How Walkthroughs Open Doors

Frequent, brief, unscheduled walkthroughs can foster a school culture of collaborative learning and dialogue.

Margery B. Ginsberg and Damon Murphy

Every Thursday, the associate principal at Spring Woods High School in Houston, Texas, spends 20 minutes walking through the school’s five Algebra classrooms during first period. He notes each classroom’s layout, the curriculum for the day, and the level of engagement among students. He speaks with one or two students in each class, asking them whether they understand the material and know where to get extra help. He notices similarities and differences among the classrooms and how teachers’ strategies influence student learning.

Returning to his office, he writes some quick e-mails: “Way to go!” to a teacher who was doing a particularly great job, and a message to the math department chair about how the visits went. The e-mails are typically brief and positive, but they may also contain a question, such as, “Would you mind if I share your approach to group work with our new teachers?” or “What have you found to be successful with the students who were messing around by the window? If their behavior is typical and you’d like to share ideas, I’d enjoy putting our heads together.” Sometimes he places a sticky note in a teacher’s box with a “Thank you!” and a positive observation.

During a walkthrough of English classes on another day, the associate principal gets caught up in watching a dramatic presentation of portions of King Lear in a 12th grade class. In addition to performing modern-day renditions of the play, students are reciting material that they have written themselves in response to a scene that they had studied. Moving on, the associate principal visits another 12th grade English class that is also successfully studying King Lear, but in a more traditional way. That afternoon, he sends an e-mail to the more traditional teacher stating that he appreciated her well-organized presentation. He also suggests that she might enjoy sharing ideas with the teacher whose students were making presentations of the material. A week later, the principal receives a special invitation to the more traditional classroom, where he finds students performing modern-day renditions of the play.

Benefits of Walkthroughs

Administrators usually visit classrooms only when they need to conduct formal teacher evaluations. A few, however, make a practice of stopping in and walking through a few classrooms every day. These frequent, short, unscheduled visits can foster focused, reflective, and collaborative adult learning; generally, teachers welcome the opportunities for feedback and discussion that walkthroughs provide. Yet, even though staff members are more likely to accept and admire those who make time for walkthroughs, many administrators omit them from their daily schedules.

Typically, they neglect walkthroughs because their professional preparation did not include practice in this approach. Administrators still tend to focus on visiting classrooms two or three times a year, following a protocol prescribed by state or district policy. Administrators also face urgent matters requiring their immediate attention every day, so putting off regular visits to classrooms seems justified, and they hope that visiting classes for evaluation purposes fulfills at least a minimum standard for instructional leadership. In addition, most principals do not have coaches to demonstrate the potential benefits of walkthroughs, even in

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schools where teachers regularly visit one another’s classrooms to provide collegial support.

What are the benefits of implementing a daily schedule of short, unscheduled walkthroughs?
- Administrators become more familiar with the school’s curriculum and teachers’ instructional practices.
- Administrators can gauge the climate of a school: Are students engaged? Are cross-curricular concepts part of everyday teaching? Are new teachers catching on?
- A team atmosphere develops as teachers and administrators examine instruction and student motivation and achievement together.
- Administrators establish themselves as campus leaders and instructional mentors, influencing teaching, learning, and ongoing school renewal.
- Students see that both administrators and teachers value instruction and learning.

Few administrative tools provide these benefits better than walkthroughs. Administrators report that these classroom visits also contribute to their own knowledge about teaching and learning, the essence of school renewal.

But how can administrators develop comfort and skill with this form of instructional leadership?

Getting Started
Administrators and teachers should work together to create a walkthrough protocol that makes sense from everyone’s perspective, with a schedule for reviewing the process after an initial trial period. Together, teachers and administrators can determine their school’s approach by asking several important questions.

- How can the walkthrough process contribute to our school’s approach to renewal?
- What are some of the reasons for conducting periodic walkthroughs? Who should visit classrooms? Which rooms? How often?
- What questions should observers bring to walkthroughs? What questions should observers ask students?
- What other data can we gather and analyze to complement insights from walkthroughs?
- How can we create a positive experience for all participants?

Basic Procedures and Questions
Each school must create walkthrough procedures and a set of questions that observers should ask to see the benefits during walkthroughs. At Spring Woods High School—a large, diverse, high-poverty, urban high school that has received national awards for its professional development and school reform—campus-based administrators are working together to set aside 20 minutes every day for visiting classrooms. This length of time might seem inconsequential, but 20 minutes a day across a five-day week, multiplied by the number of administrators in the school, computes to many hours of observation time.

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Replacing these 20 minutes with other responsibilities is easy; but the benefits of walkthroughs far outweigh the difficulties of sticking to the schedule.

Walk the entire room. Don’t get trapped at the door. A good memory device is to physically touch the back wall of each visited classroom.

The observer’s questions (Hall, 2001) can include the following:

Is there a clear academic focus? Can I ascertain the purpose and expectations of the lesson when I enter the classroom—through what I see on the wall or hear from the teacher and students?

What is the level of student engagement? In general, is the movement, sound, or silence productive? Is student engagement high (80–100 percent), medium (60–79 percent), or low (0–39 percent)? What specific student behaviors indicate the level of engagement?

What do the walls of the classroom show? Is the environment pleasant and innovative? Look for displays of
- Exemplary work,
- Specific scoring criteria (or specific standards and targeted benchmark skills),
- Writing samples with scoring rubrics,
- Helpful information on mechanics of writing such as capitalization and punctuation skills,
- Helpful information on problem solving, and
- Classroom agreements (ground rules).

How well do students understand the assignment? Select at least two students to speak to quietly and quickly, either at their desks or in the hallway. Ask them some questions:

- What are you working on?
- Why are you doing this work?
- Is what you are working on interesting to you?
- Is what you are working on interesting to you?
- What do you do in this class if you need extra help?

- Do you have a portfolio? May I see one or two examples of work from this class?

Students’ answers should go beyond identifying an assignment. The goal is for students to be able to identify the skills they are working on and why.

Encourage them to do their best.

Do students communicate effectively and demonstrate critical thinking skills? Do I see evidence of productive communication styles and higher-order questioning? Can students respond in ways that include personal perspectives and imaginative and thoughtful analyses of new information?

Observation Follow-up
Unless a teacher requests additional time to reflect together on walkthrough observations, administrators should keep their observation comments and feedback to the teachers simple. The administrators and staff should decide in
Advance on the purpose and format of the walkthrough feedback process. When discussing walkthroughs with teachers, observers may want to mention what they noticed, questions and compliments, and possibilities for improving equitable and high-quality student learning. In general, informational and supportive feedback is more productive than evaluative comments, with additional coaches or mentors available for more extensive support.

Walkthroughs in Context
At Spring Woods High School, walkthroughs complement other forms of professional development—such as peer coaching, videotaping, and reflecting on student work—and are part of an overall framework for collaborative learning. A team of parent, teacher, and administrative representatives helps the school maintain this framework. All staff members work together to examine many kinds of data—conventional and creative (Ginsberg, 2001)—and to develop a shared language of teaching and learning, a pedagogical compass that helps the community pull in the same direction. The district staff ensures continuity between school and district goals.

In other words: advocacy for constant school renewal operates at every level (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000).

Principals who are instructional leaders create, with teachers, structures that promote focused dialogue about teaching and learning. The demands of a school day, the school year, and shifting political agendas can easily interrupt this level of thoughtfulness. Nonetheless, challenging teachers and administrators to discuss the whys and hows of what they do is crucial for ongoing school renewal. In the context of a school’s collaborative culture, walkthroughs provide an effective structure for this kind of dialogue.

References

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