

# Using Classroom Walkthroughs to Improve Instruction

Nancy Protheroe

Frequent five-minute visits focused on specific “look-fors” can give principals valuable information about what’s working—or not working—in their schools.

A program of brief but frequent classroom walkthroughs has become an increasingly popular strategy in recent years for informally supervising teachers and observing classroom activities. But what is it about walkthroughs that can help improve instruction? Are there elements of the process that should receive special attention in order to maximize their effectiveness?

Although there has not been extensive research on walkthroughs, the experiences of schools that have introduced the practice help to address both these questions.

## Why Use Classroom Walkthroughs?

Cervone and Martinez-Miller (2007) describe classroom walkthroughs as a tool to “drive a cycle of continuous improvement by *focusing on the effects of instruction.*” Ginsberg and Murphy (2002) discuss some specific benefits:

- 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 con-

cepts a part of everyday teaching? Are new teachers catching on?);

- A team atmosphere develops as teachers and administrators examine instruction and student motivation and achievement;
- Administrators establish themselves as campus leaders and instructional mentors, influencing teaching, learning, and ongoing school renewal; and
- Students see that both administrators and teachers value instruction and learning.

Principal John Skretta (2007) says that “their greatest value is that administrators can use them to gather data, which in turn can be used to prompt and provoke dialogue about instruction between teachers and administrators.”

## Walking Through a Walkthrough

Perry (in Richardson, 2001) describes the walkthrough approach as different from one that focuses on a single classroom because its intent is to create “a schoolwide picture made up of many small snapshots ... It’s a strategy for providing a school, not an individual teacher, with feedback about what it’s doing or not doing.” He cites a middle school where teams comprising the principal, an assistant principal, and three or four teachers go through the building about once a week. These walkthroughs follow a specific protocol, with time spent before each walkthrough to identify and discuss the focus of the observations, followed by a “debriefing” discussion among team members to identify elements that should be shared with teachers.

*Before going into the classroom, visitors would be assigned a specific task. For example, one visitor might be assigned to note whether and what types of student writing are displayed in the room, another to write down what is written on the chalkboard, and another to pull aside one or two students to learn what they understand about the writing process ... After leaving each classroom, the team of visitors goes down the hall a short way and spends about five minutes comparing notes. After visiting all of the classrooms for that day, the visitors assemble and spend about 45 minutes going over the evidence they have collected (Richardson, 2001).*

## The Key Elements

Perry’s description of the process makes it clear that observers—whether they are principals, teachers, or individuals from outside the school—are not simply wandering from classroom to classroom to gather general perceptions of what is going on. Several elements are critical to the success of the process.

**Making walkthroughs routine.** Many of the walkthrough protocols involve very short—typically five minutes and no longer than 15 minutes—visits to classrooms, which should be a “scheduled



part of the daily routine” (Johnston, 2003). You may be thinking, “How can five minutes be enough to get a sense of teaching and learning in a classroom?” Kim Marshall (2003), a former principal who conducted an average of four of these short visits every day for eight years, answers this question:

*If the principal wants to get a general sense of how a teacher is doing and then have a substantive follow-up conversation about a particular teaching moment, five minutes is plenty. True, it's a mere sliver of a teacher's day. But five minutes in a classroom is a long time.*

#### **Identifying the focus of the observations.**

Effective walkthroughs have a purpose. One principal describes the quick walks he and his assistant principal make through the school that target “specific things that we are looking for.” For example, “one week they might be looking to learn *Is the objective of the lesson clear to the students?* ... The following week they might [ask] *What instructional strategy is the teacher using? Is this an appropriate strategy to use with the lesson?* (Hopkins, 2008).

One approach to walkthroughs focuses on “look-fors”—“conditions that when present in classrooms enable students to improve their achievement and learning levels” (Graf and Werlinich, n.d.). Identifying them can provide a powerful—and collaborative—opportunity for teachers and school leaders to address questions such as: “When we visit classrooms, what should we see that makes an important difference in student success? Is there something that we should see in every classroom?” (Graf and Werlinich, n.d.).

**Visiting the classrooms.** Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, and Poston (2004) have developed a “three-minute classroom walk-through” model that includes five steps:

- Notice whether students appear to be oriented to the work;
- Review the curricular objectives being taught;
- Observe instructional practices;
- “Walk the walls” to look for infor-

## “Observers ... are not simply wandering from classroom to classroom to gather general perceptions of what is going on.”

mation on what has been taught previously or may be taught in the future; and

- Note the existence of any safety or health issues.

Other models have observers spending more time in each classroom, for example, to provide participants with opportunities to talk with students.

**Reflecting after the walkthrough.** Love (2009) discusses opportunities for collaborative inquiry by school staff—especially among teachers—as a structure that helps develop a focus on what is working and what is not in terms of teaching and learning. Reflection after walkthroughs is built around that concept, as described by Skretta (2007): “The best walk-throughs give teachers relevant, real-time data on their instruction ... Feedback on the walk-throughs should be specific to observed behaviors, focused, and descriptive of the level of performance observed.”

One organization promoting the use of classroom walkthroughs (Learning 24/7, 2004) identifies the type of reflective practice needed if they are to significantly impact teaching:

- A deliberate pause in the often-hurried pace of teachers and school leaders;
- Establishing a purposeful time for a close look at the data that have been collected;
- A willingness to be open to other points of view;
- An effort to consciously process your own thoughts—not simply leaving the classroom with general impressions;

- An intentional effort to gain new insights and understandings from both the observation and the analysis of data; and
- Action based on the findings of the observations.

### **Experiences of Schools Using Walkthroughs**

Rossi (2007) used the walkthrough observation process developed by Graf and Werlinich (n.d.) as the basis for dissertation research. At the elementary school level, Rossi found staff members believed the walkthroughs conducted in their schools had affected instruction with positive outcomes that included:

- Teacher sharing of best practices;
- Increased principal awareness of what is happening in classrooms;
- Increase in teacher time on task;
- Better principal understanding of curriculum gaps and inconsistencies;
- Better principal understanding of professional development needs;
- Improvement in the quality of student work;
- Improved quality of conversations about instruction; and
- Development of a common language around instruction.

One of the elementary school principals interviewed by Rossi (2007) was very specific about the benefit of using walkthroughs in his school:

*The more opportunities I have to get into the classrooms, the more information I have to talk with teachers about and the more that we collectively research good practice and talk about good practice and tap in on each others' experiences and practices ... They [don't just] come to talk with me about discipline problems, they come to talk about instruction.*

### **Getting Started**

Graf and Werlinich (n.d) recommend these steps for principals planning for classroom walkthroughs:

- Conduct a preliminary walkthrough to begin collecting baseline data

- around a wide spectrum of effective instructional practices;
- Conduct a meeting with the staff to establish clear expectations related to the purpose and process of the first walkthrough;
  - Establish a focus for subsequent walkthroughs by working with teachers to identify the “look-fors”—the specific elements of effective instruction or guiding principles of learning that they wish to target for implementation; and
  - Connect the “look-fors” to established standards. This is an important step with respect to developing a common language for staff and for establishing a matching set of indicators around instruction and learning. □

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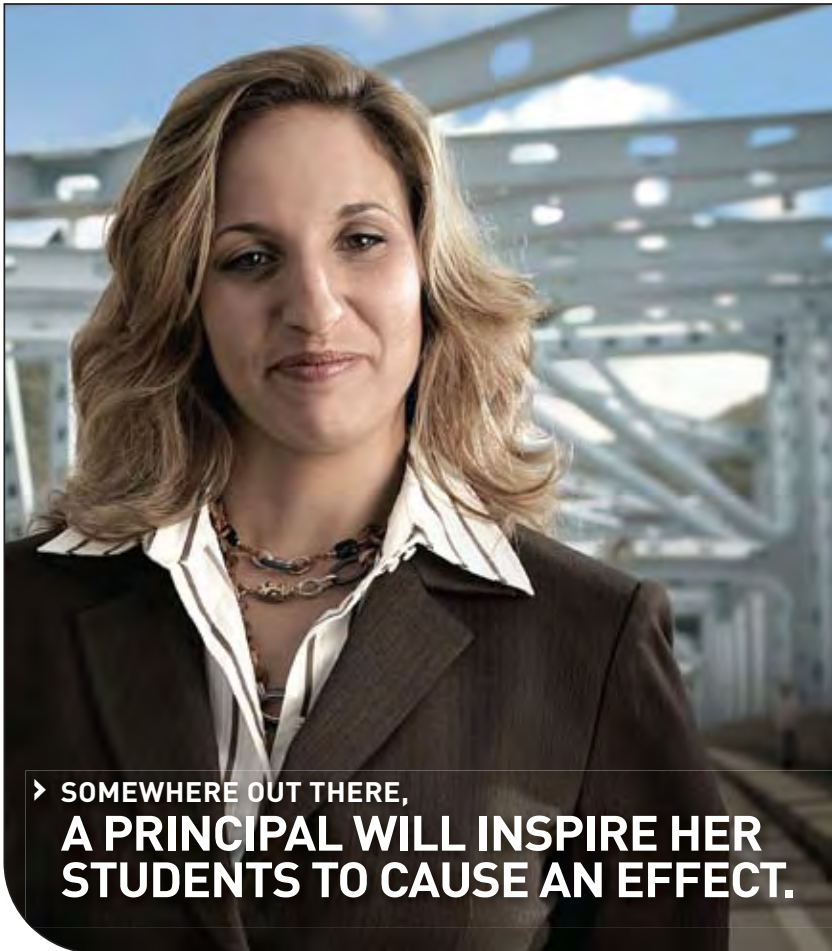
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### WEB RESOURCES

The Summer 2007 issue of *Leadership Compass* examines how school administrators can use classroom walkthroughs to improve student learning. The articles address the value of walkthroughs, how to perform them, and how to use them to embark on strategic school improvement.  
[www.naesp.org/Leadership\\_Compass\\_Archives.aspx](http://www.naesp.org/Leadership_Compass_Archives.aspx)

An article, "Using the Classroom Walk-Through as an Instructional Leadership Strategy," can be found on the Web site of the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.  
[www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter\\_NL\\_Feb07.pdf](http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Feb07.pdf)

Guy A. Rossi's doctoral dissertation reports on perceptions of school staff concerning the impact of classroom walkthroughs in schools.  
[http://etd.library.pitt.edu/ETD/available/etd-07292007-140309/unrestricted/Rossi\\_ETD\\_7-29-07.pdf](http://etd.library.pitt.edu/ETD/available/etd-07292007-140309/unrestricted/Rossi_ETD_7-29-07.pdf)

