

# ASK THE TEAM

By Catherine Jacques

May 2013

## Leveraging Teacher Talent: Peer Observation in Educator Evaluation

### Question From the Field

#### How are states and districts using peer observers as part of educator evaluation systems?

Many of your teachers are already keen observers and skilled in supporting and collaborating with their colleagues. Leveraging this rich talent among your staff can be an efficient way to address capacity challenges and enrich teachers' evaluations with more targeted feedback. Teachers, however, require training to become systematic, reliable observers who can provide growth-oriented, actionable feedback to their peers. In a scan of states and districts, we found two distinct models for peer observation<sup>1</sup> as part of educator evaluation:

- **Peer observers contribute to the performance evaluation for all teachers.** Peer observers are trained on the evaluation process, observation protocols, and how to provide feedback to colleagues. Evidence from peer observations is used as part of the summative performance evaluation for educators, but an administrator determines the final evaluation ratings.
- **Consulting teachers are part of an aligned peer assistance and review (PAR) program for novice and/or struggling teachers.** Peer observers are trained to serve as consulting or mentor teachers. After conducting classroom observations and mentoring the teacher, the consulting teacher presents midyear and end-of-year recommendations for dismissal, retention, or continuation in the PAR program for an additional year.

To actually realize the benefits of peer observation, you need to ensure that it is appropriate for your context and is thoughtfully planned and implemented. We offer the following considerations and examples as a starting point for thinking about this important topic.

<sup>1</sup> Peer observers are different from peer evaluators. A peer **observer** collects observation data and provides feedback to teachers, but, unlike a peer **evaluator**, an administrator is responsible for determining the teacher's final evaluation score.

## 1. CONSIDER THE TRADE-OFFS Is Peer Observation Right for Us?

Considering peer observation requires that you carefully weigh the benefits and the challenges associated with implementing the process within your own state or district. The following are known trade-offs to consider when thinking about peer observation.

### Benefits

- **Reduces the burden on principals while retaining frequent teacher observations.** The Measures of Effective Teaching project found that having more observers and more observations increased the reliability of performance ratings (Ho & Kane, 2013). For many districts, however, it is difficult for principals to find adequate time for conducting multiple observations during the course of a school year while balancing their other job responsibilities. Using trained and certified peer observers can allow for more frequent observation from multiple observers without overburdening administrators. This approach can lessen the time burden for principals, particularly in schools with large numbers of teachers.
- **Enhances evaluator credibility by matching teachers and observers with similar content area or grade-level expertise.** Peer observers who evaluate teachers who share their specializations will learn to recognize common classroom challenges and practices specific to a teacher's content area or grade level. Likewise, teachers value opportunities to engage in professional conversations about their instructional practices with other similarly qualified educators, including opportunities for overall improvement and ways to address the specific needs and challenges of individual students.
- **Offers new opportunities for teacher leadership and alternative career paths.** The current status quo in the teaching profession offers teachers a limited range of options for career advancement and leadership opportunities. Creating peer observer roles enables teachers to develop expertise in evaluation, the district's instructional framework, and how to provide feedback to colleagues. Trained peer observers also frequently find that serving as an observer informs and strengthens their own instructional practices.

### Challenges

- **Calculate the cost.** Peer observers need release time and classroom coverage, which requires carefully distributing both human and financial resources. Training—including calibration and retraining—is an essential component of implementing a quality peer observation system with fidelity. These costs, along with the long-term sustainability of the program, must be considered.
- **Define and communicate roles.** As a relatively new position, clearly defining the peer observer's purpose, role, and responsibilities is a critical task. The observer selection process, required training, workload, and job expectations must be negotiated in district labor agreements and should be understood by all staff.

#### Food for Thought

- In District of Columbia Public Schools, each peer observer is estimated to cost approximately \$1,500 per evaluated teacher.
- In Hillsborough County Public Schools (Florida), peer observers cost approximately \$1,125 per evaluated teacher. Mentors, who play an extensive support role, cost approximately \$4,320 per evaluated teacher.

- **Demonstrate peer observers' accuracy and reliability.** Teachers must know that peer observers were selected through a rigorous process, have completed high-quality training, are regularly monitored, and have opportunities for recalibration. Without these assurances, teachers are unlikely to trust the objectivity of peer observers and/or the feedback received. Plan ahead to ensure that (1) this training is provided and (2) the qualifications of peer observers are demonstrated to all staff.

## 2. DECIDE ON ROLES

### What Kind of Peer Observers?

Peer observers can take on a wide range of roles within an evaluation system. For example, peer observers may do the following:

- Contribute to both support and evaluation or only evaluation.
- Conduct either informal or formal observations.
- Gather evidence on either some or all aspects of instructional practices.
- Conduct some or all observations.
- Work exclusively in one school or across a district.
- Work with specific types of teachers (e.g., specific grades or subjects, experienced, novice, or struggling) or all teachers generally.
- Serve as either part-time or full-time peer observers.

#### Tip

Consider district size when defining the roles of peer observers.

- Smaller districts may need peer observers to continue teaching in the classroom.
- Larger districts may want teachers to serve solely as observers and support staff for a set period of time.

In determining the roles that peer observers should have, districts need to consider not only the financial costs of peer observation but also human resource implications, district size, staffing structures, and existing evaluator training and support.

#### District Spotlight

Hillsborough County Public Schools uses peer observers and mentors to conduct formal observations of teacher practice. Teachers are observed between three and 11 times per year depending on their status and their previous rating. Peer observers and mentors conduct the majority of observations for novice and/or struggling teachers.

- **Roles.** Peer observers are classroom teachers who contribute to performance evaluations for at least one year. Mentors are classroom teachers who serve in a mentoring or coaching role for novice and/or struggling teachers in the district. Mentors also can provide reliability checks by dual-coding observations and convening workgroups to share best practices.
- **Training.** All peer observers receive full training, must pass a certification exam, and must demonstrate reliability across time through recalibration exercises.
- **Workload.** Peer observers work full time conducting observations and providing teachers with feedback; however, mentors spend approximately 10 percent of their time contributing to performance evaluations.
- **Specialization matching.** Although peer observers and mentors are not assigned to solely observe teachers of specific grades or content areas, the district provides training to align curriculum and evaluation efforts across different schools.

Source: *Teacher Evaluation Handbook: Empowering Effective Teachers* (<http://www.fldoe.org/profdev/pdf/pa/Hillsborough.pdf>)

### 3. SELECT AND PREPARE

#### Who Should Be a Peer Observer?

The success of a peer observation system depends heavily on two factors: (1) the selection process for identifying peer observers and (2) the training provided to teachers who are selected as peer observers. Teachers who are strong candidates for peer observation roles should have the following characteristics:

- Demonstrate consistently high effectiveness ratings, especially in instructional practices.
- Maintain positive relationships with other educators in a school.
- Participate in schoolwide support and collaboration opportunities.

Candidates for peer observation roles often independently apply for the position several months to a year prior to taking on the role as a peer observer and spend substantial time completing specialized training prior to conducting observations. Training culminates in a prequalification or certification test that demonstrates a peer observer's reliability and accuracy in scoring. Reliability checks and recalibration opportunities are provided several times per year (or annually at a minimum).

#### Tip

Peer observer training should include the following topics:

- Observation procedures, including timeline, caseload, and data security
- Data collection rubrics and scoring
- Consistency, accuracy, and fairness in scoring
- Curriculum and standards for teachers being observed
- Professional interactions and strategies for collaboratively discussing instructional practices with teachers

#### District Spotlight

Escambia County Public School's (Florida) PAR program, Successful Teachers Assisting Rising Teachers, which also is known as START, is fully aligned with its performance evaluation system and uses a rigorous, multistage process to recruit and select consulting teachers. Consulting teachers work full time to conduct observations and provide feedback on all aspects of the performance evaluation, including student performance, with the exception of the professional responsibilities domain of the practice component. To ensure that a consulting teacher is an actual peer observer, not a quasi-administrator, teachers can serve as a consulting teacher for a maximum of five years only (not necessarily continuously) over the course of their careers. In addition, the district guarantees that the teacher can return to the same teaching assignment he or she left when activated to serve as a consulting teacher.

#### The Consulting Teacher Selection Process

- **Recruitment.** In December, district leaders give presentations in schools to explain the PAR program, the job of a consulting teacher, and the necessary qualities and skills expected in the role. A current consulting teacher shares his or her experiences and challenges in the role and is available to answer candidates' questions during each presentation.

#### Food for Thought

"For the process to be viewed as valid and fair, you need to identify the right people to serve as consultant teachers. They need to be outstanding teachers, highly respected among their peers, and already serving as teacher leaders. Most importantly, they need the capacity and passion to coach, mentor, and evaluate novice teachers and have hard, honest conversations with their peers."

—Dr. Karen Owen,  
Escambia County School District

- **Application process.** Candidates complete an application and obtain a letter of recommendation from their principal and their building’s union representative. The candidate asks two colleagues to complete a survey about his or her abilities as a teacher, peer, and colleague and his or her contributions to the school. To encourage the staff to be candid, all recommendation letters and survey responses are collected anonymously.
- **Candidate selection process.** A joint team of district and union representatives reviews all of the applications and selects the final candidates according to the following process:
  - **First stage.** After reviewing and scoring applications, recommendations, and peer survey responses, the joint team decides which applicants move on to the next stage.
  - **Second stage.** The applicant’s principal and building representative each select two staff members to complete surveys about the applicant’s communication, teamwork, and instructional skills. The surveys are used to generate applicant ratings, which the joint team combines with ratings from the first stage to make another cut.
  - **Third stage.** The joint team carries out unannounced classroom observations and rates the performance of each applicant using the district’s evaluation framework. Usually, one district representative and one union representative complete the observation as a pair. The joint team reviews all of the information collected as well as the district’s grade-level and specialization needs relative to the remaining applicant pool. The joint team requires a consensus agreement on each applicant selected for the interview.
  - **Fourth stage.** The joint team conducts an in-person interview with each remaining applicant.
    - **Performance task.** The applicant watches a short classroom video of a second-year teacher and takes notes on the teacher’s strengths and areas for improvement. During the interview, the applicant is asked to demonstrate how he or she would conference with the teacher in the video and provide feedback on performance. After the interview concludes, the joint team collects the applicant’s observation notes and compares them with the master scorer’s notes for the same video.
    - **Interview questions.** In addition to the performance task, the joint team asks the applicant a series of questions that assess the applicant’s skill and passion for coaching and mentoring.
- After all of the interviews have been completed (usually in early April), the joint team reviews all of the information gathered on each remaining applicant and reaches a consensus decision on which applicants to select as consulting teachers. Successful applicants receive extensive training and are then included in the district’s pool of consulting teachers. Each year, depending on subject-area and grade-level needs, teachers are activated from the pool to serve as full-time consulting teachers.

Sources: *Interview with Dr. Karen Owen, director of staff development, Escambia County School District, on April 16, 2013; and The Professional Learning Department: Additional E3/START Information—START Update Presentation* (<http://ecsd-fl.schoolloop.com/pl>)

## 4. ALIGN EXISTING PROGRAMS

### Already Have a PAR Program?

PAR programs are professional induction and support systems that are jointly controlled by the local union and district administrators. (For more details on PAR programs, see the Bonus Resources in the I Want to Know More! section at the end of the document.) Some districts have opted to align their existing PAR programs with their performance evaluation systems, although this is not a universal practice. Aligning a district PAR program (or similar mentoring or induction program) to performance evaluations can help support novice teachers in becoming proficient and provide remediation for teachers who need to improve. Consider the following strategies for ensuring smooth alignment:

- Establish a formal process for sharing formative and summative feedback based on the same professional practice standards that are used in the performance evaluation system.
- Clearly outline and communicate the intersection between the PAR program and the districtwide performance evaluation process. Alignment options include the following:
  - Observations conducted and evidence gathered through the PAR program also may count toward performance evaluations (which can reduce the burden on evaluators).
  - Novice teachers may be exempt from summative performance evaluations until they successfully exit the PAR program.
  - Struggling teachers may be identified for participation in the PAR program based on their performance evaluation results.



Montgomery County Public Schools' (Maryland) PAR program is fully aligned with the district's performance evaluation system. All novice teachers participate in the PAR program. Experienced teachers who receive an unsatisfactory overall rating also participate in the PAR program, if after review the need for assistance is confirmed. Teachers participating in the PAR program undergo the PAR process alongside the district's full performance evaluation process; however, evidence gathered for performance evaluations also may be used to help provide feedback and assistance to teachers.

- **Role.** Consulting teachers are on leave from the classroom for three years to mentor, coach, and evaluate their colleagues.
- **Training.** Each consulting teacher completes a 36-hour course to develop reliable and accurate observation skills as well as meaningfully engage teachers and provide feedback on their instructional practices.
- **Workload.** Consulting teachers support a caseload of approximately 18 teachers each year and support the teachers in multiple ways, including formal and informal observation; written and verbal feedback; and coaching, modeling, and coteaching.

Sources: *Taking Teacher Quality Seriously: A Collaborative Approach to Teacher Evaluation* (<http://www.mceanea.org/pdf/TQ.pdf>) and *MCEA/MCPS Peer Assistance & Review Program: Teachers Guide to the Peer Assistance & Review Program and the Teacher Evaluation System* (<http://www.mceanea.org/pdf/PAR2011.pdf>)



## I WANT TO KNOW MORE!

### Bonus Resources

Goldstein, J. (2007). Easy to dance to: Solving the problems of teacher evaluation with peer assistance and review. *American Journal of Education*, 113(3), 479–508. Retrieved from <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/racetothetop/pdf/par-goldstein-2007.pdf>

Harvard Graduate School of Education. (2012). *A user's guide to peer assistance and review*. Cambridge, MA: Author. Retrieved from [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/resources/users\\_guide\\_to\\_par.pdf](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/resources/users_guide_to_par.pdf)

Ho, A. D., & Kane, T. J. (2013). *The reliability of classroom observations by school personnel* (MET Project Research Paper). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from [http://www.metproject.org/downloads/MET\\_Reliability\\_of\\_Classroom\\_Observations\\_Research\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.metproject.org/downloads/MET_Reliability_of_Classroom_Observations_Research_Paper.pdf)

Johnson, S. M., & Fiarman, S. E. (2012, November). The potential of peer review. *Educational Leadership*, 70(3), 20–25. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov12/vol70/num03/The-Potential-of-Peer-Review.aspx>

Johnson, S. M., Papay, J. P., Fiarman, S. E., Munger, M. S., & Qazilbash, E. K. (2010). *Teacher to teacher: Realizing the potential of peer assistance and review*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/05/pdf/par.pdf>

Papay, J. P., & Johnson, J. M. (2011). *Is PAR a good investment? Understanding the costs and benefits of teacher peer assistance and review programs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/new\\_papers/PAR%20Costs%20and%20Benefits%20-%20January%202011.pdf](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/new_papers/PAR%20Costs%20and%20Benefits%20-%20January%202011.pdf)

Papay, J. P., Johnson, J. M., Fiarman, S. E., Munger, M. S., & Qazilbash, E. K. (2009, April). *Beyond dollars and cents: The costs and benefits of teacher peer assistance and review*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego. Retrieved from [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/new\\_papers/JPP\\_AERA\\_2009.pdf](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/new_papers/JPP_AERA_2009.pdf)

**For more examples or information on this topic**, please e-mail [gtlcenter@air.org](mailto:gtlcenter@air.org).

**Catherine Jacques** is a research associate at American Institutes for Research and provides technical assistance for the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.