



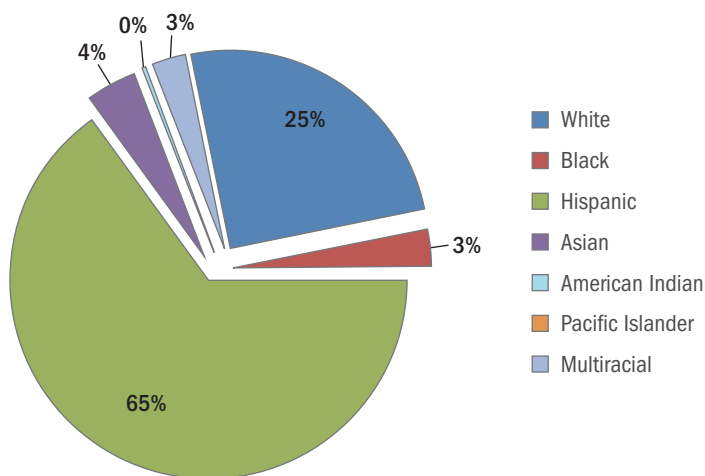
Peer Evaluation in Bensenville

“It is All About Communication and Support”

Introducing Bensenville

Bensenville Elementary School District 2 serves approximately 2,248 students in prekindergarten through eighth grade with three school buildings and one administration center. The district includes the town of Bensenville and portions of Wood Dale and Addison—a string of suburbs within earshot of Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. The district’s population includes 62 percent low-income families and 33 percent of students who are limited English proficient. The district also has a high percentage of students from Hispanic backgrounds, nearly 65 percent of the student population (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Bensenville School District 2 Student Demographics¹



In the last few years, the district has faced many challenges. For instance, population changes have created a more diverse student body. These demographic changes coupled with new state and federal accountability requirements (e.g., Common Core State Standards, a new evaluation system, continuous improvement using the Rising Star platform) have Bensenville teachers and staff working hard to meet these challenges while maintaining the high level of student learning and support in their district.

Peer Evaluation: The Bensenville Way

The Peer Evaluation Initiative in Bensenville, which is part of the district’s Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program, is guided by several principles:

- A sound evaluation system reflects a set of core convictions about effective instruction and learning.
- Appropriate and timely feedback between the teacher and evaluator drives ongoing teacher development.
- Teachers contribute to student learning in numerous ways that can be observed and measured.
- A teacher’s primary professional responsibility is to ensure that students learn and progress.
- Children can complete academically rigorous work regardless of socioeconomic status and language barriers.

¹ See <http://www.bsd2.org/index.aspx?NID=7>



Although many educational initiatives have been implemented to improve student performance, Bensenville teachers, administrators, and staff have enthusiastically embraced the district's Peer Assistant and Review Program (PAR), which includes a Peer Evaluation Initiative. Because it is a Race to the Top (RttT) district, Bensenville leads other districts in implementing key initiatives aimed at improving school performance and student achievement. More comprehensive principal and teacher evaluations that tie student growth to teachers' reviews are chief among the state initiatives. These evaluations comprise one part of a much broader effort within schools and districts to create PAR programs that combine evaluations with multiple supports such as peer mentoring to ensure that teachers are prepared for more rigorous standards of teaching and learning.

In this issue, the Midwest Comprehensive Center at American Institutes for Research describes Bensenville's path to implementing a new peer evaluation initiative as part of a revamped PAR program. PAR is not a particularly new approach to improving teaching and learning. Schools and districts have developed and implemented PAR programs with peer evaluation components since the early 1980s while states such as California have passed legislation requiring PAR programs in all public school districts since the late 1990s.² But PAR programs can vary, with each district developing peer assistance and teacher evaluation to meet their specific needs while adhering to state or local policies. Speaking with Bensenville teachers and staff, and observing the peer evaluation process in action, reveals some helpful insights about peer evaluation for other districts in Illinois interested in revamping their own PAR programs. In Bensenville, the journey to develop and implement a PAR program with a new peer evaluation component highlights the importance of two elements: communication and support.³

In Bensenville, the guiding principles for the peer evaluation initiative are as follows:

- A sound evaluation system reflects a set of core convictions about effective instruction and learning.
- Appropriate and timely feedback between the teacher and evaluator drives ongoing teacher development.
- Teachers contribute to student learning in numerous ways that can be observed and measured.
- A teacher's primary professional responsibility is to ensure that students learn and progress.
- Children can complete academically rigorous work regardless of socioeconomic status and language barriers.

These principles have been used to create a PAR program with a peer evaluation component that gives teachers multiple opportunities for feedback on their instruction over the course of the year. Driving this program are two full-time consulting teachers who agreed to leave the classroom for two years to take on this role. They bring not only the latest educator techniques from national training workshops but also their own experiences as highly effective and respected teachers in the district. With such devoted staff, peer evaluation in Bensenville is *not* a one-time event. Rather, it is an ongoing process that occurs in a supportive relationship between teachers and consulting teachers in Bensenville.



The district's Peer Evaluation Initiative incorporates many types of data to inform a teacher's instructional practice, including teachers setting professional goals, consulting teachers conducting formal and informal classroom observations, and the analysis of student data. In this three-step process, beginning in the fall, the consulting teacher and teacher have a conference to discuss and complete goal setting for the academic year and self-reflection. Next, at the midyear point, informal classroom observations are conducted and a review of student data is completed, where the educator is asked to reflect on the student data collected and revisit the goals set earlier in the year. The third and final step in this process involves an end-of-

² Additional information on the history of PAR and an overview of PAR components can be found at <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/parinfo/>

³ The Midwest Comprehensive Center (MWCC) at American Institutes for Research was launched in October 2012 under a five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education. MWCC provides technical assistance to the state education agencies (SEAs) of Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, with a focus on building the capacity of the SEA to support districts and schools to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for college or a career. Technical assistance is tailored to each state's individual needs while also being aligned to the priorities of the U.S. Department of Education. Additional information on MWCC work can be found at <http://midwest-cc.org/>.

year conference where the educator and consulting teacher have another opportunity to self-reflect on the year and revisit goals, seeing instruction as a skill that needs to be continuously assessed.

At all three steps of the peer evaluation process, teachers are provided opportunities for ongoing professional development in order to meet goals or address particular issues that become apparent during the peer evaluation process. Consulting teachers provide teachers with relevant materials or, in some instances, conduct training through “model classroom” activities that demonstrate new learning or support techniques for teachers. Weekly meetings and “drop-in” visits by consulting teachers help to reinforce new techniques or address ongoing issues, with consulting teachers encouraging teachers to, in the words of one consulting teacher, “reach out to us whenever...on the phone, email, or even a text if they need help.”

Consulting teachers, teachers, and staff at Bensenville all agree that this relationship-based structure for evaluation cannot be implemented without support from all those involved. But how did Bensenville manage to build such support among staff and teachers? The answer from staff and teachers alike: communication.

Implementing Peer Evaluation: A Focus on Communication

Teachers, administrators, and principals all agree that communication has been a vital element in successfully implementing peer evaluation in their district. Communication comes in multiple forms—from meetings to e-mails, casual conversations to more formal correspondence—and occurs between multiple parties—such as administrators and staff, teachers and consulting teachers, and principals and administrators.

Bensenville’s focus on communication began in the early stages of peer evaluation implementation. E-mails detailing the peer evaluation program, including information on the peer evaluation process and consulting teacher roles, were sent to teachers and staff the summer before implementation. At the same time, meetings before the start of the school year were held to provide additional information on the PAR process, consulting teacher roles, and what should be expected once the school year starts. This early information was crucial according to teachers interviewed. “[The meetings] really helped us understand the logistics about how the PAR program was going to be put in place...there weren’t really any surprises once everything started.” Likewise, for some administrative staff, communicating the peer evaluation program early and in multiple formats helped to reduce some of the anxiety that some teachers might have had given the eventual “high-stakes” nature of peer evaluation and its future role in determining teacher performance. With “lots of communication” about what to expect, teachers “never feel threatened about their job and self-performance... there’s a positive relationship that is built.”

Early communication is important to the successful introduction of a new program, but ongoing communication is critical to successful implementation. Bensenville administrators and school principals work to keep multiple lines of communication open with teachers regarding peer evaluation, informing teachers of any changes to the initiative or new milestones in the initiative’s implementation. These lines of communication—from more formal lines established through weekly PAR team meetings to more informal lines established by e-mail and phone conversations between consulting teachers and teachers—also are important for administrators seeking to better understand how teachers are embracing the new initiative or changes to existing structures.

As Bensenville administrators worked to communicate the expectations of peer evaluation to district and school staff, they also worked to communicate the goals of peer evaluation to teachers. In Bensenville, the need for peer evaluation was framed both as an expectation (that is, as an RttT district required to implement peer evaluation) as well as a district goal of teacher development. Communication from leadership was important in establishing “buy-in” from teachers and their representatives who came to see peer evaluation as a positive tool to better their skills as teachers and learners.

Communication is, as one principal mentioned, “about keeping school staff informed about what is going on and how schools can support student learning.” But communication also is about gaining the confidence of all stakeholders that peer evaluation was needed, not as a way to monitor teachers but rather as a tool to support teachers to be “the best they can be.” In Bensenville, as one administrator put it, “Communication is key.”

“We want to blur the lines between administration and staff,” according to one administrator, so that the PAR program is seen through the lens of partnership and mutual collaboration rather than a lens of “us [administrators] versus them [teachers].”

For many administrators and teachers in Bensenville, the term “peer evaluation” is somewhat inaccurate. “It’s not so much about evaluation,” as one teacher explained, “as it is about support”:

People rarely hear the term “evaluate” at all because it’s all about support. Sure, formal observations are a part of it...but it’s really about support. And I don’t hear any flack about, “Awwww, I can’t believe this person is evaluating me.” Whereas last year, we were hearing some apprehension about what the district was looking at, I have heard ‘no one’ complain about this.

This shift from evaluation to support was a key part of Bensenville’s implementation plan. “Our plan” for peer evaluation, according to another district official, “was much more about growth and was not punitive...it’s our obligation to give critical, descriptive feedback to help [our] teachers grow. We set this expectation of what we think effective teaching is...then we provide the scaffold to do this.”

Much of the scaffold or support provided, especially for first-year teachers, comes directly from the district’s consulting teachers. Consulting teachers provide informal feedback through regular classroom visits, conduct demonstration or “model” classes or curricula to help teachers build new skills, and position themselves as advocates for new teachers by encouraging open communication. Additional support from school principals as well as teacher mentors assigned to first-year teachers ensures that there are multiple “layers” of support to help new teachers adjust to what one teacher described as “the things they don’t teach you in college...such as effective classroom management.”

What’s more, for administrators in Bensenville, the culture of support being fostered between teachers and consulting teachers has played a large role in establishing buy-in for the peer evaluation program:

Nothing is more key than peer-to-peer. All the research suggests this. If students learning from other students is one of the highest mechanisms for learning, then we need that with our teachers. There is nothing more important than this. It gets to the essence of how adults learn. If we’re going to have a learning organization, we need to be in sync. It’s very helpful.

According to one principal, “The teachers wouldn’t be as successful as they are without the consulting teacher. I can see growth in the first year teachers—they’re becoming more confident, addressing former problem areas because of the work with the consulting teachers.” This supportive relationship—in addition to other supports for teachers such as professional development sessions known as “Bensenville University”—has helped teachers embrace the more evaluative elements of Bensenville’s PAR program as teachers see peer evaluation as more of an opportunity for improvement rather than a chance “to get into trouble.”

Even so, it is important to note that peer evaluation in Bensenville is in the early stages of evaluation. Formal evaluations have recently been conducted for first-year teachers using the new program evaluation model, and the district has recently begun implementing the peer evaluation initiative for veteran teachers. Administrators acknowledge that the relationship between consulting teachers and teachers being consulted may change as the stakes get higher and evaluations become a more formal element of teacher performance ratings. Administrators also admit that winning over veteran teachers has taken “slightly more time” than first-year teachers. However, administrators and teachers continue to express enthusiasm for the program overall, stressing that a focus on communicating peer evaluation as another layer of support has helped frame the evaluative element of peer evaluation in a more positive and productive light.

Policy in Action

In late October, Midwest Comprehensive Center researchers spent a day with the two Bensenville consulting teachers to shadow them during a “typical day” in their support roles. During this day of observation, the researchers saw first-hand that this district’s approach to peer evaluation and professional development is highly differentiated for each individual educator. The consulting teachers are ready to assist their colleagues in any way to support them in meeting the needs of students in the district. For instance, at the beginning of the day, a consulting teacher may be preparing curricular materials and supplies for a math center activity in a first-grade classroom; in the next hour, she may be conducting a language assessment with a third-grade English language learner. In other words, the day observing consulting teachers showed that they are ready to support their peers to meet the diverse, individual student needs found in this district.

The Bensenville Way: Lessons Learned



What can others learn from Bensenville about implementing peer evaluation in their own districts? Staff shared many pieces of advice, with an emphasis on communication, shared vision, and finances.

First, as mentioned previously, communication is key. Keeping consulting teachers and school staff informed about what is going on and how the school can help support teachers is vital to increased collaboration. Districts could consider providing as much information as possible to staff ahead of time to help foster positive relationships. Communication can take multiple forms and is not simply a “one-way street” from district to schools to teachers. Communication and collaboration go hand in hand.

Second, selecting consulting teachers are critical to a successful peer evaluation component of a PAR program. In Bensenville, consulting teachers are nominated by district staff and are selected on a competitive basis. They have a history of excellence in the classroom and also a strong rapport with other teachers in the district—two characteristics that district staff mentioned were very important in their selection process. What’s more, consulting teachers in Bensenville are “pulled” from their classroom duties to support the PAR program full-time, enabling them to focus all of their efforts on supporting teachers through the peer evaluation process and other PAR initiatives (e.g. classroom modeling, curriculum development meetings with individual teachers).

Third, successful peer evaluation implementation requires a shared vision. Districts might make sure that principals and consulting teachers are working together, in partnership with a shared vision. There are always “gray areas,” but it is best to be on the same page. Documents that convey this shared message, such as a peer evaluation handbook, are important, but so too are “indirect” actions that help to foster a culture of change within the district and a sense that everyone is working toward the same broad goal of student improvement.

Finally, school and district finances might need to be taken into consideration when implementing new peer evaluation procedures or systems. Peer evaluation can require an increase or redirection of resources. In Bensenville, five teachers were trained to go through the evaluation process during the first year. The district’s dream is to add more teachers next year but, as officials admitted, some tough decisions need to be made concerning finances to make the initiative a reality.

Other RttT districts may find useful lessons from Bensenville’s experience. A detailed plan focused on proactive and continuous communication has proven successful in implementing a peer evaluation initiative that emphasizes the elements of support—rather than evaluation—that are available to teachers as part of formal evaluation requirements. Bensenville has been able to garner strong buy-in from all stakeholders as it continues to monitor, refine, and roll out its PAR program. It’s an encouraging start and an enthusiastic effort to continually provide the best teaching and learning possible to a quickly changing group of students and a diverse community.

This work was originally produced in whole or in part by the Midwest Comprehensive Center at American Institutes for Research with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under cooperative agreement number S283B120020. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the federal government, the Midwest Comprehensive Center, or American Institutes for Research.