

BRIEFINGS | LEADERSHIP

# What are we learning from classroom walk-throughs?

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore September 23, 2024



We often visit schools and classrooms to join ‘walk-throughs’ with principals and their supervisors. As the new year begins, we find ourselves with two questions that have come up during debrief sessions in multiple districts. First, are walk-through observation protocols really telling us what we need to know about student learning? Second, are teachers putting a higher priority on classroom management than on student engagement and learning?

We wonder whether current walk-through observation tools over-value classroom control at the expense of student learning: a problem that’s easily addressed through awareness and a rebalancing of the indicators.

Districts work hard at creating good quality walk-through tools, setting expectations for walk-through frequency, and building systems for capturing feedback. A standard walk-through protocol typically includes observation of the learning environment, instructional practices, standards alignment, student engagement, and assessment of student understanding.

We see this as a positive shift away from summative evaluation and toward formative observation and feedback. The degree to which this is a shift rather than just a complement depends on the state policy environment. Some states are beginning to move from accountability to more developmental models for teacher growth. These include Connecticut, Michigan, and Utah to name a few. Utah is making big strides in developmental growth, specifically emphasizing self-assessment, feedback from students and parents, and evidence of professional growth.



District investment in walk-throughs and feedback is paying off in four ways:

1. A wider range of coaches and leaders are getting into classrooms.
2. Both teachers and school leaders are getting more frequent feedback.
3. Fidelity to new instructional expectations, initiatives or materials is improved because it is checked as part of observations.
4. Walk-through evidence and debriefs are more tightly aligned with the work of principal supervisors and district instructional supports.

### **What are walk-through protocols telling us about student learning?**

Here's a story. Last year, we'd walk high-need schools each month with a small team of talented principal supervisors. Each month, the team would do a rigorous analysis of its findings, give feedback to school leaders, and support those school leaders with implementation. We'd go back the next month to find that the improvements could be seen in classrooms. About four months in, one of the frustrated supervisors smacked the table with her palm and asked, "Then why aren't we seeing the results in student performance?"

The team noticed that the walk-through protocol was focused on *activity* rather than *learning*. Teachers were certainly getting better in their use of new high-quality instructional materials, their instruction was clearer, and classroom routines were tighter. But we noticed that required 'engagement' strategies such as 'do nows', think-pair-share, and 'exit tickets' focused on doing the activity, rather than using what students are demonstrating to address their concept misunderstandings and learning gaps.

Like most of us, teachers want to get it right. When teachers got feedback about the activities on the walk-through observation form, they used it. Unintentionally the district was motivating them to focus on the what and the how, but not the why.

### **Are teachers prioritizing classroom management over student engagement?**

Adapting Daniel Pink's well-known work in *Drive*, motivation and engagement requires three elements:

1. Autonomy: the degree to which someone feels they have control and direction over what they're doing.
2. Mastery: seeing results – getting better at something that matters.
3. Purpose: the 'why' – seeing how this work is leading to a goal.

We see evidence every day of 'designed in' engagement in video games, social media platforms, and streaming services. Why is this so hard to attain in classrooms? In looking at the evidence we saw during walk-throughs, we noticed that while all three of Pink's elements were somewhat present in most classrooms, none of them were optimized, and – most importantly – student agency seemed intentionally limited.

We began to wonder whether teachers were over-controlling their classrooms to ensure good classroom management. There are several reasons why we may be seeing more emphasis on control:

- An increase in student misbehavior coming out of the pandemic
- A weakening of school and classroom culture related to pandemic school closing
- Widely reported [teacher exhaustion](#)



- An increase in teacher absences and vacancies leads to more coverage by substitutes
- Increased diversity of the student population for which teachers may be ill-prepared
- A sharp increase in the percentage of teachers with little or no pre-service preparation
- Teacher evaluation standards that include indicators such as “classroom environment” (NC) or “managing student behavior” (TN)
- A relaxing of expectations on both teachers and students as leaders worry about attendance and turnover
- And, ironically, as teachers feel that they are being assessed on classroom management an increased sense of burn-out and decreased joy in teaching

For four decades, researchers have studied the ‘contradictions of control’, demonstrating that control and engagement are inversely correlated: as control increases, engagement with learning decreases. All educators agree that creating a classroom environment and culture where efficient and productive learning can take place is a foundational condition for student success. It falls to school and district leaders to pay attention to the tension between control and engagement, help teachers find a balance and, if necessary, give permission for teachers to experiment with an explicit loosening of control to make room for more robust student engagement.

During classroom walk-throughs, it's essential to recognize that a quiet classroom does not always equate to a productive one. Instead, leaders should look for signs of engagement: students collaborating on projects, asking probing questions, engaging in critical thinking, and demonstrating what psychologists call ‘discretionary effort’ (i.e., doing more than is required). These behaviors are indicators of a healthy learning environment, even if they come with a bit more noise and movement than in a traditionally controlled classroom.

### **Finding the balance with walk-throughs.**

The issues raised by our first question, about student learning, are a direct, if unintentional, result of how walk-throughs are being used. The issues raised by our second question, about classroom management, are an example of how good walk-through practices offer a lens into larger problems of practice.

The four pay-offs from walk-throughs that we cited above are strong arguments for continuing to invest time, people, and data resources in these processes. They also provide a strong argument for being attentive to the continuous improvement of these processes.

Organizational development consultants often say that the easiest place to find problems is on the underside of things that are well-developed. In many districts, walk-throughs are well developed and district leaders now have the chance to ask, “What are we *not* getting out of this process? What are the *unintended consequences* of this process? How well do teachers and leaders understand *why* we are doing this? *How* are we using what we’re learning?”

Finding a balance begins with broadening the walk-through observation indicators to include behavioral descriptions of student engagement and learning such as students leading discussions, inquiry-based learning, engaging in peer feedback, and presenting different perspectives. Books by Doug Lemov and David Yeager provide thoughtful ways of thinking about these broader indicators. The paradox of well-designed student engagement is that it leads to a positive classroom culture, reducing the need for overt control.

Finally, improving walk-throughs from a solid practice to an exemplary practice requires a culture change. Working over time on these strategies will embed walk-throughs and



feedback across your district:

- Have a clear and well-understood purpose explicitly connected to district and school goals
- Be transparent about the process, the observation indicators, and what leaders are seeing during observations
- Broaden ownership for design and implementation by engaging more stakeholders and soliciting feedback
- Constantly focus on the impact of the process on student learning
- Celebrate successes, large and small

Where to begin? Add a few engagement-focused indicators to the tool, such as “Are students initiating tasks, setting personal goals, or seeking feedback?” or “Are students making connections between the material and real-world scenarios in their community or personal lives?”.

Train principals to look for and give feedback about authentic learning. Be explicit about the visible behaviors and deeper signs of cognitive and emotional engagement. Find and scale strong student engagement practices already in place in your schools.

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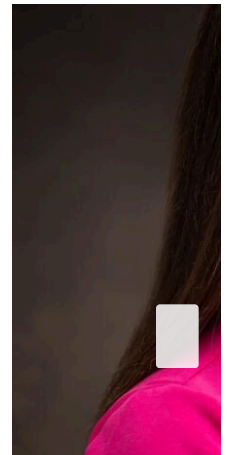
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