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## School-Based Instructional Rounds

Tackling problems of practice with teachers

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In 2008, Marilyn Oat was a fourth-year principal at Killingly Memorial School in Killingly, Conn., when her school hosted a visit by a group of superintendents from districts across the state. The superintendents were participating in a network devoted to using instructional rounds (IR), a practice of observing patterns of teaching and learning instruction across classrooms in order to improve them.

When Killingly superintendent Bill Silver decided to launch an in-district rounds process, Oat herself became involved in visiting schools with other principals. But soon into the process, she felt something important was missing: her teachers.

"Instead of looking *at* the teachers, what if we looked *with* the teachers at the students and what they were learning?" Oat asked. And instead of hosting a team of outside superintendents once every few years, or a team of district administrators twice a year, what if there were much more frequent observations by teachers and others from *inside* the school?

Over the next year, with the support of her superintendent, Oat and her team used these two questions as a springboard for innovation. While keeping faithful to the core stages of the IR practice (see "Key Elements of IR," p. 6), they added some important variations: grade-level teachers began meeting together to identify collective "stuck points," and half of them observed the other half one week and then flipped roles the next week. They used grade-level team meetings to digest their findings and observations and then made commitments to one another about the improvements that they, as a team, wished to implement. They repeated the cycle every seven or eight weeks and within the first year saw quantifiable gains in the assessment metric used by the district for instructional rigor and gains on state test scores.

### Adapting IR for Single Schools

Oat and her teachers were not alone in adapting IR, a practice initially designed to support school and district improvement network visits in schools either within or across districts. Educators like those in Killingly have begun to experiment with and adapt the principles and practices of instructional rounds for a single-school context, or school-based instructional rounds (SBIR):

- Some have set up structures that dramatically increase the frequency of rounds visits.
- Others have replaced the portions of the next-level-of-work process where visiting teams make suggestions for systemic improvement with an internal commitment process where school-based teacher teams decide how they want to address their problem of practice.
- In some large districts, SBIR visits are led by district coaches to concentrate on areas of improvement flagged by the district-based rounds visits.
- In many settings, rounds cycles are tightly tied to existing school improvement structures, where, for example, the internal teacher teams debrief their observations and analyses in professional learning communities or other meeting structures that already exist in their schools.
- Some districts using school-based rounds have tried to align or "nest" them with their districtwide or cross-school rounds practices.

### Using SBIR to Accelerate Improvement

These emerging SBIR practices have a number of potential benefits. Most significantly, they engage teachers as major players in rounds work and related improvement efforts—something that has been

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difficult for some cross-district superintendent networks, or even cross-school district networks, to do successfully. Teachers play central roles throughout the SBIR cycle. They can be much more engaged in the critical work before a visit of identifying a common stuck point or problem of practice.

In contrast to a cross-school rounds—which typically begin with a 30- to 40-minute introduction to the context of the school, the nature of the problem of practice, and the nitty-gritty detail of where the school is stuck in its improvement work—school-based observers already know these things implicitly and deeply. There is a shared context in SBIR that creates a sense of intimacy on school-based rounds not generally seen on cross-site visits. This shows up most palpably in the interactions that visitors have with students during their classroom observations. Most rounds norms allow, and encourage, visitors to talk to students about their work when it does not cause any disruption in the classroom. On school-based rounds, the visiting teachers may not only know the subject and lesson plan intimately (in Killingly they are likely to have helped develop it at their grade-level team meeting and be teaching the same lesson the next day), but they may have even taught the children whose work they are examining. In contrast to the more generic questions most outside visitors ask, in-school visitors will ask sophisticated probing questions of kids, such as: “What strategy are you using?” and “What do you do when you don’t get it?”

The more intimate knowledge of students and content also shows up after the observations, when teachers are trying to identify patterns and look for evidence of changes in what the students know, whether they are being pushed outside their comfort zones, or if they are able to understand and articulate concepts they are learning. Since so many rounds visits focus on student thinking, this insider ability to talk and listen to students and to assess their work in much greater detail is a big asset.

When the visit is more detailed in its focus and conducted by close colleagues, it can lead to more immediate adjustments in improving practice. In contrast to cross-school network rounds, where observations and suggestions from the visiting team are filtered through the principal and whatever teachers participated on that team, in school-based rounds, the sharing of the results and lessons from a rounds visit is generally much more immediate and often more detailed and personal.

The follow-up to a visit is key. If improvements sparked by a visit are not discussed, implemented, and supported in ways that lead to instructional and organizational improvement, the visit becomes a stand-alone event, and a great deal of time and energy has been wasted. There is an embedded quality in SBIR that makes this less likely. Nobody leaves at the end

of the visit. Teachers own the work. Frequently teacher teams have worked together to identify a problem of practice before the visit and become a natural part of the follow-up mechanism. When teachers make commitments to their peers for improvement, they develop stronger teams that tap into the power of lateral accountability. In school-based rounds, tighter links are often made between rounds and other school improvement processes and structures, like professional learning communities, teacher teams, internal data cycles, and professional development.

### **Possible Pitfalls (and Ways to Address Them)**

Yet, there are potential pitfalls in the emerging SBIR practices. Teachers who know each other well and have congenial relations may be more likely to stay in the “land of nice” with one another rather than work at developing the nonjudgmental descriptive data and analyses that are the foundations of rounds.

Teachers who are immersed in a particular culture or setting also may not even notice routines or practices—even if they are not very effective—that outside observers would, or they may struggle to come up with suggestions for doing things differently, beyond what is already in place, to contribute to improvement. SBIR could make it more likely that teachers will be satisfied with the opportunity to observe each other’s practices, to share ideas, or to make minor changes rather than attempt more ambitious and fundamental improvements connected to improvement strategies at a

### *Key Elements of IR*

An idea adapted from the medical rounds that doctors conduct, instructional rounds help educators work together systematically to improve classroom instruction using these key elements:

- The host school identifies a “problem of practice” on which visitors will focus during classroom observations.
- After a brief orientation, visitors divide into groups to observe in three or four classrooms, spending about 20 minutes in each.
- During the observations, visitors jot down specific, nonjudgmental notes about what teachers and students are saying and doing related to the problem of practice.
- Following the observations, visitors and participating hosts then analyze the data, looking for patterns, and ultimately making suggestions for improvement.
- Hosts incorporate data and suggestions into their continuous improvement work.

district level, another hallmark of instructional rounds.

To address the potential for narrowed focus, isolation, and insularity, and to secure the improvement benefits that SBIR has to offer, some schools and school districts have developed *nested rounds*, where schools participate periodically in rounds with others in the district.

For example, although Superintendent Silver required each Killingly school to develop its own internal rounds practice, he made sure that each continued to get at least one visit per year from “outsiders”—central office personnel, specialists, teachers, and administrators from other schools in the system. The schools continued to conduct their own, more frequent, internal rounds but were able to be strategic about when the participation of outsiders would help move their improvement work. Nested rounds provide the outside perspectives, outside ideas, and calibration that can help overcome the potential insularity of school-based rounds.

### Using SBIR to Support Improvement Work

The educators who created school-based rounds as an offshoot of network or cross-site rounds learned some important lessons. They had to address five key design questions to ensure that SBIR would be useful in supporting their improvement work:

- *Why develop SBIR?*
- *Who should be involved at the school, and why?*
- *What school-based model makes the most sense, and how will it work logistically?*
- *How will SBIR be integrated into existing improvement structures?*
- *How can educators take advantage of the benefits of SBIR and minimize the downsides?*

The educators who have successfully answered these questions have shown that SBIR has the potential to bring strategic school and (where appropriate) system instructional improvement much more deeply into classrooms. The practice can engage significantly more classroom teachers in improvement work that is vibrant, focused, and tightly tied to their work. At the same time, it can change their relationships with their peers, augmenting the vertical accountability on which our school systems rely so heavily with the lateral and team accountability that we know can be such a powerful driver of individual and organizational learning. ■

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