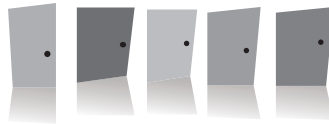


# ENGAGING TEACHERS IN CLASSROOM WALKTHROUGHS

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# CHAPTER 1



## Defining Teacher Leadership in Classroom Walkthroughs

*Teachers learn best from other teachers in settings where they literally teach each other the art of teaching.*

—Judith Warren Little

Classroom walkthroughs have become increasingly popular as a valued tool for the continuous improvement of schools. We interpret classroom walkthroughs as brief, frequent, informal, and focused visits to classrooms by observers for the purposes of gathering data on educational practices and engaging in some type of follow-up. Walkthroughs differ from full-period observations in that they consist of short, quick snapshots. They enable observers to record information over time on features of classrooms including instructional materials and strategies, curriculum standards and lesson objectives, levels of cognitive interaction, student engagement, classroom resources and displays, behavioral management, and more. Walkthroughs differ from most short-term classroom visits in that the observers have a particular focus and set of look-fors in mind as they collect data for subsequent discussion and action.

For the most part, walkthroughs have been used by administrators to better acquaint themselves with the day-to-day operation of a school. However, we know that limiting walkthrough observations to administrators significantly limits the impact of this practice. To obtain all of the benefits of classroom walkthroughs, teachers must be involved throughout the process—from investigating potential implementation to developing the protocol itself to planning for evaluation and revision.

When teachers visit one another's classrooms to gather information on teaching practices and student learning, a wealth of shared knowledge is collected. We are firmly convinced that, in terms of the positions of the people doing classroom observations, the further those people are from the classroom (for example, district-level staff observing classrooms versus teachers observing one another), the less instructional practice will change. In other words, teachers working with their colleagues have the greatest effect on improving teaching practices.

## **The Rationale for Involving Teachers as Leaders in Walkthroughs**

We found a number of important reasons why schools decided to include teachers in walkthroughs. The educators we interviewed were explicit in their belief that classroom observations are a valuable source of professional growth for teachers at every stage of their careers. These educators view walkthroughs as a means for teachers to observe, reflect on, and discuss their practices and to focus on individual, collegial, and schoolwide improvement. They know that the outcome of walkthroughs involving teachers will be greater consistency of instructional best practices across all grade levels and subject areas.

Moriah Martin, former staff development teacher at James Hubert Blake High School, points out that a “principal-only” approach to improving teaching and learning is not effective:

We knew that if teachers did the walkthroughs, they would observe the teaching themselves and could better discuss and identify strong

teaching practices. If only principals were doing the observations and then talked about what they saw with the teachers, it would not only be very “top-down,” but the school improvement process would not be owned by everyone.

Teachers observing teachers provides opportunities for the teaching staff to (1) note useful practices other than the ones they use; (2) ease the fear of trying something new; (3) feel motivated to improve their craft; (4) identify possible areas for their own professional development; (5) identify areas of practice for reflective dialogue with colleagues; and (6) accelerate improvement in student performance. Walkthroughs are another way for teachers to become responsible for their own professional growth and are an excellent complement to traditional professional development.

## The Benefits of Teacher Leadership

Teachers and students directly benefit from teachers collaborating and participating in walkthroughs. Although peer observations can be threatening, when walkthroughs are implemented in a carefully planned, considerate, and respectful manner, the rewards are great. The process will enable members of your school community to engage in dialogue and reflection about teaching practices. Furthermore, we believe that student achievement is directly linked to collegial collaboration, which is clearly supported by classroom walkthroughs. The whole walkthrough process includes real conversations about teaching, an understanding and use of a common vocabulary, and teachers asking for and providing one another with assistance. Taken together, these benefits have the potential to raise the instructional capacity of a school to a higher level of continuous improvement and performance.

We have professional expertise right in our own schools, and we need to take advantage of that, which teacher walkthroughs can help provide.

—Mike Matsuda,  
Coordinator for Quality Teacher Programs,  
Anaheim Union High School District

Teachers have traditionally worked in relative isolation, as so-called independent artisans exercising their craft behind closed doors (Bloom, 2007). According to Richard Elmore (2007), privacy of practice produces isolation, and isolation serves as the enemy of improvement. Isolated teachers perceive others as self-reliant, and they are reluctant to ask for help or engage in instructional conversations. They often doubt themselves and believe they are alone in experiencing the challenges and frustrations of teaching. Isolation prevents teachers from disclosing personal strengths, challenges, and needs. By contrast, we promote opportunities for teachers to observe other teachers in action, capturing and sharing the very best practices in teaching and learning. They can work together to support one another's professional growth and development. According to Jeff Nelsen and Amalia Cudeiro (2009),

Many teachers learn best by observing colleagues using the strategy they are attempting to learn themselves. Having each teacher observe several other teachers practicing a new strategy and discussing what they observed in the initial learning sessions can be a powerful support. It also gives teachers the opportunity to develop

Compared to other types of professional development, the walkthrough is the most enriching and stimulating. It is an opportunity to see "best" practices in action and debrief and reflect upon those observations with colleagues. What better way to learn? See how something is done, then discuss it to cement an understanding!

—Mary Lou Bettez,  
7th/8th Grade ELA Teacher,  
Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School

a common vocabulary around the new practices and sends a strong message that "We're all in this together." (p. 34)

Involving teachers as observers in the walkthrough process can transform the entire school into a learning community and build a culture that values the engagement of teachers in continuous and sustained professional growth. No matter how schools tailor the process, the essentials are the same—teachers learning from teachers in a nonevaluative way, talking about their craft, and developing lessons as a result

that will improve student achievement (Blatt, Linsley, & Smith, 2005).

As depicted by the examples in this book, we find that teachers are increasingly buying into the idea that walkthroughs are an effective tool for examining and continuously improving their practice. Teachers take charge of their own learning by collaborating with one another for personal professional development—learning from colleagues through observation, inquiry, dialogue, sharing, and practice. These walkthroughs help staff measure the progress they are making in implementing a new initiative, and they enable teachers to observe effective practices that confirm their own classroom behavior. They can also help teachers acquire new ideas and techniques through one of the most powerful means to learning—watching those ideas and techniques being enacted. Helping teachers feel comfortable with involvement in the walkthrough process is key to making it work for the entire staff as a true professional development and school improvement tool.

## Featured Schools

The basis of the work for this book came from our two-year study of 40 schools that were conducting teacher walkthroughs—representing 30 school districts in 17 states and 6 schools from 1 school district in Canada (see Figure 1.1 and Appendix A). The evidence shows that including teachers in the walkthrough process occurs among all types and at all levels of schools. As we studied these schools, our interest was not only in the ways they involved teachers but also in how they created the interest and motivation for teachers to engage in the walkthrough process. We found schools with a variety of approaches to walkthroughs, and we selected schools for our study that

- Implemented a nationally known walkthrough model or designed a brand-new model.
- Were at various stages of implementation of walkthroughs.
- Included different grade levels (elementary, middle, and secondary school).
- Represented neighborhood, charter, and alternative schools.
- Were of various sizes in terms of numbers of teachers and students.
- Included many different populations of students in terms of ethnicity and poverty rates.

- Represented all the geographical regions of the United States.

Our primary means for identifying schools that met these criteria were the following:

- Contacting key individuals from the 18 classroom walkthrough models featured in the book *Classroom Walkthroughs to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Kachur et al., 2010).
- Contacting a network of key educators across the country knowledgeable about schools where peer observations were occurring.
- Contacting executive directors of the ASCD affiliates, who in turn communicated the request to their members.
- Conducting Internet searches on walkthrough models and reports.
- Reviewing the literature on classroom walkthroughs.

In addition to traditional public schools, the study included a Native American school (Ganado Intermediate School), an alternative high school (Bridges High School), and a charter school (Arroyo Vista Charter School). The schools ranged in size from 80 to 2,690 students, with teaching staffs of 6 to 149. The schools represented wide variations of racial and ethnic mixes, and poverty rates ranged from 4 to 99 percent, based on free and reduced lunch program enrollment.

## Data Collection

We asked the educators in these schools to share details about their teacher walkthrough processes from inception to evaluation. The educators we contacted included central office personnel, building administrators, and many different kinds of teacher leaders. Our primary purpose was to acquire stories and recommendations we could share with our readers who want to engage their teaching colleagues in the walkthrough process.

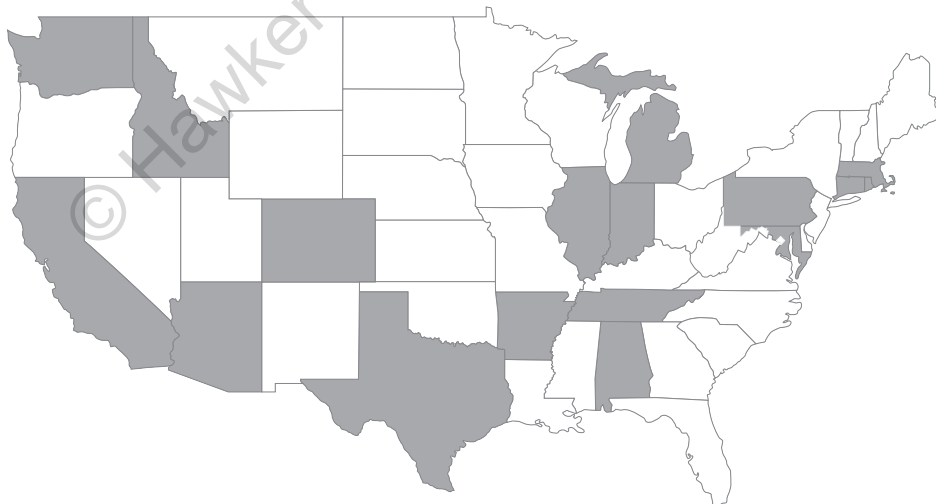
The educators with whom we communicated shared their experiences through questionnaires (see Appendix B), phone calls, and e-mails. One round of questions focused on what each school was doing to involve teachers in walkthroughs. The focus of those questions was primarily on the

- Reasons that led to involving teachers in walkthroughs.
- Walkthrough model used.
- Purpose of and participants in the walkthroughs.
- Walkthrough logistics (such as coordination, scheduling, tracking, frequency, and length of visits).
- Selection of the focus and look-fors in walkthroughs.
- Data gathering and follow-up to the observations.
- Roles and responsibilities of the principal in the process.
- Evaluation of the walkthrough process and measure of its effect on teaching and learning.

The second round of questions (see Appendix B) focused on how the schools established walkthroughs that involved teachers and how they addressed

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**Location of U.S. Schools in Walkthrough Study**

Region	States
Northeast	Connecticut, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island
Midwest	Illinois, Indiana, Michigan
South	Alabama, Arkansas, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas
West	Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Washington





challenges to implementing their walkthrough models. The focus of those questions was primarily on the

- Features of the school culture in place to support teacher leadership in walkthroughs.
- Benefits to the teachers, students, and school.
- Initial steps to implement walkthroughs.
- Connection of the walkthroughs to other school improvement initiatives.
- Issues and obstacles to overcome (such as trust, teachers unions, scheduling, and teacher reluctance or resistance).
- Preparation of teachers for walks (such as training and walking norms).
- Evaluation of the walkthroughs and subsequent effect on teaching and learning.
- Changes to walkthrough purpose, protocols, and practice over time.
- Recommendations for initiating and sustaining walkthroughs.

The information from the surveys and follow-up communications provided us with a rich source of ideas, issues, and recommendations. We believe that sharing what these schools learned will be of great value to those of you who want to involve teachers in the walkthrough process. Such information will contribute to your agenda as you consider the design, implementation, and sustainability of a teacher walkthrough protocol in your school.

Reasons given by schools for involving teachers in the walkthrough process were to

- Share teacher expertise about existing instructional practices and needs.
- Advance the school improvement plan.
- Establish accountability for school initiatives.
- Build team spirit among the teaching staff.
- Determine the progress made in implementing a new initiative after participating in professional development efforts.
- Advance the development of a real professional learning community.
- Track the progress being made in delivering a standards-based learning environment.