Indistars

WICHITA PUBLIC SCHOOLS
DISTRICT-WIDE ROLLOUT OF KANSASTAR

by Maureen M. Mirabito

Note: This is the first of a multi-part story about Wichita Public Schools' work to establish system coherence, initiative alignment, and the explicit connection to improved teaching and learning. This series will track their implementation of Indistar (KansaStar) in an effort to pull all of this work together and into a continuous school improvement process.

Wichita Public Schools is receiving national attention for its system coherence, initiative alignment, and explicit connection to improved teaching and learning. The work that they have done (and continue to do) is impressive—integrated and well-executed systems and processes that would make Apple executives swoon. And in a smart next step to their strategy, they are expanding the use of Indistar (KansaStar) from its 28 priority and focus schools to all 90 of its school sites.

But there is something else happening in Wichita Public Schools that is driving their strategy and their success—and for a district that has figured out how to measure pretty much everything, it's one thing they can't measure: **removing the fear** around data and performance and replacing it with be-

lief and support in achieving real continuous improvement.

The work began five years ago when Superintendent John Allison shared his vision for the district as a new superintendent. It emphasized a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and was communicated as *the work* that the district and its schools must focus on to improve learning outcomes for all students, one by one. The work began with an intense focus on literacy and expanded to include numeracy, behavior, instruction, and data-based problem solving, all referred to as **protocols**. I wanted to call them areas, or categories. But the more I learned, the more I understood the distinction: in Wichita Public Schools, protocol means something very different than, say, category, or area. Protocol implies agreement, or code. It conveys: pursuing this work at an optimal level is our promise to our students, their families, to each other, and our selves. There is a role for everyone in this work—and *a role* of the district staff was to help principals and school leadership teams get and use data from each of those five protocols to make the best decisions to improve teaching and learning, to achieve optimization.

So often, it's not the knowing that impedes us; it's the fear of what we might find or how we *could* be judged. In the case of Wichita Public Schools, using and talking about data was their *counter* to fear and inaction. Once educators began to consistently and deeply use data, they discovered that most fears were exaggerated: what they thought they'd find wasn't as bad as what they did find, and even if it was, at least they found it—a necessary first step toward change and improvement.

Over the past five years, knowledge of and discussions about data have become a steady drumbeat within and

around every conversation about literacy and numeracy, behavior and instruction, leadership and learning in Wichita's 90 school sites. It goes like this: *What data are we collecting? What do the data say about our district, our school, and this student? What do the data tell us about our leadership, our structures, and our instruction? What will we do so that the data look different next time?*

Leading the data integration and now improvement work is Dr. Lisa Lutz, Executive Director of Innovation and Evaluation, along with her "phenomenal team of three." Through their consistency in providing meaningful data, their promise and follow-through in providing judgment-free support, and their tireless work in making connections and creating alignment to ease the confusion and even workload of schools, they have established a culture that thrives on data as a way of deciding, learning, and connecting.

But again, it wasn't always that way.

"We work with all types of data sets that provide leverage to principals and their leadership teams within the MTSS protocols. We put the data into a district and school profile, similar to a dashboard, and we train the principals on how to talk about, process, and use the data to improve their instruction. Regardless of the data, we always tie it back to instruction and how teachers can use it."

The data profiles are updated regularly with formative and summative data; they include district level, school level, grade level, and some district comparisons. Individual student data are provided to schools separate from their profile data. The training is referred to as a STAT session, which occurs monthly in Wichita Public Schools.

"When we started the STAT sessions, principals didn't say

much. Partly because they didn't know what to say, but it was also difficult for them to see their data up there and then have to speak to it. They felt they were on the spot. But now, it has become better than okay to talk about data. It's really and truly the way we work now."

Second to left is Lisa Lutz, Executive Director of Innovation and Evaluation, along with her "phenomenal team of three" – left to right, Scott Dellinger, Julie Baergen, and Laurie Johnson.

This shift didn't happen by chance. It happened because Dr. Lutz and her team provided the structure, the processes, and the timely delivery of data and training through the STAT sessions. She and her district colleagues engaged in close collaboration to identify and provide the right support and resources to school staff in the areas they required them **without judgment**.

"Our conversation is not personal. Our conversation is

what do we need to do so that the data look differently next time we look at it," said Dr. Lutz.

There are two types of STAT sessions: principal STAT, occurring monthly and including a cohort of approximately three to six principals depending on level (elementary, middle, high) with a focus on school-level data; and school STAT, occurring approximately six times per school with the principal and his/her leadership team, and including both school- and student-level data. Dr. Lutz and her small team provide principal STAT to all principals at a district location; school STAT was offered to the 28 priority and focus schools at their school site.

This year, Dr. Lutz and her team will expand what they provided for the 28 priority and focus schools to all 90 school sites. They can do this because of the capacity they've been building in their principals to serve as strong instructional leaders.

"All along, the goal has been to build the leadership capacity of principals to lead this work, to know their data and be able to speak to it and help teachers to process around it to improve instruction. We have been at this for five years. So this year, when principals of all 90 sites come in with their cohorts, the sessions will be called principals' school STAT. Each principal will receive their data down to the student level, we will discuss it in our cohorts, and they will return to their schools to process it with their leadership and instructional teams."

Real, Continuous Improvement

Recently, Dr. Lutz was told that she would lead the district's school improvement work, a likely outgrowth of the success and impact of the STAT sessions and its connection to improved teaching and learning. Dr. Lutz has both the vision for and the specific knowledge of improvement to see how Indistar (KansaStar) can provide yet another opportunity for alignment, coherence, and capacity building for the work that happens in the district and schools.

"This responsibility gave me an opportunity to think about school improvement differently. I didn't think that the school improvement process we had been using was successful—establish some goals, describe how you'll meet them, maybe review it all at the end of the year to see how you did," said Dr. Lutz.

But it wasn't just the ineffectiveness of the traditional process that got her thinking differently, it was the diversity in size, scope, needs, and pursuits of each individual school.

"There are so many different school sites doing so many different things—national accreditation processes in the high schools, Title I school requirements, priority school and focus school requirements. It just made sense to have something that was common with ALL schools—a common way to monitor and continuously improve all of the different things they are doing to address their individual school community needs and optimize their Multi-Tiered System of Support every step of the way."

Once Dr. Lutz cleared the possibility of using Indistar (KansaStar) district-wide with the state (*absolutely*, was the response from Ms. Sandy Guidry, school improvement coach), she took a proposal to the district's Academic Leadership Team (assistant superintendents and executive directors) and asked them for their feedback and support. They were all in agreement to proceed.

The next step was to figure out how to integrate the MTSS work into Indistar (KansaStar). Dr. Lutz began with teams.

Building Capacity of People in the Schools

At the time of the decision to take Indistar (KansaStar) district-wide, the district had just begun to assemble district support teams, a structure designed to provide support and guidance to all 90 school sites in sustaining their multi-tiered system of support. Indistar (KansaStar) provided an ideal platform through which to provide a common and consistent approach for continuously assessing, planning, implementing, and supporting its very diverse schools and their communities.

There are a total of 11 district support teams, each comprised of three to four district-level staff, including an Assistant Superintendent or Executive Director who also serves as the team lead. Dr. Lutz's team, for example, includes a special education coordinator, an English as a second or other language coach, and a director of equity and diversity. Each team is similar in composition.

Driving the work of the district support teams—as well as the selection of indicators that Wichita will use in its Indistar (KansaStar) system, is a very detailed implementation rubric.

"To support sustainability of the MTSS that has taken us five years to build, we developed a comprehensive document that describes four growth stages of implementation—emerging, developing, operationalizing, optimizing— for each of the five protocols—literacy, numeracy, instruction, behavior, and data-based problem solving. Assessments are integrated into each protocol," explained Dr. Lutz.

Using this implementation rubric, Dr. Lutz and her team

examined the indicators of effective practice within Indistar (KansaStar) to determine which best aligned with each of the five protocols and assigned them accordingly.

"When our priority and focus schools started with KansaStar, there were more than 150 indicators and it was really hard to know where to start or which ones to select. With our district-wide rollout, we have revised the process entirely to align the indicators to our implementation rubric, narrow the focus (at least to start), and take full advantage of our district support teams with the goal of achieving optimization in each protocol," explained Dr. Lutz.

Wichita Public Schools does not underestimate the value and importance of continuous communication in the work of continuous improvement. In addition to the regular, ongoing support schools will receive from their district support teams, principals will continue their monthly training in STAT sessions: thirty minutes of data, thirty minutes processing what it means for improving teaching and learning. As already mentioned, principals will now lead their own staff through a similar approach. In this first year, however, Dr. Lutz expects a lot of time and attention will be spent on getting good at the process and in using KansaStar really well.

The first few steps of the first year of this new school improvement process look like this (keep in mind, principals and leadership teams have and will continue to receive training and coaching every step of the way):

1. The school leadership team rank orders each of the five protocols against the four growth stages described in the implementation rubric.

2. For each protocol, the school leadership team makes a warm statement and a cool statement, for example: *We know*

we're doing well in this area based on this evidence; We know we have work to do in this area based on this evidence. It is not enough to say, "We think." Evidence is required.

3. When the rank ordering is complete, the protocol receiving the lowest ranking becomes the school leadership team's focus for improvement.

4. Principals and leadership teams review the Indistar (KansaStar) indicators of effective practice that align with their lowest ranked protocol only (the alignment of these indicators with each protocol is outlined in the implementation rubric).

5. In their initial plan, school leadership teams assess three to five indicators of effective practice and develop implementation plans for a minimum of two.

6. Implementation plans will be monitored through monthly principals' school STAT meetings, through prescribed school reviews, and in regular monitoring and coaching in KansaStar.

"I think it is really important for us to take this slow. At our STAT session this month, we spent 30 minutes on data and 30 minutes setting the stage for how the school improvement process will work and how it aligns to the work we've been doing for the past five years to improve teaching and learning," explained Dr. Lutz. "The principals' homework for this month was to go back and share the process and how everything we are doing—the protocols, the district support team, and the school improvement process—ties together."

At next month's STAT session, principals will log in to Indistar (KansaStar) and go through the process of how to assess an indicator. Their homework after that session will

be to lead their own leadership team through the assessment of their selected three to five indicators and determine which two will be developed for implementation.

"Principals and leadership teams have been very receptive to this approach and the use of KansaStar because it pulls everything together. They knew they were responsible for implementing these five protocols with support from the newly established district support teams so they were like, 'Finally, we've been waiting for this—something that guides the work, aligns the work, and lets everyone know where we are in the process as we go,'" said Dr. Lutz.

And the priority and focus schools that were already using KansaStar?

"They were so thankful to see the alignment of indicators to protocols. To them, KansaStar felt like *one more thing* they had to do because they were priority and focus schools. But now, everything is integrated and aligned so they see it as a complement to their work rather than an addition to it. They were relieved to see it all come together."

District Support Structures and Processes

The pursuit of alignment and change to the school improvement process hasn't only impacted the work at the school level; it has changed conversations and ways of working at the district level as well.

"We've started to put together our own protocols for the conversations and reviews that we will conduct in the schools as district support teams to ensure consistency in how we approach our work and in the support, feedback, and services we provide," explained Dr. Lutz.

The mechanism through which progress monitoring and

needs identification will occur is through school reviews. At the start of this year, the district support team met with the principals of their assigned schools to talk about what a school review would entail, including the agreement that, before a formal school review took place, the district support teams would conduct informal school reviews and a minimum of 10 classroom walkthroughs. Some schools will receive quarterly formal reviews; some will receive semester formal reviews; others will receive annual formal reviews.

"The frequency of the formal reviews was determined based on the alignment of the school's self-assessment of the protocols (using the implementation rubric) with their data. For example, if a school says they are at optimizing in a particular protocol but their data indicate that 50% of students are below the 25th percentile on screeners, there is a misalignment and they will receive a quarterly review."

The school reviews include three parts: the first part entails 45 to 50 minutes with the leadership team presenting their rank ordered outcomes (with supporting evidence) and rationale to the district support team; the second part involves one hour of classroom walkthroughs and a debrief of what was observed; the third part is 30 minutes with the principal to make recommendations for professional development and provide warm and cool feedback about what was observed throughout the review.

"Within three days, the district support team leader must go into KansaStar and write up the report in the coaching comments—overall, what was the discussion, what recommendations were made, and what follow-up is needed by the district support team to provide further support," explained Dr. Lutz.

Every quarter, the team leaders from each district support team will meet to pull up KansaStar, review the reports that were completed for that quarter, and see where the school is in assessing indicators, developing tasks, and progressing through their level of implementation of indicators.

"We explained to schools that we were looking for alignment. If you've said this is your lowest protocol and highest need, are you selecting indicators and developing plans that align with that?" explained Dr. Lutz, "Additionally, our superintendent has requested that at least one member from the district support team be present at the STAT session that principals are leading with their leadership teams to ensure both that the alignment is carrying through and that they are receiving the support that they need."

As superhuman as all this work and alignment seems, Dr. Lutz reminded me that they are all very much human.

"We have the setup, now we have to execute," she shared. "I think it is important that we take this slow enough to ensure the process works. I know it will be too slow for some people who want those plans in KansaStar now. I certainly understand that. I assure them we will get there but that it is going to take time. By the start of next year we will hit the ground running with the continuous improvement process we've been after."

I don't think there is anyone who believes otherwise.

Ensuring Continuous Improvement of the Process

It shouldn't have surprised me, but when I ask about the feedback loop from principals on the process, she tells me about the district workgroups that exist for each protocol. Dr. Lutz is in charge of the data-based problem-solving work-

group which has already outlined one of its tasks for the year: to create a taskforce of principals who have used KansaStar to help those who have not.

"We're going to examine the process we're using, including within KansaStar, for the purpose of improving the process as the year goes along. Their feedback and our response to it are critical to making it a process that works for everyone."

I asked Dr. Lutz what else she'd like us to know about this effort and the people involved, which is clearly a testament to the relationships that she, her superintendent, and her colleagues have built with their school principals, leadership teams, and staff.

"All along, we have honored our commitment to look hard at the data, provide real support, including alignment of initiatives and their connection to teaching and learning, and to avoid judgment. We have invested a lot of time and effort in relationships—consistency and follow-through are critical—and that has paid off for us time and time again. If you say, 'This is what we need to do and why,' there isn't anyone who would say, 'No, no we're not doing it.'"

In a district of 92 schools with varying needs and pursuits, KansaStar will serve as a common denominator for sustaining and tracking improvement. It will replace a static school improvement process with a responsive continuous improvement one. And it will stretch the reach of district staff without expanding them. It is the next step in the methodical and courageous work that has been growing (sometimes up, sometimes out) for years in Wichita Public Schools.

We have a lot more to learn from them and we'll be sure to share it when we do. ⭐

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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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