

## **Walkthroughs: Observation Timeframes: What Works Best?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**The amount of time that school administrators conduct classroom visitations and walkthroughs varies. There are different opinions by administrators who state classroom visitations should be short while others disagree and believe longer observations reflect a better sense of what goes on in the classroom. How long should the classroom observation by a school administrator last? Some administrators attest that three to five minutes is sufficient while other administrators insist that ten minutes is most appropriate for teaching assessment. The research regarding classroom visitations and the required length of time to appropriately assess classroom teaching pedagogy is minimal to non-existent. The current research does not address which timeframes for classroom assessment work best however, it does focus on why walkthroughs were effective ways to improve student learning and achievement. This article will share important information regarding classroom visitations and walkthroughs and recommend an optimal and efficient way to assess teaching in the classroom.**

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There are different opinions by administrators who state classroom visitations should be short while others disagree and believe longer observations reflect a better sense of what goes on in the classroom. While current research does not address which timeframes work best, the research does focus on why walkthroughs were effective ways to improve student learning and achievement.

According to Lemons and Helsing (2009), walkthroughs could help administrators better understand whether instruction was geared to generate lower-level thinking and when and how teachers were encouraging students to engage in higher-order thinking. Ginsberg and Murphy (2002) state that the benefits of walkthroughs

implemented on a daily schedule of short and unscheduled visits, enable administrators to become more familiar with the school's curriculum and teachers' instructional practices. Administrators can also gauge the climate of a school: Are students engaged? Are cross-curricular concepts a part of everyday teaching? Are the teaching concepts catching on? Ginsberg and Murphy (2002) believe that a team atmosphere develops as teachers and administrators examine instruction and student motivation and achievement together. Research further supports that administrative walkthroughs help establish administrators as campus leaders and instructional mentors, influencing teaching, learning, and ongoing school renewal. Also, students see both administrators and teachers who value instruction and learning, thus promoting higher student achievement.

In some schools, according to Skretta (2007), walkthroughs are 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 Skretta's school, he states that walkthroughs are not for formal evaluation purposes, but as a lens through which to view school improvement in action. The walkthrough, according to Skretta, is an excellent vehicle for demonstrating support for teachers' instructional effort 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. Also, Skretta states that saying that principals should conduct walkthroughs is one matter; actually conducting the walkthrough and providing teachers with the kind of feedback they need and deserve is another. The best walkthroughs give teachers relevant, real-time data on their instruction.

From a teaching perspective, teachers and administrators would agree that walkthroughs serve as a valuable tool to enhance student achievement. One of the key issues is; how much time should be spent when a walkthrough is conducted? A study based on current research found the short three to five minute walkthrough to be the most effective. According to Marshall (2003), if a principal wants to get a general sense of how a teacher is doing and then have a substantive follow-up conversation about a particular teaching moment, five minutes is plenty. True, it's a sliver of a teacher's day, but five minutes in a classroom is a long time. When Marshall speaks about teacher supervision to a graduate class or an audience of principals, he often plays a videotape of a teacher in action and turns it off after five minutes. Marshall stated the people are astonished by how much longer it seemed and how much happened in that time span. Marshall believes that if he stays in a classroom longer than 10 to 20 minutes, there are diminishing returns, as principals are constantly being pulled in a hundred different directions; and longer visits are what he considers a luxury that principals simply cannot afford. Marshall (2003), states that principals who make short, frequent visits can see a lot. But can they see enough? This begs the question of what principals need to know about teaching and learning. Marshall recommends that school leaders should be able to answer the following questions:

1. Are teachers on track with the curriculum?
2. Are the students learning?
3. Are teachers “happy campers” in terms of their jobs and their lives?
4. Do some teachers deserve special praise?
5. Do some teachers need redirection, emergency support, or a negative evaluation?

According to Marshall (2003), a principal cannot possibly answer these questions without spending quality time in classrooms and having substantive follow-up conversations with teachers. Marshall believes that a regular cycle of five-minute classroom visits with a follow-up conversation after each one is the most efficient way for a principal to monitor classrooms and find the answers to those key questions. Another reason, according to Marshall, for keeping classroom visits to only five minutes: it’s the only way to visit frequently enough to see the big picture. If visits are lengthy, the principal cannot fit as many into each day and will not see teachers often enough to have a sense of each teacher’s overall reality and the reality across all classrooms in the building.

Another author who supports short classroom observations is Susan Black. She believes the classroom observations should be done in three to 10 minutes. She cites Carolyn Downey’s book *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through—Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time*. Downey and her research team have shown that, with training and practice, principals and other instructional leaders can observe a teacher’s critical teaching decisions—such as having students work independently or in groups—in as little as three minutes! But according to Downey, for three-minute walkthroughs to work as promised, principals and other instructional leaders should make sure these sessions are:

- Informal—Avoid filling out checklists, and take notes only to help recall details later.
- Brief—Observe classrooms frequently and keep the visits short.
- Unannounced—Arrive without advance notice to avoid a staged lesson.
- Focused—Concentrate on the decisions teachers make about curriculum and instruction and how their decisions affect students’ learning. For teachers who need help, suggest one or two things they can try.
- Non-evaluative—Keep visits collegial and cooperative. Assure teachers that the purpose of your visit is continuous improvement throughout the school.
- Reflective—Ask teachers to reflect on their instructional decisions and strategies. Occasionally invite teachers to a follow-up conversation to discuss ways to improve practice.

Cudeiro and Nelsen (2009), suggest that administrators and instructional leaders 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). The authors go on to explain that benefits gained from learning walks help change the culture of their schools from one of distrust and isolation to one of collaboration and openness.

Ginsberg and Murphy (2002), confirm that a walkthrough need not be long, averaging at least five minutes in each classroom. The key they believe is consistency and commitment! They suggest that principals and other instructional leaders work together to create a walkthrough protocol that make sense from everyone's perspective, with a schedule for reviewing the process after an initial trial period. Together, they say, teachers and administrators can determine their school's approach by asking several important questions. Ginsberg and Murphy (2002), suggest using the following questions:

1. How can the walkthrough process contribute to our school's approach to renewal?
2. What are some of the reasons for conducting periodic walkthroughs? Who should visit the classrooms? Which rooms? How often?
3. What questions should observers bring to walkthroughs? What questions should observers ask students?
4. What other data can we gather and analyze to complement insights from walkthroughs?
5. How can we create a positive experience for all participants?

Each school according to Ginsberg and Murphy (2002) must create walkthrough procedures, protocols and a set of questions that observers should seek to answer during walkthroughs.

In summary, the most effective administrative walkthroughs by principals and instructional leaders should consist of three to five minutes. In addition, collaboration and discussions should take place between principals and teachers who have been observed. Communication and discussions after the walkthrough is extremely important and necessary in order to improve student achievement.

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