THE LEARNING Principal ®

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

CLASSROOM WALK-THROUGHS:

Learning to see the trees *and* the forest

BY HOWARD PITLER
WITH BRYAN GOODWIN

For some, the practice of classroom walk-throughs, where principals or other instructional leaders spend only minutes observing classrooms to form an impression about the teaching and learning occurring in them, seems preposterous. But consider the study Malcolm Gladwell describes in the introduction to his book, *Blink* (Little, Brown, and Co., 2005).

After watching just two seconds of soundless video clips of Harvard professors they'd never seen teaching a class, students rated how effective they thought the professors would be as instructors. The researchers were surprised to find that not only did the students find the task easy, but their instantaneous impressions were highly correlated with end-of-the-semester ratings by those who actually took the classes (Gladwell, 2005). So, if college students can accurately assess the quality of professors from just two silent seconds of video, can principals assess the quality of a teacher's instruction after only a

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JANET GONZALEZ

Principal, Adlai Stevenson High School

Lincolnshire, Ill.

District: District 125

Grades: 9-12

Enrollment: 4,500 students

Staff: 350 teachers

Adlai Stevenson High School is known nationally as a model for teacher professional learning communities and as a high-performing high school that continues to improve. A suburban Chicago high school, its student population in 1.2% African-American, 4% Hispanic, 14% Asian, and 82% white. The percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch is 2.4%.

Q&A High-performing schools require taking risks, sharing responsibility

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Q. What do leaders need to do to continually improve a high-performing school?

It's keeping the focus on what we are trying to accomplish. The questions are, how do we know, what's the data, is this really a problem?

Keep asking questions. My job is to hold the yardstick up: Is this how we want to behave? Is this going to further our vision and goals? Those are the questions that are embedded into every conversation and to the work we do daily.

Q. What advice do you have for leaders in other high-performing schools?

Make sure your vision is firmly embedded — what is it you want for students? You do that through looking at data and the kind of questions you ask. The simplest place for schools to start is to look at failure rates. If, as professionals, we're comfortable having kids fail, then why are we all here? Kids failing really isn't acceptable. Looking at that data really forces you to look at what it means to fail, what is it students need to know and be able to learn, how do we know they're learning? What do we all value? For us, that led to a lot of common assessments and great conversations about what's important for kids to learn.

Q. How do you determine what questions to ask?

Look at how teachers are working together. Help provide time for that. And really focus them. That didn't happen overnight here. We didn't have the leadership structure, all the tools, the things that guide our learning teams.

You have to really empower teachers to take ownership of the curriculum and student successes and failures.

What's unique about this school is risk taking. We have things that we try, and they don't work. We ask what can we do, how do we move forward? How can we best support kids? Teachers suggest what that support looks like. It's being willing to try new things to get new answers. We keep pushing, asking how we can do it better. I think that's the hard part. We get really tired by the end of the year — we think, "Isn't that good enough?" But we keep asking the questions, keep saying, "How can we be more successful?" The idea of continuous improvement is ingrained in all of us.

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Q. Isn't it hard in today's climate to take risks?

No, because it's what we should be doing. They're calculated risks. We try not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Shared responsibility makes it easier. You have to listen to the people you're working with, the people working directly with the students. You have to listen to the parents; you have to listen to the kids. What do they need, and what's going to help them?

Q. How do you empower teachers?

Keep the focus on what's happening in the classroom. Team meetings are sacrosanct. We don't pull teachers out of their curriculum team meetings. Keep the message loud and clear that why we're here is what's happening in the classroom, to improve instruction, to give students everything we can. We have to keep the focus on academics.

Focus on the instructional core

Harvard's Richard Elmore has a reputation for speaking truth to power. He does not mince words when describing the essential ways to improve school performance: 1) increase teachers' knowledge and skills; 2) change the content; 3) alter the relationships of the student to the teacher and the content. When it comes to professional development, Elmore asserts (2002) that **the best professional learning occurs closest to home**, and that *the* leadership imperative is implementation of new practices.

Similarly, Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning's balanced leadership research found that a principal's knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment ranked high among 21 leadership responsibilities that correlate with student academic achievement. This leadership responsibility involves a hands-on approach to classroom practices and extensive knowledge about best practices in the field; it extends beyond platitudes about the importance of instruction. Principals need to actively develop their own background and expertise in the field of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the company of their colleagues (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, pp. 54-55).

Effective principals also need to **promote educators' deep understanding of content knowledge and make the use of research-based instructional strategies and a variety of classroom assessment a high priority in the school** (Roy & Hord, 2003, pp. 104-105). These objectives can be accomplished by **modeling the use and importance of deep understanding of content knowledge and research-based instructional strategies at staff meetings, committee meetings, and schoolwide events**. Teachers will believe that instruction, content, and assessment are important when the principal not only engages in substantive conversations about these issues, but also is willing to display that knowledge. The administrator can reinforce the importance of this knowledge during **classroom observations and conversations with faculty**. When the school leader takes time to focus on good classroom practices, she sends a message to faculty that this is an important issue for a school focused on student achievement.

In addition, the principal **provides time** for educators **to develop and use deep understanding of content knowledge, research-based instructional strategies, and a variety of classroom assessments**. The principal also needs a strong knowledge of the change process. The gap between knowing and doing (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) becomes as wide as the Grand Canyon when the new skills differ from familiar and comfortable habits. Educators can take between two and three years to develop these skills and use them at a high level of quality (Joyce & Showers, 1988). Acknowledging the needed timeframe, encouraging persistence and perseverance in mastering these new practices, and supporting continued use of new practices also falls under the principal's purview. The leadership imperative, according to Elmore (2002), is to invest in human skills and knowledge. Everything else is outside of the core.

NSDC STANDARD

Quality Teaching: Staff development that improves the learning of all students deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

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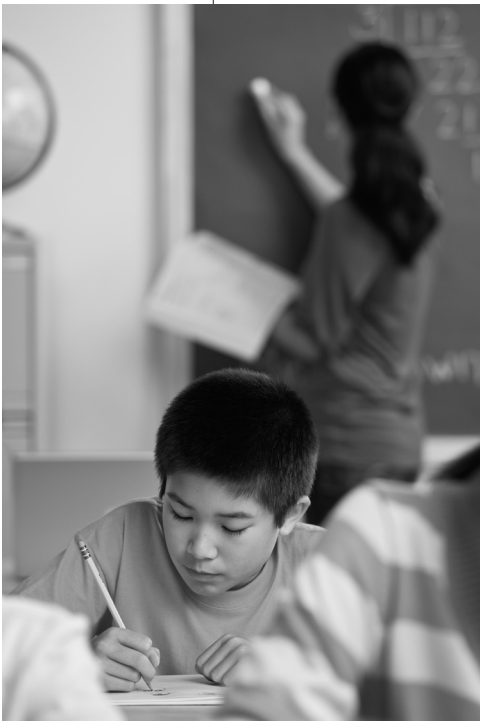
CLASSROOM WALK-THROUGHS

Purpose: To collect nonevaluative data from classroom observations to use in enhancing teachers' professional development that will improve student learning
Materials: Observation sheet
Time: 5-minute walk-throughs; follow-up conversation

DIRECTIONS

1. **Create a framework of what research-based techniques you are looking for when observing teachers.** You may use the nine strategies outlined in *Classroom Instruction That Works,* by Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jane Pollock (ASCD, 2001) and on the observation form included on p. 5.

2. **Conduct classroom walk-throughs.** Use the observation form here, or one you create. Make notes immediately after the observation, but to avoid the appearance of an evaluation, fill in the form after leaving the classroom. Look for:
   - The extent to which teachers use **research-based strategies**. Great teachers employ a variety of teaching strategies, understand the instructional purposes of each, and use each strategy intentionally.
   - **Student engagement.** Research shows teachers should vary student groupings to support their learning in different ways according to the learning goal. The key is to determine whether teachers are intentional in their use of grouping patterns.
   - **Technology use** by both teachers and students.
   - What **students are doing and learning**. Over time, students' responses when asked their learning goal will indicate how well teachers are communicating learning goals and whether students are engaged and intentional about their own learning.
   - **Levels of learning** according to Bloom's taxonomy. Both lower and higher forms of learning are necessary and appropriate in different contexts. However, if the majority of student learning is at the lower level, a discussion with the teacher is in order.
   - A correlation with **student achievement data** on summative evaluations.

3. **During a follow-up coaching conversation, ask teachers:**
   - Why did you use this particular strategy during the lesson?
   - Can you explain why you selected a particular student grouping strategy?
   - What pedagogical or learning purpose did you intend by using the selected technology?
   - How do you help your students connect activities to your learning objective?
   - How do you use different levels of Bloom's taxonomy in your lessons?
   - How does what I observed compare with your student achievement data?

Source: Adapted from "Classroom walk-throughs: Learning to see the trees *and* the forest," by Howard Pitler with Bryan Goodwin, in McREL's *Changing Schools* (Summer 2008).

Observation form

Teacher name _____ *Date* _____

Which research-based teaching strategies did the teacher use?
- ❏ Identifying similarities and differences
- ❏ Summarizing and note taking
- ❏ Reinforcing effort and providing recognition
- ❏ Homework and practice
- ❏ Nonlinguistic representations
- ❏ Cooperative learning
- ❏ Setting objectives and providing feedback
- ❏ Generating and testing hypotheses
- ❏ Cues, questions, and advance organizers

How are students grouped for their learning?
- ❏ Large group
- ❏ Small groups
- ❏ Pairs
- ❏ Cooperative groups (small groups with assigned roles for each member)
- ❏ Individual work

Are teachers and students using technology to support student learning?
- ❏ Teacher is using technology.
  What/how? _____
- ❏ Students are using technology.
  What/how? _____
- ❏ Students' responses to how often/when they use technology in their learning:

  _____
  _____
  _____

Do students understand their goals for learning?
- ❏ Students can articulate the learning goal for the lesson.
- ❏ Students are focused on an activity without understanding its relation to a learning goal.

Are students learning both basic and higher order levels of knowledge?
- ❏ The lesson exhibits learning at the lower rungs of Bloom's taxonomy (e.g. remembering, understanding, and applying).
- ❏ The lesson exhibits learning at the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy (e.g. analyzing, evaluating, and creating).

Do student achievement data correlate with walk-through data?

_____
_____
_____

Source: Adapted from "Classroom walk-throughs: Learning to see the trees *and* the forest," by Howard Pitler with Bryan Goodwin, in McREL's *Changing Schools* (Summer 2008).

Classroom walk-throughs: Learning to see the trees *and* **the forest**

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few minutes? Maybe, but short observations also can be badly flawed.

The key to making accurate decisions based on short observations is knowing what to look for. For example, Gladwell notes that when emergency room doctors and nurses in the Cook County Hospital reduced their lengthy interview protocol for chest-pain patients down to a quick EKG reading and three simple (but incisive) questions, they dramatically increased their ability to accurately assess whether people with chest pain were about to have a heart attack. Likewise, if principals don't know what to look for or misunderstand the purposes of walk-throughs, their observations can be useless, or worse, harmful to teachers and students. But if they are equipped with the right set of "look-fors" and a clear understanding of purposes, brief classroom observations can, in fact, be powerful tools for promoting great teaching.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Principals should ask themselves these six questions when observing classrooms:

1. Are teachers using research-based teaching strategies?

Although there's no single right way to teach, great teachers employ a variety of teaching strategies, understand the instructional purposes of each, and use each strategy intentionally. The nine strategies from *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001), for example, can serve as a framework for determining the extent to which teachers use research-based strategies.

2. Do student grouping patterns support learning?

One of the nine categories of effective instruction in *Classroom Instruction That Works* is cooperative learning, which includes supporting student learning through large groups, small groups, pairs, cooperative groups (small groups with assigned roles for each member), or working individually. Any of these strategies may be

> **NSDC'S BELIEF**
>
> Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

appropriate at different times and for different learning purposes.

3. Are teachers and students using technology to support student learning?

While educational technology is more prevalent in today's classrooms, many teachers still do not put these tools to best use.

4. Do students understand their goals for learning?

While conducting walk-throughs, principals should observe not only teachers' strategies, but observe what students are doing and learning.

5. Are students learning both basic and higher order levels of knowledge?

Classroom observations also should reveal whether students are learning at the lower rungs of Bloom's taxonomy (e.g. remembering, understanding, and applying) or at the higher levels, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

6. Do student achievement data correlate with walk-through data?

Principals should also observe classrooms through the lens of student achievement data.

In *It's Being Done,* Chenoweth provides the following anecdote of how Sheri Shirley, principal of Oakland Heights Elementary School in Russellville, Ark., uses classroom observations to help her high-poverty school raise student achievement (Chenoweth, 2007, p. 44):

Shirley spends a great deal of time in class-rooms herself, watching for effective teaching methods that can be shared. In one instance, she knew that the children in one classroom were mastering many more "sight" words (words read automatically without having to laboriously spell them out) than in others. ... she noticed that in the less-successful classrooms, if the children missed a flashcard word, the teachers would simply read the words to the children. In the more successful classroom, any time the children missed a word, the teacher would teach them a "trick" to read the word more quickly. She might point out, for example, that there was a "word within the word"

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that the children already knew. That simple practice on the part of the teacher was helping kids read better, and by noticing, Shirley was then able to initiate conversations among teachers about effective teaching practices.

For example, if the children already knew the word "and," they could see that word in the word "stand." When principals place their classroom observations within the context of student achievement data, they can dramatically increase the acuity of their observations and identify ways to improve teaching and learning.

HOW TO USE WALK-THROUGH DATA

A number of misconceptions exist about how to use data generated from classroom walk-throughs. Indeed, some teachers' resistance to walk-throughs is likely due to the fact they or their principals — or both — are unclear about how to use their observation data.

Coaching, not evaluating. For starters, the purpose of a walk-through is not to pass judgment on teachers, but to coach them to higher levels of performance. Walk-throughs are *not* teacher evaluations; they are a method for identifying opportunities for improvement and supporting the sharing of best practices across the school.

Measuring the impact of staff development efforts. In its best use, the walk-through process will provide strong data to schools and districts regarding the extent to which their professional development initiatives are actually making it into the classroom. If a district's focus is in differentiated learning, for example, and the data indicate that an overwhelming percentage of observations show students are working only in whole group settings with each student doing exactly the same type of work, there would be an apparent disconnect between the intent of the professional development and actual classroom practice. By systematically collecting and analyzing data from classroom observations, school leaders can determine whether staff development efforts are making a difference and guide real-time adjustments to the professional development they are offering teachers.

Supporting professional learning with walk-through data. Savvy principals also understand the power of sharing their aggregated observation data with school staff to support professional learning. For example, one elementary school we worked with in Montana discovered through walk-through data collected over a three-month period that teachers taught students in a whole-group setting in 67% of all observations. Through conversation with the staff and professional development on learning context, that number decreased to 56% during the following three months.

FINAL THOUGHTS: VIEWING THE MOSAIC

As the success of this school illustrates, one of the most powerful aspects of walk-throughs is aggregating the data across teachers and over time. One or two or even 10 observations of an individual teacher do not provide a clear picture of the quality of instruction within a school. But 10 visits each to 40 teachers' classrooms do provide a more accurate picture. Think of it as a mosaic. Looking at one tile in isolation tells you almost nothing. But when you see 400 of those tiles laid out in an orderly manner, a picture begins to emerge.

So, too, with classroom walk-throughs: When principals understand what to look for and the purposes of their observations, they are able to pull together their brief *Blink*-like observations into a more complete picture of the quality — and variations in the quality — of instruction occurring in their buildings. In short, the power of walk-throughs lies not only in seeing the trees, but also the forest.

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SPELL OUT YOUR CORE BELIEFS

If you've read or heard anything from NSDC in the recent past, you've no doubt memorized the NSDC purpose statement — why the organization exists:

Every educator engages in professional learning every day so every student achieves.

That valuable statement guides our actions and goals in our everyday work. But undergirding that purpose is a set of beliefs — what the organization stands for. NSDC has defined what we believe are the important core values we share:

- Every student learns when every educator engages in effective professional learning.
- Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.
- Remarkable professional learning begins with ambitious goals for students.
- Professional learning decisions are strengthened by diversity.
- Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

- Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

Have you outlined your own core beliefs? If not, consider what NSDC stands for and consider which of its beliefs fit into your own framework. Defining your beliefs may help you shape your work in the year to come.