

NEWSLETTER

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Using the **CLASSROOM WALK-THROUGH** *as an Instructional Leadership Strategy*

Providing effective instructional leadership is one challenge that every principal faces. In addition to managing schedules, hosting assemblies, and disciplining students, principals are expected to possess the knowledge and skill to make a positive impact on the teaching and learning process. Recent research shows that high-performing school districts actively seek to establish a clear expectation that the principal will be the instructional leader and the primary architect of instructional improvement at the school (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

Instructional leadership can take many forms, from ensuring that high-quality teaching materials are readily available and scheduling professional development to conducting formal observations and modeling lessons. But one essential component of instructional leadership, say many experts, is the interaction of the principal with teachers about their classroom practice.

A strategy used by many principals to gather classroom information and frame that interaction is the classroom “learning walk” or “walk-through.” The walk-through can be defined as a brief, structured, nonevaluative classroom observation by the principal that is followed by a conversation between the principal and the teacher about what was observed. Used well, the walk-through can provide both principal and teacher with valuable information about the status of the school’s instructional program.

This month’s newsletter examines the walk-through strategy as a tool for providing instructional leadership.

Why Conduct a Walk-Through?

The walk-through can serve many purposes. First, it gets principals into classrooms. Unlike formal observations, which often last a full

class period but occur only two or three times a year, the walk-through, when used consistently, ensures that the principal will see teachers teaching more often, albeit for a shorter length of time. Depending on the size of the school, the principal might visit every classroom as often as once a month, or even weekly. These structured visits also give principals a first-hand view of instructional issues and patterns while providing them with a meaningful way to demonstrate their interest in and knowledge of the teaching and learning process. And, says Principal Teresa Cockerham, Ed.D. (personal communication, January 12, 2007), of Providence Senior High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, “We are able to look at what is being taught in classrooms and then compare that with the district standards. It is a nonevaluative tool that focuses on alignment and calibration.” The primary purpose the walk-through serves, though, is to provide a structure for dialogue between principal and teacher about what goes on in the classroom, “an adult-to-adult model of discourse that involves professional conversation about practice” (Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, & Poston, 2004, p. ix).

Essential Elements of a Walk-Through

The specific components of the walk-through vary with its purpose, but all effective walk-through strategies share certain common elements. They include the following:

Brevity

The walk-through is designed to increase the number of classrooms that principals visit, so brevity is a must. While the typical walk-through lasts about 10 minutes, Dr. Cockerham (personal communication, January 12, 2007) says, “If we are in the classroom longer than three minutes, then it defeats the purpose of gathering first impressions.” Walk-throughs do not replace longer observations but instead supplement them by providing a high number of classroom practice “snapshots” that over time can reveal patterns and instructional issues throughout the school.

Focus

Former Michigan Principal Todd Wiedemann says the common focus of the walk-through “puts teachers and principals on the same page in terms of expectations” (Hopkins, p. 2). But because the walk-through is an adaptable strategy that can be used for a variety of purposes, special attention must be paid to clarifying for all participants what is being observed, and why. To ensure that there is indeed a common understanding, teachers should be involved in developing the “look fors” and “listen fors” that principals use during the observation as well as the reflective questions that structure the feedback session. This participation will go a long way toward reassuring teachers that the walk-through is a strategy for support, not for evaluation.

Dr. Cockerham (personal communication, January 12, 2007) says that a great deal can be observed during each walk-through: “We are looking to see if students are engaged; if students are being taught on the appropriate grade level; evidence of planning; what is on the walls of the classroom...we also ask students what they are *learning* as opposed to what they are *doing*.” Alternately, the walk-through can be structured to gather data on how well and often teachers are addressing priorities identified in their school plan. It also is possible to change the focus of the walk-through during the year as the faculty decides to emphasize certain components of their program or decides to practice a new instructional technique, such as critical questioning.

The walk-through strategy works best when everyone—both the observer and the observed—knows and understands its purpose and focus.

Dialogue

A third common feature of the well-designed walk-through is that it results in a dialogue between the principal and the teacher who has been observed. The dialogue begins with the principal giving feedback about what was seen and heard. According to authors Hall and Hord

(2000) this brief, one-on-one, focused feedback is the most powerful staff development approach available to impact teacher behavior. Feedback often takes the form of reflective questions, such as “Why did you group your students for that activity?” or “How did you develop the criteria for posting student work?” The goal of the dialogue is twofold: to encourage teachers to reflect on their classroom practice and to inform the principal about how that practice can be supported. Principals also can talk about schoolwide trends they have identified and make suggestions for classrooms to visit or for specific professional development (Downey et al., 2004). When principals and teachers can talk openly about what matters in the classroom, the possibilities for continuous improvement are increased significantly.

Variations on the Theme

Although the walk-through can be an effective strategy to increase principal instructional leadership, it also can be employed as a tool to promote teacher leadership and build professional learning communities. Once teachers are trained in the basic principles of the walk-through, it can be used in a variety of ways. In one school, all third-grade teachers might agree to visit each other’s classrooms, focusing on consistency and coherence. In another, the walk-through might take place after school and engage the entire staff in examining how classroom set-up and structures support student learning. “No matter how schools tailor the process,” say authors

Blatt, Linsley, and Smith (2005), “the essentials are the same—teachers learning from teachers in a non-evaluative way, talking about their craft, and developing lessons that will improve student achievement.”

Others take a team approach to walk-throughs. This strategy deploys a group as large as five or six. The observers meet beforehand to decide the focus, and then each team member is assigned to observe a specific aspect of that focus. When the walk-throughs are completed, team members meet to debrief, and written feedback is shared with the teachers who have been observed. Team members might include the principal, teachers, instructional coaches, or even staff from a neighboring school (Richardson, 2001).

Conclusion

The walk-through can be a practical, useful strategy to support improved teaching and learning in any school. But careful attention must be paid to its organization and use to keep the walk-through from becoming just another educational fad. Regardless of its structure or purpose, the walk-through must be purposeful and focused. It must be done consistently and with a high degree of accountability. The effective walk-through results in increased dialogue and reflection about teaching practice on the part of both teacher and principal. And, most important, the walk-through supports improved teaching and increased student achievement.

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