

School Improvement Plans: Update
June 2012

JUN 12 2012

One of the core elements of the "District Improvement Strategy" (Attachment 1) is that improvement in student learning comes primarily through improvement in instructional practice. Thoughtful and structured School Improvement Plans are one way to systematize the improvement in practice across the school district while respecting the different needs of individual schools.

We began the School Improvement Plan work during the 2010-2011 school year through a series of professional development activities for school and district leaders. These were summarized in a document shared with the Board and the public on June 14, 2011 (Attachment 2). Our work during 2011-2012 built on the previous year's work, and we extended it to include the following elements:

1. A School Improvement Plan (SIP) Template (Attachment 3), agreed to by the administrative team, that all schools used this year to develop a 2-year Plan in collaboration with their staff, based on student achievement data. The SIP includes the following elements:
 - A summary of student performance data, celebrations and challenges
 - Student performance targets, some common across schools serving the same grade levels
 - A Problem of Practice based on student performance data, classroom observation and staff input based on the Common Core of Teaching
 - A principal/headmaster's Theory of Action, a statement of the strategy undergirding the school's improvement efforts
 - School-wide strategies to improve student learning, including adult actions and methods to assess the effectiveness of the strategies
 - Grade level/ departmental strategies

For most schools, this work differed from the way they had previously developed School Improvement Plans. Professional development focused on working with school leaders and their School Improvement Teams to develop the elements of the Plan, which was completed by most schools in the late fall or early winter and posted to each school's website.

2. To monitor and strengthen the effectiveness of the School Improvement Plans, each school began the process of implementing School-wide Data Teams. Our goal this year was for each school to begin implementation of a School-wide Data Team, often a similar group of staff that developed the SIP. As this was new work in virtually every school, we developed a set of Standards for School-Wide Data Teams (Attachment 4), which includes the standards for School Improvement Plans. Schools used this document as a way to understand their school's status in relationship to exemplary practice. It is designed as a self-assessment tool for schools to chart their course on the School Improvement Plan journey. Schools are at various stages of implementing

School-wide Data Teams, and this work will continue through all of next year. School-wide Data Teams use common assessments across a grade level or department to determine the effectiveness of the instructional program for the entire school and what changes to instructional practice need to occur to improve student achievement. Some examples of these assessments would be Blue Ribbon math assessments at the elementary and middle schools. We developed a Team Observation Form to capture the essential elements of an effective Team, and I used it in my observations of all the school's Improvement Teams this year (Attachment 5). The annual Cycle of School Improvement is Attachment 6.

3. A third element of school improvement is the establishment of grade level or departmental data teams. We set out the standards for effective teams (Attachment 7) at the department (secondary) or grade level (elementary). While some schools had existing teams of this nature (sometimes referred to as Professional Learning Communities or PLC's), embedding this practice into all schools, grade levels and departments will be future work.
4. A fourth element of improving instructional practice is called Instructional Rounds (Attachment 8). Instructional Rounds are not an improvement strategy unto themselves; rather, they can be an accelerant to an improvement strategy already under way. Teams of teachers and administrators visit classrooms and look for evidence that efforts to address the Problem of Practice identified by the school are actually occurring in the classroom. Patterns are described and suggestions made for the next level of work for the school. In October all administrators participated in an Instructional Rounds visit at Fairfield Warde High School. In addition, schools hosted Instructional Rounds and principals/staff participated in Instructional Rounds visits to other schools. In some cases, school-based Instructional Rounds occurred involving staff from one building, although this was not a required activity. This will be continuing work next year, involving more teachers leading Instructional Rounds after participating in my training this year.

In many cases, this is a change in work and a change in culture. Some of the work is substantively different (developing a Theory of Action, a Problem of Practice based on data) and some of the work is cultural (willing to share practice with others). To get a sense of both of these elements, I have included an excerpt from a document I shared with our Administrative Team in September after we had made some commitments for this year and before we began our work (Attachment 9). It also includes my Theory of Action for improvement of the school system.

While the School Improvement Plans are designed as two-year plans, all schools will be doing some revision to the Plans for 2012-2013 based on (1) student performance data; (2) Instructional Rounds (school-based and district-based); and (3) feedback from teachers on the effectiveness of the strategies in their existing Plans.

A District Improvement Strategy for the Fairfield Public Schools

David G. Title

For the past six months I have been learning as much as I can about the Fairfield Public Schools. As part of my "Entry Plan" I have conducted dozens of one-on-one and small group interviews, observed classroom instruction in every school, met with representatives from each PTA and read a wide range of documents to help me understand not only the current status of the Fairfield Public Schools, but also to understand the history, tradition and culture of this community and its school system.

In developing this document I have also drawn on my professional experience in education over the past 32 years and my 6 months of experience leading this school district and observing its operations first-hand. My learning about Fairfield and its public schools will continue. As that happens, undoubtedly strategies that, at this point, seem fruitful may not turn out to be so, and other strategies will be necessary. The ideas in this document, therefore, reflect my best thinking at this time but these ideas are subject to refinement in the future.

As I have said repeatedly at public appearances, our school system does not need a complete overhaul. It is a high-performing system on many common measures. We offer a comprehensive program in academics, arts and athletics. Our student performance measures are among the highest in the state. Hence, the urgency for change may be less immediate here than in other school systems.

However, in an ever-changing world, complacency sows the seeds for decline. Just a few examples – changes in the student population, changes in workforce requirements, changes in technology – illustrate that if we simply continue the status quo, our performance may not keep pace with the world.

If we have programs or systems that are working well, then continuing to support those programs or systems makes sense. Where we can grow and improve our programs or systems – that is where we can focus our change efforts. Given that we cannot focus on an unlimited number of initiatives, we need to focus our efforts on the change initiatives most likely to give us a good return on our investment of time, energy and resources.

One common thread through much of my entry plan discussions has been a sense of what I term "initiative fatigue." Often, this feeling comes about because the school system takes on many disconnected change initiatives that cannot be implemented well. As a result, many change efforts fail to achieve the promised results and the resulting cynicism makes future change increasingly difficult to achieve. What I hope to outline here is a strategy to focus our energy for future changes – a lens, if you will, through which proposed changes will be viewed before implementation begins.

THE GOAL

Before we can begin to talk about change, we need to understand the goal – the end – we have in mind. My simple version reads like this:

Our goal is to ensure that all students acquire the skills and knowledge outlined in our comprehensive, rigorous instructional program.

In other words, we are here to improve student achievement. Offering a comprehensive, rigorous program is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to achieving this goal. We need to maintain a first-rate instructional program that ensures that students who master it are prepared for success in the 21st Century. The instructional program, as I see it, is not simply the academic courses, but encompasses, for example, displaying good character, problem-solving ability, collaboration skills and technological proficiency. It must be continually updated, which means weeding out obsolete elements that are no longer relevant to a 21st Century education. In other words, *what* we teach is critical – after all, doing a marvelous job of teaching the wrong content is not the outcome we want.

A truly premier school system ensures not only that the instructional program is first-rate, but also that all students achieve it. If we are to become a premier school system, our mission must be to “ensure” student success (not “hope” or “inspire” it). A truly premier school system targets success for all students.

MEASURING PROGRESS TOWARD THE GOAL

Given that our “end” is student learning, our progress toward that end needs to be measured in terms of student learning. Some examples of benchmarks that could be used to determine progress toward this goal are as follows (I invite discussion of additional measures or replacements of these suggestions):

- Percentage of student performance at Goal and at Advanced levels on CMT and CAPT
- Percentage of students performing at Basic or below on CMT and CAPT
- Number and percentage of students achieving 3 or higher on AP exams
- Number of students successfully completing a co-curricular program or activity (during school or after school)
- Percentage of students achieving their goals on Individualized Education Plans
- Percentage of students achieving the district standard on district-designed common assessments (meeting district standards on curriculum)
- Percentage of students achieving success in their first year of college
- Number of high school students needing credit recovery to graduate

These are neither precise targets nor an exhaustive list. For example, there is no measure of a student’s character development. They also represent data we may not be collecting currently. I bring them forward to lay out the general concept that we measure our success by examining data on student achievement. Determining the exact targets, timelines and measures is beyond the scope of this document. Improved student learning is the goal; everything else is a means to that end.

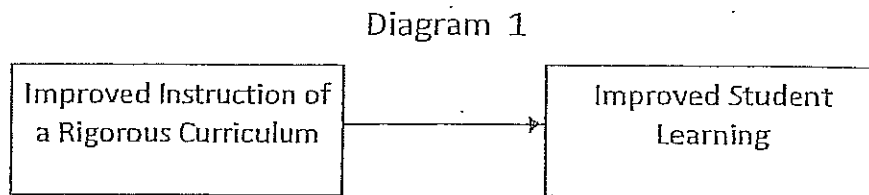
HOW TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL

Any strategy of improvement is, at its heart, based on a series of “if then” propositions that underlie the work. One may agree or disagree with these “if then” propositions; we may find that they seem correct now but are found to be inaccurate later. For example, we undertake professional development of teachers under the belief that if we improve the skills of teachers, then student learning will improve. Over time, that conditional statement has not always proven to work in practice. There may be a missing link in the chain – that is, something else that needs to occur to get the result one wants. In this case, it may be that the “if then” statement may be modified to state that if we improve the skill sets of teachers and if they change their instructional practices as a result, then student learning will improve. Hence, an improvement strategy is always subject to modification based on results.

The first underlying “if then” in this improvement strategy is this:

If we improve instruction, then student achievement will improve.

Diagram 1 shows this simple relationship.



Although this relationship sounds obvious, it is not clear that either educators or the general public actually fully believes it. Consider how often individuals will attribute student achievement results to factors other than instruction when asked to interpret results. Societal ills, video games, family background, the internet, home life and so forth are often listed as the primary factors influencing achievement.

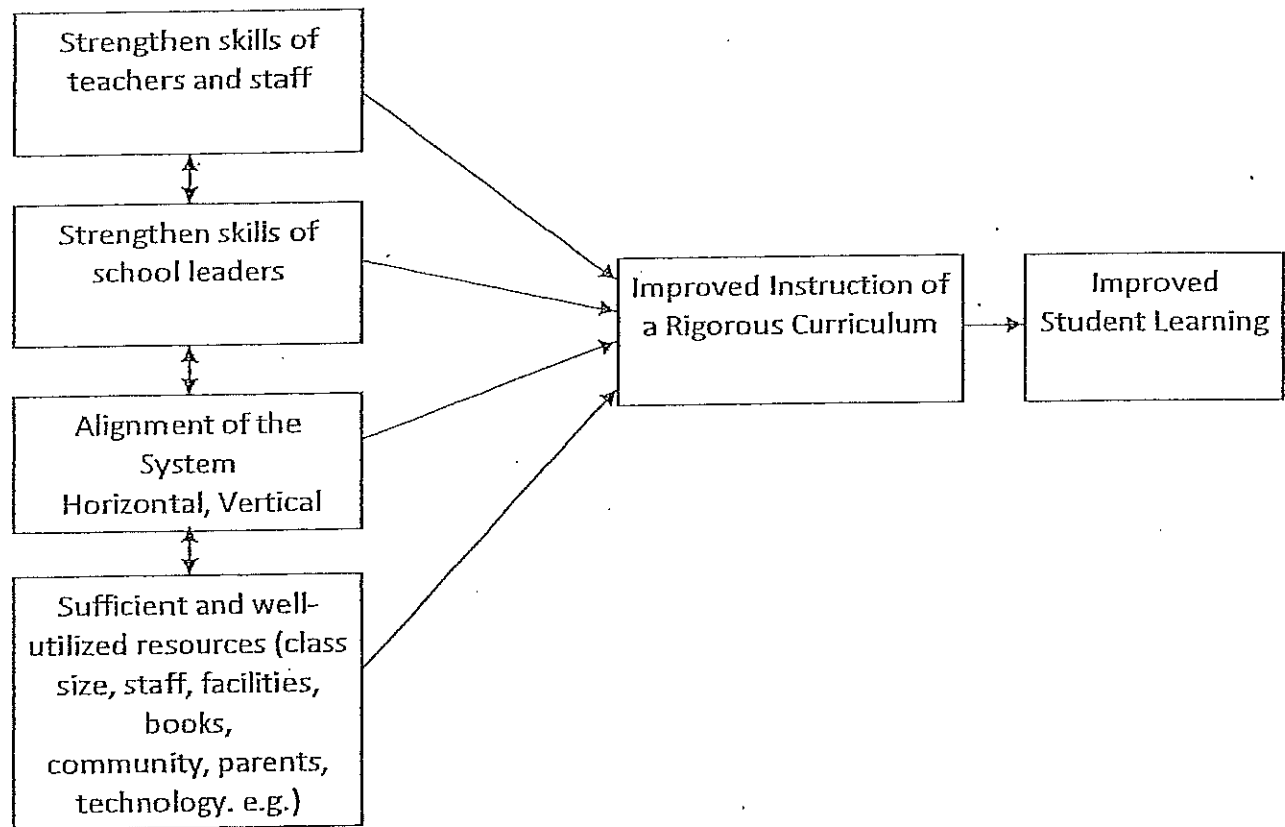
FOUR AREAS OF CONCENTRATION

The next step in building a district improvement strategy is to identify a limited number of focus areas that have the most promise for improving instruction. Every “good idea” can be linked somehow to improved instruction; the issue is which ideas have the greatest promise of showing gains in student learning for the resources we devote to implementing them. In the corporate world, terms such as “return on investment” or “cost-benefit analysis” would apply here. In our case, one of our scarcest resources is time. Money is another scarce resource but time is often more within our control.

Just because something takes little time or few resources does not mean that it is worth doing; similarly, just because something takes a large amount of time or resources does not mean it is not worth doing. It is the expected benefit (in terms of accomplishing our goal) in relationship to the time and resources spent that’s important. In other words, where is the best place to commit the time of our staff to get the greatest return in terms of student learning?

I see four broad strands that, were we to concentrate our resources and make significant progress in each of these areas, would pay significant dividends in improving classroom instruction and, therefore, improving student learning. They are Teacher Skills, School Leader Skills, System Alignment and Instructional Resources. Diagram 2 shows the connection.

Diagram 2



The verbal "if then" of this diagram reads like this:

If we strengthen the skills of teachers and staff, strengthen the skills of school leaders, ensure horizontal and vertical alignment of our system and have sufficient resources, then instruction will improve and student learning will increase.

One limitation of this graphic is that it does not display the interplay possible between each of the four boxes. Improved skills of school leaders, for instance, often will lead to improved skills of teachers and staff. Certain resources can lead to greater alignment of the system. Improved teacher skills can lead to greater alignment. Think of these four boxes as a connected set of change efforts rather than the discrete boxes that appear on this page.

For each of these areas, I will describe the specific area where there is room for growth; improvement efforts may overlap from one strand to another.

STRENGTHEN TEACHER SKILLS

The most direct route to improved learning is through the continuous development of teacher skills. We have many skilled teachers in Fairfield. Our student achievement results are very good. However, keeping teacher skills current is important because of the changes in the student population and expectations for student learning. Hiring the best and brightest is always a priority, but after hire, teachers need to continuously update their skills. For example, the demographics in Fairfield have changed over the past decade. The English Language Learner population is rising. Colleges and the workplace expect greater skill levels from our graduates than ten years ago. Technology continues to evolve, so teachers need to learn how to use instructional technology to improve student learning.

Another area for growth that relates not only to teacher skills but also to the other three focus areas is the analysis and use of student performance data, in particular by teams of teachers. We can make great strides in pinpointing where we need to improve student learning by looking at student performance data in a collaborative and systematic way. Our teachers need skills in collaboration and data analysis, timely access to meaningful data and the time to do this work well. Moreover, analysis of student performance data should be the driving force for the focus of professional development efforts.

STRENGTHEN SCHOOL LEADER SKILLS

Teachers need support in improving instruction. Principals, assistant principals, headmasters, housemasters and curriculum leaders/liaisons play a critical role in assuring that instruction in each classroom is of the highest possible quality. There are virtually no instances in the literature where a school has made sizeable gains in student achievement without a solid school principal. School leaders provide the balance of support and accountability required to improve instruction.

Principals need a skill set in analyzing and taking action based on student performance data. They need to be able to develop school improvement plans based on student data and work with teams of teachers to enable them to work collaboratively in developing new strategies for improved learning. They also need to be able to articulate a shared vision of what good instruction looks like in the classroom, and they need to be able to give feedback to teachers, collectively and individually, that will encourage teachers to continue effective practices and change ineffective ones. They also need to know how to support teams of teachers as they struggle through this new process; collaboration is a learned skill.

AN ALIGNED SYSTEM

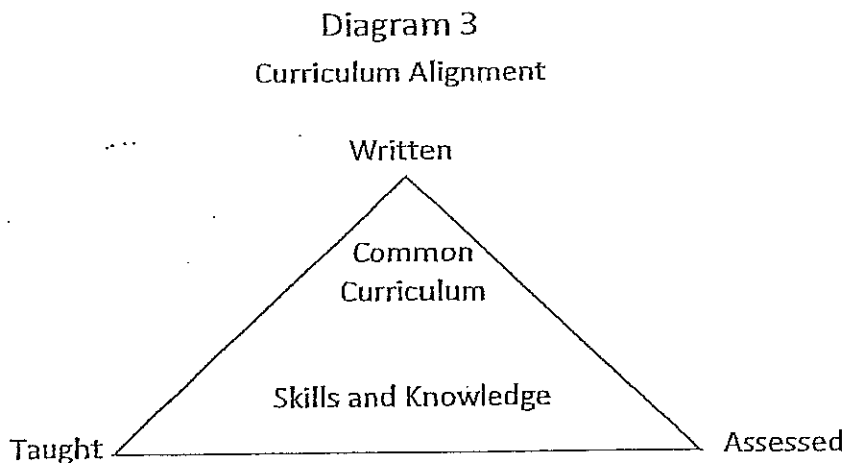
This strand has many components; most of the issues that parents, teachers, principals, Board members and community members mentioned to me fall into this bucket. Words such as “equity,” “consistency” and “fairness” were frequently used to describe some elements of the school system. In fact, aligning a system of 17 schools may be the central challenge facing us.

In the educational world, alignment can be thought of in two ways – so-called “horizontal” alignment and “vertical” alignment. Both are important to achieving our goal.

HORIZONTAL ALIGNMENT

This type of alignment means that there is a consistency in the educational program and resources across the same grade level and subject area. We have horizontal alignment when the curriculum being delivered in every second grade classroom across the district is consistent. We cannot expect students to master a rigorous instructional program (that is, our curriculum) if the written curriculum is not, in fact, the taught curriculum and the assessed curriculum. A teacher may be doing a great job of teaching and assessing a curriculum, but if it is not the one approved for that grade level or subject, we do not have alignment.

Alignment of assessment is a growth area for us. Common assessments are a good way to ensure consistent delivery of curriculum without constraining teacher flexibility in how they teach. Assessments must align to the written curriculum and the taught curriculum. Diagram 3 shows this relationship.



Horizontal alignment does not require identical teaching techniques or identical resources. Teachers need some latitude in their instructional styles as long as the approved curriculum is being implemented as designed. There are limits to the degree of variability, but consistency does not necessarily mean identical. One downside to a push for horizontal alignment is that it encroaches on some staff members freedom and, as such, can generate a negative reaction those who have been able to “do their own thing” with little thought for how it impacts learning across the school district.

Horizontal alignment can also relate to the equitable distribution of resources. Technology – both hardware and software – would be “Exhibit A” of this issue in Fairfield.

Responsibility for horizontal alignment often falls to district leaders, as it is their job to ensure the implementation of the instructional program system-wide. Principals can assure such alignment within their buildings, but the roles of curriculum leaders and central office leaders fall into this arena. Well-functioning grade level or subject area data teams can also bring about greater horizontal alignment within a school.

VERTICAL ALIGNMENT

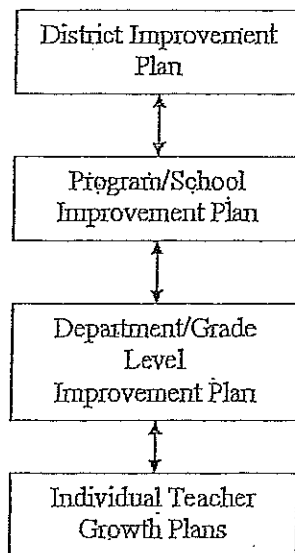
A system that is “vertically” aligned has a consistent program of instruction from grade to grade. There are no gaps in student knowledge from one grade to the next and there is no unnecessary duplication of curriculum. The growth area for Fairfield in this arena appears to be at two transition points—from fifth grade to sixth grade and from eighth grade to ninth grade. Some districts experience an issue from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten but at this point that seems to be less of a concern than the two mentioned above.

The real power of vertical alignment can be seen when improvement efforts at all levels of the system are consistent. For example, when the vision of what good classroom instruction looks like in the eyes of the superintendent, director of curriculum, curriculum leader, principal and teacher is aligned, there is a greater probability of full implementation. When teachers receive “mixed signals” about what effective instruction consists of, one will not get full implementation. For example, a teacher may get advice on instruction from her principal, reading consultant, curriculum leader or Director of Elementary Education. If all of these individuals are not “on the same page,” then the teacher is confused.

The same is true of improvement plans in general. In an aligned world, elements of the district’s improvement plan are evident in the improvement plans of the schools and in the individual improvement plans of grade levels, departments and teachers. Each of these improvement plans may differ because, if done well, they are based on student performance data specific to that teacher, grade level or school. Working toward a common process of analyzing data at the teacher, grade level, school and district level that leads to an alignment of improvement plans would concentrate our resources throughout the system on the most critical areas.

Diagram 4 shows the vertical alignment of improvement plans. The arrows indicate that information flows in both directions to inform our practice. For example, if “differentiating instruction” is a district-wide improvement strategy, evidence of this practice should be evident throughout the system. Conversely, evidence from the “ground up” — the individual teacher level — can and should inform department/grade level/school strategies.

Diagram 4



RESOURCES

Without a certain level of resources, all of the skills and alignment work may be limited in its effectiveness. Resources can include class size, additional staff to support struggling or advanced learners, books, materials, technology, software, adequate facilities as well as community and parent resources. The relationship between resources and student achievement does hinge on staff trained to use them effectively, hence the emphasis on teacher and school leader skills. Without adequate resources, however, the best-laid plans for improvement may fall flat.

In an era of limited financial resources, we need to assess the "return on investment" of our resources. Again, the "return" needs to be measured in terms of improved student learning as the outcome. With limited dollars, for example, are we better off investing in technology or people? The answer is not obvious nor is the answer always binary. Without the technological resources, for example, to provide teachers and principals with real-time data about student performance, we cannot implement a solid program of student performance data analysis.

A THEME

Concentrating our resources of time, energy and dollars into these four focus areas will yield the greatest impact on student learning. One theme across all four areas is the improved use of student performance data to drive our decision-making. For example:

- Implementing a district-and school-wide protocol in the use of student performance data to improve instruction and target services to children
- Implementing school improvement plans based on student performance data
- Implementing professional development for teachers based on student performance data
- The alignment of district, school, department, grade level and individual teacher objectives/goals based on student performance data

CONCLUSIONS

The school system provides outstanding learning opportunities for students. To ensure that all students master our rigorous curriculum, we need to concentrate our change efforts in the area that will provide the greatest leverage to improve instruction. I have identified four main "lenses" through which to view our current and any proposed change initiatives.

The district does suffer from a case of "initiative fatigue." Sometimes this condition is caused by the district undertaking so many initiatives that none can be done well; sometimes it is caused by people not being able to understand how the many initiatives underway are tied to a bigger picture for change. I hope through this general framework for district improvement we may be able to tackle both parts of the problem. Change initiatives that do not directly and clearly address improvement in classroom instruction as outlined here can be phased out; at the same time, we can show how the remaining initiatives fit into the bigger structure by tying them directly to one of the four "lenses" outlined in this document.

Generally speaking, fewer change efforts done well are more effective than many change efforts done not as well. Concentrating the scarce resource of time in the areas where the "return" (in terms of student learning) on "investment" (in terms of time) is greatest is critical. Time is scarce because the day-to-day managing of a complex school system takes up a vast amount of teacher, school leader and district leader time. Carving out time to implement change initiatives is an important part of leading, but if the day-to-day managing of school begins to erode, then change efforts will be sidetracked. In addition, some change initiatives are required of the school district due to changes in state or federal law.

Despite these constraints, change is necessary. Before undertaking any new initiative, the decision-makers — whether they are the Board of Education, central office leaders, principals/headmasters, curriculum leaders, teachers — need to demand that the time invested in such an effort will likely have a significant and positive impact on improving instruction and therefore lead to our reaching our goal of ensuring that every student masters the skills and knowledge outlined in our rigorous instructional program.

Summary of Administrative Professional Development 2010-2011
D. Title 6/14/2011

You may recall from my "District Improvement Strategy" that improvement in student learning comes primarily from improvement in instructional practice. To improve instructional practice in Fairfield I proposed concentrating on four areas: 1) strengthening teacher skills; 2) strengthening school leader skills; 3) alignment (horizontal and vertical); and 4) adequate resources. This document describes one of our major initiatives in the second area, strengthening school leader skills in the area of effective instructional practices.

The year began with a session in the summer of 2010 where the full administrative team, consisting of all district-level and school-level leaders, read and discussed Connecticut's Common Core of Teaching (CCT). The CCT describes what Connecticut believes to be the attributes of high quality instruction. Each principal/headmaster then followed up with his/her faculty in the fall to introduce the CCT.

We then converted all of our K-12 Administrative Cabinet meetings, held once a month, from business meetings to professional development sessions. The purposes of these sessions were:

1. To develop a common understanding of what effective instructional practice looks like in the classroom across the entire school district (alignment).
2. To sharpen administrator skills in observations of classrooms to identify relevant evidence to assess classroom practices.
3. To be able to take the evidence from an observation and communicate it effectively to teachers using a common protocol based on best practices in adult feedback.
4. To assess a school's strengths and areas of growth in the three areas of the instructional core – teachers, students, task – based on evidence gathered in classroom observations.

We engaged in the following activities this year:

- The full Administrative Cabinet watched a video of a lesson, gathered specific evidence from the video, shared perceptions of this evidence with colleagues, and worked toward a common understanding of the interpretation of the instruction. We developed a "CCT Short Form" to help administrators gather evidence in the classrooms and shared this form with teachers.
- We learned a protocol for communicating with teachers after an observation and practiced that protocol with colleague feedback.
- We observed a video lesson of a Fairfield teacher and watched the principal conduct a post-conference with the same teacher.
- We brought in sample tasks from Fairfield classrooms and assessed their quality according to the standards outlined in the CCT.
- In the fall, as part of my Entry Plan, I observed for a minimum of one hour in at least four classrooms in each school with the principal/headmaster and debriefed for a minimum of one hour on the evidence of effective instructional practices seen during

the visit, noting any patterns across all classrooms. If a teacher asked for feedback from me directly, I met with that teacher and modeled the post-conference protocol with the principal/headmaster observing this practice.

- In the spring, I repeated this procedure with administrators who were not involved in the fall round of observations (housemasters, curriculum leaders). Principals/headmasters who had done classroom observations with me in the fall were given the option of repeating the observations with different teachers or having me observe them implementing the post-conference meeting protocol and giving them feedback on it.
- Other members of the central office instructional leadership team participated in the observations in the fall and spring.
- All school leaders are using the "CCT Short Form" in the spring to visit as many classrooms as possible to gather evidence about instructional practice. Using the rubric, in consultation with staff, each school will develop a focus area for the coming year (called a "Problem of Practice"). The purpose of this exercise is not for individual teacher evaluation but to determine the "Problem of Practice" for the entire school.

Future work during 2011-2012 will involve the following activities:

- Continued observation of classrooms by the full Cabinet to sharpen administrators' skills in observing classrooms, gathering and interpreting evidence, and coming to common understanding of effective practices.
- Continued practice and feedback on post-conferencing with teachers after an observation.
- Continued focus on the attributes of a high quality task, coming to a common understanding of effective tasks.
- Each school will develop and implement a plan of action to improve instruction in the identified "Problem of Practice," and include it in the School Improvement Plans.
- Developing a protocol for colleague visits ("Instructional Rounds").
- Implementing colleague visits to other schools to observe instruction, focused on the school's "Problem of Practice."
- Revision of each school's plan of action based on colleague feedback and year-end observations of instructional practices.
- Engagement of teachers in classroom observations in each school and across the school district.

Improvement of instructional practice does not occur as a singular event. It happens over time in a culture where administrators and teachers are willing to put their practice "on the table" for others to see. We are fortunate in Fairfield to have administrators and teachers who have been willing to open their doors and let their colleagues observe their work and receive feedback on it.

FAIRFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS
SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN
2011-2013

School _____
Principal/Headmaster _____
Date _____
Team Members _____

1. Narrative Analysis of Student Data [Student Data in Appendix]

- Celebrations
-
-
-
- Challenges (identify needs)
-
-
-
-
- Hypothesize cause of these results
-
-
-

2. By level student achievement targets for June 2013

- Reading
- Writing
- Math

3. School achievement targets for June 2013:

-
-
-
-
-

4. Theory of Action Underlying This Plan

SCHOOL-WIDE STRATEGIES

FOCUSED STRATEGY (addresses the problem of practice and are limited in number and high leverage)	ADULT ACTIONS (include persons responsible, the timeline and how actions will be monitored)	EVIDENCE OF SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION (identify student achievement measures and timeline)	SPECIFIC SUPPORT NEEDED
1.			
2.			
3.			

GRADE LEVEL OR DEPARTMENT STRATEGIES

FOCUSED STRATEGY (addresses the problem of practice and are limited in number and high leverage)	ADULT ACTIONS (include persons responsible, the timeline and how actions will be monitored)	EVIDENCE OF SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION (identify student achievement measures and timeline)	SPECIFIC SUPPORT NEEDED
2.			
2,			
3.			

STANDARDS FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOL DATA TEAMS

DOMAIN	STANDARDS	NEVER	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
School Improvement Plan Domain Overall Rating: (write 1,2,3 or 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The plan establishes a school target for each student outcome indicator identified by the District. Each target is based upon a school's analysis of its own data. The school can defend its choice of each target. Multiple indicators of success are included. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritized areas of strategic adult work have been identified in the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and are limited in number. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actions described in the plan have a high degree of leverage (positive effect of multiple outcomes). 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For each area of strategic adult work, a detailed action plan has been developed that includes key strategies, timelines, results indicators, persons responsible and other relevant information. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional Development associated with key adult strategies is included in the plan. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers and administrators provide each other feedback on the implementation of initiatives in the SIP. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher leadership is present in the development and implementation of the SIP. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers and administrators work collaboratively to plan and implement PD consistent with the SIP. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers and administrators routinely observe classrooms to monitor instructional improvements. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A copy of the plan is distributed to each staff member and is discussed regularly. The plan is posted on the school's web site. 	1	2	3	4
Membership Domain Overall Rating: (write 1,2,3 or 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal / Headmaster and other building administrators are regularly attending members of the team. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elementary – representatives from each grade level. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary – representatives from each department. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-classroom staff members are part of the team 	1	2	3	4

Structure Domain Overall Rating: (write 1,2,3 or 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings are conducted at least once per month. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings are of sufficient length to ensure monitoring of implementation of all aspects of the plan. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An agenda with appropriate data is sent to all members in advance of the meeting. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear process for data collection and analysis, decision making, follow up and feedback has been identified and is followed 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data used in analysis is in the SIP. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The team uses relevant data (both adult action data and student outcome data) to determine the effectiveness of actions designed to achieve the identified student outcomes. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The team modifies the plan in response to the data and tracks each change 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The team coordinates and may direct the work of the Instructional Data Teams. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minutes are sent to all members following the meeting. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles are clearly defined (Chair, recorder, etc.) and rotate throughout the year. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Norms are developed and followed. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The chair facilitates the meeting and all members reinforce the norms. 	1	2	3	4
Process Domain Overall Rating: (write 1,2,3 or 4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings begin with a review of the prior meeting's commitments. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is participation by every member with honest dialogue on key issues. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All members come prepared with appropriate data. 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The discussion follows the agenda (focused, time-limited, on task). 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The discussion centers on what the group can control. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion is largely supported by evidence and data. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team serves as a problem-solving group as obstacles arise. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions made by the group are supported by all members. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the end of each meeting, next steps are clearly identified and a timeline is developed for follow up. All members agree to take certain actions 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those responsible for each action plan are clearly identified 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All members feel safe to admit weaknesses or challenge the view point of others. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group members are attentive, use positive body language and dignify each others' contributions. 	1	2	3	4
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The team coordinates and may direct the work of the Instructional Data Teams. 	1	2	3	4

Fairfield Public Schools Team Observation Form

ATTACHMENT # 5

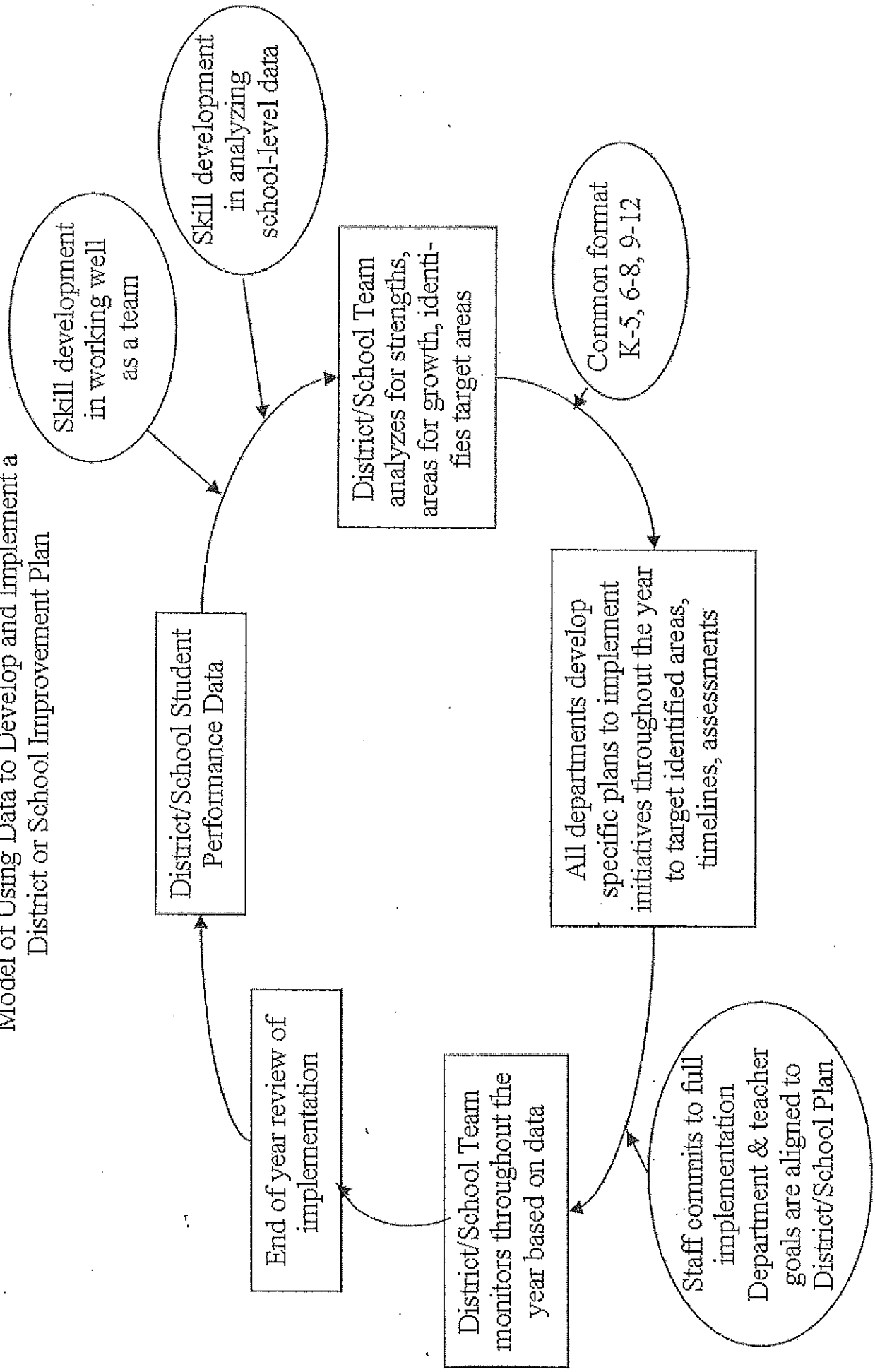
Name of Team & Size: _____

School: _____

Facilitator: _____

CRITERIA	EVIDENCE
Everyone participates, no one dominates.	
Norms are enforced by everyone, not just facilitator. Facilitation is rotated among group members.	
Meetings accomplish what they set out to accomplish.	
Meetings end with a commitment by all members to do something by a certain time.	
Discussion about improved student learning focuses on changes in adult actions ("agency").	
Meetings often begin with a review of prior commitments.	
Discussion is respectful but avoids the "land of nice" syndrome. Members are direct and honest in a respectful way. Challenging the view of others is acceptable.	
Discussion often flows among group members themselves without going through the facilitator.	
Members' comments often build upon each other's comments.	
Psychological safety is evidenced by members' willingness to put their practice on the table, admit weaknesses.	
Members feel that they both contribute to the team but also take away learning from the team.	

Model of Using Data to Develop and Implement a District or School Improvement Plan



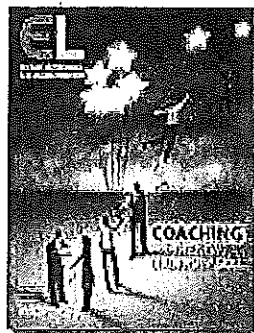
STANDARDS FOR EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL DATA TEAMS

DOMAIN	STANDARDS	NEVER	SOMETIMES	OFTEN	ALWAYS
Membership Domain Overall Rating: _____ (write 1,2,3 or 4)	Elementary Level:	1	2	3	4
	• Organized by grade level (all grade level teachers)				4
	• Appropriate support staff included (e.g. language arts specialist, social worker)	1	2	3	4
	Secondary Level:	1	2	3	4
	• Organized by those teaching common courses				4
	• Appropriate support staff included	1	2	3	4
Process Domain Overall Rating: _____ (write 1,2,3 or 4)	• Each Instructional Data Team selects a representative to the School Data Team.	1	2	3	4
	• Meetings begin with a review of the prior meeting's commitments.	1	2	3	4
	• The discussion follows the agenda (focused, time limited, on task).	1	2	3	4
	• All members come prepared with appropriated data.	1	2	3	4
	• Student achievement data is used to identify areas of strength and where improvement is needed.	1	2	3	4
	• Issues are clearly described and limited in scope.	1	2	3	4
	• Instructional strategies are designed to address the goal and measure progress.	1	2	3	4
	• Strategies are implemented for a specific period of time.	1	2	3	4
	• Team members consult formally and informally about the strategy and implementation.	1	2	3	4
	• Team members administer an assessment to measure the effect of the strategy on the student(s).	1	2	3	4
	• Teams, at regularly prescribed intervals (e.g., every 2 weeks), evaluate the effectiveness of the selected strategy through the results of the assessment.	1	2	3	4
	• If the data indicates minimal progress toward the goal, the team analyzes and revises the strategy or selects a different strategy.	1	2	3	4
	• If the team determines the strategy is successful, go on to another instructional issue or area needing improvement.	1	2	3	4
	• The Team periodically returns to previous issue to be sure learning is sustained.	1	2	3	4
	• At the end of each meeting, next steps are clearly identified and a timeline is developed for follow up. All members agree to take certain actions.	1	2	3	4

	• Those responsible for each action plan are clearly identified.	1	2	3	4
	• There is participation by every member with honest dialogue on key issues.	1	2	3	4
	• The discussion centers on what the group can control.	1	2	3	4
	• The discussion is largely supported by evidence and data.	1	2	3	4
	• The team serves as a problem-solving group as obstacles arise.	1	2	3	4
	• Decisions made by the group are supported by all members.	1	2	3	4
	• All members feel safe to admit weaknesses or challenge the view point of others.	1	2	3	4
	• Group members are attentive, use positive body language and dignify each others' contributions.	1	2	3	4
	• The Instructional Data Team makes periodic reports to the School Data Team relative to progress, process and issues; takes unresolved instructional issues to the School Data Team for advice and direction or possible referral to another level.	1	2	3	4
Structure	• Meetings are conducted at least once every 2 weeks.	1	2	3	4
	• Meetings are of sufficient length to ensure monitoring of implementation of all aspects of the plan.	1	2	3	4
	• An agenda is sent to all members in advance of the meeting.	1	2	3	4
	• A clear process for data collection and analysis, decision making, follow up and feedback has been identified and is followed.	1	2	3	4
	• Data used in analysis is in alignment with the SIP.	1	2	3	4
	• The team uses relevant data (both adult action data and student outcome data) to determine the effectiveness of actions designed to achieve the identified student outcomes.	1	2	3	4
	• The team modifies the plan in response to the data and tracks each change.	1	2	3	4
	• Minutes are sent to all members following the meeting.	1	2	3	4
	• Roles are clearly defined (Chair, recorder, etc.) and rotate throughout the year.	1	2	3	4
	• The chair facilitates the meeting and all group members reinforce the norms.	1	2	3	4
Domain Overall Rating: (write 1,2,3 or 4)	• Norms are developed and followed.	1	2	3	4



EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP



October 2011 | Volume 69 | Number 2

Learning from Instructional Rounds

Elizabeth A. City

When teachers conduct instructional rounds, they focus on why a problem of practice persists schoolwide—and on what they can do about it.

How do we improve our collective teaching practice? How do we ensure that every classroom is a place of rich and valuable learning for all students? And who's responsible for doing so?

Over the last several years, my colleagues and I, in collaboration with educators across the United States, Canada, and Australia, have tried to answer these questions.¹ The model we've developed to improve instructional practice is based on medical rounds, the primary way that doctors learn and improve their practice. We call the approach *instructional rounds*.

The practice, which began with administrators, has become increasingly popular in schools. Teachers are usually the most enthusiastic rounds participants, leading the next evolution of the practice.

What Are Instructional Rounds?

Instructional rounds are a disciplined way for educators to work together to improve instruction (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). The practice combines three common elements of improvement: classroom observation, an improvement strategy, and a network of educators. Many educators currently use one or more of these elements, often with some success. In our own work, my colleagues and I have found that it's the *combination* of elements that's most powerful. We have also found that it's hard to dislodge familiar habits and behaviors that serve different purposes, the most ingrained of which are supervision and evaluation.

Instructional rounds contrast with supervision and evaluation on a number of dimensions, the first of which is learning (see fig. 1, p. 39). Rounds are an inquiry process. People doing rounds should expect to learn something themselves. In supervision and evaluation, only the person *being* observed is expected to learn. I think of this as the difference between looking through a window (supervision and evaluation) and holding up a mirror (rounds).

Figure 1. Instructional Rounds Versus Supervision and Evaluation		
	Instructional Rounds	Supervision and Evaluation
<i>Learning stance</i>	Inquiry: Genuinely want to learn something ourselves Main learners: The observers	Informative: Genuinely want someone else to learn something Main learner: The observed
<i>Unit of improvement</i>	Meant to improve the collective (school, system)	Meant to improve the individual
<i>Accountability</i>	Lateral (peer-to-peer)	Positional (top-down)
<i>Output</i>	Next level of work, collective commitments	Evaluative feedback, prescriptions for next steps
<i>Primary focus in the classroom</i>	The instructional core, especially the students and the tasks they're engaged in	The teacher

Participants in rounds, particularly teachers, emphasize the learning they do as observers. "My teachers schooled me pretty quickly on this—you don't learn anything by being observed, only by observing," said John Roberts, assistant director at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School in Lowell, Massachusetts, after introducing rounds to his faculty.

Rounds are not about "fixing" individual teachers. Rounds are about understanding what's happening in classrooms, how we as a system produce those effects, and how we can move closer to producing the learning we want to see. This focus on "we" means that peers learn to hold one another accountable, individually and collectively. For rounds to accelerate improvement, educators need a protocol for taking next steps that they've committed to on their own. They don't rely on someone with formal authority to enforce agreements or on others to comply with mandates. In the California Rural Network, for example, superintendents do follow-up visits with one another after rounds visits. They say this follow-up visit from a peer helps them take action amid multiple competing priorities.

Rounds are fundamentally descriptive and analytic, not evaluative. At no point in rounds do we declare what we see to be "good" or "bad" or something we "like" or "don't like." Observers don't tell the observed what to do next to improve. However, observers *do* think about "the next level of work" or what the school or district could do to make progress in a problem area.

Finally, because rounds are about the instructional core, when my colleagues and I are in classrooms we focus on the interactions among teachers, students, and content. Effective supervision and evaluation, of course, pay attention to these things as well. However, educators consistently say that one of their early changes in practice as a result of participating in rounds is a shift of attention from the teacher to the students and the tasks they're engaged in.

How Do You Do Instructional Rounds?

Although educators adapt rounds to their purpose and context, the essential practice looks the same and relies heavily on protocol: You gather a group of colleagues who will meet together over time (that is, you form a *network*); you define a problem of practice connected to your improvement strategy; you visit classrooms in small groups; you

debrief after the observation; you identify next levels of work and build the group's relevant knowledge and skills; and you repeat this process often.

Assemble a Network

Some networks are composed of peers (all superintendents, principals, or teachers). Others have cross-functional groups (teachers and administrators together or multiple roles across a district). Some educators build on existing networks and incorporate rounds into their practice; others form new networks for rounds. Some are intentional about who is in the network (for example, staff members in shared content areas or in cross-content areas that focus on a shared issue); others are pragmatic (for example, those who have a common planning period do rounds together). The same group meets over time, giving members the opportunity to build a trusting, respectful community that pushes itself hard and develops a common language and understanding of learning and teaching. Networks typically range from 8 to 30 members.

Define the Problem of Practice

A problem of practice is something the school cares about, feels stuck on, and wants to understand more deeply. A problem of practice focuses on instruction, is observable and actionable, connects to a broader strategy of improvement, and is high leverage (City et al., 2009). See "Common Problems of Practice" (p. 40) for examples. Schools vary in their process for determining a problem of practice. The process works best when it's connected to ongoing improvement work and is based on data. A school might convene its instructional leadership team and ask the following questions: Where do we feel stuck? Where are we struggling? How do we know we're struggling? Which situation do we need help collecting data on and thinking about?

Schools sometimes invite the whole faculty to identify a problem of practice; sometimes they work with their leadership team to identify a problem. And sometimes, frankly, they pluck the problems of practice out of thin air, with just the principal deciding what the "problem" is. I don't recommend that option, as it usually results in little improvement and in data that teachers aren't all that interested in.

Ballarat Clarendon College, a K–12 school in Victoria, Australia, started with this problem of practice:

We've noticed that our students are more often engaged in tasks that involve remembering and understanding than in tasks that involve analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Some students aren't getting enough opportunities to practice higher-order thinking skills and to take an active role in the learning process.

At Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, teachers thought that students struggled with intellectual curiosity. Students sat in class "absorbing" and didn't ask questions. After examining this problem of practice in rounds, teachers decided that the level of the task assigned might have something to do with students' lack of intellectual curiosity, so they shifted the problem of practice to be about the level of the task and the level of teacher questioning.

Observe in Classrooms

The network divides into small groups of approximately four people. Each group typically visits four classrooms, staying 20–25 minutes in each. Observers don't have rubrics to guide them because they're gathering descriptive data rather than assessing against a rubric. However, they usually do have focus questions related to the problem of practice, such as, What are students doing and saying? What's the teacher doing and saying? What's the task? They also question students about what they're working on, what they do when they don't understand something, and how they know whether their work is good or great.

The problem of practice acts as a filter. In classrooms, observers don't pay attention to all the things they think are important. For example, if the problem of practice is about higher-order thinking skills, observers try to ignore how well students are behaving, what is or isn't on the walls, or whether the teacher wrote the objective on the board. Observers also don't do an implementation check on a given strategy. They're detectives, not inspectors. They try to

unlock the mystery of why the school is stuck, why this problem of practice persists, and what might help the school get unstuck.

Between classroom visits, observers don't chat about what they saw or what they thought about what they saw. They save that for the formal debrief.

Debrief

Lowell Middlesex Academy assistant director John Roberts finds the rounds protocol crucial. "The reason we follow this protocol," he notes, "is that it separates us from the practice and keeps us from being the crazy, judgmental human beings we are." The debriefing protocol moves in steps from description to analysis to prediction and leads participants into identifying the next level of work.

Describe. In the description phase, the various observation groups come together to share the evidence they collected related to the problem of practice. Evidence is most helpful when it's specific and descriptive as opposed to judgmental or general. Gathering and stating specific, descriptive evidence are learned skills that educators can help one another with. When you hear something judgmental—such as, "The teacher talked too much" or "The questions were mostly low level"—ask "What's the evidence?" When you hear something general—such as "The teacher asked lots of questions"—ask for specificity, for instance, "What were some specific questions the teacher asked?"

Analyze. Having built the evidentiary foundation for a strong discussion, observation groups move into the analysis phase, looking for patterns across the evidence and noting exceptions to the patterns. Patterns might include the following:

- Teachers ask questions that require one- or two-word answers, and students respond with one or two words.
- Students sit in groups, yet work individually.
- The pattern of interaction is teacher–student–teacher, with teachers initiating the conversation.

We pause at this point in the debriefing session so each group can share the patterns it has seen. Often, a distinct pattern will emerge across the school—that tasks are low level, for example—but sometimes groups see different patterns in a certain grade level, content area, or classroom.

Predict. Next, the protocol asks, "If you were a student in these classes today and you did everything the teacher asked you to do, what would you know and be able to do?" This question doesn't ask what you think teachers *hope* students will learn or what the objectives written on the board are, but what students would actually learn if they completed the tasks given to them. For example, observers might predict that students would be able to follow directions, recall information, or complete mathematics problems if they had the formula for the problems in front of them.

Identify the Next Level of Work

Taking into account all the evidence, what do we now understand about this stuck place? How can the school focus its energy and resources to make progress on the problem of practice? What new knowledge and skills might teachers need, and how might the school support that learning?

For example, a rounds visit might reveal that in a school whose students struggle with higher-order thinking, teachers typically give students fairly low-level tasks. The next level of work might be for the teachers to see these data together—for example, teachers might collect all the tasks given on a certain day and then assess them using a framework like Bloom's taxonomy.

On the basis of their assessment, the teachers might identify the support they need, which might involve having more time to design tasks together or receiving training in Bloom's taxonomy. At the same time, school leadership might not only reorganize planning time to make it possible for teachers to design tasks together, but also look at how challenging the tasks are that *adults* are being asked to complete during professional development and other

meetings. The school might stop having informational meetings where teachers are just called on to listen and, instead, create sessions where teachers are challenged as learners.

Different networks experiment with different ways of formulating the next level of work. Some brainstorm action steps for this week, next month, and by the end of the year. Others generate reflective questions to prompt further thinking, such as, In a differentiated classroom, what would teachers and students be doing? or How do teachers know that their students understand? At Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, teachers create commitment cards and post the cards in their classrooms. For example, one might read, "Ask a question at the evaluation level at the beginning of class."

Inevitably, rounds bring to the surface areas of need that can inform professional development. In Boston Public Schools, for example, high school principals worked together to generate a common definition of rigor but realized they didn't all agree on what it looked like in the classroom. Through rounds, they identified a districtwide pattern of tasks focused on remembering, understanding, and, from time to time, applying. The next level of work was engaging teachers in rounds and developing a deeper understanding of rigor.

As a result, the central office designed a course on rigor and the practice of rounds. Teachers learned that students with low skills do not need low-level tasks—rather, they need supports to successfully engage with high-level tasks. They also learned to compare the stated task with the enacted task, which may be more low-level than expected; students may simply be doing more of something or following the teacher's example rather than really using their minds. Teachers took the course, learned how to do rounds, and will facilitate rounds focused on rigor as a problem of practice in their schools.

For Judith Blanco, district instructional coach for Boston's high schools, rounds are a "cyclical process that ties your whole school improvement plan, your professional development, and your rounds together, all informing each other." Because the process is cyclical, she says, "rounds shouldn't be one-time events." Melissa Chen, science teacher at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School, agrees: "We don't see rounds as an extra thing—they're part of what we do." At Lowell Middlesex Academy, teachers do rounds once a week. Teachers at Ballarat Clarendon College do rounds once every two weeks. Other networks do rounds once a month. Frequency matters.

Why Do Instructional Rounds?

Rounds are time-consuming, complex, and challenging. So why bother? Several educators I asked suggested the following reasons:

- *To take improvement to the next level.* In the California Rural Network, school districts had been engaged in improvement through Reading First and other efforts. As a result, they were experiencing improvements in student achievement. They believed they could take student and adult learning to the next level, but they weren't sure how to do it. Rounds have helped them build on their earlier improvement efforts.
- *To build a common understanding of effective learning and teaching.* Educators in the California Rural Network think that rounds are a valuable way to explore the following questions: Do we know what effective instruction looks like? Do we recognize it when we see it? Do we agree?
- *To reduce variability.* Educators at Ballarat Clarendon College do rounds "because we know there's a significant difference in levels of instruction among classrooms." They think rounds will help them reduce variability by focusing on tasks in classrooms and getting shared commitments about how to improve.
- *To focus the work.* Melissa Chen says that rounds help Lowell Middlesex Academy focus: "There are so many things we want to improve, and it helps to put more of our energy in one place, to choose one problem a year that we want to look at."
- *To put educators in charge of their own learning.* Judith Blanco sees rounds as building on Boston's previous coaching work. According to Blanco, it's "a way of getting teachers to observe one another's practice in a

nonevaluative way. It's a process and structure to make that happen." Connie Tate of the California Rural Network explains,

We're trying to build collective efficacy. It's really behavior modification: Tell me what to do, and I'm going to resist it, but give me time, let me do it and see the results...and I'll change my behavior.

- *To provide data and inform professional development.* Lowell Middlesex Academy uses rounds to inform professional development in a targeted way and create a feedback loop for teachers: "It's hard to plan professional development if we don't all agree on what we're seeing in our classrooms." Similarly, educators at one Boston high school said,

The data from instructional rounds give us a more complete picture of student learning and bluntly show whether professional development has had an impact on student performance—[and] whether we have adequately addressed the problem of practice.

Ultimately, educators choose to do rounds because they find them a powerful way of continually informing and improving their practice. One educator in the California Rural Network captured her experience:

We're finally having conversations about instructional practice. I've learned more about myself as a teacher and about quality instruction in one day of instructional rounds than in five years of professional development.

It's in Our Hands

Done poorly or briefly as just another initiative, rounds, like any improvement effort, will have little effect. At worst, poorly done rounds will suggest that we educators are incapable of improving our own practice. However, done well, in a way that is sustained, and integrated with an improvement strategy, rounds offer the opportunity for educators to show ourselves and others what we're capable of as professionals and to develop learning environments in which all students can succeed.

Common Problems of Practice

- Are students engaged in high-level or low-level tasks? Do teachers ask high-level or low-level questions?
- Are students able to articulate their thinking in writing?
- Are students able to transfer learning from one content area or grade level to another?
- Is students' understanding in mathematics conceptual or only procedural?
- Are students active or passive participants in class?
- Are some students—such as students with special needs, English language learners, boys, or girls—performing as well as they might? If not, what does this look like in the classroom?
- Do teachers do most of the talking and thinking in the classroom?
- Do teachers enact a high-level curriculum in a low-level way?
- How do teachers know what students know?
- How do students know the quality of their work?
- What role do students play in assessment?
- How do students talk with one another about classwork?

Reference

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving learning and teaching*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Endnote

¹ We build on the early work of Tony Alvarado, Elaine Fink, and colleagues in New York City District 2 and of Andrew Lachman, Richard Elmore, and colleagues in the Superintendents' Network of the Connecticut Center for School Change.

Elizabeth A. City is executive director of the Doctor of Education Leadership Program and lecturer on education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is coauthor, with Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, of *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (Harvard Education Press, 2009) and coauthor, with Rachel Curtis, of *Strategy in Action: How School Systems Can Support Powerful Learning and Teaching* (Harvard Education Press, 2009).

Copyright © 2011 by ASCD

September 15, 2011 Administrative Cabinet Professional Development
Notes

1. Review Commitments from August Workshop

- Establish and implement a School Improvement Team process as described in the standards. Using or modifying an existing team is fine.
- Develop and implement a School Improvement Plan using the (modified) template according to a timeline agreeable to the supervisor for your level.
- Using the standards and your self-evaluation of your school's practices, identify one or more areas for improvement throughout the year and include in your professional growth plan.

There is some messiness about our journey through School Improvement. Each school is in a developmentally different stage based on the Standards we examined in August. One of the principles in the "Instructional Rounds" book is that we get better at the work by actually doing it. In this case, we will get better at School Improvement (and all of its attendant parts) by doing it.

2. Problem of Practice

Developing a Problem of Practice requires us to admit that not everything is perfect. We are admitting that our present practices are not always getting us the results we want. I realize there is a risk in doing so. It is my belief that if we make our private practice public then we can improve it. This is a culture change for schools and school districts.

Once a Problem of Practice has been identified, it becomes part of the School Improvement Plan under the "Whole School" banner. You work with staff to 1) identify and "name" the Problem; 2) develop some actions you, collectively, believe will address the Problem of Practice; 3) implement these actions; and 4) identify indicators that your actions have improved the Problem of Practice. Instructional Rounds visits will focus on your Problem of Practice, as visitors will be focusing their time in the classrooms looking for evidence related to your Problem of Practice.

Standards for an effective Problem of Practice:

Is your Problem of Practice:

- focused on elements of the CCT/instructional core? (teachers, students, task)?
- directly observable in the classroom?
- actionable (within our control, can be improved)?
- connected to a broader strategy of improvement (school, level, system)?
- based on data/evidence, not just hunches (student learning data, classroom observations)?

- “high leverage” (if improved, would we be likely to make a significant difference in student learning)?
- something that you are grappling with (maybe have tried to improve before)?
- sufficiently specific that it would allow observers to focus on it when in the classroom?
- include some context for others (e.g., history of under-performance in a certain area, have worked on it before with limited success)?

If you can answer “yes” to these questions, you have developed a Problem of Practice that is ready for the next steps in the process.

3. Theory of Action

Your School Improvement Plan, which includes addressing your Problem of Practice, should be based on an overall strategy. This strategy is called your Theory of Action.

Elements of a Theory of Action: (“What’s your strategy?”)

Theories of Action are developed by the leader. They can be developed with input from staff, trusted colleagues or supervisors, but ultimately it is “your” Theory of Action. You need to be able to stand up in front of a group (parents, teachers, supervisors, etc.) and say, “This is my strategy for how we can improve.”

Theories of Action are specific to the individual leader, the school and the culture/history of the organization. We all have these in our heads. It’s a matter of making them explicit, sharing them and using them to determine the actions you will undertake to improve. Some people find it easier to think about improvement efforts already underway and ask the question: Why am I doing this? How will this improve student learning?

A Theory of Action:

- Describes a causal relationship between improvement efforts and improved student learning
- Is a series of if/then statements, the end result of which is improved student learning
- Can be proven or disproven over time and therefore is subject to continuous revision, especially as “missing links” in the chain are identified
- Undergirds improvement efforts; it is not a specific year-by-year set of tasks

There is no “right” or “wrong” Theory of Action.

I have one for the school system:

- *If we work effectively in teams across all levels of the organization to examine system, school and individual student progress, and if we create a culture where individuals regularly share effective practices and if we regularly support and supervise teachers in*

implementing effective classroom practices, then teachers will improve their instructional expertise and student learning will improve.

- *If we improve the instructional leadership capacity of school and district leaders, then they will be better able to identify effective instructional practices, help teachers improve their practices through support and accountability and this improved instructional practice will lead to improved student learning.*
- *If we provide our staff and students with appropriate levels of educational resources (human, time and material) and if they use these resources effectively, then student learning will improve.*
- *If we ensure that a rigorous, comprehensive instructional program is consistently delivered across all schools and grade levels with alignment between the written, taught and assessed curriculum, then instruction will be of consistently high quality and student learning will improve.*

D. Title

9/15/2011

