Peer Assistance and Review: Pathways to Growth

Lessons from Five Districts
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.”

—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. 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.

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.” 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. These programs place a heavy emphasis on labor-management collaboration and high standards for classroom performance that lay the foundation for success.

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. 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. Distributed leadership utilizes the skills of individuals and holds them accountable for their contribution to the goals of the organization. Lateral accountability describes teachers working together in mutual support to allow everyone to improve. 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. 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 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. 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 teachers) 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. 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." PAR programs can help improve induction and support for new
After three decades of success, the Toledo union and district still support new, probationary and referred teachers. 

The union proposed expanding the PAR program to include all teachers in need of improvement, through its Accountability Blueprint. 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. More 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.18

“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.19 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 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 count toward a teacher’s summative assessment, either as a

one administration’s burden of having to hire and retain new teachers; 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. Teaching standards and a rubric provide a way to talk about teaching practice using common language. In Niles Township, the CTs and administrators have the same understanding of 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.

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 or principal must remain in the program. The district felt the need for budget cuts there is no formal administrator training. This program 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 districts and community and was a joint effort between the union and administrators. 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/united board of review has several tasks, including governing the board of the PAR district, focusing 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 success 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, training for CTs and administrators, and meetings between the CTs, managing the PAR space, 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 strategies 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 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. Evasion of 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 plan 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. 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 leave work. Here, the PAR panel will address these issues in 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 should be creative in finding resources to ensure that CTs and PTs are adequately supported.

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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 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.”30 It’s Elemental: A Quick Guide to Implementing Evaluation and Development Systems,31 and “Moving Beyond Compliance: Lessons Learned from Teacher Development and Evaluation.”32 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.”33

References

16. For consistency, this document will use the term “consulting teacher” in reference to all peer review teachers, recognizing that not all districts use the same terminology.
18. The Toledo Model caps its consultant-to-participant teacher ratio at 1:12. The Miami Model has no such cap; in one school, the ratio is 1:27.
### Appendix

Additional AFT locals interviewed for this paper:
- Cincinnati (OH), Kendra Phelps, kphelps@afte.org
- Chapel Hill-Carrboro Federation of Teachers, Dianne Jackson, djackson1262@gmail.com
- Oklahoma City (OK), Mary Best, aftoffice@gmail.com
- Poway (CA), Candy Smiley, csimley@powayteachers.org

Additional AFT locals with PAR programs:
- ABC Federation of Teachers (California), Rich Saldana, Richard.saldana@abc.usd.us
- Anderson Federation of Teachers (Illinois), kelhodson@acsc.net
- Boston Teachers Union, Paul Tritter, ptritter@btu.org
- Philadelphia Federation of Teachers, Dee Phillips, dphilips@pft.org
- Saint Paul Federation of Teachers (Minnesota), Beth Gregor, beth.gregor@spps.org
- Volusia Federation of Teachers (Florida), Primrose Cameron-Hall, Primrose.Cameron-Hall@floridaea.org

#### Details of the Five PAR Programs Visited

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

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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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