

LEARNING FROM OHIO'S BEST TEACHERS: A HOMEGROWN MODEL TO IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Teacher effectiveness is recognized as a key piece of any effort to improve teaching and learning. Increasingly, support for teachers that's embedded in their work in the classroom is seen as the best way to ensure that a qualified educator stands at the front of each classroom.

Four Ohio districts – Brunswick, Cincinnati, Columbus and Toledo – have extensive experience with groundbreaking programs that seek to professionalize teaching and improve teacher quality. Commonly known as Peer Assistance and Review, or PAR, this approach began in Toledo in 1981.

PAR provides stipends to teacher leaders who are released from full-time classroom duties to mentor and evaluate new teachers. The program also supports those with more experience who are struggling to meet the needs of their students.

This study by Policy Matters Ohio seeks to bring PAR to the attention of state policymakers and other stakeholders. This model is particularly relevant as the administration of Gov. Ted Strickland focuses its attention on improving Ohio's public education system; in his state of the state speech this year, the Governor highlighted the need to learn from Ohio's best teachers, those who know "what works best in the classroom." PAR, with its reliance on teacher leaders, provides just this opportunity.

Well-designed peer assistance and review programs:

- Release effective, well-trained teachers from classroom duties for up to three years so they can work intensively to mentor new hires and underperforming veteran teachers;
- Include an evaluation component, so teachers who don't make the grade can be dismissed;
- Provide targeted professional development to teachers who need it most;
- Are governed cooperatively by administrators and teacher union leaders;
- Lay the groundwork for further collaborative efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Peer assistance and review programs are used in about 70 districts around the country, most of them in Ohio, Connecticut and California.

Research is beginning to show that strong support for teachers in the classroom, like that provided by PAR programs in Ohio, can reduce teacher turnover and associated costs and may boost student achievement.

- A 2004 study found that 27 percent of new public school teachers either changed schools or left teaching altogether after their first year, and that strong support systems can reduce such turnover by 30 percent or more;
- Another study estimated the costs of such turnover are as high as nearly \$18,000 per teacher, including expenditures for recruitment, training and transfers;
- Research also suggests that beginning teachers who receive strong support are more likely to have classes that do better in reading.

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Based on data provided by the four Ohio districts with peer assistance and review programs, Policy Matters estimated that the cost for each teacher served ranged from about \$3,300 to more than \$9,000. Compared to the direct financial cost of replacing teachers who might stay in teaching with adequate support or the cost to student learning of keeping underperforming teachers in a classroom with no help, PAR can be a cost-effective way to improve teacher effectiveness.

All new teachers are required to enroll in the program; non-first-year teachers are referred to the program by administrators and others. Anywhere from 1 to 5 percent of all veteran teachers in a district may be enrolled in PAR in any given year, according to data supplied by two districts; a significant number of those teachers leave the district while in PAR or are dismissed because of the program. Between 6 and 8 percent of new teachers who go through PAR programs at these four Ohio districts were either dismissed or chose to leave their districts.

While implementing or encouraging PAR more broadly across the state will by no means address all issues confronting public schools, such programs should be viewed as a model of an effective collaborative approach to school improvement.

Policy Matters recommends that the Strickland administration work with the Ohio Department of Education to develop a voluntary pilot program for districts where administrators and teachers want to work together to implement peer assistance and review.

The state should provide grants to districts that show evidence of being able to implement effective programs. At least one grant should go to a consortium of smaller districts that may have trouble implementing PAR programs on their own.

It may seem unrealistic to call for a new program like PAR when state and local budgets are being squeezed. But the state can redirect its own funds and seek seed money from the federal government and private foundation sources.

The timing is right for such an effort. There is a broad consensus that effective support for teachers is an essential component of improved teaching and learning. PAR can be part of the solution.

Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute dedicated to researching an economy that will work better for all in Ohio. Learn more about Policy Matters Ohio at www.policymattersohio.org.