Margaret Stevens (a pseudonym) had tears in her eyes. In 20 years as a high school English teacher, she had rarely felt such pride. Her colleagues in her large, urban school district had just finished visiting her classroom and other classes in her school, and had observed and acknowledged the teaching and learning that occurred.

Stevens, a teacher with the Edmonton Public Schools in Alberta, Canada, is part of a districtwide initiative to implement instructional walk-throughs as one way to increase student achievement and high school completion rates. Five years ago, when the Alberta provincial government began reporting high school completion rates, Edmonton Public Schools learned that its high school completion rates were low — only 64% of students who started high school finished within five years.

The district implemented a framework of support for teaching and learning, and a key element supporting the framework is instructional walk-throughs that provide staff with opportunities to learn from each other. Instructional walk-throughs helped move the staff from a culture of isolation to a culture of collaboration and support. They provided teachers and leaders with the opportunity to take an honest look at the level and the type of instruction in the classroom (Davidson-Taylor, 2000) and provided schools with data about their progress in achieving identified goals.

THE INSTRUCTIONAL WALK-THROUGH JOURNEY

Collaborative instructional walk-throughs were introduced over five years, beginning in 2001 and evolving as administrators learned from challenges. A continuous approach of pressure and support (Fullan, 2004) resulted in a successful collaborative model.

When the district first introduced the idea of collaborative instructional walk-throughs, a good number of
educators in the district’s 207 schools worked in isolation and rarely opened their school and classroom doors to colleagues, either within or from outside their schools. The districtwide student achievement services team first introduced school staffs to “safe” instructional walk-throughs in which observers looked for evidence related to the school’s instructional focus or districtwide expectations. Initially, feedback tended to be positive and very general. Staff at the hosting schools felt affirmed by the visits, but the feedback did not provide specific, detailed information for teachers to make changes to enhance teaching and learning. After two years, principals asked for more.

In 2003, the superintendent asked principals to spend half their instructional day visiting classrooms, observing teaching and learning, sharing feedback, coaching, and offering support. District leaders redesigned the walk-throughs to help principals with this shift in their work to being stronger instructional leaders by developing an observation guide based on research (Costa, 2001; Cawelti, 1999; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Marzano, 2003) that listed 18 indicators of good teaching and learning divided into three categories: classroom environment, instructional strategies, and students as partners. Principals and school leaders used the guide when visiting classrooms.

A year later, the process was streamlined after feedback from principals. Hosting schools were asked to select up to three indicators from the original guide that reflected the current focus at their school as well as to match the indicators with their school’s best practices. Identifying the indicators and matching them to current practice stimulated powerful professional dialogue among school staffs, who needed to decide which strategies they were all working on that they believed would have the greatest positive impact on student achievement. In the walk-throughs, observers were better able to focus their observations and provide more specific feedback.

During this period, district staff had honed their observations skills and understanding of the concepts listed on the observation guide. Hosting teachers were more comfortable having visitors in their rooms. Schools were hosting their own internal walk-throughs, as well as initiating walk-throughs with other schools in addition to having district walk-throughs. The culture was changing.

In 2005, district administrators decided to turn over the coordination of walk-throughs to schools. The student achievement services department trained 560 staff, including teachers, assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, and principals, to facilitate walk-throughs. Schools grouped themselves into trios so each could host a walk-through during the school year. The observation guide was replaced by a “critical question” that the host school posed for visitors to provide feedback. The critical question and indicators provided the hosting school staff a focus to reflect on their work and critically examine one aspect of that work. The process of identifying indicators encouraged school staff to develop a deeper understanding of one best practice.

### Course completion rates

at Edmonton Public Schools in Alberta, Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course cluster</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>Difference 2003-05</th>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 10 English</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>81.6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11 English</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>85.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12 English</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10 math</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>74.9</td>
<td>7.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 11 math</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>80.8</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 12 math</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 10 science</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>76.1</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 11 science</td>
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<td>82.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade 12 science</td>
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<td>Grade 12 social studies</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>78.2</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### ROADBLOCKS

The evolution of walk-throughs within Edmonton Public Schools was not all smooth sailing. Student achievement services staff worked closely with senior administration and the teacher’s union to ensure that visits to classrooms were not evaluative and did not violate the code of professional conduct. To meet those expectations, the team agreed that walk-throughs would involve key components:

- **Observers would visit at least three classrooms and give overall feedback about observations of the three class visits, not about only one classroom.**
- **The template for recording evidence was one blank sheet; evidence gathered in that box represented evidence about the school, not about an individual classroom.**
- **Observers spent a maximum of five to seven minutes in each classroom, enough time to gather data,**

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TAKE A WALK ON THE REFLECTIVE SIDE

The following guided imagery gives a picture of what happens during an instructional walk-through in Edmonton Public Schools.

It is 8 a.m. Monday. Margaret Stevens is looking forward to having groups of observers in her room today. Stevens is familiar with the process and knows that about 30 teachers and principals from six to seven schools are on their way to the library, the designated meeting room for this event. Her principal and the school’s instructional leadership team are welcoming the visitors and directing them to the library for coffee and snacks while networking with colleagues.

About 8:30 a.m., the principal formally welcomes the guests and provides an overview of the school’s instructional work. During this 10-minute presentation, the principal shares a “critical question” that helps focus the walk-through. The critical question is the area upon which the school staff would like observers to gather evidence and provide feedback. The school staff developed the critical question in a professional dialogue. Stevens recalls how much she learned about her own and her colleagues’ beliefs about effective teaching and learning in that conversation. She remembers how that conversation helped create a sense of community as teachers agreed on common goals for all staff in her school.

The principal helps organize the guests into groups of no more than five participants and a trained facilitator. Generally, these groups comprise teachers and principals from different schools so staff members learn from colleagues and develop a deeper district perspective. The facilitator will lead the group to visit three classrooms, with each visit no longer than seven minutes. During those seven minutes, visitors will gather evidence related to the critical question.

As the observing team enters her room, Stevens continues her instruction and tries to ignore the visitors. She knows what they will be looking for and understands they are not observing her, but the teaching and learning occurring in her classroom. Seven minutes pass quickly, and the facilitator motions the participants to leave the classroom and move down the hall. Here the facilitator involves them in a discussion about the evidence they gathered related to the critical question. The facilitator is careful to keep the conversation about evidence only in keeping with union policies — observers are not to discuss to what degree nor how well or poorly they thought the instruction went. This conversation is powerful learning for the group. The facilitated conversation provides an opportunity to expand observations and learn from each other.

The process is repeated twice more in other classrooms. After the second and third classroom visits, the facilitator also asks the observers to generate feedback for the host school in the form of reflective questions, such as “How will you know you have been successful with individuals following a group activity?” or “How have your assessment practices impacted achievement for students at risk?” The team is challenged to ask reflective questions that are neutral and nonjudgmental, but that still provoke deep reflection for the staff of the hosting school.

After the classroom visits, the whole group returns to the central meeting room. The facilitator works with the whole group to summarize the evidence and to generate and list each team’s most effective reflective questions — those that will help the school move forward with its work. This information is given to the school’s principal.

Guests then regroup and meet with colleagues from their own school to discuss how to take back to their own school what they learned. These conversations are a catalyst for change and deepen understanding of teaching and learning practices. Participants spend time planning next steps.

Later that day, Stevens’ principal shares with the staff some general comments from the feedback. Once again, Stevens feels intense pride and a sense of accomplishment that spurs her on to continue this collaborative work. She knows there will be more staff discussion about the feedback and the implications for moving the work forward in her school.

but not enough time to make independent observations beyond the specified indicators.

• School staffs were encouraged to create a critical question that focused on observers gathering evidence related to student learning rather than teaching practice (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

• A staff member with knowledge of the walk-through protocol and trained to ask reflective questions facilitated observers’ conversations outside of classrooms.

• The walk-through group provided feedback related to the critical question only in the form of evidence gathered and reflective questions. Focusing only on the critical question helped the schools become “self-managers, self-modifiers, and self-directors” of their work (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

• Teachers volunteered to have visitors in their classrooms; principals did not mandate that a specific teacher must have visitors.

SUPERB RESULTS

The collaborative instructional walk-through model enhanced student achievement and provided job-embedded professional learning, incorporating elements of what Dennis Sparks
identifies (2005) as the most powerful forms of professional development. Quotes from Edmonton principals support Sparks’ work:

- Sparks suggests, “Focus on improving student learning and provide personalized in-school and in-classroom assistance to teachers.”

An Edmonton school team noted, “Having completed the IWT process this spring, staff has recognized the importance of feedback and of the necessity to self-examine our teaching practice, individually and collectively.”

- Sparks states that effective professional learning activities “are practical and intellectually rigorous and produce complex, intelligent behavior that is the hallmark of skillful teaching and leadership.”

An Edmonton principal said of the walk-throughs: “Using the reflective questions for feedback is a great way of summarizing what was observed because it transforms simple observations into powerful seeds for thought that enable our staff to discuss their work at a much deeper level.”

- According to Sparks, good professional development will “deepen teachers’ content knowledge, expand their repertoire of instructional strategies, and connect them to one another in sustained, interdependent ways.”

An Edmonton principal said, “Some of the teaching practices that we currently employ are so much a part of what we do that we don’t realize how powerful they are to the development of literacy skills in our students. The (walk-through) participants pointed some of them out to us. … We are currently identifying our best practices to support our instructional focus, and the information provided to us (from the walk-through) helps us get a clearer picture of the areas of strength and need with regard to current practice.”

- Sparks says, “Create schools in which teachers feel emotionally connected to the larger, compelling purpose and to each other in a professional community.”

An Edmonton principal said, “The preparation and the IWT event made us look at ourselves as a larger unit rather than as an aggregation of specialized programs. It generated questions of what a secondary level teacher needed to see in a primary classroom as the foundation for future reading skills; it acted as a reminder to teachers of older students that their students ‘came from somewhere’ and reinforced the idea that our staff should do more inter- and intra-school visitations.”

- Sparks suggests, “Energize schools to pull resources that support their continuous improvement to use the best available knowledge and skills within and around them.”

An Edmonton teacher leader stated, “Overall, it was felt that for teachers, the IWT was an interesting and dynamic process. It allows all teachers the opportunity to participate in a professional development activity that facilitates growth in instructional leadership at the school level. The ability to go to another school and observe a variety of best practices also widens the perspective of what work is occurring in other schools and across the district.”

While walk-throughs alone may not have improved student achievement, studies have linked the practice with increased teacher efficacy and with increased student achievement (Frase, 1998). And evidence within the district demonstrates improvements: High school completion rates rose from 64.1% to 68.9% within the four-year period and data on high school course completion rates for 2004-05 (see chart on p. 54) show strong improvements and are a predictor of future high school completion rates.

Edmonton Public Schools’ journey is not over. Change is the only constant in this process. But change keeps teachers learning and growing and gets educators closer to the goal of higher achievement by all students.

REFERENCES


Davidson-Taylor, C.M. (2000, November). Is instruction working? Students have the answer. Principal Leadership, 30-34.


