

Indistars

STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

Transformational Leaders Network

Maine Priority Schools

By Larry Kugler

Indistar (Dirigo-Star in Maine) supports school improvement planning, implementation, and progress in Priority and Focus schools. The Transformational Leaders Network (TLN) supports the principals of these schools to more successfully utilize Dirigo-Star.

“I’ve left the TLN before, feeling really energized and feeling that I can continue this hard work with my staff, with fresh ideas and fresh focus...” – Kristie Clark, Principal, Gov. James B. Longley Elementary School

“When we go to these meetings, it is very positive. There is a lot of support for each other and we are not sitting there saying, ‘Poor us.’ We are looking at the work that is being done by schools and the positive things that are going on in schools and we are using that to help each other, in order to raise the aspiration of kids, but also of teachers, and let them know that we are all in this together.” – Paul Theriault, Principal, Shead High School and Eastport Elementary School

These are just two of the many positive comments from principals who attend the monthly Transformational Leaders Network (TLN) meetings in Maine. The enthusiasm these and other principals express about the support and encouragement they get from being a part of this group is consistently positive and leads to more effective use of the Indistar platform. But what is the TLN and how did it evolve in Maine? That’s the Success Story you’re going to hear about.

The Beginning

Originally provided for six SIG principals, the TLN has expanded and matured and now serves all 22 Priority school principals. The state leadership team, coordinated by Fran Farr and Stephen MacDougall, with support from George Tucker and Al Pfeiffer, plans, organizes, and leads these monthly meetings during the school year.

This team is comprised of state staff and contracted coaches, each of whom works closely with a few schools, providing onsite support and online coaching. Priority school principals attend TLN meetings in two separate cohorts (13 in Cohort 1 and 9 in Cohort 2).

Each meeting is organized to model the best practices of a school's leadership team. As George Tucker, Title I School Improvement Coach, states, "We wanted to give principals an opportunity to collaborate about topics that were important to them. With a larger group than SIG, one thing we wanted to improve was the use of 'air time', where everyone would get a chance to engage, so we do very few whole-group activities. We usually work in pairs, small groups, sometimes by grade level or size of school, which gets everyone involved."

So what do the principals have to say about the TLN meetings? Do these meetings meet the goals Tucker described? Do the principals get to collaborate? Are there small-group activities that get everyone involved around topics of interest to the principals? The response to these questions is a resounding, "Yes!" During the first year of the TLN, the state staff asked all principals to bring evidence of the work their schools were doing related to one indicator and to share with a small group. The other participants reviewed the evidence and shared ways in which they were addressing the same indicator or asked leading questions to help the principal think more deeply about their approach. Principals valued the "collaborative time to have 'real' conversations" about their schools. They found the "round-table conversations and critiquing of each other's Indistar indicators" particularly valuable.

Kristie Clark, Principal, Gov. James B. Longley Elementary School, speaks for other principals when she describes this experience: "Sometimes they say something and it's like a light bulb goes off and it's like, 'Oh, my gosh, why didn't I think of that!'"

Laura Shaw, Principal, Washburn Elementary School, commented on one of the early activities where they worked to "unpack" the indicators: "I think, one of the things that initially helped me and my leadership team was we [the TLN] did some work around unpacking indicators as a group. What that meant to all of us was coming up with a common understanding of what the indicator meant and then we went beyond that: what was everyone doing to support that indicator, and what was the work around that."

The principals give a great deal of credit for the success of the TLN to the way the staff has structured these meetings. According to Paul Theriault, Principal, Shead High School and Eastport Elementary School, "The structure is so good that everyone is open and sharing. It builds on each other and everyone says, 'What a great idea! Can we share this?' And people share back and forth. We email each other if we have questions. Everybody has got some strengths.... That is the nature of it, but we all feel that there is safety in our conversation."

The structure Theriault is referring to includes activities that require collaboration, involving work in small groups, and includes the following components:

- School coaches lead a celebration of positive accomplishments.
- A representative from the Maine DOE will do a brief presentation on some state initiative or requirement that is specifically connected to a required Indistar indicator. Small-group processing of the information follows this presentation.
- A principal or several principals will then conduct a presentation on their successful practice(s).

- This leads to the entire TLN—including principals, coaches, and state staff—working together.
- One of the coaches leads a protocol-driven review of one required indicator for which all principals have brought documentation of their progress.
- Time is reserved for networking, when principals "connect with fellow principals to exchange ideas, discuss challenges, brainstorm possibilities and build capacity."

The TLN represents a broad range of elementary, middle, and high schools from large to small, rural, and, in some cases, very remote schools. Each brings a different perspective to their work. These principals see a value in the diversity of perspectives, as each participant brings a "fresh set of eyes" through which to consider the ideas being presented. This diversity encourages "thinking outside the box."



From left: Al Pfeiffer, George Tucker, Fran Farr, and Stephen MacDougall

Continued Improvements – School Presentations

The staff determined that, while the TLNs had been well received and principals found them highly beneficial, an additional approach was in order. They planned for each principal to make a presentation about their school's progress and challenges. The other principals would then have an opportunity to provide feedback and suggestions and for the presenter to respond to their feedback. As Stephen McDougall stated, "They [the presentations] were more an opportunity for the principals to take a very deliberate step back for themselves and their leadership teams and say where they have come from, where they have gone, what their successes are, and what their challenges are as a way for them to really plot out the next steps with the intention that, when they went through that process, they then could use it to further inform the school board, superintendent, general public, and faculties in turn."

Knowing that principals have a great deal of work to do in their buildings, it was not surprising that this assignment was initially received with less than full-throated support. Yet, when the presentations began in the fall of 2015, attitudes changed dramatically.

Many found the process of reflecting on their successes and challenges and developing their presentations eye opening and worthwhile:

"We realized how much we had done. I mean, you are in it. You don't look outside and look at the whole thing and (think), 'Wow! We have done so much work!'" – Laura Shaw, Principal, Washburn Elementary School

"It made me realize how much work we have done and how many wonderful changes have taken place because, when you're here every day, you don't sometimes see it, and you lose sight of your successes. You're focusing so much on the weaknesses but, when that was put into a PowerPoint and ready to present, it was like, "Wow, we really made some changes – having a leadership team, a data team, the PLC's, the Parent School Community Council going and all these wonderful things that we put in place towards this process. But you just don't stop and think about it, so those PowerPoints made all of us realize how far we've come for years and how far we also have to go. But it did, it really helped us focus on our strengths and, still, where we need to go from there." – Denise Kimball, Principal, Hartland Consolidated School

A number of the principals specifically mentioned the protocol used during these presentations as extremely helpful. Presenters were initially given the floor for a brief uninterrupted 15–20 minute PowerPoint presentation.



Small-group collaboration at a TLN meeting

"...those were the most powerful couple of meetings that we had in my three years, no question about it. It was just so good. What was different about it was we did have, for a period of time, just us talking about our school."

Following the presentation, the other principals had the opportunity to provide feedback and make suggestions while the presenter merely listened. How did the presenters feel about this? Listen to what one had to say.

"Not only me talking about it but also hearing the other people talk about my school and what they are deriving and ideas that they might have about something that we put out there. It was just so good that we were able to do that."

All the TLN principals had the opportunity to present as well as to be a part of the audience that shared their perspectives and ideas with the presenters. The principal who found it so valuable to just talk about his school also found it extremely worthwhile to listen.

"The other part is me listening to other people's presentations. I might have not picked up on some special thing that they said—for example, a student-led leadership team. Hearing one school talk about that even though I might have heard that in the past..."

After the audience provided feedback, the presenter was allowed a few minutes to respond. But the interactions didn't end there.

"They discussed it while I was sitting there and not talking, but I was taking notes as they were coming up with some ideas and then I got to reflect on what they said at the end, the last three minutes, I think. I got to reflect and actually it was kind of neat because after the three minutes was up, you know, they stopped us, but I still had principals coming up with Post-it notes and putting them all over my iPad giving me suggestions on where to go further, and those meant a lot and I actually kept those and I'm still using those suggestions." – Denise Kimball, Principal, Hartland Consolidated School

Overall, TLN principals identified positive outcomes from these presentations similar to their positive feelings about the entire TLN experience. They found a common bond with their peers that resulted in the safety to share their challenges so they could grow from the experience. As Fran Farr, one of the coaches and one of the lead organizers of the TLN observes, "The TLN is a perfect example of a culture of candor where all ideas are welcomed."

"I think the important thing is that safety factor and just getting the chance to get away from the politics of this whole thing. It is just fantastic. And what we have been able to bring back and the focus of a leadership team here at the school, it just has put things into perspective for us – a lot of aligning of things and more organizations; we don't feel like it was floating all over the place."

"It was like visiting all these Priority schools across the state, and I think what we found by sharing was how much we had in common."

The Future

What does the future hold for the Maine TLN? Janette Kirk, ESEA Director, Title I, who oversees Program Improvement initiatives in Maine, sees the value of the TLN firsthand. She observed the camaraderie and support that had developed among the Cohort 1 group of principals when she began in her new position. She recognized the outstanding work being done by Fran Farr and Stephen MacDougall, the coaches who organized, planned, and led the first cohort, and she entrusted them and the other coaches and staff to continue their good work. She decided she would be most useful attending the newly organized second cohort in January of 2015. Stephen MacDougall credits her with improving the TLN experience for these principals:

"She is present. She listens and she answers questions. And more importantly, after we had a TLN session, the school may have identified a need, and how powerful it is when we leave the TLN session and the principal and the school receives a call from Janette or from Janette and the coach, which says, 'You know that problem that you brought up. We would like to come and meet with you on site to see if we can resolve it.' That has been taking place this year, and in my perspective it is doing two immediate things. Number 1 is building credibility and secondly it also promotes accountability. In other words, the state is saying [to] the school, 'We [are] going to provide you with this,...because we are working with you to improve student achievement.' And I can't tell you how far that has gone in really firing up these principals and these schools to say, 'Hey, there is somebody out [there] who really cares.' And again it's working in conjunction with the DOE and the school coach."

Janette and the TLN state leaders are working to expand the reach of the TLN. They recognize the impact it has had on these leaders and their schools. They know this from the words and actions coming from the principals. When a meeting had to be cancelled because of weather this past winter, the "outrage" (Janette's word) from the principals resulted in the meeting being rescheduled this spring, during a time when schools are increasingly busy with state assessments and end-of-year planning. The principals made clear they want and count on these opportunities. As one principal said:

"I have no one to talk to and bounce ideas off, and when I come to those meetings, I have an opportunity to talk to other professionals and it is the only time that I have this opportunity."

The TLN has provided these education leaders the opportunity to explore with their peers a wide range of Dirigo-Star issues in a risk-free and supportive environment. The state staff and coaches have organized and effectively led meetings that principals have found to be highly useful.

"I'm really glad I got the opportunity. I have enjoyed the experience. I don't like my school being a Priority school, but if I had to do it anyway, to turn things around, this is a great way of doing it, so I appreciate having that opportunity."

"I think one of the biggest things is the mindset it has put us into this being a positive experience."

"Every person, regardless of where their understanding was initially, was lifted in furthering their understanding..."

These principals are now better equipped to guide their Leadership Teams and their schools to more effectively implement Dirigo-Star in Maine. Their understanding about the indicators has been lifted because of the collaborative study of the Wise Ways and "unpacking" of the indicators. They approach their work with greater understanding because of the diversity of thought and perspectives of their peers. And they celebrate their successes because of the opportunity to be reflective and the support provided in the TLN by both the state staff and their peers. Dirigo-Star is firmly embedded in the improvement work in Maine. The Transformational Leaders Network plays a prominent role in this success. ★

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.

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