

Indistars

Washburn Elementary School, Auburn School Department, Maine

by Larry Kugler

If you'd have interviewed Holly Couturier, principal of Washburn Elementary School, following her initial Indistar training last September in Orono, Maine, she would have told you that Dirigo-Star (Indistar in Maine) was overwhelming and more than a bit confusing: Maine had identified 52 of the available indicators that schools were to focus on, a group of indicators that overwhelmingly concerned structures and organization of the Leadership Team. Holly would have also told you that, after participating in the orientation meeting, she believed that her staff was already addressing some of the indicators in the system and they would be able to recognize and build on their strengths. She returned from the training with the attitude that this was an opportunity that her staff and community should embrace.

Holly has been the principal at Washburn for 5 years. She has led this school whose student population fluctuates greatly during the year as a result of the highest free and reduced lunch rate (81%) in her district and the frequent evictions often associated with high poverty rates. The school's mobility rate, which this year ended with a 58% rate, fluctuates between 50% and 70% annually, which poses additional challenges for this school. Washburn Elementary added preK to its K-6 student population, providing another challenge and another opportunity,

according to Holly, who seems to have the ability to see opportunity in challenging situations. She has been able to infuse this belief and approach into her school and specifically into her Leadership Team.

When Holly returned from the Indistar orientation, she challenged her Leadership Team to dig deeply into the indicators and unpack them, using Wise Ways to stimulate and challenge their thinking. They identified some indicators that were "Limited Development or Implementation" and sought ways to improve their implementation. Holly engaged her entire staff in this process. Team leaders solicited input and opinions from all teachers in the school and brought back to the Leadership Team a broad array of information that informed their discussions and ultimate decision making. More important was the en-

The Leadership Team

From left: Lisa Coburn, Michelle Gagne, Jandrea True, Jessica Michaud, and Holly Couturier, principal



gagement of the entire staff in their improvement work because of Holly's belief that everyone needed to be an important part of the process.

This process produced results that Holly didn't anticipate. She and her team concluded that indicators are not meant to stand alone. They came to recognize that the indicators complement one another and tasks that are created for one indicator might well support the implementation of other indicators. The Task Report, available in Indistar, reinforced this observation and serves as one of Holly's "go to" reports.

Holly operationalizes her belief that transparency benefits their work. Agendas and minutes are posted on Google Docs so her entire staff knows what is being discussed and acted on at Leadership Team meetings. If you go to the Washburn Elementary School website, you'll find the procedure for accessing the Guest Login to the Indistar site, so parents and community members are kept informed about the school's progress.

Transparency manifests itself in other ways that directly impact teaching and learning at Washburn ES. The student data wall provides a focus for the school to address the learning needs of its students. Every month the literacy wall is updated to reflect student progress and the changing instructional needs of the entire student body. Data is updated, decisions are made,



groups are changed and teaching continues. Plans are already underway to expand the data wall to include mathematics instruction at Washburn.

The data wall provides a great example of a practice that was well underway at Washburn that was validated as the school began assessing Dirigo-Star indicators. The Leadership Team and the entire staff were able to recognize and celebrate their success collecting, analyzing, and using data effectively through the process of assessing the indicators. Additionally, because the school embraces Reading Recovery to address the needs of struggling first-grade students, they were able to address the RTI Indicators (RTI01, RTI02, and RTI03). They recognized their success with one practice that was already yielding positive results. This year will conclude with all but two first-grade students having met the district's first-grade benchmark. What a great start these students will have continuing to realize success through their elementary school experience!

Washburn ES began the 2013-2014 school year identified as a Priority School with the requirement that it utilize Dirigo-Star (Indistar). While Holly recognizes that it has had a significant impact on the functioning of her Leadership Team, she acknowledges it has not yet had the same broad impact on her Instructional Teams and classroom instruction.

She thinks the reason is because the emphasis of the 52 indicators is on establishing structures and organization of her Leadership Team. While she initially would have liked more flexibility selecting indicators directly impacting classroom instruction and the role of the principal, upon reflection and having a year's experience becoming more familiar with Dirigo-Star, she acknowledges that the more focused and prescriptive emphasis resulted in an effective Leadership Team and improved overall functioning of the school. As she passes the principalship to a new leader next year, she is optimistic that

the school will be able to select additional indicators that more directly impact classroom instruction and continue the improvements that have already taken place.

Holly was encouraged by the interviewer to take some credit for establishing a positive tone in her school and the expectation that engaging in the use of Dirigo-Star would help Washburn ES. She didn't see this as an additional burden but as an opportunity to recognize some of the positive things the staff was already doing. She didn't see the 52 indicators as overwhelming and stated to her superintendent, "We only have to do 52 indicators over a few years." One of her first activities was to introduce the 52 indicators to her entire staff, highlighting the fact that they were not overwhelming. She also introduced Dirigo-Star to her students' parents and encouraged them to use the Guest Login to become familiar with what the school was doing. She further asked parents to ask staff members throughout the year where the school was with the indicators and their improvement efforts. Teachers are better able to explain what is happening at Washburn and, as a result, Holly reports "parents have a better understanding of what we are doing and are therefore more supportive of the school."

Holly is leaving Washburn ES in a strong position to continue its improvement efforts. Dirigo-Star provides the opportunity for the school's new principal and staff to pick up right where they left off, recognizing and celebrating their strengths and identifying areas they can improve. Congratulations Holly Couturier and the staff and parents at Washburn Elementary School. ★

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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.

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.

Indistar was developed by the Academic Development Institute (ADI) in Lincoln, IL, and is now co-managed by ADI and the Center on Innovations in Learning, a center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

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