriculum guides and assessments throughout the year and used as part of the improvement process the following school year.

Each year, additional grade levels and content areas have been added to the point where now all grade levels and most content areas are included. The curriculum guides have continued to grow and improve over time and help address Question 1 in the learning triangle (What do students need to know?). By clarifying the targets and developing a common understanding of the objectives and criteria for success, teachers and students are sure they're focusing on the essentials that will help them be successful at the next level.

The predictive assessments, now called benchmark assessments, have also evolved over time based on teacher feedback. These assessments are now administered twice per year in grades 3 through 8, three times per year in kindergarten through grade 2, and at the midpoint of semester courses. The assessments provide comparison data for school staff to see how they are doing in relation to others in the district, compared to where they should be at that point in the school year. Teachers utilize the data from these assessments to inform instruction and help with addressing Question 3 in Figure 2.

This long-standing, ongoing PDSA has helped provide valuable insight on learning gaps to students, staff, and district officials. The data helps guide school- and district-level professional development while also driving classroom-level PDSAs.

Another such PDSA has saved the district hundreds of thousands of dollars during its seven-year span. At the end of the 2006–07 school year, I-SS was faced with more than \$207,000 in bus driver overtime costs. The finance officer at the time felt that “wasn’t too bad” for a district with more than 200 buses on the road every day.

Kim Fox, district routing coordinator, said the district could do better, so she took this on as a personal challenge to achieve improvements. Bus driver overtime became her department PDSA. Fox and the transportation department spent the summer reviewing assignment processes and substitute driver procedures. “The biggest challenge was to make sure that all schools were consistent with how their resources (drivers) are managed,” Fox said. “I have always known we have enough drivers available, however, the challenge was, and still is, to make sure all drivers are held accountable for driving on a daily basis.”

When drivers returned in the fall 2007, changes had been put in place to redistribute drivers and create clear processes for how substitute drivers are assigned. Instead of just being assigned to

drive buses to their home (local) school, drivers now worked in high school feeder zones and were scheduled to substitute and drive for other schools within the zone. With just this simple change, the bus driver overtime was reduced by more than \$100,000 in one year.

The PDSA didn't end there. Each year since 2007–08, the overtime PDSA has been tweaked and the savings have continued. Shadow tracking devices have been replaced with Synovia GPS units. The district has also implemented drivers punching in/out on the bus for driving time—saving \$70,000 in driver payroll the first year it was implemented. Annual bus driver overtime reached an all-time low of \$38,957 in 2011–12. Despite even more personnel cuts that directly impacted drivers, the 2012–13 driver overtime total for the district was \$51,000, less than one-fourth of the original overtime amount. For the 2014–15 school year, I-SS is upgrading again so that drivers will now use payroll ID numbers instead of key fobs to log in from the bus to save even more time.

As a regular part of executive leadership's commitment to quality, each district department maintains a department-level PDSA. The district's i3 federal grant used the PDSA process to refine and improve school support by focusing on communication. Based on feedback from teacher focus groups collected by the grant's external evaluator, the i3 department identified a need for schools to quickly request support and receive valid, accurate information, and resources from i3 specialists. Through the PDSA, the department created an innovative online support request system (designed in collaboration with the district's IT department), and the results have been outstanding. In years three and four of the grant, schools have made more than 610 support requests, and in subsequent focus groups, teachers and staff surveyed have said communication is aligned, timely, accurate, and helpful.

### Students Get in on the Act, Too

At the school level, individual grades or subject area teams and classrooms use the PDSA process to monitor student learning. The use of the PDSA at this level allows students to become more engaged in the learning process. Students share what learning strategies work for them and become better problem solvers and collaborators in the process. The student and classroom PDSAs engage students in the planning and problem-solving areas so they learn to work together to improve individual and group performance. Figure 3 is an example of the steps included in a classroom PDSA.

### The Evolution of Quality at I-SS

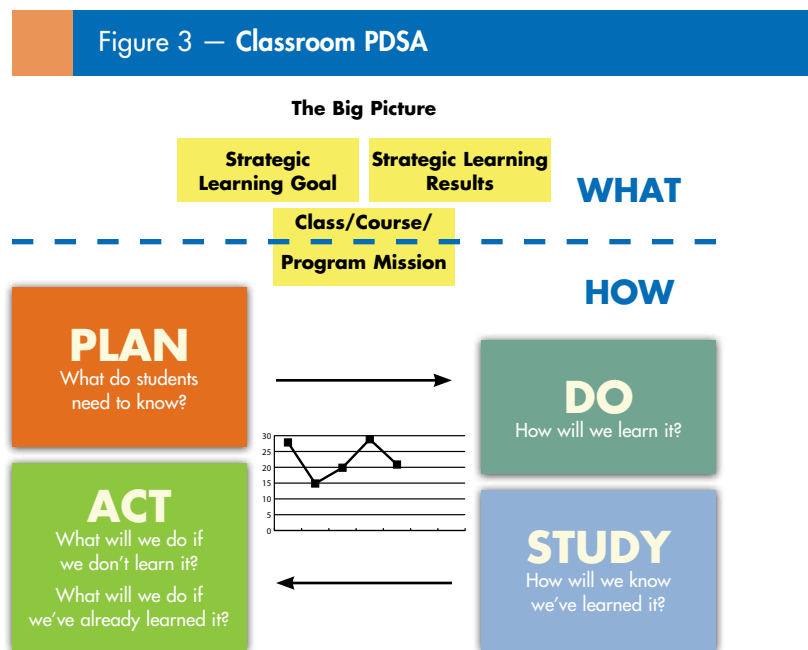
Originally, all departments and classrooms used a common template to complete PDSA. This was important in the early learning stages so that everyone had a common basis. As the district has evolved in its learning and use of the process, so has the tool itself.

There is now a separate PDSA template used for department and school improvement plans outlining the goals, approach, deployment, and monitoring of the plan. Classrooms have moved to a PDSA that is more age and subject appropriate while still including all of the process components, as seen in Image 1. These changes have allowed for more innovation and ownership by teachers and students.

Each school is staffed with an instructional facilitator (IF). Originally, the role of the IF was designed to help with the coaching of the PDSA and the use of data. After a decade of use, staff is now more adept with data-driven decision making and the PDSA process. "The work of the IF has evolved over time to match the growth and needs of our teachers instructionally," said Director of Curriculum Support Kim Rector. We've moved from training continuous improvement processes and tools, to training teachers how to use data and information, to target what students need and improve their instruction. We're finally able to give specific support to teachers and PLCs that directly impacts students."

IFs now apply the continuous model knowledge to the RtI process. In 2010, I-SS received a prestigious i3 "Investing in Innovation" grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The grant focused on aligning specialists (including the IFs) who worked with teachers at all schools. As a result of the grant, our schools began hosting "Data Days," where teachers review student academic performance and progress-monitoring data, along with other measures like attendance and discipline referrals, and use that data to select evidence-based interventions that help students reach specific, measurable goals.

Our data sources have evolved over time and we now have specific, diagnostic data that pinpoints literacy gaps for students. IFs, intervention specialists, instructional technology coordinators, exceptional children's specialists, and other curricular support



staff are able to help teachers take this information, identify the gaps, and select a treatment, or specific strategies, to close student gaps. The specialists might train teachers how to effectively implement these strategies, model them for the staff, or work directly with the students. While the training, coaching, and support used to focus on learning the principles and tools of continuous improvement in the classroom, the focus is now on instruction through the model of continuous improvement.

The impact of this rigorous level of data analysis and continuous instructional improvement has been remarkable. At N.B. Mills Elementary, teachers instruct a population of more than 500 pre-K through fifth-grade students who are faced with some of the greatest challenges in the district. More than 90 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, and a large percentage of students speak English as a second language. However, their students' data tell a story of authentic change and hope. Since the 2011–12 school year, students have achieved higher proficiency levels in reading than ever before. For example, 62 percent of last year's first-graders were proficient in the overall DIBELS Composite, but during the 2013–14 school year, 82 percent of first-graders scored "proficient" on the midyear DIBELS Composite assessment. Principal Kim Mitchell noted that in 2013–14, students in five of six grade levels at midyear were performing at or above the proficiency levels of where the students were the previous year. The i3 team didn't settle for the idea that "our kids are not comprehending," according to Mitchell. The COMPASS team showed N.B. Mills teachers how to peel back each layer to learn what factors were impeding

student learning and what staff could do to help. The district's results are just as compelling: I-SS students outperformed North Carolina's state average in every end of grade/course assessment, in grades 3 through 12, except one.

### The Results ... So Far

During the last 12 years, Iredell-Statesville Schools rebuilt its fund balance from -\$2.5 million to more than \$11 million in 2012 by aligning and more closely monitoring processes. A district that was once mired in financial question had its seventh consecutive year with zero audit findings. All of this has helped the district to weather other funding cuts occurring at the state and local levels affecting budget and personnel.

Despite personnel cuts and funding at some of the lowest levels in North Carolina, Iredell-Statesville Schools has continued to grow programs and student achievement. In 2013, 88.1 percent of students graduated and received more than \$22.5 million in scholarship offers. SAT and ACT scores ranked ninth in the state out of 115 school districts.

As everyone in Iredell-Statesville Schools realizes, the journey to improvement is not a destination at which you arrive and rest easy, it is a continuous process.

### For More Information

- To learn more about the continuous improvement efforts in Iredell-Statesville Schools, visit [www.iss.k12.nc.us](http://www.iss.k12.nc.us).
- To receive more information about this case study, contact the district's public information office by calling 704-924-2032.
- To view more examples of success in quality, visit the ASQ Case Studies landing page at [asq.org/knowledge-center/case-studies](http://asq.org/knowledge-center/case-studies).

### About the Author

**Melanie Taylor** is the deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction at Iredell-Statesville Schools. She earned bachelor's degrees in business/marketing education and business management from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, a master's degree in education administration, and a doctorate in educational leadership from the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. With 23 years of experience in education, Taylor has previously served as a middle school teacher, elementary assistant principal and principal, and executive director of elementary/Title I.

## What Is RtI in Iredell-Statesville Schools?

NC Responsiveness to Instruction (NCRtI) is a statewide initiative consisting of a multitiered framework promoting school improvement through engaging, high-quality instruction. NCRtI employs a team approach to guide educational practices, using a problem-solving model based on data to address student needs and maximize growth for all.



Keri Bass, a fourth-grade teacher at Troutman Elementary School, discusses a classroom PDSA with her students.