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## Peer Assistance and Review

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All Teachers on the Road to Instructional Leadership  
in Columbus (OH) "100% Project Schools"

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The NEA Foundation Issue Brief



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MAY 2012

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Dear Colleagues:

As professionals, teachers can and should regularly consult each other on problems of practice, share their expertise on issues ranging from instructional strategies to pedagogical content knowledge to classroom management, and have ample opportunities to observe each other in action. Peer assistance and review (PAR) incorporates these important principles by bringing to bear expert teacher input to the assessment and support of novice teachers in 100% Project schools in Columbus.

The NEA Foundation's ongoing investment in 100% Project schools represents as much an investment in building teacher leadership as in providing effective support to new teachers—a yet under-resourced dimension of human capital development across the nation. Ultimately, however, this investment is about improving outcomes for children. As Susan Moore Johnson said during remarks at an NEA Foundation national convening, “This [PAR] is about kids. Kids have to be put first. That really can't happen unless teachers are well supported and are in a system that holds them accountable in a meaningful way.”

We encourage you to learn more about PAR in Columbus in this latest NEA Foundation Issue Brief as a lens for examining support to new teachers—and building teacher leadership— in your own communities.

Sincerely,

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## Peer Assistance and Review

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### All Teachers on the Road to Instructional Leadership in Columbus (OH) “100% Project Schools”

Great teachers may be born, but they are also made, requiring many years of training and experience and commitment to the field and to students. They provide instruction that is both “learning centered,” focused on the development of knowledge acquisition and content, and “learner-centered,” responding to individual students’ experiences, interests, talents, needs, and cultural backgrounds (Darling-Hammond, 2006). A tall order indeed given class sizes, the diversity represented in classrooms today, and the variable quality of pre-service teacher preparation. Great teaching is possible, seen every day in thousands of schools where expert veteran and new or novice teachers have come together to prepare their students for college, work and life.

A question that continues to loom in districts nationwide is how best to support the professional growth of novice teachers, so that they become experts in their field and instructional leaders in their classrooms and the greater school community. Other professions use well-developed and structured apprenticeships, residencies and induction to ensure that novices receive ongoing supervision and support for improvement of their practice. The practice of medicine—with its well-supervised field experiences and extended residencies—is a good case in point. The education and resulting life opportunities of our children create stakes that are just as high as good medical care. We know that providing new teachers with support in the form of induction programs, mentoring and coaching, and standards-based teacher supervision and evaluation improves teaching quality – and outcomes for students.

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**Peer Assistance and Review (PAR), a program of structured mentorship, observation and rigorous, standards-based evaluation of teachers by teachers, is among the strongest ways to develop great teachers.**

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## PAR: More than Evaluation

Districts such as Columbus City Schools have instituted PAR as a comprehensive professional growth system that reflects the complex enterprise of teaching and learning. Like other districts that have implemented PAR, Columbus designed its program to improve teaching quality by having expert teachers evaluate and mentor their novice peers. Although novice teachers generally receive between 15 and 20 formal visits per year by the expert teachers assigned to them, actual contact time can be much higher, with daily formal and informal communications depending upon the novice teacher's needs.

The Columbus union and district leadership understand the need for a solid foundation for ongoing development of the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to teach effectively, and for over 20 years now, have instituted PAR for first year teachers. With funding from the NEA Foundation's Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative, Columbus has developed a second year of PAR (PAR II) in selected schools that comprise the 100% Project to help teachers tackle head-on some of the more nuanced aspects of their practice.

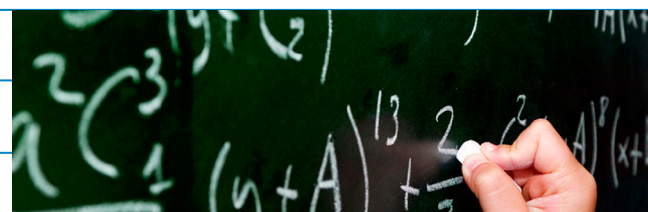
Columbus City Schools Superintendent, Dr. Gene Harris, articulates the power of PAR to build teachers' capacity to deliver the complex and differentiated instruction required for 21st century learning:

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**We started PAR for new teachers in their first year more than 20 years ago—so Columbus recognized early on that teachers do not simply finish their pre-service education and are ready to go. The expert teacher provides support, guides, observes, gives feedback, and models effective teaching. This is the “assistance” in PAR. As for the evaluation component, when new teachers are evaluated, it is as much about how far they have come along in a year...In the second year of PAR, novice teachers become more reflective and focus their attention on specific areas for improvement—again, under the close guidance of their expert, supervising teacher. (G. Harris, personal communication, August 29, 2011).**

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These practices are validated directly and indirectly by research. For example, findings from a study on standards-based teacher evaluation conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education illustrate the benefits for students. The study found that teacher scores produced by these evaluation systems are positively associated with the achievement of their students (Borman & Kimball, 2005; Milanowski, Kimball & White, 2004). A seminal study conducted by the Center for Organization and Restructuring of Schools found that the development of a shared vision for high quality instruction and learning, possible through, for example, PAR's standards-based evaluation and structured time for teacher-to-teacher support and exchange, is also positively associated with higher student achievement (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Current research on PAR programs specifically is underway at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Early findings relate increases in student learning to increased retention rates of novice teachers (Papay & Johnson, 2011).





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## Increasing New Teacher Retention

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Upon their assignment in schools as licensed teachers, many novice teachers find themselves isolated professionally—left to sink or swim. The cycle of teacher isolation is perpetuated by a lack of opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful exchange with and learning from their more expert colleagues. (Heider, 2005)

The consequences of isolation are well known: high teacher attrition from the profession. This is not surprising given classroom environments characterized by dramatic increases in diversity represented in public school classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) combined with heightened standards and accountability for student learning. However, studies demonstrate that new teacher turnover rates can be cut in half through comprehensive induction—a combination of high quality mentoring, professional development and support, scheduled interaction with other teachers in the school and in the larger community, and formal assessments for new teachers during at least their first two years of teaching (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004 as cited in Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005).

Reflections captured in an external evaluation report (Upton, 2011) by both PAR II expert and novice teachers in Columbus reveal important dynamics about how and why novice teachers participating in PAR are less likely to leave: they are not isolated, they become more confident in their practice, and reflect on—and own—the ways in which they need to improve. Expert teachers note:

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I see more confidence. They are more reflective. The PAR II program was kind of like a continuation of what you want them to do in the future anyway...They are more confident and they are working more towards refining their skills.

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She [the novice teacher] is in the process of earning her masters, so she enjoys bouncing ideas off of me... She's always asking me for ideas and some of the things I did in my class, so it's been collaborative, working together with what I know about Unified Arts. She's been very positive, and she's glad that she has a mentor critiquing and looking at what she's doing.

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## Increasing New Teacher Retention

Participating novice teachers see these benefits too:

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A focus on student engagement is the result of goal setting with my PAR Consultant. This focus has energized and challenged me to create lessons that are cross-curricular and student engagement focused.

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I am very interested in reading the summary transcripts that my PAR ll provides, along with any questions to me. They really help me self-assess what is going on in my classroom.

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Columbus City Schools goes even further to integrate PAR with other reforms in participating schools to bolster teacher effectiveness. The current literature on effective schools stresses the importance of ongoing and data-driven professional learning in the context of structured, collegial and sustained interaction among teachers (Goddard., Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Kardos & Johnson, 2007; Herman, Dawson, Dee, Green, Maynard, Redding & Darwin, 2008). Learning Forward (n.d.) (formerly the National Staff Development Council), for example, asserts that:

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The most powerful forms of staff development occur in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning, and problem solving. These teams, often called learning communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning.

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Columbus has taken this to heart. Through development of its professional learning communities, novice teachers participate in grade-level and content area teams during and well past their second year. This holds great promise for their development as instructional leaders within their classrooms and beyond.

PAR is a powerful tool for increasing new teacher retention and effectiveness; it also represents a powerful tool for building the teaching profession as a whole.





## Teacher Empowerment through Union and District Collaboration

As discussed earlier, PAR formally taps teachers' expertise to build the capacity of their peers and recognizes teaching as a complex endeavor that requires many years of growth and support. But it also allows a greater measure of regulation of the profession by those deeply committed to and engaged in the profession. It creates an enduring structure that supports teacher empowerment and union-district collaboration as tools to improve student success. By helping to regulate who stays and who goes in the classroom – with ownership and accountability for the quality of their teaching practice – a PAR program ensures that teachers are at the table for conversations of teacher quality and student achievement.

An empowered workforce is good for our kids: empowerment is strongly correlated with teachers' task motivation, higher levels of organizational commitment, meaning, self-determination, and sense of efficacy (Dee, Henkin & Duemer, 2003). While an understanding of how factors such as these directly affect student achievement is limited by the existing research, similar qualities and dispositions have been examined in research on teacher leadership and school-based management, and have been found to positively impact student achievement (Appalachia Educational Laboratory, 2005).

PAR promotes teacher empowerment through several processes, codified as policy in the union contract. PAR provides for:

- ✓ shared union/district governance and administration of the PAR program;
- ✓ union identification and hiring of expert teachers;
- ✓ teacher co-development of and/or agreement on the standards of effective instruction as articulated in the observation rubrics used to assess instructional capacity and growth; and
- ✓ co-equal teacher and administrator input to summative assessments of novice teachers' effectiveness.

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## Teacher Empowerment through Union and District Collaboration

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Rhonda Johnson, president of the Columbus Education Association, reflects on the role of the union as a collective voice for professional empowerment of teachers:

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Through PAR, the district recognizes teachers as professionals and unions as the collective body upholding standards of professional conduct and development. The principal plays a “minor” role in PAR compared with that of the PAR expert, supervising teachers. These teachers work with the principal to make sure that he/she is helping meet the novice teachers’ goals or if the novice teacher is having difficulty in a certain area. The principal prepares a short summative evaluation that actually has little weight in employment decisions. So, the collaboration really takes place at the level of the PAR panel. We—the union and district—are colleagues with clear roles to play. (R. Johnson, personal communication, August 29, 2011).

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Two core structural elements create an enduring collaboration between the union and the district—the PAR Panel and the consulting teachers. Based on its research of several PAR programs, the Harvard Graduate School of Education Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (n.d.) describe these elements:

- ☑ The PAR Panel is a joint labor–management group consisting most often of an equal number of representatives from the teachers union and administration (with some including a slight majority of teachers). The Panel designs or refines the program’s components, manages the budget, and is responsible for selecting, training, and supervising the consulting teachers.

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- ☑ Consulting Teachers, typically known as the supervising or expert teachers, evaluate and mentor new teachers and assist low–performing veteran teachers. They are chosen through a competitive selection process conducted by the PAR Panel.

In most districts, consulting teachers are released full-time from classroom teaching for three to five years and are responsible for a caseload of 10 to 20 teachers.





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## Kids First: Promoting a Culture of Accountability

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With empowerment, support for teacher professional growth, and the rigor and richness of standards based teacher evaluation comes greater accountability for student achievement. These dynamics drive the NEA Foundation's continuing investment in Columbus and have led the Foundation to hold a convening on the subject, supporting interested communities in the design and development of their own PAR systems. Harriet Sanford, President and CEO of The NEA Foundation, observes:

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Our continued investment in Columbus and in our other “Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative” sites is based on our firm belief that teaching effectiveness is the most important school-based factor driving up outcomes for children. This belief is supported by the research evidence that has emerged over the last 20 years. Our investment is also a testament to the critical role unions play as professional associations, where accountability for quality teaching and student outcomes is generated equally from within the ranks of the teacher force and its leadership.

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PAR, though only one strategy for accomplishing this in K-12 public education, is nonetheless a powerful one worthy of consideration by districts and unions working together across the nation.

## Additional Resources

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The Harvard Graduate School of Education Project on the Next Generation of Teachers

➔ <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/>

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The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (TQ Center)

➔ <http://www.tqsource.org/>

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PAR: Teachers Working Together to Improve the Quality of Teaching and Learning (Montgomery County Education Association)

➔ [http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/resources/teachers\\_guide\\_to\\_the\\_par\\_program\\_and\\_the\\_new\\_tes.pdf](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par/resources/teachers_guide_to_the_par_program_and_the_new_tes.pdf)

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