

# Indistars

STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

## Vancouver Public Schools

### Vancouver, Washington

By Maureen Mirabito

Note: This is the third 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). This interview includes his colleague, Mychael Irwin, principal of Hazel Dell Elementary School in Vancouver Public Schools.

## The Background

If you are over the age of 35, then chances are the word DeLorean means something to you ("Roads? Where we are going, we don't need roads.").

It also means something to educational leaders in Vancouver Public Schools (VPS), though it has more to do with beliefs, behaviors, and district-school aligned blueprints than a well-timed lightning strike and a flux capacitor. We know *Back to the Future* as a movie title, maybe even as a planning protocol. In Vancouver, it is also a mindset just different enough from the more familiar "beginning with the end in mind" approach to change and improvement. In VPS's version, the end has already been achieved—they describe what that looks like, feels like, has resulted in as though they are already there. Then, they describe exactly what they did to get there, what obstacles they faced, and how they overcame them. They get specific—people, behaviors, timelines, expectations.

It is a subtle difference, but it is an important one.

If you've read the other two stories in this series, then you know there is another, critically important layer to the work that is happening in Vancouver Public Schools. They have taken a page (or maybe they've written it) from the design methodology that is turning the business world on its head: Rather than push ideas, supports, and services down to schools, Chief Academic Officer Travis Campbell and VPS leaders are instead listening to and observing the needs that their schools face and then building and organizing supports and services that respond to them. In other words, rather than provide the same services they've always offered, they create the ones that are needed even if, especially if, that means changing how things have always been done.

It is now May 2016, nearly six months since my first conversation with Campbell,

and we are ready to talk about how the process of improvement is taking hold in the schools and classrooms at VPS. In the thoughtful, sense-making way that VPS operates, Campbell has invited his colleague, Mychael Irwin, who is just finishing up her first year as principal of Hazel Dell Elementary School in Vancouver.

Irwin is an experienced turnaround leader and brings a unique perspective to the improvement work occurring in VPS, particularly with respect to their use of Indistar to support it. She first used Indistar when she was an instructional coach in another district and then as a principal of a priority school in another state. Now, as principal of Hazel Dell in VPS, she hit the ground running when it came to using Indistar as a tool to guide and manage the improvement process. She describes the variation in need, circumstance, and support among the three schools but also the undercurrent of pressure to improve performance that was common among them. We talked about forces and energy and how they compete, complement, and interact, and I suspect the concept of time travel may not seem such a stretch for Irwin.

### The Past

“When I started here in July, the school did not use Indistar as part of its school improvement planning. In the past, the process was more traditional and most of the responsibility fell on the principal. The plan was created but it was not typically shared publicly with all the stakeholders. As is common, it ended up in a drawer or binder. It was not the living document that it becomes in Indistar,” explained Irwin.

Among the first things Irwin did was to expand the sphere of influence on the improvement planning process. She began with her leadership team but she did not end with them.

“We had planned a whole faculty meeting to introduce what improvement planning and implementation would look like and feel like at Hazel Dell, but first, I acclimated my leadership team to the practices—along with the research and the vocabulary that supported them—that we would expect to see in all meetings and all classrooms throughout the year,” Irwin explained.

Those practices and that research were the Indistar Wise Ways briefs upon which the indicators of effective practices in Indistar are built.

“As a leadership team, we read the Wise Ways briefs that corresponded to the seven turnaround principles used in Vancouver Public Schools deeply and thoroughly. We highlighted the actual descriptions—what the research looked like when it was implemented—that spoke directly to what we expected (and needed) to see happening in our classrooms.”

Irwin and the leadership team repeated the process with the whole faculty soon after. She assigned each of her leadership team members one of the seven turnaround principles with the responsibility of leading a small group of faculty through a discussion related to that principle and the corresponding Wise Ways research.

“The conversation that came out of that meeting was phenomenal. There was transformation in understanding, beliefs, and possibilities with the whole faculty. Prior to that meeting, it was less common to have faculty conversations about what schools do and how they operate if they want to be successful.”

The faculty at Hazel Dell began to look inward at the changes that were needed to create change and improvement. Instead of focusing on external, technical triggers that might flip the switch—for example, borrowing from recess to add to instructional time—they examined Wise Ways research and discussed changes more focused on instructional practices and behaviors to transform the school. They began to believe that the power to change and improve was within them.



The schools in VPS benefit from the responsive support that the district provides as needs are identified through their continuous improvement planning process.

Five, six, seven years ago, Hazel Dell families were considered typical working- middle-class families. Since then, the school has experienced increases in poverty levels, cultural representations, and value representations. Student mobility fluctuates with the season, and 70% to 75% of the children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. More would qualify, explained Irwin, but pride and situational poverty prevent many parents from applying.

“The turnaround principles that Vancouver Public Schools adhere to, along with the Wise Ways research that supports them, gave us an anchor. Before, the faculty anchored themselves to the similarities in demographics: What works for one will work for most. When that went away, they didn’t know what to anchor to anymore. The turnaround principles and the research have given us that anchor,” explained Irwin.

“Now, everyone knows the direction that the school is headed in, and the ownership was nearly immediate because we all worked on, continue to work on, what we need to do to achieve our vision—individually and together. If those turnaround principles and that research is where we are headed, what does it look like when WE do it?”

## A Critical Step Forward

Irwin described the conversations and recognitions as cathartic for many of her staff, but also discouraging.

“We outlined several tasks to get started on immediately, and then everyone took a deep breath and realized, ‘Oh crum [except they didn’t use the word crum] this is going to take years!’ It was frustrating for them to realize that, if we want to be this school and live out our beliefs, then this is going to be hard. The realization of what it meant for them, individually and collectively—changing practices, accepting differences, learning new behaviors—was really hard but also a really important first step.”

For Irwin, Indistar allowed her and her staff to start big and then create the funnel of action steps that would get them there.

“We talked about the future. We went five years down the road and envisioned people paying money to come and see what we do and how we do it. We are the exemplar. What are we telling them and showing them when they visit? What steps did we take to get here? What did our belief that all kids are accepted regardless of poverty, language, culture, or values look like in our school? What do we do? Those became our tasks and Indistar gave us a place to store our thinking and follow through on it.”

## The Impact of Alignment, Choice, and Support

Irwin brings a unique perspective to the use of Indistar to support school improvement. Hazel Dell is Irwin’s third Indistar school, and her second as a principal—each a very different experience.



Here, teachers from several schools, including Hazel Dell Elementary, receive professional development as a result of a common need that emerged for improving teaching math practices, especially for English language learners.

“In my first school with Indistar and in a different state, there were more than 200 indicators of effective practice that we were expected to assess and implement at one point. In another school within the same state, the number of indicators we had to assess and implement were not quite as high, but we also had a lot of need. The work seemed formidable. Soon after, the state’s department of education shrunk down our indicators to just three, and we were able to choose which three! We really did the work then and experienced huge growth.”

“Here in Vancouver, my perspective is that, as long as the district follows the system the school is using and it’s a collaborative effort, we’re going to make inroads. What’s so different here in Vancouver is how inclusive Travis Campbell and his team are in the needs assessment and decision-making processes. Our district improvement process is as alive and well as our school improvement process—and aligned!”

In addition to the alignment between district and school planning, another practice that earned Campbell and his team high marks from principals was the choice they were afforded in expressing their performance goals.

“The district gave all of the schools the option to create their goals in Indistar using the SMART goal format, a logic model format, or another way altogether that made sense to the school and their needs. If I had been told I had to use the SMART goal format, I might not have been as excited about using the Indistar platform, because I have used that format before in Indistar—and intuitively SMART goals make sense, but my personal experience with them is that, when you accomplish the goal, there is no place to archive your work in the platform. A logic model approach has allowed us to constantly revisit our work, build on it, and make the adjustments needed to achieve our goals.”

Not only is the district and school process for improvement aligned and customized, but the curricular and instructional support is as well (which comes as no surprise if you’ve been following this series on Vancouver Public Schools). It is this support that has made all the difference to Irwin, her teachers, and their students.

“I’ve been able to call the district help desk and say, ‘Hey, I need some help with differentiation’ or ‘I have a teacher who needs some support with cultural competency,’ and they set them up immediately with professional development. The support system here for teachers is just unbelievable. Everything we want to do here is possible because we all know where we are headed and the support from the district corresponds to that.”

Campbell’s experience with Indistar is unique, too, having worked at the state level on continuous improvement and now at the district level. I asked him to reflect on the evolution of his thinking and understanding of the improvement process throughout his experiences.

“At the state level, my focus was largely on teacher leadership and not quite as balanced with principal leadership. My new learning is that there has to be an absolute

balance between supporting principals as the building leaders of change and supporting and growing teacher leadership to help support the principals in carrying out this work. It has to be done as a team.”

Support for principals and their teams are among the highest priorities in Vancouver Public Schools. Some of that comes from the culture within the district, but it also comes from the direct interactions occurring between principals and their teams with district level staff on a scheduled monthly basis, even weekly in some cases.

“Supporting principals to grow and nurture the health and effectiveness of their leadership teams has been a critical realization for us in the district. As we look ahead, we will continue to provide targeted support to our principals on how to effectively manage and nurture highly effective leadership teams. We have hired an expert that will work with principals on effectively assessing the health and well-being of their team and in building the skills required to navigate human dynamics and personalities in order to, as a team, execute the work that will improve student learning outcomes.”

This direction is once again the result of a responsive district that listens to, analyzes, and connects dots among conversations, observations, data, and needs.

“The increased availability and transparency of data places greater responsibility on the district to become more flexible and nimble in meeting the needs that surface at the building level, which are born out of the expectations that we are holding them accountable to.”

As Campbell nears the end of his first year as chief academic officer in Vancouver Public Schools and reflects on the hard, collaborative work that has occurred, I asked him if he can identify one success that illuminate all others.

“The transparency of data is cause for great celebration, of course. But there’s another great success. Just last week we held our final district improvement process meeting, with all district offices represented and members of the principals’ association included, to complete our assessment of the current states of our district-level indicators and the first draft of our SMART goals document. I can confidently say that those documents reflect a more authentic reality, congruent with what we are doing and what the data—quantitative and qualitative—say that the schools, their teachers, and students need,” said Campbell.

That is not to say that they’ve completed or finalized their work in any way. It’s only to say that they are headed in the right direction, though Campbell would be the first to tell you it is not a straight line, not ‘from here to there’.

“I have seen the need to create healthy and open thought partnerships with the principals and the executive directors who work with them, and to infuse and reinforce deeply that this process is not perfect. That has been another lesson for me and something I strive to impart through my leadership—getting better at what we do and how we do it is an ongoing process; it is iterative and cyclical versus formulaic.”

The parallel between what we need to do as adults to change and improve our

practice, and what we want for our students and need them to change and improve in their learning, is not lost in this story. How we adapt and improve our instruction to support learning is one component; the application of that learning, the doing, the demonstration of mastery is another. That is true for both adults and students.

But there is a third, powerful component that Vancouver Public Schools leaders have made central to their design: a thriving ecosystem. They are building communities that develop skills to support learning, to set goals and attain them individually and in teams—in spite of and in persistence through disturbances or setbacks. The ecosystem of VPS has processes and expectations for learning and teaching and improving, but this district works equally hard at building and tending to every combination of relationships that live and grow there, and recognizes the value and importance of those relationships on sustaining growth, production, and persistence.

The Center on Innovations in Learning refers to the personal competencies as “the Something Other”: what we know, how we think, why we persist, and how we relate to and with others. It is those personal competencies—best developed in supportive, adaptive, and strong ecosystems, just like the one that Travis Campbell, Mychael Irwin, and their colleagues in Vancouver Public Schools are building—that will get us back to the future.

Especially when it is hard, even when it seems impossible. ★

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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