OUT *of* ISOLATION

SUPERINTENDENTS BAND TOGETHER TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTION AND EQUITY IN THEIR DISTRICTS

By Thomas Hatch and Rachel Roegman

Administrative demands, crisis management, and political challenges often strand superintendents miles away from the day-to-day work of teachers and students in the classroom. Even when superintendents strive to focus their work on the instructional core — the interactions among student, teacher, and content (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Elmore, 2002) — those same commitments and crises conspire to keep them in their districts, unable to share what they are learning or get advice and assistance from like-minded peers in other districts.

To combat this isolation, the New Jersey Network of Superintendents brings together a small group of superintendents one day each month to engage in instructional rounds and activities in which they identify and address problems of practice in their districts that focus on issues of instruction and equity (see box on p. 38). Beyond the opportunities for peer-based support, the network aims to enable superintendents to improve classroom practice and learning outcomes for all students in their districts.

Although superintendents may not have a direct influence

on day-to-day practice inside classrooms (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Mendels, 2012), the network highlights three avenues through which superintendents can impact the instructional core:

- **Personal interactions** in which superintendents discuss with district colleagues what they are learning and foster learning for others;

- **Resources,** including readings, activities, instruments, protocols, and rubrics that superintendents give to colleagues to use in their own work; and

- **Routines and practices** such as instructional rounds that focus attention on the instructional core and allow administrators and teachers to make connections, build relationships, and share information, observations, and insights about teaching and learning.

Assessing the influence of any activity on student learning is difficult. The work of superintendents intertwines with the activities of a wide range of other people and initiatives, making it impossible to isolate the effect of any one. In this article, we trace how the ideas, resources, and routines emphasized in the work of the New Jersey Network of Superintendents combines with other factors to influence the instructional core in one district. The story of this district illustrates the possibilities and the challenges superintendents face when they commit themselves and their districts to systemic work on instruction and equity.

ONE DISTRICT'S EXPERIENCE

Woodhaven Public Schools (a pseudonym) is a midsized urban district with more than 30 schools and 20,000 students.

DEFINING THE ISSUES

THEORIES OF ACTION: The beliefs and assumptions, often implicit and unarticulated, that lead people and groups to act in certain ways. When made explicit, theories of action can be used to examine how plans and strategies are supposed to reach specific outcomes and to reflect on what can be done to improve the chances of reaching those outcomes.

PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE: Issues of instructional and/or organizational practice that can be addressed in a meaningful period of time and set the stage for further work.

INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS: A practice in which groups of educators visit a series of classrooms in one school for short periods of time, make observations focused around a problem of practice, reflect together on what they observed, and offer feedback to the hosting principal *(City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).*

RED ZONES: Groups of students who are significantly underperforming their peers. These students may be concentrated in a particular geographic area or they may share other commonalities such as racial or cultural background, gender, age, etc. *(Childress, Doyle, & Thomas, 2009).*

The student population is 65% Hispanic, 25% African-American, and 10% white and Asian; 80% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and more than 60% speak English as a second or third language. While the district has been a low performer on state tests, it has made substantial improvements since the current superintendent, Roberto Williams (a pseudonym), began in 2005.

Initiatives launched during Williams' early years provided a basis for these improvements. Williams emphasized improving student performance by developing a common curriculum and pacing guides across all schools; repairing buildings and replacing old ones; and establishing learning teams that bring together central office and site administrators monthly to discuss readings and share ideas.

After Williams joined the New Jersey Network of Superintendents, he used ideas, tools, and readings from the meetings to focus his interactions with colleagues on issues of instruction and the instructional core. For example, Williams introduced readings from the network into learning team meetings, and then his assignments to administrators engaged them in examining specific issues of instruction and equity in their work. For one assignment, he asked Woodhaven's principals to write their theories of action and explain how their schools' initiatives could improve student outcomes. He also engaged staff members in developing their own problems of practice and identifying "red zones" (Childress, Doyle, & Thomas, 2009) — underperforming groups of students (see box at left).

The superintendent reinforces this work in conversations and in follow-up activities by asking colleagues to share with him and with one another their latest thinking on their theories of action, problems of practice, or red zones. One tool used for this purpose is an observation protocol Williams learned about from the network. The protocol, adapted from one developed by the Connecticut Superintendents' Network, is used to record specific details — without interpretation or judgment — about the three elements of the instructional core: students, teacher, and content (see p. 39). After sharing the protocol with his assistant superintendents, he asked them to report on their observations. These follow-up conversations enabled him to provide feedback and demonstrated a commitment to the instructional core. He continued to ask colleagues what they were seeing until, as he put it, "they actually went into the classroom and started to collect data and were able to tell me what they saw in the core. And then they came back with subjective comments, and I said, 'No, I don't want judgment. I want you to tell me what you see.' "

In turn, the administrators can disseminate key ideas and expand support for work on the instructional core by using the terms and sharing readings and activities from the network. For example, the observation protocol was adopted by some instructional supervisors who worked directly with the teachers at different levels and in different content areas. Using the protocol

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL		
What does the TEACHER say/do?	**What do STUDENTS say/do?**	**What evidence of CONTENT is there?**

Source: Connecticut Superintendents' Network, Connecticut Center for School Change.

changed the way several of them approached their work. The observation protocol brought work that began in the network into teacher discussions in the schools and served as a means of distributing leadership (Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

Establishing instructional rounds has also enabled district members to see what is happening in classrooms and to share what they are seeing with others. Although the network did not require participating superintendents to implement rounds, Williams, in consultation with district colleagues, developed an instructional rounds process for administrators. With the support of two consultants who were a part of a separate partnership and a former superintendent who had led a rounds process

in his own district, the district conducted the first rounds visit in winter 2010 with a small pilot group. By fall 2011, all assistant superintendents, instructional supervisors, site principals, and assistant principals were organized into cohorts, with each cohort engaging in four instructional rounds visits per year. "There was some realization that this is genuinely capacity building," a director of staff development explained. "You have to have some understanding about what you're doing, and you have to have everybody as a part of it."

The superintendent did not tightly control or coordinate his conversations with his colleagues, the use of network-related materials and tools, and the rounds, but all those activities

reinforced one another and helped to surface insights about classroom practice that led to the identification of a troubling pattern throughout the district: "We see some pretty consistent patterns in terms of task levels," one of the supervisors reported. "They are lower-level tasks, even in our higher-achieving schools." This realization was not easy to come by. At one school where both New Jersey Network superintendents and district administrators conducted separate rounds visits, for example, both groups reported that they saw many classroom activities that were at a low level according to Bloom's taxonomy. These results conflicted with test results showing that the school had substantially improved its ranking in comparison to similar schools. As one school administrator explained, the report from the rounds groups "wasn't as positive a message" as she was used to hearing, and, initially, she was defensive about the feedback. The administrator's own aha moment came in a conversation in which she tried to convince the rounds consultant that the students were engaged in more higher-level activities than they had seen in the rounds visits and subsequent observations. The consultant finally told her, "If you don't see it, it's not there." Subsequently, the school has developed its own inquiry into the level of questioning used across content areas.

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With growing recognition that the level of rigor of classroom activities was a problem across schools, the district developed a systemwide problem of practice: "In what ways and to what extent do classroom, school, and district forces impact the level of cognitive demand in the classroom?" Making the level of rigor an explicit focus of attention in future observations and rounds visits has contributed to several key changes in curriculum and instruction.

First, district supervisors and administrators involved in curriculum and instruction replaced the language arts curricula in many of the elementary school grades with curricula they believe will support learning activities that involve higher-order thinking.

Second, central office administrators changed their approach to the pacing guides that have been a key part of their curricular plan. The pacing guides provide a calendar designed to keep all teachers in the district moving through the curriculum at the same speed. Previously, administrators wrote pacing guides to cover the entire year and then added material to the guides using information from observations and benchmark assessments about which topics required further attention.

As central office administrators observed the preponderance of lower-level tasks in classrooms and talked with teachers and principals, they realized that they were asking teachers to cover too much material. Teachers were rushing through the curriculum rather than slowing down enough to ensure that students understood the material at a deep level. In response, administrators created a quarterly review process in which the pacing guides are adapted to take into account information from benchmark assessments and observations within the time available rather than adding demands on top of a schedule established a year in advance.

While the superintendent did not mandate these changes, his actions set the stage for the reflections on classroom practice that have prompted changes in curriculum and in interactions and conversations among district staff. "We really have people talking about the task," one central office administrator said. "Their vocabulary is changing." As Williams said, "In 2005, I didn't have principals that could even tell me what the instructional core was. Now I have principals that talk about the instructional core with me and with their assistant superintendents, their teachers, and in their professional development."

CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

The Woodhaven case illustrates the way that ideas and materials developed for superintendents can influence curriculum and interactions among administrators and teachers. It is too early to tell how students' work in the classroom will change. Further rounds visits, observations, and continuing student assessments will be needed now that the new curricula are in place. Nonetheless, the work of the superintendent, the tools and materials he shared, and the rounds visits he and his colleagues established helped pave the way to improve student performance. The district has put in place new structures, procedures, and protocols for observations and instructional rounds and for examining the rigor of learning activities; and the district is implementing new curricula and pacing guides. Readings in learning teams, rounds, red zone analyses, and related professional development have helped administrators develop their expertise. District administrators are developing connections and relationships across schools and departments that can help them identify patterns and key issues in classroom practice and inform district-level decisions about curriculum and other improvement initiatives.

Comparing this district's experience with others in the network suggests several critical factors that other rounds networks and superintendents need to take into account when pursuing similar initiatives.

1. **Illustrating that it "takes capacity to build capacity" (Hatch, 2009), the network-related work in Woodhaven benefited from previous improvement efforts in the district.** Conditions and climate were improving and relationships were developing that set the stage for the sometimes-difficult observations, reflections, and conver-

sations among administrators and teachers about classroom practice.

2. **Although this case focuses on the superintendent, it also shows the importance of informed allies who can take ideas, tools, and routines and run with them without substantial guidance.** In Woodhaven, the superintendent benefited from the fact that one of his key administrators had recently been through a master's program where she had read many of the same articles and been involved in some of the same activities that he was introduced to by the network. Some administrators had experience in early childhood settings that promoted the kind of descriptive, non-evaluative observations featured in rounds. Others had worked in the New Jersey Department of Education and were familiar with the kinds of curricula that could increase the rigor of classroom activities for English language learners in particular. Superintendents in other network districts have also found that the ability to distribute leadership for instruction depends on these allies who are already familiar with and committed to work on the instructional core.

3. **Just as the rounds work is helping to build connections and relationships in the district, the network offers the superintendent access to peers, mentors, and experts who can help support the work on the instructional core.** In Woodhaven, that support extended beyond network members to include connections to the consultants and the rounds expert who regularly visited the district and helped to keep attention focused on the rounds work and the instructional core. While not every district has access to outside experts, their meetings allow superintendents to draw on one another for advice as well as ideas about where to get additional expertise. In addition, connections with colleagues and mentors can provide emotional and social support and encouragement to sustain superintendents through difficult times and difficult work.

4. **Even as districts like Woodhaven make improvements, developments within network districts are a constant reminder that superintendents are engaged in politically dangerous work.** This work on instruction depends on identifying problems of practice, areas of underperformance, and issues of equity. Surfacing those problems and issues and making them public can strain relationships and provide evidence for critics. Even with the improvements in Woodhaven, Williams has critics who have campaigned against his work. That political environment leads to constant second-guessing about how to proceed, knowing that a misstep could bring the work to an end. "We are an organization that lives in a political environment," Williams said. "[If] you're trying to be transparent about an issue that

needs to be addressed, then you've got to be cautious about how you release that [information]."

Working with a cross section of districts in the network highlights that issues of instruction and equity are not just local issues. These issues cut across communities and district boundaries, making it even more difficult for individual superintendents to pursue them on their own. From that perspective, a key challenge for the future is to support the development of learning experiences that bring superintendents together in collective work. The work of the superintendent may be a lonely job, but superintendents cannot do the work alone.

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