

## **Cedarville High School, Arkansas**

**Interviewee:** Claire Pence, Site-based School Improvement Specialist + Leadership Team Coach

By Maureen M. Mirabito

You have to listen closely because she speaks softly, though definitively, but the first thing that Claire Pence will tell you about the Focus School designation of Cedarville's only high school in 2012 is that it was a blessing in disguise. As is usually the case with circumstances that demand change, expose vulnerabilities, and require difficult (and different) action, that realization was not immediate.

In fact, in almost the same breath that Cedarville High School learned they had raised achievement scores from the low 50's to the low 70's (a cause for celebration they thought), they also learned of their Focus School designation—achievement gaps persisted and action would be taken.

Cedarville School District is located in Crawford County, Arkansas, the southern edge of the Ozark National Forest. The district serves about 1,000 students and their families in its high school, middle school, and elementary school, which draw from Cedarville and several small neighboring towns. Poverty is prevalent and generational there, with 100% of students eligible to receive free breakfast and lunch.

Soon after their designation, the high school Leadership Team in Cedarville School District received a visit from an Arkansas Department of Education representative. The official answered questions and provided information that clarified what the designation meant, what it entailed, and what it required, including a targeted school improvement plan, with the suggestion to use Indistar, a school improvement action planning and implementation platform.

Indistar was not new to Claire Pence, the district's site-based school improvement specialist and Leadership Team coach. She had received training on Indistar years earlier, though at the time it didn't go any further in the district. Now, as a Focus School, the State encouraged its use. Rather than grumble and complain, this high school and its community of educators united in effort and commitment to

improvement. Whether it was the designation as a Focus School or the implementation of Indistar that brought the high school together is akin to the chicken or the egg debate: both played a critical role in the cultural and instructional shifts that happened (and continue to happen) in Cedarville School District, and neither would have happened without the other.

Before they did anything else, the Leadership Team at the school invited an education instructor and former Scholastic Audit assessor from the University of Arkansas at Fort Smith to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment of their school. She examined practices related to curriculum, instruction, culture and climate, and leadership. The results would inform the school's areas of focus and the selection of indicators of effective practice, which they would use to assess, create, and monitor tasks within Indistar.

At least, that's what they thought. It wasn't long before they realized that Indistar provided them with information and developed their capacity to do much more than just plan and track progress. It provided them with the language, the research, and the space to examine and discuss their own individual practices and understandings, their effectiveness and efficiency in working together as an entire community, and the expertise and knowledge that each one of them could contribute to the growth and improvement of another. It built their capacity to examine and discuss these things in a very focused and interconnected manner around three areas that emerged from the needs assessment:

1. Time On Task: improve classroom management practices
2. Instruction: deliver engaging, high-yield instruction to all students
3. Curriculum: align curriculum at all levels, develop and deliver collaborative and rigorous lesson plans

To start, the Leadership Team selected indicators of effective practice that supported each of the three focus areas, resulting in approximately four indicators for each area. True to Indistar best practice, they rolled up their sleeves and began the

detailed, bit-by-bit, no-stone-left-untuned work of creating and assigning tasks that would lead to attainment of each indicator.

Ms. Pence has two pieces of advice for the task phase of Indistar. 1) Read the Wise Ways research again and again to *really* understand what the indicator means and what it says must happen; 2) Write tasks in the form of SMART goals—make sure they are very Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Relevant, and Time-sensitive.

The Leadership Team took on the responsibility of assessing indicators and creating tasks, but they didn't have the final say. The teaming structure in Cedarville High School includes weekly Leadership Team meetings and weekly Content Team meetings; every other week, grade-level teams meet. When tasks are created, a Leadership Team representative shares them with the Content Teams, which give feedback to improve the tasks. This practice accomplishes a few things: a) it strengthens the tasks and their attainability; b) it ensures the proper sequencing of tasks and activities (including addition of tasks that might have been overlooked); c) it creates buy-in and ownership among the entire school; d) it gets everyone on the same page, speaking the same language. The tasks, says Claire, from building them to carrying them out, is where the change happens.

Claire Pence shared several stories to illustrate this point. One in particular demonstrates how a private discussion about essential questions escalated into a school wide practice of teacher inquiry, collaboration, and professional development. The school was working on tasks related to curricular alignment, specifically the development of standards-aligned units of instruction for each subject and grade level. The practice of developing essential questions and guiding questions came up in the Wise Ways research discussion of this indicator at Content Team meetings. There it was discovered that some teachers did not know what essential and guiding questions were and how they contributed to well-planned units and lessons. This discovery resulted in the development of an additional task: train teachers on the purpose and practice of developing essential questions and guiding questions.

The Leadership Team identified teacher experts within the school who were particularly skilled in understanding and developing these questions and assigned them the task of training other teachers.

As part of their improvement process, teachers now upload units of instruction and daily lesson plans on a Google drive, which allows the Leadership Team to assess quality and implementation of instructional planning. This informs professional development needs and potential teacher providers; it also strengthens their community of practice and trust.

Without Indistar and the attention to its research, the opportunity to establish foundational knowledge and practices might have gone unnoticed. The opportunity to build collaborative and trusting relationships among teachers might have been missed.

In another story, Claire tells of a teacher who, when reviewing research related to effective instructional practices, asked for clarification on non-linguistic representations. She had no idea what they were. Except, she did.

“When you walk into her room,” as Claire put it, “it was like the scene from the *Wizard of Oz* that moves from black and white to color. She had non-linguistic representations hanging from the ceiling.”

These are just two of the stories that Claire shared about how Indistar has helped the school community at Cedarville High School to continuously grow and improve. “We grew beyond where we were,” says Claire, “and we don’t want to stop. We want to keep going.”

When asked about the culture of trust and candor, Claire says, “There is no scolding, no scoffing. When someone doesn’t know something, there is only encouragement and the opportunity to lift up experts who can help.”

In Cedarville High School, the implementation of Indistar—and the interactions and specific, detailed discussions among educators that good implementation elicits—eliminated guesswork—guesswork around what others were doing, what research says should be happening, what some people knew and others didn’t—and replaced it with the certainty—certainty of purpose, of practice, of expectations and responsibilities.

Indistar replaced guesswork with the certainty of individual, school, and student improvement.

Since Claire is the site-based improvement specialist at the high school and middle school in Cedarville School District, she was regularly visited by the middle school principal who would say to her, “I want my teachers to do exactly what the teachers at the high school are doing. I want a password to Indistar.”

It took a little bit of time, but Claire confirmed that this year, the middle school principal got his password, and he has moved full tilt with Indistar, its research, and the development of tasks to achieve the indicators of effective practice.

Claire said that one of the greatest understandings that Indistar has helped the Leadership Team to build is that improvement does not end with the completion of a task or the attainment of an indicator. “It feels great to check them off, and the evidence that fills up those blank spaces to show we are improving is so exciting. That’s where you feel the momentum shifting. But,” Claire says, “we constantly revisit indicators, develop new tasks, achieve progress in different and exciting ways. Our work is never done.”

In Cedarville High School, it’s just done better.

I asked Claire what she was most proud of, what she wanted everyone to know about Cedarville and their success. Again softly but also definitively she said, “Our teachers. We are 100% free and reduced lunch, and our schools now score as well as schools around us without the challenge of such a high poverty rate. Our teachers could go to a bigger district, receive better pay, but they stay. They are so dedicated to this work and the culture we have built, they stay.”