

How to Benefit from CGCS Peer Reviews

In 2008, the Council of the Great City Schools conducted reviews of the Seattle Public Schools' business operations, including Human Resources, Information Technology, Finance, Maintenance & Operations, Capital Construction, Transportation, Procurement, and Food Services. The organization also conducted an assessment of the district's bilingual education programs. This effort was initiated by the senior management of the district to help formulate strategies for designing business operations and financial services to better support the district's academic priorities. The resulting findings and recommendations were used to help determine the goals and priorities for the district's five year strategic plan, which was unanimously adopted by the School Board.

The district was not making adequate progress in student achievement, and therefore the superintendent and school board initiated a major effort to redesign the district's approach to delivering educational services to our students. As a part of this effort, it was determined that the business operations were inadequate to fully support schools. We perceived the CGCS peer reviews as a way to quickly understand these shortcomings and help create roadmaps for improvement.

The peer reviews continue to play a major role in formulating strategies for improving business operations and financial services that will advance the district's strategic priorities. At a macro level, the reviews are used to align the vision, mission, goals and objectives of each department with the district's strategic plan and goals. This is forcing the departments to be clearer about how they perform their day-to-day work.

The Council's reviews are also used to benchmark district processes against the best practices found in other member districts. For example, key members of the district's operations staff have developed professional peer relationships with members of the Council's review teams. This has resulted in staff dialogues with colleagues in other districts to explore ways for improving processes, as well as site visits to see firsthand how districts approach managing certain processes for better results.

From a district perspective, an added benefit of the Council's service is its affordability. The cost of each review includes only actual expenses for travel, lodging, and meals. The return on investment (ROI) for Seattle was one of the best aspects of engaging the Council to perform these reviews. It was a way to get a team of leading, national experts to provide complete assessments at very low cost. If we had relied on outside consultants to perform this work, we would not have been able to afford either the cost or the time to get comparable results.

Contact: Don Kennedy, Chief Financial and Operations Officer, Seattle Public Schools, drkennedy@seattleschools.org