

My Recipe for School Improvement: Walkthrough Observations on a Handheld Computer

I think about school improvement a lot. Like most principals, I wonder, “How am I going to improve my school?” especially when so many things compete for my time. After many years and many approaches, I find that walkthrough observations documented using my handheld computer are particularly effective and efficient. This article will share why I find walkthroughs to be so useful and why *The Administrative Observer* software on my handheld computer is my tool of choice.

Guarding time for classroom observation. “Do you have a couple of minutes?” Principals hear that question every day – many times. If I don’t guard time for classroom visits, I find my day filled with many visits of a “couple of minutes” and before I know it the day is over. Walkthrough observations of five to seven minutes let me stay in touch with classroom instruction and still say “Yes” when my teachers ask if I have a couple of minutes.

The importance of feedback. Teachers often wonder, “What was that about?” when a principal visits their classroom and leaves without comment. The opportunity for school improvement is lost without systematic feedback. In my experience, a written summary of the observation paired with a conversation about the visit are powerful feedback tools. Before I started using *The Administrative Observer* on my handheld computer, however, there were many times I did not get back to the teacher to share my thoughts and have that discussion. “Do you have a couple of minutes?” got in the way.

The right tools for the job. *The Administrative Observer*, available for many smartphones and handheld PDA’s, lets me record my thoughts on my handheld during the observation. Most of my work is done when I leave the classroom, and this makes it much more likely I will get back to the teacher with a summary and a conversation.

Expectations. Feedback is most powerful when the expectations are spelled out ahead of time and when feedback is expressed in terms of those expectations.

My teachers know what I am looking for when I make a brief visit to their classrooms. I tell them the seven or eight most important things I hope to see, and I ask them to focus on those each class period. *The Administrative Observer Standard Edition* lets me put those expectations into the software as preferences and record my thoughts easily while I am in the classroom.

“*The Administrative Observer* software lets me get feedback to the teacher via e-mail before the class period ends.”



The actual walkthrough visit. The characteristics listed below fit into my handheld. Importantly, I can revise or edit this list with ease any time changes are needed. The handheld screen isn't always big enough to show all the text, but it's there. All I have to do is tap with my stylus to indicate what I saw. Sometimes I also indicate how well I thought the teaching behavior was done.

Qualities I look for currently include

- Quiet, orderly classroom atmosphere.
- Students appropriately engaged in meaningful activities.
- Meaningful recitation from all students every day.
- Teacher skillfully guiding direct instruction.
- Friendly, welcoming classroom environment.
- Skillful classroom management.
- Accommodations for special needs students.
- Appropriate use of graphic organizers.

When I leave the classroom after a walkthrough visit, my record of the observation is complete.

Generating the written summary. Back in my office I sync my handheld with my desktop PC. Sometimes, if needed, I revise my thoughts before *The Administrative Observer* creates a written summary in my preferred format.

This written summary can be printed out and placed in the teacher's mailbox. More powerfully, the software can also create the observation summary as a PDF file that can be attached to an e-mail and sent to the teacher. This is my preferred method because feedback reaches the teacher's inbox before the class period has ended.

Follow through conversation. Because they know it is coming, teachers check their e-mail after a walkthrough visit to find out what their principal thought. They get a chance to reflect on the feedback, and they know we will discuss it later.

Better than paper and pencil. Why not just leave a note on the desk when you leave the room? Wouldn't a two-part carbonless form with a checklist do the same job?

I use *The Administrative Observer* software to reinforce the good things I want to see more often.

I have tried the checklist note approach, and for me, the comparison is much like that of a 1918 Ford to a brand new Lexus. By using *The Administrative Observer* ...

- the quality of the feedback is better.
- the high quality report elevates the importance of the feedback.
- the software helps me keep my documentation in order.

Reinforcing the good things you want to see in classrooms more often is key to school improvement. A powerful method supported by the right tools makes reinforcement more likely. For me, that means walkthrough observations summarized using *The Administrative Observer*. Its efficiency on a handheld makes it much more likely I will get back to the teacher systematically and have a good reinforcing conversation about instructional issues important to school improvement.

Product information. *The Administrative Observer* is available in Standard and Professional Editions from Preferred Educational Software. Visit the website for more information. www.pes-sports.com (888) 959-2016.



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Focusing School Improvement by Analyzing Data from Completed Observations

Feedback to individuals following observation is one technique I use for school improvement. An important companion strategy is to examine all of my completed observations and focus school improvement efforts based on data from that analysis. *The Administrative Observer Professional Edition* adds the analysis component I need.

Taking school improvement to the next level.

Completed observations are a great source of data for school improvement. Collectively, they describe the quality of instruction in my building. When analyzed, they confirm areas where improvement has occurred and point to areas where improvement is needed. Extracting and compiling this data by hand is tedious, and therefore seldom done. Fortunately for me, *The Administrative Observer Professional Edition* automates the process and makes it easy to derive trends and central tendencies from my completed observations.

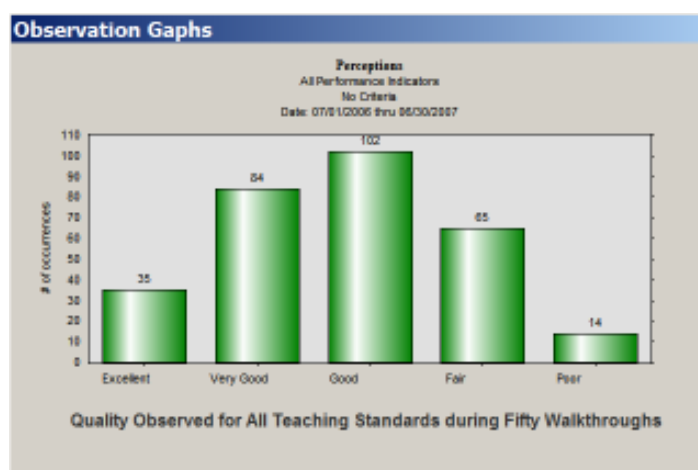
Honestly, I probably wouldn't do this if I had to extract the data and do the analysis by hand.

Answering questions with data. Like most principals, I routinely consider quality focused questions that need data driven answers. Questions consistently at the top of my thoughts include ...

- Where are we doing a good job with instruction?
- What should receive priority in our school improvement plan?
- What direction should we take for staff development?
- Which teachers should be recommended for non-renewal?

Frequency and quality. My analysis tends to focus on the frequency and perceived quality of desirable teaching behaviors seen during classroom visits. Do the observed teaching standards meet or exceed district expectations? Using *The Administrative Observer Professional*, I can express a frequency distribution showing the teaching standards observed, the ratings given during observation, and computed mean values for comparison. That information guides our school improvement planning.

The power of graphs. Celebrating victories and reinforcing quality instruction is the best way to sustain and extend that quality. Used during faculty meetings, graphs generated by *The Administrative Observer Professional Edition* can describe and reinforce powerfully the overall quality in my building.



Using the modifier boxes available when creating the graph, I can focus on a department, a grade level, or a date range. Honestly, I probably wouldn't do this if I had to extract the data and do the analysis by hand.

Data driven staff development. Making good use of our minimal staff development time is important to me. Data extracted from completed observations helps me understand (1) which teaching standards need work, (2) which faculty members can lead the effort, and (3) which teachers, over time, are improving (or not) as a result.

More examples available. Reinforcing the good things that happen in classrooms becomes easier and more frequent with *The Administrative Observer*. It gives me tools to do private feedback with one teacher. It also allows me to aggregate and analyze large numbers of completed observations, taking school improvement to the next level. If interested, more information is available on the web.

www.theadministrativeobserver.com

The Administrative Observer can be obtained from:

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