

Take a Praise Walk!

Barbara E. Phillips

One district's strategy to encourage teachers to open their classroom doors to colleagues.

"If we create a culture where every teacher believes they need to improve, not because they aren't good enough, but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve."

These words spoken by education researcher Dylan Wiliam perfectly describe the culture of continuous learning that school leaders are driven to achieve. Just as we want our students to possess a passion to grow and become more knowledgeable each day, we strive for our schools to be filled with adults who have a thirst for learning new strategies to enhance professional practice and bolster student achievement.

At times, this innate desire for continuous learning is met with resistance. While the reasons for resistance are plentiful, it is important for leaders to chip away at negative feelings by building a true community of practice in which ongoing opportunities for sharing and collaboration among teachers is at the forefront of professional growth (Wenger, 2011).

Connecting Islands of Excellence

In November 2017, our school district (consisting of five buildings) was faced with an interesting dilemma. We were celebrating the fact that our strength-based coaching model—a system in its third year that provides teachers with voluntary, non-evaluative support from peers serving as both instructional coaches and practicing educators—had already been utilized more than 50 times across the district within the first month of the school year. But there was one building that was notably absent from this process. In fact, less than two percent of the district's job-embedded coaching had taken place within that school.

While our team could have spent hours attempting to identify *why* teachers at this school were not opening their doors to professional learning through coaching, it was more critical for us to plan *how* to transform the building into a site where teacher collaboration and learning was valued. We knew we were dealing with what Foltos (2011) describes as "isolated islands of excellence without any ferry service." Educators within the building were doing great things in their classrooms. It was our responsibility to find a way to celebrate the positive teaching taking place and to strategically build opportunities for teachers to share and learn from one another. We believed that if teachers became more comfortable opening their doors to colleagues, it would increase their confidence to collaborate more frequently with their peers across grade levels and disciplines. We also believed this practice could spark a desire for additional collaboration through the utilization of the district's instructional coaches.

It was time to implement "Praise Walks."

Warming Up to the Idea

Influenced by the text *Cultural Literacy for the Common Core*, our coaching team, in coordination with the building principal, took Davis's (2014) concept of team walkthroughs and adapted it to fit our needs. The term "Praise Walks" was coined so that there would be no connection between the evaluative principal walkthroughs that happened on a regular basis and the non-evaluative learning experiences that were about to take place. We took the following steps:

Secure the initial walkers: Five peer coaches from around the district were asked to participate as the "walkers" in the first round of Praise Walks.

Elicit "open door" volunteers: All teachers within the school were briefed about the Praise Walks at a staff meeting. A follow-up email was sent seeking volunteers to open their doors to the peer coaches for a brief visit. The email stressed that this was not a formal coaching visit. Instead, the walkers would enter each classroom and stay for 5 to 10 minutes. No written notes would be taken during the walk. The visitors' sole focus would be to mentally record the positive practices observed in the classroom.

Make a promise: Each educator who opened their door to the walkers was guaranteed a spot as a walker on a subsequent Praise Walk. At the time, we were not sure if this would occur in their own school or in another building; it depended on our ability to elicit more open doors after the initial round. What we knew was that we would keep our promise: These risk takers deserved to be rewarded for their efforts. They deserved to see other professionals in action in authentic classroom environments.

After the email went out, the coaches received four invitations from teachers to enter their classrooms. While that may not seem like many, it was cause for celebration: We had enough teachers on board to begin building trust and a culture of sharing.

Steps Toward Embedded Professional Learning

While our primary goal was to facilitate an open-door culture of continuous learning, the Praise Walks also provided a platform for collegial conversations about instructional best practices and reflection on how to transfer powerful techniques from one classroom to another. To do this effectively, the following critical components were implemented during the process:

Initial meeting of walkers (15 minutes): Prior to starting, the walkers met to briefly discuss their plan for the session. To focus the walkers' lenses, we decided that the same "look-fors" in the district's coaching model and evaluation system (teach to an outcome, effective questioning, check for understanding, engaged learners, and student safety) would be utilized in this process.

Classroom visits (5–10 minutes): The peer coaches visited the classrooms collectively as a group with no notebooks. Their sole task was to look for and mentally note positive instructional practices aligned to the district's "instructional playbook" of critically important areas of effective instruction.

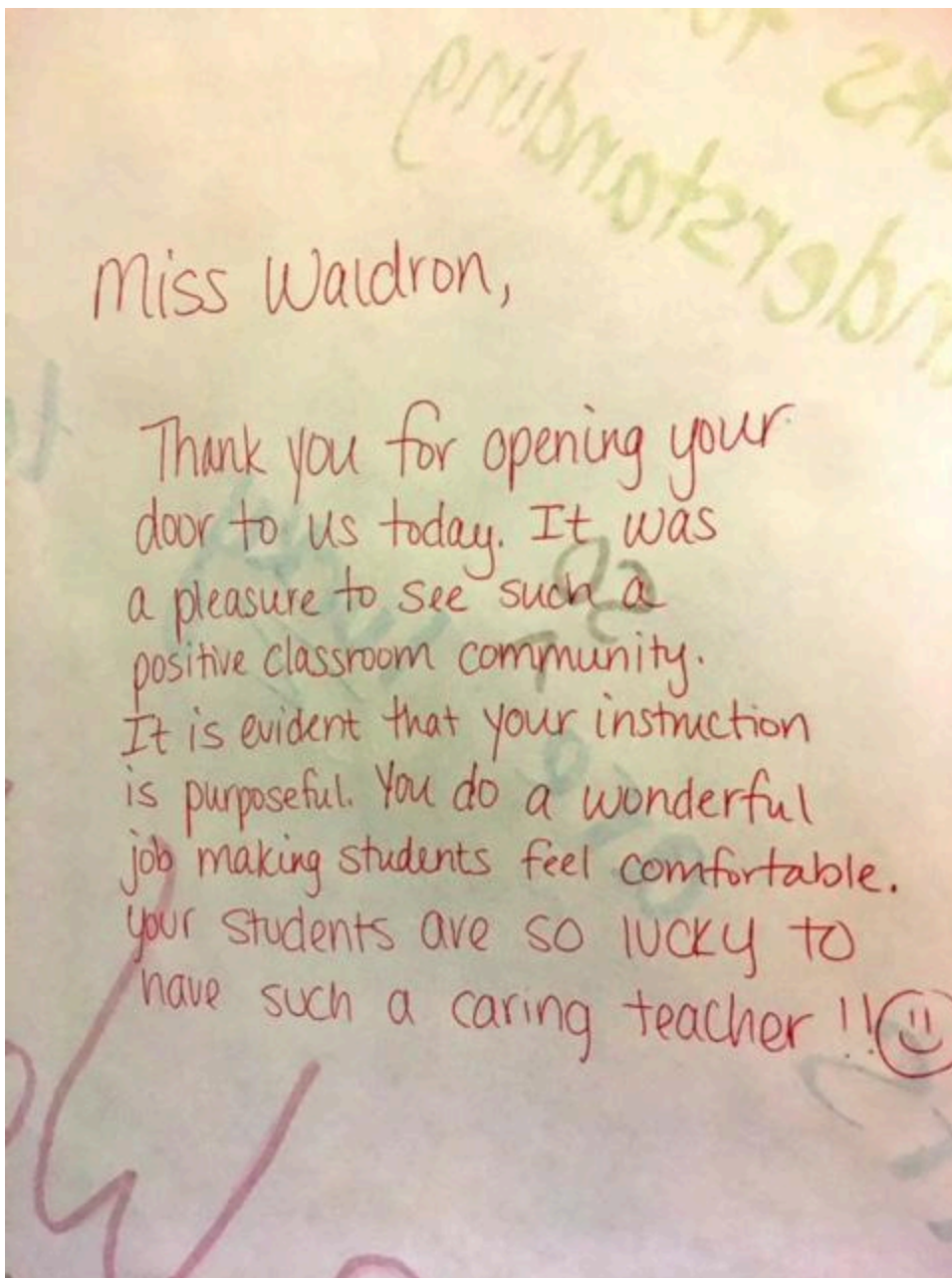
Intermittent brainstorm sessions (10 minutes): Since no written notes were taken in the classrooms, the walkers returned to a designated meeting spot between each classroom visit to brainstorm and record a list of the positive practices that were observed.

Poster creation (30 minutes): After all the classrooms were visited, the walkers split into two separate groups. Each team was tasked with creating individualized posters for two of the teachers who had opened their doors.

The posters featured the teacher's name in the center, surrounded by unique descriptors that were noted as positive practices and qualities seen within the classroom. Additionally, the team of peer coaches decided to personalize the posters by writing a thank you note to each host teacher on the back (see photos).



The front of each Praise Walk poster highlights the strengths and positive practices identified during the classroom visit. Photo courtesy of Barbara E. Phillips



The back of Praise Walk posters are personalized with a thank you note to the teacher who risked opening his or her classroom door to the walkers. Photo courtesy of Barbara E. Phillips

Walker reflection (20–30 minutes): Once the posters were completed, the walkers were asked to look at the entire poster collection to identify positive trends in instruction noted across classrooms. Since the coaches are also practicing teachers, they were asked to identify one strategy they observed and share how this technique would be transferred to their own classroom learning environment.

Celebration of teaching (10 minutes): Each poster was delivered to the visited teacher in a celebratory manner to show the group's true appreciation for their willingness to participate, and more importantly, to highlight the wonderful things taking place in their classrooms.

To say that the initial Praise Walks were met with positivity is an understatement. Participating teachers were appreciative of the sincere acknowledgement of their efforts. Stories of students cheering when their teachers received the posters

were shared throughout the building. Most important, conversations were taking shape around the strategies that walkers (the peer coaches) were implementing in their own classrooms after seeing their peers in action.

The momentum has continued. Since the initial implementation of Praise Walks, close to 60 percent of the building's teachers have now opened their doors and participated in the process with their colleagues. Teachers are initiating walks on their own—with only minimal support from administration for classroom coverage.

Evidence of Change

Have these peer observations made a difference within the school? Without a doubt. In the first five months since the Praise Walks began, requests for coaching visits within the building have drastically increased. Today, the building ranks third in requests for coaching support to strengthen teachers' practice—and more than 50 visits have since taken place. While this strategy was certainly not the only factor contributing to the change in perspective regarding the desire for job-embedded coaching, it most certainly became a catalyst for many. And still, there is work to be done.



Five praise walkers display their posters before presenting them to the teachers whose classrooms they visited.

Photo courtesy of Barbara E. Phillips

Walking Forward

Since the successful implementation of Praise Walks in this elementary school, the concept has spread throughout the district and regionally. As schools work to promote teacher-led professional learning that encompasses a celebration of

teaching, observational learning, and the transfer of best practices from one classroom to another, Praise Walks must be considered as a promising option. While this strategy was originally implemented to promote a comfort for on-site non-evaluative professional coaching in one building, it has done so much more. Teachers and students alike are taking pride in their learning and in their classrooms. For every door that opens, there is an opportunity—to share, discuss, and implement innovative teaching strategies.

I encourage you to take a walk, a Praise Walk. It just may begin a revitalization movement for educators to reach new heights in a safe and supportive environment.

References

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