

Taking the Lead

With Peer Assistance and Review,
the Teaching Profession Can Be in Teachers' Hands

BY JENNIFER GOLDSTEIN

I started teaching right out of college. I lacked a teaching credential or any preparation for the job, but nonetheless was given full responsibility for a class of fourth graders in Compton, California. As soon as I found out I would be working at Rosecrans Elementary, I jumped in my car and drove the 30 or so minutes to Compton from the Westside of Los Angeles; having interviewed at the district office, I had not yet seen the school itself. It was summer and the campus was deserted, but Major Thomas, the plant manager, humored my enthusiasm and walked me around. He opened an empty classroom and let me be. I stood there alone, taking in the room with tears in my eyes. Empty classrooms have an almost magical quality, a loud silence full of immense possibilities, and that one on that day even more so for its dilapidation, which I saw romantically: bare wood floors, old-fashioned wood and metal desks and chairs, sunlight streaming in through big metal-grated windows. I didn't yet know that elementary classrooms need rugs or carpets, that there would never be enough desks or chairs, or that the windows would be broken into anyway. I stood there at 23 years old the proudest I had ever been in my life: I was going to be a teacher.

I eventually took ownership of Room 9, which became filled with an always fluctuating number of amazing children. Most were second language learners, some spoke no English, and few

could read fluently in any language let alone at grade level. All had fabulous stories to tell, and most were eager to learn. But I had absolutely no idea what to do with them. I mostly used the pedagogical tools of randomness and inconsistency, punctuated with frustrated yelling. Having no vision of a big picture, I did my very best day by day to get by, which was in no way satisfactory for kids who genuinely needed me to teach them something.

I was relatively fortunate that first year to teach across the hall from a quite competent veteran teacher, my assigned "buddy." Actually, Charlotte had only been teaching for three years, but that made her a veteran in Compton; more importantly, she was a bit older, had children of her own, and simply had experience and maturity that I lacked. Charlotte saved me from as much as she could that year, given her own teaching responsibilities. I don't recall actually ever *meeting* with Charlotte per se; it was more support on the run. She handed me lessons to implement, took kids with whom I was struggling on occasion, and declared sole responsibility for planning for the bilingual instructional assistant we shared. That instructional assistant spent one hour in my room three times a week that year working with a group of students, and I have not the slightest idea what she did while there. It is just one example of the degree to which the whole year was a blur. In the end, Charlotte never did actually see me teach, nor I her. When the bell rang and the doors closed, I was on my own.

The other person who might have been expected to provide support or otherwise supervise the teaching my students received was, of course, the principal. She made one visit to my classroom that year, an occasion that stands out amidst the blur. On April 15, the day teacher evaluations were due at the district office, she came in during a lesson, asked me to sign a form, and promised me I would like what it said. I was thus initiated to the quality-control mechanism of my profession.

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You have likely heard some version of this story many times, but its need for attention has become no less urgent. Like so many

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marginalized school districts across the United States, Compton schools serve low-income Latino and African American students. My students were attending the elementary school ranked 24th out of 24 in the district ranked lowest in the state of California at the time. Arguably, these were the students most in need of a high-quality teacher. Yet I was unprepared and uncertified to teach. I was in an organizational system designed neither to improve my performance nor assess it. In addition, after three years—or right around the time research predicts my teaching performance would improve significantly¹—I left the district.

In school districts like Compton all over the country, there are simply not enough qualified teachers willing to staff classrooms.² As a result, administrators hire teachers who are uncredentialed or credentialed in a different field. In California, for example, 1 in 15 teachers—approximately 20,000 total—were underprepared in 2004–05, and notably 85 percent of these teachers were concentrated in schools serving predominantly students of color.³ The urgent reality is that 30–50 percent of new teachers in high-poverty schools then leave teaching within their first three to five years on the job, and those without support are 70 percent more likely to leave than those who receive a mentored entrance to teaching.⁴

This article explores one high-leverage policy that administrators such as those in Compton could implement to attract teachers who are qualified, support and guide them to develop into teachers with high-quality performance, and retain them beyond their initial years in the job, while also removing from classrooms those teachers who do not display competency even after having received intensive support and mentoring. The policy is called peer assistance and review (PAR), and it is a model of teacher-based instructional leadership that has the potential to transform teaching practice by transforming teacher evaluation. PAR shifts evaluation from the typical cursory review by a principal with a checklist, to a year-long process that involves both frequent, ongoing, classroom-based assistance and a careful, standards-based review.

PAR (pronounced as the word “par” and also referred to as “peer review”) experienced a very specific birth in Toledo, Ohio, in 1981, the result of many years of effort by Dal Lawrence, the then-president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers. (To learn about Lawrence’s eight-year struggle to create PAR, and what teachers think of the program, read the interview with Lawrence and two Toledo teachers on page 12.) Over the next two decades, a handful of districts—Cincinnati and Columbus, Ohio; Poway and Mt. Diablo, California; Rochester, New York; Dade County, Florida; and Salt Lake City, Utah—undertook their own versions of the “Toledo Plan” of peer review, still a common blueprint of the policy.*

Broadly speaking, PAR relies on “consulting teachers” (CTs)—teachers identified for excellence who are released from classroom teaching duties for two to three years, usually full time. During that time, the CTs provide mentoring to teachers new to the district or the profession, and intervention support for identified veteran teachers experiencing difficulty.[†] The consulting teachers also conduct the formal personnel reviews of the new teachers in the program, and in some cases they participate in the reviews of the veteran teachers as well. In some programs, and for my purposes here, teachers in either the new or veteran category are collectively called “participating teachers” (PTs). The duration of participation in PAR is usually one year, although some programs allow longer. During this time PTs have to meet specified quality standards or face removal from the classroom.

Consulting teachers’ activities include helping with short- and long-range planning, locating curricular resources, advocating

[†] Veteran teachers, who make up a relatively small percentage of teachers in most PAR programs, are most typically placed in PAR for intervention upon receiving an unsatisfactory evaluation from the principal, although in some districts other avenues for referral exist. Intervention cases are reviewed for validity at the outset; the shortcomings in the teacher’s performance must involve instructional matters, as noninstructional matters are not the purview of the PAR panel. Many PAR programs also include an alternative evaluation option for tenured teachers who are meeting standards.



* To learn more about the Toledo Plan, see www.tft250.org/the_toledo_plan.htm.

for the participating teacher with the principal, jointly observing other teachers, and providing general emotional support. The vast majority of CTs' time, however, is focused on observing PTs teaching and providing feedback and suggestions on instructional strategies. Each CT-PT pair works together to create an individual learning plan that focuses their work together.

The consulting teachers report to a districtwide joint teacher/administrator board called the "PAR panel."* The panel is typically co-chaired by the union president and the director of human resources (or some other high-ranking district administrator), and has a combination of teacher and administrator members. The panel holds hearings several times a year, at which consulting teachers provide reports about participating teachers' progress, present any concerns about teaching performance, and receive suggestions for improving their work with PTs. Depending on the locally agreed-upon details of the program, the consulting teachers may make recommendations about the continued employment of each participating teacher at a spring hearing, and sometimes sooner. After listening to and questioning the consulting teachers, the panel makes its employment recommendation, most typically to the superintendent of schools, who then makes a recommendation to the school board, the ultimate arbiter of personnel decisions.

PAR in Rosemont: An Effective Model of Teacher-Based Instructional Leadership

Almost 10 years ago, a new law in California gave me the opportunity to look closely at the PAR model of teacher-based instructional leadership. In 1999, California Assembly Bill IX marked the first time PAR was instituted statewide and the first time a major district had implemented the policy in over a decade. By 2002, a state budget crisis and competing state legislation had begun to chip away significantly at California's PAR programs. I conducted a study of PAR in that window of time (primarily between 2000 and 2002) in one urban district in California, which I have given the pseudonym Rosemont. The study involved a year of full-time fieldwork and data that span four years, and is among the most in-depth investigations of a PAR program to date.

Under the California law, most PAR program details were left to local school districts. As a result, and like PAR programs nationally, California districts created programs that often looked different from one another: many did not include new teachers in their PAR programs, as the state law required the program only

for veteran teachers who had received an unsatisfactory evaluation from their administrator; many did not create full-time positions for consulting teachers; and many did not involve consulting teachers in personnel reviews. In Rosemont, however, teachers—via both the consulting-teacher and PAR panel-member roles—were given substantive authority in the development of teaching quality, as well as in deliberations about employment for both new and veteran participating teachers. I do not claim that Rosemont's results are necessarily representative of all

The vast majority of consulting teachers' time is focused on observing participating teachers and providing suggestions on instruction. Each pair of consulting and participating teachers creates an individual learning plan that focuses their work together.



efforts called "peer review," but rather that they demonstrate what is possible when union leaders and district administrators bring a fresh perspective and ample resources to assisting and reviewing teachers.

For the first year of the PAR program, Rosemont selected 10 consulting teachers, who supported 88 beginning teachers and 3 veteran teachers across 28 schools. All consulting teachers and panel members participated in the study, which included repeated observations, interviews, and surveys. In addition, 16 principals and 57 participating teachers completed surveys, and I conducted interviews with 3 key district administrators, 11 principals, and 15 beginning teachers. (I did not interview any of the veteran teachers due to the sensitivity of their situations.) Given the small number of veteran teachers in the program, this article focuses on the consulting teachers' work with new teachers, providing an overview of the major components of PAR and how it differs from traditional teacher evaluation by a principal.

My examination of PAR in Rosemont yielded six key features that distinguished it from teacher evaluation as typically conducted by principals: (1) the amount of time spent on evaluation, where consulting teachers assisted and reviewed a caseload of participating teachers full time; (2) the relationship that professional development has to evaluation, where reviews were linked to assistance, including matching consulting and participating teachers by grade and subject, and using performance standards; (3) the transparency of the evaluation process, where PAR panel hearings and consulting teacher meetings made teachers' prac-

* Note that different districts use different terms for similar program roles and components. For example, CTs are sometimes called coaches, and the panel is sometimes called a governing board. Participating teachers are sometimes referred to as interns (if a beginning teacher) and intervention cases (if a veteran). Regardless of the terms used, these core components remain essentially the same.

tice and evaluative decisions about that practice more transparent; (4) the nature of labor relations, where the teachers' union was part of the process; (5) the level of confidence in the decision-making process, where the PAR process seemed to generate more confident evaluative decisions; and, ultimately, (6) the degree of accountability, where consulting teachers were willing, when necessary, to recommend nonrenewal and panel members, after ensuring that sufficient evidence had been presented, were also willing to recommend nonrenewal.

While taking a closer look at each of these six distinguishing features, this article builds on the literature that demonstrates the flaws of traditional teacher evaluation, and it posits that the more professional model of PAR shows promise. For each of the six features, I first draw on existing literature (and sometimes data from Rosemont) to highlight the problems with traditional teacher evaluation. Then, drawing primarily on data from Rosemont and occasionally on other studies of PAR, I present the ways that PAR can address these problems.

1. Making Time for Assistance and Review

Problem: Principals are overwhelmed by the demands and expectations currently placed on them,⁵ with little time for instructional leadership at a time when the focus on accountability for instructional results has increased.

Lack of time affects both the assistance and review of teachers. In Rosemont, for example, principals admitted that they cut corners with their evaluations, by necessity. Principals described the “wobble room” or need to be “creative” in doing their evaluations—typically doing fewer than desired, or even required, on teachers perceived to be performing acceptably. One principal noted simply that “the current evaluation process really is a sham, it’s a joke.” Many principals identified their need to be in classrooms and know what is going on across the school but described merely popping their heads in and out. Or, as one principal admitted, some saw teachers based on the whims of geography: “It probably depends how close they are to my office, too. Things as dumb as that even, whether they’re on my trip. Like I’m going to go to the cafeteria in a few minutes and if they’re on the way up, I’ll probably see them more often than if they’re over in the corner somewhere.”

With the traditional evaluation process used in Rosemont, principals, as well as consulting teachers and panel members, agreed that principals’ lack of time allowed teachers not meeting standards to slip through the cracks. It also invariably allowed some of those who could have developed into excellent teachers to slip through the cracks as well, through attrition, since teachers who are not systematically supported are far more likely to leave the profession.

Solution: The consulting teachers were released from classroom teaching responsibilities and focused on their participating teacher caseloads full time. By contract, consulting teacher caseloads were 12-15 participating teachers. In reality, because consulting teachers were involved in program development in the first year of implementation, they carried caseloads of approximately 10 participating teachers that year. In addition, consulting teachers developed a formula whereby assisting a veteran teacher counted as two new teachers when constructing caseloads, given

what they perceived as the larger emotional drain and investment of time needed when working with a veteran teacher.

All consulting teachers were expected to visit their participating teachers an average of one time per week, to make some unannounced visits, and to conduct three formal observation cycles during the year for personnel review purposes, presenting one at each panel hearing. Participating teachers did report meeting with their consulting teachers on average once per week, especially at the start of the school year, but this ranged from “at least once a week” to once every two to three weeks, as consulting teachers’ visits to participating teachers’ classrooms typically became less frequent for more effective PTs as the year progressed. Some consulting teachers preferred to come by informally and unannounced, while others had a set time to visit every week. Noted one participating teacher:

On Tuesday, we had a pretty routine schedule, which made it a lot nicer. I knew she was coming during second and third period every Tuesday, so I could count on that, I could make questions ahead of time that I knew I was going to want to ask. I’d teach during second [period]. So, she would typically observe during that time, and almost every time, she would give me written feedback on things that looked good and ideas for improvement. And then, third period’s my prep, so we could talk then.

Participating teachers reported that CTs made their ongoing accessibility clear at the beginning of the year, provided e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers, and could be reached as needed. Forty-seven percent of participating teachers and 80 percent of principals interviewed initiated comments on the availability of the CTs and the amount of time they were able to spend working directly with PTs. The structure of CTs’ full-time release from classroom teaching responsibilities allowed them to be on call to meet PT needs as they arose. Noted one consulting teacher, “There were a number of times where teachers called me on just specific little issues, whether it was a parent issue, a child abuse issue, an issue having to do with their principals—just little things, how-tos, that were very simple to solve, but having that relationship was important.”

Overall, consulting teachers’ time allowed a high level of involvement in the details of participating teachers’ day-to-day lives that principals simply could not match, as they were busy running schools. A principal contrasted what she could provide to beginning teachers with what the CT provided: “Before PAR started I had Friday meetings with my new teachers and they would go forever, because they’d have a million questions and I would answer them and I would write down things that they needed and I would try to support them. But I can’t model a lesson in every one of their classrooms, and I can’t do the kinds of things that a PAR consulting teacher can do, because I’m running the whole school.” The participating teachers recognized the difference between what their CT could give them versus what their principal could give them. Two of the 15 participating teachers interviewed had had negative experiences with their principals and therefore were especially grateful to be involved in PAR. The majority of PTs, however, regarded their principals with respect for their seemingly insurmountable jobs, and simply viewed the PAR program as a logical way for them to get

desperately needed assistance. One PT made this compassionate contrast: “My consulting teacher is a really good listener. I think more than my principal, my CT is a deeper, more thoughtful listener. She is doing something very specific for me, where my principal is doing a million things for everybody.... My principal wants to give me his attention, he’s trying, ... but no one can do everything.”

Data from established PAR programs suggest a positive effect on the retention of new teachers. In Columbus, 80 percent of new teachers are still in the district after five years, and in Rochester, the retention rate was 85 percent for the five-year period from 1998 to 2003.⁶ In Rosemont, principals reported being able to relax a bit about their new teachers with the implementation of PAR, knowing the teachers were getting consistent assistance and review. Survey data indicated that principals, panel members, and consulting teachers all thought PAR had a positive impact on principals’ ability to do their jobs well.

2. Linking Professional Development and Evaluation

Problem: Teacher evaluation has generally been defined as a mechanism for appraisal in order to determine fitness for employment rather than a means for improving performance. Typically, the principal’s evaluation is completely separate from any professional development a teacher may receive from formal or informal support providers. Key here is that very often administrators conducting traditional evaluations are not privy to the knowledge and perspective that these support providers have about a given teacher’s performance. As a result, principals’ evaluations are often based on very little data,⁷ limited to infrequent formal classroom observations that are almost always announced and may be quite short in duration.

Compounding the problem, principals have to evaluate all of the teachers in the school, and therefore often lack expertise in the specific content or grade level of many of the teachers for whom they are responsible.⁸ In addition, principals are often not well trained to conduct the evaluations.⁹ Such a system is not about learning or developing as a professional, but is merely the proverbial hoop through which to jump.

Solution: As a result of consulting teachers’ full-time focus on the professional development of participating teachers, PAR evaluations were based on ongoing observations throughout the year and intimate knowledge of a PT’s classroom—rather than the notorious “dog and pony show” of most teacher evaluation systems. Linking review to assistance through PAR (a) built trust and rapport; (b) provided participating teachers with ongoing instructional feedback; (c) created individualized assistance; and (d) grounded the reviews, and the training of the CTs as reviewers, in performance standards for teaching.

a. Trust: Most consulting teachers felt that supporting participating teachers’ day-to-day needs, especially at the beginning, helped develop rapport and build trust. While strong mentor programs often focus on trying to move mentor-mentee interaction beyond emotional support to substantive dialogue about teaching and learning, the reality remains that new teachers often do need emotional support.¹⁰ For some PTs, the trust needed to speak openly about teaching and learning was developed by first knowing the CT was there to help. Noted one PT: “I think one

benefit is just knowing that there is someone out there that is on your side, who you can go to to talk things through.” In contrast to a fear sometimes raised about PAR, linking assistance and review did not appear to have a deleterious effect on PTs’ trust in their CTs in most cases.¹¹ (For more on how consulting and participating teachers build their relationship, see the interview with two Toledo teachers on page 12.)

b. Ongoing feedback: In addition to building trust and rapport, however, the heart of the PAR program was ongoing feedback to participating teachers about how to teach. Wherever possible, PAR consulting teachers were paired with PTs by grade and subject matter. For several PTs, this matching was critical to their ability to work meaningfully with their CTs. Noted one: “The difference between my principal and [my CT] is that my CT has experience in biology, and just in sciences in general; she was able to bring materials and suggestions to the class. The principal doesn’t have that experience, her area isn’t in sciences. My CT would make suggestions about how to go about teaching things, and it would trigger ideas and thoughts for me.”

c. Individualized assistance: This grade and subject matching, together with the time consulting teachers had available to work with participating teachers, created an environment of individualized assistance, which CTs often compared to a good teacher’s ability to individualize instruction for students. The participating teachers noted that CTs had a high level of familiarity with day-to-day operations in their classrooms, allowing them to provide tailor-made support, such as bringing curricular materials that fit right in with a unit the PT was planning, being able to talk specifically about struggles with certain students, or recognizing when the PT was getting burned out and needed a break. The individualized assistance provided to each PT contributed to informed evaluative judgments. One participating teacher commented, “[My CT] really picked out some things that she thought that I could improve on, something with teaching style and something with assessment. And throughout the year, she really helped me with those things. So by the time she would do a formal evaluation, she could show how I’d improved in those things.”

d. Performance standards: Strong evaluation systems include established standards for performance, evaluation rubrics based on those standards, and evaluator training for interrater reliability,¹² although many teacher evaluation systems nationally lack these components.¹³ While consulting teachers were not experts in performance standards for teaching at the time they were hired, they poured many professional development hours into becoming experts, and then into becoming calibrated among themselves in using a rubric to evaluate their participating teachers. Participating teachers were evaluated on a slightly modified version of the California Standards for the Teaching Profession, which served as a benchmark throughout the year. Conversations between consulting and participating teachers about instruction were often grounded in standards language.

The consulting teachers’ ability to demonstrate participating teachers’ growth, or lack of growth, at panel hearings was dependent on solid standards-based assessment documentation gathered over time through ongoing observations. For example, in one case, a principal had hired an uncredentialed teacher one

week prior to the start of school, but quickly concluded that she was not meeting standards. While the consulting teacher was initially skeptical of the participating teacher's chances for success, she was persuaded by the progress the PT was able to make and defended the PT's renewed employment in the district. The consulting teacher became the mediator, translating the principal's broad concerns into concrete specifics on which the PT might improve. Ultimately, the consulting teacher diffused the principal's criticism of the participating teacher at the panel

observation notes or checklists, principals then typically make evaluation decisions on their own, not needing to defend their decisions to another colleague, let alone a panel of colleagues. Research has documented that, historically, principals have given inflated ratings and few negative evaluations for a variety of reasons, including minimal observation data¹⁶ and a potent desire to avoid conflict.¹⁷ This tendency may be understandable, but it does little to ensure a competent teacher for every student.

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Solution: PAR provided several ways of avoiding some of the opacity of traditional teacher evaluation. First, consulting teachers worked in multiple schools across the district based on grade and subject matching. In this way, CTs brought a broad, districtwide perspective to assessment, and a CT was not paired with a PT where there was a conflict of interest or other personal connection. (Some smaller districts with PAR programs have formed consortia, pooling consulting teachers across districts in order to accomplish this goal.)

Next, PAR opened the door to practice, altering the historic isolation of teaching by placing a mentor in PTs' classrooms on a frequent basis. While certainly not unique to PAR, the ongoing nature of PT-CT interaction is a critical piece in the quality of the reviews, because increasing the publicness of practice is likely to increase the amount of data on which reviews are based. Noted one PT:

hearing by demonstrating her growth on the teaching standards. The principal's complaints seemed vague and unsupported by comparison. The participating teacher was renewed for employment in the district and placed at another school. This fluency in standards language gave the CTs legitimacy with both principals and panel members, as well as with PTs. Several principals were so impressed with the standards-based reviews that they asked a CT to teach them the process. Principals and panel members perceived CTs to have developed valuable expertise, which was crucial to PAR's success.

3. Increasing the Transparency of the Evaluation Process

Problem: Teaching has been a notoriously isolated occupation, with individual teachers behind closed doors with their particular group of students,¹⁴ and occupational norms that typically prevent teachers from "intruding" on one another's practice.¹⁵ Noted one Rosemont principal, "The 11th Commandment is you don't speak ill of another teacher. I taught for seven years next to this nice person, just an awful teacher, and I could hear her through the wall, hear the kids and stuff and I would go over and have to quiet them down, just to kind of bring some sanity to it. But it was like the elephant in the living room. Nobody would talk about how awful she was."

Just as teachers work mostly in isolation, so do principals. As a result, another "elephant in the living room" is the small amount of information and input on which most principals base their evaluations. We've already noted that principals' evaluations are typically separated from any information that support providers may have. Another problem is that, alone with their

Had the vice principal come up to do the evaluation, she would have had no idea what it's like on a normal basis, when the vice principal was not sitting in the back of the room. I really like the idea that my CT did my evaluations. Who better than someone who really has seen the whole picture? She had an idea of where I had started, and how much I had grown. She knew the struggles I had had, so she could look to see if I had addressed those. I really liked that there was some kind of benchmark.

Finally, and most importantly, PAR created formal teams of colleagues and a structure for holding evaluators accountable for their work. Given a larger amount of data about a teacher upon which to base both ongoing assistance and review, PAR provided a mechanism whereby multiple educators were in communication with one another about that data. CTs met as a group all day every Friday, and some of this time was spent discussing PT cases and seeking advice from one another. In addition, CTs formed pairs of "critical friends," and occasionally met to discuss their PT cases or visit a PT's classroom together for a second pair of eyes.

Consulting teachers also conferred with principals. CTs were focused on classroom practice, whereas principals had a perspective about the PT as part of the school community. By the



second year of PAR, Rosemont created a format where both the CT and the principal observed a PT and then conferred, in order to be sure they were in agreement regarding professional development needed and/or the recommendation to the panel regarding the PT's renewal status.*

In addition, the most significant and formal examinations of PT practice were the PAR panel hearings that occurred multiple times throughout the year.¹⁹ CTs reported to the panel roughly three times a year on PTs' growth and/or problematic practice, first with extensive documentation and then with oral presentations. The teachers and administrators sitting on the panel offered suggestions regarding support the CTs might try, and held the CTs accountable for providing sufficient assistance in

The PAR panel held the consulting teachers accountable for providing sufficient assistance for the participating teachers to improve. In this way, teachers' practice became a district concern.



* Dal Lawrence, the former president of the Toledo Federation of Teachers who initiated PAR more than 25 years ago, has argued vehemently that principals should not be involved in the peer review process for legal reasons. His argument is that there needs to be one clear evaluator, otherwise there is a possibility for disagreement that can cause a loss to an unsatisfactory teacher in arbitration.¹⁸

order for the PTs to have the opportunity to improve. In this way, an individual teacher's practice became a district concern. In a few instances, CTs were challenged to provide more evidence for their employment recommendation or even to return to the PT for a few more weeks for one last effort. Noted one CT: "I was tap dancing around giving a decision of nonrenewal, and they asked me directly, 'What is the evidence for keeping this person?' And I really didn't have enough. They held me accountable, and that was appropriate."

Bringing Peer Assistance and Review to Your District

Educators interested in implementing peer assistance and review (PAR) should carefully consider the following challenges, gleaned from the study of Rosemont and other efforts.

Ensuring Consulting Teacher Quality

The perceived success of the program appears to be based largely on principals' and panel members' confidence in the consulting teachers (CTs). It follows that CTs should be selected very carefully. Consulting teachers must be regarded as master teachers, and in Rosemont the selection process included classroom observations by two panel members. The consulting teachers were also required to demonstrate prior success mentoring a peer, including a letter of recommendation from a teacher they had mentored. Finally, the consulting teachers had to be above reproach. Given the authority that CTs held with respect to employment recommendations, it was critical that the selection process appear unbiased and without favoritism. Once selected, it was imperative that consulting teachers received training in coaching methods, teaching standards, and assessment, and that they remained vigilant with respect to confidentiality.

Defining Good Teaching

Effective PAR programs require agreed-upon standards of practice and performance rubrics, which form the foundation of the work between participating and consulting teachers. In addition, evaluative decisions must be beyond reproach, with detailed standards-based documentation from the classroom. The challenge in many districts is that educators have not defined quality teaching or made their priorities and values clear—a necessary step for a transparent evaluation process. They also may not find themselves in agreement when they do make their values explicit. Creating these conversations, and owning (rather than importing) the standards of practice that grow out of them, are crucial steps in the PAR process.

Reframing Labor Relations

A critical issue for PAR implementation is the level of trust between teachers and administrators.¹ For this reason, most school districts begin PAR programs with new teachers only, since the idea of apprenticeship is far less controversial among teachers than peer intervention with veterans. The expansion to include intervention cases typically occurs once a program has been in place successfully for

a few years. This was not the case in California, where the state legislation specifically targeted veteran teachers. As a result, Rosemont and other districts across the state were required to skip the trust-building phase of PAR.

Reframing Instructional Leadership

Despite their complaints that they do not have time to do evaluations well, administrators are often quick to defend their turf. Principals' hesitancy to relinquish authority for teacher evaluation is understandable and, where it signals professional commitment to teacher quality and instructional leadership, laudable. The problem and its solution lie in the conception of instructional leadership. Rather than define an instructional leader as one who directly provides the instructional support for teaching and learning, with PAR, principals enact instructional leadership by communicating regularly with CTs, meeting with the panel, and conducting the personnel evaluations of those teachers not in PAR.

Building Bridges to Mentoring Programs

Some educators may adhere to the notion that assistance and review must be

The panel's expectations that the consulting teachers' assessments be standards-based stood in contrast to the ubiquitous "I know good teaching when I see it" that has plagued much of traditional teacher evaluation. Teaching standards or "protocols of practice"²⁰ depersonalize the process, creating a review that focuses on the teaching practice rather than the person. The teachers' union president noted, "We're trying to institute standards for teaching so that people will be playing on a common playing field, with common rules. Hiring and firing decisions would be made centrally. They would be based upon standards rather than the whim of a particular individual." In the union president's eyes, PAR served two purposes: reducing principals' ability to fire new teachers at will and increasing accountability for poorly performing teachers.

As the panel made individual teachers' practice a districtwide concern, it also increased accountability for administrators by identifying "red-flag situations" in schools across the district. For example, the panel identified some cases of principals failing to give beginning teachers a sufficient opportunity to succeed, such as an assignment of four preparation periods across three classrooms on two different floors of a building. Extremely challenging situations like this complicated the CT's job of diagnosing and assessing a PT's practice and potential. In such cases, the associate superintendent on the panel addressed the situation

with the principal directly and sometimes required that the conditions for the new teacher be altered.

The panel process was certainly not perfect. One of the main criticisms of the PAR panel by consulting teachers was that they did not play a critical enough role. For the most part, this seemed to be an issue of time. Hearings typically ran all day for two days, yet most of those involved tended to feel the process was rushed, not allowing sufficient time to go into the depth they would have liked. It is therefore not surprising that some CTs reported feeling that the panel was a rubber stamp on their decision about a PT. While the data reveal increased transparency, there was still plenty of room for growth toward more meaningful involvement of the panel in the process.

4. Involving the Teachers' Union

Problem: The typically confrontational nature of education's labor relations can make the rare attempt at dismissal prohibitively costly and time consuming.²¹ Many principals have viewed the union as an unbeatable adversary and often do not try to fire a teacher.²² Instead, they engage in escape hatches,²³ such as transfers (voluntary and involuntary), resignation, and retirement.²⁴ One Rosemont principal explained that, with traditional teacher evaluation, "someone allowed me, not correctly, but
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separate in order to ensure trust between mentor and mentee. While that concern was not supported by this research, those interested in implementing PAR must attend to it or face resistance. Rosemont's PAR program benefited greatly by resting on a decade and a half of mentoring efforts in California. Rosemont's consulting teachers were able to enter an already existing statewide conversation about performance standards for teaching and effective coaching strategies, and some of them had already served as mentors in the statewide Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment program. Strong PAR programs require deep knowledge about teaching and learning. If PAR is being considered in a district that already has a mentoring program, it's important to work with the current mentors so that the PAR program benefits from their knowledge and so that the mentors have an opportunity to consider the benefits that can arise from combining assistance and review.

Paying for PAR

The main cost involved with PAR is the replacement cost of consulting teachers who leave the classroom, which in Rosemont was covered by funding from the state per the state legislation. Other,

more minor costs include stipends for teachers on the PAR panel and release days for participating teachers to observe other teachers. PAR programs may result in savings, however, as they weed out weak teachers while they are probationary, avoiding the expense of termination later after they become tenured. Evidence indicates that PAR programs may also improve retention, avoiding the expense of recruiting, hiring, and orienting yet more new teachers. These cost savings are hard to measure; nonetheless, future research should attempt to do so.² Two ways that districts may be tempted to try to reduce the cost of implementing PAR are reducing CTs' release time to something less than full time or increasing CTs' caseloads. Either of these approaches risks undermining the effectiveness of the program, since CTs' work with participating teachers hinges on time, and administrators' impressions of the program hinge on the perceived effectiveness of the CTs.

Overcoming the Norms of 100 Years of Bureaucracy

Despite the largely positive response to PAR in Rosemont, it is very difficult to shift norms in the way required by this policy. Principals and panel members had great

confidence in consulting teachers' abilities and believed that they were conducting high-quality reviews. But most people—principals, panel members, and CTs themselves—wanted principals to be more involved in the process. Suffice it to say that policymakers and practitioners should be clear about their intentions regarding instructional leadership and responsibility for teacher evaluation when implementing PAR, as people will tend to regress to that which is familiar, namely, principal control. Historically, districts move quickly to blunt the effects of new teacher leadership policies.³ Educators—whether union leaders, teachers, or administrators—must overcome long-standing norms if they are going to put collective responsibility for professional standards in teachers' hands.

—J.G.

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Peer Assistance and Review

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allowed me to say you pick your battles and to be honest, you know, it's phenomenally hard to get rid of somebody. So I would say, 'Do I want to take the time to [get rid of them], knowing that I've also got this, I've got that, etc.' So you say, 'No.'"

Solution: The California legislation included teachers' unions as partners with districts in a couple of ways. The legislation required that the union sign off on a district's proposal to the state creating a PAR program (and it is worth noting that the district would lose state money it was already receiving if it did not create a PAR program). In addition, the legislation required that the panel be co-led by the union and the district, and that it be made up of five teachers and four administrators. In these ways, the Rosemont teachers' union played a central role in the changes brought about with PAR. The survey results indicate that principals, panel members, and consulting teachers all thought PAR had a positive effect on relations between the teachers' union and the district. One principal highlighted the change: "I'm working collaboratively with the union. It's a whole different feel and there's a sense that the union and I agree that we need teachers who use best practice, and we're working together to have best practices occur, and we're not opposed in terms of keeping some person in there who is not utilizing best practice. I feel like we're all on the same team and it's about children and the kind of teaching they get." Some principals were quite surprised to see the teachers' union president sitting at the table at hearings, let alone arguing for dismissals of teachers. PAR programs, however, have historically been initiated by union presidents interested in "postindustrial unionism,"²⁵ and it was the union president who advocated for the creation of a PAR program in Rosemont prior to the implementation of the state legislation. For some teachers' unions, PAR is one way to defend the profession of teaching rather than individual teachers.²⁶

5. Generating Confidence in Evaluative Decisions

Problem: Principals often doubt themselves when making evaluative decisions.²⁷ How could it be otherwise? The problem of making a decision has accrued through the problems discussed above. Principals do not have sufficient time to spend on evaluations and are not involved in professional development in an ongoing and substantive manner; therefore, they are uncertain that the teacher under review has been given an opportunity to improve. They typically lack standards on which to rate teachers. They are alone to make the decision, without the benefit of an organizational structure that provides collaboration with colleagues. Finally, they often believe that a negative evaluation of a tenured teacher will involve a timely and costly battle with the teachers' union and that they will likely lose that battle.

Solution: Just as the problem of making a decision accrues through the prior problems, so the solution accrues through the prior solutions. Due at least in part to the amount of time devoted to assisting the participating teachers, the ongoing nature of the reviews, the link between the reviews and teaching standards, and the shift from one reviewer standing alone to a group of peers participating in the process, consulting teachers, princi-

pals, and the panel had an increased sense of confidence in the quality and accuracy of the reviews. While my study did not examine the teacher evaluation paperwork, people involved in PAR, including principals, believed that higher-quality evaluations were being conducted through PAR than had occurred through the traditional process.

6. Increasing Accountability for Teaching Quality

Problem: Given the structural weaknesses in the traditional system of evaluation outlined above, teachers rarely are fired for teaching poorly.²⁸ In one study of traditional teacher evaluation, less than 1 percent of teachers were dismissed, despite the fact that 1.53 to 2.65 percent were formally identified as “incompetent” and 5 percent were informally identified as “incompetent.”²⁹ Such teachers are more likely to be reassigned to other school sites than fired.³⁰

Solution: Perhaps one of the most significant findings in the study is that, across the board, consulting teachers were willing to recommend nonrenewal of a participating teacher. This is not to imply that CTs were eager to recommend nonrenewal or that they did not agonize about such decisions when they had to be made. Nonetheless, CTs rose to the challenge—not in all cases, but at a much higher rate than principals—and when necessary, they recommended nonrenewal. In addition, principals and panel members had confidence in their recommendations, and the teachers’ union was part of the process rather than against it. The result was that out of 88 new teachers who were in the program in its first year, 11 (12.5 percent) were not renewed for employment. This included some cases of uncredentialed teachers who were given invitations to return to the district with evidence of a credential and successful teaching elsewhere. In addition, three out of three veterans (100 percent) were encouraged into retirement or into other out-of-classroom responsibilities. In years two through four of the PAR program, the rate of dismissal for beginning teachers fell to 10 percent. Some believed the shift was due to fewer uncredentialed teachers being hired in the first place by the district. In addition, while the veterans placed in the program in its initial year were perceived to be notoriously below standards, by the third year of the program one of the four veterans in PAR that year improved enough to remain in the classroom. This still placed the district below the average of a sample of other established PAR programs, where 30–60 percent of veterans have been remediated.³¹

PAR constituted a major change in accountability when compared with prior dismissal rates in the district. In the year immediately before PAR, only three teachers out of a teaching force of almost 3,000 were not renewed. While some teachers were removed for noninstructional reasons, such as tardiness or drug problems, the union president could not recall (and the district had no record of) any teachers being dismissed for issues of teaching quality in the years immediately prior to PAR.

Far from a draconian or capricious decision, a PAR dismissal represented a concerted and collaborative effort to help a teacher improve that ended with a decision that the teacher’s improvement was beyond the ability of the district. Consulting teachers and panel members often noted that they were fulfilling a

responsibility to the students of the district, in effect “stepping up” to do a difficult job that had to be done.

Summing Up: A More Professional Model of Teacher Evaluation

The transition to being one’s brother’s keeper is not easy.³² The role of consulting teacher is different from that of resource specialist or mentor teacher or other roles that officially elevate teachers into expert status. The gatekeeper function—taking responsibility for decisions about the quality of performance of others in one’s profession—is key to being a professional.³³

The consulting teachers and panel members defined their function as improving the quality of teaching for the clients of the district: students. They expressed a belief that participating teachers could be successful and were committed to helping them get there. If a participating teacher’s performance was ultimately not meeting standards, however, they saw their job as recommending dismissal of the teacher. While recommending that someone leave teaching is extremely difficult, consulting teachers mollified themselves with the reminder of the greater good of improving teaching quality for students.

My emphasis on the firing of new teachers as “good news” may seem at best cold-hearted or at worst irresponsible at a time when improving teacher retention is critical to improving teacher quality in urban schools.³⁴ In a professional model of evaluation that includes a serious concern for client welfare, however, the goal cannot be simply retention. The goal is to retain high-quality teachers (or those who show the potential to grow into high-quality teachers) and to remove from classrooms those teachers who are not performing up to standards and who show little promise of doing so. New teachers are more likely to stay both in teaching and in their current settings if they are provided with the support they need,³⁵ and the data presented here suggest that PAR may provide that support. New teachers may also take pride in belonging to a profession whose members are seriously engaged in collective responsibility for professional standards.

Lawyers hold collective responsibility for professional standards through the bar. Doctors hold collective responsibility for professional standards through a board. The professional association of teachers, their union, has not historically held any equivalent responsibility. Principals, when asked about important leadership decisions in national surveys, more often reported holding a high level of control over teacher evaluation decisions than over any of the other decisions.³⁶ An oversight panel for teacher evaluation where more than half the members are teachers and that is co-led by the teachers’ union president, however, clearly signals a radical shift in the potential role of teachers and their unions in setting and maintaining standards for the profession. In Rosemont, PAR put the teachers’ union and the district, and therefore teachers and administrators, together in a professional community of educators focused on relatively objective measures of the quality of teaching practice. As a result, the school system capitalized on the expertise of teachers in matters of instructional quality, and the teachers’ union moved from defending individual teachers to defending the profession of teaching. □

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