

# the **NEXT GENERATION** of walkthroughs

Today's walkthroughs are designed to be dynamic and meaningful to school site staff, and to help drive ongoing instructional improvement.

**M**s. Saavedra, the principal of Hamilton High School, looked anxiously at her watch as the last group of students rushed up the stairs in an effort to make it to class on time. She had been making her regular rounds since early morning to make sure everything was running smoothly; teachers were monitoring students as they gathered their materials from their lockers and students moved quickly to their classrooms to begin first period.

Normally she was more relaxed, but today she had invited a group of colleagues to visit her school to conduct a Targeted Learning Walk.

In the past, school walkthroughs were conducted once a year by a supervisor for the sole purpose of fulfilling the principal evaluation requirement. Mr. Lopez, Ms. Saavedra's central office supervisor, would quickly walk through the building carrying a checklist with items that focused mainly

on cleanliness, student discipline and budget. The visit would end with a quick review of the school test scores and graduation rates, and a discussion about any parent complaints that had reached the superintendent's office.

These visits often left her perplexed because they did not provide her with the opportunity to explore possible solutions to challenges she was facing in her school, nor was she left with a clear idea about what her next steps toward improvement should be or what type of support to expect from the central office. The walkthroughs from her past were negative experiences with little added value. Ms. Saavedra has been assured that today's Targeted Learning Walk would be different.

Her thoughts were interrupted at 8 a.m. by a call to her walkie-talkie. Her visitors

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*By Amalia Cudeiro and Jeff Nelsen*

had arrived and were being escorted to the library, where they would be meeting with her and members of her staff to discuss the purpose of the Targeted Learning Walk and begin the process.

### Walkthroughs vs. Targeted Learning Walks

Visits to classrooms have been a common practice in most school systems since the beginning of public education. Many school and classroom walkthroughs had been perfunctory, or used solely as a means for conducting formal principal or teacher evaluations. Today these visits, often referred to as walkthroughs, differ in purpose and nature from most of the visits of old – they are focused on instruction instead of structure. Walkthroughs are designed to be dynamic and meaningful to a school site or staff, and to help drive instructional improvement, not an item to be checked off on a supervisor’s “to-do” list.

But too many central office supervisors and principals continue to walk through classrooms and school hallways, checking to make sure students are on task, regardless of the quality of the assignments they have been given or the rigor of the work they are producing.

In many districts and schools, administrators are often the only leaders who engage in the practice of visiting schools and classrooms. The mandated evaluation tool is often the only tool used during these visits and is rarely seen as a means for professional growth aimed at helping individuals or schools improve.

Targeted Learning Walks are purposeful and data-driven. They are specific about what to look for and help school or district teams identify next steps once the process is over. Targeted Learning Walks are focused on the teaching and learning agenda as a means for ongoing improvement, not solely on evaluation, and serve as tools for gathering evidence of how well instructional improvement efforts are being implemented in classrooms across a school or district.

Compared to many other walkthroughs, Targeted Learning Walks are transparent to all involved in the process, become embedded in the school and district culture, and are considered an important factor in help-

ing leaders and staff improve their practice and increase student achievement results.

They are often conducted by a combination of external and on-site administrators and teaching staff and in many cases include parents, students and paraprofessionals. This process is a powerful tool when used by school instructional leadership teams, as well.

The Targeted Learning Walk is an organized visit through a school’s classrooms and halls to collect evidence about how well

practices and challenges in implementation of those practices, and make suggestions for improvement. Each step of the process must be carefully planned and communicated to the staff so that everyone knows what to expect and there are no surprises.

### Prior to the Targeted Learning Walk

Communication is key during the Targeted Learning Walk planning stage. During this stage, the leadership team of the school must inform the staff about all logistical de-



school improvement efforts, such as school- and/or district-selected instructional practices and processes, are being implemented school-wide, and how the implementation of these practices and processes is impacting student achievement results.

### Organizing a school for a successful learning walk

The success of any learning walk depends on how well the instructional leadership team of the school organizes and prepares the school community for the process. In order for a staff to fully benefit from the feedback after the learning walk, trust must be built by making the process transparent.

Effective administrators and leadership teams engage the entire staff in identifying the purpose for the learning walk and clearly articulate what evidence the learning walk team will be charged with gathering. The objective is not to catch people doing the “wrong things,” but to highlight promising

tails of the learning walk, such as how many classrooms will be visited, who the members of the visiting team will be, how long they will remain in the classrooms, and how and when the evidence and feedback from the learning walk will be shared with all members of the school community.

Additionally, it is imperative that the leadership team guide the staff in identifying the purpose of the learning walk – the specific instructional strategies, behaviors and processes that they want the visiting team to look for evidence of implementation in every classroom.

### Guiding questions before the learning walk

Following are some guiding questions that school and district leadership teams must be prepared to address, prior to the learning walk, in order to ensure that the process is transparent and the evidence collected by the visiting team is meaningful and provides helpful feedback for improvement.

- What is the purpose of our Targeted Learning Walk? What specific strategies do we need the visiting team to look for?

- What should we have available for the team to access when they are in classrooms (samples of student work, student data results, other instructional artifacts)?

- Who from our staff will participate in the learning walk along with the visiting team?

- Where will it take place? Which classrooms will be visited? Will all the classrooms be involved?

- How long will the process last?

- What evidence-gathering tools (learning walk protocol) will the visiting team use?

### During the Targeted Learning Walk

As important as the planning stage is to the success of this process, it is also critical that the visiting team identify a common and consistent protocol to use during the learning walk. A common protocol ensures that all members of the team follow the same process when gathering evidence and remain focused on the purpose identified by the school. The visiting team may need to divide into several smaller groups of four or five so as not to overwhelm the classroom.

Following are the protocol of actions and behaviors during the Targeted Learning Walk:

- Identify a common data-gathering tool or graphic organizer for every member of the visiting team to help them record their observations and wonderings related to the purpose identified by the school.

- Assign roles and responsibilities to each member of the visiting team (facilitator, recorder, reviewer of student work, student interviewer, reader of walls and room environment).

- Spend seven to 10 minutes in each classroom to look for, gather and record observational data and evidence (student work in portfolios and on display, work students are engaged in, types of teacher and student questions and responses, instructional guiding charts).

- Have the student interviewer talk to three or four students. Sample questions might include: What are you learning or

solving? Why is it important that you learn or solve this? How do you know what good work looks like? Is this work challenging for you? Would you please read a short section of this assignment for me?

- Take five minutes in the hallway after visiting each classroom to discuss, as a team,



**Culture change happens quickly in schools implementing Targeted Learning Walks because external colleagues do not come into the building with their own agenda for what needs to change, or with a punitive mindset.**

what you have gathered. Ensure that the designated recorder has kept clear notes from the discussion before you move to the next classroom.

### After the Targeted Learning Walk

Once the learning walk is over, the visiting team will need 30-60 minutes to convene in a quiet location in order to review all of its notes and discuss the evidence statements and wonderings. This discussion will help the team craft the feedback report that will be presented to the staff and/or leadership team of the school that received the visit. This process, which takes place after the Targeted Learning Walk, needs to engage all members of the visiting team (including staff from the school who were members of the visiting team during the learning walk).

The feedback report does not contain a laundry list of statements about every detail the team collected. Rather, it contains thoughtful, targeted statements (no more than four to eight evidence statements, four

or five wonderings, and four or five suggestions) based on specific evidence observed during the learning walk. In crafting this report, the team will look for common themes and trends and provide specific examples to support each theme or trend identified in the report.

Once the recorder has had an opportunity to review and share the notes from the learning walk with the team, the facilitator guides the group in crafting the report by asking the following questions:

- What are the four to eight specific statements that we can make based on evidence we saw in classrooms that support what the school asked us to look for (purpose statement identified by the school prior to the learning walk)? Did we see this evidence in some, a few, many or most classrooms? (Give exact percentages when possible.)

- What are the four or five specific wondering statements (areas of weakness or challenge) that we can make based on evidence related to what the school asked us to look for?

- What four or five suggestions can we offer this staff in order to help them improve their work and deepen their knowledge and understanding of the strategies they are trying to implement schoolwide?

Using chart paper, the facilitator charts the evidence statements made by the group, followed by a second chart containing the wondering statements. Once the evidence and wondering statements are charted, the group draws upon each member's expertise and experience to craft the suggestion statements and next steps.

### Sharing the feedback report

Once the feedback report is crafted, the visiting team works with the principal and the staff members from the school that participated in the Targeted Learning Walk to identify a process for communicating the feedback report to the rest of the school community. Following is a set of sample questions that can help guide the team in this process:

- Who will need to hear and see the feedback report? Will there be opportunity for the school community to ask clarifying questions and discuss the report?

- Who from our team will share the report and facilitate the discussion with the school community?

- How soon can the feedback report be shared?

- What are the next steps for implementing the suggestions listed in the feedback report?

- How will the leadership team be involved in this process? The staff?

- What support will the leadership team need (from the principal, central office, staff developers, consultants, coaches) to implement the suggestions and next steps?

### Benefits of Targeted Learning Walks

Schools and districts engaged in this process report that it has helped them change the culture of their schools from one of distrust and isolation to one of collaboration and openness. One of the reasons this culture change happens quickly in schools and districts implementing Targeted Learning Walks is that the external colleagues do not come into the building with their own

agenda for what needs to change or with a punitive mindset.

The leadership team and staff from the school or district hosting the learning walk identify the purpose of the visit and the strategies the visiting team will be looking for. This forces school teams to analyze their data carefully, identify promising strategies, and engage the staff in professional learning around these strategies prior to engaging a visiting team in a learning walk.

The “talk” in the hosting school or district changes from “Look what they are going to do to us” to “Look at what we have asked the visiting team to do for us.” There is also an expectation that the school’s instructional leadership team will continue to conduct its own internal Targeted Learning Walks each month to track how the recommendations are being implemented.

Finally, once the process is over, school and district staff is left with a product – the feedback report – that offers clear and concrete evidence about where the school is in the implementation of its promising strat-

egies, and provides realistic and specific next steps and suggestions that will help the school improve teacher practice and increase student achievement results. ■

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