

# Instructional Rounds: A Review

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## Introduction

This K12 Info Brief provides a capstone summary of the Virginia Department of Education’s four-part series on Instructional Rounds (September 2022 to May 2023). The motivation of instructional rounds and the purpose of this series is as follows:

- Enhance existing school improvement processes;
- Develop a common understanding of effective teaching and learning;
- Reduce variability in instruction across classrooms;
- Focus improvement work on a specific problem of practice;
- Increase teacher ownership of professional learning; and
- Provide data to support decisions around professional development.

Here are a few resources for consideration of Instructional Rounds:

- [August 2022 Quick Takes](#)
- [December 2022 Quick Takes](#)
- [Instructional Rounds Template \(August 2022\)](#)

## Key Terms

- **Instructional Rounds.** Instructional rounds are a disciplined way for educators to work together to improve instruction. The practice combines three common elements of improvement: classroom observation, an improvement strategy, and a network of educators (City, 2011).
- **Instructional Core.** The instructional core is composed of the teacher and the student in the presence of content. The instructional core anchors the practice of rounds and the instructional improvement process (City et al., 2009).
- **Problem of Practice.** A problem of practice is something the school cares about, feels stuck on, and wants to understand more deeply. A problem of practice focuses on instruction, is observable and actionable, connects to a broader strategy of improvement, and is high leverage (City et al., 2009).
- **Theory of Action.** A theory of action can be thought of as the story line that make a vision and a strategy concrete. It provides the map that carries the vision through the organization and provides a way of testing the assumptions and suppositions of the vision against the unfolding realities of the work in an actual organization with actual people. A theory of action is a hypothesis about what will happen when a set of strategies is implemented and is typically stated in “If...Then...” phrasing (City et al., 2009).
- **Ladder of Inference.** A tool that explains how we make decisions. Each step in the decision-making process is represented by a rung on the ladder where a decision is made before moving to the next rung (MacNeil, 2022).

## What are Instructional Rounds?

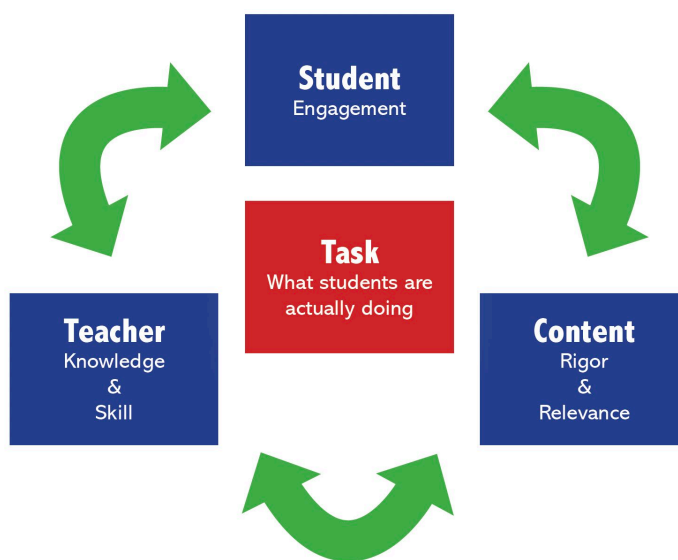
Instructional rounds provide a structured process for schools and school divisions to collect data and apply shared expertise to the implementation of improvement plans. The process of instructional rounds was developed from the rounds process used in medical education and involves small teams of observers examining instruction with a focus on a shared problem of practice (Moyer, 2017).

Instructional rounds focus observations on the instructional core, the interaction among the student, teacher, and content. The relationship among these elements drives student learning, so changing any one element requires corresponding changes to the other two elements to realize improvements.

Instructional rounds embrace three goals:

- ensure fidelity to the student achievement objectives;
- provide useful feedback to support teachers in their work; and
- accumulate data to inform professional development decisions and support professional learning communities across the district.

Exhibit 1. The Instructional Core



It is important to understand that Instructional Rounds are different than Walk-Throughs and Learning Walks as they are non-evaluative, observation focused, and feedback is provided by a team.

Exhibit 2. Walk-Throughs, Learning Walks, and Instructional Rounds (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

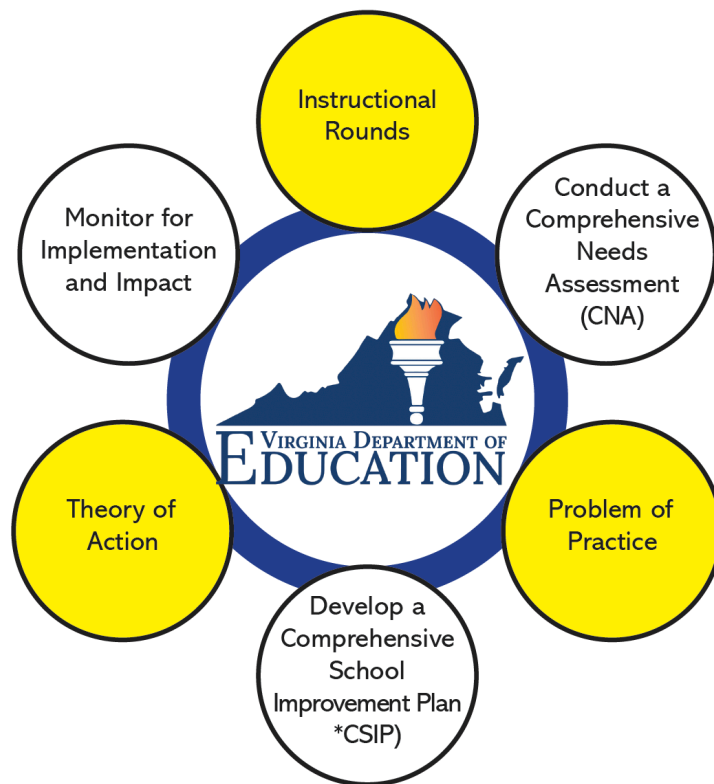
Walk-Throughs	Learning Walks	Instructional Rounds
Evaluative	Non-Evaluative	Non-Evaluative
Administrator conducts observations focused on the teacher	Team conducts learning walks to complete a task (collect evidence, observe colleagues, monitor implementation)	Team conducts observations focused on a specific problem of practice within instruction
Evaluator gives prescriptive feedback as a means of job compliance	Concludes with conversation to reflect and make application	Collective feedback to the network or team

Teachers participate in instructional rounds as part of networks with between eight and 30 members which meet repeatedly over time to develop a sense of trust and community. These networks may be formed based on shared subject area or responsibilities or may consist of cross-functional groups of teachers and administrators with varying roles (City et al., 2009). Within these networks, teachers carry out classroom observations in smaller teams of three to five led by a facilitator designated by the division superintendent or network leader (Marzano, 2011). Effective facilitators have experience with adult learning and the specific protocols or tools that will be used in the instructional rounds process. Facilitators should also have skills in consensus building (Fowler-Finn, 2014).

As illustrated below, instructional rounds are a key component of the Continuous Improvement Process along with Problem of Practice and Theory of Action.

Exhibit 3. The Continuous Improvement Process (Office of School Quality, 2022)

### The Continuous Improvement Process



### Key Components of Instructional Rounds

School divisions can use the instructional rounds process to build consensus around effective teaching practices aligned to the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) (Finch, 2018). The instructional rounds process combines three key components: classroom observation, an improvement strategy, and a network of educators. Practitioners of instructional rounds note that, although many schools already use one or more of these components, combining them yields stronger outcomes than adopting one or two components in isolation (City, 2011). City (2011) found that it is the combination of the three components creates a “powerful” strategy.

## Developing a Theory of Action

Participants in instructional rounds develop individual theories of action that describe their own beliefs about how the work they do contributes to student achievement outcomes and meets the criteria listed below:

- The theory of action begins with a statement of a causal relationship between an individual's actions and positive classroom instruction, phrased as an if-then statement.
- The theory of action is empirically falsifiable, meaning that evidence collected during instructional rounds can disprove all or part of the theory.
- The theory of action is open-ended, meaning that the causal relationships can be further refined and specified as the individual learns more about their actions. (City et al., 2009).

The following are examples for theories of action at the division and school levels:

### *Division-Based Theory of Action*

- If we create environments of shared collaboration focused on improving standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, then shared responsibility and shared accountability will create urgency for change and support continuous improvement of learning for all students.
- If we cultivate expertise in teaching and learning as the means for improving student achievement, then teaching will be strengthened, and more students will learn in deeper ways that better approach the "essential understanding" of the standards.

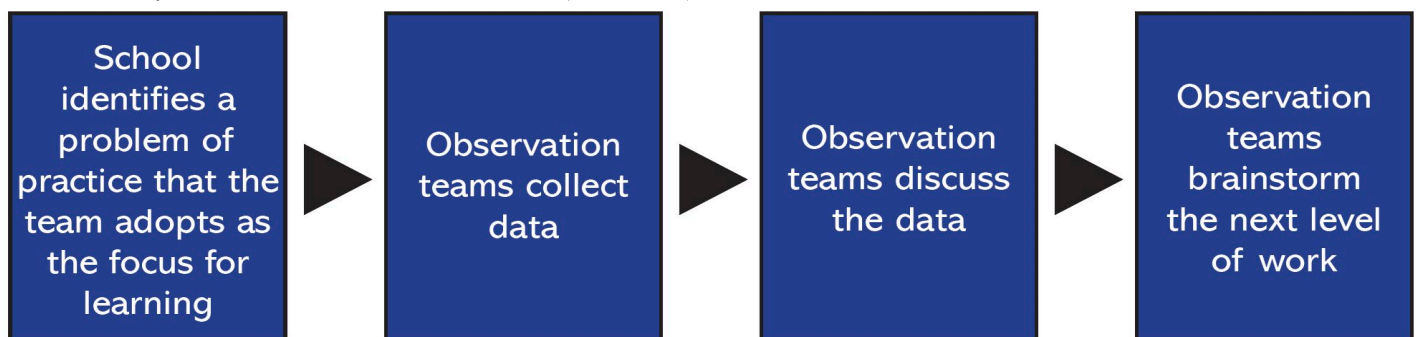
### *School-Based Theory of Action*

- If we devote resources and time to developing the capacity of our teacher leaders to facilitate ongoing instructional improvement, then the focus of our teachers' regular work together will be grounded in improving learning experiences for all students.
- If we continually develop the instructional expertise of our teachers, then teaching will be strengthened and all students will learn in deeper and more meaningful ways. (City et al., 2009, p. 47)

## Implementing Instructional Rounds

There are four steps or 'phases' involved in the implementation of instruction rounds: problem of practice; observation; debrief; and next steps.

*Exhibit 4. Four Implementation Phases of Instructional Rounds (Teitel, 2009)*

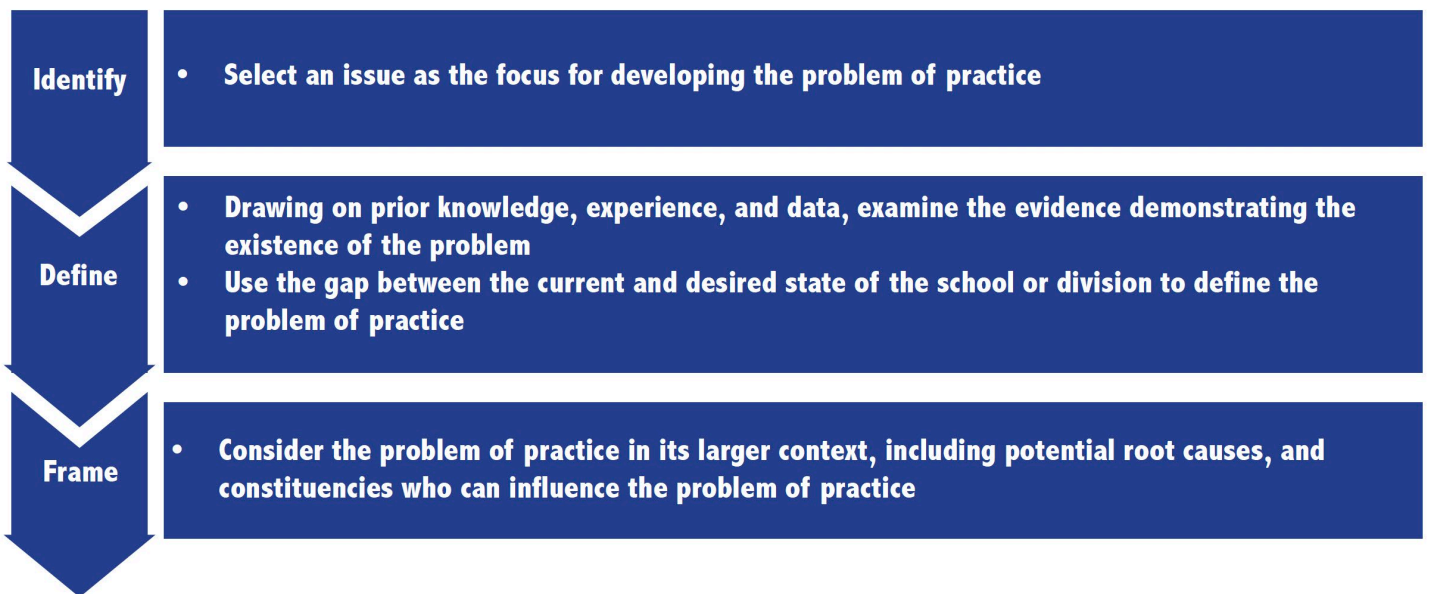


**PHASE I: Creating a Problem of Practice**

Instructional rounds teams should use the findings of their comprehensive needs assessment (CNA) to identify a problem of practice that reflects an area of discrepancy between the school’s desired functioning and the current state. In many cases, a problem of practice will extend the focus of previous improvement or professional learning efforts to identify reasons why these efforts have not yielded expected results. A problem of practice meets the following criteria:

- Focuses on the instructional core;
- Is directly observable;
- Is within the school or district’s control and can be improved in real time;
- Connects to the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP); and
- If acted on, would make a significant difference for student learning. (Teitel, 2009)

*Exhibit 5. Process for Framing a Problem of Practice (Leach et al., 2021).*



Here are two examples of a problem of practice (Troen & Boles, 2014):

- Teachers do not consistently provide daily differentiated rigorous tasks that encourage students to explain their mathematical thinking and build math fluency.
- How do we use Number Talks (a newly adopted math program in the school district) to plan math discussions that enable students with different math abilities to explain their thinking and build fluency?

**PHASE II: Conducting Observations**

During the observation of practice, the 3–5-person observation teams observe a volunteer teacher’s classroom and take notes on their observations related to the problem of practice. Observations may last between 10 and 25 minutes (City, 2011; Marzano, 2011; Teitel, 2009). Teams use focus questions to collect data that is:

- Descriptive, not evaluative;
- Specific;
- About the instructional core;
- Related to the problem of practice (Teitel, 2009)

Before the observation, teachers should advise their students of the group coming in to observe. Observers should enter the classroom quietly and unobtrusively and find a non-disruptive place to observe from. From here they take notes based on focus areas previously defined. Important to note that the observation is not rubric-based (Marzano, 2011). Notes are detailed but non-judgmental (Teitel, 2009).

*Exhibit 6. Observations in Rounds ((Office of School Quality, 2022).*

<b>Observation in Rounds</b>	
Help us collect low-inference, specific data	NOT judgments and assessments
Are used to identify patterns of practice	NOT to provide individual feedback
Focus on a problem of practice	NOT “best practices”
Support problem solving and interrogate areas of uncertainty	NOT monitoring implementation or evaluation
Provide the basis for discussion and collective learning	NOT simple prescriptions

Based on the prior Problem of Practice, here are five focus questions that could help guide observation (Troen & Boles, 2014):

- How does the teacher model the use of high-level math vocabulary so students can use it independently when they explain their thinking?
- How does the teacher listen to and follow her students’ math thinking?
- What procedures are in place to allow students to share their thinking?
- What conditions are present that foster a safe learning community?
- How is student communication encouraged and valued?



### PHASE III: Observation Debrief

Members of the observation team come together after each instructional round and share what they observed and noted. With a reminder that observations are non-judgmental and non-evaluative, observers should begin by noting the positive things and then discuss some other questions or comments. This can be done in a round-robin format where one observer goes after another (Marzano, 2011).

Teitel (2009) Observation teams discuss the data in three steps:

- Describe what you saw;
- Analyze the descriptive evidence (What patterns do you see? How might you group the data?); and
- Predict what students are learning. If you were a student in this class/school and you did everything the teacher told you to do, what would you know and be able to do?

Some groups utilize a template to help with the analysis piece of the debrief. The quadrant model below helps observers identify patterns by writing down their observations on sticky notes and then pasting them on a flip chart.

Exhibit 7. Debrief Quadrant Model (Gassenheimer, 2016)

PATTERNS	CONTRASTS
Evidence observed across a majority of classrooms, ex. Teachers referenced the learning target in five of six classrooms	Evidence observed in less than a majority of classrooms. For example: Students were generating their own learning targets in one of six classrooms
PREDICTIONS	QUESTIONS
Predictions about students at the visited school based on the following prompt: If you were a student at this school and you did everything you were expected to do, what would you know and be able to do (in light of the patterns observed)?	Questions about what observers saw in the classroom focused on outliers. For example: In what ways can you ensure that students are working collaboratively rather than independently in small groups?

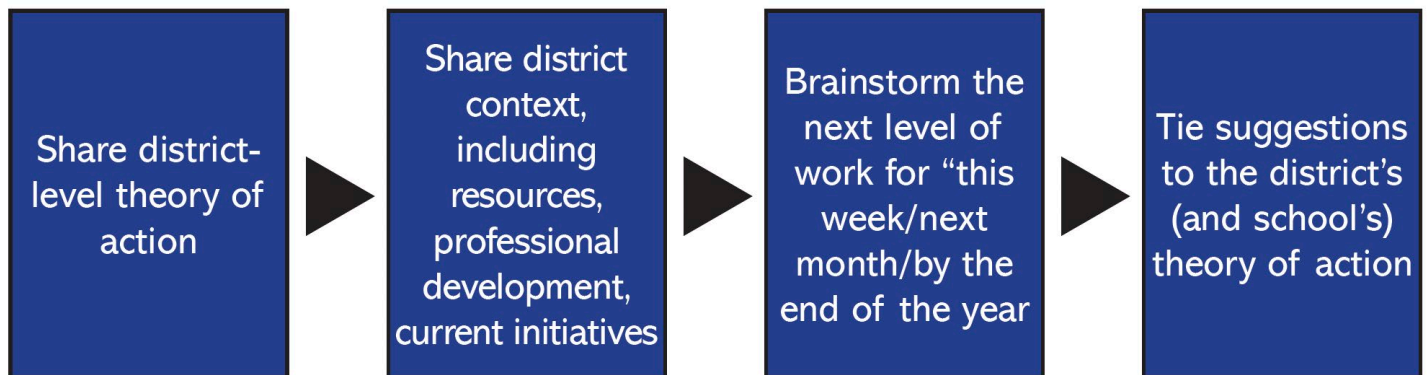
Exhibit 8. Utilizing the Quadrant Model during Debrief (Gassenheimer, 2016)



**PHASE IV: Determining the Next Level of Work**

The fourth phase of the process involves taking the information gathered and analyzed and taking it to the “next level of work,” focusing on the resources that support teacher and administrator improvement (Teitel, 2009). It is helpful if suggestions are concrete and aligned with district needs. The exhibit below provides a four-step process to brainstorm improvement strategies for the next level of work.

*Exhibit 9. Next Level of Work Process (Teitel, 2009).*



The process begins with revisiting the problem of practice with the experience gained in the observation. The analysis conducted during the debrief can now be actuated in terms of developing forward plans or recommendations for the short-, medium-, or long-term (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.; City et al., 2009; Teitel, 2009).

**Summary**

Instructional rounds serve as a tool to assist professional development and, in turn, better teaching and learning. A survey of over 9,000 teachers from the Miami-Dade Public School system found that almost 90 percent of teachers said that working as instructional teams was helpful in improving student learning (Hart, 2015).

There are a variety of strategies for implementing instructional rounds as a professional development process. Sometimes it starts small with a single group of “three willing teachers” that grew to the entire school staff (Learning Sciences International, 2016).

“The feedback I received from the teachers was so positive that many teachers asked for more coverage time to conduct more visits. Listening to teachers share the positive comments about other teachers’ practices was very exciting. It created a real synergy among the staff, and it also raised the level of respect that peers had for each other. I would also say it gave teachers the opportunity to see that they were not in this learning curve alone. This process truly raised the level of collegiality among staff and helped us move forward with the professional development process” (Learning Sciences International, 2016).

City (2011) quoted a science teacher who offered the following: “We don't see rounds as an extra thing—they're part of what we do.” Some schools conduct rounds once a week while others conduct them every two weeks or monthly. “Frequency matters” (City, 2011).

Important to understand is that instructional rounds are not about “fixing” teachers. Rather, they are about increasing understanding of what happens inside a classroom and how a system helps produce those outcomes and identifying what can be done about it (City, 2011).

A remaining challenge is that although many researchers and practitioners see instructional rounds as an important professional practice, the practice is not yet widespread (Learning Sciences International, 2016).

The Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership identified these core elements (based on City et al., 2009) of instructional rounds as well as important considerations for the process.

## KEY ELEMENTS

- shared understanding of purpose and process.
- alignment with school-wide improvement focus.
- groups are unobtrusive observers in the classrooms visited.
- notes taken focus on specific actions observed, not judgements of practice or general ideas and information.
- debriefs are discussions of practice, not evaluations.
- of the observed teachers’ practice.
- feedback is not provided to individual teachers unless specifically requested.

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

- in a diverse group of observers there may not be a shared, common understanding of effective practices.
  - allow time for this to occur/be established prior to observing classes.
- external visitors can be perceived as evaluative.
  - ensure that the purpose of the visit is clear and maintain the school-wide improvement focus.
- observed teachers may not receive individual feedback for improvement.
  - communicate with staff prior to observation whether individuals will receive feedback and provide opportunities for staff to debrief.

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