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Executive Summary

Efforts to improve student learning have come under increasing scrutiny as a myriad of federal and state requirements demanding immediate results are juxtaposed with state and regional resources to support continuous improvement. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has worked intentionally and strategically during the past five years to realize a One State, One Plan goal that aligns the various initiatives (e.g., Title I, Special Education, and ELL) with available resources.

In the past three years, significant ISBE resources have been used to provide statewide professional development and coaching services and to develop a Web-based continuous improvement platform called Rising Star. The goal of Rising Star is to ensure that districts follow a data- and evidence-based continuous improvement planning, implementation, and monitoring process. ISBE has engaged in a cycle of inquiry during the past several months to examine if the allocated resources are having the desired effect (i.e., improving student learning and adult performance through a systemic and systematic continuous improvement process).

As part of its cycle of inquiry, ISBE sought to learn how educators in Illinois use Rising Star and the extent to which they perceive it as an effective platform for continuous improvement. As of spring 2013, 2,118 schools (48 percent of Illinois schools) and 765 districts (88 percent of Illinois districts) engaged in continuous improvement planning using Rising Star on the IIRC. In partnership with the Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) at American Institutes for Research, a statewide survey was administered in fall 2013, and 2,908 respondents provided feedback. Approximately two thirds of the survey respondents were school-level users (i.e., a teacher or a principal), and 15 percent were district personnel.

Between January and February 2014, six focus groups were held across the state with 136 persons attending and giving additional insights and suggestions on how to improve Rising Star. Focus group participants were more broadly representative of school district staff (i.e., superintendents, central office administrators, teachers, and principals). Participants represented a diverse mix of districts from across the state (in terms of size and geographical location). They also represented varying years of experience using Rising Star.

Key Findings

- **Use**
  - Of survey respondents, 93 percent indicated that their district or schools are currently using Rising Star, with more than one half of the current users using Rising Star for at least two years.
  - The most frequent uses of Rising Star are to build teams, review data, identify critical needs, assess indicators, monitor implementation of plan tasks and indicators, and create a focused improvement plan.

- **Benefits**
  - Approximately 70 percent of survey respondents said that Rising Star is most supportive in creating a shared purpose, focusing the work of a district or a school,
clarifying roles, and aligning programs and initiatives. Focus group respondents supported these results.

- Focus group respondents identified other important benefits of using Rising Star:
  - Broader participation in the process
  - Use of a common language, structure, and vision for improvement
  - Consistent procedures that support improvement planning
  - Conversations focused on improvement

### Challenges

- Although one half of survey respondents reported that the indicators of effective practice in Rising Star are relevant in supporting continuous improvements, others found the indicators to be lacking in authenticity (difficult to interpret, vague), too large in number, and unwieldy (unmanageable, incoherent).

- Nearly one half of survey respondents (48 percent) reported that the Wise Ways provide current and relevant research for each indicator to a moderate extent. Some respondents indicated that the research featured in Wise Ways is too wordy, out of date, not clearly aligned to indicators, or not applicable to multiple contexts (e.g., rural districts, high-risk school).

- Nearly 90 percent of survey respondents viewed Rising Star platform as moderately to minimally helpful in monitoring progress toward improved student performance, often due to challenges with the functionality of the platform.

- Focus group participants noted that the data input and retrieval process is cumbersome.

- Forty-eight percent of survey respondents believe that the state’s expectations for using Rising Star are somewhat clear or unclear. Related to the lack of clarity on expectations, focus group participants believed that the lack of overall Rising Star guidance has led to low levels of district and school buy-in.

- Training resources, and support for implementing Rising Star are lacking or not beneficial according to focus group and survey respondents. This includes little to no feedback about progress and limited “just in time” support.

- Focus group participants expressed frustration with mixed messages from ISBE about the state’s goal of One State, One Plan and the myriad expectations for multiple single standing plans, for example, Title I, technology, e-rate, and professional development. Contributing to this frustration are the multiple legislated requirements, including new teacher evaluation system, 5 Essential Survey, response to intervention, local assessment and growth data sets, and literacy goals that districts and schools are expected to implement.

### Key Recommendations from Focus Group Participants

- **Content: Indicators**
  - Reduce, reorganize, clarify, and provide examples of indicators.
  - Allow flexibility in creating or choosing indicators based on district needs.
• Do not tie accountability to *all* indicators.

**Content: Wise Ways**

• Simplify and regularly update Wise Ways to be more relevant to school and district context.

• Build a stronger alignment between Wise Ways and its corresponding indicator(s), ensuring the research used to define the indicators is broader, deeper, more diverse, and current.

**Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Functionality**

• Improve the functionality of the Rising Star platform through adding, modifying, and deleting specific items (e.g., clarify labels, add a save button, include a dropdown menu for evidence review, provide a way to track changes over time, streamline access).

• Introduce a portal that allows for the broader community to see a public-facing version of the plans.

**Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Orientation and Guidance**

• Clarify expectations for using Rising Star, including use and collection of artifacts.

• Develop and consistently provide a comprehensive Rising Star orientation session for new users that would not only address technical features of the platform but also would provide step-by-step procedures for entering and submitting information.

• Establish realistic timelines that are consistently adhered to statewide.

**Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Ongoing Support and Training**

• Provide ongoing human resource support (e.g., coach on request, chat room, plan feedback, phone technical assistance).

• Offer quality training using a variety of delivery methods and on a variety of topics.

**Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Relevance and Alignment**

• Provide examples of what the One State, One Plan should look like and how it will benefit stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, community).

• Align with other district or school processes or plans (e.g., professional development plan for common core state standards, new teacher evaluation).

**Conclusion**

Although Rising Star is not yet perfected as a platform for continuous improvement, many Illinois districts have accepted it as a viable choice. Many users consider the components of Rising Star to be useful and supportive of a strong continuous improvement process. Thus, ISBE should consider strengthening Rising Star by ensuring that it embeds the most recent research about what influences districts to improve and yields useful information that districts and schools can readily put into practice to enact meaningful change.
Continuous improvement, by definition, is about improving teaching and learning, not compliance. However, the survey data suggest that districts and schools need clear communication about why they should engage in continuous improvement and why a more coherent statewide system of support to implement the process with fidelity is needed.

Many participants commended ISBE for this detailed process and support ISBE’s quest for a One State, One Plan. They encouraged ISBE to continue modeling continuous improvement and repeat the inquiry cycle on a regular basis to monitor the progress and improvements made.
Acknowledgements

ISBE and MWCC have made great efforts to objectively review the use, quality, and usability of Rising Star. However, it would not have been possible without the support and help of many individuals and organizations. We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all of them, especially the nearly 3,000 educators who completed online surveys and the more than 125 individuals who participated in focus group sessions.

We are highly indebted to the following individuals for their willingness to facilitate focus groups as well as for giving their time and expertise to collecting information regarding how Rising Star can be improved.

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Introduction

ISBE’s purpose in launching Rising Star was to introduce a common language for district and school improvement planning, to integrate the Eight Essential Elements for Effective Education with accompanying effective professional practice indicators, and to provide a tool robust enough to support a team-based continuous improvement process. In 2010, Illinois adopted Rising Star, which originated as Indistar, a process created by the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII). The early Rising Star adopters migrated from the CII platform to the next generation of Rising Star, which is further supported by Northern Illinois University (NIU) and the Illinois Interactive Report Card (IIRC). As of spring 2013, 2,118 schools (48 percent of Illinois schools) and 765 districts (88 percent of Illinois districts) engaged in continuous improvement planning using Rising Star on the IIRC. The intent was to blend the indicators of effective practice with the data traditions of IIRC and to support additional key state initiatives and grants, such as Title I schoolwide and districtwide planning. This process involved the following three activities:

- **Linking research to the indicators of effective practice.** Teams can choose from a menu of 155 indicators of professional practice: 50 at the district level and 105 at the school level. Research briefs that inform teams about why each practice is desirable support these indicators.

- **Integrating work across initiatives.** Indicators have been tagged to assist in the process of meeting the many federal and state planning needs and requirements, such as for English language learners, Race to the Top, and Title I.

- **Leveraging resources** (i.e., time, people, materials, and money) in support of the one plan.

ISBE is currently engaged in a cycle of inquiry to examine if the allocation of resources is having the desired effect (i.e., improving student learning and adult performance through a systemic and systematic continuous improvement process). To better understand how Rising Star is helpful at the local level and how it might be improved, ISBE, with support from MWCC, administered a statewide online survey of Illinois school and district leaders. Nearly 3,000 educators and administrators responded to the survey. Findings from the survey guided the next phase of ISBE’s cycle of inquiry: in-depth focus groups with a sample of survey respondents who expressed a willingness to participate in a face-to-face discussion about Rising Star in their regions. The objectives of the focus groups were threefold:

1. To deepen the understanding of the utility and effectiveness of Rising Star as a platform for continuous improvement in Illinois based on the results of the fall survey
2. To further describe and identify potential improvements to address the challenges districts face in using Rising Star as a platform for continuous improvement
3. To provide additional data that will serve as the basis for making recommendations to improve Rising Star

This report summarizes key findings from the fall surveys and winter focus groups, providing insights into how educators are using Rising Star, their perceptions of the benefits and challenges to using Rising Star, and their suggestions for how to improve Rising Star.
Methodology

Data

The data presented in this report come from an online fall 2013 survey of district and school staff developed and conducted by ISBE, with support from MWCC, which was followed by a series of statewide focus groups conducted in January and February 2014. The goal of the survey was to learn about respondents’ use and perceptions of Rising Star. The goal of the focus groups was to deepen the understanding of the utility and effectiveness of Rising Star based on the results of the fall survey. In addition, the focus groups sought to further describe and identify potential improvements to address the challenges districts face in using Rising Star as a platform for continuous improvement.

Teachers (37 percent) and principals (27 percent) composed the majority of the respondents to the survey. Other types of respondents included counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other paraprofessionals working in or with schools. Principals (22 percent), teachers (18 percent), and superintendents or assistant superintendents (19 percent) made up the majority of the 136 focus group participants. Process managers (11 percent) and other district staff (12 percent) made up almost a quarter of participants. A number of participants (8 percent) did not specify a role or their role was not documented in the notes that were analyzed. Focus group participants represented a diverse mix of districts from across the state (in terms of size and geographical location). They also represented varying years of experience using Rising Star.

Sampling

Because the study sought to gather as much feedback as possible from across Illinois, the research team employed a nonprobability convenience sampling approach. That is, the survey was voluntary and was open to all subscribers to the online weekly newsletter of the Illinois state superintendent of education as well as members of the following organizations: the Illinois Principals Association, the regional offices of education (ROEs), and the intermediate service centers (ISCs). Individuals in the NIU IIRC continuous improvement planners’ database were also invited to participate.

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The total number of survey responses received was 2,908, of which 2,702 (93 percent) indicated that their districts or schools currently use Rising Star and were thus eligible to respond to the survey’s core questions related to Rising Star quality and usability. Focus group participants were respondents to the statewide Rising Star survey who expressed a willingness to take part in regional discussions about Rising Star. Nearly 400 survey respondents volunteered.

From their responses, ISBE and MWCC organized a total of 21 regional focus groups in which 136 teachers, school and district administrators, process managers and coaches, and other district and school staff participated (Table 1). As much as possible, each focus group was made up of individuals in the same or similar role, but this was not always the case as there were too few participants in some locations to form distinct role-alike focus groups.

Table 1. Focus Group Dates, Locations, and Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of Focus Groups</th>
<th>Total Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-17-2014</td>
<td>NIU, Naperville</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-22-2014</td>
<td>South Cook ISC, Chicago Heights</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-24-2014</td>
<td>Illinois Education Association, Bloomington</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-28-2014</td>
<td>ROE 25, Mount Vernon</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-30-2014</td>
<td>KIDS ROE, Loves Park</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-18-2014</td>
<td>Illinois No Child Left Behind State Conference, Chicago</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>21</strong></td>
<td><strong>136</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Analyses**

The figures and the overall percentages of responses to the survey items are based on descriptive analyses of how the respondents answered specific survey questions. Focus group data were analyzed by content analysis (Patton, 1990). Using this method, the research team coded notes taken by the official note taker for each focus group into broad topic areas aligned with the focus group questions. These notes were then coded into more specific subthemes as they emerged. Employing this process of iterative coding, researchers were able to sort the data and identify recurrent themes. This report presents the key findings and recommendations for improvement that emerged from this type of analysis.

**Limitations**

Limitations of the data provided in this report include the following:

- The convenience sample does not truly represent the larger population. Thus, inferences about the larger group(s) from which they were drawn cannot be made (i.e., findings may not be generalizable).
The presence of a facilitator and note taker during focus groups may have affected participants’ responses.

Focus group analysis was done on notes taken by experienced note takers; these notes, however, were susceptible to note taker and analyst biases.

All of the survey questions were voluntary and anonymous. Thus, there is no way of knowing which school or district the respondents represented, the number of respondents per district or school, or how many districts and schools participated in the survey.

Weighted adjustments were not employed to account for regional differences, respondent characteristics, or other factors.

Limited relational data is reported (e.g., how the perceived extent of characteristics of the continuous improvement process from the survey relates to the actual implementation of those characteristics in a district or school as described in focus groups).

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2 Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was not included in the analysis because only three survey respondents were from CPS, and it does not use Rising Star as its platform for continuous improvement.
Use of Rising Star

The vast majority of the survey respondents (93 percent) reported using Rising Star to drive the continuous improvement process in their districts or schools. Among the 7 percent of respondents who reported not using Rising Star ($n = 108$), nearly one third (31 percent, or 34 respondents) indicated that they considered Rising Star but chose another continuous improvement process. Another 28 percent (or 30 respondents) never considered using the Rising Star platform for their continuous improvement process. About half of focus group participants have one to five years of experience using Rising Star. More than 40 percent, however, did not specify their years of experience.

Rising Star is intended to be a practical tool that facilitates continuous improvement planning and systematic implementation. To more fully understand how Rising Star is used, survey participants were asked about the most useful components, and focus group participants were asked to describe how the platform is used in their district or school to support continuous improvement. The most frequently useful Rising Star components identified and discussed were the following:

- Building the team and reviewing district and school information, as well as IIRC data
- Identifying critical needs and assessing indicators
- Monitoring implementation of plan tasks and indicators
- Creating a focused improvement plan

Building the Team and Reviewing Data

67 percent of survey respondents considered building the team and reviewing data and information as useful to very useful. Focus group participants did not speak to this directly but did describe how a district-level improvement team (with representation from schools) selects priority indicators either based on a review of Wise Ways, an assessment of previously used indicators of improvement, or in conjunction with existing data related to student performance (e.g., School Wide Information System™ (SWIS), Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP)).

Identifying Critical Needs and Assessing Indicators

About two thirds of survey respondents indicated that Rising Star was useful to very useful for assessing indicators, and 55 percent suggested that it was easy or very easy to do this using Rising Star.

Focus group discussions supported survey results. Using Rising Star to identify critical needs and assessing indicators was the most frequently cited use among participants. They typically described a process of identifying critical needs and assessing indicators in which a district-level improvement team (with representation from schools) selects priority indicators either based on a review of Wise Ways, an assessment of previously used indicators of improvement, or in conjunction with existing data related to student performance. This structured process of identifying critical needs and assessing indicators has helped to create shared understanding and a common language across schools within a district as well as among multiple stakeholders and players in the improvement process.
Monitor Implementation of Plan Tasks and Indicators

57 percent of survey respondents indicated that Rising Star was useful or very useful for monitoring progress of plan tasks and indicators. About 40 percent suggested that it was easy or very easy to monitor progress on specific tasks as well as the implementation of tasks in Rising Star.

Monitoring progress on improvement indicators was the second most cited use of Rising Star by focus group participants. They described regular meetings (e.g., monthly or bimonthly) to discuss and access indicators with a core team at either the district or school level. These meetings typically involve reviewing data together or in small groups and documenting progress and challenges. Rising Star was described as a “good organization tool,” with the indicators used as focal points for “honest discussions” about improvement. Although adhering to Rising Star was considered cumbersome and time-consuming by a number of participants, as shared by one participant, this ongoing process of “asking and answering questions help[s] keep everyone accountable and on track.”

Creating a Focused Improvement Plan

63 percent of survey respondents suggested that Rising Star is very useful to useful in creating an improvement plan. When asked how easy it was to use the online platform to do this, about half of survey respondents indicated that it was easy to very easy to use Rising Star for this purpose.

Creating a focused improvement plan was identified as the third most common use of Rising Star cited by focused group participants. Rising Star was described as the “big umbrella” and “orientation tool” to prioritize indicators, organize data, and align priorities and initiatives to create an overall strategic plan. Some participants also talked about aligning districtwide professional development plans with the priority indicators in Rising Star, thus linking the overall improvement plan with staff development needs to appropriately address the indicators. This is consistent with survey feedback on which some respondents noted that Rising Star helped start “candid conversations” about continuous improvement and is useful for maintaining collective accountability for progress on indicators.

Other Continuous Improvement Processes

Approximately one half of the survey respondents who did not use Rising Star but used other processes [e.g., school improvement planning (SIP), Baldrige and professional learning communities] said the primary reasons for not using Rising Star are as follows: too much time to implement the process and learn how to use the tool effectively; too many indicators to manage; and perceived as cumbersome to use and with no clear benefits. Focus group participants were also probed for other processes that they might use in place of Rising Star. Many talked about going back “to the way we were doing things.” Previous processes, goals, and indicators named included SIP, SMART goals, Danielson indicators, E-plans, Advanced Ed, the Marzano plan, and the North Central Plan. A number of participants indicated that they are “not against Rising Star” and would more willingly use Rising Star if it did not require so much time and effort that, they explained, could be better utilized for moving improvement goals forward rather than inputting data into Rising Star.
Benefits of Using Rising Star

As shared by approximately 70 percent of survey respondents, Rising Star is most supportive in creating a shared purpose, focusing the work of a district or a school, clarifying roles, and aligning programs and initiatives.

Focus group respondents also identified several important benefits of using Rising Star, some in common with the survey results. The most frequently cited benefits include the following:

- Broader participation in the process
- Use of a common language, structure, and vision for improvement
- Consistent procedures that support improvement planning
- Conversations focused on improvement

Broader Participation in the Improvement Process

Focus group participants expressed that Rising Star invites (or requires) multiple stakeholders in districts and schools to be involved in ongoing monitoring of indicators and assessing progress of plan tasks. Administrators, teachers, instructional coaches, process managers, data leads, researchers, and others are actively engaged in the improvement process, which many participants agree is necessary and beneficial for success and sustainability. One participant explained that although the district is short of funds, district and school staff have become more aware, are sharing resources and information to a greater extent, and are engaged in more conversations about improvement with each other. Another focus group participant described a collaborative situation in her district in which central office staff members have become coaches in schools, “teachers are leading the process, and administrators are resource people.” This team approach takes the pressure off of any single individual at the district or school and creates a sense of shared responsibility and, in some cases, momentum to move forward.

Use of a Common Language, Structure, and Vision for Improvement

Focus group participants across role-alike groups and locations indicated that Rising Star provides shared “meaning and purpose” for improvement activities as well as consistent vocabulary to discuss needs and priorities. As several participants pointed out, the research provided in Wise Ways was helpful to develop a common vocabulary or at least a “standardization of terms.” Rising Star was also described as a “springboard for the conversation” about improvement as well as a “big umbrella to lead the planning” and connect other initiatives. Some participants suggested that Rising Star has helped to align other initiatives, in a sense creating a “big picture” of improvement that has a greater chance of being realized.

Continuous Procedures That Support Improvement Planning

A number of focus group participants emphasized that because of the stringent requirements of Rising Star, their school or district improvement plan no longer sits on the shelf. Rising Star provides structure, establishes priorities, and requires ongoing monitoring and updating; thus, the
plans are seen as living documents. As one participant commented, our “old school improvement plans were there to make us feel better,” while the new one using Rising Star requires thought, collaboration, vigilance, and continuous updating. Another participant shared, “I honestly think this is one of the values of Rising Star, this monitoring piece…. The process of asking and answering the questions helps keep everyone accountable and on track.”

**Conversations Focused on Improvement**

Focus group participants talked about how Rising Star has helped improvement teams have more focused conversations about improvement and performance. As several participants mentioned, at the very least, Rising Star is a springboard for discussions. Conversations are typically around prioritizing or assessing indicators, although some conversations are also about sharing ideas and broadening perspectives. For example, one participant described fruitful conversations with district staff to help them “understand concepts like bilingual education and what it means.”

Survey participants found the Web-based platform to be less supportive for leveraging resources, identifying successful practices, monitoring progress toward impact, creating or strengthening partnerships, and supporting deep implementation for systemic and systematic change.
Challenges to Using and Suggestions for Improving Rising Star

Respondents to the fall 2013 survey cited several reasons for choosing not to use Rising Star. These included too much time to implement the process and learn how to use the tool effectively, too many indicators to manage, and the perception that Rising Star is cumbersome to use and has no clear benefits. Focus group participants touched upon some of the same challenges. They discussed in detail the key challenges they faced and offered specific suggestions related to the following aspects of Rising Star:

- **Content**
  - Indicators
  - Wise Ways
- **Structure and Functions of Rising Star**
  - Functionality
  - Orientation and guidance
  - Ongoing support and training
  - Time and effort
  - Relevance and alignment

### Content: Indicators

#### Challenges

Approximately half of survey respondents reported that the indicators of effective practice in Rising Star are not relevant in supporting continuous improvements. Focus group data provide insight into why district and school staff may find the indicators less than relevant.

Participants strongly noted that there were too many indicators in Rising Star. They also shared that it was an “impossible” number, indicators were “unmanageable” and “all over the place,” and schools were “stressed out,” “annoyed,” and “overloaded” by the volume of work required and, consequently, were unenthusiastic about using Rising Star. A district contact explained that printing out the indicators takes more than 70 pages, making the process less meaningful as the likelihood of anyone reviewing a document of this length is slim.

A number of participants also noted that indicators were not authentic. By this, they meant that the indicators were difficult to interpret, labeled vaguely, not meaningful, or lacking “in plain language.” Indicators containing words like “all” or “everyone” were singled out as particularly unrealistic and therefore meaningless. As one participant noted, “This is not realistic as it tells us that we are never going to get there.” Other indicators, such as making eye contact, were considered difficult to assess. One participant noted that her school’s use of indicators has not proven helpful, “We are not using Rising Star in a beneficial way, just typing in what we are already doing right now.” One district noted they found themselves typing the same responses multiple times due to the redundant prompting of certain indicators or certain kinds of information.
Suggestions for Improvement

A number of focus groups participants provided suggestions related to the Rising Star indicators. They strongly recommended that ISBE undertake the following:

- Reduce the indicators to a more manageable number; some suggested by half. Merging similar indicators or deleting the ones that are redundant or irrelevant could do this.
- Revise indicators so they are more relevant, reflect current research, have clearer, more specific language, and, to the extent possible, are clustered together by topic.
- Allow more customization in creating or more choice in selecting indicators. As educators are encouraged to differentiate instruction, Rising Star should have different levels designed for “failing schools.” Not all schools are at those levels. Some of the indicators do not pertain to every district. If a district falls below a certain level, then Rising Star is needed.
- Ensure accountability is not tied to all indicators, as some or many do not apply.
- Use realistic indicator language. Absolute phrases such as “all” or “everyone” support a feeling of impending failure. As one participant noted, “This is not realistic as it tells us that we are never going to get there. You’d like to reach it, and it’s frustrating if we believe there’s always one or two teachers that won’t meet it.”
- Create clear expectation for the use of artifacts. Some of the indicators require artifacts, and yet participants were not clear about what to do with them.
- Connect best practices to indicators (What does it look like?). Provide strategies and samples.

Content: Wise Ways

Challenges

Nearly one half of survey respondents (48 percent) reported that the Wise Ways—which is a synthesis of research, examples, and resources—provide current and relevant research for each indicator to a moderate extent. About one fourth (26 percent) thought the research was current and relevant to a great extent, whereas 18 percent suggested minimal currency and relevance. Some of these respondents indicated that the research featured in Wise Ways is too wordy, out of date, not clearly aligned to indicators, or not applicable to a particular context (e.g., a rural or high-risk school).

Suggestions for Improvement

Focus group participants offered a number of suggestions related to the Wise Ways component of Rising Star.

- Customize Wise Ways to be more relevant to school and district context. For example, participants from small district schools explained that they would like to be able to filter out Wise Ways items that are not relevant to them.
- Tie research to a variety of grade levels. Secondary educator respondents requested more specific and consistent labels and descriptors.
• Build a stronger alignment between Wise Ways and the corresponding indicator.
• Regularly update the research included in Wise Ways.
• Streamline or cluster the research briefs to simplify how they are accessed. A common frustration voiced by participants was that “[t]he body of research used to define the indicators must be deeper, more diverse, and more updated.”
• Make resource lists and materials readily available for team use.

In general, participants want Wise Ways to be a simpler, updated, and searchable source of information to guide informed decision making about priority indicators.

**Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Functionality**

**Challenges**

When Rising Star is used, approximately half of the survey respondents viewed the Rising Star tools as moderately helpful in monitoring progress toward task completion and indicators. More than one third of the respondents (37 percent) reported that the Rising Star tools were minimally or not helpful in monitoring progress.

Focus group participants noted that there were challenges with the functionality of the Rising Star site, which may contribute to the low rating of how helpful and easy the platform is to use. Overall, they noted that the site was not user-friendly and was difficult to navigate. For example, several participants noted the challenge of not being able to go back and modify data after they were inputted. Others noted that the small size of the Rising Star webpage made it challenging for users to view all Web content or adequately display summaries of data. Participants also described reports generated as being unhelpful or, at the very least, in need of formatting improvements to make them more helpful.

Another functionality challenge with Rising Star was the data input process. Participants noted that the data input process was cumbersome. For example, several revealed that, in response to the website’s challenging design, they regularly input data into a Word document before proceeding to copy and paste the content into the Rising Star site. Participants likewise found it challenging to save their work in Rising Star; they described instances in which they have lost data inputted and saved in Rising Star. Other participants noted that they were often “timed-out” of the Rising Star site as they tried to input data. A few participants expressed frustration that it was not possible to upload attachments in Rising Star to document their progress on priority indicators.

**Suggestions for Improvement**

Focus group participants provided specific suggestions to improve the functionality of the Rising Star platform. Suggestions included the addition of the following features:

• Add a dropdown menu for evidence review.
• Remove the prompt, “Are you sure you want to leave this page?”
• Clearly label all buttons.
Change webpages from narrative to bullet points.
List data and indicators should be side by side.
Add a pop-up window that opens when a user clicks on an indicator with all content displayed on one page.
Incorporate a checkbox for those indicators that are already completed.
Provide the ability to upload key documents in a user-friendly way.
Allow goals to be organized by due dates.
Use a time stamp for when users save materials on Rising Star.
Add page numbers.
Include a save button.
Allow users to sort tasks without having to export the data to Excel first.
Make navigation more user-friendly, including allowing users to go back easily to previous pages.
Be able to edit data once inputted.
Incorporate automatic reminders to users for submission deadlines.
Transparency list the deadlines.
Include Rising Star submission tips from ISBE.
Send e-mail messages to Rising Star users in addition to district superintendents.
Allow for different levels of users to access and contribute to the process. Due to the collaborative nature of the process, the district should be allowed the right to issue trackable access to teachers, administrators, and support staff.
Create a way to track changes over time (e.g., show progress from year to year).
Provide a way to print all or parts of the plan, formatted in a manner that minimizes white space.
Allow for the upload of agendas and formatting of agendas.
Allow for users to make changes to data fields, indicators, and plans even after a user labels an item “No implementation” in case priorities change.
Introduce a portal that allows for the community to see a public-facing version of the plans.
Create a new box for each year with the ability to go in and change existing data to accurately reflect changes or progress made.
Streamline access. Users have to open many tabs before arriving to the one being worked on.
Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Orientation and Guidance

Challenges

Forty-eight percent of survey respondents believe that the state’s expectations for using Rising Star are somewhat clear or unclear.

The resources that the respondents found most helpful in their orientation to and use of Rising Star are as follows: face-to-face trainings, ROE and ISC coaches, and regional workshops. Least helpful were online workshops and phone or e-mail assistance from ISBE consultants and the IIRC call center, who some respondents say are difficult to reach or do not reply to inquiries in a timely manner. Other types of helpful assistance cited by the respondents were from school administrators and improvement teams, central office staff, and school or district coaches. The latter, however, have been phased out in many schools and districts because of a lack of funding.

Focus group participants noted challenges with orienting themselves to Rising Star. Many participants did not have an opportunity to attend an initial training session or attended one and found that it was not comprehensive or sufficiently concrete enough to help users navigate through the Rising Star process on their own. A few participants qualified that the training they have attended or knew about was either too long, too far from where they are, difficult to fit into their schedules, or poorly communicated. All of which results in missed opportunities for effective training.

In addition to challenges in orienting themselves to Rising Star, some participants commented on the lack of overall guidance that has led to low levels of district and school buy-in. They noted that in their orientation training they did not receive the timeline for inputting Rising Star data or when certain components were due.

Suggestions for Improvement

Many participants stressed the need for a comprehensive initial Rising Star orientation session for new users that not only addresses technical features of the platform but also covers step-by-step procedures for entering and submitting information. They specifically recommended that the orientation focus on practical information related to using Rising Star rather than goal-setting or more abstract topics. Although some participants suggested that this training should be Web-based for ease of attendance, others maintained that the training should be face-to-face to allow for greater participant and trainer interaction. Participants also suggested that the training be hands-on and allow opportunities for networking among participants to promote information sharing beyond the training.

Regardless of the format, focus group participants cited the need for all training sessions to contain consistent information, ensuring that all trainees are getting the same content and guidance. To establish an ongoing source of support in districts and schools, a few participants suggested that a designated staff member from a school or district undergo comprehensive training on Rising Star, thereafter serving as a local resource for others.

Timelines need to be realistic and established. Changes in due dates decrease the credibility of the system.
Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Ongoing Support and Training

Challenges

Survey respondents noted a variety of types of helpful assistance from school administrators and improvement teams, central office staff, and school or district coaches. The latter, however, have been phased out in many schools and districts because of a lack of funding. One respondent shared: “Lack of support this year has really hurt our past momentum. If this process is important, which I believe that it is, people who know and understand the process should support it. Last year we had a person stop in and help us with this process. This year, [we have] nothing.”

A number of respondents stressed that training, resources, and supports for Rising Star are lacking. Some also reported that the resources made available are not beneficial. Another respondent expressed, “I have done the webinars, attended the regional workshops, and have contact with an ROE coach, and all resources are not helpful with this process. To really implement this, there needs to be time and more direction.”

Focus group participants reinforced survey findings by describing the dearth of ongoing technical assistance and support as a key challenge. Many noted that there is no one to provide feedback about their progress and no one at the state level to call upon for assistance. One participant who did receive support from an experienced Rising Star coach in the first year of implementation remarked about how valuable that experience was. Several participants noted that they had gone through Rising Star training but that it no longer felt relevant as the Rising Star platform had changed and that they did not know of opportunities for “refresher” trainings on Rising Star. Some participants lamented that they no longer have coaches who collaborate with them throughout the Rising Star process. Echoing the sentiment of many participants, one person remarked that if they have any Rising Star problems, “there is no place to go for help.”

Suggestions for Improvement

Participants suggested that they would benefit from ongoing support and training beyond an initial orientation to the Rising Star platform. For example, they would like ongoing face-to-face trainings sessions throughout the year that would outline any changes in Rising Star functionality or requirements. Several participants recommended that ISBE make available online and on-demand training modules, which would include examples of Rising Star plans and step-by-step guides, for new users as well as users who may need to refresh their knowledge about Rising Star.

Participants also indicated that a coach or contact person at the district level would be a valuable resource to troubleshoot problems, clarify deadlines, ensure accurate and timely compliance with the Rising Star data input process, and provide overall implementation support. Some participants noted the value of a coach in the past. As one participant expressed, “Every district needs access to and support from coaching.”

Communication between ISBE and Rising Star users was noted as a source of frustration. Suggestions for improving this area included the following:

- Post announcements or changes to “Message board.”
- Allow for meaningful feedback on the plan to improve. Respondents want to “do it right.” Participants were not sure if anyone at ISBE had critically reviewed their submission and were very eager to receive meaningful feedback from ISBE. Participants noted that such feedback would greatly enhance staff buy-in and compliance.
- Expand communications to a wider audience beyond the superintendent.
- Publicize training and support schedules through a common delivery vehicle such as the ROE.
- Identify deadlines and do not change them.
- Make online or phone technical support available. Many focus group participants wanted access to someone who could answer questions, give program information, and explain how Rising Star works.
- Celebrate and recognize compliance. Develop an online discussion space—blog or chat room—where participants can post questions about Rising Star to each other and troubleshoot issues or have designated chat room times when they can submit questions to a live person who is knowledgeable about Rising Star.
- Offer high-quality training using a variety of venues, (e.g., online webinars and courses, face-to-face workshops, video) and train the trainer on multiple topics:
  - Data training (should be first, not last)
  - How to be a process manager
  - Smart plan and smart start
  - Steps and due dates
  - How to develop goals
  - Guide book and technical manual
  - Assessing and monitoring indicators; how to determine if an indicator is partially or fully implemented
  - Improved capacity builder

**Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Time and Effort**

**Challenges**

The vast majority of the respondents indicated that a leadership team (that meets at least monthly) is active in continuous improvement efforts in their districts or schools. Almost half of the respondents suggested that a process manager is actively involved. Despite the fact that teams are in place, many focus group participants were vocal about how much time and effort is need to engage in an authentic, recursive, continuous improvement process.

One principal noted:

That’s about all I can say – we are trying! I am torn between authentically doing this work and doing what other principals are doing—minimally and then ignoring it. That is
not how I lead, but there are only so many hours in a day and only so much work that we can put upon ourselves and our teachers.

Participants shared that Rising Star is “overwhelming” in its current form and “takes a tremendous amount of time.” Many also noted that it is challenging to find the time to meet regularly with school staff about Rising Star and that contract issues with school staff have compounded the challenge of meeting face to face. One participant shared that staff members often enter data on weekends, making it feel as if they were “getting worked to death!” A principal summarized the competing demands for time and attention in this way:

Rising Star has certainly given us much to talk about, too much talk and too little time to implement. We have too many things that are pulling us in too many directions. The development of quality local assessments, teacher evaluation changes, and the Common Core.... It’s mind-boggling how much change we are trying to do at once.

Lack of staffing and finances were also ongoing challenges for Rising Star implementation. A number of participants noted that there were not enough overall resources to fully implement Rising Star. For example, many teachers are not able to attend face-to-face Rising Star training sessions because their schools do not have the money for substitute teachers. Participants also indicated that their schools do not have the money to reimburse staff members to take on the roles and responsibilities required by Rising Star.

Participants noted that, in its current form, the Rising Star site requires too many steps; they want navigation of the site to be simplified so that they can more easily focus on their indicators.

Suggestions for Improvement

Suggestions are included under other subheadings.

Structure and Functions of Rising Star: Relevance and Alignment

Challenges

Focus group participants supported ISBE’s aspiration of One State, One Plan. However, participants shared frustrations with multiple single standing plan requirements, such as Title 1, e-rate, technology, professional development, and the state’s aspiration for one plan. The relationship of continuous improvement planning and legislated requirements, including the new teacher evaluation system, 5 Essentials, response to intervention, local assessment and growth data sets, and district and school goals (i.e., literacy), was also a source of aggregation for participants.

Suggestions for Improvement

Several participants provided suggestions to enhance the overall relevance and sustainability of Rising Star. They recommended that Rising Star align with other district or school processes or plans, such as a professional development plan for the Common Core State Standards and the new teacher evaluation system. One participant noted that alignment with a school’s evaluation system is “the missing piece” of Rising Star.
Conclusion

Although Rising Star is not yet perfected as a platform for continuous improvement, many Illinois districts have accepted it as a viable choice. As the survey found, many users consider the components of Rising Star to be useful and have the structure (leadership teams) in place to engage in a strong continuous improvement process.

Survey respondents and focus group participants described using Rising Star to perform a number of core tasks related to improvement planning, implementation, and monitoring. They found Rising Star to be useful for identifying critical needs and assessing indicators, monitoring plan tasks and indicators, and creating a focused improvement plan.

Participants cited challenges in navigating through the system, frustrated with the time and level of effort required to input data, and unclear about requirements and when they need to be met. Despite the challenges, focus group participants saw considerable benefits to using Rising Star. They cited the involvement of more people conversing and collaborating in the improvement process; the development of a common language, structure, and vision of improvement; and the creation of a strong, research-based plan that can serve as a cohesive blueprint for improvement throughout a district and its schools as clear benefits.

Heeding the challenges and suggestions for improving Rising Star shared by survey respondents and focus group participants would help to increase the quality and functionality of the platform as well as buy-in from current and potential users. To do so would also increase the likelihood that Rising Star can reach its potential and promise of a more coherent data- and evidence-based continuous improvement planning and monitoring process.

Thus, ISBE should consider strengthening Rising Star by ensuring that it embeds the most recent research about what influences districts to improve, including the following:

- To sustain the improvement of teaching and learning on a large scale, the whole district must be involved and include strong lines of communication vertically and horizontally across the system.
- The role of leadership teams should be refocused with the highest priority on improving teaching and learning. Data are used as the vehicle for changing conversations in ways that allow the most critical problems that a district faces to be identified and addressed.
- It is important to give equal focus to both the how and what of improving teaching and learning, continuously using a cycle of monitoring and evaluating progress to constantly improve achievement.

Continuous improvement, by definition, is about improving teaching and learning, not compliance. However, the survey and focus group data suggest that districts and schools need clear communication about why they should engage in continuous improvement and why a more coherent statewide system of support to implement the process with fidelity is needed.
Appendix

Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has worked intentionally and strategically over the past five years to realize a One State, One Plan goal. Rising Star is intended to support districts and schools in creating a one plan by: a) integrating work across initiatives, b) linking research to selected objectives, and c) leveraging resources (time, people, materials, and money) in support of the one plan. The objective was to offer Illinois districts and schools an easily navigated and streamlined central planning tool to achieve this goal.

ISBE, with support from the Midwest Comprehensive Center at American Institutes for Research, is administering this survey of Illinois school and district leaders in order to better understand how Rising Star is actually working for planners.

The effectiveness of this survey is dependent on your honest completion. While your participation in the survey is voluntary, we hope you will take the time to share your views. Please be assured that your responses are completely confidential. They will be combined with those of many others and summarized for reporting purposes to further protect your confidentiality.

The survey should take only about 15 minutes to complete.

ISBE will review responses to this survey and will invite participants to attend Rising Star focus groups hosted in areas around the state to further explore the interests and needs of school and district leaders. A report will summarize survey and focus group results and will be used to inform next steps. The report will be available in the spring of 2014.

Thank you in advance for the contribution you will make to assist ISBE in supporting this continuous improvement process! If you have questions or concerns about your participation in this survey, please contact Joseph Person (person@air.org) at the Midwest Comprehensive Center. Please include in the subject line of your email: "Rising Star."

**1. Is your district/school currently using Rising Star to drive a continuous improvement process?**

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

**Continuous Improvement Process**

2. Please choose the most accurate statement.

- [ ] We considered using Rising Star but chose another continuous improvement process
- [ ] We did not consider using Rising Star
- [ ] Not applicable
Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

3. Why was Rising Star not selected? (Check all that apply.)

☐ It does not fit with our overall strategic planning approach.
☐ It does not address the appropriate range of school/district core functions relative to continuous improvement.
☐ There are too many indicators to manage with success.
☐ It requires too much time to learn to utilize appropriately.
☐ It is cumbersome to use.
☐ It requires input of too much narrative information.
☐ The Rising Star process takes too long to implement any meaningful change that impacts teaching and learning.
☐ Other:

If other, please specify:

4. Please identify the continuous improvement process that your school/district currently uses.

☐ AdvancED
☐ CPS Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP)
☐ Other
☐ I am not sure/I don’t know
☐ Not applicable

If other, please specify:

Rising Star Quality

5. How useful was Rising Star in leading to the creation of a high-quality continuous improvement plan?

☐ Very useful
☐ Moderately useful
☐ Somewhat useful
☐ Not useful at all
☐ Not applicable

If other, please specify:
### Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

6. How would you rate the relevance of the indicators of effective practice used in Rising Star to support continuous improvement?
- Very relevant
- Relevant
- Somewhat relevant
- Not relevant
- Not applicable

7. To what extent do the indicators of effective practice support continuous improvement?
- Great extent
- Moderate extent
- Minimum extent
- Not at all
- Not applicable

8. To what extent do Rising Star's indicators of effective practice align with Illinois' Eight Essential Elements?
- Great extent
- Moderate extent
- Minimum extent
- Not at all
- I don't know about the Eight Essential Elements

9. To what extent do the Wise Ways provide current and relevant research for each indicator?
- Great extent
- Moderate extent
- Minimum extent
- Not at all
- Not applicable
### Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

#### 10. What components of Rising Star are most useful?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Useful</th>
<th>Useful</th>
<th>Somewhat Useful</th>
<th>Not Useful</th>
<th>Never Used/Can't Determine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Planning tools, resources, and reports</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Step 1—Build the team; Review district or school information; Illinois Interactive Report Card (IIRC) data</td>
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<td>c. Step 2—Assess indicators</td>
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<td>d. Step 3—Create plan</td>
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<td>e. Step 4—Monitor plan</td>
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<td>f. Compliance and submission forms and dates</td>
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<td>g. Other</td>
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</table>

If other (please specify)

#### 11. To what extent does Rising Star support the following characteristics of the continuous improvement process?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Great Extent</th>
<th>Moderate Extent</th>
<th>Minimum Extent</th>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Clarify roles and responsibilities of leadership teams</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>b. Create shared purpose</td>
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<td>c. Align programs and initiatives</td>
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<td>d. Create or strengthen partnerships</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>e. Support deep implementation for systemic and systematic change</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Leverage resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>g. Focus the work of the district or school</td>
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<td>h. Monitor progress of impact</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>i. Monitor progress of process</td>
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<td>j. Identify successful practices and/or eliminate unsuccessful practices</td>
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</table>

### Rising Star Usability I

#### 12. How long has your school/district been using Rising Star?

- ☐ 1 year or less
- ☐ 2-3 years
- ☐ More than 3 years
Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

13. Which statement best describes the use of Rising Star in your school/district? (Check all that apply)
   - We use Rising Star because we are required to use it (my district and/or school is/are in federal or state status)
   - We use Rising Star because of other state-required planning (RTTT, AMAO, etc.)
   - We voluntarily use Rising Star (my district and/or school is/are not in federal or state status)
   - None of the above
   - Other

If other, please specify:

14. How clear are state expectations for using Rising Star?
   - Very clear
   - Clear
   - Somewhat clear
   - Not clear
   - Not sure

15. To what extent do the tools in Rising Star help you monitor progress toward improved student performance?
   - Great extent
   - Moderate extent
   - Minimum extent
   - Not at all

16. On average, how many times within a three-month period does your improvement team leader enter information in Rising Star?
   - 0-3 times
   - 4-6 times
   - 7-9 times
   - 10 times or more
### Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

#### 17. How easy is it to use Rising Star to perform the following functions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Very Easy</th>
<th>Easy</th>
<th>Somewhat Easy</th>
<th>Not Easy</th>
<th>Not Sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Identify priorities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Assess indicators</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Create improvement team</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Create a plan</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Monitor progress of tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Monitor implementation of tasks</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### 18. Which of the following resources has been helpful in your orientation to and use of Rising Star? (Check all that apply.)

- Webinars
- Regional workshops
- Face-to-face training (Coaching for Capacity, Monitoring and Sustainability, Data Analysis)
- Online workshops
- ISBE consultant phone/e-mail assistance
- IRC call center phone/e-mail assistance
- ROE/ISC coach
- Other

If other, please specify:

- [ ]

#### 19. Which of the following groups or individuals is actively working on continuous improvement in your district or school? (Check all that apply.)

- A leadership team that meets at least monthly
- Process manager
- Capacity-building coach
- I am not sure I don’t know
- None of the above

#### Leadership Team

#### 20. On average, how many times during a three-month period does your team meet?

- [ ] 0-3 times
- [ ] 4-6 times
- [ ] 5-9 times
- [ ] 10 times or more
## Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

### 21. What is the average length of these meetings?
- [ ] 30–45 minutes
- [ ] 60–90 minutes
- [ ] 2–4 hours
- [ ] All day

### Rising Star Usability II

#### 22. In which of the areas below has Rising Star assisted your district/school leadership team with its continuous improvement planning needs? (Check all that apply.)

- [ ] Title III AMAD
- [ ] Title I district plans
- [ ] Title I school-wide plans
- [ ] Single school district plans
- [ ] Technology plans
- [ ] Special education NA2
- [ ] Special education corrective action
- [ ] Response to Intervention
- [ ] Common Core State Standards adoption and implementation
- [ ] Social, emotional, and behavioral health
- [ ] English language learners
- [ ] Achievement gap identification and reduction among student groups
- [ ] Community and family engagement
- [ ] Other

If other, please specify:

### Background
Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

23. Please select the role that best describes you.
- Superintendent
- Central office staff
- Principal
- Teacher
- Process manager
- Coach
- Capacity builder
- Other

If other, please specify: 

24. Which term best describes the location of your district?
- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural
- Not sure

25. Which term best describes the structure of your district?
- Consolidated district
- Unit district
- Single-school district
- Elementary district
- High School district
- Other

If other, please specify: 

26. Which term best describes your school? (Check all that apply, if applicable)
- Elementary school
- Middle school
- High school
- Charter school
- Not applicable
Rising Star 2013 Survey: How Can We Improve?

27. Please indicate the region where you work.

28. Would you be willing to participate in a face-to-face focus group about Rising Star in your area of the state?

   - Yes
   - No

If yes, please provide your name and e-mail address: [Please note that this information will be used only for follow-up purposes. It will not be linked to your responses in any way.]

Thanks!
# Rising Star Focus Group

## Facilitator Agenda

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting Title</th>
<th>IL Rising Star Focus Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Session Date &amp; Location</strong></td>
<td><strong>January 17, 2014</strong>&lt;br&gt; Northern Illinois University&lt;br&gt; 1120 East Diehl Road&lt;br&gt; Naperville, IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>January 22, 2014</strong>&lt;br&gt; South Cook ISC&lt;br&gt; 253 West Joe Orr Rd.&lt;br&gt; Chicago Heights, Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>January 30, 2014</strong>&lt;br&gt; KIDS ROE/Loves Park City Hall&lt;br&gt; 100 Heart Boulevard&lt;br&gt; Loves Park, Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timeframe</strong></td>
<td>Morning Event: 10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.&lt;br&gt; Afternoon Event: 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>Representatives from (Teachers, Principals, Superintendents, Central Office, Process Managers, Coaches):&lt;br&gt; - Districts/Schools that have been using Rising Star for 3-4 years&lt;br&gt; - Districts/Schools that have been using Rising Star for 1-2 years&lt;br&gt; - Districts/Schools that will be new to Rising Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Rising Star continuous improvement planners have an opportunity to contribute to the data collection process being used this year to inform next steps with the platform. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has worked intentionally and strategically over the past five years to realize a One State, One Plan goal. Rising Star is intended to support districts and schools in creating one plan by: a) integrating work across initiatives, b) linking research to selected objectives, and c) leveraging resources in support of the one plan. ISBE, with support from the Midwest Comprehensive Center at American Institutes for Research, has been collecting information from the field since October in surveys and focus groups. These events offer an opportunity to provide deeper understanding of strengths and challenges of the platform based on the survey results. To accomplish this, MWCC has developed a process for conducting a series of Focus Groups around the state that aim to get users and nonusers feedback on Rising Star continuous improvement platform.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Outcomes
- To deepen the understanding of the utility and effectiveness of Rising Star as a platform for continuous improvement in Illinois based on the results of the fall survey.
- To further describe and identify potential improvements to address the challenges districts face in using Rising Star as a platform for continuous improvement.
- To provide additional data that will serve as the basis for making recommendations to improve Rising Star.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Activity/Content &amp; Process</th>
<th>Materials/Resources</th>
<th>Time Duration</th>
<th>Person Responsible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Run Through &amp; Set Up</td>
<td>Run through the entire event and help set up Make sure each person registered has a name badge Laptops for note takers Check and post session title Set up sign-in sheet and name badges <strong>1-1.5 hours prior to start of event room is set-up</strong></td>
<td>Table Tent Name Tags Laptop Electronic version of Notetaking tool Power cord Facilitated Agenda Copies of protocol</td>
<td>AM 10:00 – 12:00 PM 1:00 – 3:00</td>
<td>Rachel MWCC Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sign-In</td>
<td>Create sign-in sheet and name badges</td>
<td>Participants list sign-in sheet Name badge</td>
<td>1 week prior</td>
<td>Donna Camille MWCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Materials</td>
<td>Print facilitated agenda and distribute electronic Notetaking tool</td>
<td>Handouts</td>
<td>1 week prior</td>
<td>MWCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room Arrangement</td>
<td>Tables in groups of 12 people (10 participants, 1 facilitator, 1 note taker</td>
<td>Post-it notes</td>
<td></td>
<td>MWCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Group Focus Session</td>
<td>Facilitator Four Small Focus Groups A. Teachers B. Principals C. Supt. &amp; Central Office D. Process Manager &amp; Coach</td>
<td></td>
<td>120 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome &amp; Focus Group Overview</td>
<td><strong>Focus Group overview, Logistics &amp; Norms</strong> Welcome &amp; thank everyone for coming. Purpose &amp; Norms Acknowledge ISBE Staff (if available) Background Information - General overview of survey results # of respondents, # of focus group interest...1-2 findings</td>
<td>Table Tent Norms</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
<td>Rachel MWCC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Activity/Content &amp; Process</td>
<td>Materials/Resources</td>
<td>Time Duration</td>
<td>Person Responsible</td>
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<td>------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus Group Question Two</td>
<td>Question&lt;br&gt;Can you give me an example (one or two categories)?&lt;br&gt;How does that look in your district (one or two categories)?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question&lt;br&gt;If you had an opportunity to change/adjust Rising Star to be more useful, what would you suggest to help you:&lt;br&gt;  a. Use data and research to identify critical needs and select priorities?&lt;br&gt;  b. Focus your work and develop a meaningful plan?&lt;br&gt;  c. Implement your plan with fidelity?&lt;br&gt;  d. Monitor the progress and impact of your plan?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus Group Question Three</td>
<td>Question&lt;br&gt;The majority of responses to the online survey said face-to-face training/regional workshops were the most helpful resources in using Rising Star. What specifically, do you think would be helpful for ISBE to offer to respond to this need?</td>
<td></td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Probe&lt;br&gt;Content of sessions and format of delivery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus Group Question Four</td>
<td>Question&lt;br&gt;What process would you use for continuous improvement if you were not using Rising Star? Why?</td>
<td></td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus Group Question Conclusion</td>
<td>Question&lt;br&gt;Is there anything else you feel it is important for me to know about Rising Star platform and the continuous improvement process that I did not ask you?</td>
<td></td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wrap Up</td>
<td>This concludes our focus group.&lt;br&gt;Thank participants for their time and information.&lt;br&gt;Indicate that their ideas and viewpoints will be joined with others to inform future next steps with the platform.</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
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<td>Adjourn</td>
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</table>
A focus group is a small group of representatives of a target audience that provides their perceptions of an issue(s). A focus group is a qualitative research technique; however, it does not yield scientifically valid data. Each group of 6-12 persons requires a facilitator and recorder. The role of the facilitator and note taker are:

**FACILITATOR RESPONSIBILITIES**
- Ensure everyone gets an opportunity to speak
- Keep discussion on track using plain language
- Avoid influencing the group by advocating your own position
  – be neutral
- Establish credibility
- Use an active voice, action verbs, and inject humor, if appropriate

**NOTE TAKER RESPONSIBILITIES**
- Monitor time, keep to no more than 120 minutes
- Take comprehensive notes. Do not engage in discussion or sit at the table with the group (if possible)
- Record any quotes or examples that seem to capture the group sentiments
- Prepare a summary using the questions as the guide
- Keep a record of participants

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### 2/18/14 11-11:45 NCLB Conference: Rising Star Focus Group (Sheraton Chicago Hotel & Towers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role-Allike</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Notetaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>Julia Marchand</td>
<td>Rudy Lubov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superintendents, &amp; Central Office</td>
<td>Donna McCaw</td>
<td>Joe Person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers &amp; Process Manager</td>
<td>Bridget Sheng</td>
<td>Patricia Arena-Garcia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### GROUND RULES

- Respect all views and resist the urge to convert others to your viewpoint
- Be courteous when speaking and listening
- Be brief and talk in plain language
- Allow everyone an equal opportunity to express their views
- Respond first to questions the facilitator asks and then offer any additional comments
- Everyone is responsible for ensuring that everyone is heard and understood
December 16, 2013

[Recipient Name]
[Title]
[Company Name]
[Street Address]
[City, ST ZIP Code]

Dear [Recipient Name]:

This letter has been sent to you on behalf of Rachel Trimble, Midwest Comprehensive Center at American Institutes for Research, and the Illinois State Board of Education. Thank you for agreeing to host the ISBE Rising Star Focus Group session on (click to select a date) from (add times here). Your hospitality is very much appreciated, and we look forward to working with you to ensure the success of this focus group.

Please set the meeting room up with the following guidelines:
- Coffee & Water
- Room set-up for approximately 50 participants
- 4 groups of tables with seating for 12 in each group
- Screen and LCD Projector
- Presenters table & podium
- One extension cord per group (4 extension cords)

If you are unable to assist with any of the above guidelines, have any questions, or need further information please contact Lori Loving, lloving@roo33.12il.us or by phone at 309-371-7744.

The information that will be shared during the Rising Star Focus Group session will assist ISBE to further explore the interests and needs of school and district leaders. A report will summarize survey and focus groups results and will be used to inform next steps. The report will be available in Spring of 2014.

Thank you again for hosting the ISBE Rising Star Focus Group.

Sincerely,[Your Name]

Midwest Comprehensive Center, Illinois Project Lead
Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)
Rising Star Focus Group
Note-Taking Tool

Date and Time:
Note Taker:
Event Location:
Role-Alike
Focus Group:

Illinois Rising Star Focus Group—Introductions
Share name, role, district, and experience related to Rising Star platform or continuous improvement process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Experience</th>
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</table>
Focus Group Question 1:
Describe how Rising Star works in your district/school:
   a. Use data and research to identify critical needs and select priority indicators for improvement?
   b. Create a focused plan that considers the resources of the district (time, people, money, materials)?
   c. Implement your plan systemically?
   d. Monitor the progress of your plan indicators/actions?
   e. Monitor/evaluate the impact on student performance and audit practices?
(When possible, identify speaker/district, and capture the flow of the conversation.)

Focus Group Question 2:
If you had an opportunity to change/adjust Rising Star to be more useful, what would you suggest to help you:
   a. Use data and research to identify critical needs and select priorities?
   b. Focus your work and develop a meaningful plan?
   c. Implement your plan with fidelity?
   d. Monitor the progress and impact of your plan?
(When possible, identify speaker/district, and capture the flow of the conversation.)

Focus Group Question 3:
The majority of responses to the online survey said face-to-face training/regional workshops were the most helpful resources in using Rising Star. What specifically, do you think would be helpful for ISBE to offer to respond to this need?
(When possible, identify speaker/district, and capture the flow of the conversation.)

Focus Group Question 4:
What process would you use for continuous improvement if you were not using Rising Star? Why?
(When possible, identify speaker/district, and capture the flow of the conversation.)

Additional Comments
Is there anything else you feel it is important for me to know about Rising Star platform and the continuous improvement process that I neglected to ask you?
(When possible, identify speaker/district, and capture the flow of the conversation.)

Reflective Summary
(Note taker Summary—highlight themes, commonalities, key ideas...)

Midwest Comprehensive Center

Findings from Statewide Rising Star Survey and Focus Groups—A-16
Illinois State Board of Education
Rising Star Focus Group Preparation Meeting

Wednesday, January 15, 2014

Call in number 1-800-503-2899; 6496533#

Morning Conference Call: 8:00 – 9:00 A.M.
Afternoon Conference Call: 4:30 – 5:30 P.M.

Objectives
- Review facilitated agenda and note-taking tool
- Discuss facilitator and note-taker roles and responsibilities
- Discuss logistics and next steps

Agenda
- Welcome and Introduction
- Setting the Context
- Facilitator Agenda
- Role of Facilitator and Note Taker
- Logistics and Assignments
- Questions and Concerns