

Indistars



PARKER-VARNEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL MANCHESTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

by Stephanie Bisson

When you talk with Amy Allen, principal of Parker-Varney Elementary School in Manchester, New Hampshire, her voice just exudes enthusiasm. In the two years she has been at the school, Principal Allen has led an effort to redesign the school day and implement a student-centered learning community with a clear vision for success. She describes a school where students, staff, and parents are excited about learning.

Parker-Varney is a Title I Priority School, enrolling approximately 570 students in preschool through Grade 5. The school has a significantly higher minority population than average for schools in New Hampshire. About 6% of students are English language learners and speak a variety of first languages. Sixty-four percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

In the fall of 2011 when Parker-Varney was identified as a SIG school, the state asked the school to begin using Indistar. Initial planning used the Transformation Implementation Indicators. Then in 2013, when all schools became Priority Schools, Parker-Varney developed its plan using the New Hampshire Turnaround Indicators. Staff focused on the seven

Turnaround Principles. At that point, Principal Allen says that teachers came together and decided that they didn't want their school to be defined by labels like "SIG" or "priority" and the negative connotations those labels suggest. They wanted more for their students and school. Over the past 18 months, through hard work, data drives, and critical conversations, the school decided to do things differently.

Using Indistar, the Parker-Varney leadership team created a turnaround plan. First they conducted a needs assessment. The leadership team began to focus on smaller parts of their data to determine which data points were most important. What they saw led them to conclude that Parker-Varney students needed to become proficient in 21st-century learning skills. To address this need, the school began to explore project-based learning and how to provide opportunities for personalized learning. The leadership team quickly recognized that teachers and staff would need training, including opportunities to look at data and adjust instruction to meet the needs of students. They set targets and measurable goals to review.

In creating their school plan, the Parker-Varney leadership team used a problem of practice protocol, which involves the school identifying a problem, the solution to which would make a significant improvement in student achievement and taking action toward solving it. The team also used the resources of the Indistar's Wise Ways, which provide a synthesis of the research supporting a school improvement Indicator/Objective, along with strategies for attaining full implementation. Using Wise Ways, the leadership team was able to choose indicators within Indistar on which to work. They determined their current levels of implementation of the chosen indicators and created tasks for moving toward full implementation.

One indicator the school chose to focus on made a significant change in the structure of the school and student learning: *The principal spends at least 50% of his/her time working directly with teachers to improve instruction, including classroom observation.* Principal Allen reports that in January 2014 her time spent on instruction was 34%. One year later, her time spent on instruction is almost 64%. She concurs with the research basis of the indicator, “More time on instruction equals better achievement for students and teachers.”

Another indicator chosen for the school plan was *instructional teams meet for blocks of time sufficient to develop and refine units of instruction and review student learning data.* The need to respond to this indicator, along with the goals of developing a personalized and project-based curriculum, led to the redesign of the school library, creating the Innovation Lab. In the Lab, up to 80 students at a time receive computerized, individualized instruction in reading and mathematics. This arrangement has enabled grade-level instructional teams to meet while the students are engaged in Lab projects and has increased the time in which teachers engage in collaborative meetings by 65%.

This additional time has reformed instruction and assessment, and tightened teachers’ focus on instructional data, further personalizing their students’ learning. Reviewing data from the students’ work on the Lab computers, teachers are able to provide ongoing formative feedback to students. And the focus on collaboration has helped teachers view themselves as learners. They seek out ways to improve their practices and have become problem solvers and innovators who rely on one another for feedback. This collaborative effort has resulted in the development of a unit focusing on STEM activities in which students use a 3-D printer to create projects. This spring, the Innovation Lab is offering a new computer-coding course, and

students will also build their own computers.

Work in the Innovation Lab is just one of the many ways that learning is personalized at Parker-Varney. The school has also partnered with The 21st Century Learning Program. This program provides academic enrichment opportunities during non-school hours for children, particularly students



who attend high-poverty and low-performing schools. The partnership with 21st Century Learning and the additional computers the partner provided allowed Parker-Varney to extend,

in effect, the school day. Through quality online programs, students can access their personalized learning at any time, a feature that enables and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. According to Principal Allen, “Every student has his or her own program, with multiple strategies, to meet their different learning styles. Students are co-designers of projects with their teachers. Teachers are co-planners with their students.” Students produce videos, design projects, and direct much of their own learning. They understand standards and how to reflect on where they are on their own learning path. During student-led conferences, students share their learning goals with parents. They tell parents where they are in relation to their learning goals and what next steps they need to take to achieve their aspirations.

In their school plan, the Parker-Varney staff chose to work

on several of Indistar's indicators of successful family and community involvement. School personnel see family and community involvement as crucial components to the success Parker-Varney. As a result, school volunteers have quadrupled from 25 to 100 participants. At a recent Literacy Night, the school welcomed more than 200 participants. A parent involvement committee hosts as many as 14 parent events each year, addressing topics ranging from the arts to parenting skills. The committee is constantly seeking ways to better engage and communicate with parents. They use newsletters, home visits, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and open houses. The leadership team includes parents, and parents are true partners in the school's improvement plan.

Indistar provides a centralized "place" where the Parker-Varney leadership team can review the data identified as important to its focus. At twice-a-month leadership team meetings, Indistar is the road map for agendas. The team always goes back to old business, reviewing progress toward meeting objectives they have set, and then attacks the new business, setting new tasks and adjusting time lines. The Indistar tool makes the school plan transparent to the entire school community, who now look at everything implemented or purchased through this lens.

At Parker-Varney, Principal Allen, teachers, students, parents, and the community are transforming the culture of the school from one of blaming to one problem solving and risk taking. The goal is to redefine learning experiences within the school and beyond. The Parker-Varney community is well on its way to achieving this goal, and Indistar has had a key role to play in moving the transformation forward. Principal Allen says, "We do not always get to see immediate results, but through Indistar, we get to see our 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 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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