

Indistars

ALBANY HIGH SCHOOL, ALBANY, GEORGIA

by Maureen M. Mirabito

When you become the principal of a high school that has had multiple administrators in four years and graduated little more than 66% of its students in the past two years, you get down to business real fast.

You start by rebuilding your administrative and student support team. You begin by hiring some of the hardest-working, expect-only-the-best educators you can find, who believe what you believe and believe in what you can do together for students; people who will work tirelessly, exhaustedly, to rally others who have grown weary of the struggle and the unfulfilled promises of change from leaders who came, one after the other, before you. Even with the changes, the teachers worked diligently and overcame significant obstacles to make an overall 42% points gain on the End of Course Tests.

In an ideal situation, you take time to talk to people and get their sense of things, to understand what has worked and what just isn't working. You hope to honor the best of what has been done before you.

But this situation is far from ideal, even with the previ-

ously mentioned gains. When you look at the data, 121 high school seniors (out of 187) are not on track to graduate (that puts you far below the 66% rate); it is the third and final year of a school improvement grant that you are expected to close out; and ringing bells to signal the start of instruction were just jingles in a background of noise and play and trouble that you might hear if you listen close enough. But no one ever listened close enough.

So you *do* take the time to talk to teachers and understand what is and what has been. But in some cases, they have nothing left to say. They want to be told. And they might not believe you, or even believe at all, but you believe in them. As a team, you create a clear vision, which outlines what will happen and how you will help achieve the vision. You also tell them what you expect of them, of students, and why.

Immediately you assemble a core leadership team, which is designated as the Leadership Focus Team, to help you. It is composed of the administrators—principal, assistant principals, the school improvement specialist, academic coaches in the core areas, the graduation coach, and the head counselor. (The coaches will be key in helping develop the plan and working with the teachers to implement it in the classrooms.) Eventually, you will broaden the leadership team by including department chairs, media specialist, and the parent facilitator in the leadership team. But for now, until you are functioning well as a collaborative team with an unwavering focus on improving instruction in the classroom and personalizing support and instruction for students, you remain small and focused.

That is where the story of Albany High School in Albany, Georgia began under the leadership of Principal Rodney

Bullard and his handpicked assistant principals André Simmons, Jill Addison, and Jeffrey Ross, and school improvement specialist, Barbara Heusel. The high school is located in Albany, Georgia, where more than 90% of its 760 students identified as economically disadvantaged. The campus is surrounded by low-income housing in an area that is challenged by crime, gangs, drugs, and poverty. Over the years, Albany High has worked to ensure that situations in the community did not impact learning or safety in the school.

Our conversation, however, was not about the challenges. It was about school improvement: what it takes and how Indistar helps. It lasted nearly two hours—and could have lasted much longer. As with their work, we got down to business real fast, starting with a review of a five-page document they had put together in preparation for our conversation. It listed all the things that Albany High School has achieved in just two years. And, as Ms. Heusel puts it, “These achievements are significant. These are not the small changes we made, which we also did. These are the big, organizational, cultural, and systemic achievements.”

Like, for example, establishing leadership and instructional team structures for planning, and using data to personalize instruction every week and to adjust instructional plans and strategies (the focus team meets weekly, the leadership team meets weekly, and instructional teams meet three times a week).

Like, for example, implementing an around-the-clock credit recovery program for those 121 seniors who were not on track to graduate (most of them did graduate by the way, 76% of them to be exact).

Like, for example, a “bubble push” for students at risk of

not passing the End of Course Tests (and therefore possibly failing the class). This involved identifying the exact learning needs of each individual student on the bubble and putting them in classes with strong teachers who could best teach those standards. Two hundred students and 12 teachers



Albany High School teachers building tasks for Indistar’s indicators of effective practice

were involved in the effort, which resulted in a 35% increase in passing rates on exams, with 14% of students *exceeding* the achievement standard. This built on the gains made the previous year.

Like, for example, communicating again and again expectations for behavior, achievement, and attendance, and implementing serious consequences for falling short (dual enrollment at local college has increased from a handful of kids their first year to more than 60 students two years

later; students now talk about where they are in their learning, where they need to go, and future plans for college and trade).

And on and on and on.

The most telling of the achievements, however, did not appear on that five-page list. Mr. Bullard, Ms. Heusel, and Mr. Simmons let one of the biggest accomplishments slip when they talked about the faculty and staff, the students, and the parents. They let it slip when they referred to their entire learning community—the people that comprise it—as their **FAMILY**.

What follows is a snapshot of how Albany High School changed an entire culture and improved student performance in the process. For them, it was a moral imperative, and behind every one of the long list of achievements are even longer lists of tasks that were developed and tracked within Indistar. The indicators of effective practice helped to guide and inform the work, and the electronic, real-time Indistar platform put it into the hands and minds of the leadership team which includes teachers (department chairs), engaging them in the process of improvement.

According to Ms. Heusel, “Indistar allows us to have an ongoing school improvement plan. And if we are improving and we want to sustain that improvement, it has to make it to the teacher level. They need to know what we know and have the opportunity to provide input and suggestions for how we can do better. Working together in teams to assess and plan the indicators allows us to get it to the teacher level.”

“We are the last line of defense for putting these students on a good track for life. Our efforts, all of them, are heartfelt. Mr. Bullard did a phenomenal job in leading us. I get emotional thinking about it because it is intense, urgent work trying to get these students to believe in what they can accomplish.”

–Barbara Heusel, School Improvement Specialist

Change Requires Consistent Planning, Communication, Continuous Monitoring, and Teams of People to Spread and Share the Hope of It

“Almost nothing is the same as it was when we first arrived,” began Mr. Bullard. With so many needs and things to improve, Mr. Bullard and his team maintained their focus on one thing: to get better in the classroom. “To improve the level of teaching in the classroom, we had to plan well, create an environment where teachers get job-embedded professional learning, know exactly what our needs are, make adjustments based on data, and get into a cycle of evaluate, adjust, support, evaluate, and start over again.”

They began by building strong, stable teaming structures that were built into the daily schedule. “Our leadership team started out with biweekly meetings, but within a month we knew it was not enough. We now meet every single Monday during third period,” Mr. Bullard explained.

Collaboration among teachers was on a surface level at best where it was occurring when Mr. Bullard and his team first arrived. That too, has changed.

On Monday, each department presents its weekly student learning data to members of the Leadership Focus Team during their planning period.

On Tuesday, each department engages in professional

learning (determined based on student learning data and classroom observations) during their planning period.

On the first Wednesday of every month, each department plans instruction and assessments based on student learning data; faculty meetings happen the second Wednesday of every month.

On Thursday, the core Leadership Focus Team meets.

On Friday, the administrative team meets; the parent advisory council meets every third Friday of the month.

As Mrs. Heusel put it, moving those meetings meant that heaven and earth were moved first. To establish coordination and collaboration among the various teaming structures, the leadership team developed a calendar that identifies all of the critical data that various teams review on a weekly and monthly basis—for example, student and teacher attendance, discipline, indicator implementation, benchmark performance data, classroom observations, instructional team meeting agendas and minutes, grade distribution charts, pass/fail data, failures by grade level/subject/teacher, etc. Each team operates from a standing agenda using the data points, with flexibility to add new items as needed.

“We work in teams because we all have strengths and weaknesses and learning from each other is built-in professional learning day in and day out. That is the critical part of how we function,” explained Ms. Heusel.

Mr. Bullard added, “Our role as administrators is to participate with teachers in the collaboration process. We want to collaborate with them every step of the way and be at the table planning with them, so it isn’t us coming in to observe a lesson after it’s been planned and then suggesting what they do differently. We want to be doing that together right along with them. When we come in, if it’s working, great. If

it isn’t working, then let’s learn together and make the adjustments together. To come in afterwards, we have wasted time and opportunity with our students.”

“This consistency ensures that teams get through the critical instructional and student learning items that will help us all get better in the classroom. We are repeatedly tweaking our collaborative planning process to always make it more effective.”

Know the Strengths of Your People and Use Them Creatively, Hire Strategically to Build Up Weaknesses

Getting better in the classroom required educators to have strong content knowledge and effective instructional strategies. To address the content aspect, Mr. Bullard and his staff hired content area specialists in each of the core subjects. “We hired people with specific content expertise so that we talked about and improved content knowledge as intensely as we talked about and improved instructional strategies.”

Hiring wasn’t Mr. Bullard and his leadership team’s only solution. In that first year and facing a dismal graduation rate, among the leadership team’s first order of business was to know the academic strengths and weaknesses of every single senior—down to the specific content standards they were expected to master. Then they did what we all dream for students: they made the learning very personal for each one of them by identifying, regardless of grade level, which teacher taught which standard the best and would really push and encourage those students who were least likely to achieve.

After spending much of the time on the seniors and graduation tests, the attention quickly shifted to the juniors, sophomores and freshmen. Passing the end-of-the-year

course assessments, a requirement for graduation, provided a very tangible aim for both students and teachers. That became the goal around which the best instruction and deepest learning were focused. “This particular effort involved 12 teachers and nearly 200 students,” explained Ms. Heusel. Once the students realized they were surrounded with the best teachers, and that time, attention, resources, and belief were being poured into their ability to succeed, it wasn’t just test scores that changed. “Students bought in their confidence. They recognized the importance of this exam as their ticket to graduation, higher learning, and/or employment. That was a monumental shift.”

Mr. Bullard described it this way. “When they went in to take the exam at the end of the year, I asked them, ‘Do you feel good going into this test, do you feel prepared?’ They looked me in the eye and said yes, yes they did. I knew then the results would come. I could feel their confidence. I could see it.”

What the leadership team learned from its success with this group of seniors was replicated with juniors and sophomores and freshman. “Every year, we backed the process into earlier grade levels with the goal of addressing the individual needs of every child and making sure that, where they are weak, their instruction is strong.”

Establish Clear Expectations for the Behavior You Want to See In Adults and Students + Give Weight to the Consequences

Mr. Bullard and his leadership team made it very clear that student mastery of the standards was the way forward. “That was the foundation of the culture that we want to build. It gave us the leverage to eliminate practices that did not support that. For example, giving kids a zero is not acceptable because, if we can’t see their work, we can’t take

the right action to help them.”

Mr. Bullard and his leadership team are not requiring others to believe what they believe, but they are requiring certain behaviors. “We may not change minds of educators or students, but we will change behaviors by requiring them to do the work,” said Mr. Bullard.

A lot of that work started in teams. “Requiring teachers to bring student work to collaborative planning meetings, to analyze data together, and to plan together—those were significant changes in behavior. We are working on changing behaviors rather than changing minds. Changing minds is beginning to happen with the results.”

Mr. Simmons, assistant principal, was hired and immediately began to identify some goals: minimize traffic in hallways and address the student discipline issues that plagued the school. “Staff that had been here a while told horror stories of the happenings here. You just couldn’t imagine. And when we showed up, there were kids telling us that they ran the school. We knew that we could not address instruction until we addressed culture.”

Among the first changes was the strategic placement of teachers in the hallways. “We turned into broken records, driving home again and again what our expectations were for behavior: we expect you to be in class, we expect you to follow rules, we expect you to do your work,” Mr. Simmons said. The administrative staff laid out the expectations and shared them with families. They used discipline data to identify the students presenting the greatest behavioral challenges and that repeatedly disrupted the safe learning environment they demanded for their school community.

“Many of those students were 18 or 19 years old with one credit completed, many have been to jail with several arrests

and wearing ankle bracelets. They aren't coming to school to learn, they are coming to intimidate, to recruit. So we sat down with them and their parents, we laid out our expectations for their behavior and the consequences for not meeting them. They signed a contract. Before long, many of those 50 kids dropped out, went to alternative school or a different school altogether," Mr. Simmons said. Everything possible was done to help them find settings where they could succeed.

If it sounds harsh, consider this: many students thanked their leaders for giving them back their opportunity to learn; attendance has improved; class participation is at an all-time high. "We had gang issues in our school, with members trying to force and intimidate others into joining. There were just so many issues that you won't see with data and measurements. But the reason we've been able to get kids comfortable here again and participating with their learning is because they are not afraid or intimidated anymore. They thank us for making it safe for them to be at school and to learn."

As Mr. Simmons put it, the change in culture was dramatic and immediate. "This year, we have had no major disciplinary incidents; it is nothing like it used to be. The hallways are clear; kids are in class learning."

The school resource officer paid the school a great compliment when he shared that he comes to Albany High School to get peace.

"We expect students to be in class learning; we expect teachers to be out in the hallways during transition. It is not about punishing teachers to monitor, it's about making sure we do not lose our students to discipline," said Mr. Bullard.

We stop talking for a minute because they want me to hear the silence. "We have over 100 students in summer school right now—right outside the door—and you can hear

a pin drop." They are almost giddy, and you can tell it's a moment they've shared before and marveled over together—*Can you believe we are here, at this point? Can you even believe it?* And now that they get to share it with me and with all of us, it is almost more than they can bear.

Involve Them All: Let Everyone Know What You Know, and Know What They Know

The school improvement work—from the indicators of effective practice to the data that are collected to the tasks that are created and monitored and to the plans that are adjusted—happens at every level. "If you want sustainability of improvement, the information, the process, the work has to happen at the teacher level," Ms. Heusel said. Taking it one step further, even the students were involved in the process of school improvement through the newly formed student leadership team.

To start, the leadership team at Albany High School began their work their first year by assessing seven indicators of effective practice in Indistar. "We were required to assess many more than that, but to get good at the process we started with seven and we started in the leadership team. We assessed them, created tasks, and really learned the process for achieving full implementation with high fidelity. Then, we divided up as a leadership team so that one administrator and one teacher from the leadership team led a faculty team (cross-curricular and cross-grade level) through the process with three indicators. We divided it up so that every faculty member was involved in the process of assessing and creating tasks that they could return to their instructional teams to share and understand how it all comes together. As a leadership team, we would review tasks and provide feedback so

that it was a collaborative process,” explained Ms. Heusel.

This year, with the process established, the faculty got right to work reassessing the indicators and their implementation. “There is so much work to be done so there are a lot of tasks. I would download the tasks in a report from Indistar and use them in our leadership team meetings where we would prioritize the tasks and build our plans and dates for monitoring them, with the ultimate goal being full implementation,” explained Ms. Heusel.

The monitoring happened during focus walks, which the leadership team conducted twice per month. Because the teams are so data-driven, the tasks were aligned to the professional learning needs that teachers received every week. During the focus walks, the leadership team monitoring of tasks doubled as an effort to determine if professional learning was being implemented with fidelity.

“Indistar really is an ongoing school improvement plan. Like in our leadership team minutes, when our data pointed out an issue, we developed a plan that turned into next steps or tasks. Indistar also provides us with an historical archive of how we got where we are. There’s so much to remember and share. How will someone in the future know how we got here unless we have the story of our journey? This is definitely a process.”

There is another advantage to documenting your work, collecting your data, knowing what works, and changing what doesn’t: when one funding source runs out, the county steps in to fill it back up. “Last year was our final year of School Improvement Grant (SIG) money, which funded our very successful credit recovery program and some of our reading and math intervention positions, which we created because, prior to our arrival, there were only one or two support classes for students struggling in math or reading,

but now every struggling student is in a support course. We have been able to show the effectiveness of both initiatives because we monitor what we put into place and, when we see improvements, which have been dramatic, we keep going. When we don’t see improvements, we stop it, or change it. We could show the county the impact of these programs on student learning and graduation rates and they funded them when they were making cuts everywhere else.”

Share What You Learn + Celebrate When You Succeed

In other interviews I conducted with Albany, Georgia high schools, Ms. Heusel’s name came up quite a bit. That is because she was asked to train the other county school improvement specialists on establishing an improvement process using data and Indistar.

“We have really taken the collaborative approach that has been put into place in our school and broadened it into the district, which is pretty remarkable because the schools have always been very competitive. But our students are very mobile and move from school to school. So we have to make sure all of the schools are high performing because their students today are our students tomorrow. It is in all of our best interest to not make this about us, but to always make it about our students.”

Ms. Heusel specifically trained her colleagues on simplifying the process for identifying students who are at risk of course or grade failure, or of not graduating high school. “What used to take hours to do, now takes minutes. You just have to collect the right data and know what to look for.”

Improving schools is hard, tedious, but incredibly rewarding work. This school hasn’t only gotten better at getting better in the classroom. They’ve also gotten better at

enjoying the process and finding time to laugh through it. “We have a good sense of humor at this school. We might tease each other in good fun so we can laugh. You need a break from this intense work of developing students and being the difference for them. So we try to enjoy this process. We sure spend enough time together.”

Mr. Bullard, Ms. Heusel, and Mr. Simmons can’t say enough about the hard work and dedication on the part of the teachers, “It took a major commitment from the faculty to make so many adjustments in a short amount of time and with multiple administrators over the years. They never stop showing us what they are capable of. It shows in the work of our students, too.”

It also shows in their interactions with the students. Mr. Simmons talked about the joy of creating meaningful relationships with students, particularly those who haven’t had many, or any at all, with adults. “There was a rumor going around that I was leaving and the kids that gave me the hardest time at first are now the ones saying to me, ‘We hear you are going away, is that true? You can’t leave us. Don’t leave until we leave, Mr. Simmons.’ They were getting ready to start a petition to keep me here.”

Mr. Bullard said that, in the next year, one thing they are really going to work harder at is celebrating. He celebrates like he gets down to business: fast. “The staff picks on me because they say I celebrate fast,” he laughed.

Ms. Heusel chimed in, “If we are celebrating, we put weights on his feet to keep him there.”

Mr. Bullard agreed, “I’m trying to slow down but I do celebrate fast. I guess I’m just ready to get to the next piece of work.”

They are family; they understand. ★

Indistar®

Lighting our path to stellar learning®

Indistar® is a web-based system implemented by a state education agency, district, or charter school organization for use with district and/or school improvement teams to inform, coach, sustain, track, and report improvement activities.

Similar to a global positioning system (GPS), Indistar® tells you where you are and helps you get to where you want to be—every child learning and every school improving. Indistar® is stocked with indicators of evidence-based practices at the district, school, and classroom levels to improve student learning. But Indistar® is also customizable, so that the client (SEA, LEA, or charter organization) can populate or enhance the system with its own indicators of effective practice. The system also accommodates rubrics for assessment of the indicators.

The client can differentiate the system to accommodate “zones” of districts or schools. For example, the system will allow for a “rapid improvement” or turnaround track that includes different indicators than a “continuous improvement” track.

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