Indistar®: The Basics

Indistar® is a web-based, continuous improvement process, adopted by a State Education Agency (SEA), tailored to its specifications, and provided for district and school improvement. For the SEA, Indistar is a tool with many applications, and it has been co-developed with the SEAs that use it and continuously enhanced with their input. At its most basic, Indistar provides a convenient and efficient means for schools and districts to submit forms and reports to the state. That, however, is not the primary or most important purpose for Indistar. Indistar's purpose stems from the premises that underlie its development.

Indistar's Premises

1. District and school Leadership Teams will candidly assess their professional practice, compared with indicators of research-based effective practice, and chart their course for improvement if given:
   - Clear expectations.
   - A structured, continuous process.
   - Access to research and resources.
   - Coaching and feedback.
2. Districts can ultimately build their own capacity to assume responsibility for supporting, coaching, and monitoring the work of their schools.

Of course, as the word "Indistar" implies, the system provides the clear expectations, structured process, and access to research and resources in relation to "indicators" of effective practice. A school is a complicated institution, and teaching is a sophisticated endeavor. Breaking down professional practices into understandable clusters of specific acts provides the detail that is often missing when schools attempt to improve guided only by global goals and jargon-laden assumptions.

The Leadership Team

Indistar guides and supports the work of a Leadership Team, either a school team or a district team. A school Leadership Team consists of the principal, teacher leaders, and others as determined by the school. A district Leadership Team consists of the superintendent and key district personnel. For the school, the principal and another team member (called a process manager) have full access to the system to prepare meeting agendas and minutes, enter the work of the team, and download a variety of resources and reports. For the district, the superintendent and a process manager have full access to the system to prepare meeting agendas and minutes, enter the work of the team, and download a variety of resources and reports. For both the school and the district, a Guest Login enables other team members, other staff, parents, and school board members to view key documents related to the team's ongoing work. Typically, a Leadership Team meets at least twice each month for about an hour each meeting.

Indistar includes task management features that enable the Leadership Team to efficiently implement its plan, manage implementation, and track progress. The system includes more than 40 reports,

including some with charts and graphs, to enable the Leadership Team to view its work and to prepare special reports that may be downloaded and submitted, for example, to the school board.

Coaching and Feedback

Indistar enables a state-appointed or other external improvement coach to support the work of a district Leadership Team. For a school team, the superintendent, state-appointed or other external improvement coach, and a district liaison (designated by the district) may be given coaching privileges.

Coaches have three means for providing guidance and feedback to the district or school Leadership Team: (1) coaching comments specific to indicators; (2) coaching reviews with broader guidance and feedback; and (3) coach's critique, with feedback structured within an electronically submitted document with items or questions provided by the SEA. Leadership Teams dialogue with their coach via the system.

States have two additional ways to provide feedback to district and school teams. One way is through reviewable forms, which are submitted by the school or district, reviewed by state-appointed reviewers, and returned to the district or school with approval or with comments for revisions before final submission. States may also provide feedback through a State Feedback feature that functions similar to a coach's critique, via an electronically submitted document with items or questions provided by the SEA.

The District Role

At the SEA's discretion, districts may be provided with district indicators to guide a district Leadership Team in the improvement of the district and in the district's support for the improvement of the school. The district may also designate a district liaison to coach a school. In effect, the district may assume the responsibilities of the SEA in supporting, coaching,

I've gained a new understanding for aligning instruction in the classroom with the standards to meet the needs of all students.

and monitoring the work of school Leadership Teams. The SEA may execute an agreement with the district that clarifies the responsibilities the district assumes in providing primary support for its schools. In some cases, the SEA begins by providing coaching support for a school and hands-off that responsibility to the district as the school gets accustomed to the process and the district learns how to provide the necessary support.

Indicators of Effective Practice

A Leadership Team focuses on the improvement of professional practice to achieve improved learning outcomes for students. The professional practices are arranged in categories and sub-categories in Indistar, with a set of indicators in each. The indicators are plain-language, behavioral descriptions of elements of the professional practices. Each indicator is connected with a Wise Ways® brief that provides an explanation, relevant research, and citations of resources. Video demonstrations and discussions of 144 indicators are provided through Indicators in Action™ and Indicators Now™, both web-based and accessible to anyone. Indicators in Action™ is organized into online courses and modules with accompanying materials for professional development. Even though all states do not use the identical 144 indicators, these indicators cover the areas of school improvement that are easily aligned with most indicators that states employ.

The initial set of district and school indicators came from the *Handbook on Restructuring and Substantial School Improvement*, published by ADI's Center on Innovation & Improvement in 2007. In 2008, the book was honored as a "research publication of the year" by Division H of the American Educational Research Association. Since that time, other indicators have been added by states, and ADI:

◊ developed a set of indicators for School Improvement Grant schools based on school turnaround principles;

◊ adapted indicators created by the American Institutes for Research for high schools;

◊ added content to Wise Ways® for special education and English language learners, and

◊ worked with states to create Wise Ways® for state-generated indicators.

Effective practices, specific indicators, and Wise Ways® briefs fuel the Leadership Team's discussion and keep it focused on the things that matter. The Wise Ways® provide a starting point for the Team to gather other research and practice examples as it desires. Indistar also leaves room for local discretion. If the indicator doesn't fit the local context, the team simply provides a rationale for excluding it from the plan. The system also asks the Team to prioritize each objective in its plan. Indistar points the conversation in the right direction.

Indistar® provides something that has been missing from formal "school improvement" in my 35 years in education; a proven structure and set of processes to guide schools to success.

The indicators may be displayed in multiple sets of categories through a crosswalk feature, and they may be filtered to display certain subsets. In addition, an SEA may establish different sets of indicators for different types of schools—for example, high schools vs elementary schools, turnaround schools vs priority or focus schools, or schools in continuous improvement.

The Jigsaw Puzzle

As one school improvement coach explained it, working with indicators is like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. First, the Leadership Team looks at the picture on the box—all the indicators, clustered within their practices—and sees the whole of what an effective school can be. Then the Team begins to fully implement each indicator that is not already in place. Because the school or district is already implementing some indicators well, those puzzle pieces are already in place. So the Team celebrates that, and plans its work to put in the missing pieces. The Team may begin by assembling the indicators for teaming and decision making, then those for leadership. As the Team gets into the curriculum, instruction, and assessment indicators it is reaching deep into the functions of a school that matter most to student learning. Real success comes when the school or district reaches a critical mass—all staff doing the right things and doing them well. The Leadership Team succeeds by setting high standards for itself, candidly assessing current practice, and working diligently to elevate professional practice across the district, the school, and in all classrooms. This process drives professional development, helping each member of the staff achieve excellence in professional practice.

The work is continuous, not starting and stopping each year, but moving forward, getting better. When an indicator has been determined to be fully implemented, it is revisited after some time has passed. Additional tasks may be necessary to restore the implementation to a high

level. The work is never done, but the district or school is continuously spiraling to higher levels of performance.

Working with Indicators

An indicator is one "indication" that an effective practice is consistently in place. For example, the following is an effective practice for instruction: "Expect and monitor sound instruction in a variety of modes." Great. Where do we start? That practice, supported by research, implies that there are multiple instructional modes, each has its own effective ways to proceed, and a teacher should use more than one mode. The

It is the use of a continuous improvement system that forces schools to realize the work is never "complete."

practice also states that these effective ways are expected of all teachers (which means the expectation is clearly communicated) and that implementation is monitored. If we look at effective practices for principals, we will see that the principal carries a major responsibility for communicating and monitoring expected practices. If we look at effective practices for professional development, we will see that teachers should be provided training and coaching to improve their skills relative to teaching in a variety of modes. But let's stick with the instructional practice. In Indistar, the variety of modes appear as sub-categories to the practice. For example, if the mode is teacher-directed instruction, several indicators clarify how this is done. One cluster of indicators describes the procedures for introducing a

new lesson through teacher-directed instruction. These indicators are:

1. All teachers review the previous lesson.
2. All teachers clearly state the lesson's topic, theme, and objectives.
3. All teachers stimulate interest in the topics.
4. All teachers use modeling, demonstration, and graphics.

This creates a handy cluster of related indicators that the Leadership Team might address together, discussing them at a faculty meeting, providing a workshop on them, structuring them into lesson plan templates, and arranging peer observations for teachers to observe each other for the presence of these proven practices. The next clusters address the teacher's presentation, summary, and confirmation of mastery. Similar indicators are provided for other modes of instruction, such as small groups, computer-based, independent work, and homework. The point is that the details and specifics of professional practice really matter, and for that we have indicators to point the way.

Note also that the indicators specify "all teachers," and this is the way a school builds the critical mass of effective practice across grade levels and subject areas to benefit all students. To see what this looks like, Indicators in Action™ includes video clips of teachers demonstrating many indicators. These are real teachers in real classrooms who routinely demonstrate the effective practices.

Pacing the Work and Reporting Progress

The SEA establishes expectations for the pace of work by a district or school Leadership Team. These expectations may be posted in the Docs (Documents) and Links tab on district and school dashboards along with links to the state assessment system and other key state resources. The expectations may also be incorporated into filters on the indicator system. The SEA also sets reporting dates, and the district or school simply

submits an automatically generated report that is electronically posted on the SEA's administrative site. A Document Upload feature enables districts and schools to post additional documents for state review.

Bulletin Board

The bulletin board feature enables the SEA to send messages to districts or schools, and to differentiate the message for schools working on different sets of indicators. Likewise, the district may send messages to all of its schools, and coaches may send messages to the districts and schools they are serving. The messages appear on the district or school dashboard.

Support from the Academic Development Institute (ADI)

The district and school Indistar sites display two sources for online support. One provides contact information for the SEA personnel managing Indistar, and the other sends the request to ADI's client services personnel. All users may also contact ADI client services personnel by telephone. As a partner in the federally funded Center on Innovations in Learning, ADI provides technical assistance to SEAs using Indistar. Through its partnership with the federally funded Building State Capacity and Productivity (BSCP) Center, ADI provides technical assistance for SEAs for strategic planning for Indistar within the state's system of support. The BSCP Center includes a version of Indistar, called IndiSEA™, in its project for Managing Performance in the System of Support. ADI and its Centers work closely with the regional comprehensive centers to support the implementation of Indistar and IndiSEA™ by SEAs.

The Center on Innovations in Learning (CIL) sponsors an annual Indistar Summit for SEA teams and their regional center liaisons. In 2013, 22 SEA teams attended the Summit in Richmond, Virginia. CIL also administers IndistarConnect, an online network for Indistar users.

Development and Evaluation of Indistar®

Indistar began in 2007-08 as a tool to meet the needs of the Virginia Department of Education. Over the subsequent years, as 24 other states

It provides a structure - common - to carry out improvement work within a state, districts, and their schools.

and the Bureau of Indian Education adopted Indistar, the system has been continuously enhanced to satisfy the needs and requests of the state clients. Indistar is not a "shrink-wrapped program." Rather it is intentionally designed to provide great flexibility for each state and is constantly upgraded with new features. The states that make up the Indistar Network co-develop Indistar with ADI, and the system is strengthened and made more flexible and more effective all the time. It's a journey and a partnership.

With the first cohort of Virginia schools, Edvantia conducted an evaluation of participants' satisfaction with the new way of doing school improvement. In a survey of 82 principals and lead teachers, 93% responded that Indistar supported their ongoing improvement efforts and helped to structure and focus their improvement planning.

In the first few years of development in Virginia, the SEA did much more than turn on a web-based tool. Both districts and schools worked on indicators. State coaches focused on the work. The SEA provided a series of webinars for the district teams. ADI provided four days of training for principals and lead teachers, covering the process, the instructional indicators, and the

research base. A study of 30 Virginia restructuring schools (and schools in jeopardy of losing state accreditation) found that 20 of them had made gains sufficient to achieve accreditation or exit restructuring. A study of 27 of these schools (the ones that maintained constant grade-level configurations) found that 26 made significant gains, reporting an average of 20 percentage points gained in math and 13 in reading.

The Virginia evaluation was "proof of concept" and evidence of Indistar's efficacy in a small group of schools with significant and targeted support from the SEA. In 2011-12, ADI commissioned New Legacy Partnerships, LLC, to conduct an independent evaluation of state implementation of Indistar. New Legacy Partnerships conducted structured interviews with state officials and coaches in 12 Indistar states. The study report described the reasons SEAs adopted Indistar, the various ways they rolled it out, the support from ADI, and the SEAs' experience and satisfaction with the system. The findings were positive and encouraging, and also pointed to areas in which Indistar could be improved. The study concluded with:

> Every respondent interviewed reported strong satisfaction with Indistar® and, to a person, was overwhelmingly positive about the support their state had received from CII (ADI) in relation to Indistar's adoption and rollout. When asked to cite strengths about the system itself, respondents did, although several were also clear to discuss not just the system's design and technology, but also how these elements created an effective impetus for focused, collegial dialogue and action around evidence-based improvement planning.

> Respondents were literally full of superlatives when asked to describe CII's (ADI's) support of them and their state as Indistar® was introduced and adopted. As described, this support ranged from informing stakeholders about the tool, working closely with the

state to adapt Indistar's design to their state's needs, convening users from various states to build networks of support, and responding rapidly to design and technological questions and requests. These quotes also suggest the value seen in CII's (ADI's) "personal touch"

Indistar® replaces standard practice of school improvement planning as a one-time event and forces it to become an ongoing practice.

and, moreover, how they model a degree of responsiveness and urgency. This seems to reinforce their objective of creating not only a valuable tool, but one that helps to convene people that matter around educational issues that make a difference…and then take action.

In 2013, ADI began an evaluation of changes in student outcomes in schools that had implemented Indistar with reasonable fidelity for three or more years. That study will conclude when 2013 assessment scores are available and can be added to the data. This study will look at the many variables that may contribute to changes in student performance, including the:

◊ SEA's choice of indicators,
◊ SEA's expectations, training, coaching, and feedback,
◊ Engagement of the district,
◊ Leadership Team's regularity and quality of meeting,
◊ Indicators/objectives chosen for implementation,
◊ Number of indicators/objectives chosen for implementation,
◊ Quality of the Leadership Team's assessment of current practice,

◊ Quality of the Leadership Team's plans, and

◊ Quality of the Leadership Team's evidence for full implementation of indicators/objectives.

Comments from the People Who Count

I've gained a new understanding for aligning instruction in the classroom with the standards to meet the needs of all students. I have always struggled with how to individualize standardized instruction, because that seems a paradox to me. The use of centers and work time, with the different activities and the levels designated for the different students [as per Indistar® indicators] makes a lot of sense. –Teacher

As instructional leader in working with Indistar® and developing a school improvement plan using the Indicators, it has been an excellent tool in helping to keep me focused on instruction and the quality of instruction that is being delivered. –Middle School Principal, High Poverty School

I love being able to access the Wise Ways®, while in the Leadership Team meeting it helped in the decision making process as well as the selection of indicators.–Instructional Leader

The greatest thing about this tool is a living, breathing document that can be easily accessed, monitored, and adjusted. –Instructional Leader

The indicators have really made me think about planning my lesson around increasing metacognitive skills and involving students more in the learning process. I have already incorporated the wait time strategies and student progress reports into my classroom management plan. –8th grade teacher and team leader

Good to Great

ADI recently formed a relationship with the Institute for Performance Improvement to develop an independent certification process for Indistar schools, principals, teacher leaders, and coaches. The goals of this certification are to:

1. Set a quality standard for collaborative team work and effective practice related to school improvement.
2. Recognize the demonstration of collaborative team work, effective practice, and evidence of actual and sustainable improvement.
3. Establish an independent agency to administer the certification for Indistar schools.

The benefits of certification based on performance management and improvement principles are:

1. Better schools; improved student learning.
2. Benchmarking successful school practices to optimize Indistar use in all schools.
3. Recognize schools for collaborative work, effective practice, and evidence of actual improvement.
4. Address systemic barriers to improvement and sustainability.
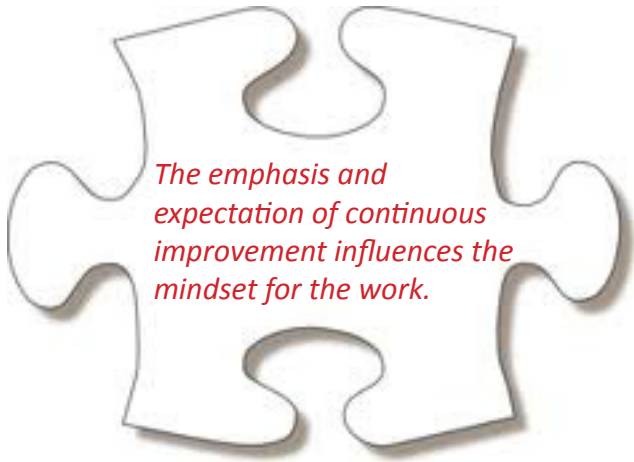
The Institute for Performance Improvement is working with a group of SEA personnel familiar with Indistar to develop the certification requirements and procedures, ready to make the certification available in the fall of 2013. As always, the SEAs are full partners in each new road taken for Indistar.

ADI has formed a strategic alliance with PLS 3rd Learning, a technology company that develops major systems in the field of education, including state standards and report card sites and standards-aligned professional development sites. For states interested in large projects of this nature, and in integrating Indistar with other systems, PLS 3rd Learning will be a high-quality partner.

Conclusion

Indistar® is a tool. It is not a static tool, but one that is continuously enhanced. Indistar is very adaptable to each state's needs and desires. This is a good thing, but it also means that Indistar and its implementation vary greatly from state to state. Thus, a laboratory is created, and states learn from each other and ADI learns from all of them. A state's success with Indistar depends, in large part, upon what the state expects of it and how the state implements it. ADI is devoted to strengthening Indistar's impact on district and school improvement, seeing change through to the classroom. If Indistar also serves other state ends for compliance reporting and monitoring, that is fine. But those are beneficial byproducts and not Indistar's central purpose.

The emphasis and expectation of continuous improvement influences the mindset for the work.

In using Indistar to guide its improvement, a district or school shifts to a different mindset in its understanding of planning and implementation processes. The object is not getting a passing grade from the state by claiming that all is well, but to candidly assess professional practice, celebrate the successes, and focus sharply on improving areas of weakness. The indicators and resources guide the way, but a Leadership Team must drive the process. When district and school Leadership Teams adopt the new mindset, they soon discover the joy of engaging in deep discussion about the things that matter most—the professional practices of all staff in providing

students with the education they deserve. Arriving at that mindset requires the right message, the right tone, and the right level of support and feedback from the SEA.

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