



101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Suite 600 West ♦ Washington, DC 20001

Human Capital: Adapting Six Sigma Strategies to Private Sector Investment in Educational Reform

Introduction

“Every student in America should graduate from high school ready for college, career, and life. Every child. No exceptions.” That statement from Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates (March 7, 2007) presents an urgent challenge to our nation as we question whether we can maintain our competitive and innovative edge in a world that is rapidly changing and an economy that is increasingly global. Schools across our nation, particularly in urban settings, continue to see alarming dropout rates, and the problem is not just limited to cities. *Time* magazine points out in “Dropout Nation” (April 9, 2006): “In today’s data-happy era of accountability, testing and No Child Left Behind, here is the most astonishing statistic in the whole field of education: an increasing number of researchers are saying that nearly one out of three public high school students won’t graduate... For Latinos and African Americans, the rate approaches an alarming 50 percent. Virtually no community, small or large, rural or urban, has escaped the problem.”

The Problem

There has been no lack of trying to address this challenge. A myriad of foundations, individuals and public agencies funnel resources to programs to keep students in school. For example, a recent report from the Scripps Howard Center for Civic Engagement and Non-Profit Development at Northern Kentucky University found there were 4,241 non-profit organizations in the Cincinnati area counties of Hamilton, Kenton, and Campbell worth over \$7 billion. While not all of these dollars are focused on education, or even children and families, a database through the United Way lists more than 2,100 organizations serving these populations. Despite these efforts, we continue to see problems all along the education pipeline, with students falling through the cracks – sometimes for academic reasons, sometimes for social reasons. This scenario plays out in regions throughout our nation.

Solution

An educational partnership called **Strive** – joining the forces of higher education institutions, urban public school systems, diocesan schools, nonprofit agencies, civic organizations and businesses throughout the Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky region – has developed a unique approach to help solve the problem of resources being funneled to piecemeal projects or ineffective programs. **Strive** is an education partnership focused on empowering every child to succeed from birth through graduation from college or

career training. It does this by aligning and expanding educational programs and systems that are proven to support student success. This helps to ensure that service providers shift their focus from delivering isolated social service programs to implementing coordinated and proven strategies that reach as many children and families as possible.

How is **Strive** accomplishing this? **Strive** has worked closely with General Electric to adapt the successful Six Sigma continuous improvement tool into a model that can be applied to the social sector. The resulting tool, **Strive Six Sigma**, guides Student Success Networks (service providers offering similar or related services) to make decisions and plan actions that have been proven effective based on research and data collection. This collaboration will help avoid duplicating services and make better use of resources. It also helps to ensure that metrics are in place to ensure effectiveness and accountability.

Strive Six Sigma has five phases: Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, and Continue (DMAIC).

- **Define** exactly what we want to do. Deliverables include a list of all team members and a team charter containing the problem definition, project scope, goals and objectives.
- **Measure** what improvements need to occur to achieve our goal. Deliverables include a process map for improved student supports and a data plan.
- **Analyze** factors that determine outcomes. Deliverables include identifying sources of variation, analyzing the data and establishing local evidence.
- **Improve** current strategy and/or fill gaps with new or existing resources. Deliverables include an improved process map and action plan.
- **Continue** to improve on the action plans. Deliverables include a continuous improvement plan.

Strive's role in this process is to help guide Student Success Networks through each step in the DMAIC process. For a Student Success Network to receive the **Strive** Endorsement they must agree to collect common data indicators, make necessary changes to their action plan based on the data and report their progress to the **Strive** partners on a regular basis. The **Strive** partners will support the endorsed action plan and upon mutual agreement the partners will actively seek funding or resources and pursue necessary policy changes.

Implementation

Expanding the **Strive Six Sigma** approach to other regions across the United States would mark a turning point from the failed strategies of the past. It would begin a process of true educational reform. If we want every student to graduate – every student – no exceptions as so eloquently stated by Bill Gates, then **Strive Six Sigma** can help to ensure that communities across the nation are investing in the right things – efforts that are proven to be effective. A great starting point for expanding the use of this model would be with the 35 members of the Urban Serving Universities.