

Indistars



MONROE COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL, ALBANY, GEORGIA

by Maureen M. Mirabito

There is no hesitation, not a hint of apprehension. For all of the success that Monroe Comprehensive High School (MCHS) in Albany, Georgia, has already achieved in the last two years, Principal Vinson Davis and the entire leadership team attest that this story is only just beginning.

Located in southwest Georgia, MCHS is a priority and a SIG school. It serves about 940 students in Grades 9–12. Most students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals; in fact, Albany, Georgia is repeatedly identified as one of the poorest cities in the nation. An experienced principal, Vinson Davis was brought into MCHS two years ago to turn the pattern of low achievement around.

According to Sonya May, MCHS's school improvement specialist and Indistar process manager, "Our kids come to school with significant challenges, particularly related to poverty and learning. But we do not make excuses, and we do not accept excuses. Our students are as brilliant as any other students in the world. Our work is to make sure they know it."

One of four high schools in the county, MCHS is designated as the math and engineering cluster. Its proximity to the local

technical college ("a stone's throw") provides exciting possibilities for students—possibilities that Mr. Davis and his team are expanding. Already this year, two students will graduate high school with an associate's degree in electronics engineering, the result of a dual-enrollment agreement between the school and the college. If all goes according to plan, those opportunities will expand.

Mr. Davis said, "We are still working out some kinks, but we are close to an MOU with the college to provide new and additional avenues for our students to pursue—career and skill development opportunities. So many of our students have to work and support their families, so night school can be a challenging option for them. But WHAT IF our students could be dually enrolled and take college credits while they are still in school during the day, right here? Those professors would be right here on our campus. It would just be fantastic for our learning community."

Mr. Davis's energy and enthusiasm grows even higher when I ask how students and families respond to these opportunities.

"Great! There is overwhelming support from families. They want this; our students want this. There is a competency exam that students have to take in order to be accepted into the current program. We have had to administer the exam *six times* this year. Next year, we anticipate *eleven* students starting coursework toward a degree. These kids will enter post-secondary education as junior engineering students!"

So take me back, I ask, to two years ago, when you arrived at the school and when you also began with Indistar.

"It was tough. We started with Indistar because we were a priority school [low-achieving], and the Georgia Department of Education requires Indistar for priority schools. A lot of things, including me, were brand new. So Indistar was one of those things we all had to figure out. At the time, it felt like one more thing."

If you've ever heard of the jigsaw approach to professional development or instruction—tasking different members of a group to become experts in different pieces of information and then return to their group to teach what they've learned to other members—then you will understand how the administrative team introduced Indistar to his leadership team and to the faculty.

“Last year, our first year, we divided the indicators among the various department chairs on the leadership team. Each department was tasked with reviewing, researching, assessing, and reporting back on their indicators according to what they found in classrooms. It provided the team with a sense of what Indistar was and what the indicators of effective practice were.”

At the time of the Indistar rollout, Ms. May was the science department chair. She had this to say about the first-year rollout: “That initial approach gave staff an opportunity to connect with Indistar, to see what it was about. It was successful in that regard, but this year we are in a totally different place and are doing things differently.” Mr. Davis stated that they have been able to implement Indistar better this year.

One of those differences was hiring Ms. May to serve as the school improvement specialist, whose responsibilities include managing the Indistar process. We talk for a moment about Ms. May's return, her new role, and the importance of having someone dedicated to the management of all that goes on with school improvement. Mr. Davis said, “The work is massive; however, it is the teamwork within the leadership makes it possible. The team welcomed me with open arms and gave me the freedom to grow into my new position. Indeed, they are the best!”

“Having a dedicated person to manage the tasks in Indistar and all the work that comes from it is critical. We had unsuccessfully applied for a School Improvement Grant my first year as principal; by the time Ms. May returned, we were awarded

one. What a blessing to have someone who is so talented, organized, understands improvement, and can advise and inform you on what's happening and what's needed based on what we learn in Indistar.”



Monroe Comprehensive High School Leadership Team

Ms. May's appointment as school improvement specialist earlier this school year was the catalyst for the “take off” that MCHS is experiencing with Indistar. Mr. David said, “Again, we were initially introduced to Indistar as a way of monitoring school improvement. When you're on the ground doing all the work that it takes to improve student learning, rebuild a culture and climate of respect and motivation, manage and develop people, and engage families...and then you are receiving a password and login so that you can submit reports, it feels like one more thing. But wow, Indistar is so much more than that.”

“Once Ms. May was hired, she and the administrative team determined how they would do things differently this year related to the assessment, planning, implementation, and monitoring of indicators of effective practice.”

Their first step was to increase their number of leadership team meetings. “We met three times per month as a leadership team, and we laid out every single one of the 28 indicators of effective practice that we are required to assess, implement, and monitor as a priority and SIG school. We determined how and what evidence would be documented, and assigned tasks that will get us closer not only to full implementation but to becoming a better school for our students. That is what school improvement is all about.”

For representation on the leadership team, Principal Davis wanted a wide cross-section school personnel, so the chairperson from every department, instructional specialists (academic coaches), a media specialist, administrators, the athletic director, the parent coordinator, a senior advisor, and even the graduation coach were all included. Davis was looking for vigorous engagement, too: “When I first got here, there were two teachers who were very outspoken at our first faculty meeting. I did not know them, did not know their work. But they were so committed and dedicated to school improvement and our learning community that I found roles for them on the leadership team. They advise us, they provide feedback, and their voices are critical to our success.”

Hearing the voices of the learning community is a common theme under Mr. Davis’s leadership—and one of the biggest changes in their use of Indistar.

“As Ms. May and the administrative team were planning how we would move Indistar out to the entire faculty and expand its reach, we asked ourselves, ‘How do we get teachers to buy-in

and understand what Indistar will help us to achieve?”

They found one of their answers in the use of the coaching comments feature. In addition to intensive collaborative planning sessions and professional learning opportunities (always informed by data), MCHS shares the coaching comments with everyone in the school.

“In the past, when the Department of Education would come into classrooms to observe, teachers wouldn’t know what they [DOE] were looking for, or finding, or thinking. The teacher being observed didn’t get feedback. Now, we share the coaching comments from the Department of Education with everyone. We copy the comment and send it to the appropriate department. Not only does that provide important feedback, it facilitates a lot of reflection and motivation to improve.”

Ms. May shared an example of one coaching comment that mentioned how seven out of nine teachers had their materials ready, reviewed prior learning, and connected it to current objectives. “Well, several of the teachers in that department pulled me aside and wanted to know, ‘Was I one of the ones who wasn’t ready?’”

Once teachers receive the coaching comment, they are asked to reflect on it and provide input, too. Ms. May said, “We always ask teachers to respond to the feedback. Often, we’ll include a prompt to frame their response, for example, *Based on this coaching comment, my next step is, or, This is how Indistar helps me to improve.* Our teachers now understand how Indistar is helping us to think about what we’re doing well right now and what our next step toward improvement will be, individually or as a school. They are involved in the process, and we are more focused because we know exactly what to look for.”

And when.

“I was brought in to do a job—to assist in turning this school

around and improve teaching and learning. We do not have an infinite amount of time to do this work, nor should we. Indistar also keeps us task-oriented, and it keeps us time-focused.” Ms. May added, “Indistar and the work of school improvement shines a light on the areas that need improvement. We own the process and immediately make the needed adjustments. Implementation of indicators is effective practice.”

I ask about the biggest shift they’ve seen this year, where they’ve observed the biggest changes and growth, what makes them most proud. Ms. May speaks first.

“Our teachers have been engaged in a lot of professional learning this year that is directly informed by assessment and observation data. We have seen tremendous growth from maximizing increased learning time and monitoring its effectiveness. We have outstanding teachers, but another thing that we see is a shift from improving whole classes’ performance to improving that of individual students and the changes in practice and behavior that requires.”

Mr. Davis speaks next. He is extremely proud of the students. They want to learn, he says, countering conceptions that students in high-need and high-poverty areas don’t want to learn, that they are apathetic. “Our kids, their families, they are showing up. They want high expectations, and they are meeting them.”

His pride extends to the faculty: “I say this to our faculty all the time: A lot of people talk about their commitment to this hard work, but you can’t assess commitment when everything is going fine. You can only assess it when there is a problem, when there are challenges, when there are disagreements between faculty members and approaches. Then you can really assess your commitment. I am proud of this entire faculty and blessed that I come to work with high-quality, high-character people who could work anywhere in the world, and they work here. I

am so proud of them, of that.”

You want to end the story right there, on that note. But you remember what Mr. Davis and Ms. May said when this interview first started—that this story is just beginning, so I decide to drill down a bit, ask about specific moments, what they are seeing in their mind’s eye when they talk about their pride and the people around them—teachers and students alike. What interactions or observations they are recalling, those moments when they know things are changing. Mr. Davis speaks first.

“There was a morning a student came in late. We are always in the halls greeting kids, and when they come late we greet them and have a conversation that starts with *Why are you late to school?* And this particular student, we saw her trying to scurry past us, so we called her back. Before we could even ask her the question she said, ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I know I’m late. I had to take the baby to daycare and I just got off work early this morning but coming to school is so important. I knew I had to be here and that you would miss me if I wasn’t here.’ Now if that doesn’t motivate you, doesn’t make you feel like you are doing the right work in the right place for the right reasons, I don’t know what else does. There was no more conversation after that, just get to class.”

Ms. May speaks now: “I have worked under other administrators, and this leadership is so different. There is no pretense, no posturing. Mr. Davis knows the name of every student in the building. He has nearly every parent’s number in his phone. Just this morning, *this morning*, he was on a call when he noticed a parent he didn’t recognize walking in a student he didn’t recognize. He put his phone away, met them at the door, and said to the student, ‘Are you new to our school? Let me welcome you.’ He shook the mother’s hand and even played with her little baby. All the students know that he cares about them, that they

come first. He knows students, he knows school improvement, and he surrounds himself with good people.”

I ask Mr. Davis and Ms. May to list their version of “keys to success.” They list three things:

Develop a culture of excellence. Have high expectations for teachers, for parents, for students. Let them know what is expected in terms of behavior, of performance, of success. Let them know what it will take and then make sure everyone does their part. (Indistar helps with that.)

Have a strong, strong leadership team. That does not mean have people who will agree with you. Have people who will tell you the truth, who will share their opinions, who are smart. I mentioned the two teachers who were outspoken and vocal at my first faculty meeting. I immediately put them on the team. In our meetings, Ms. May always says, “There is a better way to achieve our goal. Let’s find it.”

Create a culture where people are willing to take risks, where they are not afraid to fail, so they try what might be a great idea. We are working on that because once you have that expectation of excellence, nobody wants to fail kids, parents, or other staff. Lots of people have great ideas but don’t have the opportunity or support to put those ideas into practice. That is what we encourage our faculty and even our students to do. How do we get our staff, who are very talented and skilled, how do we encourage them to reach even further. That’s our next step and what we’re excited about.

Albany, Georgia is often cited as the city where the civil rights movement started. I can’t help but believe that another movement is underway there today. I tell them I will be back again next year. Stay tuned, because this story is only just beginning. ★

Indistar[®]

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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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