

# Indistars

## STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

### Vancouver Public Schools

#### Vancouver, Washington

By Maureen Mirabito

Note: This is the second of a multi-part story about Vancouver Public Schools' expansion of Indistar throughout the district. Travis Campbell describes the role of Indistar as promoting a learning culture that approaches individual, district, school, and classroom improvement as a "dynamic, iterative, and never-finished process" that is built on student need and is immediately responsive to results (what's working—keep doing it, what's not—stop doing it, what's new—start doing it).

It has been a few months since I last spoke with Travis Campbell, the chief academic officer of Vancouver Public Schools. At that time, he was four months into his role at the district, charged with leading the improvement of each of its 34 schools. In that short time, he and his leadership team in the district and those in every school have embarked on a transformation that relies on a blended, yet delicate, balance of purpose, process, performance, and mindset.

Prior to his leadership in Vancouver, Campbell worked as both a teacher and in leadership positions at the school level, and most recently had served as Director of K–12 Student and School Success at the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington State. There, he was charged with leading districts and schools across the state in the implementation of Indistar—a web-based platform that guides teams to assess, plan, implement, and monitor behaviors and activities that support the implementation of research-based indicators of effective practice.

In Campbell's mind and in his experience, school improvement was successful only when the process was open and transparent, and included teams of people working collaboratively to develop a plan of action based on need, "not when a principal sits at home on a Saturday afternoon to write a plan for compliance."

Indistar, he discovered, championed this approach and provided an interactive, real-time school improvement process that provided focus to leadership teams, advancement toward objectives, and, most importantly, feedback.

When Campbell arrived in Vancouver, just six schools were using Indistar. Soon after he arrived, he proposed the following option to the remaining 28 schools in the district:

In place of the old paper-and-binder process, we as a district will support you and your leadership teams in using and modeling Indistar and the best practices on which it is built for your team. We will re-engineer our existing K-12 Institute (a monthly gathering of principals and administrators—about 100 educators) and provide common learning for all.

Twenty-six schools signed on for a total of 32 out of 34 of Vancouver Public Schools

that would use Indistar to collaboratively assess, plan, implement, and monitor selected indicators of effective practice in their leadership and instructional teams.

At the first K-12 Institute in September, district and school leadership teams began their transformation process with a careful examination of their beliefs about learning and their purpose as educators.

“I wanted our leaders to reflect on **why** they come to work every day, what they believe about learning, and how they contribute to improving it,” explained Campbell.

At the end of that first Institute, bare walls turned full of belief as statement after statement was posted, declaring what teams of people believed about what kids deserved and how the adults would provide it.

At the October Institute, principals reviewed their belief statements and talked about the work that occurred over the past month in their own schools as they talked with teams of teachers about what they believed kids deserved and how they would provide it in their schools. That work included establishing and formalizing a process for assessing indicators of effective practice, the research upon which Indistar was built, and creating tasks that translated into behaviors and practices to implement the indicators in the best possible way. Principals heard from other principals about how their processes were shaping up and beginning to take hold.

***The message: There is no single way to do this important work but it is most effective when it happens in teams.***

The emphasis on “teams” is intentional. In fact, Campbell described it this way:

“My experience working with teams in the school improvement process became a defining characteristic of my role as chief academic officer in Vancouver Public Schools. We don’t emphasize Indistar as the solution to fix schools because we know that people, working as teams, are the solution.”

The fall convening of the K-12 Institutes focused on creating alignment between the student needs that principals and leadership teams stated existed in their schools with the dynamic, iterative plans they were building in Indistar with their leadership and instructional teams.

**“If We Do...”**

With the first level of alignment in place, the winter convening moved toward action, or performance management. Campbell and the district leadership team planned and delivered sessions to build the capacity of principals to monitor the progress of their improvement plans and the implementation of its indicators, which were also aligned to the district’s recently revised Performance Scorecard.

“We did a rollout of the tools that principals and teams could use to monitor progress in robust and profound ways and how the tools connected with one another, including our interim assessment system. We demonstrated the alignment up and down the system, and supported them with the tools, processes, time, and resources that they needed to use the tools well.”

**“Then We Impact...”**

In January, the focus was on vertical alignment of supports and services from an assessment and performance management perspective. An area that was emerging as a common need throughout the district was differentiated instruction.

“We saw the data and asked the question we are well-trained to ask as educators: ‘So what will we do with what we know?’” explained Campbell. “Consistent with our focus on process, we provided a learning experience for our principals, led by our curriculum team, that would provide principals with an understanding of the knowledge and skills needed to differentiate instruction as well as a process to turn-key the same experience with the staff in their building.”

There was a lot of energy and excitement around this work, shared Campbell. “The principals were beginning to see the tight alignment between what they were calling for in their plans, which are rooted in student need, and what we were providing them with at the district. It is so gratifying to see aligned professional learning occurring—and hearing that the work we are engaged in is congruent with the reality they are experiencing in their buildings.”

**“That Results In...”**

In March, the K-12 Institute will focus on meaningful family and community engagement: involving parents and community in the transformation process.

“We are acknowledging that this is probably one of our weaker areas—not to say that we haven’t done some great things in our Community Schools Initiative; we have. But we are going to talk about really moving beyond giving additional support in high-needs schools to empowering and engaging families in how we provide all students with what they deserve.”

**Transforming In Teams**

I asked Campbell to share some of what he is observing in the schools: how the teams are coming around to this focused way of thinking, working, and doing; of assessing, creating, and monitoring.

“The observation of things that are positive are also the things that bring some of the



Educators in Vancouver Public Schools receive professional development on Differentiated Instruction at a monthly K-12 Institute, a district-wide need determined through regular district-level monitoring of school improvement plans in Indistar.

greatest tensions. I would say that anytime you have a group of people who work together and collaborate around tough topics, you’re going to have a variety of different personalities and human dynamics at work, policies and collective bargaining agreements that influence the process,” said Campbell. “Not everyone is happy all of the time, but they are engaged and guided by a process that keeps them focused and moving forward.”

In all ways, the focus in Vancouver has been less on the tool (Indistar) and more on the focus of leadership and instructional teams. That, explained Campbell, is a message that has been well received.

“We have seen some great examples of focused collaboration in middle schools where teams have gained such a level of ownership in the work. We see deep collaboration between, for example, the PBIS [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports] coach in a school working directly with core teachers, aligning their workflow to the themes of the seven turnaround principles and the aligned indicators of effective practice. I’ve seen refinement of how leadership teams are developing naturally and organically at all levels.”

Campbell is also candid about the challenges of change and improvement, particularly when it comes to measurable increases. “You can imagine some of the frustration when you’re not necessarily making the growth that you’d expect. We’ve got a number of schools engaged in progress monitoring that are showing great growth and we’ve got some schools that are not. What are some things that we need to do to address those situations? That is something we’re talking about with our principals, their leadership teams, and in our work at the district level. Honoring the process and continuing to ask the hard action-research questions and work through the struggles as a team will continue to be the message and the work we engage in for the duration of this year and into next.”



The Leadership Team at Hudson Bay High School collaborates on the adjustment of its improvement plan within Indistar to continuously reflect the student learning needs identified through regular analysis of data.

The implementation process is something that Campbell and his team will introduce and develop over time. “When we say we’re moving into implementing the work, what does that mean? Are we following a framework, like implementation science? That has some complex natures to it and we don’t want to introduce too much too fast and risk losing them entirely. But we will continue to learn and grow from the feedback that we receive. We seek feedback from every K–12 Institute and integrate it directly into the next cycle, which folks say they’ve really appreciated.”

**Transforming at the District Level**

In February, Campbell facilitated his first district improvement process meeting with the district-level team. “We agreed as a team that our existing Operations Meeting, which historically focused on nuts and bolts of K–12 operations, would also include time every month to engage in collaborative work specific to the district improvement process. At our first meeting, we backward mapped how many school improvement plans we needed to assess as a team before the end of the year and to inform our own improvement process moving forward.”

The idea of using school improvement plans to inform the district improvement plan was a new practice that Campbell introduced to Vancouver.

“In recent history, the process would have been a job for the Title I compliance person—write something that complies. Further down the road, it was done by the associate superintendent, carrying a huge binder and calling a bunch of groups together to offer up whatever they were contributing to improve the performance of the district and its schools.”

Now, the district was committing to a district-level planning process that mirrored and reflected the real work that was happening in the schools.

“Just as we’re expecting the schools to do, we have to model this ourselves.”

To begin the shift from ‘what we think schools need’ to ‘this is what schools say they need’, Campbell noted his thoughts on printed copies of the current district improvement plan and distributed them to everyone so they could see what his thinking was and what questions he was asking.

“It was a dual process—to identify what of the current plan was consistent with what we might see in school improvement plans as we reviewed them; but also to make sure that we were operating from the same understanding for each of the seven turnaround principles around which the indicators of effective practice and school improvement plans were aligned,” explained Campbell.

In addition to backmapping the school improvement plan review, Human Resources was prepared to start the conversation around Turnaround Principle #1: Principal Leadership—more specifically on operation flexibility and how the district is distributing leadership and providing autonomy at the building level.

When it was time for this discussion to start, Campbell cued the music—Hawaiian slack-key guitar—to calm the mood and lighten the air.

Using the current level-of-development rubric provided by the state, the team listened

as Human Resources led the operational flexibility conversation and its level of implementation in the district.

“Human Resources had not been directly involved with the assessment of indicators before; they gave us their sober check and said, ‘We’re kind of limited development here,’ to which I replied, ‘You know what? That is okay because if we are not fully implemented on all indicators it means we still have work to do and that is something we would expect in any system.’”

That prompted a collective sigh of relief and is when the real discussions about process and improvement ensued, beginning with vocabulary.

“The folks from Human Resources helped us establish a shared understanding of what ‘operational flexibility’ meant. We all had different ideas according to our area of expertise. I have seen countless district teams that I’ve worked with stumble over this phrase so I had anticipated the variation. We talked about it for a while and heard a lot of perspectives; people were open and transparent in their thinking,” shared Campbell. “I had several members approach me after the meeting and say, ‘That was exactly what we needed to do; we have not had those conversations before.’ To me, that was informal confirmation that we were headed down the right path and opening up to collaboration in a way that was meaningful to the stakeholders who were there.”

The team will continue their conversation around operational flexibility electronically in a special course set up within the district’s learning management system. In March, the team will review the thoughts and definitions of their colleagues throughout the organization.

Even as we talked, Campbell was strategizing his next collaborative, preparatory move.

“Right now, I’m deciding whether or not I am going to ask the team to go back and re-fresh or refine their definition and/or respond to someone else’s definition just as a way to keep leveraging the flipped nature of the work and keep the collaboration moving,” explained Campbell.

**Reflecting on Success**

As we neared the end of our scheduled conversation, I asked Campbell to reflect briefly on some of the successes that come to mind:

- An elementary school with a principal who is focused on the process of improvement and supporting teachers around the focused, action-planning cycle.
- Principals hearing from other principals, their peers, at the K–12 Institutes who provide credibility to the process when they say, ‘This is working, this didn’t work as well; maybe consider this approach and give the teachers an opportunity to collaborate around this challenge’.
- Listening carefully to what principals and K–12 leaders say in their feedback and then applying it to the next Institute.
- Modeling the adult learning process; if folks don’t feel and experience outcomes in an authentic way and see firsthand how it can be done, then how can we expect the leaders in our buildings to do that with their teachers?

- Each of our comprehensive high schools jumped into this process and customized it in ways that were meaningful to them; the executive director of high schools was instrumental in getting them on board and making it work for them.

**Deeper Understanding**

In a couple of hours after our conversation, Campbell and teams from three different schools would present to board members on the district and school improvement process. To close out our conversation, I asked Campbell to provide a summary of the outcomes that board members would take away.

Through stories, through data, through artifacts, these are the understandings that Campbell believed would deepen among the members of Vancouver Public Schools’ Board of Education:

1. How the process enables system-wide coherency and alignment of work.
2. How it strengthens our learning organization’s cultured collaboration rooted in shared commitment and practices.
3. How it promotes the ongoing and iterative nature of continuous improvement cycles.

Travis Campbell wants all of us to deepen our understanding around the process of improvement. It is still emerging and dynamic. It is still building a culture of collaboration and energy around equity and excellence. It continues to focus on building relationships and staying open to possibilities at every turn and layer. It is more agile than ever: sideways is sometimes the way forward. And always, always, our focus and our work must match what our students’ need where learning and opportunity take hold.

And that, of course, is still and will always be in the home, in the classroom, and in the community. ★

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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