

Indistars

STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

Scott Dual Language Magnet School

Topeka, Kansas

By Maureen Mirabito

If Scott Dual Language Magnet Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas, were to write a six-word memoir, it might sound like this: *Blacklist to waitlist in two years; or, Built from strengths, success soon followed.*

Scott Dual Language Magnet (SDLM) is an urban school serving approximately 550 students in Grades preK–5. Ninety-five percent of its students are eligible to receive free and/or reduced lunch. The school was originally opened in 1996 as a computer technology magnet, designed to attract students from majority neighborhoods throughout the city into the minority neighborhood where it resides—a continuation of the city’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling in 1954.

The effort had not been successful.

“Computer technology magnet sounded cool and exciting, but it wasn’t functioning as one,” according to Sarah Lucero, principal of SDLM. “It was functioning as a low-performing neighborhood school and, realistically, we just couldn’t keep up with the pace of technology.”

Four years ago, the state identified the school’s performance among the lowest five percent in the state; its designation as a Priority School called for the replacement of the principal. One year after serving as assistant principal at SDLM, Ms. Lucero was recruited to lead the school’s transformation as its new principal.

In that first year of planning, Ms. Lucero and her team took on two really big challenges that brought honesty, organization, and clarity to their work and their purpose:

1. Changing the focus from a computer technology magnet to a dual language magnet.
2. Using KansaStar (Indistar), which went hand in hand with the priority school designation.

Fifty percent of SDLM’s students are native English speakers and the other 50 percent are native Spanish speakers. Rather than view this as a challenge, Ms. Lucero and her team saw it as the centerpiece of their unifying vision: dual language.

“We gained tremendous clarity about our mission as we began to work through the improvement planning process, took a hard look at the data, examined our attitudes and beliefs about learning. We really began to see what our students needed and deserved, and where we were falling short. That provided us with a new and very clear mission, which has been a big part of our success,” said Ms. Lucero.

As the only completely dual language school in northeast Kansas, SDLM’s goal is for all students to be bilingual, biliterate, and multicultural by fifth grade. Students in preschool through the first grade receive language arts instruction in their native language. Starting in the second grade, they will receive language arts instruction in their second language as well. Instruction in mathematics, science, social studies, English, and Spanish occurs bilingually in all grades, with native speakers serving as partners, or experts, to their nonnative counterparts.

“We’ve established a very cooperative framework. The students learn to rely on one another

and recognize and build from each other's strengths. If I am a native English speaker, I am stronger in English-delivered instruction and I will help my Spanish-speaking friends because I know that they will help me next period when our social studies instruction is delivered in Spanish," explained Ms. Lucero.

Making the decision to move to a dual language school had many implications, particularly for staffing.

"After completing the first year of our school improvement process, we had a large percentage of staff turnover. One, the mission of our school had completely changed; and two, our school culture was changing. It had been a really negative environment for students and for staff, and so we were really investing in PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) to change that. Naturally, these shifts weren't for everyone."

The shifts were, however, for some. Ms. Lucero credits the articulation of a clear vision and mission with attracting exceptional staff with the best skills and shared beliefs to SDLM. With her staffing in place, Ms. Lucero soon began to build her teams and assess and implement the effective practices of high-achieving schools using KansaStar (Indistar).

Personalized Leading, Personalized Improvement

KansaStar (Indistar) is a requirement in priority schools. To support its implementation, the state established the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), which provides district training and coaching on KansaStar (Indistar) to schools.

"The administrators in our district received training on KansaStar and a KLN coach provided us more in-depth training on the requirements of using the platform, the timelines we were expected to use for assessing indicators of effective practices and submitting our reports," explained Ms. Lucero.

The next step was for Ms. Lucero to introduce the process and begin to assess the indicators of effective practice with her staff.

"When it came time for me to sit down with my priority leadership team (PLT)—which includes grade level teachers, support staff, federal program representatives, and intervention program representatives—the process of working through the indicators was brutal," she described.



The Priority Leadership Team at Scott Dual Language Magnet School, following a summer planning meeting. Back row L to R: Sarah Lucero, Christine Reichenberger, Pilar Mejia, Mackenzie Haefner, and Kristina Lupercio. Front row L to R: Susan Hamilton, Cynthia Hopp, and Laura Hatrup.

Ms. Lucero and her team had acknowledged and agreed early on that they desired and were committed to building a more candid and trusting culture, but as Ms. Lucero discovered, it would take intention, practice, training, and time.

"For so long, teachers were used to being told what to do all of the time and now they were being asked to give their opinions and ideas. They were very reluctant to provide feedback at first and they didn't feel safe sharing their perspectives or ideas. I realized very quickly that I needed to back up, build up this team, empower them, and start by establishing norms and expectations for how we would work and interact as a team," explained Ms. Lucero.

Ms. Lucero and her PLT established nine brief norms that would guide their meetings and build their trust:

1. Safe environment
2. Communication with grade level teams
3. Collaborate
4. Set goals
5. Be a role model to other staff members
6. Put the mirror down and ask what is best for our students
7. Start and end on time (an hour after the last person arrives)
8. Debate in the room – support outside the room
9. Focus on the agenda

Parallel to the PLT's team-building work, Ms. Lucero and her administrative team (assistant principal, instructional coaches) pulled the indicators of effective practice that the school was required to address within KansaStar and organized them into an action plan document for the PLT to work from in the first year.

"While we were building trust and learning how to work together, I wanted us focused on the practices without being distracted by the platform," explained Ms. Lucero.

Once the PLT and staff began to work with the indicators of effective practice, themes, or areas, of focus began to emerge. Ms. Lucero created a document, titled "Scott's Focus," which simply and directly laid out their priorities using common language that the faculty and students would understand and use with one another.

"One of my strategies for getting the word out is to post important information everywhere, so that's what I did with 'Scott's Focus'. It was posted in hallways, the cafeteria, my office, in the bathrooms, on the back of faculty meeting agendas, you name it."

Behind the scenes, Ms. Lucero was working extensively with her process manager to input information into KansaStar (Indistar) and create the agendas used by the PLT in their meetings.

"As far as being successful, I tell our KLN coach constantly that she was the key player in helping us to become successful with KansaStar. She would review our reports and updates and provide very detailed feedback, letting us know if a task needed work or reminding us that we had left out some really important information from our notes. Having a coach has been amazing because she knows what's going on in our school and sometimes when you're in that turnaround process you get so busy doing the work that you forget to step back and see how all the pieces come together. Both KansaStar and our coach have been instrumental in doing that for us."

Ms. Lucero credits Wise Ways (research briefs within Indistar) with giving her team the research and the vision that they needed early on.

"We would read the research briefs and have conversations about whether or not this practice was something that we were doing—a little, a lot, or not at all. For example, when we first started, we of course knew we needed to change the school community culture in a big way. Parental involvement

in academics was low. We didn't even have a parent-teacher organization. We began to review the research and talk about what that practice needed to look like in our school and what steps we would take to make it happen. Parents are now involved in our curriculum and instructional development. We have even established a Parent University where parents come and learn another language or develop new skills together," said Ms. Lucero.

Sorting Out the Steps

With a firm grounding in the research, it was much more comfortable and intuitive for the team to prioritize the indicators of effective practice and determine how they would bring them to life in their school.

"Once we had assessed the level of implementation of an indicator, KansaStar requires us to determine its impact—low, medium, high—and assign it a priority—low, medium, high. This made it much easier to identify those things that were high impact and high priority, the things that would give us the biggest bang for our buck."

As Ms. Lucero described it, that process of assigning impact and prioritization helped to narrow and order an otherwise overwhelming field of varying need.

"I can say with both pride and certainty that we have moved from choppy to beautiful. The PLT meets twice a month. We always get started on time and end on time. We look at our prior meeting's agenda, we take notes about what we've done in the intervening weeks related to the items, we look to see if a task is coming up that we need to stay on top of or that we need to add to," shared Ms. Lucero.

"Before we finish our PLT meeting, we review all of our notes and determine what the next step is for involving our teachers. Each PLT member is a representative on an instructional team, so they are tasked with bringing our PLT work to those teams. Sometimes they might just be sharing information, other times they are asking for feedback, other times they are organizing a more involved level of collaboration. We have established a real conduit of communication and sharing and collaborating between the PLT and the instructional teams," explained Ms. Lucero.

In addition, Ms. Lucero's administrative team meets once per week and KansaStar is part of that weekly agenda to ensure that things are on track at all levels.

"KansaStar is really part of our culture now. I met with the PBIS team recently and the first question they asked was, 'How are we doing in KansaStar? What tasks do we have, what tasks do we need to add?' It was so natural; I didn't have to prompt them one bit," said Ms. Lucero.

Then and Now

It was time to ask Ms. Lucero to describe the differences that she has observed among students, teachers, and families since embarking on this transformation nearly four years ago.

"The dialogue, how deep the teachers are going in their conversations about instruction is remarkable. They are doing incredible things as educators; they know their impact and they take it very seriously. Not only do teachers know their students' data, the students know their own data as well. And parents. We share data with parents all of the time and they now expect it. It is common for a parent to ask, 'What level is my child reading on?' We no longer do traditional parent-teacher conferences; we do academic parent-teacher teams. The parents discuss their child's data respective to the specific activities that they can engage in at home to strengthen skills in a particular area. Together, the parent-teacher team sets SMART goals describing where they want the student to be and how they will get there," said Ms. Lucero.

Ms. Lucero told of a recent phone call she received from a grandmother who wanted some guidance on math activities that she could do with her grandchild over the summer break.

"This kind of partnership between school and home was not happening before. Last year, we had a student move up seven reading levels in second grade because his mother started working with him at home," said Ms. Lucero.

And the results keep coming—in numbers and achievements, in relationships, in beliefs, and in mindsets. During the past year, the school has gained 20% in reading proficiency, and the school's third-grade class had the greatest gains in mathematics of any school in the district. And there has been a 50% decrease in office discipline referrals for each of the past two years.

"Our Priority Leadership Team is the pillar of our school. They have been the movers and the shakers of this process and are respected immensely by their colleagues for their leadership. They are incredible. We take our commitment to disagree in our meetings, but once we reach an agreement, we support one another and the decision outside of them," explained Ms. Lucero.

Ms. Lucero said that she was most surprised to see firsthand the shift in student achievement once high expectations were established.

"It is amazing to watch students become truly bilingual, even with no one to speak to them in their second language at home. Some of our English speakers are now incredible Spanish speakers and vice versa. It's really a testament to the impact we can have on children at school," said Ms. Lucero.

Ms. Lucero has also been overwhelmed by the support they have received from the community. She describes a school where parents are part of the daily culture—from volunteering in classrooms, to providing food for teacher appreciation activities, meeting with teachers to learn how to better support their student; where families now drive upwards of 30 minutes one way just so their child can attend; where the wait list for preschool and kindergarten exceeds 50 children; where the mother of a 2-year-old calls just so she can plan ahead and ensure that her daughter can attend there. SDLM is, officially, a magnet of the best kind.

The successes are many—not to mention the School of Excellence in Spanish award received from The Embassy of Spain. In each success, however, you hear the same exclamation of pride, joy, and inspiration in this principal's voice. There is no favorite in her list: they are the shine of many bright lights, big and small. ★

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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