

Coaching for Alignment: Vertical and Horizontal Teaming and Learning Walks

“Design and deliver instruction that helps each student understand and achieve the full intent of state standards,” is listed as the meaning behind the second of ten key practices for middle grades: *Aligned Curriculum*. In this resource, we will be looking at *Indicator a*, which declares the need for teachers to regularly use protocols to design instruction, assignments, questioning and feedback strategies and summative and formative assessments that promote students’ mastery of standards.

In this document, you will find [tips on creating learning walks](#), [a video with more analysis on the learning walk process](#), [a short case study on the importance of utilizing vertical and horizontal teaming in your walks](#) and [a sample learning walk feedback form](#).

Learning Walks

You may know them as learning walks or instructional rounds, but whatever you call them, these refer to the brief visits to classrooms that allow teachers to reflect on what students are learning, current learning strategies and student engagement with content and curricula.

Benefits of Learning Walks

There are many reasons to conduct learning walks. Here are just some of the potential things you can accomplish through learning walks:

- Identify and **celebrate** best practices and innovation happening across campus.
- Create a **shared understanding** across content areas and grades of high-quality teaching and learning.
- **Connect** with colleagues to better understand their perspectives.
- Discover **opportunities** and needs for future learning.
- Uncover **conditions** that are either supporting or hindering high-quality teaching and learning.
- Build and strengthen a campus’ commitment to **collegiality** and **professionalism**.

Features of Learning Walks

What does a learning walk actually look like, though? Let's look at some basic features:

- It is centered on a problem of practice and focuses on pre-identified “look fors.”
- It is short – 10-15 minute visits.
- It is not evaluative in nature.
- It includes time for reflection and collaboration.

Learning Walk Best Practices

To get the most out of your learning walks, make sure you are using best practices.

Before Your Visit:

- Make sure everyone – from hosts to visitors – understands the purpose and benefits.
- Create the look fors together.
- Make sure the host teachers know they might be getting visitors on learning walk days.

During Your Visit:

- Encourage visitors to speak with students *if* doing so will not disturb instruction.
- Keep to the 10-15 minutes time frame.
- Enter and exit as quietly and discreetly as possible.
- Try to stand or sit in the back or in an out-of-the-way location.
- Check your bias at the door!
- Pay attention to what both the teacher and student are doing and the impact on learning.

After Your Visit:

- Provide timely feedback.
- Create time and space to share data collected on the walks.
- Don't make assumptions – rely only on what you observe.

Debriefing Questions

When it is time to debrief, make sure you are focused on the right questions. Here are some things to consider:

- What **patterns/trends/themes** emerged today across the classroom environments?
- Were there any look fors that were **implemented strongly** and with success?
- What did you **expect to see** today that you **didn't**?
- Was there anything from today that was of **particular interest?** (an ah-ha moment)
- Are there any **implications** for your own classroom instruction?

Learning Walk Video

To learn more about this process, make sure to watch our learning walk video.



The Importance of Vertical and Horizontal Teaming in the Learning Walk Process

In 2018, Kim Livengood, an SREB School Math Improvement Coach, embarked on a mission to enhance math education at Nichols-Lawson Middle School and Sylacauga High School in Alabama. Over the course of six scheduled visits, each spanning three consecutive days, Livengood worked closely with educators to elevate teaching practices and foster collaboration.

During these visits, a structured approach was adopted. Initially, middle school math teachers were observed by local instructional coaches and the school principal, followed by individual coaching conversations. The same process was then replicated for high school math teachers. Additionally, on the third day of each visit, both middle and high school math educators, along with their respective principals and instructional coaches, convened for vertically aligned professional development sessions.

Interestingly, during the initial combined training session held in the spring of 2018, a humorous yet telling occurrence unfolded. Middle school math teachers congregated on one side of the room, while their high school counterparts occupied the other, prompting Livengood to dub it "the great divide." However, strategic grouping facilitated interaction between the two groups.

Fast forward to the present, and the transformation is evident. What was once a perceived gap has evolved into a thriving collaborative environment. Middle school teachers now seek guidance from high school counterparts on approaching specific standards and refining vocabulary, while high school educators actively seek advice and strategies from middle school teachers to address student learning gaps.

Furthermore, this collaboration has extended beyond the structured visits. Over the past six years, middle and high school teachers have engaged in reciprocal visits, conducting *Peer Reviews* or *Learning Walks*. These exchanges not only foster a deeper understanding of each other's teaching methods but also strengthen the bonds between educators across the schools.

If you want to start seeing this type of reciprocal growth in your schools, then the learning walk process is a great way to get it started. Learning walks can be conducted between teachers of different grade levels and subject matters. It offers moments for the teachers to help each other through observation and collaboration.

To learn more about how to use this process to encourage horizontal and vertical teaming, [check out our post on teacher-led growth](#).

A Learning Walk Feedback Form

Now that you know what learning walks are and how you can use them to create horizontal and vertical teams in your schools, here is a sample feedback form you can use in the learning walks in your schools.



Teacher Name: _____

One **awesome thing** the group wants you to know from their visit today:

One thing the group is **wondering**, or encourages you to think about is:
