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# Transforming Education and Changing School Culture

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**Transforming Education  
and Changing School Culture***Gary Houchens & Ric Keaster*

## Case

An increasing number of schools and districts are building a common language of instruction and collaborative structures for instructional problem solving through the use of instructional rounds. Pioneered by Richard Elmore and colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, instructional rounds build on the model of medical rounds used in teaching hospitals and engage teachers and administrators in data collection and analysis around a school-wide problem of practice.

This case study examines the experiences of the Simpson County Schools in Franklin, Kentucky, where one of the authors formerly served as a district administrator. In 2009, the district initiated a multi-school effort to implement instructional rounds. Many districts adopting instructional rounds initially involve only administrators, but the Simpson County Schools invited classroom teachers to participate and play key leadership roles in the process. The case study describes the instructional rounds process, the decisions made by district leaders to involve a wide array of stakeholders in their instructional rounds initiative, and the overall effects. Teachers in the district readily embraced the instructional rounds protocol, and administration and facilitation of the rounds process has now evolved into having classroom teachers serving as primary leaders. Implications for school culture and change leadership are discussed.

**The Urgent Need to Reform Our Education System**

Arguably, public education in the United States has been subject to more change and reform efforts in recent decades than any other segment of the economy or public service realm. An emerging public consensus holds that schools have a new mission: to educate every child to high levels of academic proficiency. As a result, state and federal policy mandates have directed schools to reform curriculum, instruction, and

the reporting of student achievement results, with various rewards and consequences attached to outcomes.

But this new accountability environment also requires a change in professional culture, and many a school leader who tries to rally teachers to this new mission of schools has encountered great difficulty in effecting meaningful organizational change. Two leading authors on educational reform, Rick Stiggins and Richard Elmore, offer some insights into why schools are so resistant to the change implicit in the new mission of public education.

Stiggins (2005), writing in *Phi Delta Kappan*, explained that the mission of American schools has changed from one of *sorting and ranking* students to *educating all students to proficiency*. In past decades, the U.S. economy was such a juggernaut that students who dropped out of school or graduated with academic deficiencies could still get decent-paying jobs in the manufacturing and agricultural sectors of the economy. Schools accepted that a large portion of students would receive a minimal education, and society charged schools with essentially sorting and ranking students into groups to indicate those who had the aptitude for college or post-secondary training and those who did not.

As we know, the economy has changed. As manufacturing and agricultural productivity has skyrocketed, the market for relatively low-skilled labor has shrunk dramatically. A new economic – and moral – imperative has emerged: schools must educate vastly larger numbers of students to a higher level of academic proficiency in order to prepare them for an emerging technology-driven economy.

Responding to this new mission requires a level of professional collaboration and cooperation among educators never before seen in the United States. Curricula must be standardized, prioritized and aligned to ensure all students have access to a universal set of concepts and skills. Classroom level assessments must be designed to measure whether all students, regardless of the teacher or classroom to which they are assigned, are making progress toward curricular standards. And instructional adjustments must be made to remediate and support students who are not making progress and to offer enrichment learning for students who have mastered core skills. All of these tasks involve prolonged collaborative efforts on the part of classroom teachers.

## Changing From A Culture Of Autonomy And Isolation To A Culture Of Professional Dialog And Collaboration: The Instructional Rounds Approach

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This is where organizational change becomes difficult for schools, because the traditional professional culture of teachers is marked by high levels of autonomy and isolation. The classical structure of schools with classes of students assigned to individual teachers fosters both autonomy and isolation, especially at the middle and high school level where teachers perceive themselves as content area specialists for literature, history, science, mathematics, and other fields. Recognizing that overcoming autonomy and isolation is the key to meaningful organizational change doesn't easily answer the question of how teachers should go about engaging in its opposite: professional dialogue and collaboration. "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" (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009, p. 3).

To answer this question, Richard Elmore and his colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education have developed a protocol for collaborative instructional problem solving called *instructional rounds* (City, et al., 2009). Based on the practice of medical rounds used in teaching hospitals, instructional rounds involves a protocol of data collection and analysis focusing on a school-wide problem of instructional practice. By engaging teachers and administrators in the non-evaluative analysis of instruction, a new language of practice starts to emerge:

Language is culture. Culture is language. One of the things we have learned from the medical profession about the improvement of practice is that how people talk to each other about what they are doing is an important determinant of whether they are able to learn from their practice...The isolated culture of schools works against shared conceptions of problems and practices. The rounds process is designed to develop a language and a culture for breaking down the isolation of teachers' practice. (p. 10)

### The Instructional Rounds Protocol

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Elmore and his colleagues outline the rationale and process of rounds in their book, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (2009). Initially developed to assist networks of superintendents in building a common language of instruction,

in 2009 the Harvard Graduate School of Education began offering intensive, multi-day training workshops open to school leaders from around the country through its Professional Programs in Education (PPE). Attendees were trained in the following protocol for conducting rounds, including actual participation in the rounds process in area schools near Harvard's Cambridge campus.

Rounds begins with a host school identifying a problem of instructional practice on which the school leaders would like to gather more data. Criteria for useful problems of practice include the following:

- The problem focuses on the *instructional core* – the convergence of high-quality teaching, student engagement, and rigorous curriculum.
- The problem is *readily observable*. The best place to observe the instructional core is in the tasks students are being asked to complete as a part of each lesson.
- The problem is *actionable* (it is within the school's control or can be improved in real time).
- The problem connects to a *broader strategy* of school-wide instructional improvement.
- The problem is *high-leverage*. If progress were made toward solving the problem, the results would involve large-scale improvements in student learning.

Schools may choose from a multitude of problems of practice on which to focus instructional rounds. Examples might include whether teachers are posing questions to students that elicit high-level thinking and problem solving, whether stated learning objectives are evident in the tasks students are asked to complete, whether students have the opportunity to learn through genuinely cooperative tasks, or myriad other options.

Once a problem of practice is identified, several small teams observe classrooms, gathering descriptive, non-evaluative evidence relative to the problem of practice. This is often a challenge for school administrators who are conditioned to observe teaching through an evaluative lens. For purposes of rounds, efforts to judge the effectiveness of what is being observed is expressly forbidden. Observers are simply recording what they see, using simple prompts such as, "What is the teacher saying or doing?" or "What are the students saying or doing?"

Following observations, teams meet to analyze data from their notes using a Ladder of Inference protocol, which involves the following steps:

- Individuals identify data from their notes that directly or indirectly address the problem and share the data with the group. Group members listen attentively and assist each other in maintaining a descriptive (non-evaluative) voice while sharing data.
- As a team, each group then analyzes the data they've collectively gathered, looking for patterns.
- From these patterns, the teams generate recommended next steps the school might pursue in further addressing the problem of practice.

At the end of the rounds protocol, each team will have generated several large sheets of chart paper displaying the raw data gathered, identified patterns, and next step recommendations. Invariably, there is great congruence among the various teams' findings, even though each team typically has visited different classrooms. School-wide patterns of instructional practice become evident. Because data are not attached to individual teachers and are presented in non-evaluative language, recommendations are often received with a level of openness and non-defensiveness uncommon in professional dialogue among educators.

Schools may utilize any, all, or none of the recommended next steps from the rounds protocol, but most schools are eager to receive the data and have collaborative discussions about their meaning and implications for practice.

### The Simpson County Schools' Story

The Simpson County Schools is a small, 3,000-student school district located in Franklin, Kentucky, approximately 40 miles north of Nashville, Tennessee. Six schools make up the district, including three elementaries, one middle school, one high school, and one alternative high school for at-risk students. One of the co-authors (Gary Houchens) served as an administrator in Simpson County from 2003 to 2010. In 2009, Gary was serving as Teacher Quality & Leadership Development Coordinator at the district's central office. His duties included professional development for teachers and administrators and advising the superintendent on the overall instructional program for the district.

Gary had followed Richard Elmore's work, including his emphasis on teaching as professional practice and the advent of instructional rounds, with some enthusiasm. In late 2009, he welcomed the opportunity to travel to Harvard for the Professional Programs in Education workshop on

rounds. With him were the district's superintendent, Jim Flynn, another superintendent and associate superintendent (both from other districts), and several leaders from the local educational cooperative. The co-op staff, in particular, was interested in establishing a superintendent's network for conducting instructional rounds, similar to networks established by Elmore in Connecticut, Ohio, and elsewhere.

Gary and Jim, however, saw in instructional rounds the opportunity to further break down the barriers of autonomy and isolation they'd already encountered in trying to bring various change initiatives to the Simpson County Schools. Beyond Jim's participation in a superintendent rounds network, they planned to engage building level principals and teacher leaders in the rounds process. In doing so, they hoped teachers would begin to see discussions about instructional improvements less as something being imposed upon them from the outside, and more as a natural by-product of their collaborative inquiry and data collection about various problems of practice.

Jim became superintendent in Simpson County in 2003, the same year Gary joined the district as a principal. Together and with other district instructional leaders, Jim and Gary had led and facilitated a number of efforts to foster instructional improvement in the district, from the implementation of professional learning communities, (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005) to classroom utilization of research-based teaching strategies (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2007) to the implementation of a more balanced assessment system (Reeves, 2007). While excellent strides had been made by 2009 in all these initiatives, each new effort was typically met with some resistance from teachers and there was a collective sense that the process of school renewal was something that remained top-down rather than arising from teachers' self-perceptions of needed improvements.

The use of principal classroom walkthroughs had been a good example of a well-intentioned initiative that never garnered much buy-in from teachers in Simpson County. In his first few years as superintendent, Jim led principals through the development and implementation of a new protocol by which principals and other building administrators would conduct regular, brief (5-minute) classroom visits (walkthroughs) and complete a one-sheet checklist of best teaching practices observed. This kind of initiative was congruent with research that recommended monitoring and evaluation of instruction as a best practice for school leaders (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Instructional leaders

dutifully carried out walkthroughs several times each semester, and central office personnel spent hours tabulating data for principals, who were to then share school-wide results with teachers and collaboratively brainstorm strategies for improvement.

#### A Well Intentioned Approach That Met With Little Success

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Walkthroughs never generated the kind of meaningful professional dialogue intended, however. In retrospect, Gary and Jim recognized there were two reasons. First, school leaders themselves lacked a common, consistent understanding of what various indicators measured by the walkthroughs really meant. Principals were to assess the level of student engagement in classrooms they visited, for example, but few principals had a clear, agreed-upon definition of what student engagement really looked like. If even principals couldn't agree, how could they sincerely engage teachers in a discussion about what walkthrough data revealed regarding student engagement? Furthermore, because teachers never actually participated in the walkthrough process, but were merely recipients of the data, there was little understanding of the protocol or how the data were intended to be used. Teachers consistently reacted to the walkthrough data as if they were a form of evaluation – one that they did not consider valid in the first place.

#### Introducing A New, More Collaborative Approach

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Gary and Jim hoped instructional rounds could address many of the limitations of the walkthroughs. Not that rounds were intended to replace walkthroughs. As Elmore made clear, walkthroughs and rounds served different purposes. But rounds provided a chance to build a clear, common language of instruction through the engagement of both administrators and teachers, key components lacking in the walkthrough process.

Following their training at Harvard, Gary shared what he and Jim had learned about instructional rounds with district administrators, including school principals and curriculum coordinators. The school leaders immediately saw how instructional rounds could complement and improve work already completed on walkthroughs, professional learning communities, and other initiatives. And unlike many others who attended the training at Harvard and went home to set up administrator networks for conducting rounds, the leaders in Simpson County wanted teachers involved in rounds from the beginning. Over the next two months, Gary conducted several after-school training sessions for administrators and selected teacher leaders from each school in which he introduced the rounds



concept and gave participants the chance to practice the data collection and analysis process using videotapes of classroom lessons. Teachers, in particular, responded positively to the non-evaluative, collaborative nature of the rounds process and expressed an eagerness to share the protocol with others.

Over the next few months, Gary organized and facilitated rounds visits in each of the district's schools. A degree of trial and error is natural to the rounds process, and after each rounds visit, administrator and teacher leaders made refinements in their problems of practice and made intentional efforts to utilize the recommended next steps that serve as the ultimate outcome of a rounds visit. Principals displayed the rounds data in faculty lounges or conducted "gallery walks" during faculty meetings in which all teachers were invited to study the raw data generated during a previous rounds visit, patterns identified, and next steps recommended, then facilitated whole group discussions on how to best interpret and use the results.

### Sustaining the New Approach and a Change in Culture

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By the next school year, when Gary had moved on to a faculty position at a nearby university, he had trained teacher leaders to serve as building-level rounds facilitators. Now, teachers themselves are chiefly responsible for organizing and carrying out rounds visits, which occur about once every six weeks for each school, including developing the problem of practice, facilitating the ladder of inference debrief protocol, and leading discussion and implementation of next steps. Some schools have launched in-house rounds activities wherein teachers from within a single building gather data from their peers' classrooms. These experiences have yielded rich insights from teachers about school-wide instructional practices.

Additionally, the use of rounds has considerably counteracted the culture of isolation and autonomy once normative for schools like those in Simpson County, gradually replacing it with a culture that takes collaboration, collective inquiry, and group-problem solving as the norm. The significance of this shift cannot be overestimated. As one veteran teacher confessed after her first-time participating in rounds, "After 15 years of teaching, I have to admit that, other than observing student teachers, this was the first time I ever watched one of my colleagues teach a lesson."

The professional culture in the Simpson County Schools is still in renewal, of course. The very structures of schools themselves still reinforce tendencies toward professional isolation. Some teachers remain suspicious

that instructional rounds are somehow meant to evaluate teaching performance, despite assurances to the contrary, but typically these are teachers who haven't yet had the opportunity to engage in rounds as an observing participant. Those who do participate often remark that it is one of the most valuable learning experiences they've ever had.

The instructional rounds protocol represents a powerful strategy for shifting the language about improving schools from one of "reform" to "renewal." As John Goodlad has pointed out, renewing organizations generate their own energy and enthusiasm for improvement from within:

[Reform suggests] somebody is trying to do something to somebody else who is thought to be wrong and who will be reformed if he or she follows these directions. By contrast, in renewal, [insiders] want to change and to do so in the light of knowledge, in the light of inquiry into what is needed. It's the difference between digging up a garden to replace all the plants with something else and nurturing the garden. (Ferrace, 2002, p. 31)

The experience of the Simpson County Schools suggests that instructional rounds may be a key tool for renewing the culture of schools and nurturing the professional garden of individuals and ideas who work there.

## Discussion

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1. Discuss the urgent need for education reform, the new mission to educate every child to high levels of academic proficiency, and how the present culture of Autonomy and Isolation is likely to affect the potential success of the new mission.
2. Walkthroughs and Instructional Rounds represent two different approaches to data collection, monitoring performance, and making improvements. Without getting into the details of each, compare the different philosophies, the cultures they create, and the results they are likely to get.
3. Discuss the Instructional Rounds process and the new culture it is likely to create.
4. Having a common language is important to changing culture. Why is this the case?
5. The authors added a new variation to the Instructional Rounds approach by involving and empowering teachers. Are there other changes you would recommend to improve the Instructional Rounds approach?
6. Discuss how the Instructional Rounds approach can be used in other types of organizations and not just educational institutions.
7. What principles did you learn in this case about how to change cultures successfully?

## Key Lessons

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1. Leaders often overlook the possibility of learning from other fields (e.g., business, industry, medicine). It is important to be open to using innovations from other fields and to learn to borrow and adapt rather than reinvent what has already been done.
2. Changing culture requires considerable skill, and yet leaders are rarely trained in how important culture is to the success of an organization or in how to change cultures. Training in culture change should be a high priority in organizations.
3. Professional development activities and efforts to make significant changes, such as changing culture, should involve and be tailored to the impacted level of an organization. Too often, development activities and changes are initiated from corporate offices that are out of touch with the levels that are impacted by their initiatives.

4. In an initiative-laden environment, it is important to have everyone on the same page using the same vocabulary. Companies and organizations need to develop a common language surrounding an innovation and continually define/redefine terms as the innovation becomes a part of the organization's culture.
5. Change is a process, not an event. Having a clear and compelling reason to change, having leaders involved in the change process, and recognizing the importance of engagement and collaboration are all essentials to successful change. Like culture change, it is essential that leaders be trained in the fundamentals of the change process (Hall & Hord, 2005).
6. Efforts to develop cultures that encourage engagement and involvement in addressing issues and making improvements will be important to the success of present and future organizations. In order to improve what we do, we must talk to one another to learn from one another. We can no longer afford a "silo" approach to running organizations, and in this specific case, to transforming our educational system.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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