Instructional Rounds:

A Handbook for Principals

Practical steps to illuminate the best teaching techniques, strategies, and practices.

By Aaron Brengard

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As principal and instructional leader, I observe classrooms daily. About three years ago, I realized that though my staff members shared ideas with one another in meetings or in the lunchroom, they didn't see what I saw on my rounds: firsthand observations, new ideas, and best practices. That changed when we came upon the idea of staff instructional rounds.

During instructional rounds, groups of educators move from class to class observing one another. Instructional rounds have become the way teacher teams can see the work being done in other classrooms, develop a shared understanding of high-quality instruction, and reflect on their own practice.

The instructional core—the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the content—is the perfect lens for instructional rounds. Anything of value in classroom instruction is connected by the content and what the teacher and students are saying or doing. Teachers may have the best intentions or a curriculum may be perfectly aligned to standards, but what matters most is what students actually do. Instructional rounds can illuminate that.

Craft the Plan, Create Norms

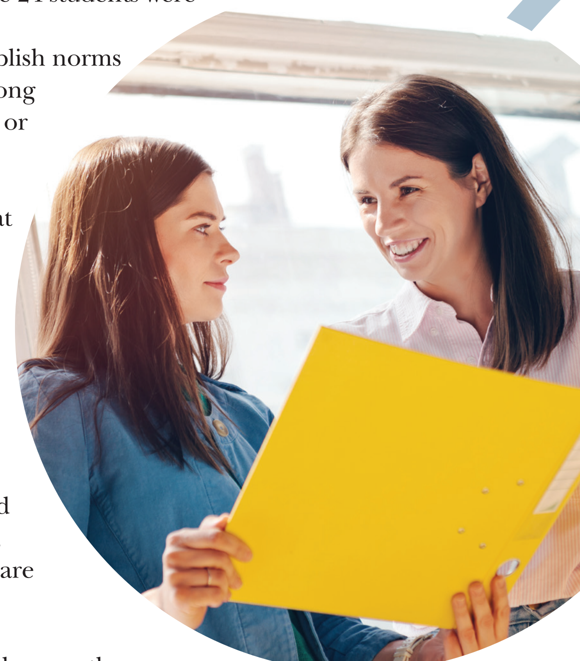
To get started, my staff and I began by reading *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* by Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman, and Lee Teitel. At a staff meeting, we discussed rounds and established them as a way for teachers to study their practice—not as an evaluation tool. We explored how our observations and discussions with colleagues would ultimately help each individual think about his or her own classroom.

Next, we established a typical rounds cycle with grade-level teams visiting three to five classrooms in other grades, making observations, and holding an in-depth discussion of trends and next steps. While mixed-grade-level teams is an option, we put an emphasis on the shared experience and opportunity to have deep discussions with grade-level peers.

In the cycle, teacher teams enter a room together and take low-inference notes for 10–15 minutes. Low-inference notes are observations with concrete data, and without value judgments or recommendations.

Getting teachers out of the classroom can be a logistical issue. Typically, we used teams of substitute teachers to release the teacher teams. Alternatively, schools can use shared collaboration time to conduct instructional rounds.

After each classroom observation, teachers huddle up outside the classroom and take turns sharing observations. For our rounds, we give each person a specific role tied into the instructional core, taking notes on either the teacher, the students, or the content. This creates some overlap in the debrief conversation that helps us understand the interconnections between the three parts of the core. For example, one observer may note a teacher saying, "Turn to a partner and answer this question." Another observer may add, "18 of the 24 students were talking with partners."



The final step was to establish norms to create a level of trust among staff. A teacher opening his or her classroom to colleagues can feel vulnerable. We needed to keep in mind that we would be guests in each other's classrooms and we were there to learn, not pass judgment. In fact, we specifically chose to never include feedback for the teacher being observed in the process. The point was to see instruction that would inspire dialogue, reflection, and personal growth. Here are our norms:

- Focus on the instructional core—the relationship between teachers, students, and content.
- Honor the process and value each other's time.
- Seek evidence and challenge assumptions.
- Stay focused on mission, purpose, growth, and improvement.
- Assume good intent.

Making the Rounds

Here's how instructional rounds work in execution, from the pre-planning to the post-rounds action plan.

Establish a problem of practice. Before heading into classrooms, teachers meet and agree upon a problem of practice. This can range from trying to determine how to hold small group instruction during math to looking for ideas to increase student engagement during a literacy block.

"As a shared experience, it was beneficial when looking to implement one of the practices we saw in our own classrooms. Having colleagues open their classroom doors in order for others to get better and hone their practice is such a personal way to share ideas."
Rachel Trowbridge, 1st grade teacher

REFLECT ON THIS
Instructional rounds are a classroom strategy focused around a problem of practice, in order to learn and extend practice. They are not an evaluation tool or checklist used to "fix" teachers.

Problems of practice are:

- Directly related to student learning;
- Focused on the instructional core;
- Directly observable and actionable; and
- High leverage—they make a significant difference for student learning.

Set the schedule. Consider how to maximize the time when teachers observe rooms. For instance, don't observe a classroom looking for a mathematic problem of practice during that classroom's reading time. Also, avoid surprising a teacher by having three to five teachers walking in her classroom unannounced. All the planning and scheduling needs to be done prior to the day of the instructional rounds. Here is a typical schedule:

- 8-8:30 a.m.: Set context, expectations, and focus for the day. Determine visit order.
- 8:30-10 a.m.: Visit classrooms. Plan for approximately 10 minutes inside each classroom and 5 minutes to debrief outside.
- 10-10:45 a.m.: Discussion to analyze trends.
- 10:45-11:30 a.m.: Create theory of action and establish next steps.

Conduct the rounds. With clipboards in hand, teachers divide among themselves the observation lens: teacher, student, or content. Before entering the room, it's important to establish a timekeeper and some kind of non-verbal signal that it's time to leave.

As teachers enter the room, they each take notes on what they see or hear. They are encouraged to ask students questions. This helps clarify misunderstandings and allows for the observer to understand the context or processes that were established prior.

After the specified 10 to 15 minutes, observers gather outside the classroom. This is done after each classroom observation. Each person takes turns sharing one low-inference observation data point until everyone has shared their ideas. The process is then repeated after the next observation. Typically, team members change observation lenses each time. By the end of the day's rounds, each participant should have used each of the three lenses of the instructional core once or twice.

Debrief. After a series of three to five classroom visits, it is time to discuss trends and identify promising practices. With the help of a facilitator (either the principal or a team-designated staff member) the team debriefs about some of the trends of practice that were observed across all of the classroom visits. Our favorite way is to chart responses on poster paper. These are the four steps to debrief.

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"I see rounds as a coaching clinic where you go in to learn from other practitioners in their field of expertise in real time. You learn to evaluate what works and what doesn't for your own personal practice."
Sergio Hernandez, 4th, 5th, 6th grade teacher

Step 1: Describe. What do you see? Share evidence of each of the parts of the instruction core in each classroom.

Tip: The best way to craft a trend is to make the description specific enough to picture the practice or strategy, but generic enough to not be able to identify the classroom where it was observed.

Step 2: Analyze. Identify trends across the instructional core. This is a chance to look for similarities across the set of observational data.

Tip: When looking for promising practices, look for trends that will inspire the group. It's not important to identify every trend, especially when they are elements already established by the team or possible negative practices.

Step 3: Predict. Use the evidence to make claims. This step holds the real power of rounds. After seeing classroom experience firsthand, teacher teams need to make some claims in order to develop a theory of action. From the trends, identify specific practices. Then, craft those practices into a theory of action using "if-then" statements: If (this practice/strategy is executed), then (this observable behavior will occur), and we know because (of this outcome.) Here's an example: If we embed small group literacy instructions into projects, then students will become better readers, and we know this because of increased fluency, accuracy, and comprehension assessment data.

Tip: Connect the theory of action to the problem of practice established prior. Have teachers think about how the claims may address that problem.

Step 4: Map the next level. How do we move instruction to the next level? Make recommendations and set action items. With a theory of action, it's time to break down the implementation into smaller, manageable steps. This includes deadlines, who is in charge, and what data will be collected to determine success.

Rounds have brought a new energy to our campus. Instead of me, the principal, being the only one seeing amazing practices going on each day, every teacher has spent a significant time analyzing what teaching looks like in other classrooms. While it definitely took training, practice, and time to implement, we now have a well-established instructional improvement practice in place. Teachers participate in at least three instructional rounds cycles per year. While I facilitated the trends debrief for each of the teams the first time, we now have teacher teams identify a peer to lead the facilitation. Rounds have not only expanded our teaching capacity, but are improving our leadership capacity, too.

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