



School Administrator

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Sidebar

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Speaking a Common Language

on Evaluation in Elizabeth

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The administrators file into the school library. Balancing their morning coffee and notepads, they head to their assigned team's table. The school's principal stands to introduce her problem of practice: In what ways and to what extent are students engaged in their learning through the use of classroom discussions?

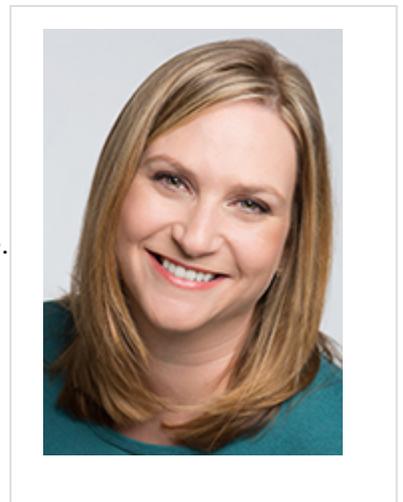
Four or five times each year, identified schools across our school district host their instructional rounds network for a day dedicated to examining school-level practice. Each network is broken up into six or eight teams of educators, which may include teachers, school leaders, central-office administrators, cabinet members and the superintendent.

Before visiting the classrooms, the teams discuss the observation strategies they will use and then stream out, ready to visit classrooms in the K-8 school to collect evidence related to the instruction they will watch carefully. Four classroom visits later, the teams return to the library. They write down pieces of evidence they collected from the classroom observations, identify what they learned about classroom discussions in the school, debate the patterns they discover, share their findings with the school leaders and draft suggestions to improve the quality of questioning at the school and district level.

Every participant is engaged in a thoughtful discussion about teaching and learning. This is what makes instructional rounds so different from any other professional learning experience in the 24,900-student Elizabeth, N.J., Public Schools.

A Common Language

In 2009, Elizabeth's then-superintendent, Pablo Muñoz, was introduced to instructional rounds through the Panasonic Foundation and the New Jersey Network of Superintendents. Muñoz's vision for the district required the development of a common language around instruction for central-office and school leaders, and he felt that instructional rounds could be a critical tool. He also understood that in order for it to be effective, the district needed to follow the model with fidelity and make use of the feedback at every level.



As such, leadership networks — involving about 175 participants, from teacher leaders and principals through the superintendent — were phased in over three years, facilitated by Thomas Fowler-Finn, an external consultant and author of the 2013 title *Leading Instructional Rounds in Education*. Participation by Elizabeth’s education leaders was non-negotiable.

Four years later, more than 175 district, site-level and teacher leaders have been trained to work together, observing classrooms, analyzing evidence related to teaching and learning, identifying patterns of practice and developing next levels of work at the school and district levels. What’s resulted? More informed decisions in human resources, stronger curricula, focused instructional leadership, stronger teacher practice and higher student achievement.

Shortly after the first network formed, the district realized that developing a common language around instruction would not be a simple task. Leaders were asked to re-focus their attention away from the teacher, to what students were doing and saying. As we identified patterns in schools and across the district, leaders at every level looked deeper into how their work affects instruction.

For Melissa Leite, the third-year principal at Robert Morris School 18, instructional rounds has shaped her leadership. “My IR findings give me a blueprint for what I want to do in my school,” she says. “The feedback coming from the IR visits impact which way our [professional learning communities] will go, what we are choosing for [professional development] and where I will focus my feedback.”

In year three of instructional rounds in Elizabeth, a network of teacher leaders received training and soon became some of the most enthusiastic participants. Tutor-interventionist Marvelis Perreira describes her experience this way: “As a teacher participating, we are looking through the eyes of the administrator. It gives us the critical perspective necessary to approach our practice differently.”

Perreira adds: “When you go into a classroom, there are two moments — one where you see what is happening and start thinking how you would change it; the other is when you walk into the classroom and you think, ‘Wow, I want to do this in my classroom.’”

Linked With Evaluation

When the New Jersey Department of Education announced a pilot program for teacher evaluation in 2011, the Elizabeth Public Schools was in a unique position to participate. While still working to build a common language around instruction, and despite concerns about the instructional rounds work conflicting with new evaluation language, we believed the initiatives would complement one another.

Data collected after the first year of implementation proved Muñoz’s instincts true. The administrators’ evaluations had a strong relationship to student achievement. In many cases, the evaluation data were consistent with student performance — the most important indicator of evaluators’ understanding of the relationship between teaching and student achievement.

Many site administrators credit instructional rounds with providing a process for them to adequately describe and understand instruction and learning, and to reliably evaluate their teachers. Leite, whose school has 46 teachers, finds that instructional rounds, professional development and evaluation go hand in hand.

“It has been an eye-opening experience and changed the way I understand observations,” she says. “After IR, my note taking changed. Previously, I focused on what the teacher was doing and missed some other important things. Because of IR, I began talking to the students and asking the type of probing questions that really tell me what is really happening in the classroom.”

In terms of teacher evaluations, Leite says she discovered what was the ultimate measure of accountability. “Historically, we felt if we didn’t see the teacher teaching, you couldn’t do an observation. Now I get my best feedback about the teacher’s performance when I study what the students are doing,” she says.

In year four of instructional rounds, the teacher leaders and school administrator networks merged, allowing for joint discussion about effective practice from different perspectives. Perreira says she found this critical, allowing her to better understand the administrator’s challenges in evaluating staff.

“The principals are better at evaluating because in their building they have previous relationships,” she says. “When they visit other schools and classrooms, it gives them an understanding of practice without the bias. They take that back to their schools.”

A Feedback Loop

Instructional rounds, combined with teacher-evaluation data and student-growth data, have created a feedback loop that guides discussions and planning across our district. Principals are using these data to place teachers based on their strengths and to identify professional development opportunities that relate to distinct areas for growth. Teachers are taking ownership of their practice, consciously bridging content knowledge with teaching.

Elizabeth’s interim superintendent, Olga Hugelmeyer (who assumed the role in the fall when Muñoz moved into the superintendency in Passaic, N.J.), views this work as key to the district’s development. She is looking to instructional rounds for the critical feedback that will move the district forward.

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