

# Where to Show Up and What to Do

by Jon Saphier

If I am a principal who wants to improve the teaching and learning in my building, there are about twelve places for me to show up and act. But to act successfully in these places there are some requirements.

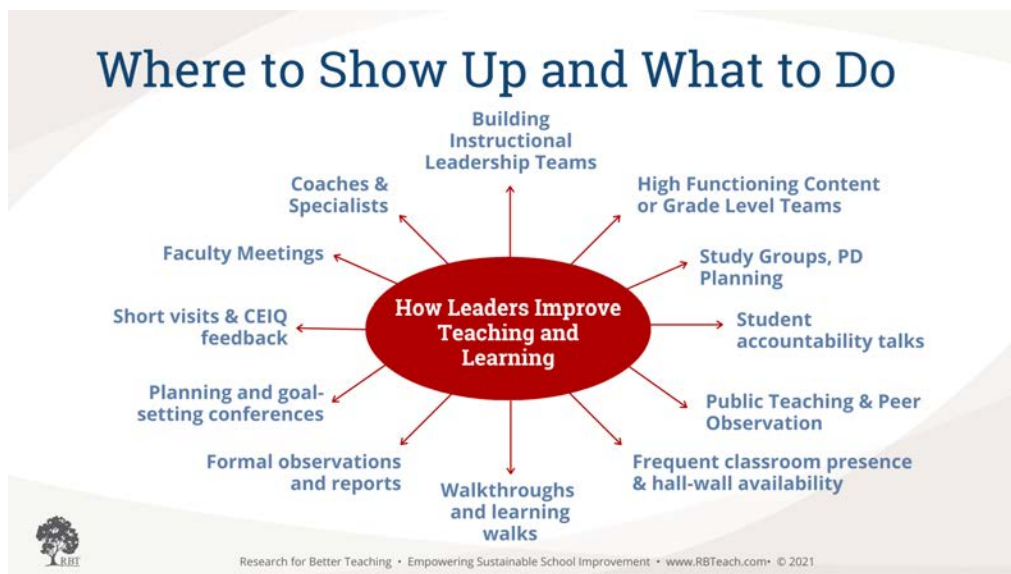
1. I need to get out of my office often enough, and therefore be good enough at time management with the help of a skilled secretary.
2. I need to have the foundational knowledge of what good teaching looks and sounds like in order to support my staff to get better at it.

Over time I need also to be working on these items:

3. Learning a repertoire of what I should do in each of the twelve places to have a positive effect.
4. Being trusted by my staff as having good intentions and being a problem solver and learner with them.
5. Being a skilled adult professional culture builder so that over time the staff are non-defensive with one another and engaged in continuous improvement.

Here in Figure 1 are the twelve places. Each is a lever of influence on teaching skill if the leader sets a tone for learning rather than for evaluation and oversight and acts skillfully when there. These twelve places comprise quite an itinerary. No one can hit all twelve islands in this archipelago in one day or even one week. But each of us can work to add one or more to our schedule if we want to magnify our influence on good teaching.

What would be the one best island to add to your cruise agenda if you were to pick one?



The daily routines of successful school-based leaders trace a path of influence on teaching and learning if we follow them about. And we can see them making moves to impact teaching skill and constant learning in all that they do as they move through these twelve locations

Now let's go into the "what to do" for a leader who wants to be a force for improving teaching and learning in each of these twelve places.

### **The Twelve Places to Show Up and What to Do:**

**High Functioning Meetings of Teams that Share Content** means doing whatever it takes as a leader to make these team meetings productive. This may mean providing guidelines for the groups, protocols, training, and directly participating in them. But above all, it means making sure they use their time to focus concretely on student work and improving their instruction. High functioning teams do error analysis of recent student work, and together they design re-teaching for students who need it. Showing up at these meetings testifies to their importance. This is one with the highest impact in the list of twelve, because when Common Planning Time (CPT) teams are really cooking, all the teachers are learning from each other and the effects are magnified. The paper on our website titled "How School Leaders Create High-Functioning Teams that Use Data to do Error Analysis and Plan Re-teaching" goes back to CPTs and what good ones look like. Having that image in clear and concrete terms is foundational to what a principal will do to move a team forward.

In **student-by-student accountability talk**, the principal or the department chair asks the teacher to share a class roster and grade book with them two times a year to review the progress of each student, one by one, with records on the table. They review each student with data about that student, and the teacher is asked to present how each child is doing. Abstractions are not sufficient. ("He's doing pretty well.") The purpose of these meetings is to focus teachers on students who are struggling and make specific plans for improving their performance. It is also a place to discuss extension plans for high-flying students.

When they come to a student who is struggling, the principal asks: "What are you doing about it?" As this meeting becomes a twice yearly event, teachers prepare themselves to have a plan for the low performing students.

The result of this regular scheduled event is at least two things:

- 1) The principal has a data-focused conversation with each teacher and the teacher is alerted to have a plan for any struggling child.
  
- 2) The principal is informed about how every child in the school is doing.

**Planning and Implementing Building Based PD and Study Groups** means using data (like that which might be gathered by walkthroughs) to pick targets for joint study across the whole building. A typical building-based study group has something the members are



studying in common. It can be a topic like "student agency," or perhaps "Making Students' Thinking Visible." Study groups can be simply book studies and discussion, but they carry more weight if the charter of the group is to try something in your teaching, and report "What you tried, How it went, and What you learned from the experience" at each meeting. We've learned that three meetings is a good rhythm because it doesn't demand too much time commitment from the participants. The rule is to try an "experiment in your teaching" and report back honestly how it worked.

These study groups gain more power if the principal joins and tries out the new skill with students just like the members do. Thus, the principal is modeling visibly (the word spreads) being vulnerable in front of colleagues and being a learner.

**Arranging Public Teaching and Peer Observation.** This one is not so easy, but one of the most powerful structures when done well.

"It is virtually impossible for teachers to learn how to improve their practice if they can't watch each other teach."

Richard Elmore, National Staff Development Council, Spring 2008, p. 45.

"...teachers must be willing to open their doors. They must be willing to allow others to use their lessons as data that can be examined and discussed over and over... This new path moves teachers away from viewing teaching as a solitary activity...It moves them toward a view of teaching as a professional activity open to collective observations, study and improvement. It invites ordinary teachers to recognize and accept the responsibility for improving not only their own practice, but the shared practice of the profession."

James Hiebert, Ronald Gallimore, James Stigler  
*Education Week*, Nov. 5, 2003

It can be built into the expected rhythm of school life as has been done at Elmont Jr.-Sr. High School in Nassau County Long Island, NY. Teachers are observed eight times a year by peers. The success of peer observation depends on the culture of non-defensive self-examination of practice established by leaders who are good culture builders. Peer observation also grows in a healthy way when study groups have a common skill for which they can give each other objective feedback during observations - like the presence or absence of the 24 moves and principles of Making Students Thinking Visible (See *The Skillful Teacher*, Clarity Chapter).

**Hall-Wall Availability:** Successful school leaders aren't cooped up in their offices. They are out and about in the school availing themselves of the opportunity to speak with students and teachers. These brief conversations ("one-legged conversations" Shirley Hord calls them, meaning leaning against the wall with one leg propped up) can be about many topics: social, for connection only, for making a brief comment about an academic or business



matter, etc... They can also be a mini feedback conference including a note of praise for a given teacher.

**Doing Walkthroughs and Learning Walks** means following various protocols for school-based personnel in groups to visit classrooms. These Learning Walks involve more and more teachers in visits that produce useful data for framing school PD, but also are intended to foster openness and quality conversations about teaching and learning.

In productive schools, the walkers consist of teams of teachers and leaders from that school. The targets of the observations are pre-determined topics (e.g., do the students know the objectives; are students given any choices...) Rather than evaluation of any teachers, the goal is to see if there is a positive pattern on a skill or practice of something we have decided to deepen. The walkthrough, then, becomes a feedback loop to the faculty of the building.

**Formal observations and reports.** A highly skilled observer can get useful data for joint analysis with the teacher. By and large, however, these formal observations are too infrequent and overlaid with the observer's role as a judge.

It does not have to be this way. Sharon Feiman-Nemser pointed out long ago that the participants' experience of formal observations by an evaluator can be very productive if the observations are frequent and the learning and insights productive enough for the teacher. One could say that the path to trust goes through the land of frequency and quality.

I would make the point, however, that in most schools formal observations and reports are a low-impact vehicle for improving classroom teaching. Given their infrequency and their tendency to invite artificial teaching performances, they cannot carry the load on their own for improving teaching and learning. It is one of twelve places to show up to improve teaching, but not the most powerful.

**Conducting Content-Focused Planning Conferences** means an in-depth conversation with a teacher about the content they will be teaching before any discussion of activities, student grouping, or any of the other usual topics of "pre-conferences." The purpose is to examine the relationships of ideas within the content, hierarchy of concepts, prior knowledge about student needs, which ideas are most important and need to be lifted out and highlighted, and what possible misconceptions and difficulties may be lurking. Good planning conferences are quite different from the traditional pre-conference. There is no discussion of student activities, student grouping, concerns about particular students – at least for the first 10-15 minutes. These content focused conferences may be more effective than observation and feedback in many cases. See "The Respiratory Lesson" on the RBTeach.com video library website for an example of how this focus on content benefited the teacher's planning and the students' learning. To conduct an effective content planning conference requires the principal to be an inquirer about the content. Not knowing it in



advance is no obstacle and may sometimes be an advantage, as it turns out to be in the video.

**Doing Frequent Short Visits with C, E, I, Q** means 15 to 20 minute visits that are not part of teacher evaluation. They are for the purpose of having substantive, productive conversations with teachers. C, E, I, Q is shorthand for evidence-based conversations in which claims (C) are backed up with specific evidence (E) and comments about the impact (I) of teacher choices on student learning. It makes observations student-focused instead of teacher-focused only. Q refers to questions the observer may want to ask the observee. It refers to a way of thinking about the data one collects as an observer. Any claims about the teaching should be anchored firmly in evidence and connected to the observed impact on student learning.

**Faculty meetings that are built around improving instruction** create experiences like small group sharing of experiments in one's teaching, joint problem-solving, input to school priorities and plans, processing of key readings, and community building. The objective is that teachers leave every faculty meeting having learned something,

This kind of faculty meeting also serves as a model of good instruction for all who experience it. Does your principal turn faculty meetings into learning experiences? If so, they are designed like lessons. They have objectives, itineraries, active participation, and summarizing moments. They can also embody the principle of learning called "meaning" (see *The Skillful Teacher* Chapter 13), that is, the topic is viewed by faculty as important and relevant to their world. The design can also embody "agency", meaning faculty members have some choices over how they process information and act on it as a result of the experience.

The **relationship between the principal and the instructional coach** has been explicated in some detail elsewhere (Saphier and West 2009). The overarching focus of their relationship is to build a strong Adult Professional Culture as described in a separate monograph (Saphier 2021). Therefore, once a week they may meet to check-in on how their latest effort is going. It might be implementing the "Collaborative Teacher Model" for peer observations around the study of Making Student Thinking Visible (Appendix A). It might be scheduling the next round of planning conferences. It might be doing a joint observation with the coach coaching the principal on the nuances of high-quality math instruction and how the principal can share her learning at a faculty meeting.

The coach performs regular coaching duties, but always in the back of that educator's mind is how her activities with teachers can build deep bonds of affiliation and collaboration between teachers. This will especially influence the coach's role at common planning time meetings.

We spend considerable time in a future work on the **Building Instructional Leadership Team (BILT)** detailing the new charter and operation of this group. The principal has a building-based leadership team that functions as a group of allies to improve teaching and



learning in every classroom. That means they divide up responsibilities, for example, for visiting common planning time meetings to ensure these teams get the support they need.

I would only add here how planning these meetings takes considerable thought. The leadership team meetings themselves follow an evolutionary history in which young teams spend quite a bit of time generating a common image of High Expertise Teaching and high-functioning Common Planning Time meetings. Later in their lifespan more time is spent on PD priorities, culture building, and school improvement plans.

### SUMMARY

In summary, we believe the term "instructional leader" means shepherding all the building-based processes and operational routines that impact, or have the potential to impact, teacher capacity. That is what the twelve places are - particular kinds of events where *how the process is handled* by the leader can have profound impact.

The supervisor of principals guides the principal on how to show up and what to do in whichever of these twelve places is the next best site to work on. That coaching requires that the supervisors be knowledgeable themselves about how to act in these twelve sites. This is where the supervisor's humility and commitment to learning together with the principal blends with the diagnostic power and warm demanding qualities of a good coach.

### CODA: Teacher Evaluation 2.0 - Implementation is the Key

I add this coda on teacher evaluation, because if it's a bad enough system, or an OK system implemented badly, it can sabotage a principal's efforts in all twelve places described above.

Since 1982, our group, Research for Better Teaching has been contracted every year to develop new teacher evaluation systems for districts ranging from the small (Catalina Foothills, AZ) to the very large (Montgomery County, MD); from the affluent suburban (Duxbury, MA) to blue collar urban (Revere, MA.) This work involves creating processes that will produce an evaluation system that is considered legitimate and fair. Thus a good process for creating an evaluation system is one that is inclusive and deliberate, involves all stakeholders and generates ownership. It develops procedures that are fair, humane, and decisive for dealing with unsatisfactory teaching. And it includes ways to recognize excellence without damaging a workplace culture of sharing and collegiality.

At its heart, a good evaluation system is designed to strengthen Adult Professional Culture while providing, when necessary, for the documentation of unsatisfactory teaching. It enables insightful performance reviews by knowledgeable evaluators and teacher decision-making about their goals, thus giving some measure of professional agency to the teacher. Such systems are often called a "Professional Growth System" (see Montgomery County Professional Growth System; Delaware State Teacher Support and Professional Growth System. The accent of those systems is on growth rather than judgment and rating (see





*How to Make Supervision and Evaluation Really Work*, 1993). This is the opposite of teacher evaluation systems that are superficial and inspire anxiety and show-lessons rather than positive anticipation and trust. The road to trust goes through the land of frequency and quality - frequent visits and quality conversation from which one learns something useful.

Over these years, we have learned that the key to success of evaluation systems is not the documents, the procedures, or the layers of the process as important as they are. What is most important is training evaluators how to implement the process well, no matter what the demographics or local circumstances or eventual shape of the evaluation system, by being skilled and useful to teachers. Developing the skills of administrators and instructional coaches at observing and analyzing classes is far more important than the mechanics and procedures or even the rubrics of the evaluation system. This means getting proficient and aligned at noticing what is important and capturing evidence of impact on student learning. If the evaluators are not skilled at observing and giving useful feedback, then it doesn't matter how good the evaluation system is or what it says in the manual.

### **Short, High Impact Classroom Visits**

Supervision and evaluation have gotten a bad name in recent years and taken a great many hits for failing to improve teaching and learning. Statistics show in excess of 95% of teachers receive satisfactory ratings in most school districts. "How can that be true?" ask the critics. Others, who are even more upset, say teacher evaluation is a joke. These criticisms are deserved. But, it is wrong to conclude that supervision and evaluation are not worth investment. The criticisms are valid because we do the work *so poorly*. That is what we must change; and change it we can. Class visits and feedback conversations with teachers, along with skillful planning conferences (see Saphier and West 2009) are among the highest leverage tools we have for improving teaching, not the least. They just need to be done well. So, let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. We need this baby healthy and strong. And let's make quality observation and feedback not just an event of teacher evaluation.

Done well, of course, a couple of good observations and conferences in an evaluation process, paired with rigorous teacher reflection and self-evaluation can certainly contribute to a teacher's growth. But when evaluators have 40+ people to evaluate in a given year (unheard of in other industries) with little hope of that ratio changing soon, we have to look elsewhere for most of the leverage on improving teaching and learning.

A short visit (15 – 20 minutes) by someone with expertise can produce a quality conversation unencumbered by write-ups, procedures, or elaborate pre-conferences. (Marshall 2017). Again, there's nothing wrong with thorough pre-conferences. Elsewhere, I argue strongly for the power of focused Planning Conferences. But what we're after here is increasing the frequency, the quality, and the productivity of observation and conversations about teaching.



Let's create the conditions for radically increasing the number of times we teach in front of another educator with the expertise to observe well, capture what's going on, and host a productive conversation based on evidence from the class.

### ***Data***<sup>1</sup>

In a short visit of about 15 minutes data should be gathered from three sources:

1. Looking carefully at what the teacher is doing.
2. Looking at exactly what the *students* are doing and how well they are learning.
3. Analyzing the nature of the planning, the soundness of the design of the lesson, and the appropriateness of the tasks the students are asked to do.

To gather data from these sources one must sit amongst the students so one can take notes on student work and exactly what they are saying/writing/doing.

When observing, determine the following:

1. What is the task the students are expected to be doing at this moment?
2. How well are the students doing at the task? Look over shoulders, examine student work, look through portfolios. Write down examples of what the students are writing or saying that is evidence of confusion, gaps, or on the positive side, evidence of understanding, creativity, or proficiency.
  - Are they confused about anything?
  - Do they have the prior knowledge needed to do the task?
  - Do they understand the directions?
3. What cognitive act does the task require students to do: Copy? Compare and contrast? Infer? Search and find? Summarize? Perform by rote? Is any higher level thinking involved? Some of these are more worthwhile than others.

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<sup>1</sup> In a comprehensive evaluation (but not in a short visit) one may assemble relevant data about many things, e.g.,:

- student folders, their content, the feedback to students that appears in them.
- word walls and other “adopted” instructional practices and evidence of how they are used
- student goals and evidence of how they are actually developed and tracked
- displayed student work and the purpose it is posted
- models of procedures
- lists of criteria
- exemplars
- evidence of routines and procedures that bear on efficiency or academic learning
- examples of communications with parents

But this kind of extensive data gathering is not the subject of this chapter. Short visits are the topic.





4. What will doing the assigned task cause the students to learn or get better at? In other words, is the doing of the task
  - a) going to help or improve their learning?
  - b) going to be something they can't do well because they lack prior knowledge or new instruction about how to do it?
  - c) or something they already could do before today?
  
5. Does the task represent what the objective is supposed to be, given:
  - a) what is called for in the curriculum and
  - b) what is available in the materials they are using?
  
6. What is the most worthwhile learning goal for these students in the story/experiment/chapter/ problem set? To answer this question, examine the materials themselves carefully by doing a quick-read, completing a few problems, or if the content is beyond your knowledge, asking questions about the content and what is significant about it. Is the level of rigor, of demand, of challenge high enough?
  
7. What is the *stated* objective of the lesson (if there is one). Look on the board, or listen to what is stated to the students or written in the plan book. Compare that with the *lived* objective, i.e., the actual objective according to what the students experience, and the *worthy* objective you came up with by examining the student materials. Look and listen to what the teacher and students are actually doing. [The stated, lived, and worthy objectives should all be the same.]
  
8. Do the students know what the objective is? Ask some of them. "What are you supposed to be learning or getting better at today?" Follow up with clarifying and extending questions if they seem to know but don't say completely.
  
9. Do the students know the criteria for good work or for mastery of the content? Ask students, "How will you know if you have done well?"
  
10. Can you see that the teacher is going to get some data/evidence about how well the students are learning what they are supposed to be learning (class work samples, a tally of who could answer questions)?

Move around so you can ask these questions of a good sample of students.

In secondary schools, get to class 2 minutes before the class starts and stand with the teacher. Note the content and purpose of brief conversations and greetings that occur with students as they enter. Much data about Expectations and Personal Relationship Building can be gathered in these moments.

Take the book, the story, the text, the math problems, the lab manual—whatever the instructional materials are—back to your workspace to have handy as you analyze your



notes. Have these materials on the table when you debrief the class with the teacher or do a pre/planning conference with the teacher.

### ***Skills***

Skilled observers of teaching and learning need a solid grounding in what to look for, that is, an ability to notice significant events and patterns. This requires a thorough study of the knowledge base on teaching. The research on successful teaching and learning is far bigger than is conventionally believed (Saphier, Haley-Speca, and Gower 2018). This knowledge is of considerable size and includes dozens of elements that have to do with the human side of teaching (e.g., making students feel known and valued; giving students desire and confidence that they can increase their ability) as well as the cognitive side (powerful teaching strategies like Modeling Thinking Aloud; Making Students' Thinking Visible.) It also includes validated skills at classroom management about which we can be very specific, and planning skills that include analysis of student work for what should be re-taught and to whom. So, observing for this range of important teaching skills requires a deep study of the research on successful teaching and developing the ability to notice the presence, absence, or missed opportunities for these items in classroom visits.

Second, productive observations require developing the ability to capture what happened in detailed, literal notes so the data for analysis and for feedback is accurate and as objective as possible.

Third, productive feedback and conversations require the analytical ability to make connections between teacher behavior, teacher decisions, and impact on student learning. "Analysis" means being able to talk or write with an appropriate balance of claims about the teaching and learning, evidence to back up those claims, and impact statements that explain the connection between teacher choices, teacher behavior, and student learning.

Finally, fourth, the most skilled observers have developed differential conferencing skills so they can strike the right mark in their approach between directive and non-directive in light of the urgency of the teaching issues and the teacher's level of professional maturity. Implementing these different styles of supervision requires practical training and practice of skills that are described in detail in Carl Glickman's book *SuperVision*.

So, to summarize, skilled observers know what to look for, can capture what happened in notes, and then analyze the scripts and scenarios for meaning and impact. Meaningful observations, however, do not proceed from just sitting in the back of the room taking detailed notes. This will only get us half of what is required for complete analysis. We have to move around and be amongst the students.

### ***Time***

You can't get much data about the rigor of the work and the ability of the students to do it in a 5-minute walkthrough. Nor in a walkthrough can you determine the alignment of the objectives and the appropriateness of choices of what to work on, given the materials the students are asked to engage. Answering the important questions posed above can seldom



be done in less than 15 minutes. And observations that do not answer at least some of these questions are superficial.

Brief walkthroughs can have many useful purposes, but they do not include producing substantive conversations between observers and teachers. Any serious effort to improve teaching and learning must produce those conversations. Therefore, visits to classes that give the opportunity for these conversations need to be frequent, productive, and non-bureaucratic—which means no elaborate write-ups. Good write-ups are important for formal evaluation, but informal evaluation and good conversations associated with it are much more important.

## REFERENCES

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## Appendix A

### RBT's Collaboration Teacher Model

RBT offers schools and districts a new professional development program designed to accelerate and reinforce professional development for teachers.

#### How Does it Work?

- A cohort of about 30 to 40 teachers take our online course “Making Student Thinking Visible”.
- Administrators select 10 people who took the course, show proficiency with the skills, have credibility with their peers, and are willing to open their classrooms up to colleagues who want to see what these skills look like in practice. (Size of the first cohort and number of Collaboration Teachers is adjustable to the scale of the program.)
- These 10 teachers are called “Collaboration Teachers”. They are willing to share their ongoing process of learning.
- We give collaboration teachers an extra full day of professional development face-to-face to increase their expertise. They practice in small groups.
- Collaboration Teachers can also get individual in-class coaching and feedback on their use of MSTV skills.
- Collaboration Teachers make presentations at faculty meetings.
- Administrators spread the word and ask if other teachers who took the course would like to visit the Collaboration Teachers. Administrators facilitate the scheduling and coverage.

#### Who's Already Doing it?

Two districts have already successfully piloted this new RBT program:

- Revere, Massachusetts (7,000 students;) [www.revere.mec.edu](http://www.revere.mec.edu)
- Eugene, Oregon (16,500 students;) [www.4j.lane.edu/](http://www.4j.lane.edu/)

#### To Learn More

Please contact: RBT Client Services at (978) 263-9449 or [info@RBTeach.com](mailto:info@RBTeach.com).

