

LEADERSHIP UPDATE

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Classroom Walk-Through with the Assistance of a PDA

Classroom walk-throughs using a personal digital assistant (PDA), as proposed by a number of software developers (such as Learning 24/7), at first glance appears to be a tool that could be valuable to the harried and overworked principal. It is an easy-to-use hand-held device that captures a “snapshot” of teaching in a given classroom. The promoters of this hand-held PDA reason that a principal can easily capture the essential elements of successful teaching and learning on a checklist built into the technology program. The promotional material for this device purports that principals will be able to boil down the essence of teaching into a summary of elements that should appear in each and every lesson, regardless of the intended learning outcomes. The principal simply ticks the boxes on the Classroom Walk-Through Checklist and totals the score. The teacher completes the Self-Reflection Checklist and totals the score. The principal and the teacher then meet and, using these results, the teacher reflects on the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. A professional development plan or a summary of professional learning needs is constructed based on the triangulation of student achievement data, teacher self-assessment data and the classroom walk-through data collected by the principal.

On closer examination, this classroom walk-through PDA technology is a superficial and mechanistic form of teacher supervision that has serious limitations.

Principals in Alberta are required to engage in teacher supervision, which is defined in the provincial policy as “gathering information

about the teaching and learning in the school from any source” (Alberta Education 2003). Effective teacher supervision is active, interactive, collaborative, collegial and is not restricted to what just appears on a checklist in a PDA. It is having professional conversations with teachers both alone and in groups regarding the context of the school and their classroom. It’s having reflective conversations with teachers about the professional decisions they have made to develop their curriculum, instructional strategies and assessment tools. It’s having collaborative meetings with colleagues using reflective dialogue to examine teaching and learning and to solve problems and chart direction.

Some questions arise about this type of PDA supervision. What happens to the data regarding the classroom walk-through? How is the data stored? Does the teacher have access to the data? Who else has access to the data? Does the teacher have an opportunity to respond to the “assessment”? What is the shelf life of the data? Is this data subject to the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIP)?

How does the context of the classroom as stated in the Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education 2003) influence the data collection and interpretation? How is reasoned judgment applied to the quantitative data being collected and reported? What does the score mean?

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Reflections from the Field

Heart, Hands and Hope—Developing a PLC Culture

From my first day as principal in a K–8 rural school, I had one overriding goal—to lead the school toward excellence by using all that I had learned about professional learning communities (PLCs). To do this, I had to ask myself what kind of culture would need to exist for a PLC to thrive?

To accomplish this, I like to think of the staff as my classroom—my *inclusive* classroom. Webster’s defines *inclusive* as including everything—comprehensive. All of the staff at this school are a part of the team—most obviously the big team but also a part of the many small teams that meet on a regular basis during the school day. We have teacher teams, an educational assistant team, a learning support team and an administrative team that get together every month to learn, lead and laugh.

In an inclusive classroom, everyone matters, everyone belongs, everyone has something to offer and everyone is expected to offer. So how is this facilitated? As administrators, our “classrooms” are filled with unique people who have heart, hands and hope. Try leading your staff with these things in mind:

1. *Heart*—Do you really know who you are leading? What are they passionate about? What are their interests outside of school? What fascinating experiences have they had? What are their dreams? Their fears?
2. *Hands*—Do you know at least one thing that each of your staff members does particularly well? What are their gifts? Are they being asked to share their strengths with others? Are they being recognized and thanked for what they do? Do they have the resources to do what they do?
3. *Hope*—What are their goals for this year? For the future? What support do they need to fulfill these goals? Do they have unrecognized gifts and talents? Have you created opportunities for your staff members to gently grow and stretch in their abilities?

A school culture that values the hearts, hands and hopes of all its members will be professional, and will learn and live in community!

Marina Schoon
Principal, Turner Valley School

Classroom Walk-Through

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The classroom PDA walk-through is a glitzy, simplistic, mechanistic tool intended to make a very complex process simple. It leads to instructional supervision that is blinkered and short sighted and reduces it to cursory classroom visits. Effective teacher supervision is not simplistic but is rightfully a very complex process that defies assigning a summative score to the teaching and learning process. More information regarding the principal’s role in instructional leadership and teacher supervision will be forthcoming in Association publications.

References

- Alberta Education. 2003. *Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy*. Edmonton. Available online at www.education.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/pol-plan/polregs/215.asp.
- Alberta Education. 2003. *Directive 4.2.1—Teaching Quality Standard Applicable to the Provision of Basic Education in Alberta*. Edmonton. Available online at www.education.gov.ab.ca/educationguide/pol-plan/polregs/421.asp.

For further information, visit www.teachers.ab.ca or contact Member Services at the Alberta Teachers’ Association, 447-9400 (in Edmonton) or 1-800-232-7208 (from elsewhere in Alberta).

LEADERSHIP UPDATE



Upcoming Events

Banff Leadership Seminar 2006: Providing Effective School Leadership to Build Vibrant Communities

The Council on School Administration presents a seminar with Harvey Alvy, noted author and educator.

March 19–21, 2006
Banff Park Lodge
Banff Alberta

For further information, contact Lorianne Tenove at (403) 269-6872 or go to the ATA website at www.teachers.ab.ca and click on School-Based Administrators.

Administrator Evaluation— What Is the Standard?

The Council on School Administration, Edmonton Regional presents dinner and an evening with Dr Mark Swanson, Director of Teacher Development and Certification. Dr Swanson will discuss the development of a provincial Administrator Quality Standard.

January 26, 2006 at 5:30 pm
Barnett House

11010 142 Street, Edmonton.

Contact James Fraser at (780) 962-8788

Leadership in Learning Conference

March 6–7, 2006
Fantasyland Hotel
Edmonton Alberta

Plan to attend and/or present at the Association-sponsored Leadership in Learning Conference. The conference theme, “Embracing the Future: Leadership for School Renewal” will feature a wide range of exciting programs that promote learning in schools and classrooms—programs initiated by teacher leaders from across the province.

Three speakers are scheduled to present: Joseph Murphy, professor of education and associate dean at Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt University; Stephen Kaagan, professor of education, Michigan State University; and David Bouchard, presenter, educator and author.

Participants will explore the many dimensions of teacher leadership in school renewal and reflect on the role of the teacher/administrator in providing leadership across the curriculum. Innovative teacher-led classroom, school and district literacy projects and initiatives will be presented by Alberta educators.

Registration and conference information is posted on the Association’s website at www.teachers.ab.ca under News. The registration fee is \$100 for each ATA member and \$450 for associate members or nonmembers.

