

Peer Assistance and Review

A View from the Inside

To better understand peer assistance and review (PAR), American Educator's editors spoke with three people who know it inside and out: PAR's founder, a consulting teacher, and a participating teacher. Dal Lawrence, former president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers and of the Toledo Area AFL-CIO Council, provides a glimpse of his struggle to create a teacher induction program, and why he thinks the end result, PAR, is so important for teacher professionalism. Audrey Fox, a consulting teacher, and Melissa Joseph, 1 of 10 participating teachers who worked with Fox last year in Toledo, Ohio, discuss their relationship and why they believe the PAR process works well. Fox, who's in her 12th year of teaching and 3rd year (of a three-year term) as a consulting teacher, has mostly taught English at the middle school level. Joseph, who taught for two years in Michigan as a long-term substitute before coming to Toledo, teaches English at Scott High School.

—EDITORS

Editors: Why is it important for the union to promote teacher professionalism and how does PAR contribute to it?

Dal Lawrence: PAR helps us look at our culture as teachers. Teaching is too often an isolated experience in which teachers take great pride in their classroom, but if they have a colleague down the hall who is having trouble, they typically don't think that's their responsibility. It's the responsibility of somebody in the office. PAR begins to change that concept of responsibility, spreading it throughout the teaching staff.

By almost everyone's judgment, the evaluation of teachers in public schools is broken. Principals are busy people, so they tend to avoid dealing with instructional problems. With PAR, a joint union-management panel accepts responsibility for competent instruction. With intensive peer assistance and a thorough evaluation, you find out who should teach, and you shorten the learning curve for new teachers from about five years to two semesters. The importance of helping new teachers improve was impressed upon me when I started to teach. I had a master's degree in history and six weeks of student teaching. It was at least five years before I was really in command of my ability to teach kids. And I was frustrated most of that time. I had a two-year probationary period, as most teachers in Ohio do, and I

had four satisfactory evaluations—even though no one ever appeared in my room.

Audrey Fox: I take pride in my career as an educator, and PAR allows me to feel valued as a professional because, as a consulting teacher, I have to uphold high standards—and I'm also held to high standards. In PAR, we have rubrics for classroom management, teaching procedures, and professionalism. In each rubric there are specific, detailed objectives and descriptions of what a satisfactory teacher looks and sounds like, and what an unsatisfactory teacher looks and sounds like. This allows the communication between the participating teacher and the consulting teacher to be consistent and based on clear standards, not opinions.

When I stand before the PAR panel, I am held extremely accountable. If I have a participating teacher who is unsatisfactory who I am recommending for nonrenewal, I am thoroughly questioned. But I am just as thoroughly questioned for the teacher that I'm saying is satisfactory. I give a very detailed description with specific examples from the classroom. Afterward, the panel members ask me a plethora of questions, seeking more examples and thorough explanations. The process ensures objectivity, thanks to the specific standards and guidelines we are all held to.

Editors: When the union first began advocating for PAR, was there any resistance among teachers or administrators?

Dal Lawrence: We didn't have resistance from teachers. We poll our members every three years, and they have been consistently and overwhelmingly in favor of PAR. Our membership actually supported the idea as far back as 1973. The reason for that is we were asking teachers the right questions, such as, "What do you want to be that you're not now?" They all wanted to be part of a profession respected for its excellence. We looked to the medical model, with its internship and residency, and used it in creating our PAR proposal, which was essentially an induction process for new teachers.

We had resistance from principals. It took us eight years to get PAR adopted. It was finally implemented in 1981. From 1973 to 1981, we were talking to school administrators across the bargaining table and they were saying that we couldn't do

this—that it was their job. Then, in 1978, we had a really tough strike. We won it big time. We ended up with a new superintendent and, for the first time, an attorney who was the board's negotiator. In March of 1981, I put the proposal for a new teacher induction process on the table again. The attorney asked why management didn't want to implement it. I said that it's a turf issue. He asked, "We don't fire anybody for incompetence, do we?" I said no. I had looked over the school board minutes for the past five years, and we hadn't fired a single person for incompetence. The next time we met, he again asked how this would work. He pointed across the table at me and said, "We're going to do this, but you're going to have to do something for us." He said if we could use these "expert teachers"—that was his term—to work with senior teachers, including those with tenure, who have severe problems, "you've got a deal." I stuck my hand across the table and that's the way it started.

Editors: Since you conceived of PAR as a program for new teachers, how did you incorporate management's demand for an intervention component for tenured teachers?

Dal Lawrence: We worked out somewhat different procedures for new and tenured teachers. There are two critical differences. One is that when a consulting teacher is working with a tenured teacher, the consulting teacher writes a detailed report for management, the union, and the teacher, but that report merely explains what has happened, it is not an evaluation. The other key difference is that with tenured teachers, the union has to ensure that a fair process is in place such that the tenured teacher's due process rights are respected and that the union upholds its duty of fair representation. In Toledo, we have an attorney who represents both union and management who is called in to review the situation before assistance even begins with a tenured teacher. It's an upfront piece of due process that ensures all procedures are followed.

When I work with school districts interested in implementing PAR, I recommend that the assistance for tenured teachers be a choice for the member who's having trouble. That



member can either face dismissal by management, and the union can provide representation in the traditional way, or that member can say, "Wait a minute, maybe I can get back to meeting standards if I have some help." At that point you can assign a consulting teacher to give the assistance that's needed. After all, if you have a member who is having severe problems, why wouldn't it be the responsibility of a union of professionals to at least offer some help?

Editors: Why is it important to combine assistance and review for new teachers? Why not create a mentoring program?

Dal Lawrence: If we really are professionals, then we ought to accept responsibility for instructional competence. In PAR, practically all the work is mentoring. The evaluation is the summary of the work that the consulting teacher has done with a participating teacher. After that consulting teacher has spent hours working with an individual, the evaluation is not only an evaluation of the participating teacher, it's an evaluation of that consulting teacher's own mentoring. If a teacher fails to meet standards, it's not only that teacher's failure, it's our failure, too. We don't give up easily.

Melissa Joseph: Combining assistance and review makes for a better evaluation because the consulting teacher gets to know you. She's there to work with you, so she knows your strengths and weaknesses better than the principal would. It helps to have someone who is consistent, who is there on your good and bad days, and who is there to help you arrive at a goal—not a one-time pop into the classroom that

might happen when a lesson plan isn't going as well as you had hoped.

Audrey Fox: From my perspective as a consulting teacher, I think one of the great benefits of assistance and review being combined is that I have a vested interest in each of my participating teachers. My job is to provide the assistance necessary to take them to successful completion of the program, to be able to say that they're satisfactory in all areas. I'm held accountable for that.

Editors: Does the evaluation interfere with mentoring or with building a trusting relationship between the participating and consulting teachers?

Melissa Joseph: When you hear that someone's going to evaluate you in your classroom and then work with you, of course it's a bit intimidating. You wonder: Is she going to see my weaknesses? Is she going to be very hard on me? But the key thing to remember is that the consulting teacher is here to help you.

When I started this job, I was intimidated by the kids. Audrey pointed out that I needed to stand firm. By the middle of the school year, I felt more confident; the kids saw that and acted accordingly. My biggest fear was that the students would intimidate me and I wouldn't be able to get through my lesson. But Audrey gave me behavior management guidelines to follow. I learned to tell students: Here's your first warning; here's your second warning. On the third warning, I send you out. Most importantly, she taught me to be consistent.

Audrey also helped me see that some behavior problems arose because students were bored. She suggested ways that I

could encourage them to be more creative, such as giving them short writing prompts in which they take on different roles. This was great because it built on my strength in writing. She also helped me with strategies to keep students engaged while we are reading aloud and discussing novels.

You don't learn how to handle disruptive behavior in college. If Audrey hadn't been there to help me, I don't know how I would have gotten through the year.

Audrey Fox: The length of time we work with our interns helps to alleviate some of that initial anxiety. It fades away as soon as they realize that what the consulting teacher saw them struggle with in class—keeping students on task, for example—doesn't result in a reprimand. Consulting teachers follow observations with constructive questioning, such as asking if the teacher has tried a particular strategy. Participating teachers quickly learn that, yes, we're going to see areas that need improvement, as well as strengths that need to be reinforced. But it's always followed up with help. And they see that the person working with them is a peer. I'm able to come into someone's classroom and say, "Here's something that I've tried." That helps participating teachers buy into PAR.

Melissa Joseph: PAR is a tool, something that teachers can use to be more professional and to improve their instruction and classroom management. Of course, with any tool it all depends on whether you're willing to use it to your advantage, whether you're willing to accept the suggestions to help you achieve your goals. □