

Indistars

STORIES FROM STARS IN THE FIELD

Lead Hill School District

Lead Hill, Arkansas

By Maureen Mirabito

This is a story about a district that should no longer exist, the perseverance of many who believed that it should, and the educators, students, and families there who are proving them right. Lead Hill School District is in the midst of a hero's journey and Indistar is aiding as its guide.

Things Were Looking Pretty Bleak

Located in North Central Arkansas just south of Branson, Missouri, Lead Hill is a small, rural district serving 370 students in grades K-12. More than 10 years ago, in 2004, the Arkansas legislature passed Act 60, which called for the consolidation of school districts when enrollment fell below 350 students for two consecutive years.

In Lead Hill, that meant dwindling enrollment year after year—from 425 to 410 to 400 to 380 and so on as students and families left the area in fear and with certain knowledge that the district would hit 350 and close.

As you can imagine, the impact of that certain fate devastated teacher retention rates, which devastated teaching and instruction, which devastated student learning. There was nothing cyclical about it: Lead Hill's existence was a fast-moving downward spiral. It had big problems.

"In any school when the turnover rate is high, there is a disconnect between curriculum, instruction, and assessment—the key elements required to improve learning outcomes for students. Relationships between schools and families falter, as do those among colleagues," explained Wanda Van Dyke, who served as the middle/high school principal for the past two years and is just completing her first month as Lead Hill's superintendent, "Lead Hill was very much a district affected by Act 60."

And Then Lights Started to Shine

Just over one year ago, in March 2015, newly elected Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson instituted a waiver removing the closure consequence to Act 60, which immediately restored some security to the district.

"The fear of closure had been removed," said Ms. Van Dyke, "but we had a lot of hard work and change ahead of us. We needed direction, we needed traction, and we needed to operate in a very different way."

The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) had some ideas. Since 2014, ADE had been piloting Indistar—a web-based school-improvement research, planning, and implementation tool—in districts and schools throughout the state. Lead Hill believed the straight-forward,

research-supported practices that Indistar was built on were exactly what they needed to find and maintain their focus and then make, step by step, the changes in practice and behavior that were desperately needed.

“Indistar, first and foremost, provided us with the benchmarks and reflective moments to assess and know deeply what great instructional strategies are and whether or not we used them in our school and in every classroom,” explained Ms. Van Dyke.

It was one thing for the staff to read the indicators of effective practices, but, as we’ve heard in the stories before this one, the transformation starts to take hold when the candle is held to the research behind the practices.

“We knew that we needed to work in instructional teams but the staff had never really done that before. We didn’t want those meetings to turn into staff meetings or venting sessions as they easily could have; we wanted them to remain focused on the specific actions and changes that each of us had to take and make to increase student achievement. Indistar, through the Wise Ways, was our guiding light in making that happen.”

The Process of Examination and Its Early, Connecting Illuminations

On paper, Lead Hill School District is comprised of two schools—a K-6 elementary school and a 7-12 high school; in practice, they now operate a lot like one school, in large part because of what they discovered through their work with the indicators of effective practice and the supporting research (i.e., Wise Ways). More and more, Lead Hill found itself doing things that made sense *because they were taking the time to know and understand (a) what they and their students*

needed and (b) what great schools did rather than what had always just been done in Lead Hill. A tough rut for any school to get out of, let alone one that was on the brink of closure and with a lot of rebuilding and recommitting to do.

“We couldn’t have scripted it better,” explained Ms. Van Dyke. “The Arkansas Department of Education embraced the Teacher Excellence Support System (TESS) by Charlotte Danielson as a framework for evaluating teacher effectiveness, which is pretty new to the district as well. When we discovered how completely in sync Indistar and the TESS is, we were overjoyed. We could actually see how the work we needed to do as a district and as schools aligned and integrated with the work we expected to see and needed to support in classrooms among all teachers.”

Arkansas requires its districts to assess a minimum of 18 out of a total of 88 indicators of effective practice within Indistar. Lead Hill, however, went the distance and made the choice to assess themselves against all eighty-eight.

“People would ask us, ‘Why are you doing that? Why spend so much time on all of those indicators?’



Here the Instructional Team for Grades 2-4 examines lesson plans and student learning data.

and I tell them, ‘Because we were coming from such a recommitted place with a desire to get it right that we needed to know exactly where we were and create a very clear vision for where we are going,’” said Ms. Van Dyke.

The district’s leadership team took the lead in becoming familiar with the Indistar platform, its practices, its research, and its resources.

“We had barely celebrated the news that we were no longer walking the closure plank than we learned we had been designated a focus school at the high school level,” shared Ms. Van Dyke. “So we were still feeling a lot of pressure, just for different reasons: all children were not learning; we had to do better so that they all were.”

The leadership team’s assessment process was not a simple, ‘Yes we are doing this,’ or ‘No, we are not doing this,’ as Ms. Van Dyke put it. Rather, it was an overwhelming and uncomfortable process as the members worked through each and every indicator and pored over the research that supported it.

“There were moments we would look at ourselves as say, ‘We are horrible, why aren’t we doing this already?’ and there were other times we’d say, ‘Can we do this?’ As defeated as we felt at times, we never stopped being committed. We knew we had to grow and, as their instructional leader and principal (at the time), I made a choice not to let negativity dominate the conversation. We would sit in silence for five minutes, which gets incredibly uncomfortable, and as we began to look at ourselves we could say, ‘No, we don’t do that right now but we should. How can we? What steps do we need to take to get started?’”

Ms. Van Dyke tells one story about two moments that changed things for everyone, almost at once.

“In one particular meeting we were talking about our use of time and instruction and voice—having voice. In particular, we were discussing the student voice and how at times we forget that they are part of our vision and our picture toward improvement. We hadn’t made any decisions but agreed it would be a recurring topic for this discussion. Two days later, our media specialist came to me and said there were a group of middle school students who wanted to speak with me and could I come.”

When you are a principal summoned by a group of middle school students, you are at once incredibly curious and nervous. Of course Ms. Van Dyke dropped what she was doing and went to those students as a listener; she was there to hear what they wanted her to know.

“The students in that room began to tell me that they were struggling. They told me that they just don’t have enough time to learn what they are expected to learn. They told me, in their own language, that teachers provide instruction but don’t give them enough time to fail and then time to correct their failures. ‘We need more time,’ they told me, and they asked me to talk to their teachers.”

Ms. Van Dyke did even better than that. She let her team know that a group of seventh and



The High School School Improvement Leadership Team has redesigned the principal’s job description to reflect the vision they’ve created for their school.

eighth graders wanted to talk with them about restructuring the schedule and instructional time. Ms. Van Dyke arranged the meeting where a panel of students spoke on behalf of many and began to share their needs with teachers.

“The students didn’t use words like collaborate and tiered instruction but what they said was ‘There are some of us who do not learn as fast as others and when we go so fast we can’t keep up and we want to give up. There are others who learn faster than your pace and so they get bored and drift off.’ They were asking for tiered instruction even if they did not know that is what it is called,” said Ms. Van Dyke.

And the teachers listened to every word.

“I was so proud of our teachers,” said Ms. Van Dyke. “When it was their turn to talk, they didn’t; they asked for more. They asked the students to describe what that kind of instruction would look like to them. Having continuously engaged in that reflective process with Indistar, it was natural for them to use it with their students. And the students had incredible ideas that we would have never heard had we not been ready to hear their voice and ask for their ideas. Our students understood what they needed and they called out to us for help.”

The teams got right to work.

“We began to look at how we schedule our classes and how we provide that instructional time,” explained Ms. Van Dyke. “We examined the structure of instructional delivery with specific focus on the time we provide students to prepare for and process new learning—including the opportunity to make mistakes, correct them, and get support, readjust our lessons, and monitor our instruction and student learning continuously. In teams, we looked at how we used pre-assessment and discovered that greater attention to how consistently we pre-assessed and then used the results would make a world of difference in our ability to plan and deliver instruction to meet the diverse learning needs of our students.”

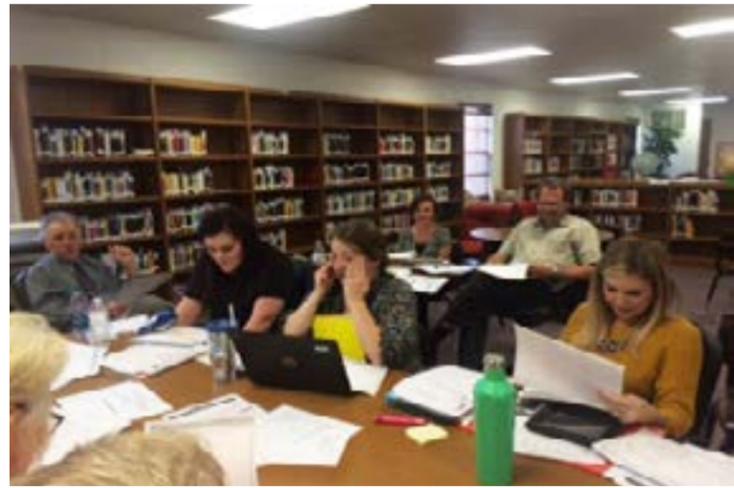
And there was something in it for the principal, too.

“The high turnover rates that we faced year after year as we waited for the closure call resulted in an average of five years of teacher experience in our district. The teachers spoke up to me, their principal, and said, ‘We really need someone to support us in delivering instruction to students the way they need it.’ And so we began to restructure our entire administrative team based

on the conversations we had been having in leadership teams around the indicators of effective practice. It was all coming together.”

One of the indicators that spoke very loudly to Ms. Van Dyke, particularly related to the need to better support teachers instructionally, was the indicator that states *a principal spends at least 50 percent of his or her time working directly with teachers on instruction.*

“When you are committed to improvement, you have to go the whole way. The assessment of that indicator was hard. Hearing teachers tell me, ‘We know you try really hard but, when two weeks go by and you are not in our classroom, it hurts



The High School Instructional Team continuously examines their practice to ensure they are not just doing things because they’ve always been done, but instead are doing things that are right for their students and school community.

us as teachers because we need you to help us grow.’ Hearing that is not easy. You have to lay your ego aside and listen hard and not get defensive about all the other things that are competing for your time. They need you in the classroom and that is all you need to hear, and what they need to hear is that you will do better. Together, we take a hard look at what has to happen next. Indistar requires that you do the emotionally hard work of letting go of practices that you apply but without a good reason for why.”

When You Know Better You Do Better

The staff at Lead Hill studied the indicators of effective practice and its research intensively. They saw how things were but also how things could be, which was where they lingered. They viewed self-reflection as a skill to master and widely apply; they asked hard questions that led to clear, connected, and obvious answers, then quietly wondered what they had ever been afraid of. This was growth and it felt great.

“We have always had two principals in Lead Hill—one at the elementary and another at the middle/high school, which I served in until just a couple of months ago. It’s just what had always been done. But as our conversations about what we could become deepened and took shape, we reexamined our entire administrative structure and how we used our resources based on needs and our vision for student learning, rather than comfort and familiarity,” explained Ms. Van Dyke.

Here is just a slice of what Lead Hill came to understand:

- They needed skilled and dedicated support to strengthen, align, and implement the curriculum.
- Instructional teams needed dedicated time to collaborate on the planning, assessment, delivery, review, and adjustment of instruction.
- The principals spent a lot of time assisting and connecting parents to resources in the community; related, the district wanted to improve communication with parents and increase opportunities for them to participate in their children’s learning.
- The principal needed to spend at least 50% of his or her time supporting teachers directly in the work of instruction.

What Better Looks Like

“We are a small district and, when the opportunity for us to rethink our structure emerged, we thought very carefully about what we wanted it to look like. We believed that Lead Hill, despite our elementary and middle/high school structure, could operate more effectively with one principal and an administrative position dedicated to the development of curriculum and instruction.



The Kindergarten-2nd grade Instructional Team meets regularly to examine student data and make adjustments to their instruction to meet identified needs, students and school community.

Our elementary principal was skilled and credentialed in curriculum and instruction, and when she moved into that newly created position, we began to advertise for a new K-12 principal.”

If you were to review the job description for that new K-12 principal, you would see expectations and practices that line up very closely with the indicators of effective practice in Indistar.

“We built the principal’s job description around what we know are critical pieces of success, including that he or she spend a minimum of 50% of his or her time working directly with teachers on instruction—in the classroom, and during instructional planning meetings.”

Better for Kids, Better for Families

As a rural district with a high poverty rate and a growth mindset, Lead Hill understood the connection between family engagement and student learning—that by involving families more meaningfully in their work to improve learning, their success would not only come more certainly but more swiftly. As part of their administrative restructuring, they hired a parent-student interventionist to work directly in support of that belief.

Better for Kids, Better for Teachers

When school started last year, Lead Hill was not meeting in instructional teams; however, they discovered very quickly through their work with Indistar and TESS that follow-through is critical to success. Lead Hill needed the hard work they were doing in their leadership team to connect with, influence, and be informed by the work that was happening in instructional teams.

Not wanting to move too fast, the district began the instructional team work in the middle school, where achievement needed the biggest boost. Those teachers met weekly to discuss individual student progress and what it meant for instruction.

“Before long, there was so much enthusiasm and traction for the work that was happening in the middle school instructional team, that elementary and high school started pleading for their

own time too. Each level (elementary and high) created and presented a plan of how they would work and what they would need,” explained Ms. Van Dyke.

“We secured resources for substitutes and made it happen with the least to no disruption to students. It is incredible to observe teachers coming to the same realizations that we were coming to: we can stop practices that no longer make sense or that aren’t working at all. Teachers are not spending their time in these meetings planning pep rallies, they are discussing and making decisions about instruction, how we use data, and how we spend our resources to support our priorities.”



The School Improvement Leadership Team at the Middle School examines the Wise Ways research to plan improvements to their practice.

Indistar Grows A School by Guiding the Growth of the People In Them

“When our students called us in to talk with us, they weren’t asking for more recess or longer lunch periods. Their request was about their learning; they were telling us what they needed as learners. Today, every person in this building considers themselves a learner,” said Ms. Van Dyke, “and that makes our possibilities for growth limitless.”

“Success with Indistar requires fidelity to its implementation. It requires you to lay your ego down and listen to the hard things. You must be reflective and investigative and humbled by what you see. You have to be a learner among learners who want to grow because it is not easy and there will be ugly parts that you must examine without blame or excuse—only to figure out what to change and do next for kids. Indistar will take you step by step through that process if you let it.”

Among its most significant and impactful successes: the attrition rate at Lead Hill has improved from 64% to 19%, and enrollment remains steady. People are growing and they are staying.

“Our teachers believe and witness every day that they make a difference. That is why they stay. As a rural school, we cannot pay top dollar and our salary base is at the minimum. We can’t change that. But what we can change is efficacy. We empower our teachers with a clear understanding of what good instruction looks like, support them in all ways to put those instructional practices to work in their classrooms, and ask for and use their feedback to make decisions about our future. Those decisions are connected and supported by the research that guides all of us.”

Ms. Van Dyke is proud of her district’s perseverance; she is proud of the team that they have become, of the disagreements they can have and work through because they all know that what is right for children will always unite them in the end. ★

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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