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aged 10 to 14

Matters

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Another Approach to Instructional Improvement: Walking for Awareness

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Roy Shawn Currie

Awareness walks can provide the backbone for creating a strong instructional climate in a school. They are an important part of the classroom instructional cycle—finding the target, taking the awareness walk, compiling data, planning professional development, and then repeating the cycle.

Finding the Target

One of Marzano's (2003) characteristics of effective teaching is the use of effective instructional strategies. Thus, the purpose of finding the target is to identify the instructional strategies already present in the school or to determine what best practices are needed to improve the overall instructional program.

The process of finding the target within a school starts with an analysis of the school's data, which can be derived from standardized tests, formative assessments, and common summative assessments. The analysis should entail identifying the trends in the data based on responses on specific assessment items. Data analysis also will include determining the strengths and weaknesses within instructional groups, grade levels, content areas, or the entire school.

Schoolwide trends represent the outer ring of the target. In order to move closer to the middle, educators must next analyze lesson plans in order to gain insight into the instructional practices used by teachers. The final step is to examine the professional development focus areas. The target may or may not be found at this time, but this allows you to move closer to finding it.

Rationale for Awareness Walks

Let the data drive the change by identifying the instructional

target. If the data do not clearly identify the need for change, the instructional leaders can go to the next step: observing classrooms via awareness walks, which involve visiting the classroom and conducting mini-observations.

As a former math teacher, I know it is not necessary to give students 40 problems to determine if they have mastered a standard. Just a small sampling of questions will provide a snapshot of the student's level of mastery. The same holds true for classroom observations. An awareness walk creates a snapshot of the instructional practices within a school.

Implementation

Step 1. Share information about awareness walks and their purpose with everyone in the school. Communicate expectations for all instructional practices identified on awareness walks by a team consisting of assistant principals, instructional coaches, departmental chairs, and other support staff. It is essential that the team and all teachers have clear guidelines as to what does or does not meet expectations as they relate to the selected instructional practices.

Step 2. Create a list of targets based on the data (e.g., differentiated instruction).

Step 3. List specific key items within the targets. For example, compacting may be a key item under differentiation.

Step 4. Provide walkers with data collection sheets by content and/or grade level (depending on the target) to document their findings. These sheets also will provide an opportunity for the walkers to ask students questions that are relevant to the target (e.g., what they are learning, the relevance of what they are

learning, and how they will use what they are learning). It is important that the collection sheets are used to focus on the quality of the items rather than the quantity.

Step 5. Walkers collect evidence that would signify the successful implementation of the identified target.

Step 6. Walkers provide specific and meaningful feedback to assist teachers.

Compiling Data

Data from the awareness walks is compiled by the members of the awareness walk team, who report the findings to the principal for further analysis. In most cases, other targets are discovered during the examination of the data.

The goal of the data compilation is to aid in setting individual continuous improvement goals for the school, or building capacity for individual teachers. The results should be presented in a faculty meeting so that all the stakeholders are informed. Presenting the data and collectively discussing the next steps will allow the teachers and staff members to become more involved in the overall instructional program.

Professional Development

Awareness walks can help schools develop into professional learning communities where teachers seek out best practices (DuFour & Eakers, 2002). The ultimate goal is to build the capacity of all teachers through professional development. In order for the professional development to be valuable, it must be differentiated to meet the individual needs of teachers.

The changes we make start with the classroom instructional cycle—finding targets, conducting awareness walks, compiling data, and providing professional development. Because making things happen for students is the ultimate goal, we need to study the changes we make and their effects on the capacity of our students (Joyce & Showers, 2002). The effectiveness of the awareness walks will be determined by the growth of the teachers. One might think of them as a series of small checkups along the way as compared with the complete physical that is done at the end of the year.

References

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Roy Shawn Currie is a teacher and instructional coach at Sandtown Middle School in Atlanta. His e-mail address is currie@fultonschools.org.