

Indistars

NEW STANLEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, KANSAS CITY, KANSAS

by Maureen M. Mirabito

Interview With Leadership Team Members:

Jennifer Simmons, SPED

Sandy Nead, Teacher Leader

Andrea Madrigal, 4th Grade

Christa Corrie, 2nd Grade

Jennifer Spears, PE

Nicole Simmons, Kindergarten

Ryan Most, Principal

Jessica Short, School Counselor

Alisa Plassmeyer, Teacher Leader (not present due to training with 5th-grade team, but is a member of the leadership team)

Building the capacity of staff is something that we talk a lot about in education, particularly when it involves improving schools. Ryan Most, Principal at New Stanley Elementary

School in Kansas City, Kansas doesn't need research to tell him how it's done. If investing and believing in your staff to solve problems, deliver exceptional instruction, and take risks (and learn from one another every step of the way) is a "style" of principalship, then it is certainly Mr. Most's style.

New Stanley Elementary School is situated in the heart of Kansas City. The children that attend the school speak more than 14 languages; 65 percent of the students receive English-as-a-second-language services. Ninety-four percent are eligible to receive free and reduced meals. The Leadership Team refers to New Stanley as a "true neighborhood school" where you can count on one hand the number of children that ride the bus.

"Families are here a lot, walking their children to school and picking them up," said Sandy Nead, Teacher Leader, and the staff at New Stanley takes full advantage of those opportunities to engage families and involve them in their children's learning. Engaging families isn't a strategy at New Stanley, it's part of their blueprint, a normal course of business. "We go into homes to visit with families, we offer math and literacy events in the evening and provide meals and snacks. Families always take away tools and resources; we prepare them to continue their learning and support their children's learning at home."

Mr. Most gave his staff full credit for their take-charge approach with families, "We have creative and insightful

staff at New Stanley. The teachers are always coming up with new ideas and ways to engage and involve our families and we just support them to make it happen.”

The “we” is the Leadership Team, a nine-member team that rotates two new teachers in every six months at the same time that two others step down.

“When it was the same group of people from year to year, there wasn’t as much a shared responsibility for improving the teaching and learning. Now, we have a way to include many voices and build the capacity of our staff to lead and participate at the decision-making level,” added Andrea Madrigal, 4th-grade teacher.

Improving teaching and learning drives just about every conversation and every decision at New Stanley. In fact, in addition to the leadership team, Mr. Most established Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Leads, which is comprised of a member from each of the grade-level teams at the school. The role of PLC Leads is to push the instructional work deeper into classroom practice.

“We have been using Marzano’s Learning Science Framework since the beginning of this year to examine the curriculum, extract the learning standards, and develop student growth plans for every student. We have invested so much in the last six months, with teachers arriving to school early and staying late, coming in on non-duty days and weekends. Everything in our building has shifted dramatically,” said

Sandy Nead, “Teachers are becoming better teachers.”

One of the tangible shifts is the time for professional development.

“We have made a big investment in professional development, making sure our teachers have the support and communication structures to share and learn from one another,” said Mr. Most.



All staff at New Stanley Elementary School will be incorporating guitar playing into their instruction in an effort to find new ways to engage students and encourage them to explore.

As anyone knows, creating a culture of candor and trust does not happen overnight. I asked what they have done to build it.

“We experienced a lot of turnover two years ago. Because there were so many new teachers, we intentionally brought

someone in to help us with a DiSC personality profile so that we could get to know and understand each other's personalities and how we work" said Mr. Most. "Once we built that, we committed to not letting anyone feel alone. I deliberately moved some rooms around, put people in different classrooms, which created some initial discomfort, but overall, it has resulted in great collaboration and stronger opportunities for teachers to work together."

Collaboration is one of the highest leveraged strategies used at New Stanley to improve teaching and learning. It is not just a buzzword there. They talk it, they walk it, and they make serious time for it. Peer observations are built into each teacher's schedule—one hour every week. Extended professional learning time (before and/or after school) also provides time for New Stanley teachers, colleagues from other schools, or external instructional consultants to share and demonstrate effective instructional skills or strategies.

Jennifer Simmons, Special Education Teacher, said, "As a special education teacher, this is the first building where my kids stay in the classroom and we are working as a team to meet their needs. I don't pull them out. The teachers here are willing to work as a team and that has been incredible. Everyone is willing to make changes and work hard and well together."

Throughout this entire interview even, teachers collaborated on their responses to questions with the skill and

ease of a team that practices collaboration toward specific outcomes a lot. I suspected it is something they would do anyway, without the use of Indistar.

Indistar was created to guide the work of improvement, not direct or dictate it. The belief is that the "how" part is best determined by those closest to the school. Even in this interview, New Stanley is modeling their "how" (hands-off leadership, strong teaming and collaboration, stretching one another's thinking to achieve the best solution, risk taking). So I was more curious about how Indistar is supporting their work, how it is guiding them.

"We are a School Improvement Grant (SIG) school. In Kansas, we call Indistar KansasStar; the state adopted it the same year we started as a SIG school, so it has been part of our monitoring process from the beginning. Does Indistar give us a lock-step, do-it-this-way guidance? No. It has, though, provided research-based strategies, a structure for recording and analyzing our progress. In that way, it provides guidance for us to determine and identify what we need to do to improve our community. At times, it may feel like a lot of homework for us, but that's because we're thorough. We want to make sure we are getting it right," said Ryan Most.

We've heard from other schools about how Indistar has helped them to push their conversations a little bit further, reach a little deeper for the best solution. Mr. Most ex-

plained it similarly in his reflections. “When we first started having discussions about improvement and what we should do differently and how, we’d often just go with the first answer. But Indistar has pushed our thinking and helped us to ask if this is the best that we can do. It has allowed us to further develop what we’re doing and determine what we have to keep doing to move forward.”

Ms. Corey added, “I think the tasks allow us to be very focused and figure out where we need to build and improve. It’s given focus, even if it seems like a lot of work, on where we need to go and how.”

Because each school approaches Indistar differently, or returns to certain indicators regularly, I was interested to know more about New Stanley’s approach. Ryan Most responded, “We just recently reassessed our first ten indicators and so we’re experiencing that cyclical process—assess, implement, reassess. We approach them by the domains—community engagement, instruction, leadership—and then we look at the indicators, then we break them down by creating tasks. Even as we try new things and accelerate, we need to stop and look at our work and ask, ‘Is this working, is it right for kids or is it just fun and exciting and different? Is it making the gains that our students need it to make?’”

Speaking of fun and exciting and different, what happens when you are a school that remains focused on all of the right things and having success with teaching and learning?

You get a guitar-playing teacher in every classroom.

“We have just arranged for all teachers to get guitars next year and see if we can be musical. If it’s a horrendous wreck, at least it will be a noisy one, but we are going to give it a try,” explained Mr. Most.

The principal got the idea from an off-hand remark that a state official made.

“Someone said, ‘We thought we’d see more music in the rooms’ and we have teachers who incorporate music into their instruction already and then we had a chance to interact with some local musicians. I come from a family that is very musical, and they all say that it is not hard to play “Smelly Cat” (reference from a *Friends* episode). As a SIG school, we can create opportunities and space to explore. Staff are nervous but excited and we think that is a great blend to model for our students.”

For all the accomplishments this school, its teachers and students, have already achieved, I asked Mr. Most what he feels is his greatest accomplishment.

“There are times I would really like to do it myself, that’s my personality. But I have restrained myself. Not doing it for anyone but providing support and assistance has probably been my biggest accomplishment.”

His staff agreed.

“He won’t give us the answer, which gets annoying sometimes. He’ll snicker and nod but he will not tell us what we

should do. He pushes us to think and give more,” shared Ms. Simmons.

Another teacher added, “There is never a wrong answer. Sometimes it’s, ‘Can we do better?’ We are always finding the best way for right now but understanding that might change down the road. It’s a growing process and that’s good.”

Ms. Madrigal added, “We’ve been able to take risks and not worry about repercussions, gotcha, or other things that might distract us from doing what we believe is best for our students.”

Another change that New Stanley has worked hard at and sees the value of is celebrating. “We have made a concerted effort to celebrate our accomplishments and it’s really becoming second nature. We have weekly peer nominations, employee of the month, student recognition, and a flare system (lapel pins to put on ID badges for various accomplishments). It all comes back to every one of the staff—secretaries, janitors, teachers, and support staff—being open and willing to work with one another. They are amazing. Everyone in this school is willing to learn,” Mr. Most said. ★

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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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