

New Book Lauds Center's Work with Instructional Rounds

The pioneering work on instructional rounds done by the Connecticut Center for School Change's Superintendents' Network plays a central role in a new book from Harvard Education Press. Packed with examples from the experiences of the authors in Connecticut and other locations, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* is must reading for anyone who wants to adopt the instructional rounds model.

Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman and Lee Teitel offer both an argument for using instructional rounds and practical ideas about how to do so. Their book is a thorough, step-by-step roadmap for adapting the innovative process and avoiding pitfalls and impediments that could derail it.

New and Powerful Ways to Achieve Student-learning Outcomes

Rounds is a four-step process, patterned after medical rounds and grounded in the popular concepts of walkthroughs, networks and district improvement plans. It has evolved from the ongoing study by the Superintendents' Network of what is effective – and what is not – about each of those ideas.

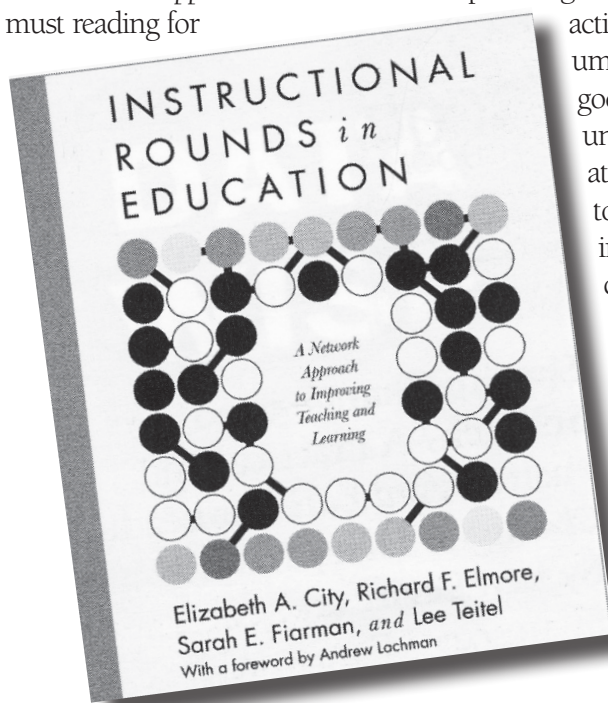
"In the United States," the authors of the new book state, "we have more variation in student achievement than do almost all of our international peers, and it matters tremendously which classroom students are in. This is no surprise, given the traditional teaching norms of autonomy and isolation. It is clear that closed classroom doors will not help us educate all students to high levels. It is also clear that what happens in classrooms matters for student learning and that we can do more together than we can do individually to improve learning and teaching."

The authors observe that walkthroughs, networks and district improvement plans all may have some drawbacks and disadvantages, depending upon how they are used. For instance, they note that the practice of walkthroughs has "become corrupted" by confusing it with and employing it as a tool for supervising and evaluating teachers. "A wide range of activities goes under the broad walkthrough umbrella – some activities supportive of good instruction, others punitive and uninformed," they write. "Some focus attention on instruction and bring together educators in ways that lead to improvement; others are technical, compliance driven, cursory (referred to derisively by teachers as 'drive-bys'), and harshly evaluative."

Instructional rounds is none of those things. Rather, it's a non-evaluative process in which a team identifies a problem of practice, visits classrooms to non-judgmentally observe, debriefs about what was observed and then focuses on how to make improvements. Here in Connecticut rounds has evolved from

the Center's commitment to the idea and the careful scrutiny and refinement of each step in the process by the Center's staff, the Network superintendents, and two of the book's authors, Elmore and Teitel.

Rounds, says Teitel, begins by doing "something that most educators have never done: look at classroom instruction in a focused, systematic, purposeful, and collective way." Many educators, he says, "call for 'increased rigor' or 'critical thinking skills,' with only a vague idea of what those terms mean, (however) network members work together to develop detailed lists of what those abstract ideas should look like in real classrooms. They come to agreement on what teachers and students would be saying and doing if critical thinking skills were being demonstrated, and what students would be working on if their tasks were really rigorous. And when they



A Message from the Executive Director

Andrew Lachman

Instructional Rounds as Innovation



Today's educators are practitioners – often functioning as solo, independent, autonomous actors in the privacy of closed-door classrooms and schools – in search of a professional *practice*. Instructional rounds is a *practice* (a tool, technique, activity) borrowed from the medical profession that can assist educators in developing a *practice* (a set

of protocols and processes for observing, analyzing, discussing and understanding instruction) that can be used to improve student learning at scale if it's *practiced* (methodically and systematically implemented) with fidelity. In shorthand, and riffing on the joke about getting to Carnegie Hall, educators need to practice the practice (of rounds) in order to have a practice.

Rounds is an excellent method for focusing on the instructional core: the complex inter-relationships between teacher, student and curriculum content. Rounds provides a key data source and a powerful feedback loop that lets educators know whether their systemic improvement efforts are actually reaching students. Recently, rounds has become a hot topic described in books, newsletters, and workshops. The danger is that rounds will suffer the same fate as so many other educational innovations. As professor Richard Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education has documented in *Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice*,¹ most innovations, especially those that directly affect the instructional core, rarely penetrate beyond a small number of schools and classrooms. If they do, they are often so watered down and altered as to be unrecognizable.

If rounds is not going to suffer the same fate, it can't be another initiative, activity, or program imposed on superintendents, principals, and teachers. It can't be the latest flavor of the month, ballyhooed in three-hour workshops as the silver bullet that will improve student achievement. Rounds, practiced with fidelity and a sustained commitment to improving teaching and learning at scale, has the potential to transform education only if it becomes embedded in the actual work of the school and district.

In *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Clayton Christensen distinguishes between **sustaining innovations**, which can be accommodated without impacting the structure or the culture of the system, and **disruptive innovations** that require systems and people to do things they've never done before.

If rounds is conceived and implemented as a systemic innovation that disrupts business as usual, rounds can help district and school leaders develop a collaborative, inquiry-based culture that shatters the norms of isolation and autonomy. As a disruptive innovation, the practice of rounds can further the establishment of an "educational practice."

The Center's Superintendents' Network was ground zero for, and instrumental in, the creation of rounds. Over the past eight years, the Center has been involved in the continuous improvement of rounds work with professors Elmore and Teitel from Harvard, the superintendents in the Network and colleagues from other communities. That's why the Center, drawing on our expertise and experience in developing, launching and refining rounds, has partnered with several districts that want to be true to the core principles of the rounds process.

As an example, we're working with Windsor Locks to revamp their practice of learning walks as instructional rounds. The Center is helping the district's administrators and teachers develop problems of practice and coaching staff to observe classrooms and provide feedback regarding patterns and trends in each school. Superintendent Greg Little notes, "staff in Windsor Locks are engaging in professional, unvarnished conversations regarding improving teaching and learning, all grounded in real time classroom data. Steve Wlodarczyk's assistance in this process has been invaluable as we work collaboratively with staff towards improving programs for our students." In Avon, Superintendent Dave Erwin recently started professional development about rounds for his administrators and teachers. "Attendees asked great questions," he reports, "and Steve's detailed, logical answers reassured them that we will be visiting classrooms to observe and learn about instruction and not to evaluate teachers."

In working with districts to implement instructional rounds, the Center is committed to the hallmarks of sustainable and effective scaling up: clear program design, local buy-in, sufficient support and professional development, strong leadership, and quality assurance. If districts develop a clearly articulated and widely shared understanding of high-quality teaching and learning, build a collaborative learning culture for both adults and students, and implement coherent and aligned system-wide strategies, then Connecticut can achieve high-performing educational improvement for all students, in every classroom, in every school.

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don't see these signs of critical thinking or rigor, they don't blame teachers, students, parents or other external factors. Instead they look within the school and district to suggest new and powerful ways educators can work together to achieve the student-learning outcomes they desire."

Putting Rounds to Work in Connecticut

"With its focus on the instructional core, a collaborative culture that values reflection and adult learning, a coherent theory of action and a system-wide implementation strategy, rounds can be an effective tool for achieving the vision of large-scale instructional improvement," says Andrew Lachman, executive director of the Center.

What the Network has learned has been the result of repeated testing and refinement of the instructional rounds model in classrooms in the members' districts. And it has hardly been an abstract exercise. Now a robust process, with clearly defined protocols, rounds is taking root in districts of individual Network members who are applying what they have learned about educational rounds.

"What's especially appealing about instructional rounds is its focus on the instructional core and classroom instruction," says Dr. Steve Włodarczyk, education program officer at the Center. "It doesn't point out any one teacher or seek to blame anyone for anything. It focuses on instructional tasks. Overall, the teachers I've worked with have been very favorable toward rounds." His observation is borne out by veteran superintendents who are members of the Network and who have introduced rounds in their districts.

After discussing it with his leadership team at their annual summer retreat, Dr. Gregory Little, superintendent of Windsor Locks Schools, initiated rounds in his district last fall, with support from the Center for School Change. "Teacher involvement is a linchpin for this program," he says. "When teachers understand this is not about evaluating them, that it's about collaboratively, as a school and district, identifying and working on a problem of practice in their classrooms, they will feel more ownership and engagement for continuous professional improvement. We've completed three school visits so far and it is already becoming part of our culture."

In Southington, the district's administrative team has used rounds for the past three years to examine best practice for instructional leadership. Each month's meeting takes place at a different school and the host principal makes

a presentation about the use of rounds-based techniques in his or school.

"Each administrator has a theory of action," explains Superintendent Joseph Erardi. "What we're looking for is supporting information about how the theory of action is embedded in the classrooms.

"Our protocol has mirrored the structure established by the Center for School Change," he adds. "Guiding questions directed by the Assistant Superintendent of

Instruction and Learning were consistent throughout the district. What is your theory of action? How does your theory of action drive your continuous improvement plan? How should

your continuous improvement plan be affecting best instructional practices in your building?

"The monthly rounds were not evaluative for either staff or administration. However, over the past three years, the transition of ownership for student outcomes has moved to teachers and now administrators as our data collection allows each school leader to build a continuous improvement plan around his or her school's public report card. We've been very pleased with the results thus far."

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What are Instructional Rounds?

"The rounds process is an adaptation and extension of the medical rounds model, which is used routinely in medical schools and teaching hospitals to develop the diagnostic and treatment practice of physicians... In the most commonly used versions, groups of medical interns, residents, and supervising or attending physicians visit patients, observe and discuss the evidence for diagnoses, and, after a thorough analysis of the evidence, discuss possible treatments. The medical rounds process is the major way in which physicians develop their knowledge of practice and, more importantly, the major way in which the profession builds and propagates its norms of practice. The rounds model embodies a specific set of ideas about how practitioners work together to solve common problems and to improve their practice. In the education context, we call this practice instructional rounds, or rounds for short." – excerpted from *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*

“When we began introducing rounds we wanted to make sure it wasn’t seen as just another ‘thing,’” explains Dr. David Title, superintendent of Bloomfield Schools, who began introducing rounds in his district four years ago. “We were careful to make sure it tied into and complemented other initiatives, such as school improvement plans and data teams. We were also very methodical about how we introduced it. It began as an administrator-only initiative and we spent a lot of time with administrators in the first year defining what good teaching looks like, so that we had a common lens. Then, in the second year we began to involve teachers more. Last summer I asked all of our administrators and teachers to read *Instructional Rounds in Education*.

“In our practice, we begin with a theory of action and then focus our rounds on a specific problem of practice. We think about what the classroom would look like if the theory of action were in operation. The rounds are made by members of our district, including other teachers. When they observe a classroom it is with the understanding that they are gathering, not judging, information about what they see in the room. The information is later reviewed in the debriefing.

“Rounds have been very effective for us,” he adds. “I do my own one-on-one classroom visitations with the principals of all our schools, three times a year. I’m seeing a lot more student-centered instruction and teachers who are willing to get out of the way and let the students learn.”

“In many respects, Connecticut is the benchmark for rounds,” says Elmore. “It’s the place where we developed the ideas and protocols for rounds, and I’m confident that the use of rounds has affected the quality of learning and teaching. It has been our experience that teachers and principals involved in rounds say it’s the most important professional program they’re involved with and it has reconnected them with why they got into education in the first place.”

Want to Put Rounds to Work in Your District?

If you would like to discuss support for rounds in your district, contact Steve Wlodarczyk at 860-586-2340 or swlo@ctschoolchange.org.

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