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## Seeing through new eyes

*Walk throughs offer new way to view schools*

By Joan Richardson

In 1998, educators at Haas Middle School in Corpus Christi knew they needed to change: 47 percent of the students were being retained in their grade each year and some children were spending three or four years in the same grade.

“We knew we had to do something to change what was going on in the classroom. No one had given any instructional guidance to the faculty in years,” said Deborah Scates who arrived that year as principal.

The strategy that has had the greatest impact on changing teacher behavior and improving Haas has been Instructionally-focused Walk Throughs, she said.

“The relationships in the building have changed. Everything now is focused on staff development and improvement of teaching. It’s all about learning here,” Scates said. Student achievement on Texas’ statewide reading assessment has also improved, she said.

Although many educators are familiar with walk throughs, the walk through is a new twist on an old idea.

In more traditional walk throughs, someone — usually a principal or an outside observer — goes through the school with a checklist and notes a variety of activities or materials in the classroom. “Sometimes, they stop in a classroom for a long period of time. Sometimes, they just stick their head in the door. What they want out of it is not really well-defined so they don’t get much out of it,” said



George Perry, a consultant who works with several Corpus Christi, Texas, schools under a grant from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation.

Whether known as “instructional walks,” “learning walks,” or “data in a day,” the pattern of walk throughs is roughly the same: A team of observers is dispatched to numerous classrooms where they spend about 10 minutes looking for very specific things. At the conclusion, the observers assemble their information and share what they have learned with the teachers whose rooms have been observed.

Unlike a classroom observation which provides a view of a single classroom, a walk through

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*Walk Throughs*

# Walk throughs offer new way to view schools

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creates a schoolwide picture made up of many small snapshots, Perry said. It's a strategy for providing a school, not an individual teacher, with feedback about what it's doing or not doing, he said.

"You can gather a lot of really good information in a short period of time if you're very focused on what you're doing. The more narrow the focus, the easier it is to talk with someone about what they're doing," Perry said.

At Haas, a team walks through about once a week, Scates said. Sometimes, the observers are from other Corpus Christ middle schools whose principals work closely with Scates. She then reciprocates by doing walk throughs of their schools. But, nearly every week, a Haas team walks through the building. The school-based team includes Scates, an assistant principal, and three or four teachers. Teachers rotate on and off the walk through team. So far, about half of the Haas teachers have participated in a walk through as a team member. The rest will get their chance this year, she said.

## CLEAR FOCUS

As with any school improvement process, a school that wants to do walk throughs needs to be familiar with its data about student achievement and to have deep conversations about what teachers will do to improve student achievement. In those discussions, teachers must be clear about what is expected to happen in each classroom and principals need to ensure that teachers are provided with professional learning opportunities to help them make the necessary changes.

Walk throughs are a way of collecting data about the school's success in achieving its goals, Perry said. They provide a way for the principal to determine what additional support teachers need in order to achieve the school's goals.

At Haas, for example, the overarching focus is on literacy and one of its goals is to increase the amount of student writing.

Preparing for a walk through to gauge the school's progress on that goal, the visitors would assemble in the principal's office for about 30 minutes and discuss what they would expect to find in a middle school classroom:

- Visitors would see students writing.
- Visitors would see evidence of past student writing such as piles of written work in the classroom and examples of student writing posted on classroom walls.
- Students would maintain writing journals.
- Students would be able to explain the writing process.
- Exemplary student writing would be highlighted so students know the standard for good writing.
- Prompts for journal writing would be on the chalkboard.

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.

In most walk throughs, the teaching continues and the visitors sit in the back or walk quietly around the classroom looking for evidence, Perry said. If visitors are going to talk with students, teachers need to be aware of that ahead of time. The visitors do not speak to each other while they are in a classroom.

Visitors spend only 10 to 15 minutes in each room. The visitors repeat the same pattern in each classroom they visit.

## DEBRIEFING

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.

At Haas, Scates prepares two reports. The first is a general report about what the team observed; the second is an individual report for each teacher.

She takes that a step further by having a private conversation with each teacher within a day of the walk through. "I think the worst thing you could do is put the form in a box and not talk with them," she said.

Typically, her conversations sound like this: "I saw you were doing this. Can you explain why you were doing that? I noticed that you didn't do this. Can you explain why?"

"When the teachers answer the questions, that's where the learning comes in," she said.

Perry believes the walk throughs also produce information in bite-sized pieces that are easier for teachers to digest. "Talking to a teacher or to a faculty about a whole laundry list of things confuses the

## A walk through creates a schoolwide picture made up of many small snapshots.

issue. That allows teachers to pick and choose what they hear and what they respond to. It's easier to attend to a shorter list of things than a longer list of things."

Learning for teachers also occurs when they have a chance to get inside another teacher's classroom. "That really opens their eyes to the need for improvement and for consistency. They assume everyone else is doing what they're doing. They find that's not the case," Scates said.

Perry agrees. "Not until teachers get into each other's classrooms and see practices are they actually able to understand what's going on and why there's a need for change and for ideas about how to do that."

# Walk Through Plan

**Walk throughs provide an opportunity to:**

**Reinforce attention** to an instructional and learning focus in the school's improvement plan.

**Gather data** about instructional practice and student learning to supplement other data about school and student performance.

**Stimulate collegial conversation** about teaching and learning through asking questions about what evidence is and isn't observed.

**Learn from other participants** through observations, questions, experiences and perspectives.

**Deepen understandings and practices** by continuous feedback.

**Deepen understandings and practices** related to continuous improvement.

Source: Perry and Associates.

## Preparation meeting

*Time: 30 minutes.*

- Assemble members of the walk through team.
- The principal identifies the focus for the walk through, the classrooms that will be visited, and why those have been chosen for visits.
- The principal leads a discussion during which team members identify evidence that would support the focus. One team member records responses on a display board.
- Determine which team member will look for each type of evidence.
- Distribute feedback forms to each member.

## Walk through

*Time: Between 10 to 15 minutes per classroom.*

- All team members enter the classroom at the same time. Team members do not speak to each other during their time in the classroom.
- Team members sit at the back of the classroom unless they have a specific assignment to speak to students or examine student work.
- Team members make notes about their assigned area. If appropriate, team members may want to sketch out a map of the classroom that indicates the location of a piece of evidence they observed.
- At the end of the agreed-upon time, all team members leave the classroom together.

## Debriefing – Outside the classroom

*Time: 5 minutes per classroom.*

- Team members walk a short way down the hall from the observed classroom.
- Speaking quietly, team members quickly share their observations regarding the last classroom visited.
- Team members then proceed to the next classroom.

## Debriefing – Final

*Time: 45 minutes.*

- Walk through team members assemble in the principal's office or other agreed-upon meeting place.
- Each visitor speaks about his or her observations. They provide specific evidence as well as attempt to present an overview of what they saw.
- Together, the team members identify trends, areas of strength, and areas that need improvement.
- Drawing on their own experience and knowledge, the visitors make suggestions about how to strengthen areas that need improvement.
- The principal makes notes on the discussion and collects the feedback forms. The principal will decide the best way to provide information back to the teachers whose classrooms were visited.

# Walk Through – Individual Feedback Form

**Make enough copies of this page so each visitor has one copy for every classroom he or she will visit.**

**All of the individual forms should be returned to the principal at the end of the walk through.**

Date

Focus Question

Classroom #

Teacher

Grade level

Subject

**Evidence that supports the focus.** *We saw ...*

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**Evidence that was missing.** *We expected to see but did not see ...*

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**Evidence that was working against the focus.** *We saw evidence that contradicts the focus ...*

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*Adapted from the work of Perry and Associates. For more information about their work, contact George Perry, (781) 934-6294 (telephone or fax) or e-mail perry123@cape.com.*

# Walk Through – Group Feedback Form

**As the group of observers debriefs, one individual acts as recorder and compiles a record of the group's observations.**

**The principal keeps the individual feedback forms and the group feedback form. Only the group feedback form will be shared with all teachers whose rooms were observed.**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Focus Question \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Evidence that supports the focus. *We saw ...***

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

## Specific evidence that was observed

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

*Continued on next page*

*Adapted from the work of Perry and Associates. For more information about their work, contact George Perry, (781) 934-6294 (telephone or fax) or e-mail perry123@cape.com.*

# Walk Through – Group Feedback Form *continued*

Sketching a rough map of each classroom may help visitors recall where they saw certain evidence and make it easier for the observed teachers to understand some of the feedback.

**Evidence that was missing.** *We expected to see but did not see ...*

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**Specific evidence that was observed**

1. 

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2. 

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3. 

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4. 

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5. 

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**Evidence that was working against the focus.** *We saw evidence that contradicts the focus ...*

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**Specific evidence that was observed**

1. 

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2. 

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3. 

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4. 

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5. 

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# Resources for walk throughs

**“By the numbers,”** by Margery Ginsberg, *Journal of Staff Development*, Spring 2001. Describes the Data in a Day process as it has been used to collect information about classroom practices that support student motivation. Available online at [www.nsd.org/library/jsd/ginsberg222.html](http://www.nsd.org/library/jsd/ginsberg222.html).

**Data in a Day.** Concept developed by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory to gather data about issues considered important by staff and students. NWREL’s web site offers information to get a school started on this process. [www.nwrel.org/sepd/scc/studentvoices/diad.shtml](http://www.nwrel.org/sepd/scc/studentvoices/diad.shtml).

**“Data analysis by walking around,”** by Francis Barnes and Marilyn Miller, *The School Administrator*, April 2001. Article describing the walk throughs practiced at the Palisades School District in Pennsylvania. Available online at [www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2001\\_04/barnes\\_april2001.htm](http://www.aasa.org/publications/sa/2001_04/barnes_april2001.htm)

## From the NSDC library

Past issues of NSDC publications have focused on a number of topics that would benefit a school interested in the walk through strategy. This is just a sampling of resources that can be found at the NSDC web site, [www.nsd.org/library.htm](http://www.nsd.org/library.htm) or ordered through the NSDC Online Bookstore.

- Action research was the focus of the February/March 2000 issue of *Tools for Schools*. In addition, NSDC has published

**“Face to face,”** by Francis Barnes, Marilyn Miller, and Roger Dennis, *Journal of Staff Development*, Fall 2001 (Vol. 22, No. 4). Article describing how the Palisades School District in Pennsylvania using walk throughs as a school improvement strategy. Available online at [www.nsd.org/library/jsd/barnes224.html](http://www.nsd.org/library/jsd/barnes224.html).

**“Getting on Scale with Successful Educational Practice,”** by Richard F. Elmore in *Rewards and Reform: Creating Educational Incentives That Work*, edited by Susan H. Fuhrman and Jennifer A. O’Day. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1996). Includes description of the instructional walk throughs practiced in New York’s District 2, a school district that is highly regarded for its dramatic improvements in student learning. Check your local library or bookstore for a copy.

*Action Research Facilitator’s Handbook* by Cathy Caro-Bruce which offers extensive information about this process.

- Collecting data was the focus of the October/November 2000 *Tools for Schools* and the Winter 2000 issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*.

- New York’s District 2 was the focus on an article in the December/January 1999 issue of *Results*.

### Walk throughs featured at NSDC conference

One of the preconference sessions at the December 2001 NSDC Annual Conference in Denver will be devoted to walk throughs.

Carolyn Downey of the Palo Verde Associates in San Diego, Calif., will present “Walk Throughs with Reflective Feedback: An Effective Coaching Strategy for Increasing Student Achievement.” The daylong session will meet on Saturday, Dec. 1. Its session number is 106.

Downey will describe a brief classroom observation structure that focuses on determining which classroom objectives are being taught and effective teaching practices being used. The session will include videotapes and simulated classroom walk throughs.

More information is available in the *Conference Program: A Networking Guide* or on the conference pages on the web site at [www.nsd.org/conference01.htm](http://www.nsd.org/conference01.htm).

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# Ask Dr. Developer



**Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask.**

**(At least he thinks he does!)**

## Walk throughs are not part of evaluations

**Q** *My principal has concocted some plan to start dropping by classrooms more often to check on progress toward school goals. She says she's only going to spend 10 minutes in my room. I think that's supposed to reassure me but I'm worried about having her develop an opinion about my work during such a brief visit. What if she comes in at the same time one of my kids is acting up and I'm dealing with that instead of doing the lesson she thinks I ought to be doing? What if she comes in when I'm trying something with my kids that I haven't done before?*

**A** Many teachers are reluctant to have visitors in their classrooms for any reason. Before your principal begins doing walk throughs, she needs to lay a solid foundation with her staff.

Teachers should always be well informed about the overall focus of their school and what specific goals their school is working on during any school year. They should know the expectations for student learning and for instruction in each subject they teach. The staff needs to understand that walk throughs are part of a school improvement process and part of staff development.

They are not intended to be "gotchas."

Walk throughs still serve a limited purpose. Because they are brief — between 10 to 15 minutes — and very focused, they are not intended to function as full-fledged observations for teacher evaluations. Pieced together with walk throughs of multiple classrooms, they provide a good overview of a very focused topic. But that overview is more about the school's progress towards its goals than about individual progress.

Districts and unions typically have contract language that spells out how and when information obtained during any observations can be used in teacher evaluations.

Some districts even require visitors — except principals — to sign agreements stating that information from their visits will remain confidential and that they will provide feedback only to the teacher and will not use anything obtained during the observation in an evaluation.

Schools that want to use walk throughs also ought to consider involving the local teachers union president in early discussions. That will educate the union about the intentions of the principal and also ensure that the principal is aware of any union concerns that may be aroused.

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