Effective Walkthroughs

During the past three years, my school district has used walkthroughs for a number of purposes and with increasing frequency. We were introduced to the process by a math consultant hired to help us deliver our newly adopted mathematics curriculum and to ensure student achievement benchmarks were met. During the walkthroughs we noted the math tools in use, the use of technology, and where student calculators were, among many other things.

Most notable were the occasions during which math was delayed or replaced for various scheduling reasons. The faculty and I were amazed to look back and count the number of times we had missed the core subject during the routine of the school year. Perhaps the greatest improvement we made as a result of the walkthroughs was to agree as a faculty that math and literacy would never be pre-empted. On late-start days, early dismissals, and assembly days, the schedule is now altered so that math and literacy are always taught, even if in condensed form. School scores in both areas improved that first year, leading the entire district to adopt the idea that math and literacy schedules will be honored on a daily basis.

Process and Purpose

We also have found success in collegial walkthroughs, a method in which a group of teachers views a lesson together and then meets to discuss student responses to the material presented by the teacher.

It puts the class in a goldfish bowl, but the teachers all enjoy seeing the different teaching and supervision styles in action.

Last year, we engaged in the accountability walkthrough, which examines items related to mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act. The targeted observations determine whether plan books are present and up-to-date, student work is on target with our district pacing charts, and that the teacher is following the school’s master schedule for the day.

To ensure that we were applying best practices to our walkthroughs, I first met with teachers to inform them that walkthroughs would be conducted by me or district personnel. They were made fully aware of what was expected and what would be recorded. Although the walkthrough itself is not designed to be a tool of formal evaluation, the information gathered could certainly be used in the teacher’s professional growth discussions.

I’ve found that many excellent teachers are unnerved by walkthroughs; the presence of a clipboard or laptop used by some of my colleagues changes the atmosphere in a room almost immediately. But teachers readily invite me to drop in to hear students read or see special lessons, and they know it is my routine to walk in a couple of times a day just for “kid contact.” I usually do not sit if students are doing group work, but elect to wander, looking at student work under way and on the walls. If the teacher is talking, I sit so as not to distract from the lesson. I also have found more success in walkthroughs when I leave my clipboard in my office. We developed a simple form with the teacher’s name, subject taught, plan book check, and a column for notes. This is easily completed after the class visit and seems to result in the teacher being much more relaxed while I am in the room.

The school needs to inform teachers of the process and purpose of the walkthrough and the administrator must develop a recording form that is efficient yet detailed. There is little question that to be a true curriculum leader one must be familiar with the curriculum, but it is a real advantage to actually witness it in practice!

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