Peer Visits and Revisits In the Superintendency

Through a structured network, district leaders receive critical feedback from colleagues, connecting classroom observations to leadership practice by LEE TEITEL

A dozen superintendents watched, riveted, as one of their colleagues from a central Connecticut school district slowly, gently but firmly pushed her fellow superintendent on what he had — and had not — done as a follow-up to a school visit three months earlier by the superintendent network.

That daylong instructional rounds visit had ended with the identification, by the host superintendent, of several tangible opportunities for improvement. Now, three months later, the two superintendents were talking about the follow-up in front of the rest of the network group.
Lee Teitel has led instructional rounds in a half dozen states.

“When we talked after the visit,” she started, “you said the most valuable insight was your realization that not everyone on your senior team had the same idea of what good instruction should look like, that you needed to do some calibration. What have you done about that?”

For the next 15 minutes, a rhythm of respectful but consistent probing continued. For each response by the host superintendent, his colleague came back with a series of questions: “What will be your actions, then, to help you get to that?” “We talked about being less abstract. What would that look like here?” “How did your debriefing with them go? What are you taking from the experience?”

The other superintendents joined in, probing, problem solving, but also sharing their questions and doubts about their own practices. At the end of an hour, they debriefed, acknowledging and appreciating how the openness of the host and the probing questions asked by colleagues set the stage for their learning.

**A Structured Protocol**

Where does this kind of superintendent learning come from?

Deep, thoughtful conversations about how superintendents can improve their leadership practice are rare. Those that are anchored in classroom observation data, guided by structured protocols and common understandings of what matters in instruction, and that take place in a collegial atmosphere with high levels of trust and vulnerability are even less common. Yet it is this kind of peer learning in networks that holds the greatest promise for supporting superintendents in leading district improvement efforts.

The opening scenario (written to preserve the confidentiality of the participants) took place last year among 12 superintendents in the Connecticut Superintendents’ Network. Now starting its 10th year, the Connecticut network is the longest-running group of educators to use instructional rounds, a practice adapted from medicine that allows educators to look closely at what is happening in their schools’ classrooms and to work systematically with a network of superintendent colleagues to improve teaching and learning in their school districts.

The superintendents meet monthly, with every other meeting taking place in one of their schools. Part of
each visit day is spent in classrooms, looking at instruction in fine detail. Their goal in their classroom observations — in contrast to other forms of walk-throughs — is not to “fix” individual teachers, but to improve the systems of support at schools and in districts in ways that will make good instructional practice more commonplace.

The steps and protocols used for a rounds visit — how the host school leaders identify a problem of practice that focuses the visit, how visitors observe in classrooms and other settings, describe what they see and then, based on the evidence, suggest the next level of work — are described in Richard Elmore’s article “Professional Networks and School Improvement” (appearing in The School Administrator’s April 2007 issue) and in greater detail in Instructional Rounds in Education, the 2009 book co-authored by Elmore, Elizabeth City, Sarah Fiarman and me.

**Beyond Observations**

The Connecticut superintendents have been observing in systematic ways in classrooms since April 2002. The superintendents have learned to talk in new ways with each other about what they see, replacing vague or judgmental generalizations (“She did a great job of transitioning from the whole-class lesson to independent work time”) with precise and nonevaluative language (“At the end of the lesson, the teacher asked students what materials they needed to get for their upcoming independent work. She took a few responses and released students to go to their desks four at a time”).

Through consistent participation (attendance at the network meetings and visits hovers around 90 percent), they have made classroom observations and debriefings a routine and central part of their jobs. They have learned to appreciate the opportunities to see and share instructional practices from other school districts, and about two-thirds of them have replicated the experience and set up instructional rounds networks among the teachers or administrators within their districts.

Yet the Connecticut superintendents know that conducting structured, regular classroom observations and generating suggestions for next steps from their peers are not enough. These are necessary but not sufficient steps to districtwide action and improvement. To connect observations with actual changes in their leadership practices, the superintendents’ network has pioneered several approaches, including the peer revisit process.

**Follow-up Visits**

The opening scenario, and others just like it that take place regularly in Connecticut, came out of a feature the network added four years ago — a follow-up mini-visit from two peers after the more formal 12-person network visit. The superintendents were aware that the long cycle for a revisit from the entire network (up to 2 years) did not create much opportunity or incentive for follow-up on the visit recommendations nor did it provide formative feedback on efforts the host superintendent might be trying after the visit.

In 2006, the network, which is sponsored by the Connecticut Center for School Change, asked two peers and a center staff member, Steven Wlodarczyk, to spend a half-day at a school site a few months after a visit. The purpose of the visit was to support the host superintendent and follow up on ideas generated at the previous visit. And although this follow-up work was done by the group out of sight of the rest of the network, there was time on the network schedule for a report and discussion of the revisit — which the opening vignette captured.
Although some expressed concern that the superintendents, already committed to one day a month for network business, would be unwilling to sign up for the additional half-day revisits, this never has materialized as a problem. The structure for the revisits varies, although there is the expectation that the revisitors will look at classrooms or evidence relevant to the focused plan for follow-up work identified by the host superintendent at the original visit.

**Peer Accountability**

When the revisit idea was proposed in Connecticut, one respected veteran superintendent put his objections bluntly: “I am already accountable to the state and to the feds. I don’t want or need to be accountable to my peers.”

Several years into this, the accountability picture is more nuanced. On one level it is, quite openly, about peers coming back and checking on the follow-up to suggestions they agreed to make. David Title, in his first year as superintendent in Fairfield, Conn., after being part of the Connecticut network for five years as superintendent in Bloomfield, says the revisits “create a kind of lateral accountability. Your peers are coming back, and you want to look at least competent. Looking good would be even better. … But nobody wants to have people come back in six months and have it look the same.”

Title, honored as his state’s superintendent of the year in 2009, also flags the leverage the revisit provides him and others in his system to foster change. “After the visit, my principal would tell the teachers, ‘They’re coming back to see what changes we have made.’ It creates a level of concern for everyone — a nice level of concern that can be very helpful,” he says.

Joshua Starr, superintendent in Stamford, Conn., echoes this aspect of the accountability. “When you report back to your peers, it sets a higher bar than simply having the discussion at the center with the network at large,” he says.

But the revisit is more than a cursory accountability check on whether the host has followed up. “You can probe a bit more on a revisit, go deeper on some things that you might have just noticed on the first visit but see more clearly the second time around,” Starr says.

An intimacy and intensity are apparent during the revisit discussions, in contrast to the more formal network meetings, which include a dozen superintendents, staff from the Connecticut Center, a Harvard professor and a note taker. As one superintendent puts it: “It is so much more intense — more opportunity to give feedback with just the three of you there. It really transfers agency for this to us. We’re taking charge of it, peer to peer, not waiting for someone from the center or one of the Harvard professors to speak. It’s not being transcribed. It’s off the record and that really changes things. Your follow-up can be more pointed and blunt. You can get more direct with people without fear of embarrassing them in front of their peers or staff.”

Yet informalness can cut both ways, according to another superintendent. “Since it is more of a conversation and not as formal, sometimes the revisit discussions move into ‘The Land of Nice.’ There can be lots of explanations and back and forth with the (host) superintendent, and we can get to a ‘Now I understand what the superintendent is up against’ mentality that might actually soften what we say and the value of what we do,” he says.
Modeling Performance
In the view of one participating superintendent, revisits create greater accountability for the visitors.

“In the regular network visits, it is helpful for the school and host superintendent to hear the information, the predictions, the next level of work, but I don’t see any real ownership of the outcomes by the visiting superintendents. We come, we make our comments, and then we move on. After we debrief, I discard my notes, and it is over,” the superintendent says. “But if I am doing a revisit, I have a deeper sense of ownership and commitment to follow up. I still have the notes from the visit and revisit for [the school district], and I still talk to the superintendent about what has happened and what has not.”

Title points to the merits of this aspect of the accountability. “You feel an obligation to do this (the revisit) for someone else. There are no hard and fast rules about how many times you need to sign up, but we do it for each other. And you learn. You usually pick districts that are working on something similar to you. … This kind of accountability is lateral and reciprocal; whenever we hear about accountability in education, it is like a dirty word, always about test scores. But this is different. There are no real consequences. It is peer to peer and really about improvement.”

Mary Conway, who recently assumed the superintendency in Vernon, Conn., after years in Plainfield, describes the revisit as a form of professional accountability. “It is the same as what I expect from my teachers and administrators — to visit each other, to share practice and to say ‘next week I’ll be back.’ It is not a ‘gotcha’ but part of a professional conversation (that says) ‘I value your input and having you reflecting back my thoughts and what you are seeing enough that I want you to know what I am doing and to talk with me about my leadership practice.’”

Conway used her first revisit in Plainfield to model exactly this professional accountability for her staff. “After we did follow-up observations at the high school, Mike McKee (superintendent in Stonington, Conn.) and Betty Feser (superintendent in Windsor) came back to my office and we held a completely honest mini-network conversation with all of my administrators watching. We set it up as a fishbowl. The three of us sat around and just named it all — what we had just seen, what I had hoped for, what the principal was trying to do. It was powerful for my administrative team to see how three people who were immersed in the work could talk about it in such an honest way.

“After a while the fishbowl broke down because you could see people wanted to go deeper, and my team started asking questions, about teaching and learning, about leadership choices, about their role in next steps for improvement,” Conway adds. “I was silent for much of it, since so much of the conversation was between administrators in my district and Betty and Mike as critical friends. The modeling, that this is how leaders talk to each other and this is how they focus on instruction, was terrific.”

In her next visit and revisit in Vernon, Conway hopes to do this again. “As I plan it, I hope to have an honest conversation with my revisit team to help get the most leverage from the network visit,” Conway says. “I want to use it as a way to make my practice visible — public to teachers. By modeling it with my peers, I want to show teachers as well as other district administrators that this is how we learn from our peers and from each other. They need to get into my head as to how this professional learning happens, to see the strategies and to see how this works throughout the system.”

Deepening Discussions
The revisits have both built on and contributed to a growing sense of community and trust in the Connecticut Superintendents’ Network. Along with working on through-lines that look closely at the links between what superintendents do and what happens in classrooms, the revisits have focused on leadership practice in the network and provide a place where it is not only safe but increasingly expected for superintendents to talk honestly about the problems they have, what they do and don’t do, and what they know and don’t know about bringing high-quality teaching and learning to scale in all their classrooms.

Superintendents report that the revisits set the stage for deeper conversations about practice and engender questions such as:

- “You decided to do X (after the initial network visit and discussion). Why did you choose that approach?”

- “You told us you were thinking that X would work. On the revisit, we are seeing Y. Is that what you expected?”

- “You told us what you were trying and why. What have you learned and what will you do next time?”

As one participant put it, “Hosts will put their leadership practice on the table in the revisit that they wouldn’t in the big group. They will, quite openly, ask their peers, ‘I wonder if this is working?’” One compared the intensity of the revisit discussions to those of a critical friends network she had been in earlier, “but here these peers have already been on two visits to my district, have focused on an issue that I have framed, and they have lots of knowledge from being in my classrooms. It’s very powerful.”

Don’t underestimate the importance of this candid peer-to-peer critique. In a world where superintendents often are isolated and expected to be learned, not learners, where opportunities for superintendents to learn and improve practice are few and far between, networks like the one in Connecticut and similar efforts in Iowa and New Jersey are providing something unique and essential.

Scaling Up
Most superintendents know that to get any improvement at scale, they need to focus on instruction and set up systems for teachers to replace isolated and idiosyncratic practice, let down their guards with one another and share teaching practice.

Superintendents, of course, must do the same for themselves: focus on instruction, set up systems to replace isolated and idiosyncratic practice, let down their guards with one another and share their leadership practice. Only then will our schools and districts go beyond the isolated pockets of excellence (in a general sea of mediocrity) that characterize so many of them and scale up high-quality instruction for all students.

The pioneering revisit work of the Connecticut Superintendents’ Network takes the instructional rounds improvement cycle — identifying a problem of practice to shape a visit, observing, debriefing and making suggestions for the next level of improvement work — to its natural next step.

At the same time, although superintendents often see accountability as a dirty word, the Connecticut superintendents are holding each other to account — to what happens in their classrooms, to what they say to each other at and after school visits, and to what actions they take afterward to improve instruction. They are building up from what they are observing in classrooms and, with a certain implacable logic, working
together to unpack the core leadership challenges faced by superintendents. In doing so, they are adding to their learning and to that of their colleagues’, redefining lateral and reciprocal accountability and contributing to professionalizing superintendent leadership practice.

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