

Augusta School District  
Augusta, Arkansas  
Interview with the K-12 Leadership Team

**By Maureen M. Mirabito**

If you ask the Leadership Team in Augusta, Arkansas what it takes to turn around a culture, shift a mindset, change a thought, and ACHIEVE they will tell you in one word: Persistence.

*But in what*, you want to know. You want to know because whatever they are persisting through, it is working. Augusta School District is a small, small district that serves about 372 students between its Elementary School (PK-6) and its High School (7-12).

“We have one stop light in Augusta, one dollar store, one grocery store. A lot of grandparents are raising children. Many teachers do not live here, some driving fifty miles to teach here,” says Pam Clark, coach for the Leadership Team and who works for the Arkansas Department of Education in school improvement. “Augusta is in the Delta region of Arkansas, on the east side of the state near the Mississippi River. When you say in the Delta, people know it’s the economically disadvantaged part of the state.”

Pam was assigned to Augusta School District three years ago when its High School was placed in priority status—the state’s designation for the most serious, lowest five percent of schools. Then, in 2014 the high school was also labeled as a school in Academic Distress. The Elementary School was identified as a Focus School and among the lowest 10 percent of schools in Arkansas.

“Kids do not come from homes where there are books. They do not know about Dolly Parton’s Imagination Station. They come to school and that is their first experience with learning. There are those old myths that some kids can’t learn. They are wrong. We know that they can learn just as well as anyone. We are proving it.”

In February, Augusta High School received notification that they were no longer in Academic Distress. And the good news doesn’t stop there. Recently the state instituted a new rating system for all public schools that considers metrics including increased student achievement and graduation rates. In March, Augusta received their grade: B.

“We like to think of it as Honor Roll,” says Joe Brown, first-year principal of both the elementary and high schools and newest member of Augusta’s K-12 Leadership Team.

It's a Thursday morning, bright and spring-like. Augusta's Leadership Team has invited me to attend part of their weekly Leadership Team meeting through a videoconference. I want to know more about this Leadership Team and their persistence and they are eager to share what they do and what they've learned.

Augusta began using Indistar three years ago, the same time the high school was placed in priority status.

Jessica Stone, K-12 Literacy Coach describes it this way, "We were in deep when we started, hoping to just get through today and maybe tomorrow and not focusing on the list of things we were supposed to be doing. We knew we were supposed to be doing them but we had no idea how."

Richard Greer, K-12 math coach and Leadership Team member agrees, "Using Indistar was overwhelming at first. It seemed there were all of these areas we needed to attack and it was tough to know where to start."

They started by meeting every Thursday morning as a Leadership Team.

"When we first started meeting, an hour was all the team could do," said Pam Clark. "Now, it is common for us to meet through lunch, into the early afternoon—four or five hours. We do not stop until we have done what we need to do to be successful. We celebrate. We look at math data, literacy data. We talk about individual students. We examine Wise Ways. We build plans and we think through how best to implement them."

Mr. Greer credits Ms. Clark with making the work manageable for them early on. "Our coach would pull a group of indicators to focus on each week. We would review the research, talk about what the indicator looked like, where we found it in our classrooms, plan for it, and know what we needed to do to fully implement it."

Richard said that establishing a process for understanding the indicators and building the structures and plans for their implementation was foundational. "Once we got the process moving, we were much more successful adding in more indicators rather than trying to do everything at once."

Part of that process involved practicing over and over again as a team to use the Wise Ways research to understand exactly what high achieving schools do. The Leadership Team considered every single detail—from how to determine where the practice might already exist in their schools to what needs to happen so that it exists everywhere all the time. Over time,

their persistence through this hard work, doing the same thing every week, taught them to function and operate collaboratively, candidly as a team.

“It wasn’t always like this, our culture of trust and honesty. We have struggled together every week, sometimes every day, through some tough realizations and difficult decisions, but always in the best interest of our students. We don’t come together just when it’s time for Indistar; we plan everything together now. We use each other to bounce ideas off of and get feedback for everything. We don’t take it personally when someone challenges us. We know that it is all about academic achievement and making sure that we are not just doing good enough—but that we are fully implementing indicators in every classroom in the best possible way for our kids,” explains Mr. Greer.

Student engagement indicators are ones the Augusta’s Leadership Team spends a lot of time on and that helped them to establish their footing as a team early on.

“We spent, and continue to spend, a lot of time talking about student engagement—at first we would talk about it week after week. It kept coming up because we just didn’t think we were seeing it. So we persisted in identifying what it looked like and how we could gather evidence when we saw it and what we needed to do when we didn’t,” explained Ms. Stone.

The team looked at research over and over again with teachers in their Instructional Team Meetings (Augusta calls them PLCs), they created forms for walkthroughs and contacted their cooperative agency (a regional office that exists to provide technical assistance and support to districts and schools) for help on best ways to collect and gather evidence for student engagement that would measure up with what Wise Ways expected. But they didn’t stop there.

“We invited students to a Leadership Team meeting and asked them what teachers did that was engaging and what they did that was not engaging. We filled up three chart pages with detailed practices and examples.”

How did the student’s feedback align with the research?

“It was right on,” said Mr. Greer.

Between the research and the student testimonials that supported it, the Leadership Team started to work intensively in their weekly PLCs with teachers on various aspects of student engagement.

“Having our student voices, supported by the research, gave us a solid foundation and platform for making changes to instruction and technique with teachers. We said, ‘Our students are saying this, research is saying this, so how will we make it happen?’ It was what we needed

to get our teachers involved and hear their ideas and get their buy-in for making changes,” said Jessica Stone.

Every Thursday, the Leadership Team spends part of their meeting conducting classroom walkthroughs, some weeks at the elementary level, some weeks at the high school. They all look for the same thing each week, and they look for student engagement a lot. They created a form to use for walkthroughs and when they’ve completed them, they return to their Leadership Team room to discuss what they saw.

“In the beginning I led the discussions, but now each team member takes a turn describing what they saw,” explains coach Pam Clark. “We used to look for weaknesses until my unit leader, Dr. Richard Wilde, met with us one day and talked about a strategy to improve teacher effectiveness. He introduced us to Ivan Fitzwater’s belief that ‘If I’m working with you, I’m always going to focus on your strengths. If I’m raising your strengths up, then your weak areas will follow.’ So we focus on strengths now.”

Two things happen after the team completes their classroom walkthrough discussions: one, a member is responsible for providing the teacher with written and verbal feedback *that day*, and two, the team combines walkthrough findings with the other data they’ve examined to plan for the following Monday’s PLC with teachers. Teachers are grouped into PLCs based on the findings and areas of need.

“Our PLCs are not static groups. The composition changes each week depending on which indicators we are looking at, what student data reveal to us, and what we see in our classroom walkthroughs,” explains Ms. Stone.

“We are always sending the work that we do in Leadership Teams to the teachers. We want them to know which indicators we are focusing on, what we are looking at, and what the research says. Our meetings always end with tasks to complete and action items to address in the PLC,” adds Ms. Clark, “and we share that information immediately with all teachers.”

There is a rhythm to this team, a cadence. You can tell they are a team that practices a lot; except you know that in their mind and by their actions, it is always the big game—this team suits up every day. They are prepared to win.

Pam Clark: “When we first started working together and were working hard at the indicators, I’d say to them, ‘An achieving school does this...., or, An achieving school is in constant communication.’ I was always using the phrase, *an achieving school*. It’s become our mantra. If I forget to say it now, they remind me, ‘Ms. Clark, an achieving school does this.’ We

are creating the mindset that they do not have to be a priority school, they can be an achieving school.”

I ask the principal, Mr. Joe Brown, what Indistar has meant to him as a first-year principal and what his thoughts were about this team.

“As a first year principal, I felt like a pinball but Indistar gave me a map of things to do and how to plan and structure my days and meet objectives that the schools must meet. There is a lot of turnover in this school—instructional and leadership—but we have built a system and a culture of achievement here at Augusta so that anyone can walk in and know what is happening, what the expectations are, and what the focus is.”

In addition to student engagement, another area of focus that has resulted in big changes at Augusta relates to the indicators that address Assessing and Monitoring Mastery, specifically the use of pre- and post-test assessments to assess student mastery of objectives, personalize instruction, and re-teach based on results.

“As a team, we wanted to look to see how many teachers do pre- and post-tests and the types of assessments they use—verbal, written, etc.,” explains Pam Clark.

The Leadership Team met with the teachers in their Monday PLC, explained to them what they were assessing, assured them that it was not for evaluative purposes, and asked each teacher to put every assessment they administered into a file folder for an entire month.

“The principal wanted to learn what the teachers were doing, to get a snapshot of what was happening across the district in terms of assessments. At the end of the month, we collected the file folders.”

As a Leadership Team, they created a rubric to organize and analyze the assessments based on whether they were summative or formative and by subject area, by grade level, even by elementary school and by high school.

“It was eye opening because we discovered that many teachers were only doing summative assessments and very few used a variety of assessment methods. This led us to further inquire how many teachers were grading assessments. Very few. We suspected, and confirmed, that students with low-achieving grades—D’s and F’s— for that period were not assessed along the way and therefore not receiving intervention support in time for the summative assessment,” said Pam.

Added Richard, “We brought assessments to the table probably three different times trying to find the best technique for building a system around implementing formative ones.

We'd start it, monitor it, bring it back, and revise it. But going through the process really built buy-in from everyone to change how we operated. We aren't okay with status quo or just meeting compliance. We all really want to improve and achieve. We go back to the drawing board if it's not working."

Another persistence tactic by the Augusta Leadership Team: they start every meeting with a celebration of success.

"In all our work, we try to be extremely positive. It is not uncommon for Mr. Brown to call an afterschool meeting for faculty to tell them what we're seeing in walkthroughs and how great they are doing. On days we see high student engagement, or bell-to-bell instruction, he might call everyone to the cafeteria last period to celebrate that success," says Pam Clark.

The team had just finished their weekly celebration of successes when I joined the meeting. I asked them to share some of what they were celebrating.

Lisa Martin, Design Facilitator, was celebrating the award of an Apple Grant that 160 schools across the US will receive. The Apple Grant will provide iPads for all students, MacBooks and iPads for all teachers. It will also boost their technological infrastructure at the school. Later that afternoon, Lisa was meeting with a representative from another grant they'd applied for and were almost certain to receive: an AT&T grant that would provide every student at Augusta High School with WiFi at home for three years. "Considering how poor and remote many of our students are, this will change their life."

Jerry Vaughn, external provider from the Arkansas Leadership Academy who attends every meeting and supports the Leadership Team in building their capacity was celebrating that "the progress is in the struggle" and that their B grade was something they have worked hard for and persevered to earn.

Jessica Stone, K-12 Literacy Coach and Richard Greer, K-12 math coach, were celebrating that elementary and high school students met their interim measurable objectives for the third time in a row *and* already met their annual measurable objective.

Cheryl Winningham, Counselor, celebrated the smooth rollout of PARCC testing.

But perhaps the one success that reflects the change in mindset and the shift in culture at Augusta was this success, one that the team shared together:

Next month, 26 seniors will graduate from Augusta High School; each one of those seniors applied to the community college located about an hour away. Over the past couple of years, Augusta has instituted a practice of placing college acceptance letters on the wall when

you walk into the school. The Leadership Team told me to ask how many letters had been placed on that wall. So I did, I asked.

Their response: **Twenty-six letters of acceptance are hanging on the wall as you enter Augusta High School.**

“We don’t know how many will go, but to have them fill out the application and know they have a chance, that’s changing a culture. That is our goal,” said Pam Clark.

The team received news recently that their coach, Pam Clark, was leaving the Arkansas Department of Education. She will leave to serve as an Assistant Superintendent in a district—guiding and coaching and supporting other educators to do their work better, to persist.

I asked the Leadership Team what will happen next year, how will you sustain your work? They hadn’t expected this question, but they were prepared for it.

Jessica Stone responds first, “Over the past three years, the amount of intensive support that we’ve needed has reduced as we’ve grown and strengthened. We are headed in that direction of sustainability and structure.”

Mr. Greer puts it this way, “Ms. Pam and Mr. Jerry gave us the level of support that we needed at first. We are now a Leadership Team that stands on its own feet; takes care of its own schools. We’ve overcome so many obstacles, but the system and the processes are in place. If we have a problem, we will bring it to the table, we will analyze the possibilities, we will make plans for implementation. We will keep doing what we do every day, not just once a week.”

You hear their confidence, feel their conviction, and sense the pride in their achievement. And you just know that they will continue to persist and achieve.

On their website, you can learn all kinds of information about Augusta School District. What stood out was their creed. It stood out because it doesn’t just exist on their website, it exists in every action of every member of this Leadership Team and what they believe in and expect of their entire school community:

YESTERDAY IS HISTORY  
TOMORROW IS A  
MYSTERY  
TODAY IS A GIFT.  
THAT’S WHY WE CALL IT  
THE PRESENT.  
WORK HARD.  
BELIEVE IN YOURSELF.  
NEVER GIVE UP.