



A Union of Professionals

Peer Assistance and Review: Pathways to Growth
Lessons from Five Districts



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Our Mission

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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Introduction

“The union has had a vision over the last 40 years, the professionalization of teaching, and [PAR] is the fundamental, integral part of it.”¹

—Francine Lawrence, former president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers and former AFT executive vice president

Since the early 1980s with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* and an increased focus on accountability in schools, education policies have increasingly targeted teachers as the drivers of school improvement. Time and again it is said that teachers are the most important in-school factor in student performance. Yet under NCLB waivers and *Race to the Top*, teacher evaluation policies designed and implemented in the last several years have been aimed at sorting teachers rather than supporting their growth. Now, in the wake of the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, in the form of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the federal government no longer will be involved in precisely what goes into teacher evaluation systems. Under the new law, states no longer will be constrained by a rigid system that focused on the wrong measures and instead will be able to implement models that make sense for teachers and for their students.

Peer assistance and review (PAR) is an approach to teacher evaluation that, done right, produces the results everyone claims to want—keeping effective teachers and removing ineffective ones—and at the same time gives teachers a chance to own their profession. These programs involve support, reflective practice, and growth for teachers. PAR programs are directly aimed at improving teacher quality by having expert teachers mentor and support both new and struggling teachers.

PAR began in 1981 when the Toledo Federation of Teachers (TFT) initiated the Toledo Plan after negotiating with the local school district. Dal Lawrence, then-president of the TFT, proposed a system of peer review to change the top-down management model of schools that was more harmful to kids than helpful.² Lawrence believed that peer review provided teachers with a shift in attitude about their work, leading to a new mindset with a common effort to aim for high standards as well as to improve professionalism. He created a program that embodies many of the critical elements of professionalism: induction and mentoring, professional development support, and authority and leadership.³

Since its creation, a small number of districts across the country have implemented their versions of a PAR program. The positive results from these programs make it clear why school districts should use PAR as a part of their teacher development and evaluation system. Research indicates that these programs are “among the strongest ways to develop great teachers.”⁴ PAR programs can help improve induction and support for new

teachers, provide support to teachers who are struggling, and create a more professional culture of collaboration and instructional improvement.⁵ These programs place a heavy emphasis on labor-management collaboration and high standards for classroom performance that lay the foundation for success.⁶

In this age of heightened accountability in schools, too many teachers are not treated as professionals but instead are evaluated on student test scores, allowed little autonomy within their own classrooms and offered limited meaningful professional development. We would be hard-pressed to find evidence that indicates top-down reforms alone improve student success and teacher performance, but conversations with teachers in districts that have PAR programs consistently revealed that these teachers had a strong voice about their practice and developed meaningful professional relationships within the school and district—both critical components of teacher retention and success.

In countries with top-performing education systems, such as Finland, teachers are assumed to be “well-educated professionals,” and through trust and communication, they can help each other recognize strengths and areas in need of improvement.⁷ Rather than the top-down accountability so often seen in education reforms in our country, PAR does what research and best practices in top-performing countries have shown works: distributed leadership and lateral accountability.⁸ Distributed leadership utilizes the skills of individuals and holds them accountable for their contribution to the goals of the organization.⁹ Lateral accountability describes teachers working together in mutual support to allow everyone to improve.¹⁰ These practices allow teachers to use their expertise and to become leaders and true professionals in their classrooms and schools. Research suggests that increased teacher leadership contributes to positive outcomes for teacher quality.¹¹

Peer review programs distribute the traditional administrator role of evaluation by creating a leadership role for teachers. If PAR practices have been shown to support teacher improvement, then why aren’t more districts using them? A key barrier is cost: PAR programs involve the release of teachers to serve in consulting/reviewer roles, so more teachers are needed to fill in those classrooms. Additional costs come in the form of space, resources such as technology and materials, and other administrative costs. Nonetheless, in districts that have invested in these programs, including those we contacted for this review, results have been overwhelmingly positive.¹² Peer assistance and review tends to result in an overall cost-savings because it reduces teacher turnover in the short term, which leads to improved student outcomes in the long term.

Another potential barrier is concern (from either management or labor) about teacher evaluation being confined to a role traditionally within the purview of a principal or supervisor. Deciding to implement a PAR program requires changing the mindset of districts where typical job functions are deeply engrained, and many

districts are hesitant to disrupt the status quo. In districts that have successfully adopted peer review, teachers and administrators alike view PAR as a way to improve instruction and labor-management relations, and to change the culture of teaching to benefit students.¹³ Districts are able to design programs with clear roles and responsibilities for principals and teachers, with both sides able to work together successfully for the benefit of all.

More than three decades since the beginning of PAR, there is clear evidence that PAR programs are successful. Today, there are many different versions and iterations, but across the country districts with PAR praise the successes and improvements they have seen in their teachers and students. The AFT has sought to understand how some districts have been able to develop and sustain these programs and what other districts can do to move beyond the barriers and toward a system of teacher-led growth and support.

Different Models with Common Design Elements

“I don’t know why peer assistance and review is not the national model. We have a system that will aid, assist and support teachers to a new level.”

—Fedrick Ingram, president, United Teachers of Dade (Florida) and AFT vice president

To discover more about why and how this program works—and why it is not more widespread—the AFT visited five districts of varying size and location, with different teacher and student populations and economies: Toledo (Ohio) Public Schools, Niles Township (Ill.) School District, North Syracuse (N.Y.) Central Schools, Providence (R.I.) Public Schools and Miami-Dade (Fla.) Public Schools. Through conversations, observations and research, we discovered some essential components for any successful PAR program. There is no magic bullet to changing a district, but there must be an investment in the people who are there. Each district is unique, but these components provide guidance for any district looking to establish a peer review program.

As a follow-up to the site visits, we studied and communicated with several other AFT locals whose districts have PAR programs. These conversations confirmed the best practices revealed by our visits but also provided adjustments districts have made to their programs in the absence of or challenge to one of the components.

In each local we visited, PAR was highly touted by program participants because it embodies an objective and fair process to both retain and support effective teachers and, in most locals, to remove ineffective ones. PAR participants often refer to the PAR paradigm as “something done with them, not to them.” This process of continuous improvement (with teacher input) is crucial to students; they cannot afford to have ineffective teachers. Nor can

school districts afford ineffective teachers: A recent report estimates the national annual cost of teacher churn is more than \$2.2 billion.¹⁴ Turnover disproportionately affects low-income schools, meaning our neediest students are suffering the most. The majority of new or “intern” teachers who leave do so because they lack sufficient collegial support in the form of collaborative groups or professional mentors/coaches, both of which PAR programs include. Ultimately, teacher churn does measurable—and immeasurable— damage to students and schools. Put another way, the more stable the teaching force, the more student achievement can grow (notwithstanding factors outside the schools’ or teachers’ control).¹⁵

If evidence clearly supports PAR as being beneficial to students, teachers and districts, the only barrier remaining is how to initiate and implement a successful program. The unions and management in each district must take the elements of PAR and mold them to fit the unique needs of the district. There are different PAR models that can help guide other districts looking to create a program.

In the traditional Toledo Model, both new and “ineffective” veteran teachers are required to participate, with some veterans volunteering for the program. Consulting teachers (CTs)¹⁶—the individuals who perform the reviews—have a caseload of participating teachers (PTs) that generally ranges from 10-20 teachers from across the district. The collaborative structure includes the peer reviews as part of the teacher’s summative evaluation in addition to informing the professional development requirement.

PAR has been adopted, adapted and modified by a handful of districts across the country. Most of the districts we visited are similar to Toledo, using PAR for new teachers and veteran teachers who receive low evaluation ratings, and including the peer evaluation as part of a teacher’s summative review. In Miami, only teachers who volunteer for peer assistance enter the program. Because their program is structured at the school level, some peer reviewers have caseloads of more than 20 teachers in one building. The peer assistance functions to assist the teachers in improving their practice and, although the peer reviews are used as part of the evidence taken into account for summative evaluations, they are not given a formal weight in those evaluations. Participating teachers whose practice improves or remains at the “highly effective” (top) level receive additional performance-based compensation.

One feature that all versions of PAR share is the commitment to support educators as they continue to hone their practices so that their students continue to succeed. The Toledo and Miami models, and others, demonstrate how peer assistance and review can be tailored to any school district to best support its teachers.

So, what specifically makes these programs work? What are some best practices other districts can adopt as they create their own PAR programs? No single factor is most important; they work together like nutrients in our food. To have a well-balanced diet, our bodies

need essential nutrients. To have a well-balanced PAR program, some essential elements are needed:

1. Cyclical, objective evaluation system
2. Political will and strategic communications
3. Trust and collaboration
4. Identical and continuous training for administrators and peer reviewers
5. Clearly defined roles and dedicated space
6. Process for evaluation and professional development
7. Data and evaluation

1. An evaluation system based on mutually accepted and negotiated teaching standards, using multiple measures to evaluate practice:

PAR is not a standalone effort; it is part of the overall evaluation system. When there is an existing high-quality evaluation system with a supporting rubric that is aligned to teaching standards, the consulting teachers (peer reviewers) can monitor and support teachers based on the same performance measures on which they will be evaluated by their administrator. These measures should guide teacher practice and can be used to identify areas of strength and growth in teacher performance.

Any top-down, state- or district-imposed evaluation system by definition negates the overt purpose of peer assistance and review. A system designed and implemented through labor-management collaboration, based on rigorous teaching standards (informed by rigorous learning standards) that employs multiple measures of assessing practice, not just student test scores or observation of practice, will be the one that offers the best chance of identifying effective teachers, retaining them, assisting them in further improving their practice and improving student success. This system requires trained evaluators (see No. 4) who can support the teachers’ continuous improvement, as each cycle will inform the next.

In Niles Township, for example, one CT said the system there works because it seamlessly connects induction, mentoring, PAR, and evaluation for tenured teachers as well as for new teachers. The idea that this process allows teachers to assume professional responsibility for their performance (one of the original aims when the program was created in 1981) holds true when they see this as coming from within, not being imposed on them.

A rubric must be aligned with the teaching standards if it is to be a meaningful measure of teacher performance. Over time, in most states, rubrics and standards also should be aligned with the Common Core or the applicable state standards, professional development standards, and 21st-century skills. It’s not unusual for districts to adjust or tailor “off-the-shelf” standards and rubrics to make them most useful. Standards and rubrics should be revisited

periodically to reflect changes in instructional practice, curricula, or evaluation practice and policy.¹⁷

2. The political will to invest in the system and strategic communications to explain and garner support for the program:

As mentioned, the investments necessary to implement a PAR program can sometimes make it seem prohibitive. This system first requires an investment in staff. If consulting teachers are to devote serious attention to the participating teachers, to the integrity of the process and the system, and to the time required to evaluate/coach/mentor/monitor 10 or more teachers,¹⁸ then they cannot hold full classroom responsibilities at the same time. And if CTs have a small caseload of participating teachers, even a part-time release dilutes the strength of the program by pulling them in too many directions. A part-time teaching load can seem like a full-time job. But releasing these teachers from their classroom responsibilities necessitates hiring another teacher or restructuring the staff or schedule. This investment extends to the training required for the CTs, the administrators and the teachers being evaluated. All this training requires time and money.

In a truly collaborative PAR model, political will and financing will be taken into account. From the moment the district and union begin considering using the model, care must be taken to communicate the program’s intention and design, especially in this era of blame-the-teacher/blame-the-school. All communications should come from the labor-management team, regardless of the intended audience (teachers, parents, school board).

Even after three decades of success, the Toledo union and district both acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining the political will to continue funding the PAR program. How can this be possible? For one, the public is often unaware of the results of PAR programs. Labor-management teams must be ready with research to provide “concrete” reasons why the program should be either established or continued. Long-term financial savings, student achievement data and teacher turnover statistics are some examples of what to use to show the benefits of PAR.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The PAR program in **Oklahoma City** had strong support from the district, but the status of the program is unclear with the hiring of a new superintendent who is interested in a different model of instructional coaching and mentoring. The union proposed expanding the PAR program to include all teachers in need of improvement, through its **Shared Accountability Blueprint**, and it has continued to promote its reform package. The program was not expanded, but it still supports new, probationary and referred teachers. To ensure continued political will from the district for PAR, the union must continue its public support of the program.

And the public must hear the more personal stories from inside PAR programs. Reducing the impact of PAR to statistics does not provide the full picture of the program because quantifiable data are not the only indicator of teacher or school success. Mere numbers ignore the social aspects of teaching, the fact that teachers are more likely to stay in the profession and in their schools if they feel supported in a collegial environment. And the teachers who do stay make the biggest difference in student achievement, attendance and graduation rates.

Critics fear that allowing teachers and the union to be a part of the termination process for teachers is a conflict of interest that will harm the profession. On the contrary, PAR in practice shows that teachers are often much tougher on their colleagues than administrators have been.¹⁹ One of the North Syracuse PAR panel members said, “We are making much better personnel decisions now than before because principals did not have time to dive into teachers’ practice—but we can. We can support our colleagues now to be the best they can be.” This can only improve the profession. Another admitted that there is “a different philosophy with regard to expectations about how we hire, treat and support staff.” Better recruiting and higher retention rates yield long-term savings. Districts can help to maintain support for PAR when they present both the financial and personal sides of the program’s success.

3. Willingness and desire to build trust and collaboration between the union and management:

If any feature weighs most heavily in PAR, this is it. Trust is the greatest challenge in any reform because it cannot be written or legislated, it must be built.²⁰ There is no such thing as perfect trust in a school district, but any existing lack of trust shouldn’t hinder a district from establishing a PAR program. Through shared goals, conversation and collaboration, a district can build the level of trust needed. As seen in many of the districts visited for this study, a PAR program often fosters trust within a district because its goals and results resonate with everyone involved.

Trust is also critical in PAR because the results of the peer reviews can have a significant impact on teachers. Peer evaluations count toward a teacher’s summative assessment, either as a percentage or as contributing evidence, which in turn leads to decisions on employment or, in some cases, additional pay. Teachers have to trust that their peers are reviewing them fairly, and that the administrators are valuing those reviews and using them appropriately. Management must trust that the consulting teachers are objective in their evaluations. This is another reason why identical and continuous training of administrators and peer reviewers is so important—both must be on the same page with regard to conducting and using evaluations.

Further evidence that collaboration works comes from North Syracuse. One CT acknowledged, “The principal and I both worked hard to support this teacher, to collaboratively arrive at a very difficult decision—to recommend to the PAR panel not to retain this teacher.”

Those collaborative conversations can only happen when there is intent to create trust between teachers and administrators. And PAR is only successful when there is trust of teachers in the system as a whole. Everyone in the process desires the outcome that will best help teachers and students, believing that PAR helps to “safeguard the profession.”²¹

It’s true that every long journey begins with one step, so if the partners approach this task with a long-term view and bigger picture in mind, i.e., a stronger teaching staff that enhances student growth, then any step forward is the right way to begin. This usually occurs when a pressing problem emerges that both “sides” have a vested interest in solving. Several researchers have recently published the merits of this teamwork, not just as it relates to PAR but also in the way it improves the school system in general.²²

An AFT document, based on the work of Saul Rubinstein, captures this “how”:

“Formalize these partnership processes through written agreements that structure relationships based on trust and teamwork; describe roles and responsibilities; and provide due process and set expectations for accountability standards, development and evaluation—while creating the possibility for change. The memorandum of understanding process reflects the tone of labor-management relations, and the attitude toward joint problem-solving and decision-making. This framework around collaboration is the vehicle from which new ways of working together can be institutionalized for systemic reform.”²³

The greatest challenge is getting started. The second greatest is maintaining momentum. Educators and administrators have not traditionally engaged in collaborative work. Administrators have traditionally managed the work of the educators in their buildings and districts; and those educators have had difficulty with this top-down style that often fails to address what they see as the pressing needs of their students and colleagues. But in a system where teachers take on what has traditionally been an administrator’s job, these roles need to change. Everyone is responsible for the well-being of the school. Administrators will benefit from having trained, high-quality teachers providing guidance and support to other teachers. Teachers who feel supported and connected to their school are more likely to stay, easing the administration’s burden of having to hire and retrain new teachers.²⁴

4. Identical and continuous training for all administrators and consulting teachers so that there is true inter-rater reliability:

There must be parallel, identical and preferably joint training for both the administrators and the consulting teachers, especially when the peer evaluations count toward a participating teacher’s summative evaluation, as most often is the case. Collaborative PAR systems, by definition, require training on evaluation of teaching practice using evidence of that practice; because many peers and

administrators evaluate the same teachers using the same tools, they should receive equal training. The PAR program also creates a constant feedback loop between administrators and teachers. Teaching standards and a rubric provide a way to talk about teaching practice using common language. In Niles Township, the CTs and administrators not only work together, they also meet monthly to discuss evaluation processes and work on their inter-rater reliability.

For any evaluation program to succeed, all evaluators need to be trained on the evaluation tools and feedback process. Without identical training, there is no true labor-management commitment to the program; and there is no imperative to have inter-rater reliability if only one rater’s evaluation carries high stakes.

This goes back to the political will to see the program through. Once the district and union have committed, they must find the resources to train the evaluators, regardless of their job title. Any number of training programs are available—from consultant companies such as Teaching Learning Solutions to university programs such as the Lastinger Center for Learning at the University of Florida. The training needs to be ongoing, with yearly evaluator recalibration. One hallmark of an effective evaluation system with multiple evaluators is the continued inter-rater reliability. So between the continued training for current evaluators and the initial training for new evaluators, the training never really ends.

5. Clearly defined roles for consulting teachers, PAR panel and coordinator, with designated meeting spaces and times:

During the design process, roles of all participants must be clearly defined, though they can and should be tweaked later as needed. The role of the CT is probably the most misunderstood and misused. Districts must make it clear whether CTs are mentors, coaches, both, or something else. PAR districts have different definitions for CTs based on the needs and goals of the individual program. In Providence, CTs provide other services beyond their work with peer teachers, for example, with website creation, database design and professional development.

It also must be clear at the outset whether the CT’s evaluations count toward a teacher’s summative evaluation and, if so, how much. Another question to answer is whether the CTs are on part-time or full-time release, and for how many years. Based on feedback from PAR participants, full-time release for a term of several years is ideal because it gives the CTs uninterrupted time to focus on their work. Most districts require CTs to return to the classroom for a designated time after their CT service; some districts create or find other ventures for those wishing to expand their leadership roles.

Another concern that should be addressed is the caseload of CTs. Suggestions from across districts proposed a cap of 10-12 participating teachers per CT, but the actual caseloads of the CTs we met ranged from 15 in North Syracuse to 27 in Miami. One consulting

teacher in Miami said, “Even though the program is voluntary, my building principal ‘strongly suggested’ to his teachers that they should all participate, so I have more teachers than I can reasonably serve.” Districts should work out what is reasonable while at the same time trying to balance the CT caseload burden with the opportunity for as many teachers as possible to participate.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

Poway, Calif., has had its PAR program, the **Poway Professional Assistance Program** (PPAP) since 1989 when the district and union signed a trust agreement. The union sees itself as a true partner with the district, and the political will is strong. The program is very individualized with two levels of support and no specific timeline for how long a teacher participates. One challenge is that due to budget cuts there is no formal administrator training. This problem was addressed by having consulting teachers train the administrators. Although not ideal, this does help ensure that the consultants and administrators have the same understanding of the program. Another major challenge in Poway is the heavy caseload of consulting teachers (there currently are only six). Budget cuts are also an issue, as is a new statewide induction program that causes the PAR program to be less individualized than in the past. The union, however, is focused on maintaining the strength of this program. One way it does this is by ensuring that activities, such as new teacher trainings, are conducted in the union office so that the program is visibly presented as a teacher program and so that administrators who visit can see the truly collaborative nature of the program.

Poway Federation of Teachers President Candy Smiley says, “After 25-plus years, our program is our culture and something we are all very proud of.”

The **Cincinnati PAR program** was implemented in 1985 but in recent years has faced troubling budget cuts. The program began with a lot of support from the district and community and was a joint effort between the union and administration. Each new hire to the district was assigned to a consulting teacher, as were veterans who were identified by their principal as needing support. Because of a decrease in funding, the number of consulting teachers has been reduced. Instead of eliminating the program, the district altered it so that rather than supporting new teachers, it supports veteran teachers identified as needing improvement. Kendra Phelps, Cincinnati Federation of Teachers educational issues representative, says this is harmful to the many new teachers in the district who could use the support that PAR provides.

Districts where peer evaluations are a part of employment decisions often have a PAR panel or board of review. In the Toledo Model, the PAR panel/intern board of review has several tasks, including governing the Intern Program, monitoring the work of the CTs, acting on the recommendations of the CTs, assigning CTs, approving professional development and managing the budget. The board is made up of union members and administrators. In most cases, the PAR panel acts to ensure the maintenance of the program. It is responsible for hiring CTs, hearing reports from CTs and making recommendations to the superintendent or board of education on employment decisions.

Based on our observations, a designated program coordinator is a highly valuable role in a successful PAR program. This person is tasked with scheduling and organizing meetings of the PAR panel, trainings for CTs and administrators, and meetings between the CTs; managing the paperwork and archive; assisting the consultant teachers; and more. This role might seem like a luxury in an already tight financial plan, but having someone to manage the paperwork, schedule meetings and help keep the system running smoothly is a necessary investment, not an expense.

Similarly, a physical space for the CTs to meet, plan, work, collaborate, store documents and strategize is a must. This need be no more than a vacant classroom or an office in the district headquarters. A teacher in Niles Township put it this way: “The need for a dedicated PAR space is essential. Very intense and critical conversations occur in PAR, and the new teacher needs to feel like this can take place in a safe space away from students, colleagues and administrators. Furthermore, being a CT is an intensely collaborative experience. Discussing observations, evaluation components and communication strategies is essential to being a successful CT.”

These roles should be negotiated during the program’s design phase, with the possibility of amendments should the district’s needs change. For example, in a district experiencing growth, it may be necessary to keep CTs in their roles longer. In most programs, the PAR panel establishes the recruiting, interviewing and hiring tasks for these positions. Again, this is determined after researching successful PAR programs. One constant seen in all the PAR panels we studied, though, is the ratio of teachers to administrators. There is always one more teacher than administrator. Further, when the PAR panel makes recommendations to the superintendent, the vote count must be a majority plus one.

Space is another issue that needs to be addressed right from the start. Envision the program in five, 10 and 20 years. In Toledo, for instance, decades of documents must be stored and archived. Districts need to have a place and a person to oversee this process. There also needs to be a sufficient workspace where CTs can perform their duties. Technology, furniture, office supplies and other accommodations are all part of the package needed to create a PAR program. Administrative details often are left out of the “bigger picture”

planning, but taking care of the small parts truly makes the process run smoothly.

Many teachers so thoroughly enjoy their roles as CTs that they don’t want to return to the classroom; others do not and want to leave the program early. Some CTs cannot wait to get back to their classrooms to practice what they have learned as CTs. Others desire even more growth and may acquire a taste for administration or coaching. CTs have personal and medical issues like the rest of us and may need an extended work leave. How the district will address these issues needs to be considered in the design phase. For example, some districts have instituted a career ladder or lattice that accommodates these concerns. Another challenge is finding data to support the number of CTs needed and how to deploy them if the number of PTs declines or increases.

Space, personnel and material resources are financial obstacles to many districts. The need for these “extras” might cause some to resist the system altogether. But again, these upfront investments pay off through building a more supported and better teaching staff. Districts can use some flexibility to create space, whether through an extra room in a school or central office or a storeroom full of mid-century metal desks. Districts should be creative in finding resources to ensure that CTs and PTs are adequately supported.

6. A clearly defined process, structure and protocol for conducting and sharing evaluations and access to useful professional development resources:

A teacher evaluation system (including the process, the multiple measures of evaluation, the evaluators and the teachers being evaluated), must be clearly defined by a district before implementing a PAR program. The description of which teachers can be included in the PAR system must be spelled out, whether beginning teachers only, experienced teachers only, or some combination. The scheduling of the CTs’ reports to the PAR panel also must be articulated. Most systems require two formal reports from the CTs to the PAR panel: one in the fall and one in the spring. The fall report might require highlights of every PT or only the ones who need extra support. The spring report generally carries employment recommendations, when applicable. The nature, disposition, time allotted and location of these meetings must be clearly defined for the system to function and have credibility.

In order for consulting teachers, participating teachers, administrators and districts to keep all these plates spinning, there needs to be a process in place for managing the people, procedures and paperwork. Questions must be answered, such as the number and timing of meetings between CTs and PTs; how the CTs’ evaluations fit into the overall evaluation of the PTs required by the state or district; how the information gets disseminated, to whom, when and why; methods of communication with colleagues about the schedule or system; where and how professional development gets assigned or provided. Without careful forethought, these procedures and protocols can easily

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The PAR program in **Chapel Hill-Carrboro, N.C.**, persists despite losing its PAR panel. The district implemented a PAR program several years ago but discontinued it due to lack of financial support. In its place, the district developed an abbreviated program with two full-time release teachers providing professional support to teachers who are identified as in need of assistance. Most of those teachers are new and typically identified through the teacher’s principal. There are currently only two consulting teachers, but the program still provides a layer of professional support to teachers in addition to the district’s induction and mentoring supports.

derail a system. This is one more reason to have a program coordinator who can organize and keep track of everything.

Continuous improvement of teachers has two components: evaluation and development. Without access to professional development resources, this evaluation model is moot. The PAR system’s *raison d’être* is to foster growth. If the consulting and participating teachers have no access to useful professional development, then they cannot grow. Accessing district-embedded professional development is, of course, much easier than finding and facilitating external professional development, but as most teachers’ professional growth needs to be targeted or differentiated, the one-size-fits-all model of wasted time disguised as professional development does not support the PAR model. A benefit of PAR is the close relationship between the CT and the PT, which provides a plethora of information about what a teacher needs to be successful. In Providence, the CTs design and deliver professional development tailored to their teachers’ needs. For the program to reach its full potential, this professional development is then linked to the evaluations.

One way to ensure that evaluations are conducted and completed on time is for districts to set the year’s calendar early (including meeting agendas). Participants must make a commitment to attend, and there should be regular check-ins (some programs have monthly meetings for all evaluators). This language should be in bylaws and/or contracts or memoranda of understanding. In short, these procedures should be spelled out in as much detail as possible, while allowing for amendments if needed. These provisions should be as transparent as those in any other contractual stipulations. This will assist in the buy-in process for all concerned.

Professional development resources can run the gamut from professional articles to professional learning communities to university courses. The frontline of PD resources, however, is the district’s coaches and mentors and the CTs themselves. Through collaboration, they might find they have hidden pockets of expertise in classroom management, teaching English language learners, close reading instruction, etc. Access to online professional development

is another avenue to explore. PAR programs might also enlist the services of university partners, national organizations (including the AFT and NEA), and local entities (businesses, community organizations) to help their teachers grow.

PAR programs target professional development offerings to the needs of teachers. This is core to the program. Unfortunately, many districts have a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development, which also lacks continuity and follow-through. In PAR programs, teachers’ targeted professional development will continue to be targeted until the teacher shows improvement in that area. One danger with this, however, is that once CTs begin handling the professional development for their participating teachers, they may be called on to offer it to other teachers who, in the administrators’ eyes, may need similar professional development. Although having in-house professional development leaders is a benefit to any school, how the district handles the potential extra burden on CTs should be addressed in the overall plan.

7. Data and evaluation:

Included in the design plan should be a way to evaluate the program. The overt goals—to improve retention of the most effective teachers in order to improve student learning—should be measurable. In some cases, this may require reforming the evaluation system if it does not have at its core supporting the continuous improvement of teaching practice. Any top-down teacher evaluation system that acts as a “gotcha” cannot support a PAR program. Any teacher evaluation system that relies primarily on student test scores to inform a final determination of teacher effectiveness is antithetical to a PAR system. The data employed in the service of the system must be fair, objective and measurable.

Start with the questions you need to have answered. For example:

- What are the rates of student achievement now? How are they measured? What would we like them to be?
- What is the teacher turnover rate in the district?
- Why do teachers leave?
- How many teachers could benefit from some supported professional development? How is that measured?
- Does the state require certain “effectiveness” levels of its teachers? Is there a mechanism for improvement?
- What are some best practices we already use to boost teacher effectiveness?
- What are some best practices to boost teacher retention and student improvement?

Unless you have a solid goal, it’s difficult to know what data to mine. Another challenge may be the resources you have to mine the data. You must have the ability and time to analyze the data as well as the commitment to use it for improvement.

Conclusion

In a time when education reforms target accountability for teachers and schools, PAR programs have provided professional and growth opportunities for teachers. These programs offer essential supports to teachers that contribute to improving their practice and thus student achievement and engagement. Teachers and administrators involved in these programs agree that PAR has been crucial to the growth and development of teachers in their districts.

As with any systemic change, planning and intention are key to a PAR program's survival. This shift requires even more: trust between the parties. None of these keys can be fashioned overnight but, instead, must be nurtured over time. No component listed above will alone satisfy the requirements of a program this intricate or consequential. But if we truly want to improve student achievement, we must ensure our students have all the resources they need to grow, and that includes well-prepared and supported teachers. PAR programs can and do make this happen.

As school districts, teachers unions, and state and local policymakers work to implement and refine evaluation systems, the inclusion of

PAR is a strategy worth serious consideration. The work done by AFT affiliates in these five cities provides guidance on the essential elements of a program and tips for successful implementation, while taking into consideration the challenges—financial, interpersonal, systemic—of doing PAR well.

This report is part of the AFT's ongoing effort to develop and examine frameworks, systems and practices for teacher development, support and evaluation. As stated earlier, PAR does not exist in a vacuum; it is part of a well-designed teacher evaluation system. The AFT has supported our locals in creating and implementing teacher evaluation systems, through our "Continuous Improvement Model for Teacher Development and Evaluation,"²⁵ "It's Elemental: A Quick Guide to Implementing Evaluation and Development Systems,"²⁶ and "Moving Beyond Compliance: Lessons Learned from Teacher Development and Evaluation."²⁷ This report is also part of our continuing effort to enhance teaching as a profession and connect the dots between all steps of the teaching career, including "Raising the Bar: Aligning and Elevating Teacher Preparation and the Teaching Profession."²⁸

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Appendix

Additional AFT locals interviewed for this paper:

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Details of the Five PAR Programs Visited

FEATURE ↴	DISTRICT ↷	TOLEDO	NILES TOWNSHIP	NORTH SYRACUSE	PROVIDENCE	MIAMI
Ratio of PT/CT		Cap of 12:1	Cap of 15:1	Cap of 15:1	Cap of 15:1	12:1 stated, but in practice ranges from 27:1 to 9:1
CTs evaluate PTs new to school and/or intern (first-year) teachers		Principals do not formally observe or evaluate interns' classroom performance	CTs solely responsible for evaluation during first and second year. Building principals observations incorporated into the CTs' reports to PAR panel	All probationary teachers are on a four-year cycle	Upon recommendation for continued support	No
CTs evaluate veteran teachers		On a volunteer basis	Yes	No	Yes	On a volunteer basis
CTs evaluate veteran teachers who fail to meet minimum standards of teaching		Only upon request of the PT	Yes, but administrators generally handle these evaluations	Not currently	Yes	On a volunteer basis
Length of time PTs stay in program		Interns stay two semesters (in rare occasions, three); veterans have one semester of CT support	One to four semesters	PTs remain in the program for four years	One school year	PTs stay as long as they want
Training for CTs and administrators		Complementary but not identical training	Identical	Identical	Similar with additional training for CTs	Only CTs are trained
Contract language stipulating terms of PR		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Additional compensation for CTs		Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
CTs report to PAR panel		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No PAR panel
CTs' evaluations used for employment recommendations		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

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OUR MISSION

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

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