

# A Bold Hypothesis: Will Thinking Lean Save the School District of Philadelphia

Dominique Aubry 18 June 2014

In a complex organization like the School District of Philadelphia, there will always be competing priorities and constant problems. When we put school district issues into basic black-and-white terms like district vs. charter or more money vs. layoffs, we are doing a disservice to our community, teachers and staff.

Oversimplifying these issues stops us from having a true discussion around the multifaceted problems we face and possible solutions. When our district leaders and principals are receiving an onslaught of community and political angst that is projected through one common statement like "more money," it forces our leadership to spend time addressing and responding to that issue vs. putting their energy toward finding alternative innovative solutions that can also be cost-cutting. We all know that the School District of Philadelphia needs more money and is severely underfunded; however, we need to go beyond fighting for money and look at what we currently have to work with in the meantime.

We have to move forward on creating a robust solution for educational equity, which at its root was never about money in the first place. When we start believing that money equals equality, we are in a losing battle, and we lose sight of what is necessary to build happy, healthy children. Again, this is not to say that money is not important, only that given the current circumstances, it is necessary to start looking at this issue in a more comprehensive way that allows us to find other opportunities rather than just waiting for more funding.

Given the situation at the school district, I believe a Lean approach provides a real solution and lens to addressing some of the core problems that we face. We simply cannot lose more staff and cut more programs as a way to save money. We need to create a Lean culture that is collaborative and empowering to get us over the hurdles we face. Lean allows us to look at what we currently have as assets and focus on optimizing those opportunities vs. looking at our deficits and trying to fill them.

Often, the budget conversation gets stuck at salaries as if that were the reason the Philadelphia School District is in disarray. Watchdog.org wrote an article about how the superintendent makes \$270,000 a year and 13 other district employees make over \$100,000 a year. This was a short-sighted article that again put the focus on cutting budgets vs. creating innovative solutions. Now, the fact that we are not seeing the outcomes we want does beg the question of whether the right people are in the roles,

but it is actually a value issue, not a salary issue.

Instead, the conversation should be about efficiency, and the way to bring this about is through Lean methodology. Lean comes with a tool kit of techniques you can use to build an asset-minded, positive culture that is focused on efficiency and effectiveness. This can include Lean Six Sigma, Kanban, Kaizen, 5s, Lean Startup and more. The great thing about Lean is that it can be used across the district from senior leaders to managers, principals, teachers, custodians and payroll clerks. All it takes is a leader who wants to increase morale and build an inclusive team that wants to be committed to hacking away at the organizational issues we face.

Instead of looking at money to solve problems, what if we first looked at Lean? What if creating efficiencies, empowering staff and creating solutions for students and parents first was an approach that could also save time and money? This is what Lean can do (with a little elbow grease of course).

If you want to find schools and districts that are practicing Lean, all you have to do is GOOGLE IT. It is not that rare, obscure or odd to practice Lean. In fact a lot of Districts and government organizations are looking to Lean as a possible solution to the many complex problems they face.

For example the School District of Ashland, Wisconsin, launched a Lean initiative and framed it in the following

*way: The main purpose for implementing Lean is to create an environment where people are enabled to work together on common goals. Lean is all about people! Lean should help create an environment that brings out the best in all of the people in the community.*

Lean is not:

- Lean is not a business or service process improvement technique to reduce employment.
- Lean does impose change on a work force. It usually requires greater flexibility in working in team based groups with multiple functions.
- Implemented properly, Lean greatly improves service levels while at the same time improves your competitive position, improves job safety and quality of work life.
- Too many people tend to see Lean as something else to do on top of their already busy work schedule.
- This is an error in logic. One can continue to work on problems with the same old approach which includes the seven (7) types of waste, OR work on the problems and opportunities through Lean which greatly reduces or eliminates the 7 forms of waste.

For a more tangible example, the Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation (EVSC) in Evansville, Indiana, went through a Lean process due to a \$25.4 million shortfall and a \$1.5 billion drop in their net assessed valuation. The district used 5s and Kaizen to increase its efficiency on

projects that ranged from new student/ kindergarten packets to HVAC order processes and bus transportation. Even though they are a much smaller district, there is a lot we can learn from their adoption of Lean principles. To learn more about EVSC's going Lean, check out this [PowerPoint](#).

In the end, Lean requires a committed, supportive leader and an engaged team. This is critical to recognize because many district employees at 440 and local school staff are tired, frustrated, worn out and just plain OVER IT, but they are our last hope! OUR STAFF NEED TO KNOW THAT THEY MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE. Lean can help empower district staff to work together more collaboratively and give them the supportive tools to succeed. Many have already rolled up their sleeves, and I ask that they roll them up a little more. Many have already dug their hands into the dirt, and I ask that they dig a little deeper. The time is now, and we have to rally together, not just for more money but for more innovation. For new solutions to old problems. In many ways, we have contributed to the mess that we are seeing, not just with our salaries, pensions and political arguments but simply with our negative attitudes. We have only made things worse by passing on our anger, sadness, frustration and hopelessness to our children, or to our colleagues and supervisors. So now that we are at the last straw and there is nothing else left to give, I say let's open our minds to the possibility of Lean and give our hearts and

commitment to our kids. Besides, aren't they why we're all here in the first place?

Go Lean.