

# Indistars



## TODD COUNTY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SOUTH DAKOTA

*by Maureen M. Mirabito*

Roberta Bizardie, principal of Todd County Elementary School in Mission, South Dakota, likes to tell her teachers and students, “I just work here. You are the reason we grow and succeed. I just make sure it goes smoothly for you and that the dots connect.”

This year, there have been plenty of dots to connect. Todd County Elementary is celebrating its first year as an expanded school community—the result of a merger between the former North Elementary School for Grades K–3, which Ms. Bizardie led as principal for three years, and the nearby South Elementary School for Grades 4–5.

“The merger was exciting for us, but it also meant a lot of changes—new and more staff and students, a brand new building, and the adapting to South Elementary’s status as a Priority School.”

While Ms. Bizardie and her staff had successfully assessed and implemented several indicators of effective practice in the three years since using Indistar, the change from Focus School status to Priority status brought with it different requirements

for indicator selection and implementation.

“We had options, but we all agreed that it made most sense to start with a clean slate—to select, assess, plan for, and implement indicators of effective practice as a new school community, with input and feedback from all members of our new school community.”

Todd County Elementary resides within the Rosebud Sioux Tribe Reservation, home of the Sicangu Lakota. It serves more than 630 students; 98% of the children who attend are Native American, and 100% receive free or reduced-price lunches. Poverty rates in this school are high, but so are persistence and determination to succeed and improve.

“We were fortunate because we’ve known for some time that this merger was happening, so we’ve been able to plan logistics together, attend professional development related to the improvement work that is needed, and begin to create common language and understanding as a new school culture.”

Six months in advance of the merger, staff from both schools attended training in Boston on the Responsive Classroom, a research and evidenced-based approach to teacher learning that is associated with increased teacher effectiveness, student achievement, and improved school climate.

“Indistar has made the integration of our culture and our work so seamless, and the connections between them more evident. The indicators of effective practice align with what we learned and apply from our Responsive Classroom training. They align with the turnaround principles that we are required to address as a Priority School. We are assessing and will soon begin planning tasks in collaboration. It all connects. We connect.”

Communication is a big reason for that. Ms. Bizardie laughs when she says, if someone doesn't know what they are expected to do at Todd County Elementary and why, it's because they made a choice to not know. "We communicate up and down and across constantly. Merging two existing schools—and the emotions that accompany that—has required us to be very deliberate in our trust building. We are working toward complete transparency, and Indistar is helping with that, guiding how we team and communicate."

The leadership team at Todd County Elementary follows the guidance of Indistar and its research, meeting twice per month for 1½ to 2 hours. "Every other Wednesday we meet at the same time, same place. Our meeting times are selected before the year begins, roles are established and rotated each month for keeping time and taking minutes. Our agenda for each meeting is established at the end of the previous meeting. There are no surprises, only expectations for hard work."

It's tough to discuss the now without comparing it to the before, particularly when you are talking about growth, which is what Roberta does when I ask her to describe how her leadership team operates.

"Before the merger, my leadership team consisted of one teacher per grade who would bring information back to his or her instructional team for feedback and focus. Now, there are two representatives from each grade's instructional team, which has inspired a collaboration among those teachers—two sets of eyes and ears, with different skills and areas of expertise. They collaborate on how the information will be presented, discussions led, and tasks developed and assigned with their grade's instructional team." In addition to two classroom teachers for each grade, Ms. Bizardie's leadership

team also includes a special educator and a paraprofessional.

Instructional teams at Todd County Elementary are organized by grade. Scheduling accommodations have been made so that teams have one hour of collaboration time every morning to examine student data, plan tasks, and collaborate on lessons and interventions. The development of tasks is a fairly new practice for these instructional teams, but has been critical in the establishment of this new school culture and collaborative ownership of success.

"In the past, the leadership team would look at the data and establish tasks for the instructional teams to review and take on. Now, the leadership team and the instructional teams operate from the same agendas—we are looking at the same data, the same information—and the instructional teams create tasks, in facilitation with the grade leadership team representatives, and give feedback on tasks that the leadership team has created."





To further encourage collaboration and openness, the leadership team and each instructional team, including the paraprofessionals, maintain a Wiki page on which agendas, meeting minutes, and outcomes can be accessed and viewed by the whole school community. “Nothing is secret, nothing is hidden. We are sharing what we know and what we do to help kids learn and succeed.”

And what Todd County Elementary has made its core focus for this first year of operation, in addition to establishing a cohesive and collaborative culture where there once were two separate and distinct cultures, is building positive relationships with students, using research-based practices to deliver aligned instruction and increase student engagement.

“I do see a shift in thinking and barriers coming down when it comes to ‘us versus them’ and ‘my students versus our students.’ We talk about our kids and what we will do to help them. Not how North did it, not how South would do it. How WE do it.”

Todd County is persisting. Indistar is helping. “It’s interesting. You can tell, before Indistar, teachers were so used to the leadership team setting their goals in the school improvement plan, and not really revisiting them. It was an exercise. They’d set goals for a percentage of students: *X percent of students will read at grade level*. It has been and will continue to be an adjustment, but a rewarding one, for them to write goals and create tasks that describe HOW every child will learn and achieve. With Indistar, that goal is not going away. And even when we fully implement a practice and reach a goal, we will always return to it. The practices don’t go away; we just might need to change how we implement them.”

I asked Ms. Bizardie what it takes—to build a new culture

of learning, to move achievement for every single student, to break down barriers. What does it take? What is essential?

“Collaboration is essential, among teachers, among families. Finding ways to bring people into the conversation, to feel involved.

And providing dedicated spaces for it to happen. That is essential. Observing teachers asking one another for help, sharing ideas and strategies in their instructional team time or

during leadership team meetings, listening to them talk about individual students and their circumstances, and the kinds of support and techniques that might help them, that is the difference. If focused professional learning and collaboration occurred when I was teaching, I would probably still be in the classroom.”

Before we end, Ms. Bizardie shares one more story of change and persistence that sounds a lot like sustainability. Prior to the merger, one of the indicators of effective practice that her elementary school implemented was *Professional development includes observations by peers related to indicators of effective teaching and classroom management*.

“Because of our clean slate and new requirements as a Priority School, that indicator of effective practice is not one we are implementing this year. But its impact was so great



on the development of so many teachers, many continue to conduct peer observations regularly and promote the value of it to others.”

She may just work there, but Roberta Bizardie has a lot to do with the change and cohesion and success happening at Todd County Elementary. “Being the catalyst for change, setting expectations, and holding myself and my teachers to those expectations is what I do. It requires preparation, consistency. This year, a lot of my time has been spent building relationships, answering questions, creating a unified culture for staff, as we get used to a new way of doing things. But as we plan for the remainder of this year and into next, my staff will hold me accountable for spending at least 50% of my time working with them instructionally. My leadership team and I will identify ways they can support me in doing that. We continue to move with urgency and to follow through on the smallest changes. Indistar helps to guide all of that—it keeps me, it keeps us focused and on task with the big things and the small things. It keeps us moving forward, together.” ★

# 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.

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