



November 2012 | Volume 70 | Number 3

Teacher Evaluation: What's Fair? What's Effective? Pages 20-25

The Potential of Peer Review

Susan Moore Johnson and Sarah E. Fiarman

A look at seven districts' Peer Assistance and Review programs shows what it takes for this approach to succeed.

Peer review of teachers is controversial for several reasons. Some say peer reviewers encroach on the rightful domain of the principal as instructional leader. Others argue that, because peer evaluators are fellow teachers, they may be biased or unwilling to make hard decisions. Many teachers find the prospect of peer evaluation unsettling because it violates the professional norm of egalitarianism—the assumption that "we're all equal." Some traditional teacher unionists reject peer review as a plan that sets teachers against one another.

Now that districts across the United States are rushing to implement new evaluation systems, many are taking a new look at peer review. They have good reason to do so. Peer evaluators can reduce the demand on administrators' scarce time, provide subject-matter expertise that a principal may lack, introduce the teacher's perspective into the evaluation process, and enable teachers to take greater control of their profession. On the other hand, research suggests that without clear evidence of their expertise and deliberate support from administrators, peer reviewers may not have the credibility they need to ensure that their colleagues accept their judgment and advice (Donaldson et al., 2008).

Does peer review have the potential to be used widely and to improve teacher evaluation? Or is it too problematic to succeed and last?

Learning from Seven Districts

Fortunately, years of experience with Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) in a small number of districts across the United States offer guidance. In PAR programs, peer reviewers (often called consulting teachers) leave the classroom for 3–5 years to provide intensive, individualized help to a caseload of 15–20 teachers. Most teachers in their caseload are novices, but some are experienced teachers who have been judged in need of improvement and referred to PAR by their principal.

After consulting teachers have spent several months providing concentrated, individualized help to each teacher, they evaluate whether that teacher meets the district's performance standards. Subsequently, consulting teachers file a report about each teacher with the PAR panel, a joint labor–management committee overseeing the program. In some districts, the PAR panel relies on the consulting teacher's report as the sole, official evaluation for a teacher; in other districts, the panel reviews the consulting teacher's report alongside the principal's evaluation. In all districts, however, the consulting teacher's report is the primary document that the panel considers in deciding whether to recommend that a teacher be reappointed or dismissed.

PAR provides teachers with expert advice for improvement and, if that effort fails, a clear path to dismissal. Because due process is ensured in all aspects of PAR, districts rarely encounter legal challenges to their decisions.

At the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, we studied seven PAR programs¹ in 2007–08 (Johnson & Papay, 2010; Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2009). We visited the districts, examined local policies, and interviewed 25–30 participants and stakeholders in each—consulting teachers, union leaders, district administrators, principals, and panel members.

Like others who have studied PAR (Goldstein, 2010; Humphrey, Koppich, Bland, & Bosetti, 2011), we found that districts with fully implemented programs retained more novice teachers and dismissed more underperforming teachers—both tenured and nontenured—than did comparable districts (Papay & Johnson, 2012). First-year retention rates averaged 90 percent across the seven districts, far exceeding the national average for similar districts. Such retention yields substantial savings, because it costs \$10,000–\$20,000 to replace a novice teacher. However, when novice teachers did not meet the district's standards, they were dismissed. As one district administrator said, "If you tenure somebody that's not really good, those are million-dollar decisions."

Approximately one-third of the tenured teachers assigned to PAR's intervention program improved sufficiently with mentoring to meet the district's standards. The other two-thirds were either dismissed formally or chose to resign or retire. Dismissal

proceedings for tenured teachers went smoothly because the PAR panel, which included both administrators and teachers, ensured that due process was provided. These districts avoided expensive legal challenges, which typically exceed \$100,000 per teacher in other districts. Finally, and perhaps most important, administrators and teachers widely reported that instruction improved throughout their schools as a result of intensive assistance and review by consulting teachers.

Most consulting teachers in these districts reported finding their work challenging and rewarding. Teachers were inclined to trust and respect the consulting teachers because they were chosen in a rigorous, competitive process and because PAR was cosponsored by the teachers union. Because consulting teachers were expected to return to teaching after their three-year term, teachers continued to see them as peers who had proven themselves in the classroom and were committed to teaching.

We identified the following actions that school districts can take to ensure that the consulting teachers are effective and that PAR achieves its potential (Fiarman, 2009).

Select Stars

Teachers are often skeptical of any program that elevates one teacher above others because they have seen principals assign their favorites to plum positions. In each of the programs we studied, the PAR panel's open, well-advertised, and rigorous selection process not only produced a deserving and skilled cadre of consulting teachers but also increased the legitimacy of the role.

Competition for these positions was often intense; three of the seven districts reported having at least 10 applicants for each position. Prospective consulting teachers had to have 5–7 years of successful teaching experience and to provide references from colleagues and administrators. To demonstrate that they would be able to write clear and convincing reports, candidates either submitted a writing sample or were asked to respond to writing prompts in a testlike situation.

The PAR panel then interviewed finalists and, in some districts, visited their classrooms unannounced to ensure that a teacher who looked like an expert on paper was truly an expert in action. During the interview process, which consulting teachers often described as "grueling," union leaders and district administrators on the panel questioned the candidates about the district's instructional standards, explored how candidates proposed to assist underperforming teachers, and asked directly whether an applicant would be able to recommend firing a colleague.

This competitive, demanding process yielded an elite group of highly qualified educators. A principal from one district said, "Consulting teachers are like supermen, superwomen. ... They are the master teachers." The head of human resources in another district said simply, "They're worth their weight in gold."

Establish Clear Guidelines

Unlike many teacher leaders who are left to define their own responsibilities, PAR's consulting teachers had clear guidelines that made their work more predictable and less stressful. For example, the program laid out a formal process for placing underperforming tenured teachers on *intervention*, a process that might lead to their dismissal. Once a principal had referred a teacher to PAR for unsatisfactory performance, most PAR panels assigned a consulting teacher to investigate whether the referral was justified. That consulting teacher then typically met with the principal, conducted unannounced classroom observations, and prepared a report for the panel, who decided whether to assign the teacher to PAR.

Program guidelines set forth how often consulting teachers should visit teachers in their caseload, the types of assistance that they should provide, how they should conduct evaluative observations, and what records they should keep.

Rely on Teaching Standards and Rubrics

In most of the districts, instructional standards were embedded in an assessment tool that included detailed rubrics for each standard. The consulting teachers relied on these rubrics to help them identify good teaching, assist teachers as they tried to improve, and explain and justify their evaluations.

One consulting teacher explained how she would use the district's standards and rubrics to assess a teacher's performance: "If a kid tells another kid to shut up and the teacher says, 'You know, we don't say that in my room,' that would go under Standard 2.1, *Encourages respectful interaction*." The rubrics for Standard 2.1 specified that the teacher merited a *distinguished* rating if her interactions with all students "demonstrated a positive, caring rapport and mutual respect." If her interactions with students were judged to be "negative, demeaning, and/or inappropriate," her rating for this standard would be *unsatisfactory*.

In another district, a consulting teacher said that when a teacher whom she evaluated asked to know the reason for his or her rating, the rubric enabled her to say, for example, "Well, here's the record of engaged time. Here's the number of times we saw you make an attempt to differentiate instruction."

Recommending that a teacher not be rehired took courage and confidence, especially after a consulting teacher had invested considerable time and effort in that teacher's improvement. With the district's standards squarely in mind, consulting teachers could make hard decisions and explain them clearly to their teachers. One consulting teacher said that the standards served as a kind of objective third party in the evaluation process, independent of both her preferences and the teacher's. Another

consulting teacher explained that, without having explicit standards, her assessments would have been based on "instinct, or your gut feeling, or your bias."

The PAR panels required that consulting teachers justify all statements about practice with specific evidence grounded in the standards, thus reassuring everyone that the evaluations were fair. Evidence might include, for instance, the exact words teachers used during class, the assignments they gave, the sequence and components of a lesson, descriptions of how they interacted with students, the number of students who were on task at any time, or students' test scores. Because opinion and hearsay were not regarded as acceptable evidence, the process had considerable credibility.

Offer Rich Training and Support

It's not enough for a consulting teacher to be an expert, resourceful teacher. To effectively coach and assess peers, consulting teachers also need to understand what it takes for teachers to abandon previously held practices and replace them with new, more successful ones. Consulting teachers need to know how to build trust with colleagues while maintaining high expectations. They need to handle a varied and demanding caseload, while also keeping records and completing reports. One consulting teacher described the challenge she faced:

It's a huge learning curve. People come to this position at the top of their game. Consulting teachers are the leaders at their schools. This is sort of a kick to the ego because you have to learn so much in this job.

Most consulting teachers had no gradual entry, no practice run. From their first day on the job, beginning consulting teachers were expected to carry out complicated responsibilities. One described the abrupt transition: "You've never been in that position and all of a sudden, guess what? You have a caseload of 13."

To help them meet these challenges, consulting teachers received training during the summer or school year in formal sessions led by consultants or experienced consulting teachers. They acquired strategies for coaching adults; one consulting teacher said she learned "how to establish rapport with people when you're trying to get them to trust you and how to use that rapport to help them find their own path." Consulting teachers also gained a deep understanding of the standards and how to use them by observing and assessing instruction, either in actual classrooms or on video, and then comparing their ratings in what one consulting teacher called "calibration training" for each standard. They also reviewed previous reports to see how other consulting teachers had incorporated evidence about the standards.

Consulting teachers also had to learn how to manage the logistics that came with their new responsibilities, such as scheduling observations and follow-up conferences, keeping records, or writing and presenting reports. Much of that learning occurred informally, with fellow consulting teachers working together in shared office space. One consulting teacher contrasted her new role with her work as a classroom teacher:

We're used to bells telling us when to move, and we go to the next place. ... And all of a sudden, instead of that, what you've got is a car, a laptop, a cell phone, and a list of 15 or 16 teachers spread all over the county. And you've got to figure out how to make sure that you give more time when they are in trouble and a little less when they are needing some space. ... So we talk a lot about that—how to schedule and how to manage your time and the responsibilities that go with that.

Before reporting to the PAR panel about their caseload of teachers, consulting teachers rehearsed their presentations with colleagues. In one district, consulting teachers took turns playing panel members who asked tough questions in response to a mock presentation.

Accounts across the districts documented the value of rich, practical, ongoing training. One consulting teacher's account was typical:

I would say that it has been a remarkable professional development experience. I have learned so much, I cannot even believe it. ... Like how to work together in a group, how to be a better writer, how to be a better communicator, about the performance indicators [standards], about instructional strategies. ... I feel like I am a better leader; I feel like I am more empathetic in my relationships.

Another consulting teacher expressed a view voiced by others: "There is no way I could do this in isolation. ... The support is wonderful."

Provide Supervision by the PAR Panel

Even with continual training, consulting teachers found their job challenging. For most, the hardest part was submitting a negative report that might well lead to a teacher's dismissal. One consulting teacher captured the sense of personal responsibility that others agreed they felt acutely: "You have somebody's career in the palm of your hand."

Direct supervision by the PAR panel often gave consulting teachers the confidence and resolve to carry out their

responsibilities. Panels required the consulting teachers to report regularly on teachers' progress through written and in-person presentations. At a minimum, written reports included a narrative description of the teacher's practice, examples of how the teacher did or did not meet standards, and a summary assessment of the teacher's performance. Some panels also required an accounting of the observations and conferences the consulting teacher had conducted with each teacher. In most districts, consulting teachers presented their cases in front of the PAR panel once or twice a year and then responded to questions about the support they'd offered and the judgments they'd made.

For example, one consulting teacher explained that if she claimed that a struggling teacher had improved, panel members would zero in and want more proof of progress. Another consulting teacher explained that whenever he reported that a teacher did not meet standards, he had to be prepared to answer some tough questions that panel members typically asked:

What have you done to help her? Have you videotaped her? Have you taken her on a peer visit to see a master teacher? What resources have you given her? What's the structure in the school like? Does she have a team leader who's working with her on a weekly basis? Is her staff development teacher helping her?

Across the districts, consulting teachers kept the panel in mind as they did their day-to-day work. One explained, "I think that you keep your eye on the PAR panel the entire time you're working with your teachers because you know what they're going to ask, what's expected of you. It's the finish line."

Focus on Both Evaluation and Assistance

The experiences of these districts tell us that peer review can work well if key components are in place: open and rigorous selection, clear performance guidelines, explicit instructional standards, ongoing training, and effective supervision.

The benefits of peer review, however, depend on the consulting teachers providing not only evaluation but also support. The *assistance* component of Peer Assistance and Review is crucial to the program's value in raising all teachers' sense of professional responsibility as they receive expert coaching, strive to meet high standards, and discuss their practice with others.

Some policy analysts today advise school districts to use their evaluation process primarily to retain the best teachers and fire the weakest (Hanushek, 2009; New Teacher Project, 2012). Such an approach, however, squanders an uncommon opportunity. Peer Assistance and Review is designed not only to ensure that the "right" teachers are retained, but also to support those teachers as they improve their own teaching and elevate the professional culture of their school.

Authors' note: We conducted this research with our colleagues Mindy Sick Munger, John P. Papay, and Emily Kalejs Qazilbash. Grants from Katharine and Al Merck and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made this work possible. The conclusions are solely those of the authors.

EL Online

For more on peer evaluation, see the online-only article "[Taking Peer Feedback to Heart](#)" by Terry Bramschreiber and Robin Koldenhoven.

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Endnote

¹ Districts in the study were Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland; Minneapolis Public Schools in Minnesota; Syracuse City School District and Rochester City School District in New York; Toledo Public Schools and Cincinnati Public Schools in Ohio; and San Juan Unified School District in California.

[Susan Moore Johnson](#) is Jerome T. Murphy Professor of Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts. [Sarah E. Fiarman](#) is principal of the Graham and Parks Alternative Public School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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