



Classroom Rounds: Should Teachers Be Trained Like Medical School Residents?

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Improving teacher quality has become a major reform theme in American education politics, though many disagree about how best to accomplish that goal. Suggestions run the gamut from changing recruitment practices and evaluations to abolishing tenure and tying pay to performance.

One idea that appears to be gaining momentum is borrowing best practices from other fields, like medicine, and applying them to education. What if teachers were trained as intensively as doctors? Would traditional medical school conventions like residencies and rounds work with educators?

Here are four reasons why this exciting idea shows promise:

1. **TEACHING UNDER A MICROSCOPE:** “Often people don’t know what high-quality teaching and learning is. We’ll show a video of a class to district leaders and ask them to describe it or rate it. There’s usually no common understanding of what ‘good’ looks like.” So says Lee Teitel, lecturer at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, who sees instructional rounds as a way for teachers, principals, and district leaders to develop a shared understanding of what high-quality instruction looks like, and how best to achieve it.

Instructional rounds are conducted in schools the way medical rounds are conducted in hospitals: groups of educators visit classrooms together, then share observations in a focused and systematic way. They analyze instruction, discuss ways to improve effectiveness, and apply what they learn to their own practice.

Instructional rounds are currently being used successfully in several districts across the country, as well as internationally.

2. **COLLABORATIVE CULTURE:** Doctors in hospitals commonly consult with one another about patients, combining their expertise to figure out the best course of treatment. Professional collaboration is less common in schools, where educators often find themselves isolated in their own classrooms, navigating the rough waters of teaching solo.

Instructional rounds is a network approach to improving teaching and learning that encourages collaboration among educators at all levels: beginning teachers, experienced veterans, administrators, and district leaders alike.

Rounds participants learn to refrain from criticizing and passing judgment on each other, and focus instead on carefully observing the work. The result is open communication among colleagues in a non-evaluative and constructive way that improves school-wide instruction and student achievement.

3. THE POWER OF MENTORING: Aspire Public Schools, one of the largest charter school networks in California, is piloting a teacher training initiative that educates teachers the way medical schools educate doctors: using a four-year residency model combining education theory with intensive practice.

In addition to taking courses at University of the Pacific, residents spend four days a week in classrooms shadowing an expert Mentor Teacher for a full academic year.

In countries like China and Finland, where students tend to score highly on international tests, mentorship is already a key ingredient in their teacher education programs.

Aspire VP of Education Heather Kirkpatrick says the goal of the Teacher Residency Program is to graduate highly skilled teachers who can successfully close the achievement gap.

4. REDUCING TEACHER TURNOVER: Though no research has yet been done to determine whether the ongoing practice of instructional rounds contributes to teachers' job satisfaction and willingness to stay in the profession, experts who participate in the process report positive results.

Robert J. Marzano worked in public education for 40 years, authored 30 books, and developed 100 sets of curriculum materials for students and teachers. He writes that instructional rounds "stimulate excitement and energy among faculty members almost immediately."

Teitel adds that for teachers who spend their careers being told what to do, rounds are a welcome opportunity to actively participate in their own professional development. "With rounds, it's pretty energizing for teachers to have an opportunity that says we're jointly constructing what this should look like," he explains. "That's a dramatically different way to work for people within a district."

Aspire's Kirkpatrick hopes the Teacher Residency Program will help teachers hit the ground running and feel effective in their profession, making them want to spend their careers in the classroom. She says Aspire is committed to "figuring out how we hone a teacher's practice so they stay for 30 years." The first cohort of 18 residents just graduated from Aspire's program, and a second group of 19 started this month.