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## Inspiring Others



### Q-and-A: How open lines of discussion can alter school culture

By [Melissa Greenwood](#) on January 29th, 2014 | [Comments\(2\)](#)

*SmartBlog on Education recently interviewed Abby Sterensis, vice president of observe4success, about her perspective on best practices for classroom observations. Here are some of her insights, based on her work with educators and school administrators.*

#### How can classroom walkthroughs and observations encourage open lines of discussion and collaboration in schools?

History has dictated what it means for the principal to walk into a classroom. It changes the entire atmosphere. Students sit up straighter, and the teacher often feels trapped in the “gotcha” moment that they have been conditioned to dread, but what if it didn’t have to be that way? What if the principal coming into a classroom was a normal event and invoked feelings of support and collaboration rather than punishment?

Classroom observations can and should be a positive experience. Informal walkthroughs ensure that administrators are getting an accurate, honest view of what is really happening in the classroom and where the teacher excels or needs help, and once the visit has happened, timely, actionable feedback is key. No delay. No nail biting. Just an open, honest account of what was seen, heard, felt during that visit so the administrator can accurately praise the positives and develop a plan to support the teacher’s growth based on predetermined standards.

#### What happens to school culture when administrators use classroom walkthroughs and observations in ways that open lines of discussion and communication?

When administrators can establish, encourage and foster a collaborative atmosphere within their school, observations will not be feared, but appreciated and viewed as an opportunity rather than something to suffer through. School culture will begin to shift. Observations will encourage conversations about performance that are seen as opportunities to build on strengths and address weaknesses and to further hone the craft of teaching.

Teachers get up early every morning because they love what they do and have an intrinsic need and desire to do their best to continually improve their performance. Building a school culture that says, “we are all here for the same reason,” our students, and where individual strengths are leveraged for all to benefit from, suddenly it is not only OK, but encouraged to ask for help. It’s expected that you will acknowledge areas in which one excels as well as areas that need improvement. The only way to get to that place is to talk openly and honestly about what is going on. Classroom observations can and should act as that catalyst. Changing school culture is hard, but our kids’ futures depend on it.

#### Educators sometimes may feel like observations and classroom walkthroughs are punitive tools. How can administrators use these activities to foster growth and encourage collaboration?

It’s all about how an administrator positions their observations and how feedback is delivered. It needs to be timely, constructive and actionable. One of the most common frustrations we hear from teachers is that feedback is delayed, not actionable, and it doesn’t lead to growth. Sending feedback immediately after an observation diminishes fear and instantly makes the teacher part of the improvement process. The administrator should provide meaningful and relevant feedback to a teacher relevant to their classroom, subject (if applicable), and school.

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This is the strongest reason why I believe customization is key when it comes to informal observation. No two schools or teachers are alike and while there are general commonalities between classrooms, specific feedback that aligns to the goals of a school or department are what can make the biggest impact throughout the year.

### What are some top characteristics of an observation model that encourages collaboration?

First, define goals. By establishing goals and taking steps to meet the observations become much more meaningful and effective. They must be meaningful to administrators conducting them, meaningful to teachers being observed, and meaningful to the overall goals of the school. How that manifests can vary greatly from school to school.

Observation should also be conducted in an environment of mutual trust. Administrators must trust that teachers are there every day to help students learn and grow, and are looking for ways to improve their practice. Teachers must trust that administrators are on their side and part of their team. Educators need to feel like the improvement of classroom instruction, not “gotcha” is the ultimate goal of observations, as this is key to creating and sustaining a high performing school.

In addition, it is extremely important that the priority of an administrator is to be there as a mentor, providing feedback, learning opportunities, constructive criticism, encouragement and praise. A system that allows for custom metrics, provides timely feedback and presents trend data in an easy-to-understand manner opens the lines of communication, which will lead to a truly collaborative school.

Abby Sterensis is vice president of **observe4success**, a web-based classroom observation and evaluation software company. Prior to founding observe4success, Ms. Sterensis worked as the director of community outreach in her family's academic tutoring business, Advanced Learning Centers.

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This was a really great read, appreciation for taking the time to put it together! Touched on some very good...

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As Principal I would walk into the kindergarten rooms on the first day, introduce myself, welcome them to school and say, "I love learning. I am in this school because I love learning, and I love to watch how kids learn. You will see me around, and I will come visit your class from time to time. When I come into the class, that is what I am coming for--to watch you learn. SO whatever you do, don't stop--just keep at it. Sometimes I will bring visitors through. They are visiting for the same reason: they want to see you in action learning, so don't stop." Then something like: see you later, have a great year... such a move doesn't work all by itself, but it does if it expresses the culture of the school.

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