One of the greatest challenges of any principal is the procurement of quality instruction for all students. The Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Instructional Rounds (IR) has produced a catalyst for continuous improvement of the instruction at our middle school. Based on the procedures of the medical profession’s practice of medical rounds, this process has helped us improve instruction.

Our Story
Years back, it became apparent that achieving consensus regarding quality instructional practice was, at times, a struggle. This observation was impossible to ignore after we embarked upon classroom observations across our district.

The following school year, a group of district and building administrators attended the Instructional Rounds in Education training at Harvard University. Enlightened by these protocols for gathering instructional data, we returned home and adjusted our collective classroom visits based on what we learned. We then began basing our classroom visits on Harvard’s elements of instructional observation as described in the book Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning.

We formulated a Theory of Action, which focused on the alignment between our district’s intended and enacted theories of instructional execution. Doing so helped us specify what we wanted to do, along with what we were actually doing in the classroom. We also worked to establish a Problem of Practice (POP)—the focus of the observation that we felt would improve student learning. Examples of our school’s past POPs include the use of clear learning targets, clear success criteria for students, evidence of differentiated instruction, and the quantity of teacher-talk versus student-talk in the classroom. Though we continued to
collect quantitative data about how often desired instruction occurred in each classroom visit, our school soon realized there was a more powerful purpose to this practice.

Our IR team’s post-observation debrief meetings often entailed refinements of our POP. The “statistical analysts” in our building took issue with these adjustments to the POP, as it admittedly skewed our longitudinal data for the year with our classroom observations. However, the genuine conversations about instruction became the real value over any numbers we were able to compare or crunch. These conversations helped us get closer to consistency in our school improvement efforts.

**Consistent Messaging**

At the close of one school year, we asked our 67 teachers to provide feedback regarding the value of IR. Consistency in our instructional delivery as a school was the most common theme recorded. One teacher commented, “Consistent instruction year-to-year and class-to-class,” while another said, “Establishes consistency in all classes.” Another teacher recognized that IR “unifies language being used.”

When asked to reflect on his involvement in this process, one IR team member stated: “Our group was focused on the exact same components while observing, and our debrief of the data was straight to the point. It’s a testament to continuity and the ‘try it, change it, try it again’ mindset.”

**Embedded Professional Development**

Other teachers identified IR to be authentic professional development. One such teacher stated that IR “gives me opportunity to reflect and improve on best practice.” Another said IR “helps ease me out of my comfort zone and gives many new ideas.” An IR team member furthered this sentiment by sharing, “I really enjoyed being able to watch and learn from my colleagues, and I am walking away from this experience with a new set of ideas and perspectives on how to develop lessons and teach.”

**Valuable Teacher Feedback**

In the words of one teacher, “IR is to teachers as formative assessment is to students.”

IR can be the catalyst for fruitful, productive dialogue about instruction. Of course, differing points of view exist regarding IR in our building. A small number of teachers shared dissenting views about this process, claiming that the 10- to 15-minute classroom visits yield limited value to school improvement.

However, it is this principal’s belief that with a growth mindset, the IR process can lead to positive change. Pick an instructional practice you think benefits children, and go out and observe it; then, come back as a group and talk about what you saw—the good and the bad. Next, share these findings with your entire staff. That is the foundation of systemic change. Sometimes we in the teaching profession need an excuse to help bring about needed adjustment in our practice. IR might just provide you with that excuse.

Perry A. Finch is co-principal of Blackhawk Middle School in Bensenville, Illinois.

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**Instructional rounds are based on the procedures of the medical profession’s practice of medical rounds.**

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