



Teacher to Teacher

Realizing the Potential of Peer Assistance and Review

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Introduction and summary

Peer Assistance and Review, or PAR, is a promising program to improve the teacher evaluation system and teaching quality more broadly. Under PAR, an innovative approach that uses expert teachers to conduct regular evaluations for novice teachers and underperforming veterans, districts can focus attention on instructional quality, retain the most effective teachers, and dismiss teachers who are not contributing to student learning. Because PAR places some evaluation responsibility on peers and requires a team of teachers and administrators to manage the process, the program is challenging to implement. It holds great potential, however, for improving teacher quality, as we'll explain in this report.

Policymakers and researchers increasingly agree that one sure way to raise educational outcomes for students is to improve the quality of their teachers. To that end, states and districts have adopted strategies for recruiting promising candidates to teaching, identifying the most effective, and rewarding them financially for their success. Meanwhile, concern grows about the continued employment of ineffective teachers, their costs to student learning, and their role in stalling efforts to improve failing schools.

Recent reports about the seeming inability of school districts to evaluate and dismiss weak teachers are fueling demands to reform local policies and state tenure laws. Some urban districts, including New York City, are currently rethinking their criteria for awarding tenure and searching for more efficient ways to dismiss teachers who are found to be unsatisfactory.¹ Union leaders, too, are facing the problem. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, recently proposed a new approach to facilitating the dismissal of ineffective teachers.²

Studies conclude that teacher evaluation and dismissal practices are ineffective in many districts, especially large, urban ones. Researchers find that far less than 1 percent of all teachers are terminated through a formal dismissal process.³ New York City School Chancellor Joel Klein reported that “just one one-hundredth of one percent of the city’s teachers are fired for incompetence in a typical year.”⁴ Surveys of teachers suggest they also think that some of their colleagues are ineffective and should be dismissed.⁵

Many critics blame teacher tenure laws for providing excessive job protections and hold teachers unions responsible for aggressively defending poor teachers throughout the process. Some unions across the country, however, have adopted Peer Assistance and

Review, or PAR, a program that can improve erratic and ineffective teacher evaluation and solve the problem of stalled dismissals.

In PAR expert teachers mentor and evaluate their peers—typically all novice teachers and veteran teachers whose work has been judged to fall below the district’s standards. Throughout the process, union leaders and district administrators work side by side to ensure that teachers receive timely evaluations, sufficient support, and due process. If teachers fail to achieve district standards despite intensive assistance, the union and administration stand together in recommending dismissal.

PAR thus works in two ways. It helps teachers succeed in the district and, if they cannot, provides a clear route to dismissal without undue delay or expense. This is possible because expert consulting teachers, or CTs, offer extensive assistance for several months before they assess teachers’ performance. Also, a districtwide panel of teachers and administrators jointly manage the process, ensuring that all procedures are followed. A principal in San Juan, California, a district that uses PAR, explained: “I’m a real supporter of PAR. I think it saves careers. The whole idea is to provide the help a teacher needs, and if they can’t step up to the plate, then they really shouldn’t be there.” This process of selective retention can lead to a stronger teaching force and promote a professional culture focused on sound teaching practice.

Policymakers, district officials, and union leaders also say PAR’s mentoring component helps beginning teachers succeed and, thus, increases retention. Union leaders report that the program professionalizes teaching by making teachers responsible for mentoring and evaluating their peers. With PAR’s specialized roles for expert teachers it also has the potential to differentiate the work and career opportunities of teachers. PAR therefore provides an opportunity to serve multiple goals, improving teacher support and evaluation, raising teacher quality, and professionalizing teaching.

Given its promise, PAR has gained national attention as a central component of an effective strategy for developing a school district’s human capital. Recently, many educational observers and policymakers, including President Barack Obama, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten have pointed to PAR as an approach with great potential for improving professional evaluation and teacher quality.⁶

Despite such expectations, PAR is currently established in relatively few districts nationwide. This is not surprising since it’s no simple matter to create an effective PAR program. PAR challenges most people’s beliefs about what teachers and principals should do. It requires unusual collaboration between the union and administration. It is complex to design, must be implemented carefully, and requires a substantial financial investment. And, PAR must be grounded in a systematic approach to teacher evaluation.

We sought to expand what is known about PAR by examining the program in seven districts across the country.⁷ We focused on districts that provide both peer assistance and peer review,⁸ where teachers support and evaluate their colleagues in a process that can lead either to continued employment or to dismissal.⁹ In each district, we interviewed approximately 25 individuals, including the superintendent or associate superintendent, the teachers union president, other administrators and union representatives, principals, and the expert consulting teachers who work in the program on a daily basis.

In this report, we present what we have learned about designing and implementing an effective PAR program. First, we describe PAR and its promise for improving teacher quality. PAR is a complicated program with many moving parts. Fundamentally, however, it relies on the day-to-day work of expert consulting teachers and is governed by the joint labor-management PAR Panel. (More detailed examples and explanations can be found in [“A User’s Guide to Peer Assistance and Review”](#) at the website of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers.¹⁰)

Districts with PAR report that it is expensive, but that some of its expense is offset if it replaces an existing induction program. PAR also typically increases teacher retention, improves tenure decisions, and reduces the costs of teacher dismissal. Stakeholders credit PAR with easing some of the evaluation burdens for principals, creating a strong professional culture built around instructional improvement, promoting labor-management collaboration throughout the district, and creating new roles for teacher leaders.

We then discuss key challenges and common problems districts face as they adopt PAR. All districts must find a sufficient and stable source of funding. The program also requires collaboration between the teachers union leaders and district administrators, two groups often at odds. Proponents must convince both teachers and principals to support PAR. The program’s success rests on careful and collaborative design, with particular attention to the standards of teaching practice and the selection and training of consulting teachers.

We find that, while PAR has great potential to improve teacher quality, districts that adopt the program do not always make full use of that potential. After suggesting what districts can do to implement PAR effectively and ensure that this potential is realized, we offer the following recommendations for federal and state policymakers who seek to support the development and success of PAR:

- Federal and state policymakers should create a context that supports local districts interested in developing PAR by providing planning grants and financial assistance for start-up costs, informing district planners about the legal context of PAR, and making it possible to fund their program from existing grants, such as those that support mentoring or improved teacher evaluation.

- Federal and state policymakers who require local districts to adopt new approaches to teacher evaluation should encourage them to adopt PAR as one component of a coherent human capital strategy.
- Through their education service units, states should assist clusters of districts working together to develop PAR programs and, thus, to share resources and expertise.
- Local policymakers should examine a wide variety of local PAR models rather than adopting one district's plan as a template. Each district's needs are distinct and the program has greater chances of success if it is tailored to fit local circumstances.
- Local policymakers should recognize it takes time—often one to two years—to plan and win support for an effective PAR program. Unrealistic deadlines are more likely to lead to premature failure than to rapid, successful adoption.
- Effective PAR programs depend on having a teacher evaluation system that is rigorous and standards based. A local district without such a system should develop one before trying to introduce PAR.
- The complex work of planning PAR should not be done in traditional negotiations. Labor and management can commit to jointly developing a PAR program and then delegate responsibility for its design to a joint task force. The final PAR plan can then be incorporated into the collective bargaining agreement.
- Principals should be included in planning a local PAR program both to ensure that their concerns will be taken into account and to affirm both for them and their colleagues the central role of principals in making PAR work.

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