



Teacher to Teacher

Realizing the Potential of Peer Assistance and Review

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Project on the Next Generation of Teachers
Harvard Graduate School of Education
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Introduction and summary

Peer Assistance and Review, or PAR, is a promising program to improve the teacher evaluation system and teaching quality more broadly. Under PAR, an innovative approach that uses expert teachers to conduct regular evaluations for novice teachers and underperforming veterans, districts can focus attention on instructional quality, retain the most effective teachers, and dismiss teachers who are not contributing to student learning. Because PAR places some evaluation responsibility on peers and requires a team of teachers and administrators to manage the process, the program is challenging to implement. It holds great potential, however, for improving teacher quality, as we'll explain in this report.

Policymakers and researchers increasingly agree that one sure way to raise educational outcomes for students is to improve the quality of their teachers. To that end, states and districts have adopted strategies for recruiting promising candidates to teaching, identifying the most effective, and rewarding them financially for their success. Meanwhile, concern grows about the continued employment of ineffective teachers, their costs to student learning, and their role in stalling efforts to improve failing schools.

Recent reports about the seeming inability of school districts to evaluate and dismiss weak teachers are fueling demands to reform local policies and state tenure laws. Some urban districts, including New York City, are currently rethinking their criteria for awarding tenure and searching for more efficient ways to dismiss teachers who are found to be unsatisfactory.¹ Union leaders, too, are facing the problem. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, recently proposed a new approach to facilitating the dismissal of ineffective teachers.²

Studies conclude that teacher evaluation and dismissal practices are ineffective in many districts, especially large, urban ones. Researchers find that far less than 1 percent of all teachers are terminated through a formal dismissal process.³ New York City School Chancellor Joel Klein reported that “just one one-hundredth of one percent of the city’s teachers are fired for incompetence in a typical year.”⁴ Surveys of teachers suggest they also think that some of their colleagues are ineffective and should be dismissed.⁵

Many critics blame teacher tenure laws for providing excessive job protections and hold teachers unions responsible for aggressively defending poor teachers throughout the process. Some unions across the country, however, have adopted Peer Assistance and

Review, or PAR, a program that can improve erratic and ineffective teacher evaluation and solve the problem of stalled dismissals.

In PAR expert teachers mentor and evaluate their peers—typically all novice teachers and veteran teachers whose work has been judged to fall below the district’s standards. Throughout the process, union leaders and district administrators work side by side to ensure that teachers receive timely evaluations, sufficient support, and due process. If teachers fail to achieve district standards despite intensive assistance, the union and administration stand together in recommending dismissal.

PAR thus works in two ways. It helps teachers succeed in the district and, if they cannot, provides a clear route to dismissal without undue delay or expense. This is possible because expert consulting teachers, or CTs, offer extensive assistance for several months before they assess teachers’ performance. Also, a districtwide panel of teachers and administrators jointly manage the process, ensuring that all procedures are followed. A principal in San Juan, California, a district that uses PAR, explained: “I’m a real supporter of PAR. I think it saves careers. The whole idea is to provide the help a teacher needs, and if they can’t step up to the plate, then they really shouldn’t be there.” This process of selective retention can lead to a stronger teaching force and promote a professional culture focused on sound teaching practice.

Policymakers, district officials, and union leaders also say PAR’s mentoring component helps beginning teachers succeed and, thus, increases retention. Union leaders report that the program professionalizes teaching by making teachers responsible for mentoring and evaluating their peers. With PAR’s specialized roles for expert teachers it also has the potential to differentiate the work and career opportunities of teachers. PAR therefore provides an opportunity to serve multiple goals, improving teacher support and evaluation, raising teacher quality, and professionalizing teaching.

Given its promise, PAR has gained national attention as a central component of an effective strategy for developing a school district’s human capital. Recently, many educational observers and policymakers, including President Barack Obama, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten have pointed to PAR as an approach with great potential for improving professional evaluation and teacher quality.⁶

Despite such expectations, PAR is currently established in relatively few districts nationwide. This is not surprising since it’s no simple matter to create an effective PAR program. PAR challenges most people’s beliefs about what teachers and principals should do. It requires unusual collaboration between the union and administration. It is complex to design, must be implemented carefully, and requires a substantial financial investment. And, PAR must be grounded in a systematic approach to teacher evaluation.

We sought to expand what is known about PAR by examining the program in seven districts across the country.⁷ We focused on districts that provide both peer assistance and peer review,⁸ where teachers support and evaluate their colleagues in a process that can lead either to continued employment or to dismissal.⁹ In each district, we interviewed approximately 25 individuals, including the superintendent or associate superintendent, the teachers union president, other administrators and union representatives, principals, and the expert consulting teachers who work in the program on a daily basis.

In this report, we present what we have learned about designing and implementing an effective PAR program. First, we describe PAR and its promise for improving teacher quality. PAR is a complicated program with many moving parts. Fundamentally, however, it relies on the day-to-day work of expert consulting teachers and is governed by the joint labor-management PAR Panel. (More detailed examples and explanations can be found in [“A User’s Guide to Peer Assistance and Review”](#) at the website of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers.¹⁰)

Districts with PAR report that it is expensive, but that some of its expense is offset if it replaces an existing induction program. PAR also typically increases teacher retention, improves tenure decisions, and reduces the costs of teacher dismissal. Stakeholders credit PAR with easing some of the evaluation burdens for principals, creating a strong professional culture built around instructional improvement, promoting labor-management collaboration throughout the district, and creating new roles for teacher leaders.

We then discuss key challenges and common problems districts face as they adopt PAR. All districts must find a sufficient and stable source of funding. The program also requires collaboration between the teachers union leaders and district administrators, two groups often at odds. Proponents must convince both teachers and principals to support PAR. The program’s success rests on careful and collaborative design, with particular attention to the standards of teaching practice and the selection and training of consulting teachers.

We find that, while PAR has great potential to improve teacher quality, districts that adopt the program do not always make full use of that potential. After suggesting what districts can do to implement PAR effectively and ensure that this potential is realized, we offer the following recommendations for federal and state policymakers who seek to support the development and success of PAR:

- Federal and state policymakers should create a context that supports local districts interested in developing PAR by providing planning grants and financial assistance for start-up costs, informing district planners about the legal context of PAR, and making it possible to fund their program from existing grants, such as those that support mentoring or improved teacher evaluation.

- Federal and state policymakers who require local districts to adopt new approaches to teacher evaluation should encourage them to adopt PAR as one component of a coherent human capital strategy.
- Through their education service units, states should assist clusters of districts working together to develop PAR programs and, thus, to share resources and expertise.
- Local policymakers should examine a wide variety of local PAR models rather than adopting one district's plan as a template. Each district's needs are distinct and the program has greater chances of success if it is tailored to fit local circumstances.
- Local policymakers should recognize it takes time—often one to two years—to plan and win support for an effective PAR program. Unrealistic deadlines are more likely to lead to premature failure than to rapid, successful adoption.
- Effective PAR programs depend on having a teacher evaluation system that is rigorous and standards based. A local district without such a system should develop one before trying to introduce PAR.
- The complex work of planning PAR should not be done in traditional negotiations. Labor and management can commit to jointly developing a PAR program and then delegate responsibility for its design to a joint task force. The final PAR plan can then be incorporated into the collective bargaining agreement.
- Principals should be included in planning a local PAR program both to ensure that their concerns will be taken into account and to affirm both for them and their colleagues the central role of principals in making PAR work.

What is PAR?

PAR is the brainchild of Toledo, Ohio’s teachers union president, Dal Lawrence, who developed the program in the early 1980s. In the past 25 years, other districts have relied on the “Toledo Plan” as their model for PAR. In all cases they have adapted the plan, sometimes substantially, to meet their local needs. The details vary, but most programs contain several common elements. A joint labor-management committee, usually called the PAR Panel, runs the program. Expert consulting teachers support and evaluate other teachers who are assigned to the program, thus changing the principal’s responsibility for conducting all teacher evaluations. Finally, PAR usually sets forth different procedures for novice and veteran teachers. We’ll examine each of these elements in turn.

PAR Panel

PAR is unique because it is collaboratively run by the teachers union and district administrators—two groups who often regard each other as adversaries. The program must be governed carefully and fairly because PAR can be controversial and the work of a consulting teacher can lead to a teacher’s tenure or dismissal. Therefore, equal or nearly equal numbers of union and district representatives form the PAR Panel and govern the program jointly. Panel members typically include the teachers union president or designate and a top district administrator, as well as other members appointed by the union president and superintendent. In one district we examined, only teachers and principals serve on its PAR Panel. The panel meets regularly and is responsible for managing all aspects of PAR.

The panel’s primary responsibility, though, is to review the cases of participating teachers and to decide whether the district should continue to employ those teachers based on the evidence collected by consulting teachers. Panel members listen to these presentations, question the consulting teachers, review the evidence, and eventually decide whether to recommend that the district retain or dismiss the teachers.

Teachers and administrators on the panels worked closely together in all the districts we studied. Rather than representing the interests of the groups that appointed them, panel members said they had to focus solely on how best to serve students. A panel member in Syracuse, New York, said, “I really step between the worlds ... When we walked into this whole thing, everybody pretty much took their hat off and we are ‘the panel’ ... It is not like ‘the administrative camp’ and ‘the teacher camp.’”

The panel conducts its work as a single body, which means that its decisions tend to be widely accepted and are seldom challenged. A panel member in San Juan said, “There is incredible power in having the president of the teachers association and several teachers in the room saying, ‘[This teacher’s] behavior isn’t acceptable. We’ve got to make a change.’”

Consulting teachers¹¹

Consulting teachers, who typically are known and respected as expert teachers, mentor novices and assist low-performing veterans. They are chosen through a competitive selection process that is conducted by the PAR Panel. Consulting teachers in most districts are released full time from classroom teaching for three to five years and are responsible for a caseload of 10 to 20 teachers, if possible in the same subject area and grade level. Most earn a substantial yearly stipend (\$3,000 to \$10,000), which is added to their regular pay in recognition of the extra responsibility and time the job requires. A few programs use part-time consulting teachers who split their responsibilities between PAR and classroom teaching or carry out their PAR work on top of a full-time teaching load.

Consulting teachers play a leading role in PAR by working with the teachers in their caseload to help them meet the district’s performance standards. They do this primarily through frequent scheduled and unscheduled visits, as well as ongoing email contact with each teacher. They provide support through such activities as:

- Developing a growth plan based on a teacher’s strengths and weaknesses
- Observing lessons and providing feedback in postobservation conferences
- Co-planning lessons
- Modeling a lesson
- Providing resources and materials
- Arranging for the teacher to observe another colleague’s class

Because consulting teachers are expert teachers with additional training as coaches, they can provide detailed feedback and advice to teachers in their caseload. According to a Syracuse central office administrator and panel member, “There is no way an administrator could go in and offer the support at the level that our PAR consultants do. Not because they wouldn’t want to—they just can’t.” Consulting teachers also know what is needed to make comprehensive judgments about a teacher’s performance because of their content knowledge and classroom experience.

At regular intervals throughout the year, consulting teachers submit written and oral reports about each teacher in their caseload to the PAR Panel. They base these reports on their detailed notes from each observation and include their assessment of each teacher’s progress toward meeting the district’s teaching standards. In some districts, consulting teachers produce formal reports for each observation they make. They also typically keep a log detail-

ing the types of assistance provided to the teachers in their caseload. Their reports, usually presented both in writing and in person, are the basis of the PAR Panel's employment recommendations. Therefore, in many ways PAR's success depends on getting the right people in the CT role and ensuring that they have the training and resources to do their work.

Novice program

In most districts that adopt PAR, it becomes the induction and evaluation program for all new teachers. Consulting teachers help their novices set up their classroom, secure needed supplies, prepare for the challenges of classroom management, and reflect on the lessons they teach. Week to week, they provide detailed feedback and support to help the new teachers meet the district's standards.

They also assess their work. In most districts, consulting teachers present a preliminary report of their novices' progress to the PAR Panel several months into the school year. In the spring they present a summary assessment, reporting whether the teacher has met the district's standards and, in most cases, recommending whether or not the novice teacher should be rehired.

Intervention program

Intervention, PAR's other component, is meant for tenured teachers who are not meeting the district's standards for acceptable performance. Usually, it's the principal who refers an experienced teacher to Intervention, though in a few districts an unsatisfactory rating on a regular evaluation conducted by an administrator automatically triggers a referral.¹² Most districts allow teachers to refer their peers to PAR, but this rarely happens.

Teachers on Intervention have problems for various reasons. They may be overwhelmed by the demands of a new teaching assignment, set back by health problems, or distracted by the stress of a family crisis. Or they may have more basic failings as teachers—not knowing their subject, lacking basic classroom management skills, or not respecting students.

Regardless of the reason, once a principal recommends a teacher for Intervention the panel typically assigns a consulting teacher to investigate whether, in fact, that teacher fails to meet the district's instructional standards. If so, the panel assigns a consulting teacher to the case. As with the Novice program, a consulting teacher works closely with the experienced teacher, providing intensive assistance and assessing progress. Intervention typically lasts one year, sometimes two.

Many reformers who express interest in PAR see Intervention as a way to dismiss struggling or weak teachers. Those responsible for PAR, however, stress that Intervention is first and

foremost a way to rescue a failing teacher and save a valuable career. Every PAR program has teachers on Intervention who eventually meet standards in response to a consulting teacher's close mentoring. But Intervention can lead to the teacher's dismissal if the teacher rejects help or fails to improve sufficiently despite the consulting teacher's best efforts.

PAR Intervention has a two-pronged approach, providing remediation and assistance for teachers who need it and counseling out or dismissing those who still do not succeed. According to the San Juan superintendent, "Ultimately, it really is a good program. We've saved a lot of careers. Those teachers are now in the classroom doing really good things. We've gotten some people moved out that needed to be moved out, and we got them out quicker than in the old process." Thus, Intervention is a high-stakes process, laying out a path to dismissal and refuting beliefs about veteran teachers' job security.

Principals

Principals or assistant principals traditionally have sole responsibility for evaluating teachers. That changes when a district adopts PAR and consulting teachers assume responsibility for evaluating some teachers. Notably, principals in every district we studied retain the right and responsibility to evaluate all teachers for tenure. Having consulting teachers assist with evaluation may free up time for the principal to focus on other aspects of school leadership and increase the school's capacity to support all teachers. In addition, PAR eliminates the need for principals to singlehandedly undertake the long process of removing ineffective teachers.

Some principals, however, respond to PAR as a threat to their authority and either oppose or resist it. Over time, though, they usually come to accept and appreciate PAR, especially when they see the quality of work consulting teachers typically do.

Importantly, PAR's Intervention component cannot work without principals' support and their active participation in evaluating and referring struggling teachers. Many of those we interviewed said their Intervention program was small because principals were reluctant to refer ineffective teachers. They said such principals had not conducted the necessary evaluations, wanted to continue assisting failing teachers themselves, or did not want to be associated with a process that could lead to dismissal. According to the Cincinnati superintendent, "There is a major role that the principal must play, and that is to trigger the request for an investigation. If that doesn't happen, the teacher is allowed to continue to just float along."

Why do PAR?

PAR programs are expensive, typically costing \$4,000 to \$7,000 per teacher served, and districts often must be creative and draw on various sources to fund them. Nonetheless, administrators repeatedly said they protected PAR during times of budget cuts because the program was so central to instructional improvement and success. What is it about PAR that warrants such a commitment of scarce resources?

Administrators and union leaders repeatedly said PAR's benefits—both financial and organizational—far outweigh its costs. They viewed PAR's expense as an investment in the district's human capital rather than an additional cost the district had to bear. A Rochester, New York, district administrator spoke of it as “an essential investment.” Several union members and administrators, including one superintendent, even called the program “priceless.”

According to these officials the benefits were many. PAR improved induction and support through intensive mentoring, helped to guarantee sound tenure decisions, addressed the problems of struggling veterans, made the principal's job more manageable, created a professional culture committed to instructional improvement, increased labor-management collaboration, and promoted the development of teacher leaders.

Improve induction and support through intensive mentoring

Key stakeholders in these districts said their PAR Novice program provided strong induction. Because consulting teachers observed and assisted all new teachers, they could quickly identify floundering novices and provide the help they needed to get a good start. Further, district officials credited the program with reducing rates of teacher turnover. As the Rochester superintendent said, “A little bit over 70 percent of my budget is spent on people—\$680 million. It's all about people. It's all about talent. And the process, I think, is a great process in developing great teachers and retaining great teachers. The retention is amazing.”

Studies show teacher turnover is costly, with some urban districts spending more than \$10,000 to replace every novice teacher who leaves.¹³ Therefore, any improvements in supporting and selectively retaining teachers can generate substantial savings.

Guarantee sound tenure decisions

District officials said PAR encourages selective retention—screening out teachers who fail to meet standards, identifying those who need help, and retaining those who do a good job. By closely supervising teachers as they enter the schools, PAR can ensure good tenure decisions. New teachers are evaluated carefully and those who do not meet district standards are not rehired.

Both administrators and union leaders recognized that granting tenure has long-term consequences for the district. As a Minneapolis administrator reported, “There’s a huge benefit because, number one, if you tenure somebody that’s not ready, those are million dollar decisions.” Administrators and union leaders also noted the incalculable price students pay when they have a poor teacher.

Retrieve a faltering career or move to dismissal

PAR also has clear benefits for teachers who already have received tenure. Stakeholders told of many experienced teachers who improved substantially through their experience in PAR. A San Juan Panel member said, “I’ve seen the difference it makes. The success stories are ones to really cheer about.” They also noted that if a teacher failed to improve the PAR Panel could recommend dismissal. In either case students stood to benefit.

Dismissing teachers with tenure is ordinarily a very expensive undertaking, in large part because administrators fail to follow required procedures and the teachers union then challenges that failure in arbitrations or court cases. District officials reported that dismissals outside of PAR typically range into what one called the “double-digit thousands.” Recent studies suggest that the full legal costs of processing a dismissal exceed \$120,000 on average in New York State.¹⁴

PAR districts, on the other hand, reported that very few dismissal decisions were challenged and no challenges had been successful. This is because PAR programs are built on strong labor-management collaboration, with union members being involved throughout the review process. In other districts, such challenges are so costly in time and dollars that administrators often avoid pursuing dismissal altogether.

As a result, districts with PAR generally dismiss more teachers than other districts.¹⁵ The number of official dismissals of tenured teachers remains small, ranging at most up to 10 teachers per year. But these dismissal rates far exceed those before PAR and in most districts without PAR programs. In addition to these formal dismissals, teachers in Intervention who realize they cannot meet standards often see the writing on the wall and resign or retire. In Rochester, the union president described how he talked with underperforming teachers: “The union, without batting an eye, says, ‘If you’re not doing the kids any good and we can’t help you come up to that level, then you’re not doing the rest of us

any good.” He said that most often these conversations led teachers to leave the district rather than face the prospect of formal dismissal.

Make the principal’s job more manageable

PAR changes the principal’s responsibilities by introducing consulting teachers who support and evaluate teachers. Initially, principals may see PAR as compromising their rights as managers and reducing their influence as instructional leaders. But in fact, consulting teachers reduce the evaluation burden on principals by providing steady support and evaluations for novices and underperforming veterans. Moreover, principals remain crucial to PAR’s success because they must continue to evaluate nontenured teachers after their first year and must evaluate and refer tenured teachers to Intervention and possible dismissal.

Many principals in districts with established PAR programs described the advantages of this arrangement. They observed that running a school is a complex and difficult task requiring attention to many demands and details that often pull them away from supervising and evaluating the teachers who most need support. A Minneapolis principal echoed a common theme: “As a principal of a large school—we have a thousand kids here—I wouldn’t have that time to devote to a new teacher as well as [consulting teachers] do. So, I have had tremendous results from the program.” Similarly, a consulting teacher in Rochester recalled a principal saying, “I’ve got so much on my plate that I’m not going to have a whole lot of time to visit with this intern. So, I’m counting on you to support and help this young man along.”

Principals recognized the value consulting teachers added to their schools, including specialized expertise in content areas. The Cincinnati superintendent articulated this benefit:

In general, principals are generalists. Some know content well and others know content not as well. The teachers know their content. If we choose the right teachers who are knowledgeable and have the experience in their content areas, you can’t have a better group of people out in the field working with their colleagues, because they know what they are looking for. They know what should happen.

No principal, however hardworking, could adequately advise teachers about instruction in every subject.

Create a professional culture committed to instructional improvement

Beyond these specific advantages, PAR can strengthen the district’s professional culture and increase collegial exchange among peers. A steady focus on teacher evaluation stimulates discussions about professional practice. A Cincinnati administrator said that “the biggest benefit is getting this dialogue, continuing this dialogue about what good

teaching practice is.” Several individuals argued that PAR achieves the type of broader transformation other induction and evaluation systems promise but seldom deliver. The Syracuse superintendent said that “to go over all the litanies of failures in the [traditional] evaluation process is probably pointless, but clearly until we create an atmosphere where teachers are in a culture of change, in a culture of support, we’re not going to get the kind of instruction that we want to happen.”

Thus, stakeholders credit PAR with increasing the instructional capacity of the school and district.

Increase collaboration between labor and management

Both administrators and union leaders further reported that PAR improves labor-management relations in the district. In several districts, the number of overall grievances had fallen as the parties learned to work together in PAR. In part, these improved relationships came about because of the necessary communication between union and district leaders. The PAR Panel union co-chair in Rochester, for example, said her administrative counterpart “happens to be in a position where I speak to her almost daily. She is the chief human resources officer, and shoot, I talked to her twice I think today. She was over here for a meeting and then I called her later on.” This type of regular communication helps make PAR possible, but also facilitates mutual respect and collaboration when other labor-management issues arise both at the district and school levels.

Promote the development of teacher leaders

Finally, PAR can help develop teacher leaders. Most consulting teachers said the role offered professional challenges and opportunities that were new and rewarding. Former consulting teachers often said the experience was the best professional development they’d ever had. According to the Rochester teachers union leader, “A very persistent, recurring comment is ‘I know my interns benefited, but not as much as I did. I learned more about teaching this year than in my first 20 years in the classroom.’” They returned to the classroom revived and inspired by a sense of new possibility and a better understanding of what makes for good and successful teaching.

These former consulting teachers also enjoyed a measure of respect as instructional experts when they returned to their school, where they continued to influence others’ practice. Other former consulting teachers eventually moved into various leadership roles in the school and district, carrying with them all that they had learned about teachers, classrooms, and schools.

What does it take?

Despite these advantages and PAR's long history in several districts, implementing the program is not easy or routine. The program is resource intensive and expensive to operate. Not only does it demand a high level of labor-management collaboration, but both teachers and administrators must be convinced that PAR deserves their support—that it neither violates union values nor undermines good management. The program itself is complicated with many moving parts, which must be carefully assembled to ensure that PAR is effective and meets necessary legal standards. Each district we studied had tailored its program in keeping with its programmatic, organizational, financial, and political realities.

Funding PAR

All of the stakeholders we interviewed recognized PAR's substantial benefits, but they acknowledged that the program is expensive. Across the districts we studied, PAR's annual costs ranged from approximately \$250,000 in Syracuse to \$2 million in Rochester, a large program with a full-time director and nearly 200 part-time consulting teachers. The biggest cost by far comes from hiring teachers to cover the classes of consulting teachers who are released either full time or part time. These replacement teachers may have less experience and thus earn less than consulting teachers, but the full cost of their salaries, fringe benefits, and training is significant, typically approaching three-fourths of PAR's total cost.

Beyond the costs of replacing consulting teachers, PAR programs cover expenses such as:

- Additional stipends for consulting teachers (ranging from \$3,000 to \$10,000 across the districts studied)
- Salary and benefits for a program director
- Salary and benefits for administrative and clerical support staff
- Stipends for PAR Panel members
- Substitute teachers for PAR Panel members to attend meetings
- Substitute teachers for teachers in the program to visit and observe other classes
- Office space for consulting teachers
- Computers for consulting teachers
- Mileage reimbursements for consulting teacher travel
- Training costs for consulting teachers and PAR Panel members

Districts reported spending approximately \$3,000 to \$7,000 per teacher for novices and \$6,000 to \$10,000 for teachers on Intervention, depending on what expenses they covered.

PAR gains credibility when its long-term funding is secure. Teachers and principals, who often see promising programs disappear when a grant ends, are unlikely to take PAR seriously unless they believe it has the kind of funding commitments that ensure it can last. Therefore, districts should carefully plan how to pay for PAR over time and how to make that stable funding apparent to all the stakeholders. Districts that secure short-term funding in order to get the program off the ground should continue to search for long-term support. Relying on established state and federal programs for funds usually makes more sense than counting on support from a foundation that promotes PAR today, but may change its priorities a year from now.

It's shortsighted, however, to look only for new money. A district's current operating budget can cover many of PAR's costs if the program is integrated into the district's ongoing work rather than treated as an add-on. A Novice program, for example, can replace a district's current induction program. It can also save costs in other areas by increasing retention rates and avoiding costly turnover. Similarly, in districts that already move to dismiss tenured teachers, an Intervention program's expenses can be met by funds that otherwise would be spent on legal costs.

Focused labor-management collaboration

Beyond financial concerns, implementing PAR requires sustained collaboration between district administrators and teachers union leaders. Cooperation of any kind between labor and management can be hard to achieve because the two parties are expected to be adversaries. Moreover, shifting responsibility for evaluation from principals to consulting teachers often provokes opposition from both sides, with administrators claiming evaluation is their responsibility and union members contending that peer review is antiunion. The program relies on the PAR Panel as a forum where labor and management work together to build a sense of common purpose and sustain PAR. But for PAR to work well, collaboration must be apparent and exercised not only at the district level but throughout the schools.

Collaborating to design PAR

In districts where unions and administrators have successfully established PAR programs, the parties often worked for years to ensure that the program they created would be accepted and work well. Usually those involved had seen the limits of competing for scarce resources in conventional bargaining and realized that their larger, shared goals for the district's students could not be achieved without collaboration. Once they accepted

joint responsibility for establishing PAR, however, union and district representatives had to participate in careful, collaborative planning to make the program a reality.

PAR often develops in districts with some history of working collaboratively on related topics. Before implementing PAR in Syracuse, union and district officials had developed new standards for teacher evaluation and were exploring alternative approaches to evaluating veteran teachers. One said this experience “helped to open up the doors” for PAR. In Minneapolis, a small group of union and management leaders convened to improve the supports that were already in place for teachers who were struggling in the classroom. The committee met regularly for a few years as they worked to change the existing system to one in which a teacher could actually be dismissed. In the process they learned about Toledo’s PAR model and their committee evolved into a PAR Panel.

Leaders of the union and administration must be ready to collaborate, but their relationship need not be smooth or tension free, either. What seems important is that both parties be ready to take some risks, trust each other’s good intentions, and work hard together to improve their schools.

Convincing the principals

Collaboration on the PAR Panel at the district level is not sufficient, however. If PAR is to truly work, collaboration must extend to the schools. Traditionally, the school-based labor relationship is an adversarial one between the principal and the union’s building representative or steward. But PAR introduces a new and unprecedented relationship between the consulting teacher and the principal. Under PAR, the principal’s role as instructional leader shifts as the consulting teacher assumes a share of responsibility for evaluating teachers. The consulting teacher has a supervisory role despite being a peer of the teachers, and, in some programs, the consulting teacher’s judgments about whether teachers should be employed or dismissed may supersede those of the principal.

Several districts that overlooked or excluded principals or their union from the PAR planning process encountered a subsequent setback—for example, there was a lawsuit in Rochester and a grievance from the principals union in Syracuse. Principals, or their unions, argued that teacher evaluation was the sole responsibility of administrators. In virtually all cases, however, that opposition subsided once the principals’ concerns were addressed and the program was implemented.

Principals therefore should be engaged from the beginning in exploring the possibility of PAR. Meanwhile, their union—if they are represented by one—should be well informed about the process and possibly participate as a third party in planning PAR. Having a PAR plan that has been reviewed and endorsed by principals will increase the chances of smooth implementation.

Convincing the teachers

Many teachers union presidents also find that PAR is initially hard to sell to their members. Teachers—especially veterans—may become alarmed to learn that their colleagues can evaluate them or that their union intends to support dismissals. Presidents often have to convince union members that they are not being sold out by their own union in order to persuade them to ratify a contract that includes PAR. Teachers must often adjust their beliefs about what a union can or should do in order to accept PAR. For instance, they must relinquish the idea that the union will protect all teachers no matter how ineffective they are. And they must come to believe that PAR can professionalize their work and improve their schools.

When union presidents advocate for PAR, they often remind teachers that incompetent colleagues make their work harder and shortchange students. They may argue that teachers will have more public support if they uphold high professional standards. And they may contend that no one is in a better position to evaluate teachers than a teacher. The union president in Rochester recalled that at the start some members opposed the very idea of peer review: “This is antiunion asking us to become snitches.” In response he explained the simple logic of peer review to an audience of 2,000 teachers: “No one knows the difference between good teaching and bad teaching better than the best teachers themselves.” Then he asked his audience: “Anybody disagree?” Nobody did.

The successes of other districts in implementing PAR and the favorable testimony by those who know it well also bolster the case for adopting PAR. The process of convincing teachers, however, takes time and must be started well in advance of a vote to ratify the contract that introduces the program.

Deliberate program design

Designing a PAR program is no simple task. Although most PAR programs follow a common overall structure, the details vary tremendously. Each district has a unique culture, financial situation, and needs, which means there is no one best design and no foolproof recipe. Important program design features include standards-based evaluation and specific guidelines for selecting and training consulting teachers.

Standards-based evaluations

The experiences of the seven districts we studied suggest that successful PAR programs rest on a strong foundation of instructional standards. In several districts, the committee of teachers and administrators that developed those standards later evolved into the group that planned PAR. Historically, districts have not had such standards, relying instead on

checklists of practices thought to be effective. Often this means that no one takes evaluation seriously. When a district adopts a set of instructional standards and a process for using them to observe and assess teachers' work, however, the entire evaluation process can gain credibility and support improved instruction.

Consulting teachers find that having clear standards that are widely understood makes their work more straightforward and helps them stay on course. And having standards that are grounded in research and endorsed by teachers and administrators ensures that the decisions of consulting teachers and panels will be well informed and evidence based. In Cincinnati, the district's standards are so well developed that consulting teachers and principals talk with ease about the "placemat"—the printed framework specifying the criteria for four performance levels on each of the 32 specific standards. Cincinnati's consulting teachers track every observed behavior back to one of the standards as they assess overall teacher performance in their reports.

Just as it takes time for everyone to understand and accept PAR, it will take time for new instructional standards to be developed and to take hold. Adopting these standards is not a step districts should dare to skip in implementing PAR—for if teachers lack confidence in the district's evaluation system they will not endorse and play their part in PAR.

Consulting teacher selection

A PAR program's reputation within a district ultimately depends on who the consulting teachers are and how they do their work. As a principal in Toledo said, "CTs need to be quality people. They need to be master teachers. They need to know what is expected. They need to be driven in many ways, themselves, in pursuit of excellence and their knowledge and understanding of what it takes to get the job done and to do it right." If they are skilled and respected, the program is likely to be well received by teachers and administrators.

A program must conduct an open and well-organized hiring process to ensure that PAR will attract consulting teachers of the highest caliber. It should publicize positions widely and recruit strong candidates, assessing them carefully. Consulting teacher positions were routinely advertised in the union bulletin and the district's job postings.

Many consulting teachers, however, said they only decided to apply for the role when they were encouraged by colleagues, principals, union leaders, or current consulting teachers who thought they would do a good job. Especially in the early years of a PAR program, advertising positions is not enough to attract the strongest candidates.

All districts require a minimum level of teaching experience to qualify for the role. Rochester requires seven years—all other districts require five. Several districts (Rochester, Cincinnati, and Montgomery County, Maryland, for example) had a process

for identifying “lead teachers” as part of a career ladder. These districts required that candidates achieve lead-teacher status before applying for the role.

Many consulting teachers described the application process as rigorous—some called it “grueling.” PAR Panels sought to assess the caliber of applicants’ work. All districts required candidates to submit an application, a recommendation from their principal and another teacher, and a writing sample. Most finalists were observed teaching—often unannounced—and interviewed by the PAR Panel or a subcommittee. Most consulting teachers recalled the interview as an intimidating process with tough questions. Interviewers often ask applicants point blank, “Would you be able to fire someone?”

In most districts, there is serious competition for consulting teacher positions, especially once the program is established. Cincinnati, Montgomery County, and Minneapolis report that they receive at least 10 applications for each opening. San Juan and Toledo receive two to six applications for each position depending on the licensure area needed. Rochester, which employs close to 200 consulting teachers each year, hires approximately four out of five applicants. Syracuse, which was in the second year of its program when we visited it, hired about the same proportion.

Consulting teacher training

Consulting teachers take on new responsibilities. Coaching and assessing the work of peers calls for different skills than those needed to succeed with students. Thus, consulting teachers must prepare for a new role. They need to become well versed in adult development and understand how individuals surrender previously held belief systems and adopt new ones. They must be able to build trust with colleagues, especially those who feel especially vulnerable. And they must be confident in maintaining high expectations and encouragement when they encounter poor teaching or lack of effort. They also need to know how to allocate their time among the teachers in their caseload and how to keep detailed and accurate records of their work.

Preservice training for consulting teachers usually focuses on coaching techniques. Some districts offer a summer workshop conducted by a nationally recognized organization such as the Center for Cognitive Coaching, New Teacher Center, Research for Better Teaching, or Pathwise. Training by experienced consulting teachers also prepares them for the documentation they will be required to complete and the legal issues they may encounter on the job. Some districts require new consulting teachers to shadow experienced consulting teachers before assuming their role. Toledo has new consulting teachers attend a PAR Panel meeting as a way of learning about the role.

All districts also provide training throughout the year. At meetings in Cincinnati and Minneapolis, consulting teachers regularly discuss examples of teaching they encounter

in their work or view on sample videos and compare their assessments. This allows them to achieve shared understanding of the district's standards. Consulting teachers say these sessions—though sometimes tedious—are essential to ensure that their evaluations will be fair. Rochester's program director organizes voluntary "Collegial Circles" where experienced consulting teachers facilitate small group discussions (usually organized by grade level or subject) about coaching techniques. In Montgomery County and Cincinnati, pairs of panel members—called "PAR Pairs" and consisting of one teacher and one administrator—lead small groups of consulting teachers in reviewing individual cases and providing feedback on their work.

Meeting legal standards

PAR programs potentially face three types of legal challenges. First, a tenured teacher may appeal a dismissal under state law. Based on Supreme Court decisions, a tenured teacher has certain procedural guarantees—adequate notice, a fair hearing before an impartial decision maker, and the opportunity to present evidence prior to dismissal. Most states, however, now permit local districts to dismiss or decide not to renew a first-year teacher without explanation or review.

States typically include "incompetence" as one reason for dismissing a tenured teacher, and this is the basis of most PAR dismissals. Given the consulting teacher's extensive documentation of a teacher's experience on Intervention, and the fact that labor and management have carefully monitored due process throughout, very few decisions are appealed and no district in this study has had a reversal on appeal. Districts that embark on PAR should understand the importance not only of providing due process, but also documenting it through observation notes, summary reports, and evidence of assistance.

Second, a teacher facing dismissal may sue the union for failing to meet its duty of fair representation. In exchange for being granted the right to represent all of a district's teachers in collective bargaining, the union accepts a legal obligation to fairly represent each of those teachers. But unless due process rights are violated, the union is not obliged to take a dismissed teacher's case to arbitration or to defend that teacher in court. PAR's structures and processes provide teachers with assurance that they will be treated fairly and that due process will be monitored. They also preserve the records that document fair treatment.

Third, some proponents of PAR express concern that consulting teachers might be excluded from the bargaining unit because they function as supervisors. Consulting teachers are not managers, however, even though they exercise some supervisory responsibilities. Nonetheless, PAR districts often are careful to note that the panel makes recommendations to the superintendent but does not itself dismiss teachers.

What we've learned

Peer Assistance and Review serves a dual purpose, as its name suggests. PAR consulting teachers provide extensive support and advice to induct new teachers into the profession and offer expert help to veterans who struggle. PAR also fundamentally changes the way teachers are evaluated and reviewed.

It is this second piece—teachers assessing other teachers—that sets PAR apart from other reforms. PAR's consulting teachers regularly observe their peers, identify strategies for improvement, evaluate their practice, and recommend whether they should be rehired or dismissed. These actions challenge teaching's traditional norms of autonomy, isolation, and equality, which makes PAR both a powerful and controversial reform.

The national education conversation is focused on teacher quality, and reformers increasingly point to teacher evaluation, tenure awards, and dismissal practices as key levers for change.¹⁶ But there is abundant evidence that school districts widely fail to use these levers effectively. Large numbers of principals never observe or evaluate teachers. Probationary teachers are routinely granted tenure not because they are judged to be excellent, but simply because time passes. Meanwhile, dismissal is extremely rare in most districts because administrators believe it's impossible to dismiss a tenured teacher and unions seem to confirm that belief by successfully challenging procedural violations in dismissal cases.

PAR provides an opportunity for districts to address these issues simultaneously by evaluating teachers rigorously before they are awarded tenure and providing a clear path to dismissal for teachers who fail despite intensive help.

PAR's potential, however, reaches well beyond dismissing weak or incompetent teachers. No enterprise like schooling—which depends so much on its employees' skills, judgment, and ongoing effort—can make good use of its human capital without attending to teachers' development. Individual teachers need to learn how they can improve their practice, and they must work among colleagues who share responsibility for their improvement. With PAR, this happens when consulting teachers offer feedback and guidance about a novice's lessons, when they model effective teaching practices, or when they recommend other colleagues whose teaching the novice might observe and learn from. Many experienced teachers who are failing find success with the support and direction that consulting teachers provide.

Meanwhile, PAR can introduce and promote a new set of norms and responsibilities among all teachers, gradually changing and strengthening the professional culture of teaching in the schools and district. Thus, PAR is not simply about assisting and assessing individuals, but also about building a more effective organization in which learning is valued and continuous.

The process of jointly developing PAR also can lead the way to a more collaborative labor-management relationship. Increasingly, districts find that adversarial confrontations over rights and resources undermine the work of teachers, the experience of students, and the success of the schools. Jointly planning and implementing PAR can help union leaders and administrators bridge the traditional labor-management divide.

That said, PAR is not an easy program to implement. It can yield real cost savings for districts by improving teacher retention and reducing dismissal costs, but it is expensive. Particularly in a time of shrinking school budgets, finding the money to start and sustain a PAR program can be challenging. Further, though we have seen PAR foster labor-management collaboration in a range of districts, teachers and administrators often come to the table with doubts and suspicion. It is only through their working together that confidence and trust build and PAR truly becomes a jointly sponsored program.

Another issue is that even though PAR is typically proposed and championed by leaders of the teachers union, convincing teachers to accept PAR takes sustained work. Teachers often take a leap of faith to give PAR a chance and gradually come to value the program when they see what it can achieve. Initially, principals, too, often oppose PAR because they think it undermines their authority by reducing their responsibility for supervising and evaluating teachers. A surprising number of new programs encountered formal opposition by the principals. But once PAR was successfully established, principals found that the assistance of consulting teachers actually extended their reach in improving instruction across the school.

It is clear that the process of bargaining, designing, and introducing a PAR program is critical to its success. Most districts adopt a model that resembles Toledo's original plan, but local details differ and those differences matter. The districts we studied did not simply install a standardized PAR program, but rather adapted a set of basic components and design options to their current systems, culture, and practices. This does not mean that a district's current structure and ways of operating remain unchanged when PAR is adopted. Rather, planners must consider carefully how to build on what is there (for example, a standards-based evaluation system or a lead teacher program), address what must be changed (for example, a superficial mentoring program or routine tenure awards), and add new, necessary elements such as training for consulting teachers and procedures for the PAR Panel.

The details of the design are important, but the process of developing and implementing PAR may be even more important in the end. That process must be inclusive, solicit the views of stakeholders, provide regular updates, be informed by best practices in other

districts, and adapt to unexpected realities and opportunities. A process that excludes key individuals or groups, ignores important information, forces approval, or discounts real problems will likely fail, however ideal their model might be.

In order for PAR to work well, it must also be adequately funded and become central to the district's strategy for developing human capital. Each of the programs we studied had tremendous potential to improve teacher quality, but no district's program had fully realized that potential. Some districts could not commit the resources needed to support all new teachers, and some assigned unrealistically large caseloads to consulting teachers, making it impossible for them to give the teachers they served sufficient time and attention.

Sometimes, however, the problem of unrealized potential seemed to be less about scarce resources and more about lack of will. Administrators and teachers in most districts said that despite a well-established PAR program, some weak teachers still were granted tenure and failing veteran teachers still remained on the job. PAR districts typically dismiss higher proportions of tenured teachers than non-PAR districts, but the absolute numbers remain small. In part this reflects the consulting teachers' success in helping teachers improve so that they can move out of Intervention. But it also seemed to reflect everyone's extreme reluctance to move on dismissal, even for probationary teachers.

This reluctance to dismiss teachers known to be failing has many explanations. Public schools do not have a deep pool of strong candidates to replace dismissed teachers and some principals would rather carry on with the teacher they have than be assigned another who might be worse. Principals, however, also are reluctant to experience the discomfort and conflict that dismissal decisions generate, not only from the teacher who is terminated but also from colleagues, students, and parents.

Educating principals about PAR, reducing procedural barriers to referral, training principals about the interpersonal challenges of having these tough conversations, and requiring them to do their job could greatly enhance PAR's value. Other than consulting teachers, principals are probably the least obvious, but most important, players in the PAR Intervention program. Districts that adopt PAR should not assume that peer review will substitute for principals' review, since in the end PAR depends on both consulting teachers and principals for its success.

Recommendations

With these points in mind, we offer the following recommendations for policy and practice:

- Federal and state policymakers should create a context that supports local districts interested in developing PAR by providing planning grants and financial assistance for start-up costs, informing district planners about the legal context of PAR, and making it possible to fund their program from existing grants, such as those that support mentoring or improved teacher evaluation.
- Federal and state policymakers who require local districts to adopt new approaches to teacher evaluation should encourage them to adopt PAR as one component of a coherent human capital strategy.
- Through their education service units, states should assist clusters of districts working together to develop PAR programs and, thus, to share resources and expertise.
- Local policymakers should examine a wide variety of local PAR models rather than adopting one district's plan as a template. Each district's needs are distinct and the program has greater chances of success if it is tailored to fit local circumstances.
- Local policymakers should recognize it takes time—often one to two years—to plan and win support for an effective PAR program. Unrealistic deadlines are more likely to lead to premature failure than to rapid, successful adoption.
- Effective PAR programs depend on having a teacher evaluation system that is rigorous and standards based. A local district without such a system should develop one before trying to introduce PAR.
- The complex work of planning PAR should not be done in traditional negotiations. Labor and management can commit to jointly developing a PAR program and then delegate responsibility for its design to a joint task force. The final PAR plan can then be incorporated into the collective bargaining agreement.
- Principals should be included in planning a local PAR program both to ensure that their concerns will be taken into account and to affirm both for them and their colleagues the central role of principals in making PAR work.

Conclusion

A successful PAR program can have far-reaching benefits for a school district, its students, and its teachers. When expert consulting teachers provide intense, hands-on support for new teachers, those novices are more likely to become effective in the classroom. As a result, these districts will experience higher rates of retention and the organizational stability that comes with it. Unnecessary and costly turnover will likely decrease.

An effective PAR program, however, is not intended to retain all teachers. Rather, it is designed for *selective* retention. Novice teachers who do not deserve to be reappointed can be dismissed in an orderly and even-handed way. In addition, districts will have the capacity and the means to dismiss ineffective tenured teachers who fail to meet the district's standards despite having received expert help and advice. Research has made it clear that students benefit directly when their teachers are skilled and committed to their learning.

Thus, PAR increases the likelihood that students will have the teachers they deserve. It can also promote teacher leadership within and across schools and help districts move beyond traditional adversarial relationships between teachers and administrators. Finally, it can ensure that the school district's efforts to support and evaluate teachers focus on teaching, learning, and the district's instructional standards.

Appendix

Summary details of Peer Assistance and Review programs studied

	Toledo	Cincinnati	Montgomery County	Rochester	San Juan	Minneapolis	Syracuse
Number of schools*	58	79	199	60	80	144	33
Number of teachers*	1,852	2,357	9,371	3,600	2,267	3,250	1,856
Number of students*	30,423	36,872	139,398	34,096	48,325	38,538	22,123
Per pupil spending (current)*	\$10,190	\$11,718	\$12,004	\$13,634	\$7,611	\$11,823	\$13,839
National union affiliate (National Education Association/American Federation of Teachers)	AFT	AFT	NEA	AFT	NEA	NEA/AFT	AFT
Year program began	1981	1985	2001	1987	2000	1997	2005
Program type	Novice, Intervention, Voluntary	Novice, Intervention	Novice, Intervention	Novice, Intervention, Voluntary	Intervention, Voluntary	Novice, Intervention, Voluntary	Novice, Voluntary
Name of CT role	Intern consultants	CT	CT	Mentor	CT	Mentor	CT
Name of PAR Panel	Intern Board of Review	Peer Review Panel	PAR Panel	Career in Teaching Panel	PAR Panel	PAR Panel	PAR Panel
Typical number of CTs per year	10 to 12	15	30 to 40	150 to 200	6	8	6
Length of CT term	3 years	3 years	3 years	2 years	3 years	5 years	3 years
Panel's composition	5 teachers, 4 administrators	5 teachers, 5 administrators	8 teachers, 8 administrators	6 teachers, 6 administrators	4 teachers, 3 administrators	6 teachers, 6 administrators	5 teachers, 4 administrators
Is there a program director?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Is there a lead CT?	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No

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- 8 Cincinnati, OH; Minneapolis, MN; Montgomery County, MD; Rochester, NY; San Juan, CA; Syracuse, NY; and Toledo, OH.
- 9 In many so-called PAR programs, expert teachers offer only assistance and do not formally evaluate their peers.
- 10 For more information, see Harvard Graduate School of Education, "A User's Guide to Peer Assistance and Review," available at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/>.
- 11 Districts have various names for the consulting teacher's role (for example, Intern Consultant, Mentor, Teacher Evaluator).
- 12 Like other elements of PAR, the referral process is determined through collective bargaining.
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- 15 For detailed information on PAR dismissals, visit <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/resources/outcome.html>.
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About the authors

Susan Moore Johnson is the Jerome T. Murphy Professor in Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Since 1998, Johnson has directed The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt>), which focuses on how best to recruit, support, and retain a strong teaching force. Johnson has written extensively about teachers and their work. In 2004, she and her colleagues at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers published a longitudinal study of 50 new Massachusetts teachers, *Finders and Keepers: Helping New Teachers Survive and Thrive in Our Schools*. In 2009, Johnson and John Papay wrote *Redesigning Teacher Pay: A System for the Next Generation of Teachers*, published by Economic Policy Institute.

John P. Papay is an advanced doctoral student in the quantitative policy analysis in education concentration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He is a research assistant with the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers and a graduate fellow at the Center for Education Policy Research. Before entering graduate school, Papay taught high school history. He holds a B.A. in history from Haverford College and an Ed.M. in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His research interests include teacher policy, the economics of education, teacher labor markets, and teachers unions. His work has appeared in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, the *American Educational Research Journal*, and the *Peabody Journal of Education*. He recently co-authored *Redesigning Teacher Pay: A System for the Next Generation of Teachers* with Susan Moore Johnson.

Emily Kalejs Qazilbash is an independent educational researcher and a research affiliate with the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at Harvard University. Her research interests include teachers unions, urban school reform, and policy and practices related to teacher quality. Qazilbash is a co-author of “Leading the local: teachers union presidents chart their own course” in the *Peabody Journal of Education* (2009). A former teacher in Boston and Baltimore, Qazilbash has also directed professional development programs for both new and experienced teachers in the Boston Public Schools. Qazilbash holds an Ed.D. and an Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a B.A. in political and social thought from the University of Virginia.

Sarah E. Fiarman is the principal of the Graham and Parks Alternative Public School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a former National Board Certified Teacher. In her principalship, she draws upon her experiences leading instructional rounds with school and district leaders in Ohio, Iowa, and Cambridge, as well as her work coaching Boston principals and teacher leaders in their use of data to improve instruction. She earned her doctorate in administration, planning, and social policy from the Harvard Graduate School of

Education, where she was a research assistant with the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. She is a co-author of *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (Harvard Education Press, 2009). She is a contributing author to *Data Wise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Harvard Education Press, 2005) and *Data Wise in Action: Stories of Schools Using Data to Improve Teaching and Learning* (Harvard Education Press, 2007). She holds an A.B. from Stanford University and Ed.M.s from Antioch University and Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Mindy Sick Munger is an advanced doctoral student in administration planning and social policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Munger studies teacher policy, teachers unions, and instructional leadership by teachers and principals. She has conducted research on international teacher policy for The Aspen Institute. Currently, she is a research assistant with the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. Munger is a co-author of “Leading the local: teachers union presidents chart their own course” in the *Peabody Journal of Education* (2009). Munger’s career in education includes experience in policy, teaching, and research. Munger served as education policy advisor to Gov. Jim Edgar of Illinois from 1994 to 1997. A former middle school math teacher, Munger has also collaborated with researchers at Harvard’s WIDE program in devising and offering online professional development courses for teachers. Munger is a graduate of Harvard (A.B., 1994) and the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Ed.M., 2001).

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