

THE LEARNING Principal

Inside

- Principal's critical role, p. 2
- How on-the-job learning affects teacher practice, p. 3
- Tool: Instructional rounds organizer, p. 6
- Tool: Instructional rounds visit schedule, p. 7

Spring 2011

Vol. 6, No. 3

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

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).

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

Continued on p. 4

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



Learning Forward is a nonprofit, international membership association of learning educators committed to advancing professional learning for student success.
www.learningforward.org

Continued from p. 1

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

Continued on p. 5

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,

Continued from p. 4

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).

REFERENCE

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.

•
Valerie von Frank (valerievonfrank@aol.com) is an education writer and editor of Learning Forward’s books. 

