Using Walk-Throughs to Gather Data

By John Skretta

Walk-throughs are a valuable source of instructional data for teachers and administrators. Detailed written observations that include a probing question to prompt reflection encourage teachers to assess and improve their practice. Data from walk-throughs can also be shared with other stakeholders to focus curricula and professional development.

“Continuous examination of data...is important for sustaining the professional learning community.... Data should be collected throughout the year on a regular basis” (Roberts & Pruitt, p. 181). Data gathering and analysis can be a dynamic and exciting process when walk-throughs are incorporated into your school’s improvement plan as an instructional snapshot. At Norris High School in Firth, NE, I use walk-throughs to regularly monitor how teachers are using identified instructional strategies to improve student achievement in reading across the curriculum. This practice has required teachers and administrators alike to rethink their typical orientation to the data-gathering and data-analysis process.

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The School Improvement Process

My walk-throughs are unannounced, informal classroom observations that last from 3 to 10 minutes. I follow up by writing feedback to the teacher that is positive, specific, and descriptive. The feedback typically includes a question to ponder that is designed to enhance the reflective capacity of the teacher. The use of the reflective question is consistent with the philosophy of professional learning communities advocated by DuFour and Eaker (1998), who wrote that “while the effective principal of the past was portrayed as a person who knew how to dictate solutions, principals of professional learning communities are more likely to ask questions” (p. 186).

In some schools, walk-throughs are a part of a formal teacher evaluation process. They supplement formal, full-length classroom observations, validating or refuting the instruction observed during the scheduled observations. At Norris, we use walk-throughs not for formal evaluation purposes, but as a lens through which to view school improvement in action. Their greatest value is that administrators can use them to gather data, which in turn can be used to prompt and provoke dialogue about instruction between teachers and administrators.

Data from walk-throughs are used to make better instructional decisions; to critically evaluate our school improvement processes; and to perform one of the most inherently meaningful steps in the school improvement process: to monitor the use and frequency of interventions identified to improve student achievement. As Davidson-Taylor (2002) noted, “Data obtained from a school walk-through can be used to generate conversations with teachers regarding student learning and their use of best educational practices (p. 30).”
Focus on Reading Comprehension

Student achievement in the aggregate is fairly high at Norris. ACT averages are among the highest in Nebraska, and the state averages typically exceed the national means. More than 85% of Norris graduates go on to postsecondary education, and most attend four-year colleges and universities. Despite these encouraging numbers, however, there has been a growing recognition among staff members at Norris that they are not reaching all learners and that not all students are fluent critical readers. The most obvious indicator of this problem is that there are several sections of reading classes for students who are not reading at grade level as determined by the Gates-McGinitie Reading Test.

These factors combined with a recent report from ACT (2006) suggesting that barely more than half of ACT-tested high school graduates were ready for the rigors of entry-level college reading prompted me to use data from walk-throughs to help teachers make the connection between the research and their instructional practices and to show them how that connection can improve reading achievement across the curriculum. The walk-through is an excellent vehicle for demonstrating support for teachers' instructional efforts while simultaneously challenging the teacher to aspire to a higher level of instructional efficacy, and support for teachers is vital to successful school reading programs. Booth and Rowsell (2002) state, “Efforts to encourage a commitment to literacy initiatives are most effective when accompanied by a genuine interest in supporting teachers’ needs” (p. 16).

Walk-throughs in Practice

Saying that principals should conduct walk-throughs is one matter; actually conducting the walk-throughs and providing teachers with the kind of feedback they need and deserve is another. The best walk-throughs give teachers relevant, real-time data on their instruction. Marzano, Norford, Paynter, Pickering, and Gaddy (2001) emphasize the instructional usefulness of feedback, so the feedback on the walk-throughs should be specific to observed behaviors, focused, and descriptive of the level of performance observed.

Following are several examples of actual written feedback from walk-throughs that I have conducted at Norris in the past two years to gather data about instructional practices that improve reading comprehension across the curriculum. In the first example, I used the walk-through to support a teacher's efforts to pair modalities in instruction. The teacher, a veteran social studies instructor, paired a lengthy news analysis article with a documentary video. The probing question I asked in my memo to the teacher is related to the teacher's follow-up activity:

The focus of the class yesterday was evident, and you are having them deal with a difficult topic in Global Perspectives. You used the whiteboard to state the key concept of genocide and provide a skeletal definition. Our students need to realize that, unfortunately, the concept of genocide is not merely a historical occurrence but one that continues as a human rights atrocity in some nations.

Pairing the documentary video with the “News Extra” article that gave an in-depth analysis of the issue in Sudan and Darfur is an excellent means of engaging students and increasing comprehension. By aligning the visual and the print modalities you ensure that you capture the preferred learning styles of most of your students. I noted that the article is longer than a typical newspaper piece and that it contains a combination of historical facts and social commentary. Are you having students use a Venn diagram or some other graphic organizer or structured note-taking activity to support their understanding of this article in comparison to the information conveyed via the video?

Have a great day and keep up the great teaching. I'd like to get in more frequently than I do!

The teacher responded to explain that through a cooperative learning activity connected to the lesson, students would
Vocabulary has been one of the primary themes of the last school improvement cycle because the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension has been borne out in the research (Billmeyer & Barton, 1998):

Great emphasis yesterday on content-area vocabulary and the need “to be all on the same page with the terminology we use.” You demonstrate a real knack for using these vivid metaphors and analogies to explain key concepts to your students. Examples from the observed portion of yesterday’s lesson included the manner in which you explained the increasing difficulty and complexity of the equations students would be working on: “I would compare it to the figure skaters in the Olympics who are on at 7 p.m. And when I’m watching at 7 p.m., I’m thinking they’re pretty good, then at about 10:30 when the really good skaters are on, I realize that they’re doing things at a much higher level.... We’re going to take these equations that we’ve just done but we are going to step up the level of difficulty on these new equations.”

This chart shows how the data gathering process for instructional interventions in school improvement is infused into the organization.
You also did a nice job of explaining the scoring process for partial credit and drawing another analogy to figure skating: As degree of difficulty in skating increases, the likelihood that there will be some type of error in execution also increases. However, judges scoring these skaters take this into account when a move like a quadruple is not completed perfectly. You then said, “That’s the same thing here. I like to give partial credit. But if you don’t show your work, it’s like a blind person trying to judge figure skating!”

I know you are aware that the use of metaphors helps capture students’ attention and allows them to engage in content in different ways. For visual learners especially, this provides a means of envisioning the concept that they can latch onto and internalize. Do you find you mostly extemporize in the use of metaphors or are the metaphors you use a conscientious aspect of your lesson design? Well done!

In her reply, the teacher was able to explain her decision making that day and reflect on how metaphors help visual learners understand concepts:

Mostly they come to me on the fly. Yesterday in the lesson, I was talking about raising the difficulty of a problem and something clicked about those same terms being used in the Olympics during the skating program, so I just tried to tie the two together. Sometimes I just try to ramble with something like that while they are solving problems at their desks so that the two get tied together, although that may be distracting to some students. One of the key secrets to teaching all types of learners in my opinion is to find something they can hook new learning to. For the visual learner who tends to file pictures of things they have learned in messy little file cabinets in their brain, it seems to help them access the right file cabinet and locate the correct file a little faster. Then, later in the chapter or even in the year when you want that information or skill to be found again, it helps to use those same words or to remind students of the hook you used and they seem to be able to locate the file a little faster.

In the third example, I commended the teacher for using effective prereading strategies to improve comprehension. She primed her students by giving them a combination of cues and encouragement. I was able to reinforce that her efforts to prepare students before reading were an important means of doing what Beers (2003) describes as “frontloading meaning”:

Today what I really liked about your instructional sequence is that you cued, reviewed, and previewed to assist students in meeting the specified criteria. You cued students to use appropriate strategies when encountering unfamiliar terms while reading: “So, on page 423…what’s a strategy for you to use when you come upon unfamiliar words? [Dictionary and glossary were both mentioned by students.] Your final instructional strategy for prereading prep was, “Do you have any questions?” I think you did a great job today of instilling in students a high level of reading readiness through this advance activity. I also appreciate the fact that you encouraged students to actively engage the text while reading by marking certain key passages or words in pencil. Good job encouraging strategic reading.

In a final example, I challenged a teacher to reflect on her instructional practice as it related to the goal of increasing reading comprehension. She had devoted a significant chunk of her class time to sustained silent reading (SSR), and I was ambivalent about whether all students were improving in their reading skills through SSR. In other words, I did not want the teacher to mistake a student activity for student achievement, so I probed the issue:

We know that there are many benefits derived in reading comprehension (such as vocabulary and reading fluency) when students engage in diverse, sustained reading. You told me earlier that you’d give your students the first 20 minutes of class time to read independently. I commend your decision to provide students some class time to read on their own, uninterrupted. I also have some questions about your plan. As I observed your students, I wondered how you had coached them into making appropriately leveled choices based on their reading proficiency. One of the things I have encountered more recently in articles on reading is that simply having kids read a lot does not necessarily help them much. Unless the reading is appropriately leveled so that it challenges them with new words and concepts,
10 Tips
for successful walk-throughs

1. Talk with teachers beforehand about the importance of informal observations so they are not alarmed by your presence and do not assume that your visit is for student disciplinary reasons.

2. Schedule walk-throughs just as you would any other part of your day. Approach walk-throughs with the commitment you make to getting into classrooms for formal teacher observations.

3. Track the frequency of your visits to specific teachers and content areas by maintaining a spreadsheet or electronic folder that lets you know whose classrooms you’ve visited and helps ensure that you don’t leave anyone out.

4. Use a laptop or PDA to record feedback while you observe so you do not have to rewrite or finalize your walk-throughs when you return to your office. Everyone knows what happens when you return to the office—other work awaits that will reduce the likelihood that you will get the walk-throughs completed.

5. Get your walk-through memos back to teachers within 24 hours at the most. If you take longer, your lethargic turnaround may frustrate teachers and your feedback won’t be perceived as relevant.

6. If you use a checklist, ensure that it is composed of criteria that are familiar to all members of your faculty through shared staff development or learning team experiences.

7. Always affirm the positives. Capitalize on areas of strength to challenge teachers to continue to grow.

8. Consider leveraging the strengths of individual teachers for professional development for the entire faculty.

9. E-mail feedback to teachers. Although follow-up conversations are an excellent outcome, do not demand a reply. Most teachers will reply by e-mail—and many will drop in or stop in the halls to visit with you about instruction.

10. Trust is established and maintained through consistency. Try to complete at least 2 walk-throughs every day—about 10 every week.
just reading doesn’t do much. How do you get your students to read varied choices and then assess that their own choices are producing the growth you desire?

The teacher impressed me with her indication that she is seeking the involvement and assistance of other teachers as she thinks through her use of SSR:

As far as silent reading is concerned, I have changed things quite a bit since last year and I am sure I will continue to change as I learn more about reading practices. I will be getting my masters in literacy and be a reading specialist K–12 and my intentions for doing that was so I could be a more effective literature teacher and get more out of choice book reading. Last year we only read on Friday and they could sit on the floor, and the students didn’t get much out of it.

This year I thought with having them reading everyday it would be part of their routine and they could see it as a more important task. They gave book talks that were originally to be given in small groups but that was hard to grade, so I took [another teacher’s] process of having them sign up for a day and give the presentation to the whole class. I understand what you’re saying as far as level and making sure they are challenging themselves with the books they choose. I will have to think on this more, and make sure they have a book that fits their reading level.

Again, I hope to get some ideas from my classes and since [another teacher] teaches some of those classes I could also talk to her for ideas. I was going on the assumption that if they’re reading, it improves their comprehension but I see that that may not be the case with upper-level readers.

Her response suggests that she has embraced one of the tenets of a collaborative culture. Rather than making instructional decisions in isolation, she has “engage[d] in collective inquiry into both best practice and the current reality regarding… students’ existing levels of achievement” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004, p. 4). Her department colleagues’ willingness to work together encourages me to think that she will continue to refine her practice. During future walk-throughs, I will be able to document her instructional growth over time.

Dynamic Data Gathering

Data from walk-throughs can be shared with key stakeholders in the school improvement process. Over time, the data gathered through myriad walk-throughs indicate trends in instructional practice and can be used to foster internal collaboration. For example, we are in the midst of developing interventions for our current school improvement cycle goals of reading comprehension and critical thinking. By making regular walk-throughs, I derive a sense of how frequently the teachers are engaging in specific instructional practices.

For example, effective questioning strategies is linked to growth in reading comprehension and critical thinking. When I reflect on my walk-throughs over the last year, however, the anecdotal evidence suggests strongly that not all the teachers are equally adept at this instructional skill. In fact, in many walk-throughs, “what” and “when” recall questions far outnumber “why” and explanatory and evaluative questions (thus the students are not operating cognitively at higher levels when questioned in classrooms) and teachers do not ask follow-up or probing questions. Instead, teachers often provide students with limited feedback when students reply to their prompts and simply move on in their instruction or provide the sought-for answer themselves.

I have observed and documented these instructional deficits in multiple walk-throughs across content areas, so I know that this is not an isolated problem in one or two instructors or one department. Thus, the implication from the walk-
through evidence is a need for professional development in questioning strategies. If I had not conducted walk-throughs, I would not have been able to identify this particular need, one that becomes glaringly apparent when one gets out of the office and into classrooms informally, unannounced, and repeatedly.

Fullan (1999) reminded educators that “the quality of relationships is central to success” (p. 37). It behooves principals to remember that the data analysis process cannot disregard human relationships. At Norris, walk-throughs are not instruments for teacher evaluation, nor are they used to dictate change or harass teachers into desired instructional practices. Instead, we use them to capture instructional practice as it is and to make positive changes and affirm excellent practice. As McEwan (2001) notes, “Effective instruction lies at the heart of raising achievement” (p. 19). The detailed feedback I give teachers enables us to capture data about the effectiveness of instructional practice and is an excellent means of using observational data to drive improved achievement. PL

References
- ACT Inc. (2002). Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college-readiness in reading. Iowa City, IA: Author.