

# Learning Walks:

“Instructional Rounds” for your school *By Judy Guild*

Today, more than ever, teachers find themselves working hard to balance the demands of an increasingly competitive learning environment while providing the best classroom practice for their students. But the new challenges teachers face also present new opportunities for learners at every stage of development.

Brimmer and May (Massachusetts) educators started a conversation about these challenges with *Global Achievement Gap* author Tony Wagner, focusing on what teachers face as they prepare their students with the “survival skills” for the 21st century.

The conversation resulted in a lasting professional practice we call *Learning Walks*, which has inspired conversations that traditional forms of assessment and evaluation often fail to do.

Assessing the effectiveness of a classroom for the 21st-century learner is the teachers’ focus during the *Learning Walks*. Brimmer and May teachers — now in their fifth year of improving their practice using *Learning Walks* — embark each month in a small group of five or six to visit their colleagues’ classrooms in

our PK–12 community. Teachers join two trained *Learning Walks* facilitators and journey through the morning visiting six to eight classrooms for about 10 minutes each. During these visits, the teachers generate many interesting ideas, pause for reflection, and learn valuable lessons.

Before each walk, the facilitators make the focus clear. Each walker is asked to observe the presence and consider the effectiveness of the *Three R’s* (rigor, relevance, and relationship). During the classroom visits, they observe the level of rigor, the relevance of the content or skill being taught, and the quality of the relationship the teacher has with the students and the students have with each other.

These “Instructional Rounds” — a term coined by the medical profession — offer an opportunity for professionals to learn from one another and improve their practice. This “student-learning outcomes” practice has created an important conversation among educators at Brimmer and May.

Teachers are also discovering important qualities of being an educator in a PK–12 school. Often, divi-

sions within schools have invisible barriers; these walks have broken down a street barrier, narrowed the gap between educators who have different interests, and have united the teachers in their common goal of developing the best classroom practice.

Below is a sampling of teacher comments made during post-walk conversations:

- *We are able to see how the curriculum spirals as the age of the child increases, thereby reinforcing the importance of mastering foundational skills.*
- *We have an increased level of professional awareness regarding the complexity of instruction at all grade levels. A first grade classroom is often more complex to run than a high school classroom.*
- *Our relationships develop with each other because of the walks, and this deepens the school-wide conversation about the learning environment.*
- *We are modeling what a learning community means, and the students benefit from this model.*
- *Now, more than ever, a classroom needs to be protected from distractions while still embracing the new tools and information*

*we have at our fingertips. We find out who can help us with this challenge when we are on a walk.*

Teachers are now adding a new dimension to the *Learning Walks*: “subject specific” walks. The facilitators now offer a “science instruction only” and “math instruction only” walk. Members of the school’s Diversity Council also provide a walk to assess a student’s educational experience through the lens of multiculturalism.

As the teachers conduct the walks, they also ask their colleagues to observe how the learners in our community experience the *Three R’s*. The goal is to improve instruction at all levels in all subjects for all students — and we are confident this will provide an even greater experience for the learner. The subject-specific walks inspire important conversations in the areas of math and science, and the learning climate and culture walks help us discover new ways our diverse community can help inform a global framework for learners in the 21st century.

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