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Is Peer Review an Effective Approach for Evaluating Teachers?

DAVID KUMROW and BECKY DAHLEN

Educational reform experts have argued for the past 15 years that to improve educational outcomes, teachers must have more control over their practice (Chase 1997; Harrington-Lueker 1997). Clearly, there is a need to change the traditional evaluative process that treats teachers as supervised workers rather than collegial professionals. The collegial peer review model may be the means. In this article we examine several aspects of peer review, including process, purpose, effectiveness, financial implications, and the future of peer review programs, and present case study.

Politics and Peer Review

Teacher unions have faced increased public criticism in recent years over their failure to address teacher incompetence in the classroom. In this context, teacher unions are moving from the industrial model to a more professional model of unionism. This recent shift embraces professional development and better reflects the complexity of teaching.

The two largest teacher unions in the United States, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), have recognized the need for professional development among teachers and have supported efforts to reframe teacher evaluation procedures. Peer review for nontenured teachers and intervention for tenured teachers whose performance is substandard have been proposed as ways to improve the evaluative process and, therefore, educational outcomes (Chase 1998).

The recent passage of California Bill AB 1X, requiring implementation of Peer Assistance and Review Programs (PAR) statewide validates the timeliness of the topic of teacher evaluation. Additionally, President

Bush's educational agenda, to ensure that "No Child Is Left Behind," promotes innovative programs such as peer review to improve teacher quality. The California measure is the first to mandate implementation of a formal peer review program. Although it technically would be voluntary, school districts could forfeit cost-of-living increases in state funds if they do not participate in the peer review process. School districts and teacher unions across the nation will watch how this mandate plays out in a populous state with hundreds of school districts and five million school aged children (Cornwell 1999).

Peer Assistance and Review (PAR)

Peterson (1995) defined peer review as a process or system for the evaluation of teacher performance by a peer or colleagues. A key element of the PAR process is that both the reviewer and the person under review (who are from different schools or work sites) have similar levels of knowledge and expertise about the subject being taught and the art of teaching. Therefore, the method for providing constructive feedback for the improvement of educational performance is objective. A formal PAR program provides educators with the vehicle to define, measure, and support good teaching and to make important decisions about discharging colleagues whose performance is substandard (Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres 1998).

Peer review is more extensive than the more common administrative evaluation. A typical administrative review is generally conducted over the span of only a few hours each semester, allowing little time for constructive dialogue between the reviewer and teacher being reviewed. The PAR process, on the other hand

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ideally involves longer, more intense interaction (Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres 1997).

The Process

Ideally, PAR systems are developed using a mixture of both summative and formative evaluation processes (Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres 1997). Summative methods presently comprise 65 percent of teacher evaluation systems throughout the nation's school districts (McGreal 1983). Evaluative systems are commonly defined by state law and/or collective bargaining agreements between teachers and school districts (Stiggins 1986). Typically, the process includes a pre-observation conference between the teacher and the evaluator, followed by classroom observation(s) by the evaluator. A subsequent meeting is held to review and discuss the results of the evaluation with the teacher (Manning 1988).

PAR programs are equally concerned with a teacher's professional development (Haefele 1993). The formative evaluation process includes peer observation and mentoring and pinpoints strengths and weaknesses of teachers so that remedial training can be implemented. (Nevo 1994).

The Purpose

According to Lieberman (1998a), peer review has three general purposes. First, the process provides concrete, objective data regarding the renewal of teaching contracts for first-year teachers. Second, it provides information regarding the performance of tenured teachers. Finally, the peer review process may identify the need for assistance and mentoring without negative implications or punitive measures.

Potential Benefits of PAR

There are several perceived pedagogic benefits (Manning 1988) to peer review. For example, the number and quality of classroom observations exponentially increases with the implementation of a formal PAR program. Improved instruction becomes the primary focus. Also, reviewers gain trust, promoting collaboration to improve teaching techniques and methods. Peer review can also promote the modeling of appropriate teaching practices from observer to those being observed. Finally, peer review benefits the observers, because they also learn from observing other teachers.

Fiscal Effect of Peer Review

Peer review programs are more expensive than the conventional or administratively driven evaluation procedure practiced in the majority of schools in the United States today. Often, the impact on the budget is overlooked by unions and school boards. Failure to develop a sound budgetary plan for any peer review program can result in its demise (Birk 1994).

Costs of a peer review program include overhead (such as clerical, computer hardware, and software) and salary expenditures as well as fringe benefits for consulting teachers, administrators, and union members who serve on the governing board of the PAR program (Lieberman 1998b). By far, the major cost of peer review is salary and fringe benefits for consulting teachers who serve as reviewers. Ideally, the most experienced teachers should be recruited as reviewers; however, senior teachers tend to be the highest paid in the district.

Review of Selected Literature

Teachers must have a positive attitude and demonstrate support if a peer review program is to be a success. Peer review in any form exists in relatively few school districts across the nation, and only recently have teacher unions supported it. Few qualitative and quantitative studies exist regarding teacher attitudes toward PAR programs.

Bodenhausen (1990) studied attitudes toward peer evaluation and the reasons behind them among teachers represented by two of the state's largest teacher unions; the NEA-affiliated California Teachers Association (CTA) and the AFT-affiliated California Federation of Teachers (CFT). Bodenhausen interviewed 15 teachers from each of six California school districts. The study reported that the teachers surveyed basically agreed with the positions of their organizations, with teachers in CTA districts less receptive to peer evaluation than those in CFT districts. The majority of the teachers who opposed PAR programs lacked knowledge and/or exposure to the peer evaluation systems used by their district. The teachers also expressed dissatisfaction with the existing, administratively driven evaluation system and concern that important problems were not being adequately dealt with.

In an examination of the experiences of peer reviewers in the Salt Lake City School District's PAR program, Benzley, Kauchak, and Peterson (1985) found a high level of teacher acceptance of the process. Eighty-five percent ($n = 33$) indicated that they felt that the process was fair, when asked if they would participate again, 85 percent said yes. The researchers further concluded that teacher involvement in the design and implementation of a PAR program is critical to its success and acceptance.

Rothberg and Fenner (1991) studied 230 teachers with 0–16 years of teaching experience from school districts in eight central Florida counties to identify their perceptions of the peer review and assessment process. Eighty percent of the respondents said observation by other teachers would be helpful to their professional growth and development; 77 percent stated that they would welcome being observed by other teachers, and 60 percent said they would consider outside, objective observation and feedback.

In an AFT member survey conducted in 1997, 77

percent of respondents felt that union representatives and school administrators should share equally in assuring good quality teaching. Additionally, 77 percent favored peer evaluation and assistance for new teachers, and 63 percent favored similar programs for tenured teachers who receive poor evaluations (Murray and Grant 1998).

Effectiveness of Peer Review

Few research studies reported in the literature have investigated whether peer review improves pedagogical skills and therefore educational outcomes and student achievement. Only a handful of studies have examined peer review from a formative evaluation perspective to determine to what degree mentoring occurs during the review process. A study by Munson (1998) examined whether peer observation enhanced teaching skills more than the more common procedure of administrative review. Munson (1998) reported that teachers desired constructive feedback about their teaching and felt that peer observations offered it. They also felt that peer observation was helpful in developing collegiality within the faculty.

Odell and Ferraro reported on a mentoring program for new teachers that included peer observation and feedback (1992). Two successive groups of K-5 teachers who received structured support from mentor teachers during their first year of teaching were the focus of their four-year longitudinal study. The researchers found that new teachers involved in this program were more likely to remain in the teaching profession than new teachers who were not involved. Four years later the participants continued to value the emotional support provided by peer observation and feedback. The authors concluded that the PAR process provides emotional support to beginning teachers and may help teacher retention.

Freiberg, Waxman, and Houston (1987) conducted a study of 20 student teachers in secondary schools who were given different methods of feedback. The student teachers were randomly assigned to one of three groups. In group one, the control, teachers received feedback regarding their performance from colleagues and supervisors. Group two, the first experimental treatment, consisted of teachers who received written feedback based on three observations. Participants in this group attended a one-hour seminar to receive an explanation of their profile, but were not provided with strategies on how to improve. In group three, the second experimental treatment, teachers also received feedback from supervisors and colleagues, in addition to participating in three two-hour seminars where they could discuss their teaching performance with peers as well as the instructional strategies they could use in the classroom to improve their performance. Analysis of data from a post-study questionnaire revealed that stu-

dent teachers in the third group felt they gained valuable insight into their teaching performance through peer observation and feedback.

Conclusions

According to the literature, peer review programs are not without added costs; financial officers and human resource administrators must factor in the additional expenses during short and long-range strategic planning. Researchers have reported that teachers have a positive attitude and are supportive of the peer review process, but school districts and unions must involve teachers in the design, development and implementation of peer review to ensure its continued acceptance. These districts must also plan and develop training and education programs so teachers can become knowledgeable about the overall peer review process and its evaluation methods.

Supporters claim that peer review results in better support for new teachers and a more effective procedure for terminating incompetent teachers. This would lead one to think that student achievement will improve as a result, but strong empirically based quantitative studies which support this cause and effect relationship are missing. Other important unanswered questions include (a) How valid and reliable are teacher evaluations completed via peer review? And (b) What is the effect on teaching quality and educational outcomes when senior experienced teachers are taken out of classrooms for up to three years to serve as peer consultants?

The Future

California's peer review bill and President Bush's educational reform package have many school districts across the country revisiting the topic of teacher peer review. Its ability to retain new teachers longer through its first-year program is particularly attractive, because increasing student enrollment and continual retirement are forcing school districts to hire more new teachers.

Current peer review programs fail to hold teachers who perform badly in the classroom accountable. Instead, bargaining between school districts and teachers unions results in more teacher assistance and development programs rather than in the termination of those teachers. Until accountability is incorporated into peer review programs, they will continue to fall short of their goals.

A Case Study: The Toledo Peer Review Program

Peer review and assistance programs currently exist in only a handful of school districts across the country. However, one program, in Toledo, Ohio, has received national recognition as a model for other school districts (Kerchner and Koppich 1993). In September 1981, the Toledo Public Schools and the Toledo Feder-

ation of Teachers (TFT) reached an agreement on a teacher performance evaluation system that was a radical departure from traditional evaluation procedures. This program provided a formula for professional development of beginning teachers and an evaluation system that detected novice teachers who showed little aptitude for classroom teaching. The program was directed at beginning teachers in the system (those most in need of professional help) and experienced teachers experiencing difficulties in the classroom (McCormick 1985).

The Internship

New teachers are required to participate in intern program for two years regardless of prior experience, unless exempted by the joint management-union intern board (Kerchner, Koppich, and Weeres 1998). Interns and consulting teachers collaborate to set mutual goals and schedule regular follow-up conferences to discuss classroom observations. Consulting teachers are experienced faculty who apply and are approved by a governing panel-review board consisting of teacher representatives and administrators. If accepted, they are released from all teaching responsibilities for a period of three years. Each consulting teacher supervises up to ten interns and makes the final recommendations to the panel-review board regarding each intern's employment status.

The Problems

In spite of its accolades and national recognition, the Toledo program has had its share of problems. In 1995, the TFT canceled the program in a dispute with the school board over extra pay for principals. School board members argued that principals should receive extra pay for overseeing state proficiency tests, as consulting teachers received extra pay for participating in the peer review program (Bradley 1995). The program was reinstated in 1996, because a more positive collective bargaining atmosphere developed (Lawton 1996).

The total cost of implementing this peer review program was considerable. The cost of consulting teachers included the contributions by school districts to teacher pensions, insurance, workers compensation insurance, leave benefits, severance pay, and tuitions reimbursement. The total cost per consulting teacher in the Toledo program is estimated at \$63,000 (Lieberman 1998b).

The Future

A missing component of any peer review program is accountability. With accountability, incompetent teachers face consequences such as termination and pay reduction. Over a 12-year period only 32 tenured Toledo teachers retired, resigned, or were terminated through the peer review process; this represents only 1

percent of the approximately 4,000 tenured teachers employed in the Toledo school system during this time period. To correct this problem school officials and union personnel must work together to eliminate contractual agreements that handicap school officials' ability to terminate incompetent teachers.

Key words: peer review, teacher evaluation, Peer Assistance and Review Programs, mentoring, teacher competency

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