

Indistars

STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

Solen High School
Solen, North Dakota
By Maureen Mirabito

There is a book titled *The Power of Small: Why Little Things Make All the Difference*. It sits prominently on my desk and, even though I haven't read it completely yet, I keep it right there. I will probably always keep it right there. The title alone is a daily reminder to consider, make the time, and have the courage to do the small things in a day that give life its "texture and meaning"; often these things, though small, make the biggest difference in someone else's life, show them that they matter. It is in tending to these small things that we discover our greatest purpose.

While interviewing the great people at Solen High School in North Dakota from my home office in Maryland, it is no wonder my eyes kept finding this book on my desk again and again: they just might have written it. The people there have demonstrated just how powerful small is in some very grand ways.

Almost everything about Solen High School is small: their size, their staff, their building, and their community. Currently, the high school serves 89 students in Grades 7–12 with nine full-time teachers at the high school and an additional four teachers who are shared with the elementary school. Many teachers drive at least 40 miles one way to the northern edge of the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in rural southwestern North Dakota where the school is located. The students who attend Solen belong to the Sioux Indian tribe. The school provides an enhanced cultural program to teach the children their native language, Lakota.

And while small in size, Solen is big in need: 100% of students are Native American; 100% are eligible to receive free and reduced-priced meals. The vast majority of students live in extreme poverty and many are homeless—either consistently, or off and on throughout the year.

But the leadership at Solen does not dwell in either extreme—small numbers or big need. Instead, they focus their work and their effort on the steady, everyday actions that they believe will have the greatest impact on the continued success of each and every one of those very special 89 students. And yes, many of those actions are small but most are not easy. And yes, many of them are working.

First, Find the Right People to Lead (they are closer than you think)

Justin Fryer is starting his fourth year as Solen School District's superintendent. Prior to taking the helm, Fryer served as the elementary school principal for a year. Jeff Brandt is starting his fourth year as Solen's high school principal after one year as a high school teacher.

Peg Portscheller has been working with the district as School Improvement Grant consultant for the past five years—ever since the school was identified among the lowest 5% in the state for student achievement. “In many ways, the school that I saw when I first began my work here five years ago does not exist anymore. At that time, Justin Fryer was the elementary school principal and Jeff Brandt was a high school teacher.”

The district was fortunate to have the assistance of Stefanie Two Crow at the Department of Public Instruction involved in their work as a SIG school.

“Stefanie Two Crow’s impact on this work as our partner at the state was immeasurable. Having grown up on this reservation, she understood the dynamics of our community and was aware of the challenges of the school culture. She understood how big our ‘baby steps’ really were and she supported everything we needed to do and try. She was just a terrific partner.”

The SIG designation was confirmation of the internal struggles the school was experiencing: low expectations for students, which manifested in low graduation rates and lack of confidence and comfort in integrating into the world outside of the reservation, mistrust among and between teachers and teachers, teachers and administrators, school and home, and a don’t-care attitude that persisted throughout the entire community.



Principal Jeff Brandt identifies his hard working staff among those things of which he is most proud, “Every person in our building cares about kids and cares about teaching.”

“The **NDMILE/Indistar** process kept the school team and staff in Solen focused on ensuring that the work being done through the SIG interventions was supported by research, regularly monitored for effectiveness, and implemented with fidelity. The indicators guide the team to create tasks throughout the year to drive the implementation and monitoring of the SIG federal requirements. Solen High School leadership and staff embraced the work of SIG as an opportunity to develop a process of continuous improvement. The assessing and planning of the research-based indicators provided the school with support and flexibility to set priorities and celebrate successes along the way as indicators were fully implemented.” – *Stefanie Two Crow, Director of Federal Title Programs at the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction*

“The kids were, to put it mildly, completely disengaged. As were many of the teachers, and parents had very little trust in the school,” explained Portscheller. “I was pretty horrified by what I saw and did not see happening in classrooms: complete chaos and teachers who did not have a handle on either management or content—nor did they care. It was going to take some very skilled leadership to do the deep work needed here, and the school board’s decision to recruit Fryer into the superintendent role and Fryer’s decision to then elevate Brandt into the high school principal role was a risk that has turned masterful.”

Leading in a fractured culture is one thing; leading and supervising former peers in a fractured culture is a whole other. These men had both the advantage of knowing the community and having demonstrated their commitment to its improvement; however, they also had the disadvantage of knowing the community and making decisions and changes that would be good for all children but not for all adults.

“This school did not begin forward progress until these two young men became leaders and drivers of the change process. It’s about quality instruction; it’s about utilizing data; it’s about having fiscal resources and using them well. But if you do not have good leadership, you cannot go anywhere.”

Second, If You Don’t Care About Children and You Don’t Care About Teaching, It Is Time For You to Go

One of the first things that Fryer committed to as superintendent was growing and developing the school board as full partners in the work of the district—namely, creating a culture where students mattered most and every decision, every action supported that.

“The changes that have occurred here in the past four years—and the successful, respectful manner in which they have been made—would not have been possible without the trust that exists between the school board and the leadership,” reflected Portscheller.

Included in these changes was the movement of 40% of the instructional staff out of the district without grievances or litigation.

“It was done well and done right and in service to children. This is a testament to the relationships that have been built by and between the leadership, the community, the staff, and the students,” explained Portscheller.

This change started with an early and simple conversation that Principal Brandt engaged in with every single teacher in his school, teachers who, just a few months prior, had been his peers. He asked them: ***Do you care about kids and do you care about teaching?***

“Early on as principal, the school board president asked me if we had the staff in place to move us forward. I had to tell him that no, we did not. We had some teachers who were really good, a few that were excellent, but we had five or six—nearly half of our staff—that were not very good at all.”

Brandt began the conversation with every teacher by articulating what was most important to him as the leader of the school and what he expected to observe consistently among all staff: building positive, trusting relationships with students.

“My conversation with every staff member was deep and meaningful about where they were in their teaching career and how they felt about kids and their role in helping them succeed. It was very clear, or maybe confirmed, which staff members were committed to what we were doing and which ones were not. The superintendent and I had to determine, with the board’s support, whether they would be back after my first year as principal. They were not.”

Today, Brandt is confident that 100% of the staff cares about kids and cares about teaching and, importantly, they all want to get better at teaching.

“I know for a fact that first year that not every teacher wanted to see kids at school, many were happy if they didn’t show up. You cannot move a school forward when that is the mindset. Today, every staff member is happy to see every child when they walk through our doors. That permeates throughout the entire school community to the point where we hear our

students talk about how happy they are to be at school and how much they enjoy and learn from their teachers. We talk to parents at games and school events and they are excited that their children are excited. They see the possibilities and opportunities of education for their children and they trust us to provide that education.”

Between the staffing changes, the development of a culture that values high-quality teaching and instruction, and the genuine outreach and engagement that has occurred with parents and families, Solen High School is a place where people—teachers, students, families—want to be.

Justin Fryer described one of the moments that confirmed this change for him: “At the graduation ceremony this past spring, one of the seniors who spoke shared how great Solen High School is and how proud he was that Solen will always be part of his journey. The gymnasium was full with students, parents, grandparents, board members, and staff. It was a terrific sentiment but it was also the culmination of so many changes that we had been making for the past few years. It was a great moment for all of us.”

The retention rate among teachers is also an indicator of just how far this school has come in four years since more than half of the teaching staff was dismissed: for the past two years, the high school has not experienced *any* turnover. The teachers keep coming back, even if it means driving 40 miles one way.

“I tell every teacher, ‘We can’t just be okay down here. We have to be great every day for these kids, that’s just the way it is.’ And they are. Our teachers are so committed to these kids and their families. Every single one of them strives to be great every day, to do what is best for kids. It is really a lot of fun to run a school when the mission is clear, the people believe in it, and the results show us we are on the right track.”

Third, When It Comes to Trust and Building It, You Cannot Go Half Way

Often, when you do the hard thing and make decisions that are good for kids and the school community overall, there is a shift in mindset and hopefulness that is almost palpable; a collective sigh of relief that staff didn’t even know they needed to take.

“You can see and feel the difference between staff meetings during my first year as principal to now in my fourth year. In the first year, there was a lot of eye rolling and mistrust. Individuals would make suggestions and the rest of the team would question the motivation behind it—best for them or best for kids?” described Brandt.

At the start of his second year as principal and after filling the positions that had been vacated by the teachers who were asked to leave, Brandt had an opportunity to rethink the Leadership Team membership at Solen High School, which had previously been limited to a few teachers.

“Being a small school and also considering the trust-building we needed to do, it made sense to include everyone on the team. By allowing everyone to have a voice and be heard, to get to know their colleagues in a student-focused environment, and, importantly, to feel included, we began to see some positive, fast growth.”

Lori Hager, a teacher at Solen High School for the past 34 years (and the only teacher with whom Peg Portscheller has ever worked that she has ‘absolutely no advice to give for improving her practice’) shared her reflections on the Leadership Team’s evolution.

“Whenever there is change, even positive change, there is fear involved in what it will mean for how we’ve done things and operated. But once we got through that, and saw the dramatic

and subtle changes that the leadership was making, we became a cohesive group. We had a chance to listen to one another—as opposed to someone else’s interpretation of what was said and how—and trust began to build. We understand each other. We each have strengths and weaknesses and we build upon those in a supportive way.”

In addition to the Leadership Team, Brandt has created two additional teams to support the implementation of the School Improvement Grant—the data team and the RTI (Response to Intervention) team.

“Each of those teams is led by a teacher leader,” shared Brandt.

“I provide support to the teams but the teachers do a phenomenal job of leading them, of determining the focus based on our goals and what data indicate is or is not working, of making decisions to ensure continued improvement, and then defining the tasks required to implement the decisions.”

Fourth, What Message Do You Send to Kids? If It Isn’t Positive, Change It

“My first year at Solen, when I was a teacher, we had a rule in place that students were not allowed to wear hats or hoods as they entered the building. It was a battle we fought every single morning. As soon as a kid got off the bus, the first thing they heard was, ‘Take off your hat and hood.’ Nothing else. If I am a 16-year-old kid, that message, first thing in the morning, is not going to put me in a good frame of mind.”

When Brandt became principal the next year, and consistent with his expectation for stronger, more positive student-teacher relationships, he didn’t just end it, he replaced it.

“I told the staff that I would support them 100% if this was a rule they wanted to uphold in their classroom; however, that when students got off the bus in the morning, the first thing they were to hear from us was, ‘Good morning, how are you doing today?’ or something along those lines that expressed genuine interest and concern in their well-being. It was a really small thing but it has made an enormous difference in how students start their day and on their outlook overall.”

In addition to the morning greeting, Brandt and his team implemented a mentoring program into the daily schedule. At the beginning of each year, students identify three teachers they would like as a mentor. For the first 10 minutes of each school day, students meet with their mentor to discuss grades, test scores, issues the students are facing, or anything else that they want to talk about.



Data coordinator/data team leader Todd Hanson and RTI team leader/middle school math teacher Jenna Feldman at Solen’s data wall.

“The idea is to ensure that every student has a teacher they are comfortable talking with and confiding in. This year, we have added 10 minutes at the end of the day for a wrap-up session where students can reflect on their day and their learning, make sure they have all their homework assignments, and discuss plans for the rest of the afternoon. The focus is really to ensure they continue to make good decisions when they leave school and to also ensure that they are prepared to be successful the next day too.”

Another small change, with immeasurable impact.

Fifth, The Power of Small and the Difference It Continues to Make in Solen High School

One of my favorite questions to ask in these interviews—especially after we’ve spent so much time on the journey and the specifications of such transformation—is about *that moment* when they felt that things were really, truly, changing.

Portscheller, who will soon move on to another district in another state that needs the guidance and support she provides to transforming schools, shared this:

In addition to leading the school as principal, Brandt is also the high school basketball coach. Last winter, he was unable to attend an RTI meeting with the entire staff due to a coaching conflict. Immediately into the meeting, I caught myself smiling as the meeting began on time and with agendas being distributed. The teacher “in charge” facilitated a great meeting, and everyone participated in very positive, productive, caring conversations about individual students who were struggling with one thing or another. No judgments were made about the kids, and the information that was shared and the strategies that were developed were done for one purpose only: to help them succeed. I remember sitting back and saying to myself, “Wow, they don’t even need Brandt to be here; they have arrived.”

For Jeff Brandt, his moment is a collection of interactions and observations of both his teachers and his staff:

There have been several little moments throughout the last four years that have helped me understand the depth of the changes that we’ve made. I’ve had students recognize that it was their actions and irresponsibility that caused them to fail classes and be ineligible for important sporting events; in the past it would have been the teacher or the coach’s fault. I’ve witnessed students choosing tutoring over basketball practice. I have received student, staff, and parent feedback that convey how much students enjoy school, how happy it makes parents to know the school is supporting their son or daughter, how staff members feel that they are a part of a team that makes decisions for the right reasons. Those are the things that stick out in my mind. You can see it on the faces of both students and staff members: they are happy to be here.

The Power of Small in Solen, Inch by Inch

Justin Frye considers building leadership capacity, putting the right people in place, and then ensuring they have what they need (and beyond) to do their jobs well just a couple of his most important duties. In addition to the relationship and vision-building he has done with the board of education, Fryer has successfully secured grant funding from a variety of sources to support the work of teachers and the needs of students. This focus will continue with an eye on improving technological infrastructure and training, facilities upgrades, and of course instructional advancements—such as district-wide curriculum mapping. Both Fryer and Brandt have identified the ability to be competitive in salaries and benefits as essential to the continuation of this growth story.

As Portscheller put it, “The hardest part of school improvement is resetting the culture, becoming a cohesive, effective, and qualified staff who cares deeply about children and deeply about teaching and learning, which Brandt has done. Then, high expectations are set for everyone; teachers are supported, mentored, and coached. Focus is placed on the most important knowledge, concepts, and skills that must be learned. Teachers determine where children are in their mastery and then create multiple learning opportunities for them to succeed. Teachers continuously hone their skills and build a repertoire of effective tools. They learn together, grow together, and take responsibility for their school’s success and that of their students. They celebrate—with the students and with each other. They set new goals.”

Inch by inch the staff, the students, and the families have grown together. And that has made all the difference. ★

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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