



# professional LEARNING

September 2009

## Walkthroughs as Professional Development

*Reviewed by Dave Swierpel,  
MSDC Board Member*

The spring 2009 issue of the Journal of Staff Development contains an article titled *Learning Walks* by Julia Steiny. The article is the story of principal Mike Carbone's journey with walkthroughs at Kickemuit Middle School in Warren, Rhode Island. Working with the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning (IFL), learning walks began in 2002 while the school was on the state's list for "insufficient progress". In 2005, the school reached Rhode Island's high performing status. Learning walks were one of the professional development strategies that contributed to their remarkable progress.

Carbone states that the learning walks helped teachers move from the "my classroom" mindset to focusing on the big picture. At the start of the walkthroughs the culture was characterized by "I shut my door, I teach what I want to teach. I do what I've been doing". Over time, the culture shifted to one characterized by collaborative continuous improvement. Classroom walkthroughs are brief (3-5 minute) but frequent observations of classroom instruction that are used for growth and reflection rather than evaluation.

The work of Carolyn Downey in the book *The Three-Minute Classroom Walkthrough* describes her approach

to walkthroughs and how it contributes to conversations that stimulate reflective inquiry.

Some of the benefits of a walk-through are (Downey & Frase, 2001):

- Common decisions can be identified that might be helpful for planning professional development.
- Effectiveness and implementation of professional development can be observed.
- Frequent principal presence raises a student's level of concern.
- The more the principal sees, the more they learn- the greater the repertoire he/she can share with others.
- The more the principal knows about what is going on in the classroom, the more he/she knows about the school's operations.
- If a parent calls with a concern, the principal has first-hand knowledge of teacher intentions and practices.
- It keeps the principal's perspective in the classroom. Decreases the "out-of-touch" thought.
- Engages the principal and teacher in collegial conversations as opposed to supervisor/employee conversations.
- Encourages teacher-to teacher and teacher -to-principal collaboration.
- Encourages all professional staff to be involved in ongoing reflective inquiry.

Pam Goldman from IFL said "Teachers want feedback, if it's constructive. They want to be successful. So talking about their practices tied to professional development they have experienced in productive, nonjudgmental ways really develops an appetite for more professional development."

There are a variety of walkthrough models to consider. A Google search of the term "classroom walkthroughs" generated 91,100 links! Regardless of the model selected, the benefits of conducting classroom walkthroughs are well documented if they are conducted correctly. Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools (near Flint, Michigan) has been conducting walk through observations for three years. District educators received professional development in the Carolyn Downey model in 2006. Teacher union representatives were included in the training along with teachers, principals, instructional coaches and central office administrators. Careful discussion occurred to clarifying the purpose for walkthroughs as professional growth rather than evaluation.

Inviting and involving teachers in the walkthrough observations is one of the most powerful things you can do to build trust and start walkthrough observations down the path of professional development and growth. There must be a clear understanding about the purpose of walkthroughs

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and the protocol being used for the observations. With these foundational elements in place, the conversation that occurs in the hallway after the observation becomes powerful professional development.

During the 2008-09 school year, Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools began a district-wide study of Marzano's research-based instructional strategies for increasing student achievement. They then implemented the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) model of classroom walkthrough observations. This model focuses the 3-5 minute observations on five areas: the primary instructional strategy being used, the context (whole group, small group, cooperative learning), technology being used by teachers and students, Bloom's level of learning, evidence of learning and a brief student interview about what the student is learning. This data is collected on a PDA or similar device where it is uploaded and collected for use by the district. Reports can be generated in a variety of formats and the data disaggregated in many ways. Carman-Ainsworth (seven school buildings) has conducted over 800 walkthroughs since the beginning of the school year. Often times a central office administrator accompanies the teachers and principals on their walkthroughs and experience the power of the collegial conversations that occur after the observations.

Walkthroughs are also conducted by the supervisors for buildings and grounds. Along with building custodians, they review the condition of buildings and grounds using a standard protocol. These walkthroughs facilitate conversations that allow kudos, opportunities for additional support that might be needed and agreed upon areas of

improvement. Other walkthroughs are also conducted that facilitates data collection and conversations about how weekly professional learning community time is being used.

Classroom walkthrough observations provide a safe and structured process for collegial conversations that leads to improved student learning. Observations also provide a

mechanism that places central office administrators and principals back in the classroom and in touch with teachers and students. This process also breaks down classroom walls by allowing teachers to observe other teachers. All of these benefits build trust throughout the system and provide a vehicle for on-going professional discussions and development.

## Video from NSDC

# Professional Development in Action

The National Staff Development Council has made available three new videos on its website at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org) to explain and showcase its new definition for quality professional development. Of particular interest, is the video entitled "Professional Development in Action." This video showcases a math department at Ford Middle School in Allen, Texas. The team is filmed while they are participating in a professional learning community around their students' performance on a particular math concept. Joellen Killion, NSDC's Deputy Executive Director, provides commentary throughout the video.



The team models the cycle of continuous improvement by: (a) analyzing student achievement data and examining their students' work, (b) identifying goals for improvement, (c) discussing how they can improve their own instruction, (d) identifying learning strategies to achieve the improvement goals, (e) then implementing their strategies, and (f) assessing student performance to see the impact of those strategies. Throughout this process the team exhibited collaborative inquiry, modeled/observed in colleagues' classrooms, and focused team efforts in common instructional strategies and common progress monitoring.

This is an excellent video to share with a department or grade level team on how they can conduct their own data-driven professional learning communities around key instructional issues. Prior to viewing, you can ask the participants to look for the actions of the team that they would find beneficial for their own professional learning. After viewing the video, you can discuss how your own team can put this continuous improvement cycle into practice in their team meetings.

Take the time to view this excellent teaching tool at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org) – click on "What We Stand For," then "PD Definition" and review video links along the right side.

# Free webinar series featuring Joellen Killion

A FREE Webinar series featuring NSDC Deputy Executive Director Joellen Killion is being offered to all educators. This four-part series will bring you the most current thoughts and research on topics important to educational effectiveness and student success.

Dates and topics are listed below. Visit [www.msdonline.org](http://www.msdonline.org) to sign up.

**October 5, 2009**

## **Building Collaborative Teams for Professional Learning**

This webinar focuses on the 5 critical elements of successful learning teams, offers ideas for ensuring that those elements are in place, and describes how teams support professional learning. Participants will leave the session with specific strategies to use in their work as team facilitators, team members, or team supporters.

**November 4, 2009**

## **A New View of Professional Learning**

NSDC has developed, in collaboration with AFT, NEA, CCSSO, and NAESP, a new definition for professional learning. In this session, participants will review the definition and discuss which elements of the definition align with their current professional development practices and which elements will be most challenging to implement.

**December 16, 2009**

## **Time for Learning**

Finding time is often cited as one of the most challenging barriers to providing effective professional learning. Participants in this session will learn how schools are rearranging their schedule to make time available within the workday for educator learning. In addition, participants will learn about resources available to support redesigning school schedules and a process to use in considering alternatives.

**January 12, 2010**

## **Evaluating the Impact of Professional Learning**

Knowing if professional learning is changing practice and student learning is important to improve its quality and effectiveness. Yet, most schools and districts are unfamiliar with how to evaluate the impact of professional learning beyond asking participants if they enjoyed their experiences. In this session, participants will explore several strategies for both formative and summative evaluation of the impact of professional learning on educator practice and student achievement.



## Place-based education initiative

By Shug Brandell

The Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMIS Coalition) is made up of schools, community partners, teacher consultants, and university educators working together to address ecological and social problems in Southeast Michigan. SEMIS is one of four “hubs” funded by the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative ([www.glstewardship.org](http://www.glstewardship.org)) with the goal to improve K-12 education and protect the environment by having students use “place-based education” principles and practices to study issues across the curriculum as they engage in environmental stewardship. This requires collaboration, understanding economic and political systems, and the impact of human cultures on the ecosystems.

Student activities included tire recycling; brownfield remediation; schoolyard habitat and playground revitalization; mural painting; using theater to communicate SEMIS work, and a species parade.

The professional development model for this initiative includes workshops focused on social and eco-justice issues. Committee members and community partners work with the teachers at their school sites to coach and guide their planning and implementation efforts. The professional development is ongoing and job-embedded through these structures of support. For more information, contact Shug Brandell, SEMIS Steering Committee member at [sbrandell@comcast.net](mailto:sbrandell@comcast.net)

*Act as if every child were your child.*

—Anonymous

**Mission Statement:**

"MSDC advocates for quality research-based professional development policies and practices to increase the capacity of those who work to improve student learning."

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**President's Message:**

# The moral imperative of professional development

A recent article by Stephanie Hirsch, Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council, raised concern about the paucity of high-quality professional development. Of equal concern is the continued culture of isolated practice among the nation's teacher.

As president of the Michigan affiliate of NSDC, I share with her a sense of urgency about the need to make NSDC's powerful new definition of professional development a priority in every school in Michigan.. I am confident that I speak for all active members of MSDC in supporting proven practices that ensure that continuous improvement takes place. Specifically, the definition calls on schools to engage in a cycle that encompasses data analysis; goal setting for student and adult learners; coaching, where appropriate; periodic assessment of teachers' learning and teachers working as team to observe and describe their practice in order to deliver quality instruction.

Ms. Hirsch describes the need to look anew at our professional development efforts as a "moral imperative." Her statement implies that excellent instruction for all students is a question of equity which can no longer be relegated to the list of education issues which in the past have only addressed the needs of children able to pay for private, independent schooling. We now accept that our nation can never realize it's awesome

potential until every student in every classroom has a teacher whose instructional practice fits the model described in the new definition.

Providing clarity around what is demanded, Ms. Hirsch moves point by point through the new definition describing what good professional development looks alike:

- Educators take collective responsibility for all students rather than individual responsibility for some students. Professional development conducted in teams creates an environment of shared responsibility.
- Established teams of teachers, principals, and other instructional staff members engage in professional development several times per week
- Educators base learning needs of both staff and students on a review of student and teacher performance data.
- New knowledge and skills is supported through the assistance of coaching and/or other job-embedded support.
- External assistance aligns with the internal goals of the school.

Achieving the high quality thinking and learning required for 21st century work, yet unknown, can only occur by building the capacity of teachers to improve instructional practice and systems within schools and to promote teacher learning.

## Contact the Executive Director

For more information related to material found in this newsletter or any other questions or input for the Michigan Staff Development Council, please feel free to contact Executive Director Amy B. Colton at [abc40@aol.com](mailto:abc40@aol.com).

You can also check out our online presence for more resources and information at [www.msdconline.org](http://www.msdconline.org).