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CAPACITY-BUILDING LEARNING WALKS



The practice of observing classrooms was traditionally seen as the purview of administrators, whether for evaluation purposes or to gauge progress across a department or a school. Fortunately, the popularity of learning walks has invited teachers into spaces where only administrators once stood. PLC+ learning walks are designed to promote decision-making within teams as members visit at least three classrooms for about ten minutes each. This protocol emphasizes reflection, encourages collaboration, and uses a nonevaluative approach to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Learning walks have been transformative in the schools and districts we work with, especially ensuring that professional learning is implemented into professional practice.⁸⁵ When schools adopt learning walks as standard practice, they create a turning point in fostering teacher leadership across the professional learning community.

Learning walks differ from instructional rounds in their scope and their formality.⁸⁶ While instructional rounds use protocols for establishing long-term networks, defining problems of practice, and formally analyzing patterns, learning walks are more loosely structured. Here are some key recommendations to help you successfully implement capacity-building learning walks:

- *Focus on equity and fairness.* Observe how instructional strategies impact all students, particularly those who may require additional support.
- *Engage in collaborative reflection.* Use the learning walks as a springboard for collective problem-solving and strategy development, especially in noticing and reflecting.⁸⁷
- *Celebrate successes.* Recognize effective practices observed to promote a positive, growth-oriented culture.



CAPACITY-BUILDING LEARNING WALK PROTOCOL

Classroom learning walks are conducted to gather insights into teaching practices by observing brief snapshots of different

classrooms, allowing educators to identify best practices, reflect on their own teaching, and ultimately improve student learning across the school, all while being nonevaluative in nature; this essentially provides a way to learn from each other and collaborate on improving instruction without feeling judged.

Purpose: To collaboratively observe teaching and learning in action, identify practices that support student outcomes, and reflect on strategies to improve collective teacher efficacy.

STEP 1: Preparation (Before the observations)

- **Establish Goals and Focus:**

- Identify the purpose of the learning walk. Focus areas should be related to the common challenge the team has identified or is in the process of identifying. The observation is a time for the volunteer teachers to profile the area of focus. For instance, if the common challenge concerns collaborative learning, the observed time should coincide with students engaged in collaborative learning.
- Clearly define observation prompts (e.g., “What strategies promote student participation?”).
- Schedule dates and times with the volunteer teachers on the PLC+ team. Observations should be no more than ten minutes.



- **Set Norms for Observations:**

- *Nonevaluative:* Observations are descriptive, not judgmental.
- *Confidential:* All observations and discussions stay within the team.
- *Focus on Practices, Not Individuals:* Observations are about student learning and instructional strategies, not teacher performance.

- **Assign Roles:**

- *Observers:* Teachers who observe the classrooms.
- *Activator:* Keeps the team focused on the goals and manages the post-observation discussion.
- *Timekeeper:* Ensures the group stays on schedule.

- **Context Briefing (5 minutes):**

- The host teacher briefly introduces the lesson:
 - What is the learning intention and success criteria?
 - What strategies or practices should observers focus on?
 - Are there any specific areas where feedback is welcome?

(Continued)

Step 2: Observation (During the learning walk)

- **Classroom Observation (10 minutes):**
 - Observers enter the classroom quietly, staying unobtrusive.
 - Observe and take notes aligned with the focus prompts, not other extraneous information unrelated to the agreed focus.
- **Descriptive Note-Taking:**
 - Observers record what they see and hear without making judgments (e.g., “Three students are using manipulatives to solve problems,” not “The students look engaged”).
 - **Repeat in at least two more classrooms to identify trends and patterns.**

STEP 3: Debrief and Reflection (Either immediately after the observation or at the next PLC+ team meeting)

- **Reflect (5–7 minutes):**
 - Observers take 1–2 minutes to individually review and organize their notes.
 - Reflect on:
 - Patterns or trends observed
 - Any surprises or questions raised during the observation
- **Team Discussion (15–20 minutes):**
 - Use a structured framework for sharing observations:
 - *Description:* Share observable evidence as it relates to the agreed focus (e.g., “All three teachers posed an open-ended question, and at least three students in each class responded verbally”).

- *Analysis:* Discuss what the observations suggest about learning and teaching as it relates to the common challenge (e.g., “Open-ended questions seem to increase participation”).
- *Application:* Brainstorm ideas for implementing similar practices to address the common challenge (e.g., “How can we use open-ended questions in our lessons?”).

STEP 4: Reflect on the Process (5–10 minutes):

- As a team, discuss the learning walk:
 - What did the team learn from the observation?
 - How can these insights inform our practice?
 - Were the observation prompts effective? (Revise protocol as needed for next time.)

Quality Checklist for Capacity-Building Learning Walks

- ☐ The common challenge drives the focus of the learning walk.
- ☐ The discussion is non-evaluative.
- ☐ Trends and patterns are noted and analyzed.
- ☐ The team decides on strategies or practices to implement and test in classrooms.



Video 4.6
A team works through the
Capacity-Building Learning
Walks protocol
qrs.ly/v2ghoci



QUICK START

	I can start this tomorrow	I can begin this month	I need to discuss this with others	Resources needed
Learn about your school district's experiences with learning walks, as there may be an existing protocol already in use.				
Identify an agreed area of focus for the learning walk.				
Schedule a time when members can participate.				
Discuss the observations and what you can implement from the experience.				
Write notes of thanks to your colleagues for hosting you in their classroom for the learning walk.				



Available for download at <https://companion.corwin.com/courses/PLC>