

## Instructional Rounds: Questions and Answers

### What are Superintendents' Networks?

Each Area Education Agency (AEA) in Iowa offers superintendents an opportunity to join a Superintendents' Network. Coordinated through the Iowa Leadership Academy, networks are supported by the AEA statewide system and School Administrators of Iowa. Networks use a process called **Instructional Rounds**, which is an explicit practice intended to build knowledge and skills of participants, and to provide helpful feedback to the host school. The **goals** of Instructional Rounds are to:

1. *Build skills of network members* by coming to a common understanding of effective practice and how to support it.
2. *Support instructional improvement* at the host school by sharing what the network learns and by building skills at the local level.

The network model emerged from work with a small group of Connecticut superintendents started by Dr. Richard Elmore, Harvard University (some Iowa networks refer to themselves as "Elmore Networks"). Elmore and colleagues Elizabeth City, Sarah Fiarman and Lee Teitel have refined the model through work with other networks. Their 2009 book, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, describes the process.

### An Instructional Rounds Network ...


Is	Is Not
A learning community	Learning in isolation
A method to examine the system	A method to evaluate teachers and principals
A method to analyze student learning and student tasks	An instructional audit to determine if teachers are engaging in a specific practice
An in-depth analysis of the instructional core observed in classrooms	A "walkthrough"
A process	A program
A way for network members to objectively describe teaching and learning	A way for network members to learn supervision skills
Developing, through shared experiences in real classrooms, a common understanding of effective teaching practice and how to support it	Reading about or listening to someone describe effective teaching practice and how to support it
Collaboration to create coherence around instructional improvement at scale	Working alone to "figure it out" for one's own system

### What is the Instructional Rounds process?


Each superintendent in the network hosts a "Rounds" visit. Harvard-trained facilitators, often AEA administrators and/or practicing superintendents within the AEA, work with the host superintendent and principal to coordinate visit preparations. In addition, facilitators guide the process throughout the actual visit and follow-up. The main components of the process are shown on the next page.



## Main components in preparing for and conducting a visit:

1. A network superintendent volunteers to host a visit and asks a principal to provide the host site.
  2. A **“Problem of Practice” (POP)** is identified by the host school. The superintendent and network facilitator determine who will be involved in the problem identification (options include superintendent, principal, assistant principals, lead teachers, central office staff, etc.). The network facilitator is always involved, to assist in the problem development and ensure that the problem statement is written in a way that will help both the network superintendents and the host school. The POP should relate to student learning and should be something with which the school is really struggling. It could be something they are trying to do (e.g. increase students’ problem solving abilities), but are having trouble doing. It should be something around which the teachers would like to have data gathered to help them work through this sticky problem.
  3. During the discussions of the POP, a **“Theory of Action” (TOA)** may be developed. The TOA is simply an *if-then* statement that describes why the school is doing what it is doing (e.g. we think that *if* we teach students to solve problems in multiple ways, *then* they will be able to solve complex problems independently). This statement helps all involved understand why the school has chosen a particular course of action. It also helps the school reconsider how their theory might be modified or elaborated upon in order to get the desired result.
  4. As the POP and TOA statements are finalized, 1-3 questions are developed that will help focus the network superintendents’ classroom observations and data gathering. These are called **“Focusing Questions” (FQ)**.
  5. The host superintendent and principal develop, with facilitator input, a schedule for classroom observations. The primary responsibility for this task may be delegated to the principal who knows the schedule and teachers best. Observations are typically done for 2-3 hours, and each observation lasts about 15-20 minutes (not a full class period). Network members are split into small groups (typically 3-5) who observe in the same classrooms at the same time. See #2 on page 3.
  6. The host superintendent and/or principal make physical arrangements for the visit. See #3 on page 3.
  7. The host leaders share information with school staff prior to the Rounds visit (see ‘visit preparation’ below). This is a critical step in the success of the visit!
  8. The host superintendent shares information with network members prior to the Rounds visit: background information about the host district/school (demographics, PD focus, etc.), TOA, POP, FQ and observation schedule. This is usually done by the host superintendent, but s/he may involve others, as well.
  9. Network members (including host superintendent) **observe** in classrooms. In some networks, the host may invite a few selected individuals from the district to observe, as well. If this is done prior to the visit day, the superintendent should coach non-network members on the process for note taking and refraining from judgment. As observers move from classroom to classroom there should be no conversation (either among network members or with teachers) about what was observed.
  10. Network members engage in a structured **“debrief”** process in which they follow a protocol to organize and analyze data collected, use evidence to predict what students will know and be able to do as a result of successfully completing the work assigned, and develop suggestions or reflective questions for the host school to consider as they move to the **“Next Level of Work” (NLOW)** to address their POP. The host superintendent participates in the debrief but remains a silent listener during the NLOW conversations.
  11. The NLOW suggestions or reflective questions are shared with the host(s). Following this, the host superintendent may offer comments or ask questions of the network. The host principal may be involved in this portion of the debrief; if so, his/her role is to listen and ask clarifying questions, not provide rationale or explanations.
  12. Network members focus on what they have learned about effective teaching practice and how to support it. They reflect on their Rounds practice and how they can improve their process and network practices in the next visit.
  13. The facilitator works with the host superintendent and principal to determine how and what to communicate with staff.
  14. The network conducts **follow-up activities** with the host (“mini visit,” report to network, etc.). Each Network has its own procedures for visit follow-up. The intent is to learn how hosts use NLOW suggestions, and to build accountability into the process.
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## What should a principal do to prepare for a Rounds visit?

1. Carefully read the *Information for Principals and Information for Teachers* documents. With your superintendent (and network facilitator, if appropriate), talk through the process to make sure these documents accurately reflect the practice of your AEA's network.
  2. Talk with your superintendent (and network facilitator, if appropriate) to find out how you are expected to contribute to the development of the classroom observation schedule. Observations are typically done for a total of 2-3 hours, and each observation lasts about 15-20 minutes (not a full class period). Network members are split into small groups (typically 3-5) who observe in the same classrooms at the same time. In order to build the observation schedule, you need to know how many classrooms each network team member should visit, and for how many minutes. Your superintendent and facilitator may have specific ideas for which network members should form an observation team, so be sure to ask for their assistance in making these assignments.
  3. Talk with your superintendent about making physical arrangements for the visit (whose responsibility is this – yours or his/hers?). The network will need a meeting room that will be dedicated to their use throughout the day (the room should be spacious enough for the network to spread out their materials and engage in small group work). Hosts make arrangements to have snacks, lunch and beverages brought in, and ensure that necessary materials are provided. Materials typically include chart paper, markers, sticky notes, masking tape, nametags, multimedia projector for showing a PowerPoint, screen, etc.
  4. To the extent possible, avoid surprises or a “gotcha” experience. Give staff as much information as you can. Don't be reluctant to ask your superintendent or the network facilitator for more information if you need it.
  5. **SHARE THE FOLLOWING WITH STAFF PRIOR TO THE VISIT:**
    - **Background information** about Networks and Rounds, including the goals of Rounds. A document called *Information for Teachers* provides answers to typical teacher questions about Rounds; distribute and discuss this document with your teachers.
    - **Information about the non-evaluative nature of Rounds.** As you discuss the *Information for Teachers* document, stress that the primary purpose of this process is network learning. Your school is providing a place where network members can observe classroom instruction together. These observations are non-judgmental and non-evaluative. Network members have learned how to gather objective evidence about the “instructional core” (the interaction of students and teachers in the presence of content). After observing, network members discuss what they saw for the purpose of developing a common picture of effective teaching practice. It's about network learning, not making judgments about anything happening in the school or district. Rounds is **not** an audit of teacher implementation, **not** a means of evaluating teachers or principals, and **not** a formal monitoring process like a DE School Improvement Visit.
    - **Information about the process used and people involved in the development of the POP.** Who did your superintendent and you involve in the problem identification? Why did they identify this problem? Emphasize that network members will gather data that could help school staff better understand their problem.
    - **Classroom observation schedule.** Give teachers advance notice and an opportunity to tell you about special circumstances that might impact the schedule.
    - **Suggestions for the day of the visit.** In the *Information for Teachers* document, direct teachers to the Q and A related to teacher preparation for the visit. Tell teachers to follow normal classroom plans/procedures. This is true even if a test is being given or students are working independently (exception would be a high stakes test where observers would interfere by looking at the test or whispering to an individual student). The only accommodation teachers need to make is to put a few chairs in the room for observers, if possible. They do not need to explain anything to observers. Observers are only interested in what they see at the time, not what has happened prior to or what is planned for after the classroom visit. Inform teachers that observers may talk to students (only when it will not be disruptive), and that they appreciate being able to see copies of assignments or tests.
    - **Plans for greeting visitors.** Some schools arrange to have student greeters available in the morning to guide the visitors to their first meeting room. This is not necessary, but can help visitors feel welcomed and can be an opportunity for students to be ambassadors for the school.
    - **Plans for post-visit follow-up.** It is important for teachers to know what to expect as a result of the visit. However, before addressing this with staff, talk with your superintendent about what will be shared. When addressing this with staff, tell them what information you and/or the superintendent plan to share with whom and when.
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## What should a principal do after a Rounds visit?

1. On the day of the visit, if you have the opportunity, thank network members for gathering data that will be useful to your school. Emphasize that their feedback is welcomed and will be beneficial to you and your staff.
2. Debrief the process by visiting with your superintendent. Discuss:
  - What did we learn from this experience?
  - How can we use these data/suggestions to improve learning for kids?
  - What will we share with whom, when and how?Many districts involve the administrative team in the initial analysis of the data; administrators then determine what and how to share with staff. Best practice is to share the data and suggestions openly so there is no perception of secrecy. At a minimum, people involved in the development of the POP should receive the suggestions/questions for NLOW provided by the visiting network. It is wise to have a plan for framing this conversation in a way that is more helpful than confusing or threatening to people in the system.
3. As soon as possible after the visit, share network suggestions with staff according to the plan developed with your superintendent in #2 above. Frame the feedback in a positive and constructive manner and avoid any actions or comments that could be perceived by teachers as negative or punitive. Model being a reflective leader by asking:
  - What did we learn from this experience?
  - How can we use these data/suggestions to improve learning for kids?
4. Take full advantage of this evidence-based feedback to address areas that might have been hard for individuals in the school to see objectively. Use the feedback to develop a plan for improvement: who will do what by when? Revisit and refine the plan at predetermined times.

## THANK YOU!

Network members appreciate your willingness to be vulnerable, work with staff to open your school doors, and give superintendents an opportunity to observe real classroom experiences in order to advance their learning.

For general questions about Instructional Rounds, contact Bonnie Boothroy at SAI, [bboothroy@sai-iowa.org](mailto:bboothroy@sai-iowa.org).

For specific questions about your visit, contact your superintendent or the Superintendents' Network facilitator from your AEA.

