Best Practices in Walk-Throughs, an Instructional Supervision technique, and the Impact on Student Achievement

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Background…

➢ Classroom walk-throughs, an instructional supervision technique, are designed to help administrators and teachers to focus collaboratively on instructional practices and to identify educator training and support needs.

➢ Walk-throughs can last from 2 to 45 minutes. The observing group can range from 2 to 12 people and may include: teachers, administrators, community members, and students. Walk-throughs can focus on one teacher, all teachers, or a subset of teachers and schools.

➢ In terms of their impact on student achievement, Leithwood et al. (2004) found that principals can positively impact student achievement by providing guidance to teachers and support staff in their school.

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Key Findings…

➢ Research suggests that walk-throughs can play a constructive role when districts make their purpose clear and carry them out in a climate of trust. Skretta (2007) encourages principals to make the intentions of a walk-through transparent and to ensure that there is a feedback mechanism included to open the lines of communication between principals and teachers (2007). David (2008) noted that walk-throughs can carry risks. For example, she states "when the purpose is murky or when trust among teachers, principals, and central-office staff is low, walk-throughs are likely to be perceived as compliance checks, increasing distrust and tension." Researchers emphasize that decisions streaming from the walk-through process should be made collaboratively.

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➢ A study on leadership practices in schools found that 88% of principals who were identified as strong instructional leaders visited classrooms daily and the other 12% visited classrooms 1 to 2 times a week. These strong instructional leaders focused on observing and talking with students so that they could assess performance, and also get a deeper understanding of where they could be of assistance to teachers (Brewster, 2005, p. 34).

➢ Waters et al., in their 2003 meta-analysis, found that there are 21 specific principal leadership responsibilities and behaviours. The following two behaviours had the greatest impact on student achievement: 1) monitoring the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on learning, and 2) being visible and having quality contact and interactions with teachers and students (2003).

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Overall, the literature summarized in this BLAM, shows that walk-throughs can have a positive impact on student achievement providing that they are transparent, non-evaluative, focused on an improvement area and conducted frequently (at least once per week). Walk-throughs should facilitate open dialogue between teachers and principals regarding effective classroom practices and support for teachers in enhancing student learning.

BOTTOM LINE ACTIONABLE MESSAGE

Recommended Reading:

Jane L. David: "Classroom Walk-Throughs" (2008)

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/dec07/vol65/num04/Classroom_Walk-Throughs.aspx

This article explains the variety of ways in which walk-throughs can happen. It also explores recent research and makes recommendations for best practice when conducting walk-throughs as a form of instructional supervision. The studies reviewed reveal that there is a wide variation in the usefulness and effects of walk-throughs. For example, one study found that administrators think walkthroughs are more useful than do teachers (who rarely receive individual feedback), and those doing the walkthroughs report learning more than do those who are observed. David cautions that walk-throughs can carry risks if teachers view them as evaluative rather than their intended purpose which is to inform practice or identify what supports are needed. Noted risks include increased levels of distrust and tension between teachers and administrators. Another study summarized in the article pointed to the value of district-designed walk-throughs in developing shared understandings of high-quality practice. This study concluded that training in the use of valid and reliable data-collection instruments and clear rubrics play an important role in creating a common language and communicating district priorities. Overall, research suggests that walk-throughs can play a constructive role only when districts make their purpose clear and carry them out in a climate of trust. The author states that before launching any type of walkthrough process, it is important to ensure that everyone understands how it connects to improvement efforts. This connection should be reflected in the specific data that observers collect, the thoughtfulness and quality of the protocols, and the way the results are used. Checklists focused on surface features are not likely to provide useful information to teachers as they implement new approaches or refine their teaching practices. The article states that districts will not accomplish much by amassing new data unless they train observers well and prepare educators to use the data. In conclusion David found that, as one of several strategies designed to support strong instructional leaders and teachers, walk-throughs can be helpful; however, used alone or to enforce compliance, they are likely to backfire.

John Skretta: "Using Walk – Throughs to Gather Data for School Improvement" (2007)

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.principals.org/s_nassp/bin.asp?TrackID=&SID=1&DID=55499&CID=1234&VID=2&DOC=FILE.PDF

This article discusses walk-throughs as a valuable source of instructional data for teachers and administrators. Data gathering and analysis can be a dynamic and exciting process when walk-throughs are incorporated into a school's improvement plan as an instructional snapshot. At Norris High School in Firth, Nebraska, the principal uses 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. Ten tips for successful walk-throughs are presented.

Jeffrey Glanz, Vivian Shulman & Susan Sullivan: "Impact of Instructional Supervision on Student Achievement: Can We Make the Connection?" (2007)

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/28/08/04.pdf

This paper reports on the final phase of a three-part study on the status of instructional supervision within several New York City public schools. In the first part of the study the researchers found, through extensive use of surveys (questionnaires and interviews), that centralized educational reform had serious consequences for instructional supervision. Results indicated that in many instances principals, given their amount of non-instructional responsibilities, did not have the time to undertake continuous and meaningful supervision. Often, such supervision was relegated to coaches, neither trained in supervision nor given organizational authority to effectuate needed reforms to ensure quality teaching. Teachers in many cases indicated that supervision was perfunctory and evaluative. The researchers concluded that the highly centralized system of schooling that mandated prescribed curricula, added responsibilities for supervisors, and instituted narrow definitions of accountability aimed to, above all else, hold principals (and thus teachers) accountable for increases in student achievement transformed instructional supervision into a monitoring function, at its best. Several instances of effective models of supervision and professional development were discovered, however, despite bureaucratic and other non-school related constraints. These schools have had significant increases in student achievement levels as reported by standardized tests. This paper, the last in a series of reports, summarizes some findings from one such successful school utilizing indepth methodologies aimed to uncover the relationship between supervisory practice and student achievement. The questions the study addresses are: What does supervision look like in an effective school and how do supervisors effectively work to influence teacher behavior that best promotes student learning? What impact does successful supervision have on student achievement? What can we learn from this case study that might inform the practice of supervision in other schools? Based on this tentative case study involving one school, findings indicate that supervision is purposeful, targeted, and central to promoting a school wide instructional program wherein student achievement is always at the forefront. Principal leadership is essential as is the establishment of a culture of teacher empowerment and collaboration. The paper concludes with some questions for continued study into the connection between supervision and student achievement.

Cori Brewster & Jennifer Klump: "Leadership Practices of Successful Principals" (2005)

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.nwrel.org/request/2005nov/leadership.pdf

The Northwest Regional Educational Library (NWREL) produces a series of publications under the "By Request" banner. The "By Request" series, produced twice per year by NWREL, is intended to bring to light a "hot topic" in education and to spark an interest in educators so that they can reflect upon and improve their current practices. The purpose of this issue of By Request is to provide K-12 principals an introduction to leadership practices that can effect change in their schools. The booklet focuses on concrete strategies for novice principals in schools in need of improvement. It explains three different models of leadership, including Leithwood's "Instructional Leadership Model" and " Transformational Leadership Model"; and Walters, Marzano and McNulty's "Balanced Leadership Framework". As one of the four main recommendations, the article states that effective principals participate frequently (at least once/week) and meaningfully (finding out how to support teachers in student learning) in classrooms. The articles also contains a section called "Teachers Advice to Principals" that provides guidance on what principals can do to be the most effective. In conclusion

the booklet acknowledges that there is no one magic strategy that will make the difference for all schools, but rather a principal should work together with their school team to affect change.

Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom: "How leadership influences student learning" (2004)

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.wallacefoundation.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/WF/Knowledge%20Center/Attachments/PDF/ReviewofResearch-LearningFromLeadership.pdf

This research review states that leadership not only matters, it is second, next to teaching, among school-related factors that affect student learning. And its impact is greatest in schools where the needs are greatest, according to a comprehensive review of evidence on school leadership by researchers at the Universities of Minnesota and Toronto. This report, the first in a series that seeks to establish how leadership promotes student achievement, summarizes the basics of successful leadership and sets out what leaders must do — including setting a clear vision, supporting and developing a talented staff, and building a solid organizational structure — to meet the challenge of school reform.

Tim Waters, Robert J. Marzano & Brian McNulty: "Balanced Leadership: What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement" (2003)

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/LeadershipOrganizationDevelopment/5031RR_BalancedLeadership.pdf

This paper reports on an examination of the effects of leadership practices on student achievement. It includes a meta-analysis of nearly every available study since the 1970s. From a total of more than 5,000 studies, 70 met the researchers' criteria for design, control, data analysis, and rigor. (Reports on the 70 studies are reference in an appendix). From the analysis, the researchers have created what they call "a balanced leadership framework." This framework describes the knowledge, skills, strategies, resources, and tools educational leaders need to improve student achievement. The framework is predicated on the notion that effective leadership means more than simply knowing what to do; it means knowing when, how, and why to do it. The data from the meta-analysis demonstrate that there is, in fact, a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement. (The effect size is discussed and expressed as a correlation.) The paper also contains a listing of 21 specific leadership responsibilities significantly correlated with student achievement. The average effect sizes for their affect on student achievement are also reported.

Bob Witziers, Roel J. Bosker & Meta L. Kruger: "Educational Leadership and Student Achievement: The Elusive Search for Association" (2003)

The abstract for this article was retrieved December 2008 from the following link:
http://eaq.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/39/3/398

This study revisits the existing scholarly debate on the possible impact of the principal's leadership on student achievement. Both `direct effect' and `indirect effect' models are discussed. A quantitative meta-analysis examines to what extent principals directly affect student outcomes. The small positive effects found in this meta-analysis confirm earlier research findings on the limitations of the direct effects approach to linking leadership with student achievement. Finally, lines of future research inquiry are discussed.

Additional References:
This list provides information for additional literature and resources used in preparing this BLAM.

UCLA School Management Program: "UCLA SMP Classroom Walk Throughs Introduction"

The video was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NLoreKu2Us

This video describes UCLA's School Management Program's approach to walk-throughs. In their approach, school leadership teams comprised of both the school principal and teachers, decide on one improvement area and develop a focus question that helps to guide their observations while in the classroom. The leadership team is careful to ensure that the walk-through process is transparent, non-evaluative and non-threatening. They acknowledge that, before the walk-through process begins, all teachers within the school must be made aware of its intent. Lastly, as a follow up to a walk-through, the entire school team attends a debriefing session where next steps, aimed at addressing the team's common goal, are collectively decided upon.

Tim Waters & Sally Grubb: "Leading Schools: Distinguishing the Essential from the Important" (2006).

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.mcrel.org/PDF/LeadershipOrganizationDevelopment/4005IR_LeadingSchools.pdf

This report is designed so that school leaders, as well as those responsible for preparing and supervising school leaders, can learn which leadership responsibilities and practices are most essential for leaders to develop. It draws upon a meta-analysis of research on the impact of school leadership on student achievement to help leaders identify which responsibilities are essential for ensuring high levels of student achievement in their schools. Also, the report highlights findings from a factor analysis conducted of the 21 leadership responsibilities identified in its original research report, *Balanced Leadership (see above)*. One of the key findings from this factor analysis is that the "order" or "magnitude" of change underway in a school impacts how teachers perceive their leaders' performance.

Jan Stewart: "Transformational Leadership: An Evolving Concept Examined through the Works of Burns, Bass, Avolio and Leithwood" (2006).

This article was retrieved in January 2009 from the following link:
http://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/pdf_files/stewart.pdf

In her article, Stewart states that over the past four decades, the concept of leadership has become increasingly more complex and elaborate. She says that considerable debate has emerged over the most suitable model for educational leadership. Further she presents the development of two conceptual models of leadership: instructional leadership and transformational leadership. Also, the paper discusses some of the conflicting opinions and diverging perspectives from many of the critics of transformational leadership. The author argues that transformational leadership will continue to evolve in order to adequately respond to the changing needs of schools in the context of educational accountability and school reform.