At the first suggestion of instructional rounds, superintendent Chris Armstrong saw it as an opportunity to transform educational practice in the classroom in his Iowa school district.

In this middle-class, rural school district where one-fourth of students receive free or reduced-price lunch, and 10 percent are learning English, students were not applying what they had learned. If their spelling was correct on spelling tests, it was incorrect in their writing. If they learned measurement skills in math class, they could not apply the same skills in science class.

His instinct was spot on. Instructional rounds helped the 775-student Highland Community School District diagnose and solve a problem common to all classrooms among the district’s four schools.

“"In 26 years in education, I had never been exposed to anything like this..."”

The Idea of Rounds

Developed by a team of Harvard professors, instructional rounds have their roots in medical rounds used in schools and teaching hospitals. Interns and physicians observe and discuss evidence, make a diagnosis, analyze evidence and identify possible treatments. They lead to norms where doctors work together to solve common problems and improve their professional practice.

Instructional rounds – the education version of medical rounds – involve precise training to build superintendents’ knowledge and skills, and to provide helpful feedback to their schools. They also serve to break down the isolation among superintendents and encourage deep conversations about teaching and learning.

Starting Instructional Rounds in Iowa

Armstrong is an original member of one of now several “superintendents networks” sponsored by the Iowa Leadership Academy (ILA) and funded by the Area Education Agency (AEA) System, School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) and with support from the Wallace Foundation.

The rounds idea was brought to Iowa in 2007-2008 when one of the lead Harvard researchers, Richard Elmore, was invited to share the model with superintendents in the Mississippi Bend AEA. By 2009, networks had been formed in all AEAs,
making Iowa the only state with a statewide network dedicated to supporting superintendents in their work as instructional leaders. SAI provides staff to coordinate networks as part of the ILA, including facilitation training and an annual statewide meeting.

How Instructional Rounds Work

In the course of instructional rounds, a superintendent presents a “problem of practice,” and then during site visits colleagues observe classroom instruction, debrief and provide feedback and suggestions for the next level of work. A skilled facilitation team trained by the Harvard researchers assists in site visits.

“We want to provide more than an implementation check... We want to dig deeper by going into the classroom and observing student behaviors...”

“It gives me an opportunity to think about and focus on teaching and learning,” Armstrong said. “As we visit classrooms and have discussions, it deepens my understanding of how instructional strategies and the tasks we give students engage students in their own learning.”

To prepare for rounds visits, teachers and principals meet to identify areas where they struggle and where students need help.

“We want to provide more than an implementation check,” Armstrong said. “We want to dig deeper by going into the classroom and observing student behaviors, and their interactions with teachers and tasks. This allows us to give them data they cannot get in any other way.”

Network superintendents are trained in a series of steps designed to provide each other with a much clearer understanding of specific problems and recommendations for improvement:

1. Identify a common problem of practice that usually cuts across grade levels and/or subjects, making it a systemic problem for the district or school.

2. Observe classroom practices, and make specific descriptive comments about what both teachers and students do and say as well as the tasks that students are asked to do. This is the heart of what the Harvard researchers call the instructional core – the relationship among teachers’ knowledge and skill, the level of content being taught, and students’ active engagement in learning.

3. Debrief together about classroom observations. During the debriefing, superintendents describe what they saw, analyze the evidence and identify patterns, and predict what students in the school should know and be able to do if they successfully complete the tasks they are assigned.

4. Brainstorm the next level of work for the host district. This can include ideas on what teachers, the school or district might do to take their practices to the next level as they work toward achieving the goals in their school improvement plan.

Although the process seems straightforward, Armstrong says most educators have little experience observing classrooms while being nonjudgmental or looking with a trained eye at the complexity of the tasks that teachers assign and students perform.
Instructional Rounds in Highland Community Schools

To address the problem of students not applying what they had learned, the facilitation team created three additional questions to guide the network superintendents’ observations and debrief during Highland’s initial site visits in October 2009:

• What tasks are students asked to do?
• Who is doing most of the work and thinking – teachers or students?
• What opportunities do students have to apply knowledge and skills, and how do they respond?

The results of the instructional rounds showed that most of the classroom questions were recall, and the tasks only asked students to apply knowledge. The superintendents found that instruction provided very little time for students to analyze, create and evaluate knowledge.

Armstrong says it was the conversations they had after the instructional rounds that helped them to improve, although he admits that some teachers had trouble separating the observations in their classroom from feeling like an ineffective teacher.

“None of us has all the answers, but all of us bring expertise to the conversation,” Armstrong said. “If we come together as a community of learners, talk about the data and focus on the practice, we can improve the teaching and learning that is taking place across the entire system.”

Changing Highland’s District Culture

To promote collaboration, Armstrong brought teachers on board as part of the district improvement planning process. No longer does the central office dictate what teachers should do. Instead, the district has developed a more collaborative approach where teachers and administrators see a common need and work together on it.

The district provides teacher training in collaboration to encourage a community of learners who work together. Armstrong admits that it’s been difficult.

“We still don’t have everyone believing that this is the way to go, but over time, more and more teachers want to do this,” he said.

Armstrong wants to improve instructional practices by continuing to observe what students are doing and then bringing that information back to teachers. The aim is to help teachers understand the kinds of tasks to give students so they make connections across content areas.

“Our based on the patterns, we all ask what we expect students can do,” he said. “There is either a match to what the district is expecting – or a mismatch.”

Armstrong says they studied the analyses and patterns surfaced by the instructional rounds process.

“Based on the patterns, we all ask what we expect students can do,” he said. “There is either a match to what the district is expecting – or a mismatch.”
“We are also trying to make a shift from the teachers doing the work to the students doing the work,” he said. “Teachers put on great performances with high energy, but how are students interacting with the task and instruction? How do we improve the task to help students do the thinking and work to construct meaning of the content?”

To support teachers in this work, the district has increased the amount of time for teacher collaboration and professional development. Collaborative time is now once a week, not once a month as it had been. And the district is exploring how to create even more time for collaboration next year. Teachers use the collaborative time to plan instruction, develop formative assessments and learn about effective teaching practices.

**Instructional Rounds and Districtwide Change**

“Collaboration definitely is a systems issue,” Armstrong said. “If the superintendent isn’t collaborative, there is no chance that principals will be collaborative – or that teachers will be. Collaboration has to be system-wide, supporting people and not penalizing them, valuing people and not dismissing them or their ideas. Everyone contributes to the system.”

The instructional rounds model is designed to lead to systemic improvement. For districts to go beyond isolated pockets of excellence, they need to accomplish three interwoven tasks:

- Develop a clearly articulated and widely held and understood vision of what high quality teaching and learning look like.
- Build a collaborative learning culture that fosters engagement, collaboration and continuous learning.
- Develop and implement coherent system-wide strategies that support the kind of teaching and learning that districts want in all classrooms.

Armstrong says his involvement in the instructional rounds process has “turned everything upside down.” By observing teachers and presenting them with data about what actually is taking place in their classroom, the next level of work comes from a vision of high quality teaching and learning.

He says the focus on data is helping to make the district’s work coherent. Further, the school board is fully supportive of the rounds process and the types of data it provides for decision-making.

“We want the rounds to drive our teaching and learning agenda,” Armstrong said. “Because it makes sense to everyone, we can get the most out of everything we do.”

Over time, Armstrong wants to involve central office staff, principals and teachers in leading their own instructional rounds. The next challenge is working with teachers to expect more of their students by giving them tasks that require higher-order thinking skills. Another challenge is helping students to incorporate teachers’ instructional strategies into their own learning strategies.

“**We want the rounds to drive our teaching and learning agenda...**”

Asked if he would recommend participation in rounds to other superintendents, Armstrong said, “One hundred percent yes – without any reservations. The Harvard team is extraordinary to work with. That opportunity alone is worth being involved in the network. I would hope every superintendent would get excited to be involved in the rounds process.”