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Classroom Walkthroughs

Where data-gathering and relationship-building meet for school improvement

By Kristin Rouleau & Tracie Corner

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Why walkthroughs?

Classroom walkthroughs are a widely used tactic, and as with any tactic, it's a good idea to know what strategy they support before knocking on that first classroom door. There are different varieties of walkthrough, each suited to a different purpose as part of your overall school-improvement strategy. The variations among them can be subtle. Match the walkthrough to what you're trying to accomplish, and you'll have a powerful addition to your data collection plan to inform progress. A mismatch, on the other hand, can mean squandered time and effort, and a missed opportunity to build staff cohesion.

Since walkthroughs are a highly visible sign of a school leader's commitment to improvement, it pays to enter into a walkthrough program with intentionality and staff understanding of the purpose of the walkthroughs. In this paper we'll review the characteristics of all good walkthroughs, describe several distinct types, and offer some advice on choosing the right type for your school's needs. We'll pay particular attention to the less formal end of the walkthrough and observation spectrum: those that aim to build staff capacity, collaboration, cohesion, and coaching, as opposed to those that are formal parts of the annual performance review process.

'Snapshots' of schools

Research on classroom walkthroughs for school improvement only began appearing in the literature within the last 5–10 years, and much of it is from non-peer-reviewed sources such as doctoral theses and blogs reporting on the experiences of a single school. Brown & Coley (2011) expressed hope that further research would establish how well walkthroughs can

If virtual learning is possible, so are virtual walkthroughs

How do you do a classroom walkthrough if there are no classrooms to walk through?

Schools are having to make all kinds of adjustments in 2020–21, and walkthroughs are no exception. Talking to students may be more challenging if your school has gone virtual. You may not be able to see student engagement in the same way. Still, standards of instruction shouldn't change. Principals still need to be clear with teachers about the purpose of the walkthrough and should, if at all possible, continue using the same templates.

Chat features and breakout rooms can be used to ask students what they're working on. If lessons are recorded, gather a group of teachers to watch a few lessons and observe how teachers are adapting to the virtual environment. You may note, for example, that different teachers are using digital tools in different ways to promote student collaboration, and initiate a discussion about which techniques seem the most promising.

After all, walkthroughs aren't supposed to be an opportunity to get some steps in, but to improve performance by creating a shared knowledge base among principals, teachers, and students. This remains eminently do-able in an online environment.

support changes in teacher behaviors known to affect student learning. Nevertheless, many researchers, including Bloom (2007), Brown and Coley (2011), and Stephens (2011), have developed enough confidence in classroom walkthroughs to be able to call them a transformative tool with the power to provide meaningful data to holistically support leaders, teachers, and student achievement.

Walkthroughs are often described as "snapshots" with the unique power to reflect stories within educational settings, including the instructional strategies in use at a school and indicators of student learning (Allen & Topolka-Jorissen, 2011; Bole & Farizo, 2013; Goldhorn, Kearney, & Webb, 2013; Kachur, Stout, & Edwards, 2010). Extending the metaphor, Stout, Kachur, and Edwards (2013) say classroom walkthroughs can "create an album of a building's strengths, patterns of practice, and needs" (p. 1). Walkthroughs, adds David (2007), can be an informal, nonevaluative measure for collecting valuable information that "can paint a picture to inform improvement efforts" (p. 81).

Multiple researchers have described walkthroughs as effective ways for instructional leaders (commonly principals, but also various other roles like assistant principals and teacher coaches) to play an active role in generating focused, qualitative data to inform schoolwide improvement efforts (Bole & Farizo, 2013; Starrett, 2015). In addition to the data, the process of participating in the walkthrough builds a sense of investment in the leader, which can grow into a determination to foster tailored teaching instruction and practice, helping the school thrive (Bole & Farizo, 2013; Brookhart & Moss, 2014; Bloom, 2007).

Classroom walkthroughs go by several names, including classroom visitations, learning walks, and mini observations (Bloom, 2007; Bole & Farizo, 2013; Brookhart & Moss, 2014). Irrespective of the name, walkthroughs, like other formative monitoring tools used for school improvement (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002), have in common their ability to *informally* collect data to promote school improvement (David, 2007).

Mentoring and peer coaching became a significant part of the educational landscape in the 1980s and 90s, and walkthroughs arose as a way for school leaders to participate in this newly supportive form of school improvement (Bloom, 2007; Garza, Ovando, & O'Doherty, 2016; Protheroe, 2009). The technique evolved from management practices in the business world (Brown & Coley, 2011). In fact, the term Management by Wandering Around, or MBWA, was trademarked by Hewlett-Packard. At the tech company, MBWA serves as an informal approach for managers to visit with their employees, hear their thoughts and ideas, understand the customer experience, attain qualitative data, and "keep a finger on the pulse of the company" (Stout et al., 2013, p. 3). Soon school administrators began emulating H-P, walking through classrooms during instruction to guide their own understanding of which practices were effective and ineffective, and to help them formulate improvements (Bole & Farizio, 2013); Bloom, 2007; Stout et al., 2013).

From tech to teaching

As walkthroughs grew in popularity among principals, various approaches arose that, one might say, formalized an informal approach to school improvement (David, 2007). Protocols, checklists, and software products gave principals a handy source of "look fors" while managing to maintain the walkthrough's emphasis on informality and individualization (Garza et al., 2016). Regardless of the medium, all such products had the stated goal of offering nonevaluative, actionable feedback to teachers to inform instructional and professional development goals, collaboration, and overall professional learning (Archer, 2005), helping

teachers to improve their students' learning (Pitler & Goodwin, 2008) and helping principals pinpoint classroom and schoolwide needs (Bole & Farizo, 2013).

Because these products, like walkthroughs themselves, are as flexible as principals need them to be, they do present one disadvantage for the researcher: There is very little in the literature addressing their quality, reliability, and validity (Brookhart & Moss, 2014). Nevertheless, the literature does offer some fundamental characteristics they all have in common. First is their informal and non-evaluative nature; walkthroughs are not used as performance assessments (Bloom, 2007; Stout et al., 2013). Teacher mistrust can undermine walkthroughs (Archer, 2005; Bloom, 2007) but by putting school leaders on the "factory floor," as Archer puts it (2015, p. 1), walkthroughs have the potential to build trust and confidence among teachers, who believe that if their school leader is doing a walkthrough, it really is for purposes of improving the school and not judging teachers (Steiny, 2009).

Secondly, walkthroughs must not merely collect data on teachers but engage them, building a culture of collaboration that shares leadership, is student centered, and embraces continuous learning of staff (Stout et al., 2013; Steiny, 2009). Walkthroughs work best—and the data they yield is easiest to put to use—when they are introduced progressively and integrated into an "open door" attitude toward learning together in a trusting space (Feldman, 2016).

Another key element to all successful walkthrough programs is consistency. They should be a routine element in a regular cycle of continuous improvement, and they should follow a general structure (Feeney, 2014; Stout et al., 2013; Protheroe, 2009) with predictable frequency and duration. Most research suggests that a walkthrough should only last between three and 10 minutes (Bloom, 2007; Bole & Farizo, 2013; Stout et al., 2013), and usually it should be unannounced (Garza et al., 2016). And, the more often walkthroughs occur, the more likely they are to become part of a school's culture and contribute to increased student achievement (Starrett, 2015). At a minimum, 10 walks per classroom per year ought to suffice (Oliver, 2009)—which means that principals are in classrooms every day.

Regardless of how walkthrough data is collected and recorded, knowing the purpose for doing so is important (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007). The school leader doing the walkthroughs needs to learn how to capture data that can be put to use in a way that is meaningful, objective, and (again) nonjudgmental (Feeney, 2014; Larson, 2007). The data can serve a wide variety of purposes. Some specific examples from the literature:

- Informing the engagement of English learners (Bloom, 2017)
- Exploring what contributes to student intrinsic motivation (Ginsberg, Bahena, Kertz, & Jones, 2018)
- Observing whether teachers have high expectations of their students' critical thinking abilities and engage them in higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy (Pitler, 2009)
- Conversing unobtrusively with students to gauge if they are engaged in their learning and if differentiated strategies for optimal learning are provided (Oliver, 2009)
- Taking note of how teachers enable students to think and work with the content of a lesson (Bole & Farizo, 2013)

The observational focus is guided by what is known in the literature as "look fors" (Allen & Topolka-Jorissen, 2011; Pitler & Goodwin, 2009). Often, "look fors" take the form of questions (Protheroe, 2009). Classroom walkthroughs should be used to search for evidence related to teaching and/or learning, to strengthen the teaching profession (which

is usually informed by standards), and directly or subsequently support student achievement (Bloom, 2007).

How this evidence gets shared is just as important for collaboration and the health of the learning community as the walkthrough itself. Providing feedback in the form of a debriefing or post-observation note, whether written or oral, is vital to maintaining transparency and trust among the staff as well as to applying the evidence for school improvement purposes (Bloom, 2007; Stout et al., 2013). Skretta (2007) says this should happen within 24–48 hours. The feedback does not need to be exhaustive. Rather, it should be targeted to foster collaboration. Example: The principal might single out a teacher's instructional technique or a tactic for reducing challenging behaviors for praise, and ask that it be shared with fellow teachers. Such feedback may help persuade dubious teachers of the walkthrough's benefits (Garza et al., 2016). Principals may also choose to aggregate data and share it with the entire faculty to illustrate how a specific instructional practice is beginning to permeate classrooms or to create urgency about the need for change.

No classroom walkthrough approach is necessarily exhaustive or perfect. But when guided by the fundamental components described above, any of them can contribute to systematic school improvement (Bloom, 2007).

How stakeholders benefit

Walkthroughs provide distinct benefits to various school stakeholders.

For instructional leaders: Leaders need to be seen. In McREL's research on effective principal leadership, visibility was identified as one of 21 key responsibilities with a statistically significant correlation to student achievement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Walkthroughs might backfire if they are interpreted as showmanship or attention-

seeking; however, staff, including teachers, do tend to view them as sincere, which bolsters their opinion of the leader's capacities (Garza et al., 2016). Performing walkthroughs may help staff feel that leaders have a greater awareness of the school setting, instructional practices, curriculum, and the ways that students and teachers are doing well or struggling (Brown & Coley, 2011; Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002; Weber, 2007; Westcott, 2010). In the course of a walkthrough a leader can gain knowledge that helps inform staff professional development, as well as builds rapport with students and supports their needs (Brown & Coley, 2011). Once they witness the school leader's commitment to ongoing school renewal, staff may be more likely to partner in continuous improvement efforts (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002).

For teachers: Teamwork, mutual respect, and a sense of supportiveness are the big benefits of walkthroughs for teachers (Garza et al., 2016). Walkthroughs can help staff members form and sustain trusting relationships (Bole & Farizo, 2013; Weber, 2007). As walkthroughs help schools transform into communities of learning, teacher development also can benefit (Cervone & Martinez-Miller, 2007; Steiny, 2009; Stephens, 2011). Schools with an active walkthrough process may actually arrive at better instructional practices than those without (Garza et al., 2016) when the walkthroughs are used to tailor professional development to teachers' needs. Teachers have reported increased satisfaction, self-efficacy, and positive attitudes when walkthroughs are used regularly in their school (Brown & Coley, 2011). And when walkthroughs are focused on improved classroom instruction, teachers say they perceive their principal—and the entire school—as more effective (Ing, 2013).

For students: Students have measurably benefited from classroom walkthroughs at the classroom, school, and even district levels (Stout et al., 2013). Once aggregated, the data collected in walkthroughs can support changes in instructional practice in ways that are student-focused and foster achievement (Starrett, 2015). Some ways that walkthroughs can support school and student achievement include identifying the most effective ways to teach lessons (e.g., lecture versus interactive) and what learning materials are needed (Archer, 2005). Evidence of curricular activities and instructional practices gained during walkthroughs can be aligned with student achievement data, thus identifying trends that need to be changed, and subsequently, actions needed to better support student achievement (Bloom, 2007). Seeing that the leadership and teachers of their school are collaborating on shared school improvement goals may lead students to do better work (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002; Protheroe, 2009).

Walkthroughs aren't necessarily easy to implement

While classroom walkthroughs offer a great deal of flexibility in how data is collected, how it is shared, and how it is used, researchers have noted a few common challenges. The most frequently cited challenge is time. Principals are frequently overscheduled and making time for walkthroughs can be difficult (Bole & Farizo, 2013). To combat this, Stout et al. (2013) strongly suggest keeping walkthroughs short, regularly scheduled, and highly prioritized. Expanding on the idea of prioritization, Skretta (2007) advises that walkthroughs should be built into a leader's regular schedule, because even if each walkthrough lasts just a few minutes, it can produce a great deal of potentially valuable information. Another tip from the literature: Whatever particular format a leader settles on, stick with it, because following a consistent structure supports fidelity (Goldhorn, Kearney, & Webb, 2013).

Another common challenge identified in the literature is something we've already hinted at: settling on a naming convention. Bandying about several names for the same process in your school can only cause confusion among the staff—and confusion can undermine the goodwill that walkthroughs are supposed to create. Whether it's called a "classroom walkthrough" or a "learning walk" or something else in your building, keep calling it that. The consistency will help build support for the walkthrough as an element in a school improvement strategy (Ginsberg et al., 2010).

One more challenge to bear in mind: If walkthroughs are supposed to be informal, some researchers question if they are a good tool to collect quantitative data and suggest it's best to avoid this temptation (Bole & Farizo, 2013). However, to support implementation of instructional strategies, a school's leadership team, along with teachers, may decide that quantitative data will provide valuable information. It is essential, then, that everyone involved in the process has a clear understanding of the purpose of the walkthroughs and the data being collected.

Next let's look at some of the types of walkthrough your school might consider. These are variations on a theme, so don't get hung up on the distinctions among them; what they have in common is far more important than the ways in which they differ.

Walkthrough type 1: Implementation support

A walkthrough focused on supporting teachers in implementing school improvement strategies is a practical way to collect data on a school's progress toward its goals. When a building's leadership team and faculty join forces to identify the look-fors for this kind of walkthrough, it sends a message that "we're in this together," and it's clear what data is being collected and for what purpose. This opens up a huge range of possibilities to support school improvement efforts. For example, a school might use an implementation support walkthrough to observe for student engagement levels, student ownership of learning, teacher use of learning objectives and success criteria, effective use of collaborative groups in the classroom, technology integration, the quality of student work produced under the direction of a particular teacher, student management strategies—the list truly is boundless. And when the leadership team shares schoolwide data about observations and aligns teacher professional learning with observed needs, teachers can focus their effort to develop greater precision in their teaching practices.

We saw this in action at an elementary school where we consulted. When the principal met with grade-level teams to discuss implementation of their schoolwide writing initiative, he asked the teams what would help them improve and what he should expect to see today—and in a month—related to the writing protocols they were teaching students to use as they responded to text-dependent questions. After visiting with each team, the principal proposed a set of look-fors for each grade band. Teachers reviewed and added to the list, which the principal then used when conducting walkthroughs. Each week at learning community meetings, the principal shared his observations and teams discussed what their next steps would be. At monthly faculty meetings, the principal shared schoolwide observations and asked teams to share their practices with one another. In this way, they were able to maintain momentum with the schoolwide writing goal and monitor implementation and progress in both teaching and learning.

Walkthrough type 2: Coaching

The coaching walkthrough is a bit less about the institution as a whole and a bit more about the individual teacher. It departs from ticking the boxes of a formal evaluation system and offers opportunities for principals, coaches, and colleagues to join forces to identify resources and strategies that are important to their students. The look-fors may be related to goals the teacher and principal or coach have identified together, or may be entirely teacher-driven. What's important is that these walkthroughs are about *coaching*, regardless of who is doing the observing. They are not evaluative, but focused on feedback to support teachers in professional growth.

At the elementary school, for instance, the principal and a 3rd-grade teacher agreed that the teacher and his students would be well-served by better alignment between lesson objectives and the learning tasks students were asked to complete. Further, they recognized that students needed to know *why* they were doing what they were doing. The teacher made a plan to explain learning objectives and link lesson activities to them, explaining to students how each activity would advance their learning. When the principal visited, he noted the posted learning objectives, and if students were already engaged in a learning task, he would talk with them, asking what they were learning. With each walkthrough, the principal was able to give anecdotal feedback to the teacher that guided his next steps. The principal didn't take notes; these walkthroughs were not part of the teacher's permanent record, but rather, an informal process of collecting and sharing data to contribute to teacher and student learning.

Walkthrough type 3: Instructional rounds

Think of instructional rounds, also called learning walks, as best-practices scavenger hunts: Groups of teachers and administrators set off together in search of specific "look fors" related to a significant finding from a school's data. Suppose a high school has six 9th-grade bio sections and two of them are performing better than expected. An instructional round would be organized to find out why, in hopes of identifying practices that can be replicated in other rooms.

Instructional rounds can be a regularly scheduled part of a school's routine, or they can be situational, arising in response to a newly discovered opportunity. What they all have in common is their focus on a specific

trend or practice suggested by a data review or informed by the goals being pursued. At one middle school we worked in, small groups visited classrooms to better understand how to use questions to support all learners. Observers then shared their *affirmations* (strategies already in use that they wanted to keep using, such as wait time); *reflections* (strategies they currently used that they wanted to reconsider, such as calling only on students with raised hands); and *considerations* (strategies they observed that they'd like to try in their own classrooms, such as randomly calling on students randomly).

Teachers used these observations to extend their understanding of questioning as an instructional practice and were able to see how questioning was used—or could be used—as part of their school improvement focus.

Other kinds of observations to consider

As useful as they are, walkthroughs probably shouldn't be the only type of observation conducted in a school. Other observations are typically longer and have specific processes guiding them. Most notable is the formal evaluation observation. It's conducted by a leader with positional authority, typically a principal, district leader, or teacher leader, to evaluate teachers' classroom practices vis-à-vis the district's teacher evaluation system. Formal observations are too often viewed as a compliance activity. However, when viewed as a support for continuous improvement, leaders and teachers can find formal observations and the teacher evaluation system to be useful components of professional growth.

Another type of observation is a peer observation. The benefit of peer observations is right there in the name. Lacking positional authority over one another, teachers can learn from one another and offer one another supportive, nonevaluative feedback. Peer observations, often part of a peer coaching process, involve teachers engaging in an observation-feedback cycle to learn from, and with, one another. Observations and feedback can be for one teacher to learn from another, for teachers to better understand what happens in their colleagues' classrooms, or for teachers to give one another feedback on their use of an instructional practice aligned to the school's improvement goals.

Tips for a successful walkthrough program

A good walkthrough is a good thing, but that's not all we're after: We want to build a strong walkthrough *program*, something that endures year in and year out as an integral part of your school improvement process. Since there are, as we've described above, different kinds of walkthroughs, each of these tips isn't meant to apply to every walkthrough, but in aggregate they will help you fine-tune each walkthrough to its intended purpose.

Don't walk alone. If you're a principal, you need to see and be seen, but don't forget the importance of distributed leadership. If staffing in your building and district can accommodate it, include instructional coaches, teacher leaders, classroom teachers, and/or district leaders in your walkthroughs. Have conversations about what you see, what you're learning, and how it can support the whole school. Ask questions like, "What did Mr. Rivera do to prepare his students to engage in robust, on-task, student-to-student talk?" or "Ms. Painter, Mr. Thomas, and the entire 3rd-grade

team all asked questions that really stimulated discussion and curiosity. How did they learn how to ask those 'just right' questions?" These conversations can be opportunities for everyone to contribute and learn, and can catalyze an inquiry-driven learning process in your school.

Build walkthroughs into your schedule. This demonstrates that you're undertaking them with forethought, not as an afterthought. Consider beginning and ending each day with a set of walkthroughs, but also consider scheduling them at different times during the day so you develop a fuller picture of what's happening across your school. If you miss a day, move on to the next day. Constantly trying to reschedule may result in a desire to simply stop doing walkthroughs. The more you communicate why walkthroughs are important and how they support your school improvement efforts, the more staff and parents will respect and protect your commitment to getting into classrooms.

Use a template tool—and share it. Just as students deserve to know their learning outcomes, teachers deserve to know what you're looking for—and better yet, they should help develop your walkthrough look-fors. Be clear about your purpose, how you will give feedback, and what the information you gather will—and won't—be used for.

Set challenging but reasonable goals for what you can do. Instructional leadership—working to reduce variability and increase quality in instruction across a school—is a top priority for principals. To do this, principals need to be in classrooms observing learning and teaching. We also know, because we've been there, that the principal's job is huge. Make a plan and use it. One principal we know had a plan that included doing walkthroughs the first 30 minutes every morning and, if possible, another 30 minutes mid-afternoon, focusing on the school improvement strategies teachers were working to implement. The office staff knew she would be out of the office during these times and if someone needed her, they kindly asked them to wait (unless it was an emergency, of course).

She gave feedback by leaving a short note on the teachers' desks or spoke directly to them, if possible. When she returned to her office, she

made a few notes about strengths and areas for growth *across the building*, and at each faculty meeting she shared what she had learned in the two weeks prior and what she was hoping she'd learn in the coming weeks. Her staff appreciated the transparency and consistency of her process, and looked forward to hearing about how they were advancing their practice as a collective.

Look for bright spots. If walkthroughs are new to your school culture, you may want to begin by accentuating the positive. That's not to say you don't notice the things that aren't working; rather, by illustrating bright spots, you're communicating what is possible. One principal, new to her building, noticed that several teachers allowed high-performing students to self-select projects to demonstrate learning from time to time—and similarly noticed that there were a number of students who seemed disengaged with a much more structured and less demanding task she had assigned. When conducting walkthroughs, this principal provided feedback to her staff in the form of a bright spot and a question: "The small group at the back table was highly engaged in their curiosity-driven project and could tell me all about what they were learning. I wonder, how would the other groups in your class respond differently if they were also given an opportunity to pursue a topic of personal interest?"

Have a great walk!

Walkthroughs are where data and purpose come together. Designed to build performance by bringing people into contact with one another and reflecting on what they observe, walkthroughs add collegiality to the school improvement process in a way that more-formal processes just aren't designed to do. Don't be fooled by the walkthrough's comparative informality; if walkthroughs can help the engineers and managers of Silicon Valley to innovate, they can do the same for any school. ■

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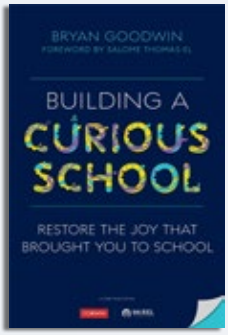
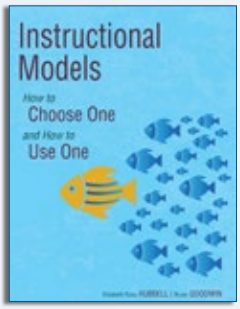


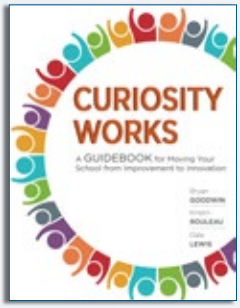
Building a Curious School: Restore the Joy That Brought You to School

Building a Curious School uncovers the many subtle ways in which formal education seems to hinder our natural curiosity and reveals how rekindling a sense of wonder in schools can prime the pump for learning, foster a culture of engagement, grow better educational leaders, and prepare students and staff to lead more fulfilling lives. Grounded in research, this engaging examination of curiosity shows educators how to intentionally cultivate inquisitiveness and wonder in teaching and learning.



Instructional Models: How To Choose One and How To Use One

Your school may be lacking a straightforward yet powerful tool that can work wonders in aligning expectations and talents: an instructional model. Join authors Elizabeth Ross Hubbell and Bryan Goodwin as they explore the variety of instructional models available to today's educators and explain how they can unite teachers and students in identifying—and achieving—classroom goals.



Curiosity Works: A Guidebook for Moving Your School From Improvement to Innovation

Take charge of your school's learning environment and culture and push past performance plateaus by rekindling the power of curiosity across your school. *Curiosity Works* guides school leadership teams through a six-phase journey toward powerful, continuous improvement and innovation, with 17 tools you can use to reflect on where you are as a school and where you want to go, and implement the action steps needed to get there.