

3. Reflecting and dialoguing with teachers and community members
4. Working with school improvement plans

THE EQUITY WALK

The Equity Walk is a framework to be used for securing accountability and transparency. It consists of the principal or vice principal walking through the school to assess evidence of an equitable approach to schooling for all students. In certain situations, school administrators may invite or request teachers and/or other school and community members to participate in an Equity Walk. The criteria to be observed are as follows:

- Public space
- Classrooms as learning environments
- Classroom resources
- Purposeful classroom talk (instructional strategies)
- Differentiated instruction
- Differentiated assessment and evaluation
- Parent and community involvement
- Building capacity: professional learning teams
- School improvement plan
- Coinstructional activities
- Additional factors

Each of these criteria is both significant and useful as schools continue to move further toward a culture of evidence-informed decision making. The inclusion of public space, for example, opens up opportunities to gather perceptual and tangible data related to the school's mission, vision, values, beliefs, and attitudes. The way in which public space is defined, maintained, experienced, reproduced, and transformed has tremendous influence on the social relations of power. What is its significance in the students' and community's negotiation of their identities and their sense of belonging? The messages in the public space are powerful indicators of an equitable school. I remember visiting a kindergarten to Grade 5 school where the entire month's curriculum for each grade was displayed on the walls in the lobby and updated in a timely fashion.

Everyone in that school knew what was happening and/or what should be happening every day. I immediately felt included and connected. In another school, pictures of multiples of family structures sent a message that all were welcomed and valued.

The information gathered in an Equity Walk is useful in providing support for instructional strategies that lead to student success. In classrooms we look for evidence of differentiation in terms of how student groups are structured, the type of work the students are doing, and how teachers accommodate different learning styles. Active engagement of students promotes equitable outcomes. In an elementary school, all of the components of a balanced or comprehensive literacy plan must be part of the literacy block. The strategies and resources used in the literacy block are an important component of an inclusive classroom. We also look for curriculum approaches, such as the James Banks framework and Mirrors and Windows, that were highlighted in previous chapters. Inclusive programming also ensures that the needs of English language learners and students with special needs are met.

Evidence-Based Decision Making

School teams rely heavily on data collection in developing evidence-based school improvement plans. Data are used to identify and remove barriers to student achievement, to raise awareness about discriminatory practices, and to encourage conversations and collaborative actions about equity issues. Disaggregation of the data allows teams to do a gap analysis and to target specific areas that require improvements. In this way, staff can intentionally effect change for students who are underserved and foster their success. The principal of one secondary school, for example, reports how the staff engaged in collaborative data analysis and determined that “inferencing” was a needed area of focus. They then made use of critical learning pathways to explicitly teach “inferencing,” which resulted in improved achievement in reading comprehension. In an Equity Walk, school leaders would also observe collaboration and alignment in content and instructional strategies among teachers in the same subject area and grade as they work in a focus area identified by data analysis.

In Chapter 7 we explored the terrain of parent and community involvement in some depth; however, in terms of an Equity Walk,

the principal needs to also closely focus on how parents are involved and what happens as a result of their involvement. What do the parents do differently and what does the teacher do differently in an authentic partnership school? How do the students' interactions and the learning environment change as a result?

School Improvement Planning

Many principals are viewing the walkthrough process as a powerful strategy for improving schools. “The walk-through is a significant step in influencing real change in schools by getting administrators close to the classroom and building their capacity to become instructional leaders” (S. Sather as quoted in Hopkins, 2005/2011). Walkthroughs allow principals and teachers to engage in dialogue and reflection about critical aspects of school improvement—students, curriculum, and achievement. The school improvement planning process is the vehicle for translating collected achievement data into constructive change in the classroom and the school. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2008) reports that a common characteristic of high-performing schools is their practice of translating the planned collection and use of data into priorities, goals, and strategies linked to school improvement planning.

Cocurricular Activities

One of the components for observation on an Equity Walk is the area of coinstructional activities also called cocurricular or extracurricular activities. Epstein (2011) writes as follows:

Students gain knowledge and build cultural capital when they engage in and enjoy activities, events, and services in school and in their communities. In recent years, after-school programs have become more common, but they do not serve all students at any age or grade level. (p. 380)

Research has revealed the enduring value of visits to museums, zoos, science centers, music and art camps, cultural performances, and talent activities. To remedy the inequities in opportunities for many families, Epstein introduces the idea of an “enrichment voucher”—a kind of “food for thought stamp” that could be subsidized

by government or community agencies and distributed to low-income families who wish to develop their children's talents.

The matrix below sets out the above criteria accompanied by a number of activating questions, "look fors" in terms of evidence, and invitations to administrators, staff, parents, and other actors to engage in conversations that promote learning.

Equity Walk in Action

To view an Equity Walk in action, visit the following website: <http://www.principals.ca/Display.aspx?cid=8194&pid=8075>

The Equity Walk Matrix

The purpose of equity walks is to sharpen and focus the instructional leadership lens and allow the gathering of observational data to confirm or challenge assumptions regarding school improvement and equity in the building(s). Equity walks support ongoing monitoring of implementation. The observational data remains tacit unless there is specific collegial feedback to staff to engage them in reflecting on instruction and assessment.

(Dr. Bev Freedman,
personal correspondence, 2009)

The template for the Equity Walk can be found at the beginning of the Tools and Resources Section at the end of this book. The column headed "To promote learning conversations" would be the area in which you write your comments during your observations; then you can use these notes to dialogue with the teacher about furthering his/her learning or to engage in conversation with those involved to further collective learning.