

Indistars

SOUTH PRAIRIE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, NORTH DAKOTA

by Carol Diedrichsen

South Prairie is a rural, single-school district about 10 miles south of Minot, North Dakota. Its elementary school serves K–8 students—all of whom are bussed to and from school; high school students attend classes in Minot. The school was one of the first schools in the state to take a stab at assessing the 99 NDMile indicators, as North Dakota required of all first-time NDMile users in 2010. Following the assessment, South Prairie’s leadership team launched into the task of planning for 33 of the indicators.

The team and state staff can laugh now at how ambitious and unwieldy that number was. And team members can look back wistfully at the luxury of a common lunch time, when they could examine school progress daily. For South Prairie has witnessed tumultuous changes in the last few years.

The district, on the fringes of a new oil production zone, has had to accommodate many new students, as oilfield workers and their families settled in the area. This boom followed an earlier influx of construction teams needed to rebuild after the severe flooding in 2011. While many of those earlier construction crews were temporary residents, people

who come to the community now are staying, and that trend is expected to continue over the next several years.

South Prairie Elementary School has grown along with the community. In 2010, South Prairie served about 135 students; within a few years, that number had almost doubled to 250 students. In 2013, the district hired four new teachers and split Grades 1, 2, and 3 into two sections each. Grade 5 will have two sections next year. Equally momentous is a new junior high/senior high that will open for the 2015–2016 school year, and the principal anticipates that enrollment will be 350. The opening of the high school will keep older students—and funding—in-district rather than outsourcing their education to Minot.

More classes, more students, and more teachers—South Prairie just isn’t the same school it was when NDMile was launched. The indicators initially chosen for NDMile now need reassessment, so this year the leadership team will again examine the 99 indicators. But they’ve set more manageable goals this time, planning to act on 15 indicators—not 33. Still, no small task. And gone are daily lunch discussions, which, because of a larger staff and more complicated schedules, are no longer possible. This week, the team will begin meeting bi-weekly after school.

A stable, committed core of leadership team members has been intentional at folding new staff into the school community and into the team, and it has engendered the trust of the school as it has overseen NDMile work. The result is that instructional teams are functioning well, volunteers have come forward to serve as new leadership team members, and the principal has been able to spend more time with the team and visiting classrooms. Title I Schoolwide Coordinator Sarah Storkson, a 13-year veteran at the school, has witnessed this



Some members of the South Prairie School Leadership Team for a quick break on a crazy school day. Left to Right, Barbara Rohn, Missy Jansen, Sarah Storkson, and Jodi Pederson.

school's tumultuous changes, and Storkson credits Indistar Wise Ways as an important factor in keeping the leadership team on track. Having this research foundation is "huge," she says, because it gives a reason for buy-in. The indicators aren't "just from nowhere." The discrete indicators are good reminders of much that staff members acknowledge as professional practice, things that matter: teachers moving about the classroom, maintaining eye contact with students, pre-viewing the lesson, checking for mastery, and so forth.

South Prairie's core belief resounds over the intercom each morning:

I believe in myself and my ability to do my best at all times. I will act in such a way that I will be proud of myself, and others will be proud of me too. I will not waste this day, as it will not come again.

Committed to this belief and wasting no time themselves,

the leadership team members will begin by taking stock of where they are and getting beyond their "state of shock" over the urgent and increased need for different ways to provide interventions. But this doesn't mean they are starting from scratch. What have been the highlights and key benefits from their NDMile work that South Prairie will carry forward to help them over the next hurdle?

Collegial, ongoing conversations: Work on the indicators of effective practice finds staff members routinely bouncing ideas off one another in their instructional teams. The more formal and organized sharing of ideas through NDMile leadership and instructional team meetings has created focus that results in good ideas being implemented and not just left as hallway conversations. The value of rich collegial conversation work was an unexpected bonus resulting from NDMile. This collegiality has been a boon for figuring out ways to serve students while creatively managing resources. In addition to NDMile work, it has particularly bolstered the staff's Response to Intervention (RtI) work, work to which the school has committed in its mission statement, promising to provide students with "the differentiated education necessary for them to be productive citizens in our society." Because of increasing enrollment, the number of students needing intervention has grown and the variety of problems to be addressed has expanded. According to Principal Delwyn Groninger, "Sixty-four percent of our students with 'F's' came from twenty-three percent of our population base that is new to us this year. We have been gaining more students with gaps in their subject mastery." The teamwork that NDMile has promoted will enable a coordinated response to each student's needs.

Using data: Analyzing data in order to direct next steps has been a key to this school's successful use of NDMile. The drilling down into data is now embedded in the way they do business. Data on student achievement guides the staff in selecting appropriate activities and strategies in their NDMile plans for indicators.

Staff ownership: The improvement process has been primarily self-directed. In the early days of NDMile, although state staff provided feedback and were available by phone, no state-supported personnel were placed in schools using NDMile. Further, Principal Groniger was the sole district administrator until last year. Although he fully supported the school improvement efforts of the staff, his contributions were necessarily restricted by his work on the expansion of the elementary school and planning for the high school. He looks forward to greater and more direct involvement with the leadership team in the NDMile process in the coming year.

The leadership team, buoyed by support from faculty and the administration, is eager to face the challenges of South Prairie's new educational landscape. A congenial staff who enjoy working together, who know how to use data, and who have readily undertaken NDMile embrace the task of reassessing NDMile's indicators because their eyes are on the goal of that reassessment: better outcomes for the students of South Prairie Elementary School. ★

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