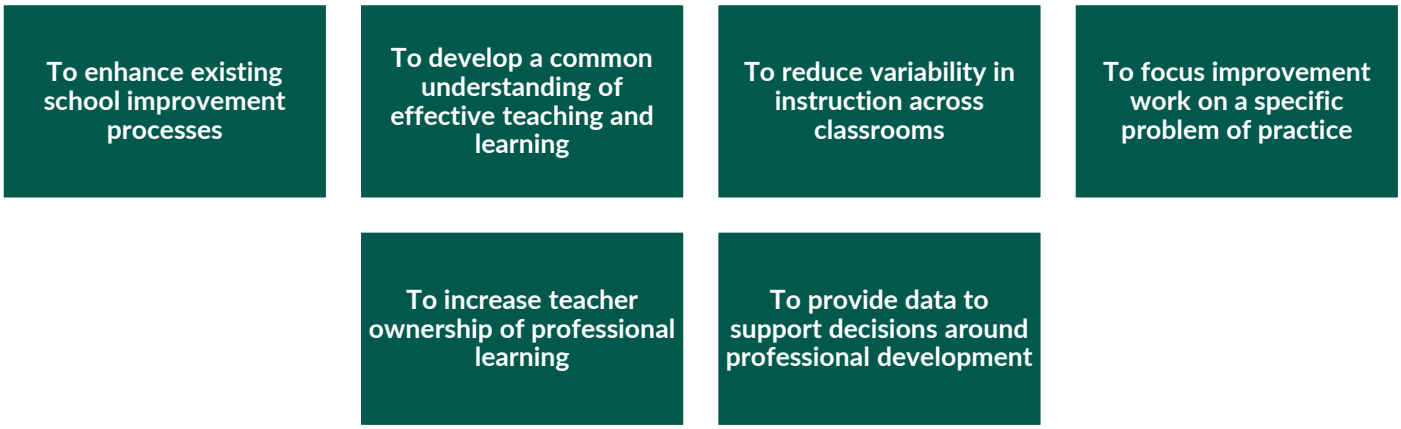
Outline of Elements

Instructional rounds provide a structured process for schools and school divisions to collect data and apply shared expertise to the implementation of improvement plans. The process of instructional rounds was developed from the rounds process used in medical education and involves small teams of observers examining instruction with a focus on a shared problem of practice.[1] Schools use instructional rounds to create coherence in the implementation of the Comprehensive Strategic Improvement Plan (CSIP).[2] The figure below presents common motivations for implementing the instructional rounds process.

Common Motivations for Implementing Instructional Rounds



Source: *Educational Leadership*[3]

Instructional rounds support a collaborative school culture by engaging all teachers in the improvement process. Ideally, all teachers participate in instructional rounds once per semester.[4] Participating in a school-wide instructional rounds process builds collective accountability for student achievement.[5] A study of an instructional rounds initiative for pre-service teachers in Australia finds that participants report teaching rounds increase their ability to collectively evaluate teaching practices and that it also facilitates a schoolwide learning community.[6]

Instructional rounds networks within and across school divisions can promote division-wide improvement. For example, the Alabama Best Practices Center facilitates a statewide instructional rounds network in Alabama. Individual districts within the network can participate in one of around 18 instructional rounds events held by the Alabama Best Practices Center at host schools throughout the state.[7] Divisions use instructional rounds to promote division-wide improvement by developing networks that include observers across schools in the division. In other cases, networks of superintendents at the state level form instructional rounds networks across school divisions.[8] Although empirical research on the outcomes of multi-school instructional rounds networks is limited, a network in Australia reports the outcomes listed below.[9] Likewise, Elmhurst Community Unit School District 205 in Illinois reports that using instructional rounds as a division-level professional learning strategy for school leaders has supported the implementation of learning targets as an improvement strategy.[10]

Outcomes of Multi-School Instructional Rounds Networks

OUTCOME LEVEL	OUTCOMES
School-Level	• Professional dialogue at the executive level around pedagogy and its complexity • Professional learning at the whole-school level • Increased reflection on practice • Motivation to change practice in classrooms • Principals visiting classrooms more frequently • Principals focus more on teaching and learning • Greater appreciation of what classroom teachers do daily • Recommendations taken back to school – shared and implemented • Starting to view problems of practice as challenges
Student-Level	• Student voice is being heard • Teachers are seeing learning through the eyes of the students • Increased and improved student/student and student/teacher dialogue • Students are becoming more independent learners

Source: Creating a Path Network[11]

Key Components of Instructional Rounds

School divisions can use the instructional rounds process to build consensus around effective teaching practices aligned to the CSIP.[12] The instructional rounds process combines three key components listed below. Practitioners of instructional rounds note that, although many schools already use one or more of these components, combining them yields stronger outcomes than adopting one or two components in isolation.[13]

Key Components of Instructional Rounds

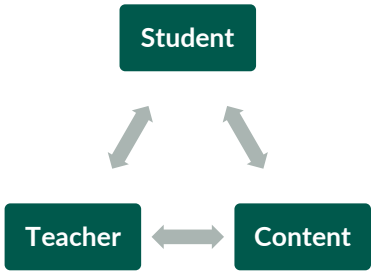
Source: *Educational Leadership*[14]

Individual teachers participate in instructional rounds as part of networks with between eight and 30 members, which meet repeatedly over time to develop a sense of trust and community. These networks may be formed based on shared subject area or responsibilities or may consist of cross-functional groups of teachers and administrators with varying roles.[15] Within these networks, teachers carry out classroom observations in smaller teams of three to five led by a facilitator designated by the division superintendent or network leader.[16] Effective facilitators have experience with adult learning and the specific protocols or tools that will be used in the instructional rounds process. Facilitators should also have skills in consensus building.[17]

Instructional rounds are distinct from classroom walkthroughs and other forms of observation. Classroom walkthroughs typically focus on administrators observing classrooms to improve the practice of the observed teachers. This process focuses on the growth of the teacher being observed, rather than the administrator. In contrast, the instructional rounds process is designed to support growth for both observed teachers and participants in observation teams.[18] In addition, teachers typically volunteer to be observed during instructional rounds.[19]

The instructional rounds process focuses observation on a problem of practice. The problem of practice represents an observable and actionable challenge related to instruction that connects with the school's broader improvement strategy as outlined in the CSIP.[21] An effective problem of practice focuses on the instructional core.[22] The instructional core represents the interaction of students, the teachers, and course content as shown opposite. The instructional rounds process rests on the assumption that the relationship among these elements drives student learning, and that changing any one element requires corresponding changes to the other two elements to realize improvements.[23] For example, changes to the curriculum will be ineffectual unless teachers receive professional learning to support the new curriculum and students engage productively with course content.[24] As a result, instructional rounds need to address the interaction among all three elements of the instructional core.[25]

The Instructional Core



Source: *Instructional Rounds in Education*[20]

Participants in instructional rounds develop a theory of action that connects their work to the instructional core. The theory of action reflects each participant's belief about how the work they do as part of their role in the district contributes to student achievement outcomes and is typically developed throughout participants' engagement with instructional rounds. Individual members discuss their theories of action with one or two peers and refine them based on peer feedback and personal experience. In many cases, participants begin with a general or abstract theory of action and refine it to identify specific actions that will lead to improvements in student outcomes as colleagues question their assumptions.[26] An effective theory of action meets the criteria listed below and identifies concrete actions that will lead to improvement.[27]

Criteria for Effective Theories of Action to Support Instructional Rounds

The theory of action begins with a statement of a causal relationship between an individual's actions and positive classroom instruction, phrased as an if-then statement.
The theory of action is empirically falsifiable, meaning that evidence collected during instructional rounds can disqualify all or part of the theory
The theory of action is open-ended, meaning that the causal relationships can be further refined and specified as the individual learns more about their actions

Source: *Instructional Rounds in Education*[28]

Developing theories of action helps instructional rounds networks align actual classroom practices with improvement strategies identified in the CSIP.[29] By examining individual theories of action in the aggregate, school divisions illustrate how each individual in the division depends on others to accomplish their role, which improves accountability within the organization. Participants frequently identify gaps in the implementation of theories of action, which can form the focus of school improvement efforts.[30] The figure below presents sample theories of action at the division and school levels.

Sample Theories of Action at the District and School Levels

Division-Based Theory of Action

- **If we create environments of shared collaboration focused on improving standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, then shared responsibility and shared accountability will create urgency for change and support continuous improvement of learning for all students.**
- **If we cultivate expertise in teaching and learning as the means for improving student achievement, then teaching will be strengthened and more students will learn in deeper ways that better approach the "essential understanding" of the standards.**

School-Based Theory of Action

- **If we devote resources and time to developing the capacity of our teacher leaders to facilitate ongoing instructional improvement, then the focus of our teachers' regular work together will be grounded in improving learning experiences for all students.**
- **If we continually develop the instructional expertise of our teachers, then teaching will be strengthened and all students will learn in deeper and more meaningful ways.**

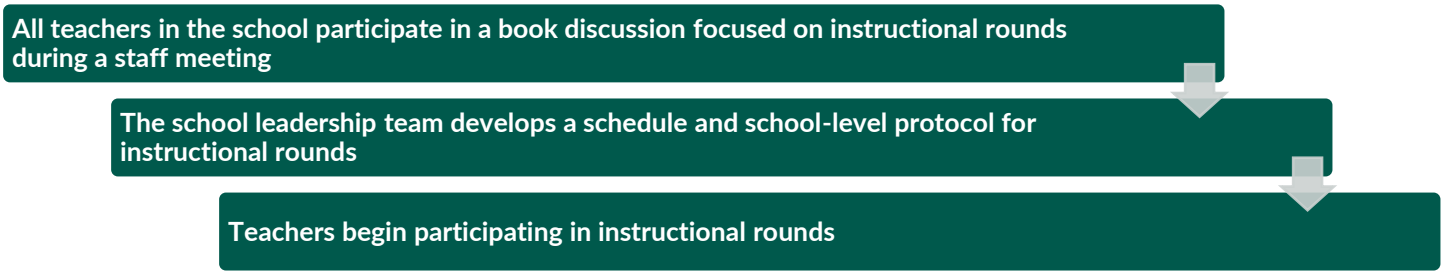
Source: *Instructional Rounds in Education*[31]

Division and School Needs

Implementing instructional rounds requires divisions and schools to develop formal structures to support the instructional rounds process and a culture that facilitates collaborative learning. Necessary formal structures include logistical support for observers and teachers hosting observations. Participation in instructional rounds entails a substantial time commitment, so participants need time built into their schedules for instructional rounds.[32] Schools can provide this time by scheduling instructional rounds during existing collaborative planning time or by providing teachers with released time from regular classroom instruction and assigning substitute teachers to cover their classes.[33]

Divisions should provide participants with professional learning before beginning the process of instructional rounds. For example, Northeast Elementary School in Indiana established a schoolwide professional learning community that engaged in book discussions focused on effective instructional strategies to develop a common language and a shared vision of effective instruction before beginning the instructional rounds process.[34] Similarly, principals at Elmhurst Community Unit School District 205 in Illinois engaged in book studies focused on instructional coherence and professional capital at the outset of the district improvement process and used instructional rounds to translate learning from these book studies into school-level implementation.[35] The figure below illustrates the professional learning and implementation process used by Katherine R. Smith Elementary School in California for instructional rounds.

Sample Process for Implementing Instructional Rounds



Source: *Principal*[36]

To participate in instructional rounds, both observers and observed teachers need to be comfortable with peer observation.[37] Instructional rounds relies on a culture of mutual accountability in which peers hold one another individually and collectively accountable for student outcomes.[38] Teachers can be uncomfortable being observed by peers, although many teachers come to appreciate the benefits of observation after receiving usable feedback. A process that provides teachers with opportunities to experience peer observation and feedback before the formal initiation of instructional rounds may increase teacher buy-in.[39] Similarly, division superintendents and other leaders participating in the instructional rounds process may resist peer accountability, especially when they already face substantial external accountability pressures.[40] Effective professional learning builds consensus around the need for improvement through instructional rounds. In school districts where teachers do not agree that improvement related to the problem of practice is needed, instructional rounds are often unsuccessful in driving changes in practice.[41] Professional learning encourages instructional rounds participants to embrace peer observation and collective accountability by supporting a shift from a fixed mindset toward a growth mindset as shown below.[42]

The Shift from Fixed to Growth Mindset to Support Instructional Rounds

DOMAIN	FIXED MINDSET	GROWTH MINDSET
Skills	• Innate • Unchanging	• Result of hard work • Can always improve
Challenges	• Something to avoid • Will reveal a lack of skill • Overwhelm	• Embrace • Opportunity to change • Calls for perseverance
Effort	• Not necessary • Linked to being not good enough	• Essential • Leads to mastery
Feedback	• Produces defensiveness • Personalized	• Useful and positive • Welcomed • Identify areas to improve
Setbacks	• Blame others, not my fault • Easily discouraging	• Opportunities to learn from • Focus on making changes

Source: The Principal's Playbook[43]

Developing problems of practice requires schools to develop common definitions and understandings of desired student outcomes and teaching practices.[44] A common language for instruction and a common definition for effective teaching allow teachers to identify specific aspects of their instruction and focus areas for deliberate practice leading to improvement. It enables administrators and other observers to provide teachers with feedback aligned to a consistent definition of effective teaching.[45] Instructional rounds networks develop common language through repeated meetings and discussions over time.[46]

Create a Process

The developers of instructional rounds have created the four-step process for implementation shown below. Each component of this process is considered essential to instructional rounds, and a process that does not include one of these components is not considered instructional rounds.[47] Below, Hanover presents strategies to support the implementation of each phase of the process.

Four-Step Process for Implementing Instructional Rounds

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE	OBSERVATION OF PRACTICE	OBSERVATION DEBRIEF	NEXT LEVEL OF WORK
School identifies a problem of practice that: • Focuses on the instructional core; • Is directly observable; • Is actionable (is within the school/district's control and can be improved in real time); • Connects to a broader strategy of improvement (school, system); • Is high-leverage (if one acted on it, it would make a significant difference for student learning). Network adopts the problem of practice as the focus for the network's learning.	Observation teams collect data that is: • Descriptive, not evaluative; • Specific; • About the instructional core; • Related to the problem of practice.	Observation teams discuss the data in three steps:: • Describe what you see; • Analyze the descriptive evidence (what patterns do you see? How might you group the data?) • Predict what students are learning. If you were a student in this class/school and you did everything the teacher told you to do, what would you know and be able to do?	Brainstorm the next level of work: • Share district-level theory of action; • Share district context, including resources, professional development, and current initiatives; • Brainstorm the next level of work for "this week/next month/by the end of this year." • Brainstorm suggestions for school level and for district level; • Tie suggestions to the district's (and school's) theory of action.

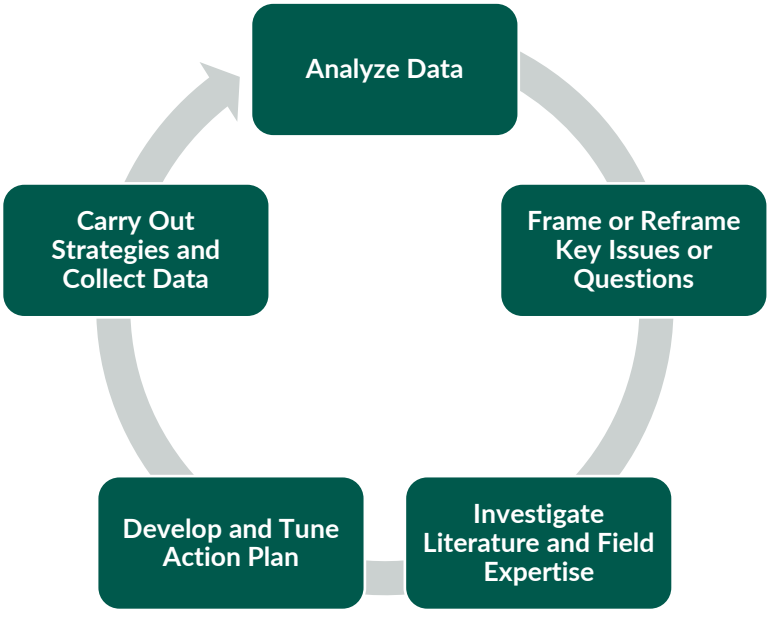
Source: *Harvard Education Letter*[48]

Problem of Practice

School leadership teams use student data to identify a problem of practice as the focus area for instructional rounds. An effective problem of practice reflects an area of discrepancy between the school's desired functioning and the current state.[50] Instructional rounds networks can use the data inquiry cycle outlined opposite to support the identification of problems of practice.[51] In many cases, a problem of practice will extend the focus of previous improvement or professional learning efforts to identify reasons why these efforts have not yielded expected results. After collecting student data and examining strategies using this cycle, instructional rounds networks can engage in a facilitated dialogue to identify problems of practice that may contribute to challenges identified in the data.[52]

Instructional rounds networks ensure that all observation team members understand the problem of practice and associated teaching strategies by providing professional learning related to the problem of practice before beginning classroom observations.[53]

Cycle of Inquiry



Source: National School Reform Faculty[49]

Observation of Practice

During the observation of practice, observation teams observe a volunteer teacher's classroom and take notes on their observations related to the problem of practice.[54] Instructional rounds align observations with the instructional core by focusing on student actions over teaching actions.[55] Observation teams use the problem of practice to structure what features of teaching, student activity, and content they look for during the observation.[56]

Typically, the observation lasts between 20 and 25 minutes. Observation teams do not use a rubric to structure observations because the purpose of the observation is to collect descriptive data. Instead, observation teams use focus questions to align their observations to the problem of practice. Teams can record their responses to focus questions during the observation to collect observational data that will inform the debrief. Structuring the observation using focus questions ensures that the data collected relates to the problem of practice and does not focus on the implementation of specific strategies or other factors that team members may believe are important but do not relate to the problem of practice.[57] The table below presents a sample set of focus questions aligned to a problem of practice related to math instruction in the elementary grades.[58]

Sample Focus Questions and Problem of Practice

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE
Teachers do not consistently provide daily differentiated rigorous tasks that encourage students to explain their mathematical thinking and build math fluency. How do we use Number Talks (a newly adopted math program in the school district) to plan math discussions that enable students with different math abilities to explain their thinking and build fluency?
FOCUS QUESTIONS
• How does the teacher model the use of high-level math vocabulary so students can use it independently when they explain their thinking? • How does the teacher listen to and follow her students' math thinking? • What procedures are in place to allow students to share their thinking? • What conditions are present that foster a safe learning community? • How is student communication encouraged and valued?

Source: The Learning Professional[59]

The instructional rounds observation process is distinct from the observation process used for teacher and school evaluations. School leaders should take care to assure all teachers in the building that data collected during instructional rounds will not be used for evaluative purposes.[60] Instructional rounds rely on action protocols rather than mandates from administrators to ensure the completion of the next steps identified through the observation process.[61]

Comparison of Observation for Instructional Rounds to Observation for Evaluation

ASPECT OF OBSERVATION	INSTRUCTIONAL ROUNDS	SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION
Learning Stance	• Inquiry: Genuinely want to learn something • Main learners: the observers	• Informative: Genuinely want someone else to learn something • Main learner: The observed
Unit of Improvement	Meant to improve the collective (school, system)	Meant to improve the individual
Accountability	Lateral (peer-to-peer)	Positional (top-down)
Output	Next level of work, collective commitments	Evaluative feedback, prescriptions for next steps
Primary Focus in the Classroom	The instructional core, especially the students and the tasks they're engaged in	The teacher

Source: *Educational Leadership*[62]

Observers participating in instructional rounds intentionally use descriptive and analytic rather than evaluative language when describing their observations.[63] Evaluative language such as the examples of evaluative description listed in the figure below makes it difficult for observation teams to conduct dialogue based on the data collected during observations and may reflect observers' initial assumptions rather than actual observations. In contrast, intentionally using non-evaluative descriptions makes it more likely that data collected through observation will accurately reflect what occurred in the observed classroom. Non-evaluative description enables instructional rounds networks to draw causal inferences from participants' observations. Professional learning for participants in instructional rounds networks should address providing non-evaluative descriptions.[64]

Examples and Non-Examples of Non-Evaluative Description

Examples of Non-Evaluative Description	Examples of Evaluative Description
• Teacher asks, "how did you figure out this problem?" Student explains • Student followed directions in the text to make circuit boards • Teacher said, "Write the words that I spell in the blank spaces. S-P-O-T, D-O-T, P-O-T."	• Fast-paced lesson • Too much time spent on discussion and not enough time on individual work • Excellent classroom management • Teacher used effective questioning techniques with a range of students • Teacher had good rapport with students • Students conducted a very sophisticated lab experiment

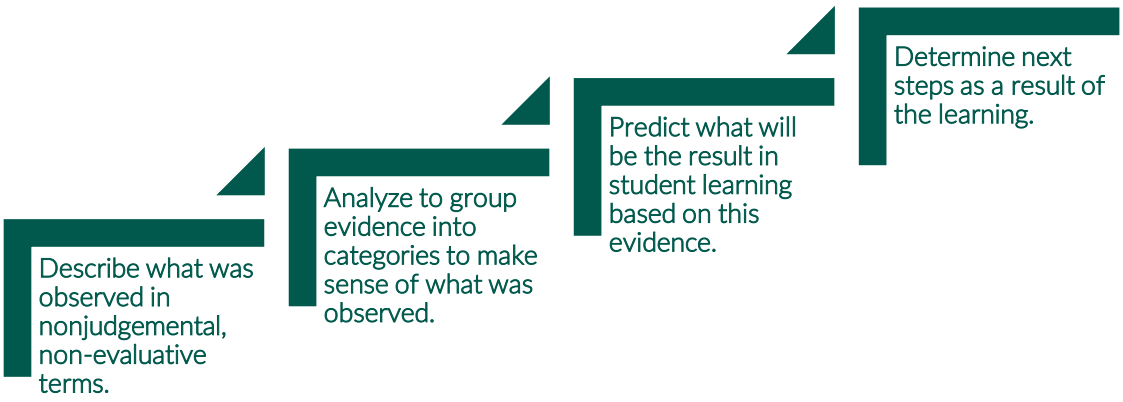
Source: Creating a Path Network[65]

Observation Debrief

During the observation debrief, observation teams within each instructional network come together to share the data they have collected on the problem of practice using the focus questions.[66] Team members collaboratively categorize findings collected using the focus questions to identify patterns or trends in instruction. These patterns will identify instructional strengths and areas for improvement that can form focus areas for the next level of work.[67]

The instructional rounds process structures the observation debrief to avoid the natural tendency for observers to move directly from observation to evaluation by using the ladder of inference outlined below. This process forces observers to analyze data collected during their observations and make predictions based on this analysis before making any evaluative judgments.[68] Following the observation, observers identify "the next level of work" for continuous improvement rather than rendering a summative judgment of effectiveness, reflecting a desire to promote continuous improvement rather than evaluation.[69] Observers should refrain from offering classroom-specific recommendations or feedback unless specifically asked to by the observed teacher, and should not share observations or comments with anyone outside the observation team other than the process of determining the next steps.[70] If observers provide evaluative feedback during the observation debrief, facilitators can prompt them to provide more specific evidence to make their reporting more descriptive and analytic.[71]

Ladder of Inference



Source: Los Angeles Unified School District[72]

The instructional rounds process is most effective when schools use standardized protocols to guide observation teams in implementing each element of the process. Protocols such as Affinity Mapping and the 5 Whys for Inquiry Process enable observation team members to structure and interpret observation data.[73] Schools and divisions can also provide summaries of instructional practices to guide the work of observation teams. For example, one school described in a 2009 summary of instructional rounds provided participants with a one-page summary of the literacy strategies teachers were focusing on to support a literacy-related problem of practice.[74] The Alabama Best Practices Network uses the quadrant model outlined below to identify patterns and outliers in the practices observed during instructional rounds. Participants create charts including each of the elements in the figure below based on their observations, and then participants review each team's chart to compare findings.[75]

Quadrant Model for Guiding Observation Teams

PATTERNS	CONTRASTS
Evidence observed across a majority of classrooms, ex. Teachers referenced the learning target in five of six classrooms	Evidence observed in less than a majority of classrooms, ex. Students were generating their own learning targets in one of six classrooms
PREDICTIONS	**QUESTIONS**
Predictions about students at the visited school based on the following prompt: If you were a student at this school and you did everything you were expected to do, what would you know and be able to do (in light of the patterns observed)? Ex., Students will be aware of daily academic goals	Questions about what observers saw in the classroom focused on outliners, ex. In what ways can you ensure that students are working collaboratively rather than independently in small groups?

Source: Alabama Best Practices Center[76]

Observers can also use a pluses and deltas format to structure positive and negative comments. In this format, observers record examples of positive practices or practices aligned to the improvement strategy as pluses, and examples of areas in need of improvement as deltas. For each area of the debrief, each member of the observation team shares their pluses before sharing deltas. At the end of the process, observers identify specific practices they can use, adopt, or reexamine in their classrooms or schools based on their observations.[77]

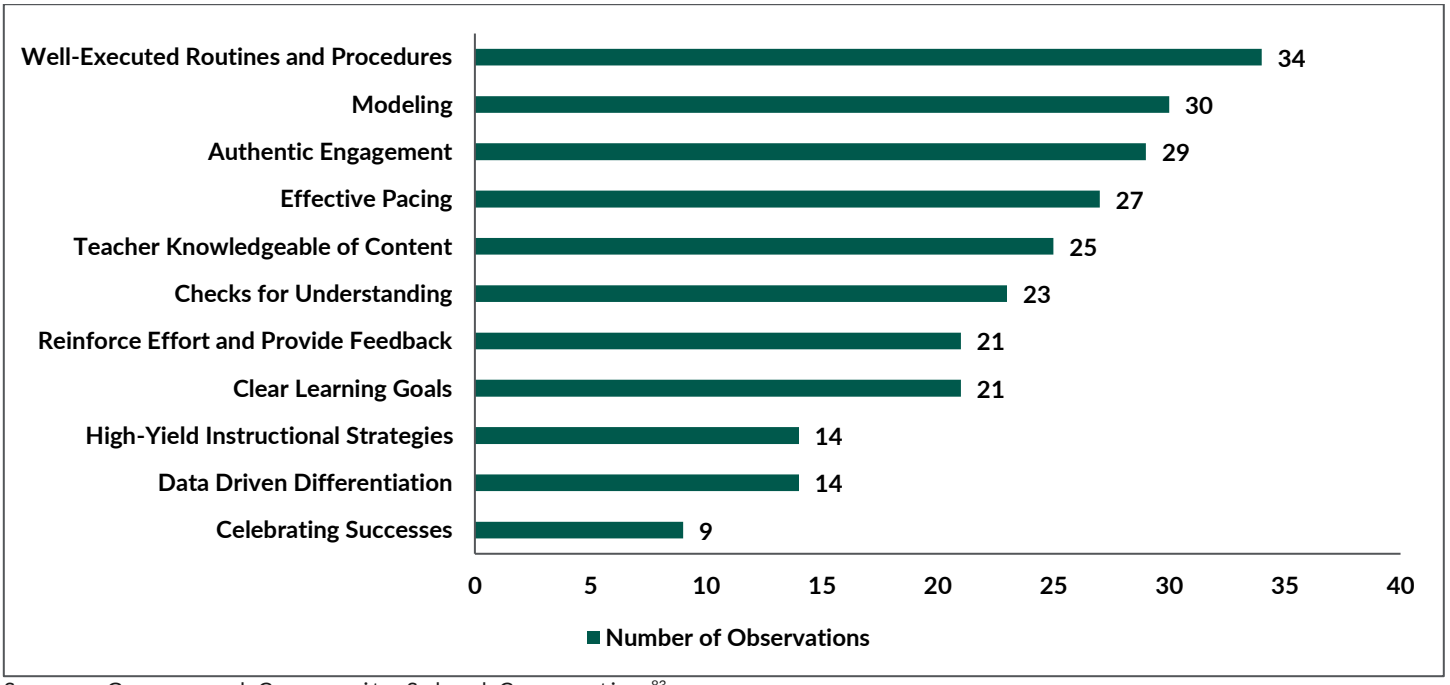
Next Level of Work

Instructional rounds networks use findings from the observational debrief to determine the next level of work in addressing the problem of practice. The next level of work may involve changes in schoolwide policies or procedures to facilitate effective teaching and learning strategies or professional development to provide teachers with knowledge and skills identified as necessary for improvement.[78] For example, Red Lion Area Junior High School in Pennsylvania used an instructional rounds process to support the implementation of a new technology initiative. After observing lessons using a framework that examines technology integration, observation teams debriefed their observations and planned professional learning activities as the next level of work.[79]

Florence Middle School, a participant in the Alabama Best Practices Center's instructional rounds networks, shares data collected using the Quadrant Model with teachers in meetings of collaborative teams. Teachers then use these data to identify the resources and supports they believe will be most beneficial for improving their practice in the area of focus. For example, teachers identified a need for a common district-wide definition of differentiated instruction with concrete examples of implementation and targets for improvement. As the next level of work, collaborative teacher teams developed a toolkit of best practices for differentiation.[80]

Schools can convert qualitative data collected through observations into quantitative data to identify the next level of work. For example, Northeast Elementary School in Indiana used data from teacher surveys to create an Instructional Snapshot of instructional practices that teachers were expected to implement in each classroom. During instructional rounds, observers collected data on the implementation of each practice included in the Instructional Snapshot.[81] The school's instructional rounds network collected these data using the chart presented below, which allowed the network to identify elements that were frequently observed and elements that were less frequently observed. Based on this chart, Northeast Elementary School selected a less-frequently observed element as the next level of work.[82]

Northeast Elementary School Chart of Observed Teacher Behaviors



Source: Greenwood Community School Corporation[83]

Supplemental Resources

The following resources provide additional information on continuous improvement beyond those already included in this info brief.

Resources on Yearly Planning for Continuous Improvement

Resource	Publisher	URL	QR Code
"Affinity Mapping."	National School Reform Faculty	https://www.nsrfharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/affinity_mapping_0.pdf	
"Collaborating to Improve Instruction: Instructional Rounds"	The National Center on Time and Learning	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQsPYyvDd3s	
"Classroom Observation Strategies: Instructional Rounds."	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOtzYoR3gxA	
"Creating a Path Network."	Creating a Path Network	https://www.creatingrounds.com/	
"Five Whys for Inquiry."	National School Reform Faculty	https://www.nsrfharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/5_whys_0.pdf	
"Instructional Rounds."	Oakland Unified School District	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FM8yPvz_b2k	
"Instructional Rounds (IR) Observation of Practice Protocol."	Bloomfield Hills School District	https://www.bloomfield.org/uploaded/LocalWeb/Instructional_Rounds_BHS_docs.pdf	
"Instructional Rounds Observation Protocol"	Neuhaus Education Center	http://idahotc.com/Portals/0/docs/2013%20webinars/Instructional%20-Rounds-Process-Idaho-Calibrations.pdf	

Resource	Publisher	URL	QR Code
"Investigating the Role of Instructional Rounds in the Development of Social Networks and District-Wide Improvement"	American Educational Research Journal	https://www.tc.columbia.edu/ncrest/publications--resources/HatchInvestigating.pdf	
"Observers as Learners: Instructional Rounds in SAISD."	Learning Forward	https://lfp.learningforward.org/handouts/Dallas2018/7855/Observers%20as%20Learners.pdf	
"When Technology Works: A Case Study Using Instructional Rounds and the SAMR Model"	Educational Leadership Review	https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=coe_articles	

Source: QR Code Generator[84]

Endnotes

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[7] Gassenheimer, C. "A Closer Look at ABPC's Statewide Instructional Rounds Program." Alabama Best Practices Center, April 21, 2016. https://aplusala.org/best-practices-center/2016/04/21/a-closer-look-at-abpcs-statewide-instructional-rounds-program/

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[11] Chart contents taken verbatim with minor alterations from: "Creating a Path to the Future: A Network of Educators Using Instructional Rounds to Enhance Student Learning," Op. cit., pp. 23–24.

[12] Finch, P.A. "Sustaining School Improvement Through Instructional Rounds: Doctors Do Rounds to Check on Their Patients and Tweak Plans of Care. You Can Use Rounds to Improve Education." *Principal*, 97:4, April 3, 2018. p. 44.

[13] City, Op. cit., pp. 36–37.

[14] Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 37.

[15] City, E.A. et al. "The Instructional Core." In *Instructional Rounds in Education*, Harvard Education Press, 2009. https://www.fpsct.org/uploaded/Teacher_Resource_Center/Instructional_Practices/Resources/20091124152005.pdf

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[23] City et al., "The Instructional Core," Op. cit., p. 22.

[24] Ibid., p. 5.

[25] Philpott and Oates, Op. cit., p. 23.

[26] City, E.A. et al. "Theories of Action." In *Instructional Rounds in Education*, Harvard Education Press, 2009. p. 41.

[27] Ibid., p. 43.

[28] Chart contents adapted from: Ibid., pp. 41–42.

[29] Finch, Op. cit., p. 44.

[30] City et al., "Theories of Action," Op. cit., pp. 45–46.

[31] Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 47.

[32] Young, Cavanagh, and Moloney, Op. cit., p. 286.

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[35] Mover, Op. cit.

[36] Chart contents adapted from: Brengard, Op. cit., p. 9.

[37] Sander, McDermott, and Slightom, Op. cit., p. 20.

[38] City, Op. cit., p. 37.

[39] Young, Cavanagh, and Moloney, Op. cit., pp. 284–285.

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