

Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

Snapshots of learning

*Classroom walk-throughs offer
picture of learning in schools*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Nadia Carlson* steps into an elementary classroom and pauses at the back of the room. Her focus today is to observe exactly what students are doing. She scans each cluster of desks, making notes about the children who are engaged in the lesson and those who are not. She quickly dips down and quietly asks one student what she is learning. Just as smoothly as she has moved into the room, Carlson slips out the door five minutes later.

Classroom walk-throughs are not traditional classroom observations. They are shorter, more focused snapshots of learning in a single classroom in order to assist one teacher or across a variety of classrooms in order to create a bigger picture of learning in a school. Walk-throughs are

* Fictitious person

known by many names — walkabouts, instructional walks, learning walks, data in a day. Regardless of the name, the process is roughly the same: one or more observers spend three to five minutes in a classroom looking at one specific component of instruction. If there are two or more visitors, they debrief with each other for a short time after the walk-through. Finally,



whether there is one visitor or several, observations are shared, preferably verbally and soon after the visit, with the teachers whose classrooms have been visited.

Classroom walk-throughs were inspired by “management by walking around,” a concept that took hold in corporate offices in the early 1980s as a way of putting managers in touch with employees. By the mid-’90s, the idea has surfaced in school

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“A good baseline for any administrator is to do 20 minutes of walk-throughs at least three times a week.”

—Margery Ginsberg,
Powerful Designs for Professional Learning
(NSDC, 2004), p. 92.

“Speak quietly and quickly to at least two students, either at their desks or in the hallway. You might ask them what they are working on and whether it is interesting or important to them.”

—Margery Ginsberg,
Powerful Designs for Professional Learning
(NSDC, 2004), p. 89.

“Walk-throughs are useful for raising questions rather than drawing conclusions.”

—George Perry

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districts as a way for principals to gain a better understanding of what was happening with classroom instruction.

In the last five years, however, the use of walk-throughs has blossomed as teachers have become more comfortable opening the doors of their practice and principals more confident and skilled about offering feedback about teaching and learning. As the practice has become more widespread, the educators who are involved in walk-throughs has also become more diverse. Initially the domain of principals, instructional coaches and classroom teachers now frequently engage in walk-throughs.

“When teachers are involved in doing the walk-throughs, that’s when it really takes off in a school,” said George Perry, an educational consultant who estimates he does about 150 walk-throughs a year in various schools.

Perry calls the walk-through “one of the most powerful tools that educators can use to stimulate conversations around improving teaching and learning.”

Because it’s based on a school’s own daily routine, it’s the most valuable data schools can collect and it’s very valuable professional development,” Perry said.

READINESS FOR WALK-THROUGHS

Principals should introduce walk-throughs only when there is a high level of trust between teachers and administrators.

Teachers tend to be most concerned about whether the information gleaned during a walk-through will remain confidential, especially whether it will be used as part of their annual evaluation.

Information obtained in a walk-through is intended to be used with the teacher who was observed and no one else. That information should not be discussed with other teachers and notes from the observation should not go into a teacher’s file nor be used in an evaluation.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE

Principals can avoid much of the confusion about how information is used if they ensure in

advance that teachers have a good understanding of the process, Perry said.

He recommends engaging the school leadership team in the discussion. “It’s most helpful when the leadership team takes this to other teachers,” he said.

Initially, principals should announce in advance when they will do walk-throughs and what they will be observing. The focus could be the same for the entire school or it could vary for each grade level or department. The focus could remain the same for a week or for an entire month, depending on how frequently the visits will occur.

As walk-throughs have become more popular, more varieties of walk-throughs have emerged.

If a small group of observers is visiting a variety of classrooms, for example, the principal or school coach would assemble the visitors in advance. During that meeting, she would instruct visitors about the focus of the visit and each visitor would be assigned a task. One visitor might be asked to watch for student engagement in the lesson, another to note what is on the wall or the chalkboard, another to observe the materials students are using.

If a principal is visiting a variety of rooms alone, she still should identify the focus of her observations in advance. For example, she might walk through seven 3rd-grade classrooms and look at materials that students are using for the lessons at that moment or she might record whether cooperative learning is occurring.

“I used to tell teachers just to go on as if we’re not there, just ignore us. Now I recommend that visitors introduce themselves to the teacher. This is just a 30-second conversation with the teacher so the teacher can acknowledge that you’re in the classroom,” Perry said.

When a group of observers moves through a variety of classrooms, they should gather at the conclusion to speak about what they have seen. This is presented as factual observations, not just opinions. “Students were working individually,” *not* “I don’t know why students weren’t working with partners for this assignment.”

The principal or his designee should provide

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feedback to the teachers who were observed. Perry recommends that feedback include strengths (“I was impressed by ...”), questions (“I wonder about ...”), and, when appropriate, next steps. (“May I bring some teachers to see how you ...” or “I would like to talk with you about ...”).

ADMINISTRATIVE WALK-THROUGHS

Using walk-throughs has changed the atmosphere at Lomax Junior High School in LaPorte, Texas, said principal Leigh Wall. “They put the focus on learning. It’s not about what kids are doing, it’s about what they’re learning,” Wall said.

Wall has been doing walk-throughs at Lomax for two years and typically visits about 20 classrooms a week. So far, the building’s three administrators and the department heads have done all of the walkthroughs. Each administrator focuses on one grade and certain content areas and tries to get into about two dozen rooms each week. Department heads are expected to do one walk-through each week. Each uses a handheld device to keep track of the observations in individual classrooms. Data from the handhelds can later be downloaded into Wall’s computer, where she can quickly assemble information from a variety of classrooms to view a picture of learning in her school.

The LaPorte district provided a three-day training in the process for all principals; Wall paid to have her assistant principals included as well. She later trained teachers at her school in the process, even though only administrators were initially doing the walk-throughs. “I wanted teachers to really understand the process,” she said. During this school year, Wall plans to add teachers to the walk-throughs.

Teachers asked administrators to use the walk-throughs to determine if they were implementing Marzano’s nine instructional strategies. One of their discoveries was that teachers were not implementing the summarizing and notetaking strategy appropriately. Many of them were just having students copy notes from the board, Wall said. As a result of that, teachers

requested more staff development in how to appropriately implement that strategy, she said.

WALK-THROUGHS BY COACHES

Principals are not the only ones who can do effective classroom walk-throughs. The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) has trained more than 1,000 K-3 reading coaches in its process of student targeted classroom walk-throughs. New coaches learn the technique during a summer institute. Novice coaches observe a principal and coach prepare for the walk-through, do an actual walk-through in a demonstration classroom, and finally debrief their observations.

“This gives them a chance to see a walk-through in action,” said Georgina Pipes, who coordinates the reading coaches statewide.

“We always want a principal and a coach to do these together, although sometimes it might be a school’s whole literacy leadership team. Part of the message is that this is a schoolwide movement,” Pipes said.

ARI suggests that coaches do a walk-through in every teacher’s classroom once a month. That may mean that the coach is doing several walk-throughs on some days.

In the ideal situation, the classroom walk-through grows out of the regular data meetings that occur at each ARI school. In those meetings, the reading coach and grade-level teachers look at data for students in that grade. Together, they identify a struggling reader and the teacher describes her efforts to improve the child’s reading. “Often, she says she’s tried everything she can think of to help Johnny. That’s a signal that this is a good prospect for a walk-through,” Pipes said.

In that situation, Johnny and his learning are the focus of the walk-through. “It shouldn’t be like we’re hovering over Johnny. We talk about touching all four walls when we’re in a room. We don’t want the child to be aware that we’re looking at him. The kids become very accustomed to having adults in the room so often they’re not really paying that much attention to us,” she said.

The walk-through tells the coach a great deal about how she can support the teacher. “It’s a safe conversation if you’re talking about a student and his learning,” Pipes said. ■

“More than four or five visitors in a classroom at one time can be overwhelming to teachers and students.”

— George Perry

“Vary the times that you visit. Some weeks, go in at the beginning of a class, the next week, the middle of a class, then the end of a class. You want to ensure that you’re seeing a variety of times.”

— Leigh Wall

“Walk the entire room. Don’t get trapped at the door. Literally walk through. A good mnemonic rule is to touch each wall of each classroom.”

— Margery Ginsberg,
Powerful Designs for Professional Learning
(NSDC, 2004), p. 89.

Walk-throughs provide an opportunity to:

Reinforce attention to a focus on instruction and learning in the school's improvement plan.

Gather data about instructional practice and student learning to supplement other data about school and student performance.

Stimulate collegial conversation about teaching and learning through asking questions about what evidence is and isn't observed.

Learn from other participants through observations, questions, experiences, and perspectives.

Deepen understandings and practices by continuous feedback.

Source: Perry and Associates.

Walk-Through Plan

Preparation meeting

Time: 30 minutes.

- Assemble members of the walk-through team.
- The principal identifies the focus for the walk-through, the classrooms that will be visited, and why those have been chosen for visits.
- The principal invites team members to identify evidence that would support the focus. One team member records responses on a display board.
- Determine which team member will look for each type of evidence.
- Distribute feedback forms to each member.

Walk-through

Time: 3-5 minutes per classroom.

- All team members enter the classroom at the same time. Team members do not speak to each other during their time in the classroom.
- Team members sit at the back of the classroom unless they have a specific assignment to speak to students or examine student work.
- Team members make notes about their assigned area. If appropriate, team members may want to sketch out a map of the classroom that indicates the location of a piece of evidence they observed.
- At the end of the agreed-upon time, all team members leave the classroom together.

Debriefing

Time: 45 minutes.

- Walk-through team members assemble in the principal's office or other agreed-upon meeting place.
- Each visitor speaks about his or her observations. They provide specific evidence as well as attempt to present an overview of what they saw.
- Together, the team members identify trends, areas of strength, and areas that need improvement.
- Drawing on their own experience and knowledge, the visitors make suggestions about how to strengthen areas that need improvement.
- The principal makes notes on the discussion and collects the feedback forms. The principal will decide the best way to provide information back to the teachers whose classrooms were visited.

Walk-Through Individual Feedback Form

Date _____

Focus Question:

Classroom #	Teacher
Grade level	Subject

Make enough copies of this page so each visitor has one copy for every classroom he or she will visit.

All of the individual forms should be returned to the principal at the end of the walk-through.

Evidence that supports the focus. *We saw ...*

Evidence that was missing. *We expected to see but did not see ...*

Evidence that was working against the focus. *We saw evidence that contradicts the focus ...*

Adapted from the work of Perry and Associates. For more information about their work, contact George Perry, 781-934-6294 (telephone or fax) or e-mail info@perryandassociatesinc.com.

Walk-Through Group Feedback Form

As the group of observers debriefs, one individual records the group's observations.

The principal keeps the individual feedback forms and the group feedback form. Only the group feedback form will be shared with all teachers whose rooms were observed.

“Often, the physical setup of the room will cause you to be a distraction. If the door places you at the front of the room, quickly walk to the back of the room.”

— Carolyn Downey, *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through* (Corwin Press, 2004), p. 22.

Date _____

Focus Question:

Evidence that supports the focus. *We saw ...*

SPECIFIC EVIDENCE THAT WAS OBSERVED

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Continued on next page

Adapted from the work of Perry and Associates. For more information about their work, contact George Perry, 781-934-6294 (telephone or fax) or e-mail info@perryandassociatesinc.com.

Evidence that was missing. We expected to see but did not see ...

Four horizontal lines for writing.

SPECIFIC EVIDENCE THAT WAS OBSERVED

Five numbered horizontal lines for writing.

Evidence that was working against the focus. We saw evidence that contradicts the focus ...

Four horizontal lines for writing.

SPECIFIC EVIDENCE THAT WAS OBSERVED

Five numbered horizontal lines for writing.

Sketching a rough map of each classroom may help visitors recall where they saw certain evidence and make it easier for the observed teachers to understand some of the feedback.

“You must clarify for teachers that they are to ignore you and carry on with their work whenever you walk into the room, unless you specifically ask for their attention.... You cannot observe teachers who are engaged with the observers.”

— Carolyn Downey, The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through (Corwin Press, 2004), p. 22.

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resources / walk-throughs**“By the numbers”**

Margery Ginsberg, *Journal of Staff Development*, Spring 2001

This article describes the Data in a Day process as the author has used it to collect information about classroom practices that support student motivation. Available to NSDC members in the members-only area of the NSDC web site, <http://members.nsd.org>.

Classroom Walk-Throughs

Margery Ginsberg, in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning*, Chapter 8, edited by Lois Brown Easton

This chapter presents a rationale for doing walk-throughs as well as describing the steps for a successful walk-through. NSDC, 2004. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, <http://store.nsd.org>. Item #B248.

“Seeing through new eyes”

Joan Richardson, *Tools for Schools*, October/November 2001

This issue of the newsletter is devoted to a description of walk-throughs. Available to NSDC members in the members-only area of the NSDC web site, <http://members.nsd.org>.

Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through

Carolyn Downey, Betty Steffy, Fenwick English, Larry Frase, and William Poston

This book provides a detailed plan for doing a three-minute classroom walkthrough that is well-supported with a study of the relevant research. Corwin Press, 2004.

“Walk-throughs provide stepped-up support”

Corrie Ziegler, *JSD*, Fall 2006

This article describes how teachers in Edmonton, Alberta, moved from a culture of isolation to one of collaboration using instructional walk-throughs. Available to NSDC members in the members-only area of the NSDC web site, <http://members.nsd.org>.

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