

# Indistars

## **DOUGHERTY COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL, ALBANY, GEORGIA**

*by Maureen M. Mirabito*

Like many educators with a mile-high list of things to do and accomplish and change in high-need, low-achieving schools, Ashley Mitchell, school improvement specialist and Indistar process manager, and the leadership team at Dougherty Comprehensive High School in Albany, Georgia considered Indistar one more thing added to their list.

It wasn't long before they discovered they had it all wrong. Not only would Indistar manage their list, it would help them to prioritize and execute it. Guided by the indicators of effective practice, the research behind them, and the built-in ability to create tasks, adjust, and adapt them based on the data they analyzed and the instruction they observed, that mile-high list was collapsed and collated into an organized, well-lit, research-backed plan for improving the teaching, the learning, and the culture of their school.

Not to be overlooked is the sustainability and capacity that Indistar is helping to build.

“We have had six principals in five years. You can imagine the instability that creates in a learning community. But Indistar has helped to build our capacity as a leadership team; conversations have shifted from ones about management to ones focused on improving instruction. We rely on assessment and observation data to make decisions. We understand and are doing the work of school improvement in a very focused and methodical way. If our administration were to change again, we would not have to start over. Our team is focused and positioned to keep moving ahead.”

Dougherty Comprehensive High School is one of four high schools located in Albany, Georgia. Ninety-seven percent of students are African-American; 98 percent come from economically disadvantaged homes. Seven hundred and forty-three students attend Dougherty High School, a decline of more than 50 percent in the past ten years. “When I began working here ten years ago, our enrollment was up around 2,500 students. We attribute the decline to several factors—rezoning, factory closures, and lots of people moving out of the area,” explains Ms. Mitchell.

Dropout rates are high in the county overall, a challenge that the superintendent has identified as a top priority in the system.

As the school improvement specialist and Indistar process manager, Ms. Mitchell serves as the liaison between the state, the district, and the school. School improvement initiatives are led by her, which means she gathers and uploads a lot of data from and into Indistar.

“Last year, I served on the leadership team as the chair of the social studies department. It was our first year using Indistar and we spent a lot of time looking through the priority school indicators.”

In their second year, Ms. Mitchell’s role has shifted and so has the work. This year, the Leadership Team is more focused on the implementation of the indicators—creating tasks and assigning responsibilities to leadership team members, providing professional learning to teachers in areas that emerge as needs, ensuring plenty of collaborative time between teachers to plan and assess instruction and student learning, and using coaching comments to guide their leadership team discussions and next steps.

“Our coach, Ms. Malone, visits us regularly and conducts classroom observations and focused walk-throughs. She provides very specific and detailed feedback in her coaching comments (within Indistar), and often poses them as questions. As a leadership team, we use those comments and questions to guide our discussions and next steps, or tasks, related to instruction.”

Capacity building—both instructional and leadership—continues to emerge as a theme in Dougherty Comprehensive High School’s work with Indistar.



Dougherty Comprehensive High School

“We have worked through several problems and challenges, collaborated and persevered to identify different solutions. Over this past year, we have grown so much in our individual and collective abilities to do this work of improvement. As a leadership team and as a faculty. There is buy-in for this work and Indistar has given us a common language to use, making it easier for everyone to have a voice.”

One of the first changes that DCHS made this year was to provide subject-area collaborative planning twice per week for teachers, and weekly grade-level Monday meetings.

“One of the indicators of effective practice speaks to collaborative planning among instructional teams. We go above and beyond the minimum expectation that research suggests. Our department chairs lead the collaborative planning meetings, which are really an extension of our leadership team meetings. Since so much of our decision making in the leadership team is based on observation and walk-through data, as well as formative assessment data, we bring what we find (including the data) to collaborative planning meetings. This drives discussions about what strategies are working well, and what adjustments are needed in lesson planning, delivery, and/or assessment. Our instructional coaches provide on-the-spot professional learning there as well.”

Monday meetings provide an opportunity for grade-level teams to meet and discuss areas emerging as successes *and* concerns—for example, attendance, discipline, or student engagement.

“Last year, these meetings were mandatory, but staff were not compensated. This year, because we received a School Improvement Grant, we are able to pay a small stipend to teachers. Every Monday we meet by grade level from 4:20 p.m.-5:50 p.m.

The sessions vary each week, but often include some component of data analysis, research, and/or professional learning. We also offer a ‘Spotlight on Excellence’ segment, which highlights an educator who is getting results with an effective strategy or approach. They get the recognition but they also train the rest of their team on that strategy or approach.”

I ask Ms. Mitchell how their use of Indistar and their approach toward improvement has shifted.

“Again, at first we viewed Indistar as a monitoring tool, almost a Big Brother in our school. But now we understand how it guides and organizes our work. Our focus is always to improve teaching and learning, but how we do that, even from week to week, changes based on what we learn or see. Indistar accommodates that, even encourages it. It is so important to make sure that everything gets put in there—tasks, agreements, evidence. Because even if we forget about it, Indistar doesn’t. We stay accountable and we stay on track.”

I ask Ms. Mitchell which report is her favorite within Indistar, even though I’m pretty sure I already know the answer.

“The Task Report! It really helps us to know where we stand, what needs to be addressed. I can highlight the task, the name, the date it was due to be completed, and we have a talk about the status at our meetings.”

Next year, DCHS will continue its intensive focus on in-

structional practice. They will continue to work with teachers this summer in creating aligned units of instruction, lessons, and assessments. There is also serious discussion about adding additional collaborative planning days during the week.

“We are hopeful, committed, to creating a culture of high expectations among students and teachers and parents in our learning community. There is one student who comes to mind that exemplifies what we want for all students. He has participated in our exceptional student program (ESP), which is our program for students receiving special education services. But he wanted to graduate with a regular education diploma so he has persevered to do just that. Tomorrow, he will receive a regular education diploma at graduation.”

Mindsets are changing at Dougherty Comprehensive High School, and Indistar is helping to make it happen. Through focused and concentrated effort at changing practice and behavior, improvement and excellence is not the tall order it once appeared. Adults and students alike see the possibilities spread out before them—solutions and opportunities within reach, a few tasks at a time. ★

# 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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