Toward a higher standard of leadership

Bringing Instructional Rounds to scale in Iowa

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The state of Iowa instituted Instructional Rounds (IR) in 2009 to support a cohesive leadership system with the following intentions:

- strengthen and establish a standard of leadership practice for superintendents across the state, and
- bring effective teaching and learning to scale.

With minimum financial investment from the Iowa Department of Education, the state involved 125 districts within its first two years. Here we offer insights that other states might find useful when considering Instructional Rounds as a vehicle for enhancing statewide leadership capacity.
**Instructional Rounds background**

Instructional Rounds was conceptualized by Richard Elmore and colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Inspired by the medical rounds model, the IR process brings “discussions of instruction directly into the process of school improvement” using “a set of protocols and processes for observing, analyzing, discussion, and understanding instruction that can be used to improve student learning at scale (City, Elmore, Fiarman, Teitel, 2009).”

Many teacher supervision activities require administrators to make rapid, on the spot judgments of individual teachers or schools to monitor, evaluate, and, when necessary, prescribe interventions. In contrast, IR emphasizes learning for school and district leaders and systemic change. It requires “many administrators to ‘unlearn’ the judgmental observation practices that frequently characterize supervision (City et al., p. 62).”

Once an IR cohort (usually called a network) has developed preliminary norms of participation and interaction and has undergone initial training in the IR process, members from each district or school (depending on the structure of the network) take turns hosting a rounds visit. They define an instructional challenge—called a problem of practice—facing them. The network spends about a day using a protocol to observe instruction guided by the identified problem of practice. Rounds visitors do not use their personal savvy to identify areas of concern. Rather, they use the problem of practice to guide their feedback. Immediately after classroom observations, visitors meet in a structured debriefing session guided by the network facilitator.

Between school visits, members of the network share additional information—such as articles or professional development plans—that relate to the host’s problem of practice. The facilitator and one or two members of the network may make follow-up visits to the host district or school to dialogue about their thinking since the visit. Networks typically have facilitators who give ongoing support to individual participants and the network as a whole. Instructional Rounds requires ongoing action following visits, as members of each group use what they learn to:

- focus their energies on a few high-leverage strategies that improve instruction as opposed to a potpourri of programs,
- hone a theory of action, and
- align resources accordingly.

**Background facts on Instructional Rounds in Iowa**

Iowa does not view IR as a panacea. As a stand-alone enterprise, Instructional Rounds has limited power. It works when used to advance a systemic strategy for improving leadership, and ultimately, teaching and learning practices.
Iowa has cultivated IR as one strategy to support a statewide cohesive leadership system.\(^1\) Scaled-up over two years, Iowa’s IR model gradually diminishes reliance on outside support. Iowa has chosen to focus on superintendents, working with facilitators, as members of the IR network. Typically, superintendents work in cohorts of 10–15, usually devoting one day each month to school visits and meetings.

**Purpose of IR in Iowa**

The Iowa Leadership Academy explains that Instructional Rounds networks serve to improve instruction at scale and contribute to the definition of what it means culturally to be a superintendent in Iowa:

“Networks involve an explicit practice intended to build knowledge and skills of participating superintendents, and to provide helpful feedback to their schools. Network members develop a shared understanding of teaching and learning through discussions of common classroom observations. This understanding is connected to the district process of school improvement, and can be used to improve instruction at scale.”

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1. See Fisher (2009) and An Investment Prospects Great Leaders (2010) for more information on Iowa’s cohesive leadership system work

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**Shared understanding of effective teaching and learning**

In 2009, new state legislation mandated that all districts implement Iowa Core\(^2\), a set of essential student proficiency standards. Iowa Core promotes deep, conceptual learning and Iowa has found that the IR process helps focus this learning. Bonnie Boothroy, Associate Executive Director of SAI and Director of the Iowa Leadership Academy, explains: “In our Superintendents’ Networks, the focus on the instructional core helps district leaders see first-hand the level of learning in which in which students are engaged. The instructional core concept is helping superintendents deepen their understanding about content, teaching, learning, and student tasks. We believe this will make them better equipped to know the questions to ask and actions to take for effective implementation of the Iowa Core in their districts.”

**Defining and initiating effective leadership**

Iowa is pushing to move IR from an initiative to be the very work of superintendent leadership. IR cultivates a philosophy of networking, continuous learning, and attention to teaching and learning among superintendents. One Iowa superintendent said: “We need to clearly convey that this is the way Iowa superintendents do business; if you become an Iowa superintendent, the expectation among

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2. See [http://www.corecurriculum.iowa.gov](http://www.corecurriculum.iowa.gov)
your peers is that you will become engaged in this work. Our work as Iowa superintendents is instructional improvement.”

Iowa has instituted policies and procedures to expand participation and promote understanding of what entails a serious commitment to Instructional Rounds. Superintendents who want to participate in an IR network must agree to a set of non-negotiable commitments, including “attendance, active participation, willingness to be visited, confidentiality, honest communication, and mutual support and accountability” (City et al., 2009, p. 74–75). A superintendent who agrees to the commitments may join a network. Notably, Iowa requires the signature of a local school board member for a superintendent’s participation to guarantee the district’s political backing and increase the likelihood that the superintendent will follow through. By the spring of its second year, participating superintendents numbered 125.

**Process and expectations**

The Iowa Leadership Academy summarizes the process and expectations for Instructional Rounds networks in Iowa:

Networks use an “instructional rounds model” in which superintendents participate in site visits to each other’s districts. The host superintendent presents a “problem of practice,” then network colleagues use a non-judgmental protocol to observe classroom instruction, debrief, and provide feedback and suggestions for the next level of work. Over time, all members’ schools are visited, leading to shared understandings of issues related to improving teaching and learning. Trained facilitators coordinate professional learning, organize visits, facilitate network conversations, and ensure fidelity to the basic principles of the model. Facilitators from all networks meet periodically to coordinate their work and ensure statewide consistency.

Initially, facilitators in each network determine structural elements such as network size, time commitment, frequency of site visits, etc. Network members establish norms of practice for things such as attendance, mutual responsibility, involvement/attentiveness, confidentiality, sharing, etc. Network members determine how they will hold themselves and each other accountable for honoring their norms. Participants are expected to: attend all network meetings; host and participate in site visits; and be an active and engaged learner.

**Who sponsors and coordinates**

Two key facets in Iowa’s development of IR have been the use of multiple partners and
the relatively limited direct expense from the Iowa Department of Education. Iowa’s IR work has taken place under the auspices of the Iowa Leadership Academy (ILA), whose mission is to provide quality leadership development for Iowa administrators. IR has been funded by the School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) and the Iowa Area Education Agency (AEA) system, with support from a Wallace Foundation Leadership Grant. The credibility of these established professional organizations has lent credibility to the IR endeavor in Iowa (City, et al., 2009). Each AEA sponsors a network and provides materials and trained facilitators. SAI contributes a website and the time of Bonnie Boothroy, Associate Executive Director of SAI and Director of the Iowa Leadership Academy. Boothroy serves as the statewide Rounds Coordinator, dedicating 40% of her time to the initiative. Her work involves coordinating the networks for statewide coherence, organizing facilitator training, participating in Rounds visits and providing feedback to facilitators, and serving as liaison to a training team from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The total annual cost for the facilitator training and facilitation has been approximately $120,000. In addition, both sponsoring groups provide in-kind support for facilitator time and travel, materials, technology support, and meeting expenses. In the first year, the Iowa Department of Education contributed approximately $50,000 from a larger pool of Wallace grant money it had received, as well as the salary of two consultants being trained as IR facilitators (approximately five days of each consultant’s time). That ongoing training has been delivered by a group of Harvard Graduate School of Education professors, including Richard Elmore, Lee Teitel, and Elizabeth City.

**How Iowa has expanded so far**

Iowa has taken a gradual approach to expanding the number of AEsAs and superintendents involved and transferring responsibility from the Harvard trainers back to Iowa itself. In the first year (SY 2008-2009), Iowa piloted IR in one AEA with 33 superintendents. The Harvard team facilitated a beta test IR network in the pilot AEA. In the same pilot AEA, the Harvard team simultaneously provided training to approximately 35 facilitators. These facilitators are practicing superintendents and leaders from AEsAs across the state. After the first year of training, facilitators described the work of beta network in their home AEsAs and recruited superintendents from their AEsAs to participate in the second year.

In the second year (SY 2009-2010), Iowa added nine additional networks to the initial beta network. During this second year, networks addressed the fundamental vocabulary and shifts in mental models that rounds demands. For instance, some superintendents confused IR with walk-throughs, information audits, or quality reviews, a common misunderstanding among
those learning the IR practice (City et al., 2009). Walk-throughs and information audits tend to be about making assessments or rendering judgment, whereas IR is foremost about the learning of the participants. Thus the distinction of IR from other more customary supervisory duties had to be made clear.

Networks also worked on learning the mechanics of a rounds visit day—for example, how the problem of practice is developed and communicated; how visitors organize their classroom observation responsibilities; and what it means to progress from description to analysis, prediction, and the next level of work in the debrief. Another core tenet of IR is to shift from educators’ customary classroom observation habit of focusing on what teachers are doing to looking at what students are doing. “Look down, not up,” is the mantra. It took almost the entire year to gain traction in moving this mindset—again, a common experience among those learning IR across the country (City et al, 2009).

The Harvard team continued to support IR in Iowa in the second year, but its support was less intensive. The leading of networks by facilitators trained by Harvard rather than by Harvard team members themselves made this reduction in Harvard’s involvement possible. Elizabeth City continued to communicate regularly with Bonnie Boothroyd and lead videoconferences among Boothroyd and the Iowa facilitators. The Harvard team also presented at a statewide meeting of all network superintendents and one day of on-site facilitator training.

In the second year, Iowa worked to calibrate network practices to increase the likelihood that network members across the state would share consistent experiences. One strategy used to advance this goal was running a rounds visit for facilitators only.

**Looking ahead**

For this current third year, Iowa relies even less on outside consultation, but still plans to hold a statewide meeting for all network superintendents with the Harvard team. The AEA system and SAI are jointly allocating approximately $117,000 to support networks. Total direct costs for the third year are projected to remain approximately the same as the previous two years: about $120,000.

In year three, School Administrators of Iowa (SAI) will budget approximately $48,000. Of that amount, 0.2 FTE (approximately $30,000) pays for the statewide network coordinator, about $11,000 will support meeting space and conference venue rental, and roughly $4,000 will support one tenth of a full-time statewide support staff member. SAI will contribute website hosting and webmaster time; printing and materials; telephone, IP videoconference, and other communication expenses; business manager time; travel expenses to attend Harvard-sponsored national network events; and in-state travel expenses for a program coordinator.
The Iowa Area Education Agency system will budget for approximately $69,000 of which $30,000 will be devoted to the continuing support of Harvard. The remainder will support two tenths of a statewide network coordinator’s time (about $30,000) and one tenth of a support staff member’s time (about $4,000). AEAs will contribute travel expenses for facilitators and superintendents to attend in-state meetings, time for the chief administrator and staff members to facilitate the AEA network, materials/printing for network meetings, travel expenses for AEA representative to attend Harvard-sponsored national network events, and a program evaluation.

In school year, the only expense for the Iowa Department of Education will be the time of one consultant to attend five days of facilitator meetings/training.

**How IR advances Iowa state goals**

Instructional Rounds in Iowa exists for one overarching goal: to bring good teaching and learning to scale in two primary ways. First, it coalesces a shared understanding of what effective teaching and learning looks like and, second, it instantiates Iowa’s definition of effective educational leadership.

**Preliminary results**

The Iowa Leadership Academy has found the IR work overall to be beneficial, writing, “Our initial positive experiences foreshadow the promise of this model for creating a shared practice of improvement” (n.d. a, p. 2). Iowa administrators individually have reported positively on their experience with IR. For example, Chris Armstrong, a superintendent of a rural district and member of the original Iowa Superintendent Rounds cohort, notes the spotlight that rounds have shone on the instructional core: “In 26 years in education, I had never been exposed to anything like this — specifically looking at the relationship between the teacher, the student and the content — and then giving special attention to examining the tasks student are asked to do” (School Administrators of Iowa, n.d., p. 1)

Armstrong adds that Rounds have supported him to actualize the often heralded, but less often realized, concept of superintendent as an instructional leader: “It gives me an opportunity to think about and focus on teaching and learning. 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.” (School Administrators of Iowa, n.d., p. 2)

Armstrong’s experience is not uncommon among superintendents who have participated actively and seriously in an Iowa IR cohort. Principals who have hosted visiting superintendents have also commented positively on the experience. After a visit, one principal reflected: “It was a really powerful experience. [Practitioners made] observations in our building, which then led to what were known as patterns of
practice for us, which I found really meaningful because then from there we had really good conversations and good collaboration with the superintendent that was focused on student learning specifically. And I think that anytime you can do that with some good data those conversations become much more powerful.” (Iowa Leadership Academy Superintendents’ Network. video, n.d.)

The principal’s remarks highlight the ability of rounds to both focus conversations on matters of instructional practice, grounded in data, and activate feedback loops between schools and their district.

While Iowa is too early in its work to evaluate the association between superintendent participation and student achievement, a preliminary evaluation analyzing self-reported survey results from superintendents participating in the initiative’s second year found that overall participants were “positive about their new learning.” Moreover, the evaluator found, “respondents provided a consistent positive feedback theme regarding their experiences and commitment to the project.” (p. 5)

We do not mean to be naïve about the impact to date or the challenges that remain. Much more work remains. For example, the same 2010 evaluation reviewed artifacts from Iowa visits and found many examples of incomplete work. At the same time, the evaluator concluded that these gaps were predictable and represented “typical start-up data.” (p.10) The evaluation concluded that its preliminary review could only offer baseline data and should be succeeded by future evaluation that, as the IR work matures, compares the relationship between superintendent IR participation and the realization of new practices at the school level.

We should remember that Iowa’s nascent IR work exists within a larger effort to promote a cohesive leadership system. A 2009 Rand Corporation study examining the results from 10 states receiving Wallace Foundation funding to develop cohesive leadership systems found that Iowa, along with Delaware and Kentucky, ranked in the top of the ten states for the cohesion of its leadership system (Augustine, et al., 2009). That Instructional Rounds is one element of Iowa’s CLS (An Investment Prospectus Great Leaders, 2010) is a promising signal.

The words of one Iowa IR participant may capture the promise IR offers: “I believe this work has the potential to change staff development and student experiences more than any other initiative I’ve worked on. Ultimately [it has] the chance to change student learning.”

The road ahead

Harvard-trained and experienced individuals will train the next cadre of IR facilitators in Iowa. Preparing new facilitators to maintain fidelity to a core set of principles and practices remains the primary challenge. Iowa recognizes that networks will naturally vary—
mostly because of differences in facilitation—but some aspects of the model are non-negotiable. Some non-negotiables originated with the Harvard trainers and others emerged from Iowa’s learning experiences over time. Although Iowa does require absolute uniformity, reducing variation among networks remains a goal. For example, some networks visit schools monthly while others have managed only one or two visits in their first year (a condition, Boothroyd acknowledges, that is not sufficient to galvanize change).

Iowa plans as well to better prepare better principals and teachers prior to site visits. The state hopes to develop materials that principals can use to decrease teachers’ anxiety by increasing their understanding of IR process and goals. Although some teachers have read Instructional Rounds in Education (City et al., 2009), some still have questions and concerns about Instructional Rounds.

Iowa intends to create better ways to provide feedback to schools about their identified problem of practice. Initially, feedback took the form of suggestions by the visiting superintendents, but some host schools found this overwhelming. Iowa has begun exploring an idea used in the Columbus, Ohio IR networks—providing schools with reflective questions about the problem of practice rather than offering suggestions for change. Early experiences with this approach suggest that it may encourage more reflective practice and be less overwhelming to the host.

Today, more Iowa superintendents want to begin IR networks in their own districts. In contrast to the original reluctance to start visiting schools for fear of not doing it right, Iowa now realizes that the power of Instructional Rounds comes from first doing it. The worry about getting it right comes later.

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