

INTRODUCTION

Why Professional Networks? Why Rounds? Why Practice?

Pierce Middle School is stuck. Despite the best efforts of its leadership and teaching staff, Pierce's results on the statewide test have leveled off, or slightly declined, after two years of more or less steady improvement. Pierce's staff feels the urgency of the situation. There is no question about their commitment to improved student learning. They feel they are working at the limit of their current knowledge and skill. The school district's leadership is equally concerned, since they were relying on Pierce to serve as a model for their systemwide improvement strategy. Now it's not clear what they will do. Maybe it's just a temporary glitch in the test scores. But maybe it's something more fundamental. Pierce's leadership team and the district leadership team huddle in a conference room at the central office trying to figure out what to do next.¹

This scene, or something like it, occurs regularly in school systems across the country—educators with the best of intentions huddle down in conference rooms, looking at student performance data, trying to figure out what to do next in a school that seems to have outrun its knowledge of how to improve teaching and learning. In our work consulting with districts and schools on improvement, we routinely see this problem and others like it. In the typical case, teachers are working against the limits of their current knowledge about how to connect with students around content. School leaders are doing what they know how to

do. District administrators are trying to send the right combination of signals of pressure and support to teachers and administrators, hoping that they will get it right.

Just as typically, in situations like this one, none of the parties to the discussion about what to do at Pierce *has any idea of what would solve Pierce's performance problem*. Each of the educators comes to the meeting with a set of impressions about what instructional practice looks like at Pierce. Each has a budding diagnosis about what might be going on at Pierce to explain its problem, but, just as likely, each has his or her own idea about what instruction looks like at Pierce and what it would have to look like in order to solve Pierce's problem.

American schools are under increasing pressure to produce better results than they have ever produced. No Child Left Behind has set a goal of 100 percent proficiency by 2014, and legislation is not the only source of pressure. A high school diploma is no longer a reliable ticket to a decent living. In an era of computers and instant access to information, problem solving, teamwork, and communication skills are essential for personal and national success. Most schools are falling far short of the 100 percent proficiency goal, and international assessments show us that American schools are at best in the middle of the pack among our peers in level of achievement. The problem is not that schools are worse than they used to be. In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), average scores in reading and math are higher than they were thirty years ago. The problem is not that educators aren't working hard. Walk into any school in America, and you will see adults who care deeply about their students and are doing the best they can every day to help students learn. The challenge is that we are asking schools to do something they have never done before—educate all students to high levels—and we don't know how to do that in every classroom for every child.

There are pockets of excellence throughout our schools and school systems. The students lucky enough to be in the pockets are well prepared to make a good life for themselves and for their community. The students left out of the pockets are not so fortunate. That these students tend to be students of color and living in poverty is a sad, unacceptable description of our past and present, but does not have to describe our future. Our challenge is to bring those pockets of excellence to scale—to provide for all what our systems currently provide for some.

In the United States, 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. However, not all forms of professional development and collaboration are created equal. Slowly, the image of the teacher behind the closed classroom door is giving way to an image of an open door, but many educators are not sure what to look for when they open the door and what to do with what they see.

Repeatedly, district and school practitioners tell us that one of the greatest barriers to school improvement is the lack of an agreed-upon definition of what high-quality instruction looks like. Without some understanding of what instruction at Pierce actually looks like and some agreement about what it would have to look like to achieve the kind of student learning that Pierce is trying to achieve, the meeting at the central office is not likely to produce much. Yet, time and again, educators meet to try to solve instructional problems without a common understanding of what they are trying to achieve in the classroom.

Our work in schools is about bridging this knowledge gap between educators and their practice. The *rounds process* is an explicit practice that is designed to bring discussions of instruction directly into the process of school improvement. By *practice*, we mean something quite specific. We mean a set of protocols and processes for observing, analyzing, discussing, and understanding instruction that can be used to improve student learning at scale. The practice works because it creates a common discipline and focus among practitioners with a common purpose and set of problems.

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. There are several versions of medical rounds, but 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.² 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.

Educators do, of course, have practices. That is, each teacher, principal, curriculum coach, and system-level administrator has, implicitly or explicitly, some set of “customary, habitual, or expected” ways of doing work. What educators don’t have are explicitly *shared* practices, which is what distinguishes educators from other professionals. It is this idea of shared practice that is at the core of instructional rounds. The basic idea is to put all educators—principals and central office administrators as well as teachers—into a common practice disciplined by protocols and routines and organized around the core functions of schooling in order to create common language, ways of seeing, and a shared practice of improvement.

WHAT ROUNDS IS—AND ISN’T

Instructional rounds sits at the intersection of three current popular approaches to the improvement of teaching and learning—walkthroughs, networks, and district improvement strategies.

Since what goes on in classrooms is at the heart of instructional improvement, a key part of developing an improvement practice is observation. We are not alone in attending to this. Dozens of other approaches use various forms of classroom observation, calling them walkthroughs, learning walks, classroom visitations, peer (or administrative) observations, and more. A wide range of activities goes under the broad *walkthrough* umbrella—some activities supportive of good instruction, others punitive and uninformed. 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.

Unfortunately, the practice of walkthroughs has become corrupted in many ways by confounding it with the supervision and evaluation of teachers. The purpose of some walkthroughs has been to identify deficiencies in classroom practice and to “fix” teachers who manifest these deficiencies. In many instances, judgments about what needs fixing are made on the basis of simplistic checklists that have little or nothing to do with the direct experience of teachers in their classrooms. Groups of administrators descend on classrooms with clipboards and checklists, caucus briefly in the hallway, and then deliver a set of simplistic messages about what needs fixing. This kind of practice is both antithetical to the purposes of instructional rounds and profoundly antiprofessional. The idea behind instructional rounds is that *everyone* involved is working on their practice, *everyone* is obliged to be knowledgeable about

the common task of instructional improvement, and *everyone's* practice should be subject to scrutiny, critique, and improvement.

Networks are also a common idea in educational improvement circles. It seems as if you cannot turn around in a school or district with an improvement agenda without bumping into some kind of network—a professional learning community, a critical friends group, or a teacher or principal study group. Some are within districts or within schools, and some cut across districts, perhaps organized for subject-area teachers or a particular type of administrator. Some approaches in the network category are well thought-out, well implemented, and tied to improving practice, but many are not. In some settings, they are simply new labels for meetings that are dysfunctional or disconnected from instructional improvement, or both. In rounds networks, colleagues (possibly sharing the same role, like superintendents, or possibly in mixed roles, like superintendents, central office personnel, teachers union leaders, professional developers, principals, and teachers) gather regularly to engage in and develop the practice of rounds together, over time developing a community of practice that supports their improvement work.

Our goal is to support systems of instructional improvement at scale, not just isolated pockets of good teaching in the midst of mediocrity. Consequently, 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. It is a rare school system that doesn't have an improvement plan, but they range widely in quality, focus, and usefulness. Some are dynamic and are used to drive instruction and align operations; others are exercises that end up summarized in several volumes that sit on the superintendent's shelf. Some plans are collections of activities, not framed around a central idea or focus, or even a hypothesis about what actions will logically lead to desired improvements.

Having an improvement strategy, at some stage of development, is a precondition for the effective use of instructional rounds. The process of rounds requires participants to focus on a common problem of practice that cuts across all levels of the system. It is difficult to focus in a productive way on which problem to solve if you don't have a strategy to start with. The more developed the strategy, the more you are likely to benefit from the practice of rounds. Rounds draws on and contributes to a system's strategy. Virtually all the districts we have worked with have markedly changed their improvement strategies over the course of their work with us, building on the knowledge and shared vision of teaching and learning they have developed through the use of instructional rounds. Our experience with rounds

has been primarily at the district level, building a practice among system-level and school-level leadership teams around instructional improvement. The same practice could be used in a single school, a department in a high school, or a network of autonomous schools with a mutual interest in improvement.

Rounds is a special kind of walkthrough, a special kind of network, and a special kind of improvement strategy integrated into one practice.

A Picture of Rounds

Rounds is a four-step process...

Excerpt from the Introduction of "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 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009), pp. 1-6.

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