

Making Indistar Work for You

Indistar is a web-based tool that guides a district or school team in charting its improvement and managing the continuous improvement process. Indistar is called different things in different states. For example, Illinois calls it Rising Star, the Bureau of Indian Education calls it Native Star, and Idaho and Oklahoma call it the WISE tool. The system is also tailored for the purposes of each state, its districts, and its schools.

Indistar is premised on the firm belief that district and school improvement is best accomplished when directed by the people closest to the students. While the state provides a framework for the process, each district team and school team applies its own ingenuity to achieve the results it desires for its students-- students it knows and cares about.

Providing a district or school team with an improvement process that encourages local ingenuity and responsibility changes the dynamic between localities and the state. It also requires a “culture of candor” in which district and school personnel talk openly and honestly about their professional practices that contribute to student learning. When reports are electronically submitted to the state, there is no premium for “the right answer.” The right answer is the one the local team determines will bring the district or school to the highest level of professional performance for the benefit of students.

Placing this high level of confidence in the ability of district and school personnel to chart their own course also requires that the district or school team is given convenient access to tools, resources, and effective practice to get the job done.

Indistar, by whatever name, includes Wise Ways research briefs to support its indicators of effective practice. Indistar also provides Indicators in Action video modules demonstrating the practices, and the technology for capacity builders to coach the teams in real time. Indistar enables coaches to assist the teams with coaching comments about the team’s ongoing work.

Whatever Indistar is called in your state, here are some tips to make it work for you.

1. The Team: You may call your district or school team a Leadership Team or Improvement Team or something else. No matter what it is called, the team should include the chief administrator—superintendent for a district team and principal for a school team. Other members of the team are typically selected to provide proper representation. For example, a district team may include key district administrators, a school board member, and especially staff engaged with school improvement. A school team most likely includes teacher leaders of instructional teams, departments, or subject-area teams, as well as a representative from student support services such as a psychologist, counselor, or social worker. Some teams include a parent representative, and in other cases parents are consulted regularly for input into the work of the team. Teams vary in size, but a team of six to eight members usually proves to be the right size.
2. The Process Manager: Each team needs a process manager, a person who interfaces with the web system, prepares agendas and worksheets, distributes documents to team member in advance of meetings, and enters the team’s minutes and work products into the system. The

Process Manager also distributes coaching comments and Wise Ways research briefs to team members and enters the team's response to coaching comments in the system to maintain a dialogue with the coach. Experience has shown that teams function best when the Process Manager is not the superintendent or principal but maintains close communication with them.

3. An Educative Process: Discussing fully each indicator of effective practice contributes to each team member's understanding of research-based practice and the level of implementation of the practice in the district or school. Wise Ways and Indicators in Action provide ideal material for faculty meetings and professional development activities. The Guest Login allows all faculty, school board members, and parents to view the ongoing work and progress of the team and to understand the indicators. Reflecting on the work is part of the work.
4. Effective Teams: An effective team is one on which every member attends regularly, meetings start and end on time, and a focus is maintained on the work at hand. Team members do their homework, preparing for each meeting by reviewing Wise Ways and Indicators in Action. Discussion is rich, everyone participates equally, and decisions are made after full consideration and everyone's input. Minutes are kept and recorded in the system. Teams need sufficient blocks of time for their work, and teams are most effective when they meet twice a month.
5. Data for Decision Making: To accurately assess current performance relative to an indicator of effective practice, the team needs information. For example, the team may ask the principal to log his or her use of time for a couple weeks to know if the principal is able to spend at least 50% of his or her time on instruction. The team may ask for peer observations, principal observations, or self-reports by teachers to gauge the prevalence of specific instructional practices in classrooms. Planning and gathering data is an important part of the team's work.
6. Evidence of Full Implementation: When a team determines that an indicator is being "fully implemented" in the district or school, the system asks for evidence. The evidence is not to prove to the state or another external entity that the practice is fully implemented, but to satisfy the team that the practice is fully implemented for the benefit of students. Accountability is to the students. That is a high bar. The evidence should simply address the literal meaning of the indicator, nothing more and nothing less. Pages of documentation are not required, just a summary statement of what the documentation shows.
7. Keeping it Simple: When the team is assessing an indicator, it should not stray into planning for improvement. Simply assess the current status. What does it look like *right now*? During the planning phase of the improvement cycle, the team develops a series of tasks that it thinks will lead to full implementation. Straight-forward tasks, assigned to the people with chief responsibility, with target dates for completion keep everyone focused on the work at hand.
8. Consider the Context: The indicators are organized into categories and sub-categories that give them context. Consider clusters of related indicators when assessing and planning. For example, a set of indicators may address team procedures—scheduling time for meetings, preparing agendas, and recording minutes. This cluster of indicators may be reviewed as they relate to each other. Instructional indicators are arranged for specific modes of instruction, and specific

phases of delivery. For example, a set of indicators may have to do with how a new lesson is introduced. Consider these indicators in that context, and in relationship to each other.

9. Task Lists: The system allows the Process Manager to generate task lists that can be distributed to personnel for whom tasks have been assigned. Reviewing the tasks lists at meetings enables the team to record the completion of tasks and determine upcoming work. Tasks are the link between “where we are now” and “where we want to be”—full implementation of the objective. Tasks should be *specific* and *actionable*.
10. Focus on Support: When an indicator cannot be assessed as fully implemented, the planning phase should include the supports (training, coaching, for example) that staff need to reach the mark. The purpose of assessing indicators is not to “evaluate” individual performance but to determine what supports are needed to reach full implementation.
11. All Means All: Instructional indicators typically state that “all teachers. . .” routinely exhibit the effective practice. If some teachers are strong on this indicator, they are good candidates to assist other teachers or provide professional development. But the goal is always to reach universal application of the practice, consistently and school-wide.
12. So Many Indicators: That’s why it is a continuous process, not a plan to be achieved in one year. Districts and schools are places where many professional skills and practices are required. The indicators help the teams focus on what matters most in professional performance. Achieving big, global goals comes from masterful execution of many specific practices. We expect surgeons, attorneys, accountants, architects, and other professional to be masters of a wide array of skills relative to their professions. The same is true for educators. Indistar enables the team to set priorities and achieve “quick wins” as well as to doggedly pursue the implementation of more difficult indicators.
13. Interacting with Coaches: The system allows two people to coach a district team. Often one coach is provided by the state and another may be selected by the district—a consultant, for example. The system allows for the school team to be coached by three people—the superintendent, a district liaison (district staff person assigned to this duty), and an external coach who may be provided by the state or may be a consultant selected by the district. The best practice is for the coaching comments to come primarily from one person, with other coaches assigned to the team channeling their comments through that person. This avoids confusion. And the number of available coaches will vary from state to state, district to district, and school to school. In any case, the team should review the coaching comments and respond to them with comments or questions, establishing a positive dialogue.
14. Effective Coaching: The most effective coaching comments typically come in the form of questions that prompt the team to think more deeply or differently about its work or suggestions for accessing resources or considering new ideas. While the coach may challenge the team to consider the strength of the evidence it provides for full implementation, the team is not accountability to the coach but to the students. The coach helps the team understand

tasks and processes (staying on track), how to hold itself to a high standard and check its own work, and when to consider new possibilities.

15. Reporting Progress: The various reports that can be easily generated in the system, as well as the charts and graphs in *Where Are We Now?* provide a convenient way to regularly report progress to the school board, at leadership meetings, at faculty meetings, and to parent organizations. Remember that reports can be downloaded in a variety of document formats.
16. Building from Strength: Indistar enables teams to recognize and celebrate accomplishments. The process is not deficiency-focused, but balances attention to areas that need improvement with acknowledgement of areas of strength. Don't be afraid to applaud and shout "Woo Hoo" when an indicator is fully implemented.
17. The Right Spirit: Districts and schools have sometimes become burdened with planning processes that seem unproductive and compliance-driven. No need for that with Indistar. When teams are engaged in discussion about the things that matter most to them, and encouraged to apply their ingenuity in mastering their challenges and achieving their goals, the process is a professional joy. Embrace the process, and enjoy its richness. The time saved by efficient generation and electronic submission of reports can be applied to the more meaningful work of teams doing what they know is best for their students. Working on the work is part of the work, not a distraction from it.