

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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The Classroom Walk-Through: The Upside and the Downside

The classroom walk-through is 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 will be a downside should the model adopted be overly simplified and incongruent with the Alberta context. Alberta administrators must adhere to provincial policies and regulations (the Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy 2.1.5; the Teaching Quality Standard; the *Teaching Profession Act*; the *School Act*; and the ATA's Code of Professional Conduct) to guide their practice.

Upside

The following positive aspects are common to most models of classroom walk-through.

Ongoing Supervision and Continuous Professional Growth

In Alberta, we have developed a system of teacher growth and supervision that is based on the premise that teachers are competent individuals who are constantly growing professionally. Ongoing supervision and continuous professional growth are aspects of the classroom walk-through that are congruent with our system.

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 teachers and their contribution to

the achievement of Alberta students, who are among the best in the world. It also recognizes that principals play a key role in the supervision process.

Teachers in Alberta are under constant supervision, so principals should already be in the habit of spending time in classrooms, which is promoted in various models of classroom walk-through. The TGSE policy defines the process and the Teaching Quality Standard defines the criteria. *Supervision* refers to the “on-going process by which a principal [or superintendent] carries out duties in respect to teachers and teaching required under section 20 of the School Act” and “identifying the behaviours or practices of a teacher that for any reason may require an evaluation” or 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 a prescribed standard.

Alberta principals work with teachers through ongoing supervision to ensure that the Teaching Quality Standard is met 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.

In Alberta, *teacher professional growth* means “the career-long learning process whereby a teacher annually develops and implements a



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as if he were
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ought
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**—Johann
Wolfgang
von Goethe**



plan to achieve professional learning objectives or goals that are consistent with the Teaching Quality Standard” (TGSE policy). Policy 2.1.5 requires teachers to complete a professional growth plan in which they address their professional learning needs and identify areas for growth or improvement. 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 and to have reflective dialogues with teachers based on the Teaching Quality Standard. There is room in the professional growth process for risk taking, encouragement and support as teachers incorporate new and effective teaching strategies.

Principal Awareness of What Goes On in the School’s Classrooms

Downey et al (2004, 2) indicate that two- to three-minute observations provide a “short video clip of the moment” and that the walk-through is “a time to gather information about curricular and instructional teaching practices and decisions teachers are

making.” As part of a principal’s monitoring function within the supervision process, the classroom walk-through gives the principal “many snapshots” over time, which will increase his or her overall general awareness of what is going on throughout the school. Having ongoing informal conversations with teachers about the learning environment of the school is beneficial in terms of providing ongoing feedback and support. This general awareness will be of great value to principals as they share good practice information with staff and in their communications with parents and students.

Reflective Practice Is Encouraged Within the Professional Learning Community

Downey et al (2004) present one of the goals for the walk-through approach as being “reflective, self-directed, self-analytical, interdependent teachers who examine their own practices.” Fostering and promoting norms of continuous improvement as an embedded element in the daily work

of teachers is something that the ATA strongly supports. Providing time for reflection, inquiry, coaching and mentoring will lead to sustained long-term benefits as long as there is a coherent plan with clear goals to guide practice.

Continuous Feedback

Coaching, the provision of ongoing feedback and support, should be a part of staff development within the professional learning communities model. One positive aspect of the walk-through process is that principals spend time in classrooms on a regular basis, even if the visits are short. The TGSE policy 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, where a trusting relationship exists between teacher and principal, can help teachers 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.

Development of a Collegial Principal–Teacher Relationship

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. The principal plays a key role in creating the norms and trusting relationships in the school.



Downside

The following are the negative aspects or potential problems of some models of classroom walk-through.

Overly Simplified Procedures for Supervision of Teachers

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 policies and regulations. The classroom walk-through may be an oversimplification of supervisory practice and professional discourse, and may even be reduced to a simple checklist on a PDA in some instances. In the context of creating meaningful cultural change, it does not appear to be an efficient technique. Effecting true cultural change in schools is a complex process, and "sustainable reform requires the deep ownership of teachers and principals" (Fullan 2005). Fullan makes the points 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, and change does not come from a quick fix.

Checklists

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. Downey et al's (2004) book on classroom walk-throughs affirms that "under no circumstances should checklists be used!" (p 105). Not all

models follow this paradigm. If a checklist is used, observations are limited to what is on the checklist. 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 professionals in the school setting. Instructional supervision and teacher evaluation are complex processes that require reasoned judgment, and they are best achieved in an atmosphere of openness.

No Duplicate Copy of Notes

In many models of classroom walk-through, the principal or observer is not encouraged to make a duplicate copy of the notes and provide them to the teacher. Our Code of Professional Conduct may be breached if providing notes is not part of the process. Data from observations of a teacher's performance must be shared with the teacher. Teachers must be provided with any notes and data collected and must have an opportunity to respond to the information and assumptions. 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 notes and copies properly belong to the teacher at the end of the conversation. Record access must also be in accordance with the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIP). 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.

Feedback Provided Only Occasionally

Downey et al (2004, 3) suggest that feedback does not need to be provided after the observations on every occasion. Our view is that if a lesson or part of a lesson has been observed by the principal, it is reasonable to expect that the teacher will receive some feedback, even if it is brief. Not providing feedback at all may lead to distrust and misunderstanding.

Data Collection Not Linked to Any Identified Goal

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. There is a distinct difference of opinion in the literature about the stated purposes for walk-throughs. Principals must understand the purpose of observation within the supervision process and must make sure that data collection, if it occurs, is within clearly defined goals.

Two or Three Minutes to Accomplish an Impossible Task

Two or three minutes in the classroom "to determine the content of the student learning" and "to identify the curricular objectives" (Downey et al 2004, 23) may not be enough time to accomplish these goals, especially if the principal is not familiar with the curriculum or subject matter. More extensive observations are required.

Gotcha!

Downey et al (2004) clearly point out that the classroom walk-through is not a "gotcha!" approach and warn that "should our approach not be used in the way it was designed, it could be

turned into a 'gotcha' approach" (p 9). The Alberta education system and regulations include the ATA's Code of Professional Conduct for ethical professional practice that protects and nurtures the collegial relationships that give strength to our 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 involving the individual being criticized in the discussion. It also requires that any written report on the professional practice of a colleague be provided 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.

Team of Observers

Most approaches to the classroom walk-through call for either a single observer, usually the principal, or a team of observers who spend from two to ten minutes (depending on the approach) looking for very specific things. The team approach is not appropriate in the Alberta context. Team debriefing after the classroom visit and providing feedback to the principal are highly inappropriate practices, as the team approach allows colleagues to make unsupported criticisms of colleagues verbally and in writing that become part of the group's knowledge and the principal's documentation. Depending on what is shared and how, this may constitute a breach of the Code of Professional Conduct. Every person involved could be deemed to be acting unprofessionally.

Tips for Administrators

1. Continue to visit classrooms often, as these visits will positively affect the student learning environment and provide a personal professional growth opportunity for the principal and 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.
3. Ongoing analysis and reflection about the context and the decisions that are made should be an embedded part of practice.
4. 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.
5. Consider all actions in the context of the rules of fairness and natural justice. These rules must be respected. A "gotcha!" approach is inappropriate.
6. Link observations, data collection and reflective dialogue to the Teaching Quality Standard.
7. Create a collaborative learning community that fosters complex creative thought around the dimensions of student learning.
8. Conduct regular reviews with teachers to discuss their professional growth plans and ascertain progress made toward achieving the goals teachers have established.
9. Contact ATA Member Services staff if you have any questions about the teacher growth, supervision and evaluation process.

For more information, please contact any staff officer in Member Services by calling the Edmonton office at 1-800-232-7208 or the Calgary office at 1-800-332-1280. To book a workshop on teacher growth, supervision and evaluation, ask to speak to Konni deGoeij, Joyce Sherwin or Mark Yurick.

References

- 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: Alberta Teachers' Association.
- Downey, C J, B E Steffy, F W English, L E Frase and W K Poston, Jr. 2004. *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through: Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin.
- Fullan, M. 2005. *Leadership and Sustainability: System Thinkers in Action*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin.

Legal Issues for School Administrators (LISA)

April 27, 2010

Hyatt Hotel, Calgary

10:30 AM – 5:00 PM

The Alberta Teachers' Association is once again offering a one-day seminar on administrators' legal obligations. Registration is free for school administrators and central office administrators who have retained the highest level of ATA membership. This year's sessions will focus on section 43 of the *Criminal Code of Canada*, allegations and investigations, and HR issues for administrators (sick leave and collective agreement interpretations, leaves of absence, the principal and clerical/custodial staff). An open forum for a question-and-answer period will follow.

For additional information or to register, contact Leslie Kaun at 780-447-9410 (Edmonton), 1-800-232-7208 (elsewhere in Alberta) or leslie.kaun@ata.ab.ca.



Q & A

GORDON THOMAS,
Executive Secretary

Parents taking photographs at school

Q: During our staff meeting a teacher asked about parents taking photos at celebrations, concerts etc. and then possibly posting the photos. Should we be telling parents not to do this or banning cameras (this seems drastic)?

A: The Ministry responsible for FOIP—Service Alberta—has directly addressed this very issue for FOIP: Who can photograph students at public events at schools? I quote their response (The source document is online at http://foip.alberta.ca/faq/school_jurisdictions.cfm)

“Classrooms are not public places. Schools control who has access to school property and to students. When students are at school, school staff act in the place of parents to protect students.

Schools can decide to invite spectators, including parents or media, to certain school events. This is a school policy issue rather than a FOIP issue. Once parents or other members of the public are invited (other than as volunteers within the school), the event becomes a public event, and anyone in attendance may take photographs without first obtaining consent.”

However, if someone—a parent, teacher, or professional—is taking the photographs specifically for use or for publication by the school, as a precaution I would recommend seeking consent from the people in the photograph before the photographs are used in school publications.

To find archived issues of *Leadership Update* go to www.teachers.ab.ca and click on Resources for School-Based Administrators.

Feedback is welcome. Please contact Konni deGoeij, associate coordinator, administrator assistance, Member Services, at konni.degoeij@ata.ab.ca.