Indistars

KNOLLWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SOUTH DAKOTA

by Maureen M. Mirabito

We sat at a table in the back corner of a large conference room, the clang of lunch dishes and hum of excited conversations colliding around us. It was the fifth annual Indistar Summit, a conference typically designed for state officials from around the country who use Indistar to plan and implement change in their schools. But Dr. Deborah Warr, a school principal, was asked to represent her school, Knollwood Elementary, which is located near the Pine Ridge Reservation in north Rapid City, South Dakota.

Knollwood Elementary School serves about 640 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. One hundred percent of students receive free breakfasts and lunches. More than 160 students participate in the weekend backpack program, which provides children with meals for Saturdays and Sundays. The mobility rate is high at Knollwood Elementary, with children moving back and forth between Rapid City and the reservation throughout the year, depending on family needs and circumstances.

Dr. Warr conveys these demographic data in a rote, matter-of-fact manner; you understand that these pieces of information help with the details and significance of the story, but are irrelevant to the expectations that she and her staff hold of themselves and each other, or to the outcomes they and their students will achieve.

Dr. Warr would much prefer to talk about teaming, instruction, and learning, and all of the ways that her school community

overcomes the demographic challenges that, as research and experience suggest, make student success tough to achieve. For the next 30 minutes, that's what we talk about, starting with the leadership team and how individual student data drive every decision and every action in Knollwood Elementary School.

Because of requirements South Dakota imposes on Focus and Priority Schools, Knollwood has been using Indistar for two years. While some states mandate the implementation of certain indicators of effective practice, South Dakota offers its districts and schools flexibility to select the indicators best suited to their individual needs, within some guidelines. Dr. Warr and her leadership team used this flexibility to address needs that they knew existed but hadn't yet been able to systemically and systematically address.

To begin our discussion, I asked Dr. Warr which indicators of effective practice anchored the work at Knollwood Elementary. These are the ones she shared:

- Instructional teams meet for blocks of time (4- to 6-hour blocks, once a month; whole days before and after the school year) sufficient to develop and refine units of instruction and review student learning data.
- The school's leadership team regularly looks at school performance data and aggregated classroom observation data and uses that data to make decisions about school improvement and professional development needs.
- Teachers individualize instruction based on pre-test results to provide support for some students and enhanced learning opportunities for others.

These indicators point need for better instructional collaboration and a better use of data. According to Dr. Warr, "We knew we needed to tighten up our professional learning communities and use student data more strategically. Indistar and its research provided us with a critical structure to begin that work and move forward."

Among the first tasks was to establish a solid teaming infrastructure for communicating and carrying out the work that lay ahead. Dr. Warr's leadership team includes two classroom teachers, a literacy specialist, a math specialist, a special educator, and a parent. Each member of the leadership team serves as a data team (or instructional team) leader. There are six data teams, one for each of the K–5 grade levels. The math and literacy specialists serve on at least two data teams.

Dr. Warr and her leadership team's early goal was to improve the quality and quantity of teacher collaboration. "I knew I needed to give teachers time to collaborate, and again, we wanted to improve how we used data to make decisions about student learning. The indicator and its research, concerning instructional teams and the frequency and purpose of their meetings, helped me to define my expectations and establish solid footing for how we would make this happen in our school," said Dr. Warr. She and her leadership team wasted no time establishing specific tasks and structures that would support the attainment of this indicator, including a complete restructuring of the school day.

"I pulled together support for an early release schedule on Wednesdays," she said, "I relied on the research, which lifted the burden from my shoulders—it wasn't something I dreamed up in the middle of the night, but it was research-based and proven to improve teaching and learning."

Data teams now meet every Wednesday. Two Wednesdays per month are spent looking at either mathematics or literacy formative assessment data, student by student. Another Wednesday is spent working collaboratively to develop and refine instruction. The fourth Wednesday is used for professional development, which is informed by formative assessment and classroom walk-through data.

Implementing early release time for collaboration wasn't the only schedule change that Dr. Warr and her leadership team

made. "We also knew that we had to increase instructional time and ensure that kids had built-in interventions and enrichments during the school day." Dr. Warr explained that, prior to built-in interventions and enrichments, additional support was provided by supplemental providers and external agencies outside of the school day, but participation was optional. In too many cases, students and their families didn't or couldn't participate.

"Our increased focus on data and discussions around instruction confirmed that we needed an intervention program that kids couldn't opt out of, one that every kid would get." The details of the intervention program were further informed by the close analysis of student-by-student data. "As a leadership team, we identified which teachers were having the greatest success moving which group of students. We could identify the particular skills and expertise of teachers and match them to the needs of individual students."

Every day, every student at Knollwood Elementary participates in one hour of individualized, personalized instruction that was planned collaboratively in Wednesday data team meetings and delivered by a teacher with specific expertise in that skill.

Because the teaming structures are so integral to Knollwood Elementary's operation and success, I asked Dr. Warr to describe what we would see at a leadership team meeting. "We start with our agenda, always, which includes data reviews and assessment of how close we are to meeting our goals. The data reviews include

formative assessment data for individual students, the data teams' findings and minutes, as well as discipline and parent data. Based on our assessment of data against where we are in meeting our goals, we review existing tasks and develop new ones by grade level."

"We can look at the data and see that Tanya hasn't moved in her performance over the last month and ask, 'What are we doing to make sure she moves to the next level?' We talk about specific strategies for specific students. That is where you go from, 'This is one child, one teacher's responsibility' to 'As a whole school, what are we all doing to get Tanya there?'"

I asked Dr. Warr to share a specific moment when she knew that a transformation in school culture was occurring. She shared a story about a leadership team meeting in which its members were talking about individual kids and their progress. "To have a fifth-grade teacher sharing ideas and suggestions about what a second-grade child might need, it broadens perspective and expertise. The reservoir of knowledge is expanded instantly. To hear teachers saying, 'Have you tried this? This is what worked for me in a similar situation'—it is very powerful. Before Indistar, we didn't establish real specific steps for moving forward. Now, we not only set specific steps as a school, but we establish goals by grade level. That was probably an option before Indistar, but it just never occurred to us until we had the structure and ease to do it that way."

Through their focus on establishing real communities of learning and using data to make decisions and adjust instruction and personalize learning—and with Indistar to provide the structure and research to take action and measure results— Knollwood is looking to move out of Priority status this year.

"I am most proud of the fact that every teacher feels accountable for all students' learning, that all teachers take such pride in and have hope for our kids and their learning. When we set our goals, teachers are willing to give so much and work as hard as they need to see that our students progress."

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 Insititute (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.

www.indistar.org