

In Our Hands

Teachers Should Guide and Guard the Teaching Profession

What are the hallmarks of a profession? Formal qualifications, a shared code of conduct, specialized knowledge—these and many other qualities are all important, but there’s one that teachers should carefully consider: responsibility not just for the quality of your own work, but for that of your peers.

Doctors have their medical boards and attorneys have their bar associations, but most teachers have no such opportunities to take responsibility for their profession. Advocates of peer assistance and review (PAR), a program that gives teachers the lead in guiding and guarding the teaching profession, want that to change. Like doctors and lawyers, shouldn’t teachers set the standards for their own profession, help newcomers meet those standards, offer intensive assistance to anyone who is struggling, and recommend the removal of those individuals who, after receiving assistance, are not meeting those standards? Are any of these things really better left to administrators?

Members of the American Federation of Teachers are clearly leaning toward taking greater control of their profession. Earlier this year, a poll of the AFT’s teachers found overwhelming support for the idea of having experienced, specially trained teachers mentor and evaluate new teachers—72 percent said their reaction was either very or somewhat positive, and just 8 percent said their reaction was very or somewhat negative. No doubt, that’s why the resolution on peer assistance and review, which offers support to locals interested in adopting a PAR program for new teachers, passed so easily at the AFT’s 2008 convention.* The AFT’s poll also found strong support for assisting and evaluating tenured teachers who are struggling—58 percent said their reaction was either very or somewhat positive, and just 21 percent said very or somewhat negative.

Whether your reaction is positive or negative, learning more



is worthwhile. In the following article, Jennifer Goldstein, who did a multiyear study of a peer assistance and review program in California, offers an in-depth comparison of traditional teacher evaluation and PAR. Then, on page 12, Dal Lawrence (who created PAR through collective bargaining while president of the Toledo

Federation of Teachers) and two teachers (who have firsthand experience with PAR) talk about what PAR means for professionalism and how combining assistance and evaluation—when done right—can make each more meaningful and powerful.

There are right and wrong ways to address teacher evaluation. Unfortunately, some policymakers and administrators across this country are ready to toss out both traditional, principal-driven teacher evaluation and peer assistance and review. What’s their alternative? Complex statistical models that rank teachers according to their “value added.” Such models reduce teaching to nothing more than gains in students’ test scores. And, as if that weren’t bad enough, the models are far, far from perfect. Starting on page 18, Harvard University Professor Daniel Koretz discusses the benefits and limitations of value-added models, explaining that although they do offer some useful information, they should not be used to make any high-stakes decisions. In Koretz’s words, “Value-added-based rankings of teachers are highly error-prone.”

Once you understand the technical problems with these models, it’s clear that value added cannot and should not replace a thorough, thoughtful evaluation of teacher performance. And, once you grasp the many benefits of frequent, ongoing, and interdependent assistance and evaluation, it’s clear that traditional, principal-driven teacher evaluation is no match for peer assistance and review.

—EDITORS

* To read the AFT’s peer assistance and review resolution, go to www.aft.org/about/resolutions/2008/peer_assist.htm.