
Cherry Hills Village Elementary: Using Observational Protocols for Instructional Rounds For Peer-to-Peer Observations

Successful Strategies from Colorado Schools

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- Kelli Feltz, Second Grade Teacher, CHVE



Why Feature Cherry Hills Village Elementary?

Cherry Hills Village Elementary School (CHVE) is one of 24 Colorado schools with the highest sustained rates of overall academic achievement and student growth over a three-year period. The school received a Colorado Legacy Foundation award for teacher leadership, which recognizes innovative leadership models that empower teachers to achieve consistent, sustained student achievement growth.

CHVE is part of Cherry Creek School District, which has been using observational protocols to facilitate teacher collaboration and improve instructional practices district-wide for the past two years. This work is a component of one of the district's major improvement strategies (in the Cherry Creek District Performance Plan) that is aimed at increasing teachers' understanding and utilization of best practices in culturally responsive instruction.

Goal: Provide opportunities for all teachers to receive frequent, meaningful and useful feedback on their instruction.

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Teachers in every school can likely relate to Mrs. Feltz's dilemma. Teachers often feel isolated, with limited opportunity to learn from their peers except through informal communications – touching base in the hallway, sharing lesson plans, connecting at staff meetings or via email. But these strategies don't effectively capitalize on the wealth of experience and knowledge among a school's staff, or the diversity in strategies and techniques used by all teachers every day. A more structured, purposeful and formal process is needed in order to leverage and extend the excellent instructional strategies used in classrooms and to improve teaching and learning for all students.

Promising Practice: Using Observation Protocols for Instructional Rounds

Cherry Creek School District (CCSD) is addressing this challenge head on. The district has developed [long](#) and [short](#) observational protocols and implemented a process for peer-to-peer observation called "instructional rounds." According to Dr. Elliott Asp, Assistant Superintendent in CCSD, the protocols and observations are the most effective strategies the district uses to build a culture focused on continuous improvement. "If you teach in CCSD, you have to know that you're going to observe and learn from your peers and vice versa. We are fo-

cused on providing opportunities for teachers to improve because no matter how good anyone is, you can always get better.”

The Cherry Creek protocols were adapted from instruments developed by Marzano Labs and were produced in collaboration with education consultant Dr. Robert Marzano. They are based on Dr. Marzano’s The Art and Science of Teaching. The protocols provide a district-wide common language of instruction and guide teachers’ observations of one another, reflection on their own instruction, and feedback for teachers being observed.

PROTOCOL: NINE DESIGN QUESTIONS	
1	What will I do to establish and communicate learning goals, track student progress, and celebrate success for all students?
2	What will I do to help all students effectively interact with new knowledge?
3	What will I do to help all students practice and deepen their understanding of new knowledge?
4	What will I do to help all students generate and apply recently mastered knowledge in new and novel situations?
5	What will I do to engage students?
6	What will I do to establish or maintain classroom rules and procedures?
7	What will I do to recognize and acknowledge adherence and lack of adherence to rules and procedures?
8	What will I do to establish and maintain effective relationships with students?
9	What will I do to communicate high expectations for all students?

The protocols provide a guide for peer-to-peer observations, or instructional rounds. At their core, instructional rounds create opportunities for teachers to observe their peers and subsequently dialogue about the instructional methods observed. Instructional rounds are not intended to be evaluative. The value of the observations is the collaboration it creates for teachers, the opportunity for teachers to develop a common language and understanding of what high quality instruction looks like, and inspiring teachers to reflect on their own practice and improve.

There are obvious barriers as well as sensitivities to teachers observing each other: finding time away from the classroom, ensuring that time away is valuable and useful, and resistance and wariness about being observed by peers. But CCSD believes that peer-to-peer feedback on instructional practices is one of the most important strategies for improving student

achievement. According to Asp, “Once teachers take part in using these protocols and implement instructional rounds and realize it isn’t a ‘gotcha’ or punitive strategy, they find it to be a very valuable use of their time.”

“We’re seeing teachers begin to reflect on their teaching. They’re starting to see this as a tool that helps them work on their individual goals as well as school and district goals, rather than seeing it as one more thing to do. Teachers say things like ‘this protocol and observation process really helps me improve my relationship with students, or how to present new lessons or how to make my lessons more rigorous for all kids.’”

Implementing Instructional Rounds in CHVE

In Cherry Hills Village Elementary School, like all schools in CCSD, instructional rounds are a practice that builds upon ongoing professional development in effective instruction. CHVE’s professional learning communities spent several years studying Marzano’s [The Art and Science of Teaching](#) and establishing a common

language around instruction. When instructional rounds were introduced, Pam Livingston, CHVE’s former Principal, and a small group of teacher leaders from the school went through a year of professional development provided by the district. During the year the teacher leaders practiced using the protocols by videotaping their own teaching, using the protocols to reflect, and observing other CHVE teachers. Subsequently, Mrs. Livingston and teacher leaders led Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in a study of the observational proto-

Coordinating and Finding Time for Instructional Rounds

In CCSD, it’s up to schools to find creative strategies to create time for instructional rounds.

- In many schools teachers cover each other’s classes.
- A full-day sub could free up three different teachers for a couple of hours to do observations and debriefs. Four subs, strategically scheduled, can free up 12 teachers in three different rounds groups. Some schools used the sub only for observations so more could be scheduled, and then used planning time for teachers to receive feedback.
- Sometimes teachers offered to do rounds during planning periods. If a grade-level team has a common planning time, they’ve had one or two teachers volunteer to observe, while the remaining teammates plan.
- Some schools set up observations during planning time, and then debrief after school.
- Some schools designate a teacher, or someone other than the principal, to coordinate instructional rounds.

cols. Through a staff self-reflection survey, Mrs. Livingston discovered the instructional strategy the teaching staff was least comfortable with was Design Question #4, “Applying New Content.” Therefore, the PLCs focused a great deal on bolstering these strategies before any observations took place.

CHVE grouped staff into four teams. Each team includes K-5 teachers as well as special education teachers. One team goes to three different classrooms to observe a 20 -30 minute lesson in each. Each teacher being observed is notified well in advance so it’s not a surprise visit. Each classroom observation is followed by discussion and reflection – a debrief period of about 15 minutes. The team talks about instructional strategies observed and how they would work across different grade levels. Teachers are out of their classrooms for about 2.5 hours, and during that time a substitute teacher or teacher’s assistant covers their class. During a future PLC, the entire staff talks about the experience. The observational protocol guides the observations, the debrief, and personal reflection.

Kelli Feltz is one of CHVE’s teacher leaders that helped lead implementation. From her perspective, the goal of instructional rounds is to use the observational protocol to identify teaching strategies and skills that teachers are using. “We’re looking for practices that teachers use all the time.” According to Mrs. Feltz, “There is great value in having a diverse team because we have different perspectives on instruction and we’re able to collaborate with special education teachers and figure out ways to adapt strategies to help all students.”

Mrs. Feltz believes that instructional rounds will help her be more aware of the instructional strategies she uses and those that she employs with less frequency or fidelity. “One of the many things we’re looking for are classroom management techniques. I found that some of my colleagues used a really efficient strategy to transition kids from tables to the floor. As a result of instructional rounds and having the opportunity to observe their practice, I save time in transition and have more time for instruction. Observing my colleagues has allowed me to fine tune everything I do.”

“I expect to see a change in student achievement and assessment results, because if teachers are getting better, then students are getting better.”

Important Resources That Support the Practice

[The Art and Science of Teaching](#) by Dr. Robert Marzano.

Note: Although CCSD uses the work of Dr. Marzano, Dr. Asp believes that districts with a different instructional framework would still find CCSD’s observations protocols useful.

Sharing Tools and Artifacts – Helping All Colorado Schools

[Observational Protocol Long Form](#)

[Observational Protocol Short Form](#)

[Instructions: Using the Observational Protocol](#)

Videos of Cherry Creek teachers addressing the following questions:

- How is the Cherry Creek Observational Protocol being used in your school?
 - [Heritage Elementary School](#)
 - [Peakview Elementary](#)
 - [Sky Vista Middle School](#)
- What has proven to be most successful for you, having been a participant in the protocol work?
 - [Cherry Hills Elementary School](#)
 - [Sky Vista Middle School](#)
- Through the course of this work, what have you discovered about the protocol and about your own instructional practice?
 - [Greenwood Elementary School](#)
 - [Peakview Elementary School](#)
- What would you say to someone who is apprehensive about getting involved in the Cherry Creek Observational Protocol work?
 - [Sky Vista Middle School](#)
 - [Sky Vista Middle School](#)
- What else would you like to say about this project?
 - [Cherokee Trail High School](#)
 - [Greenwood Elementary School](#)
 - [Sky Vista Middle School](#)

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