

Q&A with Dr. Pat Greco, Dr. Gary Kiltz, and Suzanne Thomas

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Q: There are a lot of different approaches to school reform, why did you opt to implement some of these quality improvement tools instead of something else? Why, in your view, is quality improvement is compelling?

Pat: I have actually studied system improvement for 25 years. It was part of the focus of strategic planning. School site-based staff development was part of the original research I started within my career. Part of the challenge is that we have been talking about initiatives for more than 30 years and we have not been getting to scale. When we think about a lot of what we are talking about here, it is really embedded in the work around master learning. That is not new. Gradual release has been around since the 1980s. When we talk about initiatives, we title them as if it is a new body of knowledge, but what we have to actually look at it differently. This of how health care communicates their understanding of cancer research. They do not talk about cancer research as an initiative; they talk about it as a process of learning, reflection, and refinement. That is really all this is. When Deming started the process in the 1950s, he was talking about how to embed a commitment to excellence in practice, not an “initiative” or “program.” That is really where this work is grounded. Clearly, this is not new, we did not invent it. It is based on research on how you improve organizational change.

Gary: I think it goes to your philosophical foundation. For our organization it philosophically fits into the idea of growth mindset, Carol Dweck’s work. We realize that learning is a personal process of growth. The system needs processes that allow for personal continuous growth across the system. The process of improvement is consistent from the superintendent, to the division leaders, to the principals, to their leadership teams, and to the classroom level with the students. We are putting that PDSA process and growth mindset in front of our students so that they see their learning as part of the process that is continuous and ongoing.

Suzy: The one thing that I was going to say is that staff has really owned the process because the division leaders have done such a good job modeling the process. Our teachers can see that the improvement process is happening all around them. It is not just something that they are told to do, but they can see the results every day. It also gives them ownership over what they do in their classrooms.

Pat: Another part is that a child’s day can be impacted by the bus driver, food service workers, custodians, as well as the secretary at the front desk; the work of continuous improvement needs to be owned by everyone, not just our classroom teachers. Too often when we talk about the climate for learning, we are only talking about the skills and tactics that teachers are going to use. This process of improvement is for the organization, not just certified staff. It is how we work with families and how we actually outreach to the community. Our staff knows the “why” behind our improvement focus, and they have the skills to actually use these skills and apply the improvement process and problem solving within their work.

Q: You mentioned the PDSA cycles at the classroom level. One of our participants wants to know whether the PDSA cycles were individualized for each teacher or if they were focused on school or

departmental goals. Can you tell us about the balance there between individualization and overall goals?

Pat: It is a combination of both. We have the adult learning framework where we have taken the research around improvement practice, the gradual release model, the workshop model, and then we align those to our goals. Finally, individually, when our coaches conduct a walkthrough and examine the reflections of progress with our teachers, the instructional coaches are getting the feedback from the staff on what they individually need for support.

Suzy: I would have taken this question a little bit differently. Say, we have two different geometry classrooms their learning targets are aligned and they are doing assessments using the same common assessments, so that would be the “plan” portion of the PDSA. How you go about meeting those targets would be different in each section. But then they will come together and look at their results. So in the “study” piece the teachers come together and are starting to see what learning strategies are working the best in different sections. The learning targets and the structure are aligned, but then you have differences within those short learning cycles that you can individualize and measure really well. This gets back to that key question of how do you know a change is an improvement. This gives us a way to measure that.

Q: How teachers are responding to the new evaluation model? You talked a little bit about that. How you are implementing it within the district. More specifically, how do you think about the general idea of embedding evaluation goals within other goals that are maybe more improvement oriented? How can evaluation and improvement work together? It seems that in your district you are trying to put those together. How are teachers responding and how do those fit together?

Pat: That is one of the challenges. Again, we are so heavily politicized across the nation right now. Wisconsin is not immune from that level of fear and anxiety. Everyone across the nation well knows the impact of Act 10 in our state and it actually was a driver of fear. When you think about it though, one of the core principles around quality from Deming is to drive out fear. You focus on improvement, support, learning, and target growth. You identify the expectations for performance. You expect action and commitment, but you drive it with heavy support. People should know that we will be there to work with them. If people are deciding not to engage, that is really a non-compliance issue. You do not drive culture around that fear.

Suzy: For us, the continuous improvement model came in before the SLO (student learning objectives) process. When the SLOs were introduced as part of the state required evaluation system for performance, we made a really strong effort to show how they are similar to what we are already doing within our PDSA cycles targeting student growth. That eased some of the anxiety as well. It actually became the idea that: well it's not that big of a deal because we are already doing that. That helped to ease anxiety. Although anytime that there are changes there is a little bit of anxiety. We tried really hard to communicate how those two things are similar.

Gary: I just wanted to add one more thing. With that evaluation model, there are two components: one around the competencies for strong teaching and the other around the six standards for performance.

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The competencies have demonstrated the great value of our adult learning frameworks. Teachers understand clearly what the expectations are. We have aligned our adult learning expectations with the six standards. The conversations that administrators are having around the evaluation and what they are seeing are directly tied to our instructional model. They are not separate. We are looking at growth and using coaches to help teachers really get to the mastery level. We are seeing this as a growth opportunity for teachers, just as we would for our students. The other part around the student performance, as Suzy said, is that we are using the student learning targets. I likened it to a recipe; the SLOs are only one ingredient of the recipe. We identified the other seven ingredients of the recipe using the classroom continuous improvement process. Through those eight ingredients, we have a recipe that is providing something of quality made in the classroom that is focused on really personalizing student learning and allowing teachers to do what they need to do around their own learning.

Q: A quick clarification question. I know you did this in the presentation, but could you describe what SLO stands for and what that means? Just unpack that briefly for us.

Pat: In some states when they talk about embedding the performance expectation for children into the evaluation process for the adult, Wisconsin is calling the student learning outcomes the performance result portion of the state evaluation system. As Suzy indicated we were focused on improvement of performance and student learning well before the state came in with the requirements. It is really about the improvement cycle and having the student learning outcomes aligned with the classroom goals. If a child is already over the targeted result, they are looking at the growth of that child, regardless of where their entry point is. For children that are below the grade level expectation, we actually know who those children are and are focusing on gap closing, accelerated process, and additional interventions. The kids know that too. That is part of where the SLOs fit into a continuous improvement cycle. The challenge is when systems shift the evaluation expectations without building the skills to problem solve and improve learning. Continuous improvement and the PDSA cycle provide the problem solving skills necessary to improve performance.

Gary: To set that student learning outcome is actually a tremendous process where teachers take a look early in the school year at initial data regarding students in the classroom and set their goals accordingly. They may set a goal for a particular subgroup of the class, if they are noticing that is an area they need to target. This is a collaborative process, so you are working with grade level teams, subject area teams. The goal is set for the classroom, but working closely with the team to monitor, analyze, and determine some curricular and instructional process steps.

Q: We had three questions on the subject of time. Based on your presentation, there is an impression that there is a lot of time dedicated for data analysis, planning, professional learning communities, and teacher growth. Related to those things, how much time do you dedicate to those aspects of quality improvement? How do you organize that time so that teachers can actually participate in it? And thirdly, how do you educate the parent community about it and the necessity for it? I think that is a sticking point for a lot of non-educators.

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Pat: I will go back to your statement Lee about jargon. We try hard to keep the jargon out of the communication with the family and talk about improvement and student's individual performance. Going back to the time element, it is an intentional organizational commitment to the improvement for our people. We started first by identifying the people who we would have in the first run of the classroom training level. We have it organized into Level 1, Level 2, and Level 3 training. We started before the school year starts with the initial training, and we have added days after the school year ends. We have Wednesday early release time, and we do use sub-release for teams of up to thirty at a time when we are actually starting to build the momentum. Coaching goes into the classroom and we have it embedded into our feedback and support process. We do not do "flavor of the month" staff development. Everything that we are choosing to fully implement, we are supporting with intention. We are limiting what we are training on, but we are training and coaching very deeply.

Gary: The other piece we put in this past year is that every Wednesday students are released early. So our teachers have collaborative time every Wednesday to get together and look at the data. I will say that since we are in the early implementation of that process, it does need to be standardized a little more. We are putting into place some common templates, and identifying common problem analysis tools that will be helpful to our teams. At this point, that is really the time for teachers to come together, look at the data they have, and make some decisions around students, curriculum materials, and instructional strategies.

Suzy: One thing that I would add is that our teams that have the improvement model deeply embedded in their work are truly able to maximize their instructional time. The structure clearly points out the areas they need to work on. So while time is always limited, these teachers are the ones who can use it the most productively.

Q: We have a question about buy-in or ownership. Can you tell us more about how you got people at all levels of the organization from the classroom to the district, and maybe even outside, in fact you just spoke about how you got parents onboard, involved? Could you tell us a little bit more about how you do that, especially with those who may not be initially motivated or early adopters?

Pat: When you look at the research around change, part of it will say that some will go with the organization because they are typically the early adopters; that is how they are wired as professionals. Some won't. The research indicates that you actually have to change behavior before you change beliefs. The biggest difference here is that we are building the infrastructure around development, growth, and skill building. Our teachers actually know how to change behavior. Then they reflect on the process and their learning during coaching. The process is showing the change in adult behavior. Our teachers implementing most deeply are demonstrating improved student performance results. We did intentionally start with the people who are ready because you want your early innovators to be the ones to tease through the early implementation of the process when the complexity is high. Our early adopters are the problem solvers. Then you identify your mid-level solid teachers who are ready to take that next step. The teachers really in the bottom ten percent need specific strategies to work with them also. We are helping them engage, or we are identifying the staff members who are not meeting the

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organizational expectations. Our leadership team builds specific strategies to work with our lowest performers into the process as well.

Gary: I would just add that as we have been implementing the improvement model with teachers the data do not lie. Our early implementers were showing student performance growth, other teachers have noticed it and want to know how they are getting that type for growth among their students. It has led to teachers really believing in the process. The other part of this is that because we are doing this in short cycles of reflection, we are allowing for innovation and creativity to be even greater. By doing short cycles, we are able to be much more flexible and responsive to that innovation and leverage the learning from each PDSA cycle. So instead of waiting for a whole semester or year to determine if this innovation is leading to a good change or a bad change, we are seeing it from a short cycle and are able to shift much faster than typical education organizations. Teachers get excited, either saying this isn't working and we need to change here, or this is working and we need to look to see what could accelerate it.

Suzy: I just want to add one more thing. I think that our district has done a really great job at highlighting the work of our teachers internally. There was one particular moment when there was a panel of teachers speaking about improvement and it became clear that there were more people committed to the movement than were not committed. Our own dedication to highlighting the work of our teachers has really helped get more people on board because they see it as the norm.

Q: One question has come in about the steps of continuous classroom improvement. You mentioned that there are eight steps during your presentation. One participant is wondering how you know that a teacher is going through those eight steps of the CCI model?

Suzy: This is actually tied into the buy in piece as well. We have the adult learning framework that sets up expectations for what level each person should be. As coaches, we meet individually with all of the teachers and they usually self-reflect on where they would place themselves on the rubric. We both will talk about what evidence they have to support that. In addition, our principals will do walk through as wells, not as an evaluative tool, but really for them to understand how this model could look across different classrooms. It ensures the principals understand the process deeply as well. So it is really the coaches working closely with the teachers, meeting with them on an individual basis to know where they stand and how we can help them to improve.