

# Indistars

STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

## Vancouver Public Schools

### Vancouver, Washington

By Maureen Mirabito

**Note:** This is the first of a multi-part story about Vancouver Public Schools' expansion of Indistar throughout the district. The purpose is to promote a learning culture that approaches individual, district, school, and classroom improvement as a "dynamic, iterative, and never-finished process" that is built on 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).

There is a book that I read to my children. It's about a Siamese cat that thinks it's a Chi-huahua. Try as they might, his family cannot convince the cat that he should be chasing birds instead of tennis balls. His mind is just too canine-oriented and his actions follow suit.

I was reminded of this story while interviewing Travis Campbell, a teacher turned teacher-leader, turned state official, turned chief academic officer of Vancouver Public Schools in Washington State since July 2015. While I don't believe anyone is trying to convince Travis that he is no longer in the classroom I don't think they would be successful even if they tried. His mind is too classroom- and student-oriented and his actions follow suit.

"I am a teacher to the core," explained Travis, when he describes his approach to leadership and his enormous responsibility to improve 34 schools in a district that already has earned many state and national honors for innovation and excellence. It summarizes *what* he is charged with but it doesn't describe *how* or *why* he believes so passionately in it. For Travis, the how begins and ends with people and the district's adoption of Indistar in all but two of its schools—a big step toward changing how the people in the schools think about, execute, and adjust their work. "We don't emphasize Indistar as the solution to fix schools because we know that people are the solution, teams are," explained Travis. As such, he and his colleagues invest their time and energy leading and supporting people and teams to implement the Indistar process, something Travis described as "dynamic, iterative, and never finished."

The Indistar process is not new to Travis. He's been coaching districts and schools in and through it on a statewide scale since 2012. Prior to his move to Vancouver, Travis served as the director of K–12 Student and School Success at the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington. It was there that he helped to develop, teach, and coach districts across the state in a school improvement planning process that he referred to as "messy at the beginning, but out of which something beautiful came."

It was messy because the state spent a lot of time examining indicators of effective practice within Indistar and aligned them around the state's major initiatives. Indistar allowed the district and school teams to plan, act, and revise as needed around those indicators. "We began to see broad, authentic interest in what this process meant for teaming, teaching, and learning," explained Travis. "Creating and then communicating how the state's initiatives had been integrated into Indistar was critical to both the success of the process and to the resulting im-

provement in districts and schools,” said Travis. “Without that alignment, we would not have been as successful in transitioning how schools and teams thought about and pursued improvement.”

Like many states that use Indistar, Washington required its use in priority and focus schools only; however, the state offered it voluntarily to all other districts and schools. **Today, the number of schools voluntarily engaging with Indistar in the state has exceeded the number of schools required to use it.**

It was through his close work with districts and schools that Travis became aware of both the needs of Vancouver as well as the possibilities. He was drawn to the superintendent’s vision for every child and his will to do what was required to achieve it.

“My experience working with teams in the school improvement process became a defining characteristic of my role as chief academic officer. I lead the school improvement process in all schools as well as at the district and believe passionately in examining and dismantling inequitable structures and barriers to student success,” described Travis.

Vancouver Public Schools is composed of 21 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, 5 high schools, and 2 magnet schools. The district serves 23,500 students; 53% are eligible to receive free and reduced-price lunch, and that percentage increases to 80% in the urban areas toward the south end of the city, where poverty and migration are also challenges that the district is working to address.

“Our district has been recognized for its Family–Community Resource Centers, which are embedded in our elementary, middle, and high schools serving neighborhoods with the highest concentration of needs. They provide anything from clothes to food to services and support. Our schools are not only magnets for learning, but magnets for community resources that families can access easily right in their neighborhoods.”

The resource centers are the result of a partnership between the district and more than 700 education, government, business, faith-based, and community organizations, all with a shared goal of reducing barriers to learning. More than 2,600 volunteers donate time and expertise to their operations. “We also have a mobile resource center that travels to schools that don’t have a fixed center with a coordinator on site,” explained Travis.

This precedent—community involvement and timely, creative, and effective solutions for addressing needs—is similar to what Travis is building upon when it comes to improving teaching and learning and the structures that support it. And the timing could not have been better for moving the district toward the dynamic, iterative, action-research style process afforded through Indistar.

### Expanding Indistar Throughout the District

“The three-year plans that the district and its schools created in 2012 were sun-setting so everyone was gearing up for that same institutional *write our plans and collate them into nice neat binders* process,” explained Travis.

That process, explained Travis, encouraged educators to talk more about the programs and services they were offering and the percentage of students that would be served, but didn’t, as he put it, “get into the finer grain-size of a critical path: who is doing what, by when, and why for every child.”

In Travis’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.”

When Travis arrived in Vancouver in November 2015, six schools were using Indistar. His pitch to the rest of those schools not using it was this: *In place of the old paper and binder process, we as a district will support you 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 three hours.*

The result of his pitch was successful: twenty-six additional schools signed on for a total of 32 out of 34 schools using Indistar as their process to improve teaching and learning in their schools.

The K–12 Institutes would be structured to model for principals the conversations and activities that they should have with their leadership and instructional teams in their schools.

At the first K–12 Institute in September, principals arrived to find poster paper, sticky notes, and markers on the table. “They were so confused, even asking me, ‘Do we have assigned seats?’

Nope! Sit wherever you feel most comfortable,” recalled Travis. “Their faces said it all, ‘Oh boy, we are going to engage in something!’”

What they engaged in was a deep and heartfelt discussion about beliefs that would frame and inform their work moving forward in this new, interactive, and never-finished process.

“I wanted people to think about why they come to work every day, what they believe about learning, and how they contribute to improving it. We used Simon Sinek’s book *Start With Why* and, after some discussion and individual reflection, I asked them to work in their groups to complete the statement ‘We believe...’ and write their belief statement at the top of their poster board,” explained Travis.

At the end of the activity, 26 groups of educators displayed beliefs about what kids deserved on walls throughout the room.

WE BELIEVE...all students can learn and make a positive impact in our world community. We provide all students, no matter their social/emotional economic status, access to resources to be college-, career- and life-ready. Join our community and experience success.

WE BELIEVE...education is a moral imperative. All students can learn at high levels. Our students deserve the best.



Principals working to build collective calibration of SMART goals at the November K–12 Institute

WE BELIEVE...that what we do is the single most important responsibility and we must continue to grow and improve in ourselves and our system to create a quality future for our students and society.

WE BELIEVE...our responsibility is to ensure that our students leave VPS as highly capable citizens, ready to positively act on the challenges of our world.

WE BELIEVE...that improving our schools in collaboration with families and community partners improves student learning and the overall health and well-being of our community.

WE BELIEVE...strong schools empower all students and strengthen our communities for today and in the future.

WE BELIEVE...we have the resources and passion to equip our students to do better and be more...than those that came before.

WE BELIEVE...every child deserves access to high-quality learning experiences that empower them to discover and reach their fullest potential. #VPSsuccess

WE BELIEVE...exceptional education = life choices

WE BELIEVE...in supporting all people in their growth and development, however it looks, whatever form it takes, and wherever it starts.

WE BELIEVE...we are responsible and have a moral imperative to serve society by affecting students, families, and the community.

WE BELIEVE...that all people in our learning community have the potential to be positive contributors to our society and learning process through a growth mindset.

WE BELIEVE...our schools are the equalizer, and our role is to help students explore and find their place in the world.

“The rest of the meeting was situated around getting to know one another and getting to know me as their thought leader and partner in this process. After our whole-group discussion, we broke into leveled groups, where one of the central office executive directors led them in a deeper discussion of this work as it related to their specific context,” explained Travis.

In October, the K–12 Institute picked up where it left off in September.

“We reviewed our belief statements and talked about the work that occurred over the past month—building belief statements in school leadership teams and cultures and beginning to establish and formalize a process for assessing indicators of effective practice,” said Travis. “Principals heard from other principals about how they approached it and what this process was beginning to look like in their schools.”

**The message: There is more than one way to do this work.**

In Washington State, the school improvement process is framed by the seven Turnaround Principles, to which 132 indicators of effective practice within Indistar have been aligned. Schools are required to select one indicator from each Turnaround Principle, for a total of seven that they will first **assess** (degree to which it is present in ALL classrooms for ALL teachers and ALL students), then **plan for** (determine and assign specific tasks and activities that will move toward attainment of 100% implementation), and finally **implement + monitor** (execute and evaluate the plan).

It’s not much different—surprise!—than what Travis was doing as a teacher in the classroom.

“These are really action research cycles,” said Travis, “Teams are going through each stage and then and looping the assess, plan, and monitor stages. In an action research it is look, think, and act—but all of it is very intentional.”

November’s K–12 Institute will build on both September and October’s work. Travis referred to it as “collective calibration of goals.”

“The homework for principals in October was to begin developing smart goals for their school related to Turnaround Principle One: The principal keeps a focus on student learning outcomes,” explained Travis.

In a large group, volunteers will articulate their goal and what it will look like and feel like fully implemented in their school. Then in their smaller, leveled groups, each principal will work through at least one peer-reviewed cycle of their goal. A rubric will assist reviewers in knowing what to look for and in providing specific, focused feedback. The principals will then use that feedback to refine their goals.

“The peer reviews will accomplish a couple of things. First, it will help to build common understanding around goals, how we create them, express them to others, and what we envision when they are met. Second, we hope that the principals will take the peer review model back to their buildings and use it in their teams as they develop goals for each of the seven Turnaround Principles. Ideally, this process will be naturally embedded throughout the assess, plan, implement/monitor cycle,” explained Travis.

### **Aligning the District Improvement Process to the School Improvement Process**

At that first September K–12 Institute, Travis worked with central office staff to determine what the Leadership Team structure at the district level should look like—in composition and in work patterns.

“The district improvement plan had largely been driven by categorical requirements. I proposed that we transform our work as leaders to be more explicit and responsive to the instructional and learning needs that emerged at the school level through their improvement process.”

“We started by thinking about where and how each area’s work fit, connected with, and supported each Turnaround Principle, one by one. It was something to see them connecting their worlds to these broad school success principles,” said Travis.

Another advantage to this purposeful discussion was the emergence of cross-functionality and opportunities for improved collaboration between the various departments at the central office.

“There was a lot of positive energy around what our next steps would be. We are anxiously awaiting the results from the schools’ needs assessment process,” explained Travis.

In October, the central office staff was focused on developing guidance and support on the more procedural aspects of Indistar.

“September and through October was the period when schools were migrating to Indistar. We

weren't sure what to expect, but I'm not sure we expected all but two schools to sign on. So the focus for October at the district level was on the development, vetting, refinement, and dissemination of comprehensive guidance for using Indistar and ensuring that everyone was clear on the guidance," explained Travis.

However, that critical procedural step did not keep Travis from the schools or the classrooms. He gets out to schools and classrooms at least once a week for 90 minutes to do leadership coaching with principals. The executive director with supervisory responsibility accompanies him in conducting a pre-brief, a classroom walkthrough observation, and then a debrief with the principal.

"It's a great opportunity to get to know the principals, hear their concerns, and especially to provide them with handwritten feedback that includes both affirmations as well as questions to push their thinking and actions related to their school improvement plan," explained Travis. "Our district really operates on the belief that the principal is the fulcrum of change and we can't achieve without ensuring we have effective instructional leaders in every building. My purpose is to learn about the school cultures but to also ensure my colleagues and I are doing our parts to support principals in their effectiveness."

In November, the district-level team will have the results from the schools' needs assessment findings, and that is what they will focus their work around at this month's K-12 Institute.

"A researcher in the district is doing a content and pattern analysis of the needs assessment conducted by the leadership teams in the schools. He is arranging them in a consumable format so that, as a district-level team, we can use data dialogue protocols to establish an understanding about what school-level teams are saying they need under each Turnaround Principle and determine whether or not what we currently provide in terms of support is aligned with those needs," explained Travis. "So we are going from a bottom-up approach: looking at what student problems of learning are, understanding the problems of practice for teachers, and then up to the leaders and teams and determining what we need to continue with, stop doing, and start doing."

In true teacher fashion, the district is modeling exactly what it expects principals and leadership teams to do in the schools: use data to identify strengths and weaknesses; develop a plan of support that includes what must continue, what must stop, what needs to start; implement and monitor the plan; and then start the cycle over again.

Leadership Teams will submit their plans three times per year in Indistar—November, February, and May. Travis has made it very clear that "submit" means a static PDF of the plan that has been created. It does not mean done, over.

"The very new and exciting part for schools and for the districts is this transition from a neat and tidy paper plan that is submitted at the start of the year and maybe reviewed at the end of it... to an iterative, never-finished cycle of inquiry and the expectation that the plan that you submit in February ought to look different than the plan you submitted in November, and the one you submit in May ought to look different than the one submitted in February."

Because Travis has had the advantage of working in school improvement at the state, district, and school levels, I asked him to share his thoughts on the potential that Indistar can provide to those who use it.

"It requires a plan of action and accountability for every person involved. If we are committed to creating a high-achieving, more socially just educational environment for our children, then we have to mobilize the behaviors and practices that will make it happen. Indistar is about the people using the tool and the indicators it is built upon that are observable and measurable behaviors

that you can see. It reminds us that agendas and minutes are important not for their own sake, but because of what is decided in those meetings and how and what those decisions will mean for changing practice and behavior."

As for the changes that Travis hopes to see in schools and classrooms?

"My hope and aspiration is that we see deep collaboration among leadership teams that represent a variety of stakeholder perspectives. I would like to see authentic engagement with the tool and resulting conversations around things that matter most—laser focus on learning and student outcomes; meetings that are tight and oriented to student needs. Finally, that the plan of action is front and center in that process and not in a binder. Are they sticking to monitoring what they set out to do and how are they operationalizing that on a monthly basis? Those will be some of the *look fors*," described Travis.

If there is one thing that Travis wants you to take away from this first conversation—this prologue, as he called it—it's that this process of improvement is emerging and dynamic. It is inspiring a culture of collaboration and energy around equity and excellence. It's focusing on building relationships and staying open to possibilities at every turn and layer. And always, always, it's focusing Vancouver Public Schools to be responsive and aligned with what our students need in the place where learning and opportunity take hold.

And that, of course, would be in the classroom. ★

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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