

Rochester City School District Peer Assistance Review Program

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### Abstract

In this paper the author evaluates the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program in the Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY. The author evaluates the system's strengths and weaknesses and discusses the program's alignment with New York State requirements. The paper addresses the benefits to teachers and the school district that participate in the PAR program. The RCSD PAR program is nationally recognized and serves as a model for all school districts.

It is currently a New York State regulation that all new teachers receive, and successfully complete, mentoring in their first year of teaching. According to the New York State Department of Education, the purpose of the mentoring requirement for teacher certification is “to provide a new teacher with support in order to gain skillfulness and more easily make the transition to one’s first professional teaching experience” (New York State Department of Education, 2010). This statement is similar to one by Jean-Claude Brizzard of the Rochester City School District (RCSD) in his description of his district’s Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program in which he states “...the program links first-year teachers with experienced mentors who familiarize them with the district, enhance their professional skills, and inspire them to be excellent” (Rochester City School District, 2008).

The State’s guidelines for the mentoring programs, as stated by New York State, include, but are not limited to, joint development of the program by school administrators and local teachers’ bargaining agents, focus on mentor/intern relationship that develops over a school year, release time for mentors’ and interns’ professional development, defined mentor selection process and training, activities for mentors and interns, described roles of principals, and evaluation of the program (New York State Department of Education, 2010). The RCSD fulfills most of these requirements through the PAR program. Like any system, it also has aspects of which it can improve upon.

The RCSD PAR program was developed in 1988 cooperatively between the RCSD and the Rochester Teacher’s Association (RTA). The program provides all

newly employed teachers in the district with a Lead Teacher mentor for one full school year. According to the Mentor Handbook for the RCSD, it is ultimately the decision of the Career in Training (CIT) Panel as to the career level status of “new” teachers and their eligibility for the program so there are some instances where teachers do not have to accept a mentor (Rochester City School District, 2008)

The RCSD PAR program has a calendar that defines monthly activities for all mentors and interns such as orientations, needs assessment forms, early warning reports, status reports, panel review of final reports, and a year-end social event. The District has clearly taken steps to fulfill the State’s wishes of a yearlong program that allows a mentor to guide “the new teacher to self-assessment, professional confidence, and independence” (New York State Department of Education, 2010). The layout of the program, as well as the described activities for mentors and interns, is prescribed in a way that each mentor is ensured a yearlong program that allows for self reflection of professional learning but also assesses the intern in a succinct, goal setting way using standards, checklists, and defined needs and positive attributes.

Other aspects of this program that I found to be positive included the 6 days of per diem release time for mentors and interns to be used for the intern’s professional development, a Needs Assessment Form completed by the intern between September and October, and the final evaluation process that I found to be collaborative in nature. The Needs Assessment Form I found interesting because it allowed for self-reflection on the interns part as well as the ability for the mentor to focus activities, materials, and guidance to areas that will be most useful for the

intern. The final evaluation for the RCSD PAR program includes considerations of both the mentor's assessments from the year and the supervisor's evaluations. The CIT Panel makes the final decision for recommendation of continued service based on submitted paperwork and I find that the evaluations throughout the school year allow for continual conversations between mentors, interns, and supervisors. Based on the paperwork that is provided in this program I would find it difficult to believe that any intern reaching the end of the school year without a recommendation for future continued employment would be surprised.

The pieces of the RCSD PAR program that I feel could use improvement are in the mentor selection process, the mentor-intern pairing process, and the role of the principals in the program. Before activation as a mentor teachers must have achieved Lead Teacher status in the district and have passed summer training (Flarman, n.d.). Although the literature suggests that the selection process is competitive, from an internal viewpoint it seems selection of mentors is heavily based on availability and can turn political in nature in some buildings. Mentors take on administrative like supervision responsibilities, and from first hand contact with some mentors as well as conversations with interns who have participated in the program, not all mentors necessarily display the attributes necessary to not only supervise novice teachers but assist in their development as professionals of their own.

Although I have no specific literature on the actual process of pairing mentors and interns my experience in the RCSD is that mentors are assigned to new teachers based on certification area and building location, when possible. The

problem I find with this arrangement is that any mentoring program is highly dependent on the personal relationship that two individuals develop and the trust and respect that follow. Therefore, placement of mentors and interns without personal connection always leaves the possibility of a wide disconnect and I do not see evidence of a consistent way of the district dealing with this. While many interns, as well as national evidence, suggest that the program is highly successful, there are a comparable number of individuals who would tell you that the process is ineffective and more work for a first year teachers..

The principal's role in the mentoring program is not consistent at all throughout the district and sometimes non-existent. I found little evidence in the RCSD Mentor Handbook or the User's Guide to Peer Assistance and Review of any major principal involvement. I believe that the district could improve upon this connection of mentors, interns, and principals, as in the end it will be the teacher and principal that must work alongside each other to develop what is best for the students in their school environment.

The RCSD PAR program has developed into a nationally recognized mentoring program and fulfills many of New York State's mentoring requirements. Having been in place since 1988, the RCSD and the RTA have clearly placed a lot of time into developing a program that they believe serves a function for the betterment of their district, and ultimately their students. While certainly not perfect, I do believe that for a district the size of RCSD, it has done an excellent job in supporting new teachers in a difficult profession through its mentoring program.

## References

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