

Indistars

ENEMY SWIM DAY SCHOOL, SOUTH DAKOTA

by Pam Sheley

Sitting in the upper northeast corner of South Dakota, nestled between glacial lakes, is Enemy Swim Day School.¹ The school is one of the original day schools, started in the 1930s when it was a K–8 school in a one room building. The “Day” in its name distinguishes it from the boarding schools that had been in existence and mainly run by missionaries or the government. Enemy Swim Day School was one of the first day schools located on a reservation, operated by the tribe to serve children from that reservation. Today, Enemy Swim is a school of choice. Parents may choose to send their student to attend either one of the five public schools in the region, or Tiospa Zina Tribal School (Enemy Swim’s sister school located about 25 miles north), a boarding school, or Enemy Swim Day School. The school currently serves 170 students who come from as far as 40 miles away. In the 1980s, Enemy Swim applied to be a grant school under the Office of Indian Education Programs (now Bureau of Indian Education [BIE]). The BIE contracts with or administers grants to American Indian tribes for the operation of schools. These schools are referred to as tribally controlled schools (grant schools). Enemy Swim Day School is charted by the Sisseton

¹ “Enemy Swim” is a name that derives from the legend of a local battle between the Dakota and rivals, a battle in which the Dakota Akicitapi forced their attackers to swim to the safety of an island in Enemy Swim Lake (www.esds.us/esds-2/history).

Wahpeton Oyate (Tribe) and operated by a local board of education of tribal members with independent fiscal agency. In 2006, the school moved into a new building.

Along with preK–Grade 8 programs, staff at Enemy Swim also administer a family and child education program (both center-based and home-based programs) serving almost 40 students and their families. They have a 21st-Century grant for after school and summer school programs. The staff also teach adults who are finishing a GED degree or working on employability skills in the Adult Learning Center. The only age group the school does not serve is high school. Students may either attend one of the public schools, Tiospa Zina, or a boarding school for high school education.

Enemy Swim Day School is fortunate in having had the security and stability of veteran staff and a principal who has served the school for the last 18 years. Virginia Dolney has been at Enemy Swim Day School for 21 years, first as a teacher, then as principal. Virginia was the principal when Native Star (the BIE’s version of Indistar) was first introduced to the 178 schools in the BIE as the “new” way of collaborating on school improvement. The leadership team was very excited to be given access to a tool that they believed would keep them focused and put all the pieces of a school improvement plan in one convenient place. Virginia says of her team, “We’re nerdy that way.” After almost four years of using the system, one could expect the excitement to wear off, and yet Enemy Swim is still excited about Native Star because its faculty are seeing its anticipated potential fully realized.

Enemy Swim Day School has a small staff with each member



wearing many hats by serving on different committees and teams. The parents are also very involved in the school and serve on committees. The Partners in Education team (PIE), comprised of representatives from all areas of the school, including parents, serves as the schoolwide strategic planning and school improvement team. This leadership team (currently with five members) guides the improvement planning in Native Star; however, all the staff is involved with the work. Information from other committees and teams informs the leadership team on what to include in Native Star, which provides the means for the school to keep all the work focused on their four priorities: academics (with technology), Dakota culture and language, individual potential, and family and community collaboration.

Leadership Team meetings are held at least twice a month at Enemy Swim. When asked what a typical leadership team might look like, Virginia commented on the team's lively discussions focused on the indicators of effective practice and the Wise Ways. At the beginning of the school year, the team decides what indicators they plan to focus on during that year. Some of the indicators will need to be assessed and planned. Other indicators are already in progress and need to be monitored to ensure those who are responsible are completing their tasks. They schedule all their meetings and assign the indicators that will be discussed at each meeting so they know well in advance where their focus will be at each meeting. When the question is asked at the meeting, "Are we doing this (effective practice) or are we not?" and the discussion takes off, Virginia is quick to bring them back to "What does the research in the Wise Ways say?" Each meeting includes discussion of the indicators as well as checking on what work is already in progress. Team members hold each other accountable by keeping track of upcoming tasks and due dates.

Virginia and her leadership team were also excited to see a new set of indicators added to Native Star this past year. The BIE added a set of culture and language indicators that schools have the option of including in their school improvement plans. Enemy Swim saw that these indicators complement and guide work they had already committed to under their priority of Dakota language and culture. They had also been through the Family Engagement Tool² and are



Enemy Swim Day School Partners in Education Team: (L to R): Principal Virginia Dolney, Lori Wiley, SPED Coordinator (seated in front), Andi Ward, 3rd grade teacher and literacy team leader (standing), Sara Lorensberg, Instructional coach and math team leader

working through a set of family engagement indicators. Enemy Swim realized after their first year of implementation that, although there is a wide variety of indicators in Native Star, they needed to narrow their focus and concentrate on those indicators that fit within their priorities for their school. They became much more intentional about the indicators they chose to work on and how they structured their plans.

The indicators are also a way for the leadership team and the school to continually ask themselves, "How can we do better?" because they truly see this as a continuous school improvement plan. Virginia specifically mentioned the indicator that states, "The principal spends at least 50% of his/her time working directly with teachers to improve instruction, including classroom observations" as a priority indicator for her and her team. Even though this indicator had

² The Family Engagement Tool is a web-based process developed by the Academic Development Institute that takes a team (the school leadership team including the principal plus several parents of students currently enrolled in the school) through a review of the school's policies and guidelines about parent and family engagement (including compacts and homework guidelines) and has the team work through a survey of what a school currently does in the area of family engagement and how they can improve. The survey results in a Needs Analysis that pinpoints the areas of strengths and weaknesses a school can work on.

been marked as “objective met” since they had worked through their tasks and decided in the past that it was met, Virginia opened it back up and put it back into their plan. The team wanted to ensure that they would not lose ground with this essential indicator after the reduction of administrative staff and realignment of duties. Also, as mentioned above, the school has been fortunate with the stability of long-serving teachers. However, in the past year, many veteran teachers were leaving and new staff—not only new to the school, but also teachers new to teaching—were coming on board at Enemy Swim. Native Star provides a way for those new teachers to see what the school has been working on and what the priorities of the school are, and gives them a “road map” on the effective practices that are expected of all the staff at Enemy Swim. Virginia knew she would need to be in the classrooms to see and monitor what the new teachers are doing and determine areas where they may need support.

So, what does a typical school year look like for Enemy Swim Day School? At the beginning of the year, the entire staff meets, and the goals and mission of the school are reiterated for all the staff. The improvement plan is laid out (recall that the leadership team [PIE] has already decided what indicators would be worked on and what was going to be a priority for the year), and every teacher in the building knows what indicators are a priority and what is expected of them in their classrooms. The PIE team also meets with stakeholders in early fall at the annual parent meeting for the same purposes.

Throughout the year, teachers begin to see the connections—that the indicators are what they worked on in their professional development, what are talked about as the standards for their practices, what are being modeled throughout the school. The Wise Ways reinforce for teachers and staff that the practices are based on research and fit within the “models” the school is already using. The indicators



are what anchor instructional coaching and monitoring throughout the year. During the year, Virginia uses the new “Celebrate Our Success” report to show the school board, teachers, and parents what is being accomplished in their school. The PIE (leadership) team meets at least four times a year to share and discuss progress of goals in each of the four focus areas, review perception and achievement data, review, and plan “next steps” in the school improvement plan. At the end of the year, the staff comes back together to review and wrap up—and get geared up for the next year.

There is a tendency in education to try something new for a year or so, or until the next new thing comes along, and then jump to the new thing. Virginia and her leadership team are grateful that Native Star is something that the BIE has stuck with and continues to use and improve. In the first year of rollout, the BIE also required schools to do much of their improvement work on “paper and pencil” forms; however, now the system integrates almost all the components of the school’s work into the one convenient, web-based system that all the stakeholders have access to see—Native Star. There are “go

to” people provided by the BIE for Virginia to ask questions that come up. Coaching has not been as consistent as she would have liked, and the BIE has struggled to keep people in the positions of Native Star specialists (coaches), but Enemy Swim Day School “coaches itself” by keeping a close eye on the professional practices in the school, continually reassessing what they are doing and why, keeping everything they do aligned with their four main priorities, and always keeping their students’ success at the center of all they do. Their school’s website includes this quote, which sums up their focus and dedication to their students very succinctly: “We will be known forever by the tracks we leave (Dakota).” ★