

Indistars

STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

Salina Public Schools

Salina, Kansas

By Maureen Mirabito

This is a story about a district that was already doing pretty well, knew it could do better, but wasn't exactly sure how to go about it—until they took a few small steps and one pretty giant leap without a single look back.

Linn Exline has been the Executive Director of School Improvement for just over one year in Salina Public Schools in Kansas. Shortly after she was promoted to Executive Director in 2014, Ms. Exline and a colleague, then-principal Carmen Flax, attended training in the fall of 2014 on a web-based improvement process that the state was requiring of all Priority and Focus schools called KansaStar (Indistar). Ms. Flax's school was neither Priority nor Focus, but as a school on watch, the state gave the district the option (that the district accepted) to use KansaStar in the school. As a result, the district had three schools using KansaStar, two that had been previously identified as focus schools and the newly identified on-watch school.

That training and what it demonstrated proved to Linn that her vision for school improvement as a systemic, inclusive, and habit-forming process was on the mark. "When I came back from that KansaStar training, I told my staff, **'this is what we need to do district-wide.'**"

But they didn't immediately jump right in. Both Linn and the director of staff development and accreditation, Pam Irwin, wanted to gain some deeper knowledge about the system and figure out how they could make it fit with state and district priorities.

"I was new to my position, and our department was new at working together. So rather than start right away with KansaStar district wide, we decided to go ahead with just adding the on-watch school. We also began to rewrite our local school improvement plan for all schools. We wanted it to be more of a living process, like KansaStar, and also begin to integrate components of state and district initiatives," said Ms. Exline.

Through conversations with Linn recounting her experiences as a principal and what she had learned at the KansaStar training, Linn and Pam began to make changes in focus, approach, and expectations to the paper-based plan and rolled it out for principals to use for the 2014–2015 school year.

"One of elements that we realized was missing after the KansaStar training was a feedback



The team bringing KansaStar to Salina Public Schools consists of (from left): Carmen Flax, Director of Assessment and Elementary Programming; Linn Exline, Executive Director of School Improvement; and Pam Irwin, Director of Staff Development and Accreditation.

mechanism. There was no opportunity for faculty to share what was working and what they would change where it wasn't working. So, we built in time at our monthly administrative professional development sessions for principals to review their written school improvement plan, write feedback on it, and identify their next steps," said Linn.

It was a great effort and a step in the right direction, but Linn and her team realized the obstacle almost immediately. "While the principals were looking at their plan more often, the right people were not at the table to hear the message, understand the reasons, and carry out the work," said Linn. "What we learned pretty quickly was that they were still doing this new plan for us at the district. The plans still weren't guiding building-level conversations and day-to-day practice. We needed to do a better job supporting them in seeing the difference and making it happen."

It was at that point that Linn and her team made the decision to offer KansaStar district wide. "While our revised plan was an improvement, it wasn't moving us closer toward systemic, strategic change that focused on instructional and leadership practice," explained Linn, "so at the beginning of the 2015-16 school year, we offered the schools this option: use the existing plan for one more year and then migrate to KansaStar, or move to KansaStar right away."

This is what Linn and her team heard from the three schools already using Indistar, "We will not go back. This is what is driving our work and the shift in our results." And this is what Linn and her team heard from each of the eleven schools not yet using Indistar: "We want to switch. We want to go with KansaStar."

While they might have been hoping for a more gradual on-boarding of KansaStar users, Linn and Pam were excited with the momentum and what it meant for their vision of building cultures of real change, problem solving, and growth in every school—an entire district of principals and teachers willing to take the leap with them.

To start, Linn hired Carmen Flax, the principal who had a year of KansaStar experience, as director of assessment and elementary programming for the district (Salina is also in the midst of implementing full-day kindergarten). With KansaStar, Carmen was instrumental in helping the district leadership understand the types of change in support that principals would need from the district level—everything from how support was provided, to a shift in focus (from programs used to practices employed, for example), and how expectations for improvement were established, communicated, and reinforced.

Linn explained it this way, "We have spent years talking about strategies and what needs to happen in schools and classrooms, what specific strategy needs to be implemented, what program or approach. Now, our discussion is about systems. How do you put the system in place that supports teachers to implement the best practices in the classroom?"

Carmen explained the impact that KansaStar had in her school this way, "The greatest take away for me was this: KansaStar was not asking us to perform rocket science. But it significantly, really significantly, improved the quality of our focus on the main thing, which is student learning and instruction. KansaStar drove us to make that the main thing. It allowed us to create short-term goals with frequent feedback, and it gave us these jobs to do that were meaningful, that were stair-stepping us to the bigger, long-term picture. It was a two-way dialogue in all directions. It opened up lines of communication between the district and the state, between the district and the schools, and between our leadership team in the school and every single person on our staff. KansaStar forced us to have depth of action versus surface-level action. Those changes were deal makers."

Behind the scenes and prior to the rollout, Linn, Pam, and Carmen used the rubric criteria from the state's new accreditation model (a focus toward implementation of four R's: relationships, rigor, relevance, and responsive culture) and the list of 58 indicators of effective practices that the state selected for KansaStar to create linkages between the two. When it came time to introduce the schools

to KansaStar, principals and staff would hear it within the context of how it supported the state and the district expectations for improvement.

"To kick-off the implementation of KansaStar, state representatives gave principals an overview of the system. Nothing overwhelming, just a sense of what it looked like, what it could provide, and how they could interact with it," explained Linn.

Not long after the introductory session, principals and their leadership team attended a daylong training to engage more deeply with the system. Following that, the district provided them with time and support to get into KansaStar and get familiar with it as a team.

"Once principals and leadership teams had a chance to see the system and its various components, we communicated our expectations for how they would select indicators and start their planning," said Linn. "We are starting slow this year—to get them used to the process and this new shift in focus."



Linn Exline, Executive Director of School Improvement for Salina (KS) Public Schools, after attending a KansaStar training, declared to her staff, "This is what we need to do district-wide."

The Indicator Selection Process

Linn and her team understood that several things were happening at once—leadership teams and faculty were not only using a new process to plan and execute improvement (a big adjustment), they were also having to think about improvement differently than they had in the past—a new mindset. The district school improvement team was mindful of these changes and considered them carefully in their rollout. They didn't want to go too fast and discourage staff, nor did they want to go too slow and lose momentum. So they identified three improvement pathways from which principals and their leadership teams would select indicators, adding to them over time. Within this structured approach, flexibility was provided in the selection of indicators, which allowed schools to prioritize their own work.

Leadership. There are four critical leadership indicators that Kansas requires schools using KansaStar to address. To start, the principals and their leadership teams in Salina selected one of those four leadership indicators to assess, plan, implement, and monitor. Once the work for that first leadership indicator was underway, teams would move onto the next indicator until all four leadership indicators were being planned for, implemented, and monitored within KansaStar.

The Four R's. Parallel to the leadership work, principals and leadership teams reviewed, discussed, and assessed themselves against rubrics developed for each of the four R's—rigor, relevance, responsive culture, and relationships—and selected the rubric that they felt needed the most improvement in their school. From there, the teams selected one of the several indicators that had been aligned to one of the components on the rubric and, as with the leadership team indicators, began to assess, plan, implement, and monitor the work related to that first indicator that matched the component. Once underway, the team would repeat the process for every indicator aligned to that component.

District-Wide Need. At the district level, the district and building administrators identified and prioritized district-wide areas for growth. The school improvement team selected the four areas that had highest priority and aligned them to the indicators of effective practice as well.

"Over the next couple of months, we will decide which area of concern we want every school to focus on this year, district-wide. The principals and their team members are helping us to determine

that in a very methodical way. Once we identify it collaboratively, each school will be required to implement the indicators associated with that specific focus area, moving through their implementation one by one as they are in other areas,” explained Linn.

“Our goal over the next four years is for every teacher in the district to know and grasp all four of the accreditation rubrics and the indicators that are aligned with them. This gives teachers an opportunity to see and understand how all of the pieces fit together at all levels of the system, not only in their classrooms.”

The Process That Builds Capacity

There are a number of ways the district’s approach is shifting to accommodate this new process and new mindset, while also building the capacity and commitment of school leadership.

For example, the superintendent has provided time at the monthly administrative meetings for administrative teams from the district level and all 14 schools to collaboratively engage in a process for determining which area of concern every school will focus on for the year. The idea is to build the capacity for administrative teams to engage in this process collaboratively at the district level and then go back to their schools and use it with their leadership teams and faculty in assessing indicators and developing tasks to implement them fully.

“What’s been really great about doing this work at administrative meetings is that it’s not just principals and assistant principals and lead teachers attending. District-level operations, finance, special education...everyone is there. It’s a process that everyone owns, not just the school improvement department,” said Pam.

The process looks like this:

1. The administrative team (comprised of district- and school-level administrators) reviews the indicators of effective practice that are aligned with one of the four areas of concern (as identified by the district).
2. The administrative team conducts an initial assessment/rating of the indicators associated with the area of need.
3. The administrative team reviews the Wise Ways research for each of the indicators associated with the area of need.
4. The administrative team discusses and determines what best practice looks like according to the Wise Ways research for each indicator associated with the area of need.
5. The administrative team re-rates the district based on the research and their determinations of best practice.
6. The administrative team repeats the process for each of the four areas of concern at subsequent monthly meetings.
7. The administrative team reviews the research summaries and best practices for each of the four areas of concern (resulting from Step #4).
8. The administrative team makes a decision about which area of concern (associated indicators) the entire district will focus on (implement) for the remainder of the year.

“Like Pam said, having the time to engage in this systems-thinking, instructionally-focused work at our administrative meetings has had a positive impact on all of our thinking. It is interesting to have conversations about instruction with finance, data, and operations people. One, it sends a strong message that we are all about improvement and good instruction—that is what we all want for all of our children and classrooms. Two, they bring a very different and valuable perspective to our conversations and help us to really evaluate what we are doing and the level of impact it is having,” said Linn.

In addition, engaging in this work and these decisions at the administrative meeting allows Linn

and her team to focus on improving leadership and instructional practices at the monthly professional development meetings.

Feedback and Coaching That Builds Capacity

In addition to the face-to-face work that is happening monthly, Linn and her team are spending a lot of time reviewing the work that school teams are uploading into KansaStar and providing feedback.

“We recently sat down as a team and went through every single thing that has been uploaded into KansaStar; we reviewed all of the meeting minutes, the plans, and provided feedback. We really want to establish that systems thinking approach,” said Linn.

Linn, Pam, and Carmen agree that the principals and leadership teams have responded really well to the feedback they are getting, often requesting on-site visits and telephone meetings to get further support and coaching. Everyone is getting better at what they do.

“We’ve had meetings with every single principal at least once, and what we’re seeing is an improvement in the depth of questions they are asking and in conversations we are having. We have that indicator as a focus and can turn to the Wise Ways research to have candid, specific discussions about what needs to be in place and whether or not they are really there,” said Carmen.

In addition to the open-door feedback, Linn, Carmen, and Pam will visit every single school between now and February for structured visits. They will spend 30 minutes with the principal and his/her lead teacher or assistant principals before meeting with the entire leadership team to discuss their plans and the improvement they are seeing along with how the process is working overall—including continued coaching on putting the system in place to support the work.

“We’re really focusing on helping principals put a system in place that will support teachers to assess and improve instruction and the strategies they are using. We want to see that they are putting feedback mechanisms in place, that they are getting information out to the entire staff, and that everyone feels as though they have a seat at the table even if they’re not on the leadership team,” said Linn.

Carmen shares her perspective as a principal using KansaStar and how the focus and the discussions pushed her staff in building their capacity to improve. “Last year, when that feedback loop happened consistently with representatives from instructional teams in discussions about indicators, you would hear the fifth-grade representative say, ‘Fifth grade has nailed it, here’s how’, or ‘Fourth grade is working on this and really making progress,’ then third grade pipes up and talks about how those teachers are supporting one another toward full implementation, and so second grade goes back to his or her team and says, ‘Listen, everyone else is really moving along on this, we need to get on it so we have some great news to report next week.’ It was really powerful to observe because they were pushed and motivated by the success their peers were having.”

Key Elements to Successful Implementation

I asked the team to reflect on what they have learned in the past year as they’ve introduced and implemented this change in approach and shift in mindset district-wide.

Linn had already given it plenty of thought:

1. **Leadership.** There are so many things to divert our attention that it is critical to have somebody who will bring the focus back to what really matters every day. Leadership is key.
2. **Systems thinking.** The whole idea is to think about how leadership behaviors influence daily practice for everyone. For us at the district level, what do we need to do to promote this change in ourselves and our school leaders so that they take it back and use it in their schools? Stepping back and looking at how the system functions as a whole is critical.
3. **Relentless attention to the details.** Knowing exactly what we are doing and how it is

working and affecting change, examining the exact differences between current practice and best practice, identifying the steps taken to move from here to there, and then continuing to go back to the research and make sure that those details are still in place. Without the awareness of those details and forming those habits, we revert back to what we've always done.

4. **The right people.** We were able to move this forward at the district level because we now have the right people at the table to answer this question: Collaboratively, how do we do this so that our principals and buildings can do it, too? The same thing is true at the building level. Principals are redefining what their leadership teams look like to make this work happen, to answer that question: Collaboratively, how do we do this so that our teachers can do it, too?
5. **Accountability.** The feedback loop is where the change happens. Things already felt different at the building level when they received feedback on their school improvement plan in real time. That is so different than what has happened in the past, when we've waited until that once-a-year formal meeting to give feedback. Getting that feedback at and within all levels, will be key for us moving forward.

"That real-time feedback," Carmen added, "is exactly what we expect teachers to do for students."



On the Culture of Trust and Collaboration

"We are all in this change together," said Linn. "There is no gotcha, no set up. We are there to support best practice, to support their growth. People call us and are very honest, saying, 'I don't know how to do this. Can you help me?' We've worked hard to build a relationship where people can bare their concerns and ask their questions, even in front of their peers. We are getting to the point where people are taking risks, or at least are willing to."

Early in our conversation, when Carmen was reflecting on her experience using KansaStar as a principal, she had mentioned that it wasn't rocket science, just really good practice.

And she is right. In fact, when you look at the indicators of effective practice, they aren't all that exciting—they don't make you jump up and down, or sing at the top of your lungs. They might even seem a little obvious. Except when you stop to think about whether or not they are happening in every classroom among every adult. Then you start to wonder how you would go about ensuring they are happening in every classroom. And the possibilities for collaboration and teacher involvement and every-day conversations about improving how we lead and teach and learn, well, that might make you jump up and down.

In that way, those indicators of effective practice turn into something other than just words on a page. They turn into reflection, focus, and planning. They turn into a shared purpose, shared leadership, a to-do list, and a way to ask for and provide consistent feedback. Even if you don't jump, you'll be moving.

It may start out as a few small steps, but eventually, in mind and in habit, leaps are always made. ★

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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