

Indistars



AUGUSTA SCHOOL DISTRICT, ARKANSAS

by *Maureen M. Mirabito*

If you ask the leadership team in Augusta, Arkansas, what it takes to turn around a culture, shift a mindset, change a thought, and achieve, they will tell you in one word: **persistence**.

But in what, you want to know. You want to know because whatever they are persisting through, it is working. Augusta School District is a small, small district that serves about 372 students between its elementary school (preK–6) and its high school (7–12).

“We have one stop light in Augusta, one dollar store, one grocery store. A lot of grandparents are raising children. Many teachers do not live here, some driving 50 miles to teach here,” says Pam Clark of the Arkansas Department of Education and coach for Augusta’s K–12 leadership team. “Augusta is in the Delta region of Arkansas, on the east side of the state near the Mississippi River. When you say ‘in the Delta,’ people know it’s the economically disadvantaged part of the state. Kids do not come from homes where there are books. They do not know about Dolly Parton’s Imagination Station. They come to school and that is their first experience with learning.”

Pam was assigned to Augusta School District three years ago when its high school was placed in priority status—the state’s designation for the most serious, lowest 5% of schools. Then in

2014, the high school was also labeled as a school in Academic Distress. The elementary school was identified as a Focus School and among the lowest 10% of schools in Arkansas.

In February, Augusta High School received notification that it was no longer in Academic Distress. And the good news doesn’t stop there. Recently the state instituted a new rating system for all public schools that considers metrics, including increased student achievement and graduation rates. In March, Augusta received its grade: B. “We like to think of it as honor roll,” says Joe Brown, first-year principal of both the elementary and high schools and newest member of Augusta’s K–12 leadership team. While recognizing the challenges students and their teachers in the Delta face, Pam affirms their potential, “There are those old myths that some kids can’t learn. They are wrong. We know that they can learn just as well as anyone. We are proving it.”

It’s a Thursday morning, bright and spring-like. Augusta’s leadership team has invited me to attend part of their weekly leadership team meeting through a videoconference. I want to know more about this leadership team and their persistence, and they are eager to share what they do and what they’ve learned.

Augusta began using Indistar three years ago, the same time the high school was placed in priority status. Jessica Stone, K–12 literacy coach, describes that beginning this way, “We were in deep when we started, hoping to just get through today and maybe tomorrow and not focusing on the list of things we were supposed to be doing. We knew we were supposed to be doing them but we had no idea how.” Richard Greer, K–12 math coach and leadership team member, agrees, “Using Indistar was overwhelming at first. It seemed there were all of these areas

we needed to attack and it was tough to know where to start.”

They started by meeting every Thursday morning as a leadership team. “When we first started meeting, an hour was all the team could do,” said Pam. “Now, it is common for us to meet through lunch, into the early afternoon—four or five hours. We do not stop until we have done what we need to do to be successful. We celebrate. We look at math data, literacy data. We talk about individual students. We examine Wise Ways. We build plans and we think through how best to implement them.”

Richard credits Pam with making the work manageable for them early on, “Our coach would pull a group of indicators to focus on each week. We would review the research, talk about what the indicator looked like, where we found it in our classrooms, plan for it, and know what we needed to do to fully implement it.” He goes on to say that establishing a process for understanding the indicators and building the structures and plans for their implementation was foundational. “Once we got the process moving, we were much more successful adding in more indicators rather than trying to do everything at once.”

Part of that process involved practicing over and over again as a team to use the Wise Ways research to understand exactly what high-achieving schools do. The leadership team considered every single detail—from how to determine where the practice might already exist in their schools to what needs to happen so that it exists everywhere all the time.

Over time, their persistence through this hard work, doing the same thing every week, taught them to function and operate collaboratively and candidly as a team. Suggesting how much has changed, Richard describes the new culture: “It wasn’t always like this, our culture of trust and honesty. We have struggled together every week, sometimes every day, through some tough realizations and difficult decisions,

but always in the best interest of our students. We don’t come together just when it’s time for Indistar; we plan everything together now. We use each other to bounce ideas off of and get feedback for everything. We don’t take it personally when someone challenges us. We know that it is all about academic



Back row, left to right: Jerry Vaughn, Arkansas Leadership Academy, capacity builder; Lisa Martin, design facilitator; Jessica Stone, literacy facilitator; Cheryl Winningham, counselor; Pam Clark, ADE; Richard Greer, math facilitator. **Front row**, left to right: Michael Manning, federal program coordinator; Joe Brown, K-12 principal.

achievement and making sure that we are not just doing good enough—but that we are fully implementing indicators in every classroom in the best possible way for our kids.”

Student engagement indicators provided a focus for Augusta’s leadership team from the beginning, and that focus helped them to establish their footing as a team early on. Jessica Stone reports that the leadership team “spent, and continues

to spend, a lot of time talking about student engagement—at first we would talk about it week after week. It kept coming up because we just didn't think we were seeing it. So we persisted in identifying what it looked like and how we could gather evidence when we saw it and what we needed to do when we didn't."

The team looked at engagement research over and over again and in conference with teachers in their instructional subject or grade-level team meetings (Augusta calls these teams "PLCs," short for professional learning communities). The team created forms for walkthroughs, and they contacted their cooperative agency (a regional office that exists to provide technical assistance and support to districts and schools) for help on best ways to collect and gather evidence for student engagement that would measure up with what Wise Ways expected. But the team didn't stop there: "We invited students to a leadership team meeting and asked them what teachers did that was engaging and what they did that was not engaging. We filled up three chart pages with detailed practices and examples."

How did the student's feedback align with the research?

"It was right on," says Richard.

Between the research and the student testimonials that supported it, the leadership team started to work intensively in their weekly PLCs with teachers on various aspects of student engagement. Jessica noted the value of having student input, "Having our student voices, supported by the research, gave us a solid foundation and platform for making changes to instruction and technique with teachers. We said, 'Our students are saying this; research is saying this. So how will we make it happen?' It was what we needed to get our teachers involved and hear their ideas and get their buy-in for making changes."

Now, every Thursday, the Augusta K-12 leadership team

spends part of its meeting conducting classroom walkthroughs, some weeks at the elementary level, some weeks at the high school. Team members all look for the same thing each week, and they look for student engagement a lot. As they proceed, they fill out their walkthrough forms; when they've completed them, they return to their leadership team room to discuss what they saw. Those meetings have evolved and so has team thinking about how to improve instruction, Pam explains, "In the beginning I led the discussions, but now each team member takes a turn describing what he or she saw. We used to look for weaknesses until my unit leader, Dr. Richard Wilde, met with us one day and talked about a strategy to improve teacher effectiveness. He introduced us to Ivan Fitzwater's advice on coaching others: 'If I'm working with you, I'm always going to focus on your strengths. If I'm raising your strengths up, then your weak areas will follow.' So we focus on strengths now."

Two things happen after the team completes their classroom walkthrough discussions: (a) one member is responsible for providing the teacher with written and verbal feedback that day, and (b) the team combines walkthrough findings with the other data they've examined to plan for the following Monday's PLCs with teachers. Teachers are grouped into PLCs based on the findings and areas of need. "Our PLCs are not static groups. The composition changes each week depending on which indicators we are looking at, what student data reveal to us, and what we see in our classroom walkthroughs," explains Jessica.

Pam adds, "We are always sending the work that we do in leadership teams to the teachers. We want them to know which indicators we are focusing on, what we are looking at, and what the research says. Our meetings always end with tasks to complete and action items to address in the PLCs, and we share that information immediately with all teachers."

There is a rhythm to this team, a cadence. You can tell they are a team that practices a lot; except you know that, in their minds and by their actions, it is always the big game—this team suits up every day. They are prepared to win as a team. Pam illustrates this team cohesiveness, “When we first started working together and were working hard at the indicators, I’d say to them, ‘An achieving school does this...’ or ‘An achieving school is in constant communication.’ I was always using the phrase ‘an achieving school.’ It’s become our mantra. If I forget to say it now, they remind me, ‘Pam, an achieving school does this.’ We are creating the mindset that they do not have to be a priority school; they can be an achieving school.”

I ask Principal Brown what Indistar has meant to him as a newly appointed principal and what his thoughts were about this team. Joe says, “As a first-year principal, I felt like a pinball, but Indistar gave me a map of things to do and how to plan and structure my days and meet objectives that the schools must meet. There is a lot of turnover in this school—instructional and leadership—but we have built a system and a culture of achievement here at Augusta so that anyone can walk in and know what is happening, what the expectations are, and what the focus is.”

In addition to student engagement, another area of focus that has resulted in big changes at Augusta concerns the indicators that address assessing and monitoring mastery, specifically the use of pre- and post-tests to assess student mastery of objectives, personalize instruction, and re-teach based on results. Pam Clark explains, “As a team, we wanted to see how many teachers do pre- and post-tests and the types of assessments they use—verbal, written, and so forth. The principal wanted to learn what the teachers were doing, to get a snapshot of what was happening across the district

in terms of assessments.” The leadership team met with the teachers in their Monday PLCs, explained to them what they were assessing, assured them that it was not for evaluative purposes, and asked each teacher to put every assessment they administered into a file folder for an entire month.” At the end of the month, the file folders were collected.

The leadership created a rubric to analyze the assessments, organized by type of assessment (summative or formative), by subject area, by grade level, and even by elementary or high school. The team was in for a surprise, says Pam, “It was eye opening because we discovered that many teachers were only doing summative assessments and very few used a variety of assessment methods. This led us to further inquire how many teachers were grading assessments. Very few. We suspected, and confirmed, that students with low-achieving grades—D’s



A leadership team exercise in analyzing the use of formative assessments by all teachers.

and F's—for that period were not assessed along the way and therefore not receiving intervention support in time for the summative assessment.”

Richard Greer underscores the level of persistence a change in assessment practice required, “We brought assessments to the table probably three different times, trying to find the best technique for building a system around implementing formative ones. We’d start it, monitor it, bring it back, and revise it. But going through the process really built buy-in from everyone to change how we operated. We aren’t okay with status quo or just meeting compliance. We all really want to improve and achieve. We go back to the drawing board if it’s not working.”

Another persistence tactic by the Augusta leadership team: They start every meeting with a celebration of success. “In all our work, we try to be extremely positive. It is not uncommon for Principal Brown to call an afterschool meeting for faculty to tell them what we’re seeing in walkthroughs and how great they are doing. On days we see high student engagement, or bell-to-bell instruction, he might call everyone to the cafeteria last period to celebrate that success,” says Pam.

The team had just finished their weekly celebration of successes when I joined the meeting. I asked them to share some of what they were celebrating. Lisa Martin, design facilitator, was celebrating the award of an Apple grant that 160 schools across the United States will receive. The Apple grant will provide iPads for all students, and MacBooks and iPads for all teachers. It will also boost their technological infrastructure at the school. Later that afternoon, Lisa was meeting with a representative from another grant they’d applied for and were almost certain to receive: an AT&T grant that would provide every student at Augusta High School with WiFi at home for three years. “Considering how poor and remote many of our

students are, this will change their lives.”

Jerry Vaughn, external provider from the Arkansas Leadership Academy who attends every meeting and supports the leadership team in building its capacity, was celebrating that “the progress is in the struggle” and that the district’s B grade was something they have worked hard for and persevered to earn.

Jessica Stone and Richard Greer were celebrating that elementary and high school students met their interim measurable objectives for the third time in a row and already met their annual measurable objective.

Cheryl Winningham, counselor, celebrated the smooth rollout of PARCC testing.

But perhaps the one success that reflects the change in mindset and the shift in culture at Augusta was this success, one that the team shared together: Next month, 26 seniors will graduate from Augusta High School; each one of those seniors applied to the community college located about an hour away. Over the past couple of years, Augusta has instituted a practice of placing college acceptance letters on the wall just inside the school’s main entrance. The leadership team told me to ask how many letters had been placed on that wall. So I did, I asked.

Their response: Twenty-six letters of acceptance are hanging on the wall as you enter Augusta High School. “We don’t know how many will go, but to have them fill out the application and know they have a chance, that’s changing a culture. That is our goal,” said Pam Clark.

The team received news recently that their coach, Pam, was leaving the Arkansas Department of Education to serve as an assistant superintendent in a district—guiding and coaching and supporting other educators to do their work better, to persist. I asked the leadership team what will happen next year, how will you sustain your work? They hadn’t expected this

question, but they were prepared for it. Jessica responds first, “Over the past three years, the amount of intensive support that we’ve needed has reduced as we’ve grown and strengthened. We are headed in that direction of sustainability and structure.” Richard puts it this way, “Pam and Jerry gave us the level of support that we needed at first. We are now a leadership team that stands on its own feet, takes care of its own schools. We’ve overcome so many obstacles, but the system and the processes are in place. If we have a problem, we will bring it to the table, we will analyze the possibilities, we will make plans for implementation. We will keep doing what we do every day, not just once a week.”

You hear their confidence, feel their conviction, and sense the pride in their achievement. And you just know that they will continue to persist and achieve.

On its website, you can learn all kinds of information about the Augusta School District. What stood out was its creed. That statement stood out because it doesn’t just exist on the website, it exists in every action of every member of this leadership team and what they believe in and expect of their entire school community:

Yesterday is history.
Tomorrow is a
Mystery
Today is a gift.
That’s why we call it
The present.
Work hard.
Believe in yourself.
Never give up.



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.

Indistar was developed by the Academic Development Institute (ADI) in Lincoln, IL, and is now co-managed by ADI and the Center on Innovations in Learning, a center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

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