New Teacher Mentoring and Teacher Retention: Examining the Peer Assistance and Review Program

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Abstract: The first years of teaching can be difficult for some teachers and substantial numbers of them leave the profession early in their careers. This attrition can be detrimental to student academic outcomes and financially damaging to school districts. One solution schools have implemented is peer mentoring teacher induction programs. The Peer Assistance and Review program (PAR) is one such mentoring initiative adopted by a group of schools in a large, urban school district in the Southwestern United States. Administrative data indicate that schools that implemented PAR saw decreases in new teachers leaving and teacher attrition overall.

Key Words: induction, mentoring, teacher attrition, Peer Assistance and Review

The first years of teaching can be difficult. Studies have routinely shown a high attrition rate among teachers in their first five years of teaching (Gray & Taie, 2015; Hafner & Owings, 1991; Ingersoll, 2003). This high teacher turnover can be detrimental to student achievement, especially in schools with high numbers of minority students (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2012). This phenomenon harms students in the lowest performing schools, as the best teachers tend to leave these schools more frequently (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005). This trend is also troubling due to evidence that teachers improve dramatically in their first three to five years of teaching (Attebery, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2015). In addition to the potential influence of teacher turnover on student learning, there are also substantial financial costs to teacher attrition. One published report found that urban school districts face substantial costs to replace each teacher; in two urban, Midwestern districts, these costs have been calculated between \$15,325 and \$17,872 per teacher (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007). Clearly, there are significant challenges for schools and districts that experience high levels of teacher turnover.

One strategy that has been used to address the issue of new teacher attrition and support new teacher practice is teacher mentoring induction programs (Callahan, 2016), which pair a new teacher with an experienced teacher. Research indicates that these induction programs can be effective in retaining new teachers, improving teacher practices, and supporting student learning (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). There is also evidence that the quality of an induction program can be more important than how much time participants spend in the program (LoCasale-Crouch, Davis, Wiens, & Pianta, 2012).

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One example of a mentoring program that is used as an induction program is the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program (Johnson, Papay, Fiarman, Munger, & Qazilbash, 2010). PAR has been shown to reduce the burden of principals and the isolation of teachers (Goldstein & Noguera, 2006). The financial savings and organizational benefits of PAR serve to offset the costs of a program that is perceived as expensive to implement with fidelity (Papay & Johnson, 2012). PAR not only supports the development of new teachers, but also the development of teacher leaders who report satisfaction in their role in PAR (Fiarman, 2009). Principals in PAR schools also reported that PAR supported new teachers better than what the principals could do on their own (Munger, 2012). This study adds to the empirical literature on PAR by examining the ability of one PAR program to meet its own goals of reducing teacher turnover in hard-to-staff schools.

PAR was adopted by a large, urban school district in the southwest United States, with the goal of retaining and supporting new teachers in traditionally hard-to-staff schools, during the 2014-2015 school year (Small, 2014). It was the result of a collaborative relationship between the school district; the teachers union; the administrative and professional-technical employees; and a working group of educators, trustees, and community leaders who worked collaboratively to improve instruction by supporting novice teachers.

This purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which PAR was effective in achieving its goal of reducing new teacher turnover and teacher attrition in hard-to-staff schools. As school districts throughout the country balance strained budgets and the needs of new teachers, the research presented in this study can provide information regarding the efficacy of PAR to retain teachers.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

The PAR program was implemented in a large, urban school district in the Southwestern United States thanks, in part, to money designated to the program from the State legislature. The district, along with partner union organizations, decided to institute PAR in schools that were experiencing the highest levels of teacher turnover and also had low student academic outcomes. In 2016-17 this included twenty-five schools including fifteen elementary schools, two middle schools, and eight high schools that served over 34,000 students combined. In the year prior to PAR implementation these schools were retaining approximately two-thirds of their new teachers from year to year.

Schools included in the PAR program had a higher percentage of students of color and higher percentages of students eligible for free and reduced lunch than the district averages as shown in Table 1 for the 2016-2017 academic year. According to the State's accountability website, these schools serve students who identify as 60% Hispanic, 24% African American, 9% white, 3 % Asian and 4% 2 or more races. Students were largely from low socio-economic backgrounds with 91% of students in these schools eligible for free and reduced lunch. Finally, the participants also indicated that 28% were English Learners, and 14% of students had Individualized Educational Programs.

All teachers who were new to the profession in these schools were included in PAR. The PAR program began in the 2014-2015 academic year. This study examines data from the first three years of the PAR program (2014-2015 through 2016-2017 academic years). As shown in Table 2, new teacher participants ranged from 289 in the first year to 253 in the third year. There were 15

mentor, or consulting teachers (CTs), in the first year, but this number fell to 13 by the third year as shown in Figure 1.

Table 1

PAR School Demographic Characteristics: School Year 2016-17

Name	PAR Schools	All District Schools
Total Enrollment	34194	320523
American Indian / Alaskan Native %	0.62	0.38
Asian %	2.81	6.36
Hispanic %	59.56	46.25
Black %	23.87	13.78
White %	8.67	25.25
Pacific Islander %	1.57	1.58
Two or More Races %	4.24	6.4
IEP %	13.90	12.01
ELL %	27.74	18.28
FRL Eligible %	90.77	69.68

Table 2

PAR Participants by School Type

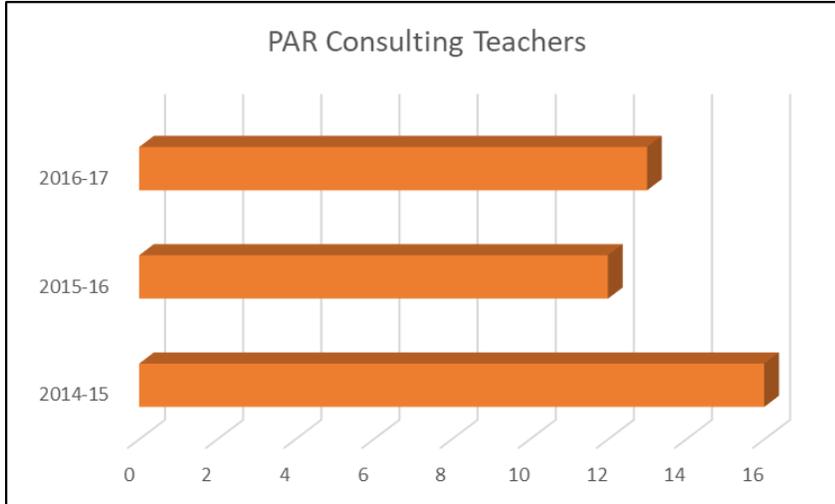|	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
Elementary Schools	140	141	122
Middle Schools	32	22	16
High Schools	117	149	102
Total	289	312	240

Figure 1. PAR Consulting Teachers by school year.

PAR IMPLEMENTATION

As described by Small (2014), the PAR program has two components: the PAR Panel and mentor teachers. The PAR Panel consists of equal numbers of teachers and principals, recommended by their respective employee unions and appointed by the superintendent. Mentor teachers provide direct instructional support to teachers and collect data through formal observations, which are aligned to the state teacher assessment framework. Mentor teachers report three times per year on the progress of the teachers to the PAR Pair, one teacher and one principal who are members of the PAR Panel, assigned to oversee the work of a small group of mentor teachers. The mentor teacher writes a final summative report at the conclusion of the period of support. Based on the data and information gathered through the program, the PAR Panel makes recommendations on whether the new teachers should receive PAR support the following year.

ANALYSIS

In order to address our research goals, we examined administrative data provided by the district. Data consisted of the percent of new hires remaining in the same school following their first year of teaching. We also collected data on the overall transiency rates of schools. All data were collected beginning with the year prior to PAR implementation (2013-2014) and carried through to the third year of PAR (2016-2017). To understand if potential changes in transiency rates were limited to PAR schools we also selected three comparison school zones from within the district based on comparable student characteristics. Details of the demographic comparison between PAR schools and the other school zones can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic Profile of PAR and Comparison School Zones

	Total Enrollment	Asian %	Hispanic %	Black %	White %	Two or More Races %	ELL %	FRL Eligible %
PAR Schools	29722	2.9	58.8	23.9	9.3	4.4	27.6	90.4

Comparison Zone 1	20719	3.8	64.3	13.1	12.2	4.7	27.5	85.7
Comparison Zone 2	21791	4.5	54.5	19.5	14.2	5.1	21.4	81.4
Comparison Zone 3	21112	3.9	72.0	11.2	8.5	2.8	36.9	90.4

RESULTS

First, we examined the rates at which new teachers stayed in their same position within PAR schools. In the year prior to PAR implementation, 69% of new teachers remained in their same PAR school. This rate increased each of the first three years as shown in Figure 3. In 2014-2015, 71% of new teachers remained in their PAR school. In 2015-2016, this number was 74% and in 2016-2017, the number rose to 79% of new teachers staying in their same PAR school.
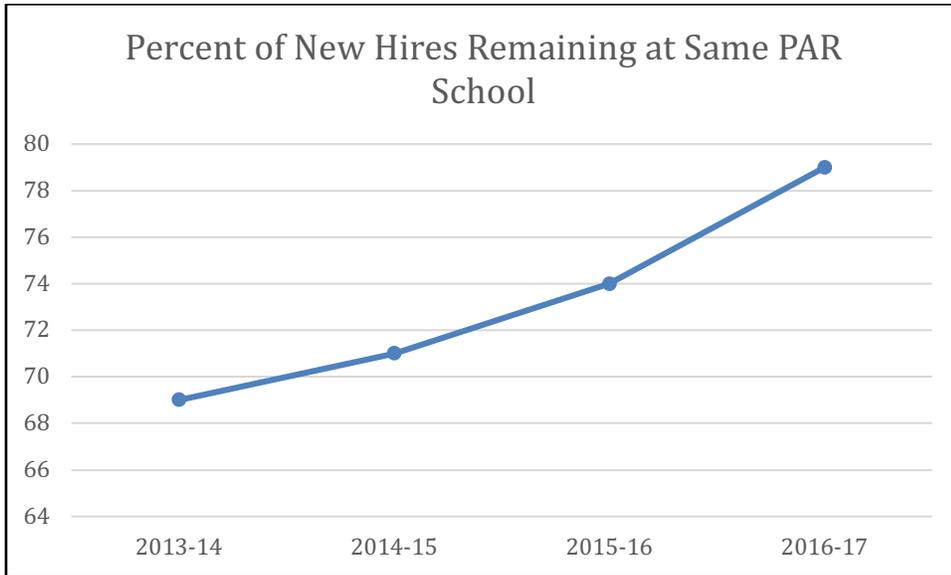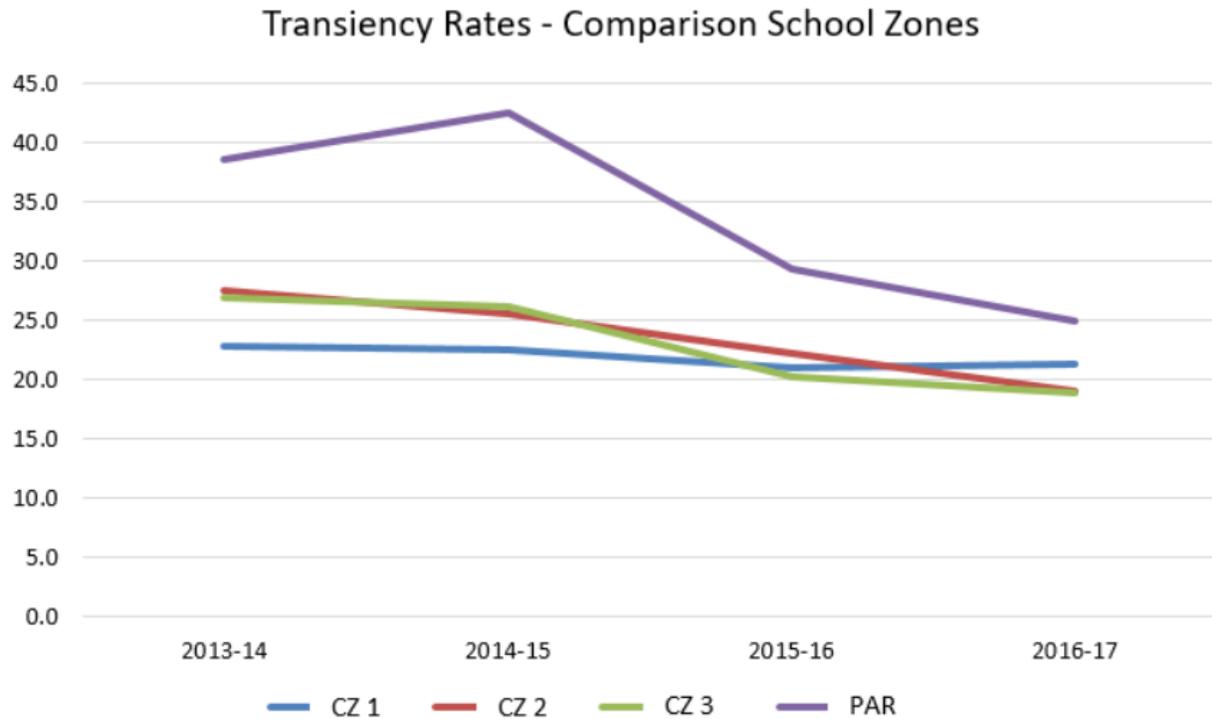

Figure 3: New hires remaining at the same PAR school.

Figure 4: Transiency rates at PAR and comparison schools.

An examination of transiency rates was conducted with demographically similar school zones as comparisons (see Figure 4). Data indicate that transiency rates dropped in all the performance zones; however, the transiency rate in PAR schools dropped by nearly twice the rate of the comparison schools. Data indicate that the transiency rates in PAR schools were higher than the comparison schools in the year prior to PAR implementation. The PAR schools had a transiency rate of 39% while the average transiency rate of the comparison schools was nearly 25%. The transiency rates of the PAR schools from the 2013-2014 through 2016-2017 academic years dropped by 14%. Meanwhile the change in transiency rates of the comparison zones (CZ) are as follows (in descending order): CZ 3: 7.9%; CZ 2: 7.3%; CZ 1: 4.5%. Therefore, PAR schools experienced a drop in transiency rates nearly double that of the next closest school group.

DISCUSSION

One approach to reducing attrition is new teacher induction programs that pair a novice teacher with a mentor teacher (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). The PAR mentoring program builds on previous mentoring models by including a structured evaluator role for the mentor (Johnson et al., 2010). This study examined if the PAR program, as implemented in one Southwestern school district, was effective at reducing new teacher attrition and teacher transiency.

Data from this study did support a connection between participation in PAR and reduced new-teacher attrition. Schools that participated in PAR saw increasing retention rates among new teachers in each of the first three years of the program. When compared to similar demographic schools, PAR schools also experienced a larger drop in the transiency rates of teachers. In fact, PAR schools saw a reduction in transiency rates by nearly double that of the next closest school group.

The apparent success among PAR schools in reducing teacher attrition is important for two reasons. First, research has consistently shown that teachers improve in their influence on student learning in the first three to five years of teaching (Attebery et al., 2015). Teacher turnover has been linked to decreased student learning in high-minority population schools (Boyd et al., 2015; Ronfeldt, et al., 2013) similar to those in this study. Therefore, there are potential educational benefits to the students in the schools where PAR was implemented. The second important aspect of this research is related to the financial impact of PAR implementation. PAR is an expensive mentoring program that required the district to fund the CTs as full time teachers even though they were not teaching students while participating in PAR. Papay and Johnson (2012) examined seven PAR districts and found that the costs of PAR ranged from $3,000 to $10,000 per teacher. However, when compared to the costs of replacing a leaving teacher at over $12,000 (Barnes et al., 2007) there might actually be cost benefits to implementing the PAR program.

CONCLUSION

The data presented in this paper support previous positive findings regarding the PAR program (Fiarman, 2009; Munger, 2012). However there is a need for additional research on the effects of PAR. While promising, PAR evaluations in the future need to focus on the impacts the program may have on student learning. Additional qualitative analysis of participant experiences would also be beneficial. The PAR program continues to be a promising approach to reducing teacher attrition in hard-to-staff schools.

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