

Getting Serious About Teacher Evaluation

A Fresh Look at Peer Assistance and Review

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You can hardly open a newspaper or major magazine today without finding a story about another incarnation or overhaul of teacher evaluation. But underlying nearly all these detailed descriptions of state and local programs is a near-unanimous and long-standing assumption: Whoever is in charge of improving teachers shouldn't also be in charge of evaluating them.

It's an assumption that makes perfect prima facie sense, but as our research shows, the assumption is wrong. Good teacher evaluation is critical, and evaluation programs should be rigorous and comprehensive. Truly effective evaluation programs combine accountability and support.

We just completed a study of two district programs of peer assistance and review, or PAR, in California—one in Poway, in San Diego County, and the other in San Juan, near Sacramento. These districts and their teachers' unions gave us unprecedented access, and the study provides eye-opening lessons about teacher evaluation.

Peer assistance and review is a relatively simple proposition. Carefully selected experienced teachers, called consulting teachers, step away from their own classrooms for their PAR terms to give a year of intensive support to beginning teachers and to underperforming veterans and, in most cases, conduct their summative evaluations. (The consulting teachers are paid a stipend for their services in addition to their salaries.)

PAR is overseen by a joint labor-management governing board whose members are selected by the district and the local union. The board has primary authority for reviewing consulting teachers' reports and making recommendations to the superintendent and school board about the employment status of the teachers in PAR. Our study revolved around three foundational questions: (1) What does the work of consulting teachers look like? (2) What makes the PAR governing board tick? and, (3) What kind of labor-management relations underlie PAR? We focused first on the work of consulting teachers. We interviewed many of them and watched them work with both beginning and experienced teachers. The unions and the districts generously provided us with redacted personnel files on PAR teachers so we could examine the written record of the support consulting teachers provided, the progress of individual participating teachers, and the evidence that led to their evaluations. We also reviewed principals' evaluations of many of these same participating teachers.

What we found belies conventional wisdom. Integrating support and evaluation works. The common assumption is that a single person cannot both provide support and conduct an exacting review of practice. We found the opposite to be true. In Poway and San Juan, consulting teachers offer intense, one-on-one, tailored support. They diagnose each participating teacher's strengths and weaknesses and examine each teacher's practice based on comprehensive knowledge of the district's standards. They then

develop a targeted year-long program of improvement and work with the participating teacher to implement it. Along the way, consulting teachers are careful to document their efforts. Their files on individual participating teachers average 190 pages in length and include multiple summary reports and detailed notes of every classroom observation and conference. They annually complete as many as 30 informal and five formal observations of each participating teacher. Consulting teachers conduct rigorous, comprehensive evaluations solidly grounded in the evidence they have amassed—annually for beginning teachers, multiple times a year for tenured PAR teachers. These evaluations determine whether a teacher moves successfully out of PAR into the classroom or the district pursues other action, including non-renewal of contracts for beginning teachers and dismissal for tenured teachers. Many teachers make it out of PAR, but some don't. We also examined the principals' evaluation files for many of the participating teachers. What a difference. To be sure, principals do not have the time consulting teachers do to provide deep support and comprehensive reviews. Nevertheless, the contrasts were striking.

Principals' evaluations were much sketchier than those undertaken by consulting teachers. Their ratings were based on many fewer observations. Their analyses of teachers' practice tended to focus on one or two areas rather than on the whole picture of teaching. Documentation and evidence were sparse. Their files averaged seven pages in length. We were privileged to observe the Poway and San Juan PAR governance boards in action. We found that board members rarely play to their roles. Listening to the discussions, we were hard-pressed to distinguish district-appointed board members from union-appointed members. Conversations focused on intensive, high-level questioning and probing about serious matters of teaching and learning. The boards ensured both that consulting teachers focused on improving instruction and that their evaluations of participating teachers were based on solid evidence.

The governance boards also oversaw, de facto, principals' often-parallel evaluations of PAR teachers. Board members questioned principals with the same intensity they questioned consulting teachers. When the boards found principals' evaluations to be inadequate, or in other words, not sufficiently grounded in evidence, they sent the principals back to redo their work.

Another aspect of the governance boards was revealing. These boards turned out to be problem-solving arenas where district officials and union leaders collaboratively addressed operational and policy problems that might otherwise have ended up as grievances or gone unresolved. We watched as a consulting teacher reported on a facilities problem in one of her teachers' classrooms. The assistant superintendent fired off an email to fix the problem. We looked on as a governance-board discussion led to the realization that a local policy was hampering special education teachers' work. The district and the union agreed to a solution on the spot.

Finally, we were struck by the collaborative labor-management interactions that form the foundation of PAR. Though both Poway and San Juan have in the past experienced rocky union-district relations, PAR has served as a springboard for building strong connections. More than simple collaborative efforts, through PAR, management and unions are doing the hard work of confronting tough, high-stakes issues and reaching accord on how to proceed when decisions carry real and human consequences.

Our PAR study served to remind us of several key issues that often seem to get lost in contemporary policy debates about teacher evaluation.

First, effective evaluation is about accountability and support. It is aimed both at improving teaching and ensuring only good teachers are in the classroom. Second, districts under increasing pressure to ratchet up the frequency and comprehensiveness of teacher evaluations confront an enormous capacity challenge. Who has the time and the knowledge to do this important work? PAR reminds us that at least part of the answer lies in the use of consulting teachers. Third, making tough decisions about individuals' employment status is never easy. But it must be done, and done with care and rigor.

Through a collaborative labor-management structure like a PAR governance board, districts and their unions can make these high-stakes decisions in ways that are both fair and accountable.

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