

What is “The Provo Way?”

Keith C. Rittel, Superintendent

Provo City School District

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Introduction

During the spring and summer of 2013 I read a fascinating book: *The Toyota Way* by Jeffrey Liker. As with only a small handful of professional books I have read throughout my administrative career, this particular work had a profound impact on me. Without going into the many details and deep principles of *The Toyota Way*, I will simply summarize two fundamental pillars:

1. Involve the people within the organization in meaningful ways, and
2. Strive for unyielding continuous improvement.

Many formal “Turnaround” processes for schools and districts are now in existence, and they usually teach these two essential principles. However, only the best ones accomplish what Toyota has: building a culture within an organization where all people are genuinely striving toward an ever better end product by working together and finding ways to improve on a continuous basis.

It dawned on me as I read *The Toyota Way* that a school district, even the Provo City School District, could benefit from developing and defining its own culture based on the two fundamental pillars. Some adaptation would be necessary, as building tangible products such as cars and trucks can be a little more predictable than teaching children. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that those fundamental pillars are foundational to any kind of organization, school districts included. Like the Toyota Corporation and its organization goals, the Provo City School District can develop a culture of mutual respect, civility/professionalism, high standards, support, employee recognition, and all of the other positive cultural factors that will contribute to a progressive effort in the district.

As some time has gone by since introducing the concept of “The Provo Way” in Provo City School District, the application and definition of the title has become very broad. This written record denotes definitions and connotations of The Provo Way as they exist at the present time. Over time it is likely that the overall concepts will increase in depth and breadth.

So as of today, this brief essay is intended to address the need for and clarify confusion about the question “What is The Provo Way?”

The Brick Wall Metaphor

The concept of a brick wall may mean different things to different people. Some may deem it to be a structure of great strength; a firm, lasting edifice that can endure time and erosion. Others may see it as a very restrictive barrier. Still others are likely to understand that a brick wall is built brick by brick, then a row at a time, and then as sections.

Of the three perspectives offered, only the brick wall as a barrier is less accurate as a metaphor of The Provo Way. If we regard the brick wall as a strong, steadfast structure that is built over time, we gain the best understanding of what I hope The Provo Way may become.

The brick wall itself becomes the district culture: “this is how we do things here.” As the wall starts to take shape, the culture becomes more tangible. To summarize a statement on p. 290 of *The Toyota Way*, “The Toyota Way becomes embedded in the DNA of each worker, each site, and throughout the entire organization.”

Also on p. 290:

Will Rogers, American social commentator, said “We are a great people to get tired of anything awful quick. We just jump from one extreme to another.” I am afraid that is what most companies are doing with lean manufacturing [“lean manufacturing is a term used at Toyota to describe the focus on eliminating wastes of time, energy, resources, etc. More on how “lean manufacturing” applies to The Provo Way will be referenced later in this document.]. It is just one more thing to jump into and one more thing to jump away from when the next fad comes along. If there is anything to learn from Toyota, it is the importance of developing a system and sticking with it and improving it. You cannot become a learning organization by jumping willy-nilly from fad to fad.”

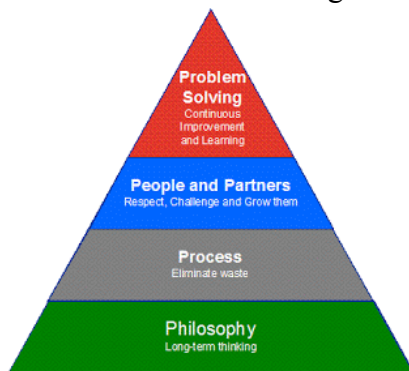
Ground Level Foundational Bricks

Like any sound structure, The Provo Way is based on having strength in the foundation, whether that foundation includes actual bricks or well-grounded philosophies.

Again, from p. 290:

The Toyota Way model was intentionally built from the ground up, starting with a philosophy. And the philosophy starts with the chief executives of the organization. What should their goal be? To build an enterprise for the long term that delivers exceptional value to customers and society. And this requires long-term thinking and continuity of leadership. It may take decades to lay the foundation for radically transforming the organization’s culture.

This link (<http://missiontps.blogspot.com/p/starting-point-of-tps.html>) helps to explain the following diagram. The pyramid can well be conceptually adapted into a brick wall metaphor format, particularly as the four sections are viewed as ground level foundational bricks.



Provo's ground level foundational bricks are as follows, each with a brief explanation:

1. *Long Term Planning*: Set a direction for the district based on the best research, data, and defensible principles as are available at the time. Allow the plan to be adaptable for worthy, research-vetted approaches.
2. *Process: The Toyota Way* summarizes this point as eliminating waste. We are efficient and effective.
3. *People and Partners*: Several Committees (many dominated by teachers to ensure the teacher voice is forefront) are now in existence. Teacher involvement is not perfunctory, but is instead meaningful. Other advisory committees hold meetings regularly. The goal for all such committees is to identify issues critical to improving student learning. This foundational brick is rooted in professionalism and respect. People within the organization should be invited to help guide the direction of the district. The work of the district should be, first and foremost, directed at helping teachers and others become as successful at their jobs as possible.
4. *Problem Solving*: As an extension of the three previous points, there is an ongoing need to identify problems, preferably by looking at defensible and replicable data. The focus here is for everyone in the system to be part of continuous improvement.
5. *Helping Teachers*: The Provo Way was conceived from the recognition that it is a very difficult time to be a teacher. Lots of change is being required, especially in the area of evaluation standards. A large focus of the Provo Way is to provide support to teachers to get better performance evaluations using the new Utah Effective Teaching Standards as the criteria. Specific training concepts are provided that align with the new standards.
6. *Best Practices and Research (Evidence)-Based Practices*: With relatively few financial resources and only 12.5% of a student's life in a calendar year, we need to focus our efforts on those instructional and student/faculty/family support strategies that show evidence of having a meaningful impact. Research-Based and Best Practices will allow us to concentrate on such defensible strategies. However, this focus will likely require that we let go of some familiar yet ineffective practices for which we cannot show defensible research.

Additional Bricks

1. *Aim Statement and Graduation*: The new district AIM statement is lofty, but provides great focus in helping our students move through the system at a rate to help them graduate on time. *"Every Student will end each school year having met or exceeded the essential learning standards, fully prepared for the next grade/course."*
2. *Professional Development*: Professional Development for educators must not be a moving target. It needs to be connected with real life classroom issues and it must have a meaningful impact on educators. In Provo, PD will be based on research and be closely tied to the Utah Effective Teaching Standards to assist teachers in their performance on their evaluations.
3. *Teacher Resource Guide*: This document was created with the intention to assist teachers with their evaluations. Specific details are provided per the standards and indicators to assist teachers improve in areas deemed to be weak.
4. *Employee Recognition*: The Provo Way commits to recognizing staff, administrators, and others who contribute to a student learning and a positive district culture. People

throughout the system need to be acknowledged for their positive efforts to make improvements throughout the district.

5. *Technology in Student Learning*: Jamie Casap, Global Education Evangelist for Google, shared the following wise counsel: “Technology initiatives that focus mostly on the device will inevitably fail.” In Provo, we will heed this counsel when making the gradual change to computer enhanced learning. The focus is on emphasizing the best strategies for teachers to employ and for students to learn with the goal of having a sufficient number of devices present in the classrooms.
6. *Hiring Practices*: In Provo City School District, we are committed to use the most legal, fair, and defensible hiring practices to recruit and hire our employees.
7. *Policy Adherence*: Legitimate governance and professionalism in a school district require defensible policies and norms, along with unwritten norms and professional behaviors. While some people may see policies as tools to find fault in others, the right number and kind of policies will help both individuals and organizations.
8. *Supervision Practices*: Supervision that focuses more on Coaching, Making Improvement instead of forming a good or poor judgement.
9. *Instructional Model*: The Provo City School District will develop and implement an Instructional Model founded on research and evidence-based best practices. Professional Development will include continual training and resources to support the Instructional Model.
10. *Math*: We know a lot about best practices in Math. However, as a district we have not consistently implemented a research-based math pedagogical approach. Subsequently, we have not effectively provided leadership to the entire district regarding math instruction and learning. We will correct this deficiency.
11. *District Improvement Plan*: This has been developed locally, based on John Hattie’s *Visible Learning* work and evidence-based best practices.

Summary and What Comes Next

As I write this, the concept of The Provo Way is still forming into a substantive entity. However, it may never be as tangible and quantifiable as some would like. A district’s culture is extremely difficult to measure in any meaningful way. Yet at the same time, the lack of a positive district culture can feel as substantive as an actual object.

Also consider that as this positive culture takes hold, through the good will and willingness of all stakeholders, additional “bricks” will surely emerge as defensible practices to also be important parts of The Provo Way. This brick wall could (and should) continue to grow.

The Provo Way itself is all about a positive, inclusionary culture that is anchored to the strong commitment to continuous improvement. The Provo Way is not a program. The Provo Way is not about pointing out faults and weaknesses among teachers. It is, however, a determined philosophy to help teachers become the best teachers they can be, and by extension, to survive the very perilous times of working in the teaching profession. By creating this positive culture and by working steadily toward support for teachers, our students will be the beneficiaries of excellent instruction from a committed teaching staff.