



# ISSUES

## For Administrators Series

Monograph #13

2006 05 01

### A Guide to the Classroom Walk-Through

Among the many ideas found in the literature to assist school administrators, a method currently gathering momentum is the classroom walk-through, a mechanism that purports to ease the task of overseeing classrooms within the school. While frequent visits by principals to classrooms is considered a beneficial feature of most walk-through models, there is danger in adopting overly simplified procedures that do not mesh with Alberta's provincial policies and regulations.

Placing a check mark next to a descriptor on a list has little potential to improve instruction or inspire professional growth in any long-term, sustainable or meaningful way. Data collection within the teacher growth and supervision process must be grounded in clearly defined goals. The role of the data gathered must be carefully examined to determine its use in making decisions about teaching and learning.

A wide variety of models and resource materials are being marketed to promote classroom walk-throughs, but they must be assessed with the following criteria in mind: (1) Do they have the ability to meet real needs? (2) Do they achieve their stated goals? and (3) Do they have potential for abuse?

#### What Can We Learn from a Review of the Literature?

Carolyn J Downey is seen as the creator of the walk-through process of supervision; however, many others have developed materials, workshops and

resources for classroom walk-through procedures, including personal digital assistant (PDA) software and other electronic programs for data collection. A review of recent publications clearly illustrates the extensive promotion of the classroom walk-through in the United States. An Internet search also yields classroom walk-through resources, workshops and materials. See the bibliography for some of these resources.

There is a distinct difference of opinion about the purposes of walk-throughs. Learning 24/7 (2002, 6) states that a classroom walk-through is a process that "assists the district in focusing on the professional development and other support necessary for increased student achievement" but also states in its PowerPoint presentation (2004) that classroom walk-through is "a way to inspect what you expect." The title of Downey et al's (2004) book *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through: Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time* suggests that it is a book about supervision or supervisory practice. In a description of the process, however, Downey states:

Our approach is very different. It is about colleagues working together to help each other think about practice. It is *not about judging* a teacher's effective use of a given teaching practice. (p 4)

The walk-through concept is universally presented as a management tool for observation. Todd Keruskin (2005, 19) reports that some models are concerned with accountability; others are focused on staff

development. Classroom walk-through is often presented as the educational take on Management by Wandering Around (Downey et al 2004, 141–55). The management style that uses informal visits was developed by executives at Hewlett-Packard in the 1970s, but gained in popularity in the business sector after Peters and Waterman (1982) published *In Search of Excellence*.

In the view of Downey et al (2004), classroom walk-throughs include short, focused, informal observations; time for reflection; a focus on curriculum and instruction; occasional follow-up; and an informal and collaborative process (pp 3–5). Two- or three-minute observations provide a “short video clip of the moment” (p 2), and walk-through is “a time to gather information about curricular and instructional teaching practices and decisions teachers are making” (p 2). Downey believes that when the goal is “professional growth rather than evaluation of the individual ... a short visit is all that is required to provide ample data to promote teacher growth” (p 3).

Downey notes that the principal should spend the majority of the time in the classroom on Step 2 of the walk-through process “to determine the content of the student learning” and “to identify the curricular objectives” (p 23). The purpose of this step is to “ascertain what is being taught and where the objective falls in the district (or state) curriculum” (p 23). Thus, Downey sees walk-throughs as having not only a professional growth goal but also a monitoring function. Learning 24/7 (2002) also states that classroom walk-through assesses “curriculum and instructional alignment on a day-to-day basis.” Step 1 of its process, Snapshot of Teaching and Learning, involves, among other things, determining the lesson “target” according to “local curriculum documents” (p 11).

According to the National Staff Development Council (2006), 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 is not observed;
- learn from other participants through observations, questions, experiences and perspectives; and
- deepen understandings and improve practices through continuous feedback.

When occasional follow-up is provided, Downey et al (2004) state that it is to “give opportunities for reflective thought” (p 3). Downey explains that principals “will want to gather data about the curriculum and instructional decisions being made and notice their impact on student behavior” (p 3). Feedback is provided only occasionally (p 3) and no checklists are used. Downey claims, “Our approach is informal, informal, and informal! With this process you do not go into the classroom with a checklist of teacher skills you wish to see, nor do you make a duplicate copy of your notes that is given to the teacher and/or placed in a file” (p 4). Downey presents three goals for the walk-through approach:

- Reflective, self-directed, self-analytical, interdependent teachers who examine their own practices
- Teachers who are continually willing to improve their teaching practices
- Teachers who are committed to working for even higher student achievement

Downey emphasizes that the classroom walk-through is not a “gotcha!” approach and warns that “should our approach not be used in the way it was designed, it could be turned into a ‘gotcha’ approach” (p 9).

In the other literature on instructional walks (also known as classroom walk-through and learning walks), procedures described typically involve short visits, such as those advocated by Downey. The observations are supposed to provide a total picture of the classroom or school, based on many snapshots over time.

Most approaches for classroom walk-through call for either a single observer, usually the principal, or a team of observers who spend from 2 to 10 minutes (depending on the approach) looking for very specific things. Downey describes the collection of data for a walk-through as follows:

You will quickly develop a record-keeping system that makes sense to you and that enables you to record enough information but not too much. If teachers want to see what you are recording, show it to them. (p 106)

The National Staff Development Council (2006) describes a walk-through plan using a team approach. In a 30-minute preparation meeting, the principal identifies the focus of the observations. Team members spend 10–15 minutes in each classroom and make notes. They have a five-minute debriefing after

each observation without the teacher present and then proceed to the next classroom. At a final debriefing (still without the presence of the observed teachers) team members share observations of the classroom visits with each other and the principal, who collects written information. The principal is then left to decide what information should be shared (and how) with the observed teachers.

Downey et al (2004) note that observations need not be shared with the teacher on each and every classroom visit (p 3). Downey's model stipulates that record keeping for classroom walk-through should be kept simple and that the notes should not be placed in a teacher's personnel file (p 105). Downey also affirms that "under no circumstances should checklists be used!" (p 105). Not all models follow this paradigm. For example, Education World ([www.education-world.com](http://www.education-world.com)) makes available sample forms to document walk-through observations including a "Principal's Walk-Through Checklist," an "Observation Checklist" and several other similar data-collection forms. Preferred Educational Software and other organizations market electronic software using a checklist format such as "The Administrator Observer." Software developed for a Palm Pilot or Pocket PC has observers check items on a list, such as "Friendly, welcoming classroom" or "Skillful classroom manager." The software produces an "observations summary," which is a report of the classroom visit. Some software permits school divisions or principals to create their own checklist terminology or descriptors. Observations are limited by what is on the checklist.

## **The Alberta Context for Supervision, Evaluation and Professional Growth**

Alberta has developed a system of teacher growth, supervision and evaluation that is based on the premise that teachers are competent individuals who are constantly growing professionally. Policy 2.1.5—Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation (TGSE) deals with accountability and continuous professional growth. It is a provincial regulation that recognizes the excellent teaching provided by Alberta's teachers and their contribution to the achievement of Alberta's students, who are among the best in the world.

Teachers in Alberta are under constant supervision. The TGSE Policy defines the process, and the *Teaching Quality Standard* defines the criteria. *Supervision* refers to the "ongoing process by which

the principal or superintendent carries out duties in respect to teachers and teaching required under Section 20 of the *School Act*" and "identifying the behaviors or practices that are not in keeping with the *Teaching Quality Standard*." So, in the Alberta context, supervision is an ongoing process of judging a teacher's competence against prescribed standards. Through the professional growth plan process, principals have a direct connection with each teacher's teaching that is supplemented by ongoing supervision. Supervision is separated from and not part of evaluation.

*Evaluation*, a formal process of gathering information or evidence, occurs only upon written request of a teacher, for the purpose of making an employment decision, for the purpose of assessing the growth of a teacher in a specific area of practice, or if through supervision the principal has reason to believe that the teacher is not meeting the standard required by the *Teaching Quality Standard*. Generally, evaluation is not used with teachers who have demonstrated competence in the supervision process. A principal may, through the supervision process, identify practices that require evaluation. The information must be based on a source other than the teacher's growth plan.

*Teacher professional growth* means "the career-long learning process whereby a teacher annually develops and implements a plan to achieve professional learning objectives or goals that are consistent with the *Teaching Quality Standard*." Policy 2.1.5 requires teachers to complete an annual professional growth plan in which they address their professional learning needs and identify areas in which they need growth or improvement. Teachers must consider the educational plans of the school, the jurisdiction and the government when devising their individual plans, which also must be congruent with the established teaching standards. The principal reviews each plan with the teacher and continues ongoing supervision to remain aware of the teaching and learning taking place in the school. As noted above, growth plans are specifically excluded from use in evaluation without the teacher's permission.

The Code of Professional Conduct for ethical professional practice protects and nurtures the collegial relationships that give strength to the Alberta education system. Principals are protected from unfair discussions that undermine their authority; teachers are protected from unsupported evaluation that damages them professionally. The code requires

openness and transparency through the involvement of the individual being criticized in the discussion. It requires that any written report on the professional practice of a colleague be given to the colleague prior to submitting it to anyone else. Individuals who participate in unacceptable practices know that they are acting unethically by the standards of the profession.

The *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIPP) in Alberta provides individuals with access to information collected about them. It places severe restrictions on how personal information can be collected, stored and used. Information by and about colleagues stored in any employer-controlled files under most circumstances is accessible under this legislation.

## Walk-Throughs in the Alberta Context

Classroom walk-through procedures have been imported from the United States and appear to have been designed for different models of teacher supervision and evaluation. Much of the terminology in the journal articles and resource materials is incongruent with the Alberta context and does not align with Alberta's definitions of the terms *supervision*, *evaluation* and *professional development*.

Within the Alberta context, the process Downey et al (2004) describe appears to fit best in working toward professional growth or professional development. Alberta principals work with teachers through ongoing supervision to ensure the *Teaching Quality Standard* and to provide instructional leadership. Quality teaching is seen to occur when the result is "optimum learning by students" (*Teaching Quality Standard*). In this role, principals make frequent classroom visits and help teachers by providing ongoing guidance and support. Principals are seen as trusted, fair, competent supervisors who fulfill a supportive, guiding role. They are problem solvers, able to assist with resources to ensure optimal learning and continuous growth. There is room in the professional growth process for risk taking, encouragement and support as teachers incorporate new and effective teaching strategies. The Blue Ribbon Panel on the School Administrator (2005) "supports the principle that school leaders should be focused on student learning through instructional leadership" and that strong collegial relationships are vital to school improvement. The success of Alberta's students is in no small way due to the strength of this collegial teacher-principal relationship.

Principals who practise a classroom walk-through method in Alberta must be very clear about the purpose, goals and use of the observations. Principals must engage in an authentic dialogue with teachers to establish criteria and discuss goals. If the goal is to provide reflective feedback for professional development purposes within the context of supervision, any feedback from a walk-through must not be part of an evaluative process, at any time. Evaluation of inadequacies in meeting the *Teaching Quality Standard* requires observation that is much more extensive and thorough, using processes outlined in policy and common law.

Team approaches for classroom walk-through conducted in the manner of the National Staff Development Council (2006) example are not appropriate in the Alberta context. Debriefings after the classroom visit and providing feedback to the principal without the teacher present are highly inappropriate practices. Depending on what is shared and how, this may constitute a breach of the Code of Professional Conduct. The team approach provides an inappropriate opportunity for colleagues to make unsupported criticisms of colleagues verbally and in writing that become part of the group knowledge and the principal's documentation. Every person involved could be deemed to be acting unprofessionally. Where the standards of the employer or other educational leader are incongruent with the Code of Professional Conduct there have been suggestions that a policy or a practice authorized by an employer can override the code. This is false. The code is a matter of personal honour and integrity and is between each individual and the profession as a whole. No person or organization can relieve an individual from the need to act with honour and integrity. The code is authorized under Section 8(1)(f) of the *Teaching Profession Act* and is enforced through the professional conduct process of the Alberta Teachers' Association.

If the purpose of the walk-through is professional development, none of the documentation should be retained in any way or become part of the personnel file of the teacher. If the purpose is dialogue and teacher reflection, the original and only copy of the notes properly belong to the teacher at the end of the conversation. Record access must be in accordance with FOIPP. This is essential to build or enhance trust in the relationship between teacher and administrator, a critical element in a collegial atmosphere that encourages risk taking. Data from observations of a

teacher's performance from classroom walk-through visits must also be shared with the teacher.

The use of a walk-through method to assess curriculum alignment raises questions around the level of expertise of the principal. Does every principal have the knowledge or expertise to link the instruction they are observing to curriculum? This may be possible in states or school divisions where curriculum is locally developed or is a simple set of scope and sequence charts. In Alberta, detailed curriculum documents make this an extremely difficult task. Adding to the difficulty is the complexity of classroom makeup in terms of multiple student factors. It is inappropriate to comment on the instructional level or curriculum fit of a lesson based on a two- or three-minute observation, unless the observation is related to a very narrow part of the teacher's responsibilities. At the request of the teacher, however, data collection during a classroom walk-through could be based on the teacher's professional growth plan and a measure that is meaningful to that plan.

One positive aspect of the walk-through process is having principals spend time in classrooms on a regular basis even if visits are short. Policy 2.1.5—Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation encourages regular visits to classrooms by principals for the purpose of guidance and support as a means to promote high expectations for learning. The walk-through debriefing conversations are opportunities for reflection that could cause teachers, where a trusting relationship exists between teacher and principal, to stretch their abilities. Reflection could become part of the culture of the school, and professional dialogue centred on an “ongoing hunger for improvement” (Fullan 2005) could be the norm.

## Overview of the Literature

Fullan (2005) makes the point that “effective cultures establish more and more progressive interactions” (p 59) and that “capacity-building training that fosters and embeds professional learning communities” is the way to change school cultures for the better (p 60). The re-culturing that Fullan speaks about is a difficult process. Classroom walk-through may be an oversimplification of supervisory practice and professional discourse and even reduced to a simple checklist on a PDA in some instances. It could also become the “gotcha!” approach that Downey et al (2004, 9) warn about. In the context of creating a

meaningful cultural change, it does not appear to be an efficient technique. To effect true cultural change in schools is a complex process and “sustainable reform requires the deep ownership of teachers and principals” (Fullan 2005). He notes that change does not come from a quick fix. In the chapter “Leadership at the School Level,” Fullan discusses adaptive challenges of a school where there is not a “simple” answer. He points out that “adaptive challenges” in a school “require the deep participation of the people with the problem; that is why it is more complex and why it requires more sophisticated leadership” (p 53).

Dennis Sparks (2000) states, “A significant portion of staff development that will lead to improved student learning should occur every day on the job among teams of teachers who share responsibility for high levels of learning for all.” He continues by saying that “cultural interventions must help create norms that foster experimentation, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Without such changes, most teachers will find it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain the new practices they have acquired.”

## Conclusion

The classroom walk-through appears to be a growing trend. A variety of models have been created, and workshops and materials are actively marketed to busy administrators. Although some aspects of school walk-through procedures are positive and could lead to professional growth, there is a downside should the model adopted be overly simplified and incongruent with the Alberta context. Alberta administrators must adhere to provincial policies and regulations, such as the Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy, the *Teaching Quality Standard*, the *Teaching Profession Act*, the *School Act* and the Code of Professional Conduct to guide their practice.

Using a walk-through process to place a check mark next to a descriptor on a list does little to improve instruction or professional growth. Working with teachers collaboratively as a professional learning community, where professionals are able to share expertise with one another, is a more effective way to improve teaching practice and develop the capacity of the professionals in the school setting. Instructional supervision and teacher evaluation are complex processes that require reasoned judgment and are best achieved in an atmosphere of openness.

## Tips for Administrators

1. Continue to visit classrooms often, as it will positively impact the student learning environment and provide a personal professional growth opportunity for the principal as well as the teacher. Exemplary practices observed by the principal can be shared with other professionals. This is time well spent.
2. Have frequent collegial conversations with teachers about optimum learning environments. Ongoing analysis and reflection about the context and decisions that are made should be an embedded part of practice.
3. Be transparent with respect to the supervision and evaluation procedures that have been adopted. Ensure that the intent of administrator actions in the supervision process is transparent and based on an assumption of teacher competence. The process should value and encourage the full participation of teachers as partners in the process.
4. Consider all actions in the context of the rules of fairness and natural justice. These rules must be respected. A “gotcha!” approach is inappropriate.
5. Link observations, data collection and reflective dialogue to the *Teaching Quality Standard*.
6. Create a collaborative learning community that fosters complex creative thought around the dimensions of student learning.
7. Conduct regular reviews with teachers to discuss their professional growth plans and ascertain progress made toward achieving the goals teachers have established.
8. Contact ATA Member Services staff if you have any questions about the teacher growth, supervision and evaluation process.

## Bibliography

- Barnes, F, M Miller and R Dennis. 2001. “Face to Face.” *Journal of Staff Development* 22, no 4 (Fall).
- Blue Ribbon Panel on the School Administrator. 2005. *Leading for Learning: Interim Report and Recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Panel on the School Administrator*. Edmonton, Alta: ATA.
- Craig, B. 2006. “My Recipe for School Improvement: Walk-Through Observations on a Handheld Computer.” *The Administrative Observer*.
- Davidson-Taylor, C M. 2002. “Is Instruction Working? Students Have the Answer.” *Principal Leadership (Middle School Ed)* 3, no 3 (November). [*The ATA Library has a subscription to the hwwilsonweb.com website if you are interested in obtaining a print copy of the Web version of this article.*]
- Davis, E E. 2005. “Classroom Walk-Through with Reflective Practice.” Intermountain Center for Education Effectiveness, College of Education, Idaho State University. Workshop offered for teachers and administrators. [www.tec.leon.k12.f.us](http://www.tec.leon.k12.f.us).
- Dexter, R R. 2004. *Classroom Walk-Through with Reflective Feedback: Principal Perceptions on Implementation*. Academic Study. Laramie, Wyo: University of Wyoming.
- Downey, C J, B E Steffy, F W English, L E Frase and W K Poston, Jr. 2004. *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin.
- Edmonton Public Schools. 2005. “Facilitating Instructional Walk-Throughs.” *The Compass*.
- Fullan, M. 2005. *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin.
- Ginsberg, M B, and D Murphy. 2002. “How Walkthroughs Open Doors.” Occasional Paper. [csd.org/csdrpdc/howwalkthroughopendoors.pdf](http://csd.org/csdrpdc/howwalkthroughopendoors.pdf).
- Johnston, H. “Leadership by Walking Around: Walkthroughs and Instructional Improvement.” *The Principals’ Partnership*. [www.principalspartnership.com/feature203.html](http://www.principalspartnership.com/feature203.html).
- Keruskin, T E. 2005. “The Perceptions of High School Principals on Student Achievement by Conducting Walkthroughs.” PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.
- Learning 24/7. 2002. “Classroom Walk-Through with Reflective Feedback.” Workshop Resource Manual.
- . 2004. “Classroom Walk-Through with Reflective Practice.” Workshop PowerPoint Presentation.

- McEnery, D. 2005. "Getting Out of the Way—A Lesson in Change." *Principal Leadership* (May): 42–46.
- National Staff Development Council. 2006. "What a School Leader Needs to Know About Walk-Throughs." *The Learning Principal* 1, no 5 (February): 4–5.
- Peters, T J, and R H Waterman. 1982. *In Search of Excellence*. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- Richardson, J. 2001. "Seeing Through New Eyes: Walk-Throughs Offer New Way to View Schools." National Staff Development Council website. [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).
- Ryan, M P. 2002. "Making Every Minute COUNT." *Principal Leadership (Middle School Ed)* 3, no 3 (November): 14–16. [The ATA Library has a subscription to the [hwwilsonweb.com](http://hwwilsonweb.com) website if you are interested in obtaining a print copy of the Web version of this article.]
- Sather, S E. 2005. "Walk-Throughs Are on the Move." *Education World: The Educator's Best Friend*. [www.education-world.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin405.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin405.shtml).
- Skretta, J, and V Fisher. 2002. "The Walk-Through Crew." *Principal Leadership (High School Ed)* 3, no 3 (November): 39–41. [The ATA Library has a subscription to the [hwwilsonweb.com](http://hwwilsonweb.com) website if you are interested in obtaining a print copy of the Web version of this article.]
- Sparks, D. 2000. Foreward to *Evaluating Professional Development*, by T R Guskey. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin.
- Walker, K. 2005. *Walkthroughs*. Research Brief. The Principals' Partnership. [www.principalspartnership.com](http://www.principalspartnership.com).
- Wiggins, G, J L Brown and K O'Connor. 2003. *Guide for Instructional Leaders*. Volume 2. Alexandria, Va: ASCD.

