



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”
www.wsascd.org

‘Critical Questions’ Series April 2010

How Can Administrator Learning Walks Change Leadership Practices?

With more and more administrators implementing the concept of *learning walks*, I have become curious about what exactly is the thinking behind this endeavor and how (if at all) are they changing leadership practices? As I pondered this question, the image of that famous Young Girl-Old Woman optical illusion came to mind. In this classic drawing when observers are asked what they see, some people say a young girl while others say an old woman. The point I am making is that we can all see the same thing yet have different conclusions. Put another way, what we find is impacted by what we are looking for.



To begin let’s consider the potential lenses that might be used by administrators as they visit classrooms. One lens could be to make sure teachers are doing their jobs, students are behaving or (my personal favorite) know what is going on in the classroom in the event an upset parent might call. This is a very traditional perspective that many people see as an administrator’s job, and frankly one that most administrators were trained to do.

In using this lens, it’s pretty clear that doing “learning walks” is nothing more than a fancy name for the same old job, because it is all about compliance and very little if anything about “learning”.

Another lens that could be used is to see students learning so we can determine how the teacher could improve. At first glance we might think this is the correct lens because the focus is on student learning. If the classroom environment is not supportive of student learning, then there must be a problem with the teacher that requires fixing. Using this lens, just like the more traditional approach described previously is still from the perspective of working to determine “blame” for any observed problem. The driving force remains evaluative in its underlying premise, just done in a more sophisticated manner based on student learning or the lack thereof.

If these two example lenses, or any others that are rooted in problem identification are used during learning walks, the result will almost always end in a downward spiral of blame and fix-it actions. But let’s face it, if the “fix-it” mindset most administrators were trained into (me included) really worked, shouldn’t we hear far less about “problems in the classroom”? One

would think as much time as we have spent using this model all the problems would be “fixed” by now. So what then is the right lens to have if this learning walk idea is to become fruitful and improve learning? I believe the answer is both painfully obvious and extraordinarily simple: It’s about our own learning as administrators. Right now you might be thinking, “It’s about our learning?” or “Hey, I am not the one with the problem”. If this was your reaction, I hope you can see how easy it was to jump into the blame box.

The lens I would encourage you to consider when doing learning walks is not rooted in identifying problems and assigning blame. It needs to be about learning how to create powerful, internally motivating learning environments for students. We must first believe that every human being has a natural need/desire to learn and behind this need to learn is tremendous energy (including students, teachers and administrators). In my district, our learning walks are focused on collecting evidence around the learning environment conditions that tap into this energy to learn we all have. Our students and teachers are helping us learn what supports their learning as humans. As a result, our administrators are reflecting upon our practices as learning environment leaders (superintendent for principals, principals for teachers) and spending far less time in the “blame box”.

As a quick example, two years ago I noticed in my learning walks that teachers rarely provided students with written learning targets. When I asked students what they were being asked to learn, many simply knew the tasks to do but had no idea what they were actually trying to learn. I shared this learning with principals and they expressed their problem of trying to get teachers to do this on a regular basis. During one administrative team meeting where we were discussing this issue, I glanced down at my agenda and noticed that as a learning environment leader myself, I didn’t have a target for our work. I pointed out this “ah-ha” moment and since then virtually all of our meetings have had either learning targets or essential questions that focused our work. The result has been administrators finding these targets of value to them as learners and they began doing the same for their learning teams (e.g. their teachers). Before long, we started seeing teachers providing written learning targets for their students.

In conclusion, my mom used to tell me, “When you point your finger at someone else, how many fingers point back at you?” If our ideas for “fixing” the learning environment to improve learning are so great, then we as learners ourselves should implement them into our practice. Using this “I’m the learner” lens while completing learning walks has served us well. Learning walks can serve as a mirror so we can learn about how to improve our own practices first. What works to improve learning for us will naturally and quickly be shared and thereby releases the natural energy to learn that we all have. Give the “I’m the learner” lens a try on your next learning walk and see if it tells you anything about your practice.

Dr. Mark Mansell, Superintendent
LaCenter School District
mmansell@lcsd.k12.wa.us