Walking Toward A Healthy Academic Environment: 
An Examination of Enhanced Administration Presence 
as Implemented in a Rural South Texas High School

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Abstract
This article is a phenomenological study written to understand a new concept that is relatively new in the educational / leadership genre of administration. Administrative presence has always been implemented, at a very minimal and fragmented frequency. This new phenomenon promotes the presence of administrators and their designees in all classrooms on a very frequent schedule. Administrators, counselors, and other individuals are prepared to make observations in the classroom. Administrators are looking for teacher engagement, student engagement, samples of student work, relevancy in learning, and classroom management. The very presence of administrators also promotes a sense of validation to the students and teachers; it is apparent that administrators value and are interested in the quality of their education.

Research Problem
Ask any current principal about their job and they will indicate to you that the job of a school principal has become much more difficult and challenging. In 2001, federal law was adopted and the new No Child Left Behind law was initiated. Principals were faced with an academic dilemma at the federal, state and local levels. School districts are now being measured and assessed for growth at the federal, state and local levels. Adequate yearly progress and the state accountability system are based on a variety of criteria including graduation rates, attendance, and state-mandated assessment scores. With the pressures that principals now face, they feel that they are moving away from administrative duties and focusing more on the analysis of data from yearly assessments and delving into curriculum and instruction. (Butler, 2008)

The obligatory and standard one to two formal teacher observations, during the academic calendar, does not adequately portray what is transpiring in a specific classroom throughout the school year. Many teachers save their canned lessons from year to year. These lessons, at times, can be identified, explained, and deciphered by administrators within school districts; administrators which have formally observed these teachers, at various times of the year, throughout their tenure.

Background
As early as the 1980s, walkthroughs or learning walks were initiated. (Archer, 2005) There are many different names for administrative presence in the classroom. Some of those names include walkthroughs, Smart Walks, Data Walks, and Learning Walks. (Wilson & Cook, 2009 and Black, 2007)

These administration walkthroughs are consistently done throughout the year. They provide administrators with the opportunity to visit all the classrooms and monitor student engagement and teacher engagement. In order for student engagement to take place there has to be definite relevance to the lesson; if students do not find any relevancy to what it is that they’re learning or attempting to learn, they will not be successful.
The earliest techniques were most likely learned from the practices found in a book titled, *The Three Minute Classroom Walk-Through—Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time*. The author is Carolyn Downey; she was a superintendent in the Arizona Phoenix-Tempe school district and currently is located at San Diego State University. Ms. Downey states, “…walkthroughs are a principal’s best chance of improving teaching and learning.” (Black, 2007)

The pioneer system that first implemented these walkthroughs was Community School District 2 out of the New York school system. The two superintendents that piloted the program were Anthony J. Alvarado and Elaine Fink. (Archer, 2005) The walkthrough concept is a concept that is fast becoming a nonnegotiable component of being an administrator.

Black (2007) reviewed the philosophy of Francis Barnes, superintendent of Pennsylvania’s Palisades School District. He states:

> Walkthroughs provide opportunities to capture ‘data worth collecting’. He expects walkthrough data in his schools to include a ‘cross-section of students’ voices that reveals how students learn, how teachers expect them to learn, and how students believe they could learn better.

The literature suggests that to be an effective instructional leader you should conduct regular classroom observations (Wilson & Cook, 2009) and that all of these administrative presence approaches are targeting the same goal which is to improve teaching and student learning. (Black, 2007)

Archer (2005) cautions administrators about possible implementation of walkthroughs incorrectly. Ineffective walkthroughs do nothing but insight educators to be leery of the effectiveness of the process, and can foster a sense of doubt among the very educators it is meant to assist. Gilliland (2007) states that in her experience, “…many excellent teachers are unnerved by walkthroughs; the presence of a clipboard or laptop used by some of my colleagues changes the atmosphere in a room almost immediately.” Interestingly enough, in the Los Angeles Unified School District the teachers’ union was able to prohibit walkthroughs as they negotiated a new union pact. The district serves over 720,000 students. (Archer, 2005)

With the trend of administrative walkthroughs reaching across the nation it is important to note that access to these programs is attainable. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), a nonprofit organization, has over nineteen different models that can be implemented in a variety of school districts. Trainer of trainers’ workshops can be scheduled by the SREB. (Butler, 2008)

Financial assistance can be found in the form of governmental grants. New Orleans is a prime example of how the government can assist in providing the funding and training of new administrative walkthrough implementations. In discussing New Orleans, Archer (2005) states, “A $1.4 million grant from the U. S. Department of Education mostly underwrites the walkthrough initiative.”

Daily vignettes of information are discerned as administrator’s walk through classrooms. Some of the benefits include the ability to monitor the school climate, grasp the knowledge of the school curriculum, and view firsthand the varied teaching practices across the educational spectrum. Students are vividly aware of the presence of administrators and can make the assumption that both teachers and administrators value learning. (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002)

Wilson and Cook (2009) interviewed many administrators on the walkthrough concept. A powerful statement was made by Marguerite McNeely. She states:

> Doing walkthroughs—being visible and giving feedback—helps everybody know that I am active within the school and pressing for improvements always. Walk-throughs reinforce that I have a vested interest in what goes on daily in our schools.
Walkthrough Implementation in a Rural South Texas High School

Administration concerns plagued a rural South Texas high school. After reviewing the state-mandated TAKS test results for the 2007-2008, administration was concerned with the lack of academic progress in the core classes. Scores were not indicative of the teacher quality, demographic makeup of the student body, or the class size teacher-student ratio. Administration felt that the campus was not performing to its fullest potential; for the last 3 years the campus had been identified as Academically Acceptable. Administration challenged the staff to attain the rating of Recognized or Exemplary.

In reviewing the district, the administrator made these assumptions:

Teacher quality:
All twenty-nine teachers employed at the high school met the criteria as a highly qualified teacher, based on state requirements, via education, teaching experience, and teacher certification for State Board of Education Certification.

Demographic makeup of student body:
The student body of this rural high school is predominantly of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity. There is 2% European American and African American. Even though the Hispanic population is at 98% there is less than 1% identified as Limited English Proficient.

Student / Teacher class ratio
The rural high school campus has a very low student / teacher ratio. On average the student / teacher ratio is 14:1.

Administrators informed the entire staff during in-service for the 2008-2009 school year that administrative walkthroughs would be implemented throughout the year by the principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, and the athletic director. They gave all teachers direction on what administrators would be looking for during the walkthroughs. They would be left with documentation; documentation would be compiled to identify trends, strengths, and weaknesses. Administrators would be looking for student centered learning as opposed to teacher centered learning. Administrators were looking for samples of student work, cooperative learning, and hands-on learning. There were some faculty members that was not in agreement with the walkthroughs; however it was not an item that was up for negotiation.

Limitation
Consistency of all administrators implementing walkthroughs was a factor that was difficult to monitor. The principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, and athletic director were asked to complete at least ten walkthroughs per week. The data collected was strongest with the principal and the counselor. The assistant principal’s walkthroughs were not very effective and did not provide data that could be utilized to assist in the developmental growth of the teachers. The athletic director actually did four walkthroughs throughout the year, citing duties with the athletic department throughout the year. The principal felt that his presence in his coaches’ classrooms would have been very supportive of the implementation of the new administrative walkthroughs.
Comments

Interviews were conducted of all twenty-nine teachers, eight students, four administrators and four parents. Notes were compiled and data indicated a variety of themes, including resentment from teachers, students’ appreciation of walkthroughs, parents’ approval, and administrators desire to improve instruction.

Many comments were relayed to us through the duration of the first year of implementation of administrative walkthroughs. Some comments came from administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Overall, the consensus was that the walkthroughs were effective. The ability to hear individuals verbalize this was very powerful.

Administrator comment:
“I feel that these administrative walkthroughs are a necessary tool to make certain that both teachers and students are actively engaged during the instructional day.”

Teacher comment:
“Why do they have to come to my classroom so many times during the week, do they think that I am not doing my job!”

Student comment:
“I’m so glad that the principal, assistant principal and the counselor are coming by the rooms; my science teacher is actually teaching during the entire class.”

Parent comment:
“I didn’t know what my child was talking about, I was under the impression that there had been a problem in the room and that is why the administrator had been going into the classroom”.

Administrator comment:
“I don’t like to go into the room; I just look through the window.”

Teacher comment:
“I don’t have a problem with administrators coming by my room. I welcome it! This validates what I do as being important to them.”

Student comment:
“I have not gotten a referral all year; the principal is always coming to the teacher’s room and I never have a chance of misbehaving.”

Summary

The purpose of this record of study is to exam the enhanced administration presence in the classroom and how it impacts a rural South Texas high school. On August 1, 2009 the Texas Education Agency presented, via their website, the ratings for the 2008-2009 school year. The rural South Texas high school presented in this article received a rating of Recognized campus. Administration feels confident that the rating increased, in part, due to the implementation of administrator walkthroughs.
References