

FOREWORD

Most school reforms ask adults to do things they don't know how to do. The more ambitious the reform, the greater the gap between what educators know how to do and what they need to know to meet the demands of the reform. If the situation were otherwise, then school reform would be a relatively easy matter of simply mobilizing educators' current knowledge in the service of collective goals. But teachers don't have their best practices locked up in classroom closets, ready to deploy when policy makers and leaders order them into action. Likewise, most school leaders aren't intentionally keeping their best leadership practices under wraps until they are threatened by accountability requirements. Most educators are currently working at, or near, the limits of their current knowledge and practice.

School reform, if it works at all, works by systematically increasing the learning capacity of individuals and the organizations in which they work. Indeed, the central problem of American school reform is learning. Students learn best when adults are working and learning at the outer edge of their own practice. Instructional rounds is based on the premise that collective observation and analysis of instructional practice, done routinely and within a disciplined stance that honors evidence and predictive validity, helps individuals, schools, and school systems focus their individual and collective learning toward improved learning for students.

But as John Roberts observes, introducing this relatively straightforward idea into schools is a culturally disruptive practice. American schools, among all the school systems in the industrialized world, are the most deeply hardwired, culturally and structurally, to resist systemic practices of adult learning. The deepest irony of American education is that the institutions that are charged with the main responsibility for learning in our society do the worst job of enabling the learning of the people who work in them. The reasons for this phenomenon have been rehearsed ad nauseam in the literature on the history and sociology of American schools.

At the base level, in the default culture of American schools and in the public mind, teaching is considered a relatively easy, nontechnical, intuitively obvious

practice that requires a set of largely unspecified, largely interpersonal skills. The common assumption is that for people who have these skills, the work of teaching is relatively straightforward. In human capital terms, this model operates on the assumption that you select good-enough teachers and put them in classrooms, and over the course of their careers, they depreciate whatever knowledge and skill they entered with until, somewhere near the end of their career, they run out of energy and skill and retire. No other knowledge-based industry or enterprise in American society operates on this premise.

Instructional rounds is disruptive, in the sense that Roberts defines it, because it introduces the powerful countercultural idea that people who work in knowledge-based enterprises should be engaged in continuous learning and improve throughout their careers. Moreover, Roberts contends, educators should be doing so in ways that challenge existing beliefs about what students can learn and, more fundamentally, raise questions about the ways schools participate in the reproduction of social and racial inequality in society. In *Instructional Rounds in Action*, Roberts's analysis of rounds leads us through the detailed processes necessary to use a disruptive practice to reshape the default culture of American schools.

John Roberts has been part of a broad network of educators from universities, schools, and school systems at the leading edge of the development and use of instructional rounds. His special passion is the improvement of learning for poor children of color. A central norm of this network, to which the instructional rounds team at Harvard and I belong, is that we view our own work on instructional rounds as a continuous learning process, rather than a process of teaching people how to implement a fixed design. We view the practitioners with whom we work as coproducers and learning partners rather than clients. And we try, not always successfully, to sustain a culture of candor and challenge in sharing our own learning struggles as part of our work with practitioners. We regard the practice of instructional rounds as never becoming a settled set of routines, but always subject to new levels of challenge and learning.

Instructional Rounds in Action is a model of how this continuous learning and improvement works. Roberts is both an analyst and a participant in the work he writes about, which in itself is no small disruption of the traditional academic research paradigm. He is a sympathetic colleague in relation to the practitioners with whom he works. But he is also an unflinching critic of the institutional constraints that get in the way of collective learning and the practices that undermine the espoused goals of equality of opportunity in secondary schools. His

conclusions are challenges for the future development of the practice, rather than summative assessments of the “success” or “failure” of the practice. And he models the qualities of reflection in actions that are critical to the improvement of practice in the education sector.

I hope that one day, educators will begin to manifest the highest and best qualities of what it means to be a profession. Practices will be anchored in a solid base of knowledge that can be used to judge the quality of work in schools. Professionals will have clear expectations about the learning that has to occur over the course of their career to meet the challenges that society gives them. Educators will challenge existing beliefs about what students can learn and do. School systems will take responsibility for the selection, induction, and development of human talent in the education sector and for the quality of the practice of people who call themselves educators. A useful starting point for this movement is the simple premise that *professions have practices*. They use these practices to develop norms and commitments to each other about what it means to be a professional. They also use these practices to develop a culture of continuous improvement. And they are willing to assess critically the quality of their own work and that of their colleagues, in light of evidence and in the service of collective improvement over time. With this book, John Roberts makes an important contribution to the process of building an education profession.

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