A Network Approach to Developing System-Level Instructional Leadership

Historically, most superintendents of schools have been classroom teachers earlier in their careers. Today, particularly in large urban school districts, we find that nontraditional superintendents coming from business, finance, law, and the military are stepping onto the district leadership stage. All superintendents, traditional or nontraditional, find their work as system leaders moves them further and further from the instructional core—from the locus of student-teacher interaction with academic content. The gap between the superintendent and the classroom, the place with the most impact and influence on learner outcomes, is rooted in more than the absence of geographic proximity. Rather, there are large looming questions about role definition and the complexity of the modern-day superintendency.

Superintendents must contend with a staggering array of demands that are, at best, tangentially related to the core business of teaching and learning. Many of these demands are political: determining how increasingly scarce resources will be allocated; managing relations with the school board, with leaders of collective bargaining units, and with external partners; ensuring safety of staff and students; communicating with staff, parents, community leaders, and the local media; contending with external policy requirements, opportunities, and constraints from the county, state, and federal levels of government; human resource and noninstructional operations; management of central office staff; and the list goes on.

And yet the instructional core is the essence of K–12 education. Student learning and development is the short answer to the question, Why have schools? Further, it would be difficult to argue with this simple statement: You cannot lead what you do not know. The CEO of an airline company had better know the air transportation industry. Wouldn't it also be true that superintendents of schools need deep knowledge of the instructional core and an understanding of how to continuously strengthen it? Isn't the true measure of their success the impact they have on the quality of teaching and learning for every child, in every classroom, in every school in their system?

It is perhaps axiomatic that effective, results-oriented superintendents strategically invest in strengthening instructional practice and instructional leadership throughout their system. However, a key question remains: Where and when and how do superintendents receive support for their own development as system-level instructional leaders—as chief executives whose core business is teaching and learning? Superintendents often lack access to opportunities that are uniquely designed to support their need for learning more about the inner workings of the instructional core, so that their visions will be driven by and grounded in educational excellence and equity for all

students. The emergence of instructionally focused superintendent networks or communities of practice represents a promising development that is beginning to fill this vacuum.

New Jersey Network of Superintendents

This issue of *Strategies* takes an in-depth look at a cross-district community of practice that is tightly focused on equity and the instructional core—the New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS). Brian Osborne, NJNS member and superintendent of South Orange–Maplewood, made this observation concerning the value of the Network: "If you think your job as superintendent is actually to improve the instructional core, that's a tremendously hard road to walk every day. . . . I feel like my colleagues here have never given up on that, never chosen to easily become cynical, blame other groups, complain. Certainly, we help each other in hard times, but to me that makes it a very unique focus and probably, above anything else we do, it's being around people who see their job that way and can live in that tension, that keeps me coming back."

The pages that follow tell the story of this Network, which recently entered its fourth year and brings more than a dozen superintendents together to engage in monthly, full-day explorations of how to increase their impact on equity and the instructional core. The NJNS has several features that are common to superintendent networks in Connecticut, Louisiana, Iowa, and Washington, among other states: use of instructional rounds focusing on a school-specific problem of practice, full-day monthly sessions, and external facilitation, documentation, and support. At the same time, NJNS is evolving in ways that appear to be unique.

Instructional rounds continue to be the connective tissue as the NJNS community of practice evolves. An early Network goal was to transfer agency from the Panasonic Foundation to the superintendent members in the Network. Presently, member superintendents are actively engaged in planning the annual NJNS program; beginning to assume responsibility for monitoring norms such as attendance; and exploring options for bringing colleagues in their home districts into NJNS experiences and learning.

An intensified focus on educational equity, along with continued delving into the instructional core, has emerged as the Network has continually evolved. NJNS superintendents, who themselves represent diverse school districts (e.g., urban, suburban, high wealth, and high poverty), are embracing the equity challenge and are working together to identify high-leverage problems of practice aimed at reducing inequitable outcomes for learners. NJNS, as a superintendent-owned community of practice, will continue to be shaped by superintendent reflections on practice and the ever present need to keep equity and the instructional core at the center of our work. ◀

—Larry Leverett, Executive Editor
—Scott Thompson, Editor

Strategies

A Community of System-Level Instructional Leaders

The classroom is buzzing with 8th graders in conversation and in motion. All 20 students are huddled around plastic tubs, working in pairs to dissect slippery gray squids. In addition to two faculty members, who are responding to questions that some students are raising, five other adults circulate through the room, jotting notes and occasionally quietly questioning individual students.

A few minutes later, the visiting adults face each other in huddle formation in the hall. They take turns sharing evidence gleaned from the classroom visit. They are members of the New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS), conducting an instructional-rounds visit to the Helen A. Fort Middle School in Pemberton, New Jersey. (See video segment from this class and the hallway huddle.)

This lesson on invertebrates is one of five classes visited by this small team of superintendents on a May morning. While this team visits those classes, three other teams of superintendents are simultaneously observing teaching and learning going on in other classrooms (or often the same classrooms at different times) in the school.

Before the visit, the school administration, working with the Pemberton superintendent and a Panasonic Foundation consultant, had defined a school-wide problem of practice that culminated with the following focus questions:

- What evidence do you see of students making connections to real-world experiences through problem-solving activities, decision making, and investigative processes?
- What evidence do you see of students using and being asked to use higher-order thinking skills as defined by Bloom's New Taxonomy?
- What evidence do you see of team teaching in the "inclusive" classrooms?

After each small team concludes twelve-minute visits to each of five classrooms, the teams meet separately to examine their gathered evidence in more detail, to derive patterns, and to collect "wonderings"—questions phrased in the form of "I wonder why" or "I wonder how"—from across classrooms. Then the full Network—all four teams, along with external facilitators—convenes to compare evidence, patterns, and wonderings from the respective visits and to develop a more holistic picture of where the school is in relation to its problem of practice. Next they report their findings to the school's leadership team.

In all phases of debriefing the classroom visits—the hallway huddle, the small-team debrief, and the full Network debrief—superintendents strive to stay in the descriptive voice, highlighting what they have seen and heard, avoiding judgmental language. This is much more easily said than done, because in most educators' experience, observation and judgment have tended to be inseparable. Mastering the discipline of gathering detailed evidence—evidence not veiled by reflex judgmentalism—is essential to gaining a more nuanced perception of what is actually taking place in the instructional core.

The first two essential questions of the problem of practice that the Pemberton rounds visit focused on could be boiled down to (1) *relevance* (What evidence do you see of students making connections to real-world experiences through problem-solving activities,

Mastering the discipline of gathering detailed evidence is essential to gaining a more nuanced perception of what is actually taking place in the instructional core.

decision making, and investigative processes?) and (2) *rigor* (What evidence do you see of students using and being asked to use higher-order thinking skills as defined by Bloom's New Taxonomy?). The rounds experience that day culminated in an open dialogue, which still stands as a marker in the Network's journey to become a community of practice with a shared vision and language concerning the instructional core. That facilitated dialogue included the following exchange:

> ***Pablo Muñoz, superintendent of Elizabeth Public Schools:*** *My challenge is understanding what cognitive complexity of the academic task means. This played itself out here with having a sense of what rigor means. My hope is that this group comes to a standard of practice around rigor that helps us and our own schools when we go back.*

> ***Earl Kim, superintendent in Montgomery Township:*** *I think that rigor and relevance are two things that would help all of our districts, if we could make that an explicit goal— to come to have a common understanding of those terms.*

> ***Brian Osborne, superintendent in South Orange–Maplewood:*** *I'm wondering to what extent we need to come to common understandings of rigor or relevance or anything of the like. What we do need is a good understanding of the connection between the district that we're visiting, their theory of action and problem of practice, and what we're looking for evidence for, so that we can be helpful to the school and so that we are rigorous about making those connections. The other thing I'm thinking is how difficult it is to align theory of action, problem of practice, and what's happening in classrooms.*

> ***Scott Thompson, design team member:*** *On this point about not being certain about whether defining rigor and relevance is the task: There's actually an interesting paper by Norton Grubb and Jeannie Oakes about definitions of rigor. It lays out seven real, distinct definitions of rigor that we would recognize. If we went through the work of having a common definition of rigor, there are still all these people for whom it will mean one of six other things. Maybe our work is to get beyond broad labels to the finer-grained perception of what's happening in the instructional core and talk in more precise terms.*

Margaret Hayes, superintendent in Scotch Plains–Fanwood: Related to the theme that's emerging, I'm not so sure it's as important that we all agree as much as that we understand the definition the district has. If I knew how they defined rigor and what it looked like in practice to them, I would be in a better position to confirm whether I saw or didn't see what they are looking to achieve.

Genesis of a Network of Superintendents

The New Jersey Network of Superintendents, an initiative of the Panasonic Foundation, was launched in December 2008 after a year of learning from existing networks and from practicing superintendents. The following are the key events that led up to the Network launch and that contributed to the program design:

- Direct observation of a principals' network in New York City and a network of superintendents in Connecticut.
- Convening some New Jersey funders, together with the executive director of the New Jersey Association of School Administrators, to gauge their interest in the Panasonic Foundation's emerging vision for the Network.
- Convening a focus group of more than a dozen New Jersey superintendents to gauge their interest in the Panasonic Foundation's emerging vision for the Network and to gather their perspectives and priorities.
- A face-to-face meeting with Stephen Fink, director of the Center for Educational Leadership, which is working with a number of superintendents' networks that are centered on instructional rounds.
- A face-to-face meeting with Richard Elmore, Elizabeth City, Lee Teitel, and Sarah Fiarman of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Andrew Lachman of the Connecticut Center for School Change to learn from their considerable experience with educational leadership networks that are centered on instructional rounds.
- The formation of a program design team to begin planning for the launch of this new initiative and the formation of a documentation team to capture key findings once the initiative was launched.

After recruiting prospective superintendents, including face-to-face conversations to gauge their level of commitment and to clarify expectations, the Panasonic Foundation and the design team it had assembled were ready to launch the Network. The thirteen superintendents who came together for the initiation of the Network on December 12, 2008, were a diverse group, representing urban, suburban, and rural communities; some Network members were longtime veteran superintendents, and others were still testing their wings; three were women; three were African American, two were Latino, and one was Asian American.

That first day the group took time to begin building relationships among and between participating superintendents, design team members, and documenters and to establish group norms.

NJNS Purposes, December 2008

- Develop a community of practice to enhance participants' abilities as change agents and lifelong learners.
- Capitalize on intellectual diversity and interpersonal connections.
- Provide opportunities for superintendents to collaborate in observing and analyzing instructional practice and student learning in K–12 classrooms.
- Promote participants' understanding of how to initiate and sustain improvements in instructional practice and student learning in their own districts. ◄

Panasonic Foundation staff, design team members, and 13 New Jersey superintendents gathered for NJNS's first meeting in December 2008.

This was essential groundwork for the formation of a community of practice. But on that first day the group also plunged into the substance of the Network's initial focus. After a presentation on instructional core and theories of action by design team member Robert Peterkin of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, participants were organized into smaller groups to analyze elements of the instructional core—teaching, content, and student learning—that could be gleaned from a descriptive article by Richard Elmore about two teachers in action.

The day culminated with viewing and grading a videotaped lesson of a high school English language arts class (it was made abundantly clear that the group would never again be asked to grade an observed lesson but was doing so for the purposes of an exercise) followed by a vigorous, facilitated dialogue. The starting point of that dialogue was the considerable range of grades assigned to this lesson by the superintendents—senior leaders of organizations whose essential work is the instructional core. The grades ranged from A-minus to D. The conversation referenced a provocative quotation from an interview with Richard Elmore that had been discussed earlier in the day: "My basic belief is that education is a profession without a practice."

Years One and Two: Delving Into the Core

The early months of the initiative (December 2008 through March 2009) had two foci: (1) the formation of a community of practice, which depends, among other things, on building trusting, open relationships; and (2) preparation for instructional-rounds visits in April and May. The latter was done primarily through developing and refining theories of action, and observing video footage of teaching and learning in action and of gathering evidence. Emphasis in viewing videos was on developing the discipline of recording detailed, nonjudgmental descriptions of evidence in the instructional core.

When learning the art of bicycle riding, that first ride tends to be both unnerving and exhilarating. The Network's experience that first day was something like that.

During the March session—one month prior to the first instructional-rounds visit—the group experienced what was dubbed "simulated rounds." Three small groups of superintendents, with at least one design team member facilitating each group, viewed different segments of three videotaped classes. A problem of practice had been fashioned, as though these classes were in the same school, grappling with a schoolwide challenge relating to the instructional core. The small teams gathered evidence from the video and then spent time identifying patterns and wonderings based on the observed evidence. Finally, the full group came together to compare notes and debrief the evidence, patterns, and wonderings.

In April 2009 NJNS conducted its first rounds visit to Franklin School in Bergenfield, New Jersey. When the training wheels come off for children learning the art of bicycle riding, that first ride tends to be both unnerving and exhilarating. The Network's experience that first day in Franklin School was something like that. Michael Kuchar, the hosting superintendent, had never hosted anything quite like this—more than a dozen superintendents from other districts descending on an elementary school in his district. It was all very new for his Network colleagues as well as for the design team members. And rounds visits are always a big deal for the host principal and all the teachers whose classes are visited.

The Franklin School, serving grades kindergarten through five, had trained teachers in all content areas in the writing process and the Six Traits of Writing. The school's problem of practice focused on these questions: What evidence do you see of students engaged in the writing process? What evidence do you see of teachers integrating writing instruction with other instruction across the curriculum and using common language for teaching and assessing students? Are students planning, drafting, and revising in a self-regulated fashion? Are students working at a level of difficulty that is both challenging and attainable? (This link provides access to sample agendas, norms, and protocols used by NJNS in relation to instructional rounds.)

Instructional-Rounds Cycle
Alignment with District Theory of Action and Problem of Practice

Implementation of Next Level of Work

Superintendent leads drafting (refining) of personal/district Theory of Action (ToA)

Teacher

Review/revise district or school strategies to address the Next Level of Work

Superintendent leads the development of a district Problem of Practice (PoP)

Student   **Content**

Instructional Rounds to collect evidence re PoP

School develops school-level Problem of Practice that aligns with the District PoP and ToA

A second rounds visit in May 2009 was conducted at the Helen A. Fort Middle School in Pemberton described at the outset of this article.

In Year One, all participants had developed and received feedback on their own theories of action and all had experienced instructional rounds as a visitor, a host, or both. By conducting four more rounds visits in Year Two of the initiative, NJNS deepened the work of Year One. At the same time, a new emphasis was added: developing school-level and districtwide problems of practice (PoP). In Year One, only the two superintendents hosting a rounds visit had had an opportunity to work on problems of practice in preparation for the visits. In Year Two, all participants worked on PoPs and provided each other with feedback, helped by additional coaching from design team members. Year Two also included topical explorations. The question of rigor that had first surfaced during the Pemberton rounds visit in Year One became the subject of an assigned reading and facilitated dialogue in Year Two.

Over the course of the second year, the design team came to feel that equity, which is at the heart of the Panasonic Foundation's Mission, was not getting the focus it needed. During one of the Network sessions, Brian Osborne, superintendent of South Orange–Maplewood, aptly summarized the situation: "When the Network started, my sense was the design team was heavily informed by superintendents' work in Connecticut around instructional rounds and was looking initially to launch instructional rounds always on the assumption that connections between theory of action, the school's problem of practice, and what happens in classrooms is going to help push equity, because it's about quality of instruction. That was the seed in the beginning, and then wanting to be more explicit about equity."

To make the need for pushing on equity more explicit in the work, the Panasonic Foundation leaders invited Jerry Weast, superintendent, and Frieda Lacey, deputy superintendent, of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), to make a presentation at the final (June) session of Year Two. The large Maryland district had made exemplary progress on narrowing achievement gaps, whether defined by the race, class, language, or special needs of children. (A previous issue of *Strategies* was devoted to a case study detailing the MCPS story; see http://www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/Strategies/Strategies1107.pdf.)

Shortly after coming to MCPS in 1999, Weast began studying data—not only student performance data, but also data concerning demographic changes. He soon realized that the district could be divided into two zones, the "red zone" and the "green zone," and that this delineation could be a powerful communication tool in addressing issues of equity and excellence.

The "red zone" is characterized by a much higher concentration of families of color, families living in poverty, families whose first language is not English, and children with disabilities. The "green zone" is simply the rest of the county, which is considerably more affluent and less diverse. In MCPS an important contributor to the narrowing of gaps was the concentration of resources in the "red zone." These additional resources included the provision of full-day kindergarten, reduced class size, a full-time staff development teacher in each school, standards-based curriculum, diagnostic assessments, parent involvement, and extended learning time.

Year Three: Equity and Excellence

That final session of Year Two of NJNS included both the MCPS presentation and dialogue on where the Network should be heading in Year Three. The latter was deeply informed by the former.

Each session of NJNS has concluded with "learning journals" in which superintendents are asked to write in response to the following prompts: (1) Ah-ha's (insights); (2) Puzzlements/questions (what remains unclear?); (3) How can we increase our learning in future meetings? These journals are then collected and compiled into a composite report that is fed back to participants as well as to the design team and documentation team. The learning journal report from the final session of Year Two included the following comments:

- "This session . . . was informative, encouraging, and beneficial. It jarred my thinking to focus more on equity and excellence (access) for all students."
- "We should include presentations like MCPS in our schedule. Plan and conduct a session on various indicators that lead to 'college-ready' graduates & promote equity & excellence."
- "The connection really worked today, and although we do need to create our own way as NJNS, I feel we still have a lot more to learn from MCPS."

During the summer "recess" between Years Two and Three of the Network, the design team conducted a survey of participating superintendents, with the lead question proposing an overarching theme for Year Three: "Leading for the improvement of the instructional core to advance equity and excellence for all students." One hundred percent of respondents favored the proposed theme, with 77 percent "strongly agreeing."

This was a significant turning point for NJNS in its evolution as a community of practice, not only because the mission and focus of the Network was gaining a sharpened clarity, but also because the Network was at that point preparing to venture into territory that would make it unique among superintendent networks that center much of their work on instructional rounds.

At the September 2010 session, launching Year Three of the initiative, superintendents were asked to brainstorm and discuss an issue of equity that their district was currently

Culture of Nice

Elizabeth City and the other coauthors of *Instructional Rounds in Education* refer to something they call the "Land of Nice." They speak about how hard it is for people involved in education networks "to shift from a culture characterized by the maxim 'If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.'" Members of NJNS tend to refer to this phenomenon as the "culture of nice," a topic that came up repeatedly in Years Two and Three of the initiative.

The concern surfaced most frequently in relation to the provision of feedback to the staff members of a school whose classrooms were the focal point of a rounds visit. Several concerns contribute to the tendency to sugarcoat the feedback: (1) recognition of the generosity of school faculty in opening up their practice for observation and a certain vulnerability that this involves; (2) the brevity of the individual classroom visits, which provide only snapshots of what's actually taking place over the longer term. At the same time, as one NJNS superintendent put it: "It's good to affirm that the school is really onto something in terms of their big themes, and at the same time, when we do that, I feel we might lose a sense of urgency that should be infused through our feedback as well. If we end up leaving the impression that things are in the right place and just keep on, then I'm not sure we sent the message." ◄

facing. Several questions emerged from this conversation, and many of these were coupled with problems of leadership practice. Key questions included the following:

- How to address the tension between the urgency to do something now and the need for reflection and planning
- How to raise issues of equity and keep one's job, so as to be able to follow through
- How to support student learning without unintentionally reproducing or creating inequity
- How to scale up equitable practices throughout the district

Additionally, one superintendent raised the issue of equity between districts within the Network, commenting that "we cannot rest until all our systems achieve at high levels for all students." While superintendents expressed appreciation for and interest in the focus on equity, they also raised potential concerns, with one referring to equity as the "third rail." Not only could raising issues of equity threaten their job, but these issues would also require Network participants to be courageous and trusting of their colleagues.

Superintendents were approaching problems of equity from a number of perspectives. Some felt they had a good understanding of equity issues in their districts, while others were working to define their "red zone." For many, issues of equity revolved around students with disabilities or the achievement gaps based on race and class, while one superintendent raised the issue of the disparity in teacher quality across classrooms and across the district. One small group shared a need to focus on creating a "cultural shift"—within the community as well as among district leadership—about the necessity of addressing issues of equity, while another group argued that it would be worthwhile for the Network to think about what teachers can do to create equity within the classroom.

When the Network met again the following month, superintendents came armed with data concerning red zones in their own districts. While the MCPS red zone was defined in part by geography, the design team stressed that in adopting this term it would necessarily need to be adapted to very different contexts, where the identification of students who are least well served may not play out geographically. In small groups they spoke about their identified red zones and responded to questions from Network colleagues, and then the small groups reported to the full group, preparing the way for full-group dialogue around key issues that had surfaced.

In identifying red zones in their districts, superintendents focused primarily on issues of poverty and special education, along with a need to cross-hatch and consider intersections of race, class, and culture. Superintendents expressed a need to disaggregate data as much as possible, which is a challenge in a school that does not have a statistically significant number of students from different subgroups. In looking at intersections, one superintendent found 40 percent crossover between students who were black, living in poverty, and identified as special ed. Two superintendents expressed concern that they were not identifying the correct red zone—that focusing on special education or race might be too general.

The focus of many red zones on special education led to further discussion of overrepresentation according to race and gender in special education. Superintendents questioned what it means for a student to be classified as special ed as opposed to regular ed, and how that classification has different meanings in different districts. One superintendent suggested that perhaps special education students as a whole would never achieve scores
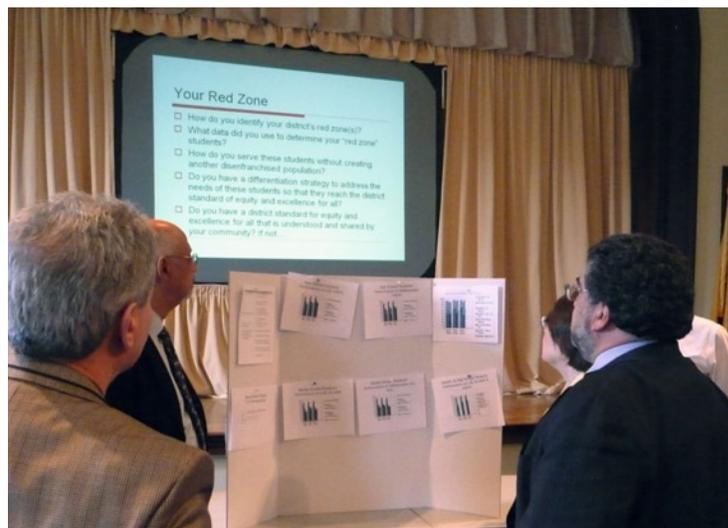
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equal to those of general education students, because of the nature of how students are classified. One design team member wondered if Network members were focusing on issues of special education because that approach felt more safe or comfortable than focusing on issues of race (this idea was echoed by one superintendent in the learning journal). One issue of equity that affects all superintendents in New Jersey concerns the inequities that exist between school districts, which raise complicated issues such as the state's distribution of resources.

A deeper dive into the red-zone work took place in preparation for and during the December 2010 Network session. Superintendents were asked to come to this session with the raw materials—charts, tables, graphic organizers, and brief verbal descriptions—for a poster display of their chosen red zone(s). During the session they were provided with the time and materials to assemble their three-panel posters. For about fifteen minutes, superintendents informally checked out each other's posters and had brief impromptu conversations about what they were seeing.

For the bulk of the morning—more than two hours—superintendents broke into small groups, with a design team member assigned to each group as a facilitator. Following a consultancy protocol, each superintendent in each small group had an opportunity to present his or her red-zone display, listen to colleagues' responses and discussion, respond to questions and comments directly raised by colleagues, and offer final reflections.

Next the full group came together to debrief the experience. Some of the questions around red zones raised through these activities included the following:

- What is a red zone?
- Are superintendents getting at the "right" (most important, highest leverage, etc.) red zones?
- How is the concept of "red zone" useful in a district with significant numbers of students not meeting proficiency on state tests? How is "red zone" useful in districts where almost all students are performing above minimal levels and/or there is little socioeconomic heterogeneity?
- Are all issues of low performance issues of equity?
- Where do race and class fit into equity?
- Does low performance by individuals or a group mean that systemic discrimination is occurring?

In addition to questions around red zones, superintendents raised many questions about the roles of state testing and other data sources in considering issues of performance and red zones. For some superintendents, meeting proficiency on state tests is an important goal for members of their communities. Superintendents and districts often compare their results to districts in their District Factor Groups—a New Jersey Department of Education designation for ranking districts by socioeconomic status. A few superintendents suggested other types of data that can be considered in identifying red zones and in measuring student achievement, such as AP scores, admission to and performance in college, and noncognitive assessments. Questions were raised around whether state tests measure the right things—if not, they may not be a good data source for identifying issues of equity.

In discussing their red zones, the superintendents discussed problems of leadership that they were facing. These included how to frame issues of equity in their districts in a way that encourages action and that allows them to keep their job. Some superintendents saw a potential need to have two visions—their personal vision for the district and the vision they

publicly share. Issues of equity, especially with powerful visualizations, can be high-leverage motivators or political dynamite, depending in part on how the superintendent frames the issue as well as the context in which the superintendent works. One specific challenge related to how to raise teacher and community expectations of students. More generally, one small group asked whether they were overseeing systems that are unintentionally or even intentionally designed to perpetuate oppression. The learning journals collected that day included the following observations:

- "The power of seeing the pictorial representation of data & of the 'Red Zones' was extraordinary!"
- "The similarity in the items selected as 'red zones' from the various districts came as a surprise, as many of us come from communities that look quite different."
- "Just examining our red zones and defining them was a valuable experience. The work of today has impact on tomorrow & my goals."

Learning Together Consultancy

The red-zone work in Year Three of NJNS was further extended through the introduction of the Learning Together Consultancy, using an adapted protocol that the Panasonic Foundation has used with teams in other contexts. In March of 2011 the Network visited the South Orange–Maplewood district and two months later came to the North Brunswick district offices. In both cases, the superintendent, together with a district leadership team, presented a districtwide red-zone problem of practice. In North Brunswick, for example, the problem of practice boiled down to two essential questions: (1) How can we foster fidelity in our leadership, instruction, and implementation of initiatives to generate consistent and high-level outcomes for our Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students? (2) What targeted interventions and/or systematic shifts are required to address the needs of Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students?

During this phase, the presenting team can walk around and eavesdrop on the conversations.

After the district presentation, which sets the contextual stage by laying out key data and the district's theory of action, along with the particular problem of practice, the full group has an opportunity to raise clarifying questions. Then everyone who is not on the presenting district team is divided into teams of four to six, and these small teams develop "warm" feedback, which takes the form of affirmative statements, and "cool" feedback, which consists of probing questions. During this phase, the presenting team can walk around and eavesdrop on the conversations. The facilitator then calls the full group together, and the warm and cool feedback is shared with the presenting district team. The district team is then given an opportunity to process this feedback among themselves, with the rest of the group listening in "fishbowl" fashion. Finally, everyone gathers to reflect on the experience.

In Year Four of NJNS, the plan is to couple consultancy experiences with rounds visits. In October 2011, the Network visited Elizabeth Public Schools, where Superintendent Pablo Muñoz and his leadership team presented a districtwide red-zone problem of practice. Then in November the Network came back to Elizabeth for a rounds visit in a school with a problem of practice that aligns with the district-level PoP. The idea is that by gaining a fuller acquaintance with the district through the consultancy experience in October, the Network could go deeper with the rounds visit in November.

Instructional Rounds

What about instructional rounds during the Network's third year? Four rounds visits were scheduled for Year Three, but due to inclement winter weather, only three took place. One of those visits was squarely focused on issues of equity. In April 2011 the Network visited

Park Middle School in Scotch Plains–Fanwood. The morning began with a presentation by the school principal and other district leaders about current achievement levels on the state assessment by various groups of students, as well as specific look-fors around student engagement in intellectual academic work.

In advance of the visit, the school staff and Superintendent Margaret Hayes had worked with a design team member to define this problem of practice:

> *At Park Middle School, students' achievement is not meeting or exceeding District Factor Group I standards in mathematics and language arts literacy. Park's special education students are not achieving a passing score on the [state assessment]. An achievement gap exists for our black or African American students, and we are closely monitoring our Hispanic students.*

Two small rounds groups noticed no differential treatment between white students and students of color, while one rounds team did identify situations in two out of four class-rooms visited where students of color were not being called upon. It was noted that because participants saw only a slice of each class, it is impossible to know if these are pernicious patterns or if, for example, one of the African American students who had her hand raised but was not called upon was a high-achieving student or had just answered a question prior to the visitors entering the room. Superintendents also raised the question of what equitable treatment should look like in the classroom—should teacher interaction with underserved students be seamless, or should it be more obvious?

Cycle of Continuous Learning

If making issues of equity central to its work is a distinguishing feature of NJNS among superintendent networks that engage in instructional rounds, the size of its design team—six members; initially seven—is perhaps also unique. The design team members spend nearly as much time in program design for the Network as they spend in program implementation and facilitation.

Further, a two-person documentation team is responsible for recording Network sessions and producing a detailed documentation report after each. This team also conducts one-on-one interviews and surveys at the conclusion of each year. The monthly documentation reports, learning journal reports, interviews, and surveys are the key sources for

The NJNS Cycle of Continuous Learning

Reflection

Program Design

Documentation

Practice
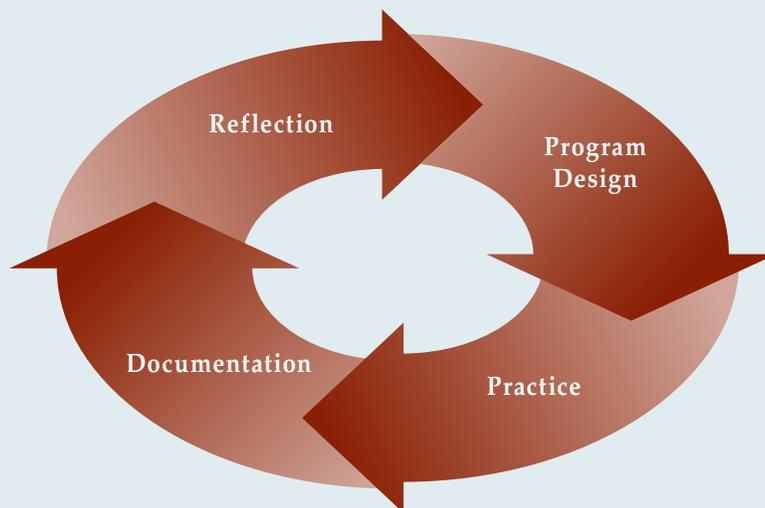
annual documentation reports. (documentation report. documentation report. documentation report.)

A key contributor to the Network's evolution as a community of practice is the process of design-practice-documentation-reflection that then feeds into the next opportunity for design-practice-documentation-reflection, producing a continual learning cycle. While busy superintendents would find it extremely difficult to carry out the design and documentation functions on their own, superintendent learning and voice nevertheless infuse this cycle.

Documenting the Network

The documentation of NJNS is designed to provide feedback to support the evolution and improvement of the Network and to develop tools, resources, and publications that share lessons learned and best practices so that other districts in New Jersey and around the country can build on the Network's experiences. Documentation efforts initially focused on four questions:

- How is the community of practice developing?
- What are superintendents learning?
- How is Network participation affecting superintendents' work in their districts?
- How is the Network theory of action evolving?

To answer these questions, the documentation team has observed monthly meetings and instructional-rounds visits, analyzed meeting transcripts, conducted annual interviews with superintendents, and carried out an annual superintendent survey.

Overall, findings from the documentation team show that the superintendents see the Network as a place that pushes them to think deeply around a range of topics, including the instructional core, their theories of action, and equity. Superintendents consistently cite instructional rounds as the most valuable Network activity. All superintendents report that they have tried out Network ideas in their districts, with most doing a version of instructional rounds and many now having schools that are identifying their own problems of practice. During the third year of the Network, a review of meeting agendas, discussion transcripts, and learning journals showed that issues of equity have also become more central in the work of the Network and the discussions among the superintendents. All superintendents report discussing issues of equity and identifying red zones with their leadership teams, and many report that their red zones are becoming narrower and more focused as a result of greater analyses of their district data. Initial analysis of the data from the third year also shows that some superintendents are finding it easier than others to identify specific equity issues in their community that they can discuss and address explicitly. The demographics of the districts—particularly the diversity and heterogeneity or homogeneity in terms of race, cultural background, and student performance, the political context of the district, and the access of the superintendents to support for data analysis—may explain some of the specific challenges that each faces.

While equity has been more central to the activities and discussions of the Network in Year Three, work on the instructional core and issues of equity do not always appear to be well integrated within the Network. In some cases, it appears as if the discussions on red zones and equity are taking place independently of the rounds visits and work on the instructional core. Furthermore, the data from the interviews and surveys also suggest that superintendents get very different things out of their Network participation. It is not clear whether this is an obstacle to the Network achieving its goals or a sign of success and adaptability. Several factors may explain this variability in the impact and influence of the Network, including each district's readiness and capacity for building on NJNS activities and each superintendent's goals for and approaches to his or her participation. ◀

— *Rachel Kliegman and Thomas Hatch*

Every design team meeting begins with reflections on the previous month's learning journals, which consist wholly of superintendent observations, and the documentation report, which captures what superintendents and design team members said and did during the Network's previous session.

From the outset, the long-term goals of NJNS have included the gradual transfer of agency for program design and implementation to the community of participating superintendents. Progress in this direction includes the following:

- During each of the 2010 and 2011 August design team meetings, which focused primarily on the program design for the coming year, a couple of Network superintendents participated directly, ensuring that the perspective of participating superintendents was directly incorporated into the design work.
- Superintendents have also participated in conference calls with design team members to review agendas and provide input on programmatic considerations.
- Superintendents have at times assumed a facilitative role during Network sessions.

Questions To Be Explored

In reflecting on the latest data from the documentation team, the design team has been working to revise the Network's theory of action. Thus, the latest iteration at the beginning of the fourth year emphasizes that beyond developing a community of practice and deepening superintendents' understanding of the instructional core, NJNS may also need to help participating superintendents to identify specific "high-leverage" problems of practice that link issues of equity and issues of instruction. Working with the documentation team, the design team identified an initial set of questions for continued examination of and reflection on the Network's theory of action in Year Four, including the following:

> **A key contributor to the Network's evolution is the process of design-practice-documentation-reflection that then feeds into the next opportunity for design-practice-documentation-reflection, producing a continual learning cycle.**

- What are the most effective "high-leverage" problems of practice that lead to systemic work throughout a district?
- What kind of support do superintendents need in identifying and addressing these problems and integrating their work on instruction, equity, and excellence?
- How can the Network maintain and promote a consistent, shared focus on instruction, equity, and excellence while being mindful of the different goals of each superintendent and the different demands, constraints, and opportunities in the districts in which they work?
- How and in what ways might the Network be expanded in the future? How might other administrators be engaged in the Network?

To help shed light on these questions, in addition to the regular documentation activities, in Year Four the documentation team has begun case studies involving interviews with central office and site-level administrators in four of the districts that have participated in the Network since the first year. ◀

— Scott Thompson

Note: Portions of this article draw on documentation reports prepared by Rachel Kliegman and Thomas Hatch.

NJNS and Elizabeth Public Schools

From its beginning in December 2008, the New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS) has included among its purposes to enhance each superintendent's learning and to have a positive influence on his or her district. Elizabeth Public Schools offers a particularly rich opportunity to look at this influence, because not only is its superintendent, Pablo Muñoz, a member of NJNS, but also his district is in long-term partnership with the Panasonic Foundation, meaning that Foundation senior consultants visit the district monthly to provide technical assistance.

When a group of observers told Linda Seniszyn, principal of Dr. Albert Einstein Academy School 29 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, that the majority of the questions her teachers were asking did not prompt higher-order student responses, she was not offended, but she felt compelled to stand up for her teachers and their work. And when a second group of observers came a few months later and arrived at the same conclusion, Seniszyn once again defended her teachers, citing examples of her teachers' rigorous work and referring to her school's test scores as evidence of the quality of teaching in her building. However, when pressed for the evidence of higher-order thinking demands, she realized that this was an area where her already dedicated teachers could push their students further and chose this as the focus for her school's upcoming three-year inquiry process cycle. Seniszyn took this finding to her teachers, and they began working toward strengthening their practice.

Who were these observers? What were they doing in School 29? And what kind of evidence were they talking about?

Both groups of observers were participants in instructional rounds, a protocol that has helped principals and administrators in Elizabeth Public Schools (EPS) to have a better understanding of the type of instruction that is occurring throughout the district, and to create a districtwide culture focused on the instructional core. The first instructional-rounds visit to School 29 was from the New Jersey Network of Superintendents, a community of practice that EPS superintendent Pablo Muñoz had joined in 2008. As a result of his involvement in the Network, Muñoz launched a rounds initiative within his own district, which resulted in a second instructional-rounds visit to School 29.

> **Superintendent Muñoz has often asked himself,** *How do I get all people in my system, at all levels, to see the improvement of teaching and learning as the core work of EPS?*

Synergy in Partnerships: A Focus on the Instructional Core

As a former EPS student, teacher, supervisor, and assistant superintendent, Superintendent Muñoz has often asked himself, *How do I get all people in my system, at all levels, to see the improvement of teaching and learning as the core work of EPS?* Two opportunities arose in 2008 to help him address this question so that school leaders like Seniszyn can push their students to the next level. Muñoz first partnered with the Panasonic Foundation and then joined the NJNS, both of which provided opportunities to advance his district's work toward its goal of becoming one of the highest-performing school districts in the nation.

The Panasonic Foundation currently works in long-term partnership with ten urban school districts, sending experienced educational consultants into these districts to regularly

work with central office and site-based administrators, school board members, and union leaders on developing systemic reforms around educational equity and rigor, ensuring that every child, in every classroom, in every school, is educated to high levels. Andrew Gelber and Betty Jo Webb, both senior consultants with the Foundation, began their engagement with EPS by working with district leaders to develop a set of achievable results, which are measurable objectives related to student achievement, as well as a set of strategies to accomplish those results. One achievable result, for example, is to have 90 percent or more of students be proficient on state assessments.

Both the partnership with the Foundation and participation in NJNS came at the right time for Muñoz, who had been focusing on the instructional core as the key to his leadership approach. The instructional core is an integral part of the Panasonic Foundation's theory of action and thus is supported in both Elizabeth's partnership with the Foundation as well as Muñoz's participation in NJNS. Developing a common language around instruction and a shared understanding of what good instruction looks like have become important goals for EPS. As a result of conversations and professional development around building a common language, particularly the introduction of instructional rounds, EPS has moved from being a system where not one principal could explain the instructional core to a district administrator to being one where 33 principals talk about the core with the superintendent, with their assistant principals, and with their teachers.

In developing a common language, Muñoz has kept the instructional core at the center of the district's work, even focusing his leadership team, the Team of Five (he and four assistant superintendents), on the core during their regular meetings. One way he did this was through the adoption of an observation protocol he learned through NJNS. This protocol asked observers to take detailed, evidence-based notes during their classroom observations focusing on the three elements of the core—teacher, student, and content—in three columns. Muñoz asked his assistant superintendents to observe classrooms with this protocol and then to report on their observations during their meetings. If their comments appeared to be judgmental, such as "The questions were too easy," Muñoz asked them to try again, using more descriptive comments, such as "The teacher asked five questions that required a one-word, factual answer." Moving from judgmental language to descriptive observations is beneficial because it gives a solid foundation for conversations around what is actually going on inside the classroom.

Instructional Rounds

Instructional rounds is a protocol that has helped Muñoz to see the type of instruction that is occurring throughout his district and to create a districtwide culture focused on the instructional core. One of Muñoz's big take-aways from the first year in NJNS was the "need to go back into the school district and replicate networks and collective learning, and transparency of what's going on in the classroom, and examining the instructional core using the instructional-rounds model." With consultants Gelber and Webb, Muñoz chose to focus on

Unlike other types of administrator classroom visits, instructional rounds are meant to be a protected space for learning, separate from evaluative or coaching observations.

implementing instructional rounds as one of his district's two foci for the next two years, with the purpose of aligning language around instructional practice so that everyone in Elizabeth would have a shared understanding of effective teaching. Unlike other types of administrator classroom visits, instructional rounds are meant to be a protected space for learning, separate from evaluative or coaching observations. In fact, according to Gelber, one of the initial successes of the implementation in Elizabeth has been the communication around instructional rounds as a protected space, so that teachers are aware that the visit is not related to their evaluation.

The sheer number of schools and administrators in Muñoz's district, however, factored in to his decision to roll out rounds through a cohort model, a pre-existing professional development organizing tool. The first instructional-rounds cohort of about 25 central office staff and four site principals began learning about instructional rounds in the beginning of

the 2009–10 school year by attending a presentation by Elizabeth City, the director of instructional strategy at the Executive Leadership Program for Educators at Harvard University, as well as reading the book she coauthored with Richard Elmore, Sarah Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*. To support City's one-day overview of rounds, Muñoz garnered further assistance by enlisting Thomas Fowler-Finn, a former superintendent and founder of his own instructional-rounds consulting group, to actually facilitate and lead the instructional rounds in Elizabeth. In their first year, Fowler-Finn led the first cohort through four instructional-rounds visits at four separate schools.

One major EPS question that arose from these visits was around differentiation. While rounds participants observed that elementary students were engaged in work in centers, for example, they frequently noted that all students were doing the same thing, even in their small groups, and at times saw this work as "busy work." Additionally, participants noted a discrepancy between what teachers were asking students to do and what students were actually doing—not producing the kind of work that the teacher expected. Participants also expressed a need for more rigorous instruction requiring more higher-order thinking by the students, and less teacher-centered didactic teaching. Fowler-Finn has also pushed Muñoz and his staff to think about engagement. The fact that students merely complete a task or do not resist a teacher directive does not necessarily mean they are actually engaged with the work. How can you tell when students are engaged, as opposed to being compliant with the teacher?

In the midst of Muñoz's planning for instructional rounds by his staff, he also hosted an NJNS instructional-rounds visit in November 2009. This visit, centered on a problem of practice concerning the need to engage students in problem solving and critical thinking, encouraged the school staff to think more deeply about the issues they had been struggling with. The visit also enabled two of Muñoz's assistant superintendents to participate in rounds, which was necessary as they would be leading the implementation of rounds across the district; seeing the process in action showed them what the process has to offer.

The question remains for Muñoz, however, around the effects on student achievement: How will an instructional-rounds visit improve student achievement? From this visit, as well as his four in-district rounds visits, Muñoz believes that instructional rounds has helped the schools think about their next steps for the work, and he sees rounds as the starting point of a conversation to get everyone focused on the instructional core. One member of the first cohort, for example, reflected at the end of the year on the instructional-rounds process: "I have grown more focused on both halves of the teacher-student equation. I believe that while I went into this focused most on the teacher, I have grown more focused on the students, their tasks, and their actions."

Ending the 2010–11 school year, all district administrators and principals have been part of one of three cohorts participating in instructional rounds. Members of the first cohort, primarily central office staff, have moved from focusing on their observations and the identification of patterns to the "next level of work" for the district, not just the individual schools. This work will focus on developing a curriculum that includes more opportunities for higher-order thinking, creating professional development that supports teachers in implementing this curriculum so that student tasks actually involve higher-order thinking, and increasing student engagement in the classroom. Muñoz has included vice principals in cohorts participating in rounds and plans to include teacher leaders and coaches. His main goal for these cohorts is to have them really understand how to do rounds—how to descriptively observe classrooms and base their analyses on evidence, not judgment.

Over the course of three years of work around instructional rounds, Muñoz, NJNS, and the Panasonic consultants all concluded that there is nothing magical about instructional rounds; merely observing and analyzing classroom instruction is not enough to solve systemic educational issues. NJNS participants, for example, found that focusing solely on the instructional core through the rounds visit could allow other critical issues to be ignored,

particularly a focus on equity for all student populations. Rounds is a key step to get people focused on instruction, but then concentrated work is required on identifying productive problems of practice, developing theories of action, and leveraging resources and supports to make the needed changes in instructional practice.

Rigorous Instruction

"Rigor" has been referred to as the fourth foundational *R* of education (in addition to reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic), but the concept of rigor does not always mean the same thing to different people. In one of the instructional-rounds visits that Muñoz participated in with NJNS, another superintendent's problem of practice raised this issue quite vividly. As NJNS superintendents discussed their observations and analysis of a problem of practice that centered on higher-order thinking, they quickly realized that there was much disagreement around what evidence of rigor looked like in actual student work. The consensus at the end of an extended discussion was that the disagreement resulted from different interpretations of the same work, and thus that they had no consensus around what rigor looks like.

Muñoz has made the development of an EPS definition of rigorous instruction one of his key strategies leading to his district's academic goals.

NJNS superintendents frequently refer back to this rounds visit as a crystallizing moment around the need for shared understanding, as well as the challenges of creating it. During this meeting, in May 2009, Muñoz spoke of his hope that the Network would reach a shared understanding of rigor in academic tasks that would support him in his work in Elizabeth. Working with Gelber and Webb, he has made the development of an EPS definition of rigorous instruction one of his key strategies leading to his district's academic goals. For Muñoz and EPS, "a shared definition of rigorous instruction will contribute to the accomplishment of our achievable results by providing concrete examples and models that can be used as the basis for ongoing fine-tuning and improvement," and this will be the focus of systemwide professional development for teachers, principals, and instructional coaches in the upcoming school year. Part of this effort will involve sharing the district's definition of rigorous instruction as well as providing exemplars of what rigor looks like in different grades and subjects. In EPS, rigor means actively creating and implementing challenging standards that define the "level of cognitive complexity of expected learning."

Gelber sees the EPS work on rigor as increasing the focus on the task—what students are actually doing in the classroom—as opposed to the assignment given by the teacher. One EPS administrator reflected on this question: "If you were a student and did the task [the teacher assigned], what would you know how to do?" Focusing on the task predicts what students will be able to do in the future, whether they are filling in the blanks on a worksheet or creating their own response to a prompt. One thing Muñoz has noticed through instructional rounds throughout his district is a huge degree of inconsistency in the types of tasks that students are asked to complete in the classroom. The authors of *Instructional Rounds in Education* argue that task predicts performance—what students are asked to do predicts what they will actually do. Drawing on this insight, Muñoz and the Panasonic Foundation together see the need to improve the consistency and rigor of tasks across the district. This includes not only designing curriculum to expect higher-order thinking by the students, but also ensuring that as teachers teach the curriculum, they do so in a way that demands that students actually engage in higher-order work.

Equity and Excellence

At the final meeting of NJNS's second year, the Network began to expand its focus from instructional rounds to considering how instructional rounds and the Network itself can be used as an avenue to support superintendents in leading for equity and excellence throughout their districts. Since then, the superintendents have read *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools*, written by Stacey Childress, Denis Doyle, and David Thomas, which tells the story of Superintendent Jerry Weast and Deputy

Superintendent Frieda Lacey's work on leading for equity in their diverse school district, a district geographically segregated along race and class lines. In the book, Weast and Lacey share how they developed a fiscal and instructional strategy to raise the performance of students from the district's poorest neighborhoods, primarily students of color and English language learners, dubbing this portion of the district the "red zone" and infusing its schools with extra resources such as smaller class sizes. After reading this book, the NJNS superintendents identified their own "red zones"—recognizing that red zones did not need to be geographic, as in the case of Elizabeth. In fact, for Muñoz, his entire district could be seen as a red zone in comparison with more affluent neighboring districts. At the same time, he used Weast and Lacey's insights as well as support from NJNS to analyze his student performance data at a deeper level, looking for groups of students at various schools who were low-performing and considering how the district could best allocate coaches to support students in literacy, an area in which EPS students were particularly struggling.

After presenting this data to NJNS superintendents in a gallery walk in December 2010, Muñoz asked six members of his senior staff to conduct their own mini–research projects identifying red zones within their areas of expertise. One of these zones was identified through an analysis of high school drop-out data that looked for predictors—such as being retained, starting in 6th grade—that might help the district better understand whether or not students are on the path that leads to graduation. While not all the presentations were of the same caliber in terms of methodology or usefulness for developing next steps, Muñoz sees all of them as adding value to the district's work because they focused the senior staff on deep analysis of data and pinpointed who is learning and who is not. The mini–research projects also enabled senior staff to consider a wide array of data for analyzing student performance, such as attendance and retention, instead of merely relying on the state's standardized test scores. As this work extends to principals, Muñoz believes that by expecting principals to identify a red zone in their schools, they are required to look at where students are not learning, and they cannot just say that things are good if, for example, their school as a whole made AYP. The district sees the need to become more focused on specific children, schools, and potentially neighborhoods in its improvement strategies.

Muñoz's current plan around red zones is to support district staff in seeing how deep analysis of data can actually drive instruction—as opposed to merely analyzing data for the sake of analysis. Similar to using instructional rounds as a tool to focus on the instructional core, Gelber and Webb see the language of red zones as a way to connect data to what is actually going on in the classrooms and to understand that data can be useful in instructional planning.

Concluding Thoughts

Muñoz's participation in NJNS has created opportunities for change throughout his district, from how principals like Seniszyn observe and discuss teaching and learning to how assistant superintendents organize their time to focus on the instructional core. This type of systemic change came in part because EPS and Muñoz had the capacity and resources to learn new ideas and determine how these ideas can best support the work that is already underway in Elizabeth. In particular, the synergy between Muñoz's work with EPS and the work of Panasonic consultants Gelber and Webb has made the incorporation of goals and activities focusing on the instructional core move more seamlessly. Districtwide professional development based on what is actually happening inside classrooms has helped EPS staff significantly in building a common language around the instructional core and a common understanding of good teaching and learning—steps they see as necessary to reach their goal of being one of the best school districts not just in New Jersey, but in the United States.   ◀

—Rachel Kliegman

Districts Collaborating on Instructional Rounds

For two districts in the New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS), working together to introduce their staffs to instructional rounds not only enabled them to split the costs of the training, but also helped them to create a districtwide view of rounds as an opportunity for shared learning. During the 2009–10 school year, superintendents Victoria Kniewel of West Windsor–Plainsboro (WW–P) and Earl Kim of Montgomery Township worked with three members of the NJNS design team to lead their staffs through the instructional-rounds process and have staff from each district participate in a rounds visit in a school in the other district. Principal Michael Zapicchi hosted a visit by Montgomery staff at High School North in WW–P, and Principal Susan Lacy invited WW–P staff to try out the rounds process at Montgomery's Village Elementary School.

Since their year of working together on instituting instructional rounds, the two districts have independently continued to deepen this work, and the superintendents of both districts have continued as active members of the New Jersey Network of Superintendents.

While rounds could be viewed by teachers as another classroom observation aimed at evaluating their practice, Kniewel and Kim believed that a cross-district approach would emphasize the purpose of rounds, in Kniewel's words, "as developing a community of learners among the administrators focused on the instructional core." Including union representatives in the rounds training and visits helped everyone to see the purpose of rounds as learning. For both Kim and Kniewel, instructional rounds is part of an overall district strategy to focus the entire organization on teaching and learning. Kim describes instructional rounds as part of "a whole philosophical shift of the district where learning starts with the teacher and the teacher team."

Including union representatives in the rounds training and visits helped everyone to see the purpose of rounds as learning.

Once the majority of their administrators had experienced the rounds process in each other's districts, Kniewel and Kim began conducting rounds within their own districts. In West Windsor–Plainsboro last year, administrators conducted rounds visits in all of the elementary and middle schools with a focus on literacy, which helped them to have better conversations with teachers because they were able to discuss specific evidence from the visits. Kniewel hopes to move forward in the next school year by incorporating the district's adopted framework, Danielson's Framework for Professional Practice, into the template used for recording evidence observed during rounds visits. This language should then inform teachers' and administrators' conversations about instruction.

In Montgomery, instructional rounds has been the primary vehicle for the use of qualitative feedback to principals and supervisors on their theories of action and to see the benefits of an organizational learning cycle: framing a problem of practice, developing and implementing a theory of action, using qualitative and quantitative feedback to assess progress, and making adjustments accordingly. So far, Montgomery staff, including teachers, have conducted rounds visits at three schools, and they plan on visiting the remaining two schools in the upcoming year. For principals, participating in rounds visits has helped them to identify high-leverage problems of practice and to articulate their theories of action

around addressing those problems. For example, Lacy's staff at Village Elementary School in Montgomery Township developed this problem of practice around literacy:

> *Our comparative data suggest that our students' language arts literacy performance on the NJ ASK is less than one would expect for school districts like ours. More importantly, a study of our authentic writing samples has revealed a weakness in our students' ability to communicate effectively. We are exploring how our students' needs are being met by our current writing curriculum.*

Kim sees the feedback that teachers receive from rounds visits as well received because teachers understand that it is not evaluative of their work but is intended to support the principal's evolving theory of action. The district intends to engage learning teams of teachers, who have identified their own problems of practice and theories of action, in learning cycles and rounds next year.

While both districts have implemented rounds in slightly different ways, Kim and Kniewel believe that the collaborative year of training enabled them to build a culture of learning as they introduced a new process for administrator development. As one participant shared, the interdistrict rounds experience was a "wonderful opportunity to observe similar lessons with colleagues and share in-depth conversations about teaching and learning." ◄

— Rachel Kliegman

Raising the Bar in ERESC

In November 2010 the New Jersey Network of Superintendents (NJNS) conducted an instructional-rounds visit to Essex Campus Academy, part of Essex Regional Education Services Commission (ERESC), a special education district serving Essex County. Hosting this event was a key piece in Superintendent Jacqueline Young's efforts to raise the bar for students in her district. In an attempt to increase student attendance and engagement with the curricula, ERESC schools had been focusing on project-based learning, but as a result of the rounds visit, Young and her staff realized that even though students appeared to be engaged during class, they were actually simply doing projects, with little connection to relevant educational standards.

Young said that the visit "really helped us to start thinking a little bit more strategically in terms of what we needed to do for the teachers relative to our staff development, and also what we needed to do in terms of getting the administrators to see what they had to do relative to providing more definitive guidance." The final step in the rounds visit included the "Next Level of Work" protocol, in which the visiting superintendents gave suggestions for steps Young and her staff could take by the end of the school year, by the start of the next school year, and by a year from the date of their visit. Immediately after the visit, the school began planning staff development activities, including opportunities for teachers to submit ideas for project-based learning and receive constructive feedback, as well as time allotted for yearly academic planning for excellence for all students. Higher standards have been set for staff and students alike.

What started as a problem of practice for the high school has evolved into a problem of practice for the district, as all district teachers are participating in the same staff development activities, and the district as a whole is working on developing rubrics to assess projects to ensure that academic skills are being demonstrated and mastered through the projects.

What started as a problem of practice for the high school has evolved into a problem of practice for the district.

While some might see the entire district as a red zone because of its student population—84 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunch and 99 percent are African American or Latino—Young has identified a specific issue of equity within her district: the preponderance of students who have exemptions from state testing, a group that Young refers to as the "learned helpless," even though she and her staff believe they are capable of passing the tests. Addressing this issue involves working with case managers from districts within the county on amending students' IEPs as well as working with teachers to have high expectations for all students. The goal is to instill students with "I can" confidence. It also involves letting students know that their teachers believe they are capable of great things, despite what may have brought them to ERESC in the first place. The district has offered test-prep classes to support students, and the students are taking advantage of the opportunity. This summer, Young held a grand reopening for the faculty of Essex Campus Academy to reflect on what they have learned from the rounds visit, student data, and staff development, and to build on the growth from last year's work and keep up the momentum from the rounds visit as they enter the 2011–12 school year. ◀

— *Rachel Kliegman*