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What learning looks like

Instructional rounds help define and achieve systemwide improvement

By Valerie von Frank

What is effective teaching? How do we know what high-quality learning looks like?

When the Cambridge, Mass., school system wanted answers to those questions, then-superintendent Thomas Fowler-Finn turned to the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Professor Richard Elmore, who envisioned an improvement process he terms "instructional rounds."

Elmore based the idea of instructional rounds on the medical model in which an attending physician and a group of interns and residents visit patients, review symptoms by looking at the patient's record or chart and questioning the patient, and discuss a diagnosis and treatment plan.

Instructional rounds help educators review data gathered from classrooms and develop theories of action, with everyone involved learning with and from one another about what works to improve student achievement.

"Many educators are not sure what to look for when they open the door (to a classroom) and what to do with what they see," according to Elmore and his co-authors (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Tietel, 2009). "One of the greatest barriers to school improvement is the lack of an agreed-upon definition of what high-quality instruction looks like" (p. 3).

TOOL: Develop guiding questions and a visit schedule using the tools on pp. 6-7.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Fowler-Finn clearly remembers the start of the Cambridge effort. He had a group of 30 or so principals and administrators watch a video of a teacher instructing her class. Then he asked them to rate the instruction on a scale of 0 (poor) to 10 (excellent). When the principals turned over their marks, they saw 2s and 3s, 9s and 10s, and about

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Principals play critical role with participation

I read a recent *Education Week* article titled "Consultants in high demand as ARRA's clock ticks." Among the points raised was a caution for school and district leaders to choose their consultants with great care. While the commentary raised some excellent points about setting clear expectations and reading the fine print of contracts, it failed to remind district and building leaders that no consultant can ever supplant the principal's critical role as a school's lead learner and instructional leader.

Even though a "leave-it-to-the-consultant" approach may be a recipe for failure, that's exactly what so many principals do. "I had every intention of joining our external literacy expert as she worked with our coaches," you can imagine a principal saying, "but I absolutely had to get that budget report to central office before the deadline." When I think back to my own days as a principal, I remember quite well all the challenges that kept me from attending professional development sessions. From the emergency phone call from an angry parent to the students who needed immediate mediation, something was always trying to pull me away from professional learning. Despite those challenges, my teachers will tell you I was present at practically all of those events.

When a principal isn't present, everyone thinks, "I have important things I could be doing as well."

The culture I set in my school emphasized that everyone learned for the benefit of our students. I also knew that my presence and active engagement in professional learning gave me the information and tools I needed to implement and sustain new ideas and strategies. And despite what I believe many principals tell themselves, I learned that everyone notices when the principal leaves the room. Even though the words may be unspoken, when a principal isn't present, everyone thinks, "I have important things I could be doing as well."

The Learning Forward Innovation Configurations (ICs), which add clarity to our standards by providing descriptive actions, take my point a few steps further. Under the Leadership strand, the IC leadership rubric describes the highest level of a principal's engagement in professional learning this way:

The principal:

- Participates in facilitated learning teams that problem solve and learn together;
- Participates in extensive, ongoing learning activities that include hands-on, problem-based, and multiple practice opportunities; and
- Allocates time to explore and practice specific behaviors and strategies and receive feedback on the implementation of new skills.

The principal assessment instrument developed by Vanderbilt University, the Vanderbilt Assessment of Leadership in Education (www.valed.com), also highlights a principal's role in planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring a culture of learning and professional behavior.

Working together with a principal and her or his leadership team, an effective external consultant can be a powerful ally in this process. Without these external experts pushing our thinking, exposing us to critical research and best practices, and facilitating important discussions, many of our efforts to improve would hit unnecessary roadblocks. They become all the more effective when paired with principals who, despite all of the challenges they face every day, make professional learning a priority, demonstrate their commitment through their presence, and work tirelessly to create the conditions in their schools that will ultimately lead to effective teaching practice and improved student learning.

REFERENCE

Brownstein, A., (2011, February 12). Consultants in high demand as ARRA's clock ticks: Experts' advice sought on race to the top, turnarounds. *Education Week*. Available at www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/02/12/20stim-consultants.h30.html.

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How on-the job learning affects teacher practice in elementary school

Teacher Learning and Instructional Change: How Formal and On-the-Job Learning Opportunities Predict Change in Elementary School Teachers' Practice
Parise, L.M., & Spillane, J.P. (2010). *The Elementary School Journal 110*(3), March 2010, pp. 323-346.

Overview

This study examines the links between elementary school teachers' formal and on-the-job learning opportunities and changes in their classroom practice in mathematics and English Language Arts (ELA). Specifically, researchers wanted to know: What are the relative effects of teachers' formal and on-the-job learning opportunities on their changes in instructional practice? Are these relationships affected by teachers' perceptions of their schools' organizational conditions?

Study approach

This study is a mixed-method evaluation of a leadership development program in all 30 elementary schools in a mid-sized urban school district in the southeastern U.S. The sample for this study was limited to self-contained kindergarten through 5th-grade classroom teachers responsible for both math and ELA instruction.

Teachers responded to a survey that included questions about their formal and on-the-job learning opportunities, perceptions of their schools' organizational conditions, and individual characteristics.

The descriptions of on-the-job learning opportunities were "Collaborative Discussion," "Peer Observation and Feedback" and "Math and ELA Advice Seeking." The measures of organizational conditions were "Professional Learning Community" and "Principal Develops Goals."

The data were pooled into a sample of 1418 observations, and five ordinary-least-squares multiple regression models were computed for changes in math and ELA teaching practice.

Selected findings

The correlations between the dependent variables — changes in math and ELA teaching practice — and teachers' formal and on-the-job learning opportunities were low to moderate, ranging from .08 to .25. Collaborative discussion had the strongest positive association with changes in both ELA and math, at .23 and .25, respectively. Finally, nearly all of the correlations between variables were significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Analysis of the data confirmed that formal professional development and on-the job opportunities, specifically collaborative discussion and advice seeking, remained statistically significant predictors of teacher change in math and ELA teaching practice, although the coefficients were small. Furthermore, that relationship was unaffected by teachers' perceptions of their schools' organizational conditions.

Implications for school leaders

These findings suggest that the learning opportunities in which teachers engage within their school buildings are at least as predictive of change in teacher practice as are subject-specific formal professional development sessions they attend. Principals may want to consider:

- Ways to promote teacher discussion about new learning and student challenges and to more time available for such learning and advice seeking. What would it take to make such time a regular part of the schedule?
- Whether teachers are losing opportunities for more effective learning with the school's overemphasis on formal or traditional professional learning. What are ways to explore this further and determine what changes, if any, to make if we discover a problem?

While other studies emphasize the importance of organizational conditions for effective teacher learning, this study suggests that organizational conditions do not inhibit job-embedded collaborative learning opportunities. LP

Find this and other studies that document the impact of professional learning in Learning Forward's Evidence Database at **www.learningforward.org/evidence/search.cfm**.

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every number in between. After the exercise, Fowler-Finn said, the confused administrators asked, "What should it have been?"

Fowler-Finn said having these experienced educators come together to develop a definition and determine what patterns the data reveal is the point of instructional rounds.

Learning Forward BELIEF

Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

Although Fowler-Finn is careful not to say rounds were the sole cause of improvement in Cambridge, he noted that after four years of work, student performance on state exams was at the top of the state's 25 urban districts after having been stalled in the middle. He said, however, that rounds were a significant factor in shifting the district culture and raising the level of instruction.

"It helped everyone realize, 'I am responsible for the performance of all students in the district. But I am not in this by myself; my colleagues will be valuable resources,'" he said.

That wider approach to improvement is at the heart of the process. "It's not about one teacher or one school at a time," Fowler-Finn said. "It's about improving learning at scale. … The work never deals with individual teachers. It is an analysis of a much bigger picture across multiple classrooms in a school."

SOUTH LANE, ORE.

For Jackie Lester, principal of Bohemia Elementary School in South Lane School District in Cottage Grove, Ore., the rounds process has been a deep and profound change.

"It's fantastic for the administrative team to go through together," she said. "We are constantly refining and learning. This is the biggest administrative professional development we have ever been involved in."

The district began the process in 2009-10, after an administrative team book study of *Instructional rounds in education.* In the first few rounds, she said, the network had difficulty organizing the data to be useful with the building staff. "That's causing us to do a better job of defining the problem of practice," she said.

Lester said rounds help teachers feel that any individual biases of the principal are removed by having a "collective

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A new process: Focus is on students rather than the teacher

Instructional rounds are different from walk-throughs. Walk-throughs tend to focus on a teacher's ability to instruct students effectively and are sometimes even used for evaluations. The purpose of instructional rounds is to gather data about the school or district as a system and to allow a network of educators to use that data for professional learning and school/district improvement.

Fowler-Finn said the teachers associations in many communities have concerns about walk-throughs' focus, but actively participate in rounds.

The rounds process involves school leaders carefully defining a specific problem of practice that is expressed in terms of student learning; for example, Fowler-Finn said: "A decreasing percentage of students are achieving at the highest levels on standardized assessments even though the student population is stable."

To define a problem of practice, the principal may involve students and teachers, base the problem on observations, use a survey, and consider student data.

Next, administrators — superintendents, assistant superintendents, curriculum directors, and other central office personnel — may join with principals, assistant principals, and in some cases teacher leaders in a "network" of observers. The network may prepare by using videos to learn how to describe what is occurring in a classroom without judgmental language.

The group meets regularly, usually monthly, at a different school and spends the morning observing in classrooms. Subgroups of three or four visit a classroom for 20 minutes, another departure from the walk-through model that often has visits ranging from two to 10 minutes. Each classroom is part of the observation process, and each is visited by more than one team to help ensure the data collected are as neutral as possible. Different groups see different parts of a lesson, but no more than two groups visit the same class.

As the observers visit classrooms, the focus is on the *students* rather than the *teacher's* work.

"It's an analysis of what is happening," Fowler-Finn said,

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group of eyes" examine student learning, which helps teachers see the larger perspective.

Lester prepared her school staff by giving them shortened readings about the process and allowed them flexibility in determining when the classroom visits took place. She said she emphasized that the data were not focused on individual teachers but on student tasks. Another help, she said, was making clear to teachers the outcome of the analysis before moving forward and sharing with them how the process helped her own professional learning.

In her school, Lester said, teachers are working in grade-level teams to plan their instruction now and paying more attention to the level of tasks they are asking of students, using Bloom's taxonomy. "I'm not having to prompt that," she said. "That's a huge step."

Lester said rounds also helped administrators learn from one another and helped her district achieve Elmore's purpose: systemwide improvement.

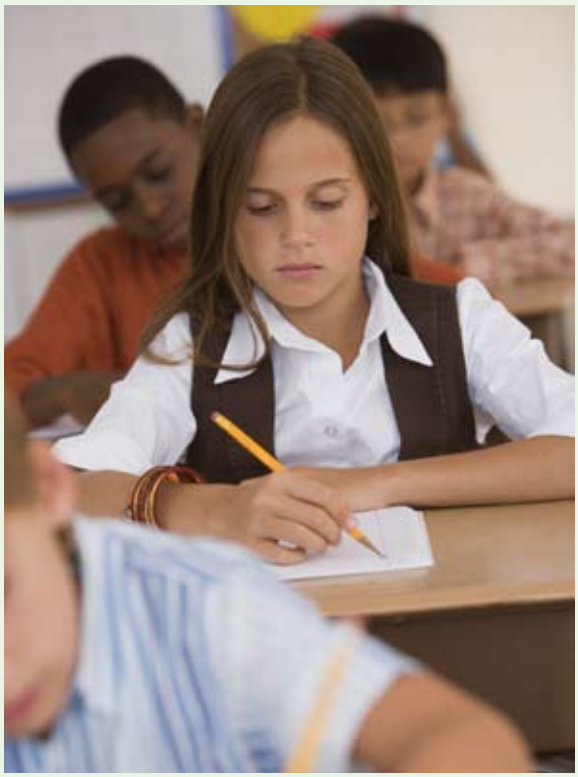
"Rounds have deepened the understanding of how our individual work at each building is moving our district toward our collective goals," Lester said. "This connects the dots."

"not, 'This is what you (the teacher) should be doing.'" For example, he said, observations might be: the teacher asked a question and called on a student whose hand was raised; the student gave a correct response. Simply recording what is observed without judging what should or could be occurring is one of the most difficult aspects of the program.

In an afternoon debriefing, members describe what they observed, analyze patterns, predict what learning might take place based on the observations, and outline next steps.

The network members meet in their small groups to record each piece of data on a sticky note, resulting in perhaps hundreds of individual notes. The network then groups the sticky notes, discussing what goes together and why, and realizes what questions members may have.

The network then discusses a next step and makes suggestions for a particular school. As principals report back to the network what they did and how effective the changes were, the administrators learn what works — and what did not — to refine their own thinking and practice.



GOAL IS TO CONNECT SCHOOLS

The ultimate goal of instructional rounds, Elmore and co-authors write, is to connect not just classrooms within a school, but schools within a system.

"A key part of the instructional rounds practice connects the classroom observations of the rounds model to the larger context of the system's improvement strategy" (p. 5).

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City, E.A., Elmore, R.F., Fiarman, S.E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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Instructional rounds organizer

After defining a specific problem of practice, create guiding questions to help the observing teams focus their data collection on the specific problem as demonstrated in what students are doing in class.

Each observer completes the form by answering the guiding questions for each class observed, keeping in mind that the focus is on what the students are doing and not on what the teacher should be doing.

After the rounds are completed, members can refer back to this worksheet during their debriefing to describe what they observed, look for patterns, make predictions, etc.

	GUIDING QUESTION #1 Example: What is the nature of the task students are engaged in?	**GUIDING QUESTION #2** Example: What resources do you see students using to support their involvement in the task?
Class/room		
Class/room		
Class/room		
Class/room		
Class/room		

Adapted with permission from South Lane School District (Cottage Grove, Ore.).

Instructional rounds visit schedule

Participants complete this schedule for use on the day of the rounds visits. Groups meet regularly at a different school each time and spend the morning observing in classrooms. Subgroups of three or four observers visit a classroom for 20 minutes, and two teams visit each class to help ensure the data collected are as neutral as possible.

Group1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6

Time	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6

EXAMPLE

In the example schedule below, a total of 18 different classrooms will be observed, and every observer group (made up of administrators, directors, education leaders, etc.) visits the full range of student age groups of the classrooms to be visited. In the case of a small school or a visit limited to certain portions of a school, some classrooms may need to be repeated more than others in order to create a full schedule.

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Observer 1	Observer 6	Observer 11	Observer 16	Observer 21	Observer 26
Observer 2	Observer 7	Observer 12	Observer 17	Observer 22	Observer 27
Observer 3	Observer 8	Observer 13	Observer 18	Observer 23	Observer 28
Observer 4	Observer 9	Observer 14	Observer 19	Observer 24	Observer 29
Observer 5	Observer 10	Observer 15	Observer 20	Observer 25	Observer 30

Note: To ensure each classroom receives two visits, groups 1 and 2 visit shared classrooms, as do groups 3 and 4 and groups 5 and 6.

Time	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5	Group 6
Network Mtg 8:30–9:00	Together					
9:00 -9:20	Room 4	Room 1	Room 2	Room 3	Room 10	Room 7
9:20-9:40	Room 1	Room 4	Room 3	Room 2	Room 7	Room 10
9:40-10:00	Room 11	Room 8	Room 6	Room 9	Room 5	Room 12
10:00 -10:20	Room 8	Room 11	Room 9	Room 6	Room 12	Room 5

Adapted with permission from Thomas Fowler-Finn, www.instructionalrounds.com.

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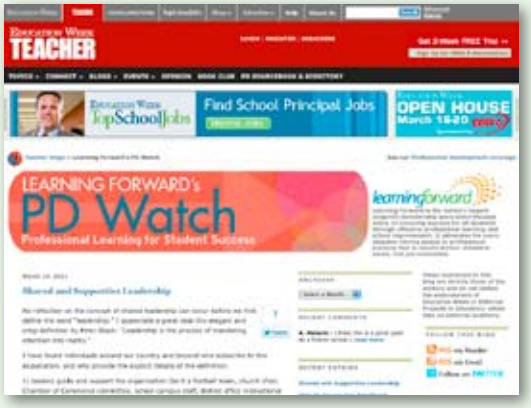

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As we strive to highlight important topics, raise concerns, inspire debate, and motivate action, tell us what you want us to address, and let us know when we fail to achieve our goal.

— Stephanie Hirsh
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