

A Second Opinion

The Alternative Voice of UTLA September/October 1998

A Teacher Guide to Peer Review

This year, UTLA members will be discussing and debating a proposal, not yet finalized, from the UTLA Accountability Committee to establish a peer assistance and peer review program. Unlike peer assistance, peer review – permitting teachers to evaluate other teachers – is very controversial, as evidenced by the sharp debate at last year's National Education Association Representative Assembly. This special edition of A Second Opinion is a contribution to that discussion. In case you didn't see it, we are reprinting an article critical of peer review which appeared in a June issue of United Teacher, as well as an opinion piece of our own.

REPRINT, *United Teacher*, June 19, 1998

Peer Assistance — Yes! Peer Review — No!

After a discussion period on "professional accountability," UTLA members will be asked to vote on a peer review program that would involve teachers in assisting and ultimately evaluating other teachers, possibly leading to their dismissal. As UTLA activists, we wholeheartedly support the creation of a comprehensive peer *assistance* (or coaching) program within LAUSD. However, we adamantly oppose peer *review* programs that could put teachers in the position of firing or recommending the firing of teachers.

When we vote, we should only support a peer assistance program in which, without exception, all interactions between teacher and consulting teacher are strictly confidential and non-evaluative.

New teachers and many veteran teachers, as well, would greatly benefit from an adequately funded and staffed peer assistance program. Teaching is an isolating activity. Student teaching and education theory courses do not prepare teachers sufficiently for what they will experience in the classroom, causing so many new teachers to leave the profession after a few years.

While no panacea, some kind of "on the job training" component is needed which would eventually meet the following goals:

- All first and second year teachers, as well as veteran teachers on a volunteer basis, would participate in the Peer Assistance program.

- Veteran teachers receiving poor evaluations from administration would be especially encouraged to participate in a peer assistance program. Perhaps the contract should require that a teacher given an "unsat" or who is "on notice" be given an opportunity to receive peer assistance for an extended period of time before any action is taken on his/her job status.

- Consulting/mentoring teachers would be full-time, out-of-classroom positions for no more than three consecutive years and would be subject to a rigorous selection, training, and accountability process.

- Reasonable teacher/consulting teacher ratios should be established to allow for substantive and timely interaction.

Unlike peer assistance, which is supportive and non-threatening, peer review programs are intimidating and potentially punitive. In most of these programs, poorly performing teachers are singled out by administrators or

A Second Opinion Viewpoint

Why UTLA Members Should Oppose Peer Review

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UTLA members should pay close attention to the continuing debate over peer assistance and peer review, especially as it relates to the issue of "accountability." To begin with, peer assistance and peer review are two very different things, even though they are often discussed in the same breath. Peer assistance involves *coaching* or *mentoring* new, and in some cases veteran teachers, most effectively in complete confidentiality. Given the inadequacies of the District's current mentor teacher program, we very much favor a well-funded peer assistance program which can, at the very least, offer assistance to all new teachers.

Peer review programs, on the other hand, put teachers in the position of *evaluating* other teachers, including recommending that they be *fired*. *A Second Opinion* strongly recommends that UTLA members vote against any program that includes peer review. Putting teachers in the position of firing other teachers compromises the proper role of our union, which is to defend, not punish, bargaining unit members. George Woods, chairperson of the UTLA Accountability Committee that is writing the peer review proposal mentioned by Higuchi, admits as much in a recent *United Teacher* commentary. Referring to the urban locals around the country that have adopted peer review programs, he points out that "...they have

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Why UTLA Members Should Oppose Peer Review

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added contract language that guarantees due process....," strongly suggesting that peer review erodes the contract.

George Woods goes on to claim that "The old paradigm that is wrapped in the argument 'We don't hire 'em, so we shouldn't fire 'em' simply does not work any longer." Yet, he doesn't tell us why it doesn't work. In fact, the paradigm makes perfect sense. From a union point of view, the *only* justification for workers being in the position of firing other workers is if they have control over the craft or profession, including hiring. Do we? Of course not. Teachers are under the domination of our employers – the education bureaucracy, the school board, and the legislature – with no control over training, hiring, pay, curriculum, class size, the condition of our students, or anything else. Under *these* conditions, why would we want to take responsibility for evaluating the performance of our colleagues? The whole thing is a set up to allow us to be our own executioners,

putting a few teachers in the position of doing the work of administrators. We all know what a joke the Stull evaluation is. Instead let's demand that the District be "accountable" to develop a better evaluation program which gives teachers more feedback and guards against arbitrary, vindictive principals.

So why do more and more teacher union leaders propose peer review programs? Leaving aside all rhetoric about improving our profession, they are mainly concerned about combating attacks on public education by Conservative forces that manipulate the public's genuine concern over the state of our schools. As George Woods hopes out loud, "[Peer review may] be a small step in convincing the critics of public education that we are serious about improving the instruction all our children receive." The problem is that peer review will do nothing to improve teacher performance. In fact, it will actually *detract* from our ability to improve public schools by fostering the illusion that

bad teachers are the main problem, thereby giving further ammunition to the Right in its attacks on teachers and public education. Instead, UTLA should focus on the key factors affecting instruction, such as poor teacher training, high student/teacher ratios, inadequate resources, non-competitive teacher salaries, and student poverty. In the final analysis, the quality of teaching and learning will only improve if these factors are addressed. And that can only be accomplished with the persistent pressure of strong, progressive teacher unions and their allies. Anything, like peer review, which weakens the solidarity of our union, should therefore be opposed. As for the honest critics of public education, it is our responsibility as teachers to educate the public about the conditions under which we work and to ask them to join with us in changing them.

Meanwhile, we should not accept peer review just because a few other urban locals around the country have done so, most likely under similar public pressure. Most urban locals do not have peer review. We should consider the issue on its own merits.

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teacher union reps and are placed in the peer review program. Teachers under review know from the beginning that they could lose their jobs as a result of the process. Instead of promoting helpful dialogue, peer review inhibits honest communication between evaluator and evaluatee.

Most important, putting teachers in the position of firing other teachers sets up an "us v. them" dynamic, undermining teacher solidarity at a time when it is most needed to combat the threat of vouchers, District break-up, and other attacks on public education. Helping principals to evaluate and possibly discipline our colleagues – even when teachers choose to be evaluated by other teachers – blurs the distinction between teachers and administrators and sets the stage for divisiveness within our union. Further, it could deprive the teacher of due process since the union is a party to a dismissal.

Nor is peer review an answer to the teacher-bashing going on in response to low student test scores. Rather, it will actually contribute to such scapegoating by fostering the appearance that individual teachers are primarily to blame for poorly achieving schools, rather than poverty, lack of funding for education, etc. A peer assistance program, on the other hand, would strengthen teacher unity as well as improve teacher performance.

Some advocates of peer review argue that having teachers, instead of principals, evaluate other teachers, creates "teacher empowerment." On the contrary, we believe that such "empowerment" lets others off the hook. It takes responsibility off the shoulders of university professors, student-teacher coordinators, employing administrators, and supervising principals, who had opportunities to reject individuals who should not have entered the profession. Teachers will only be truly empowered when our working conditions improve enough to facilitate the daily, intimate peer assistance so essential to educational quality.

We are debating peer review only because teacher union leaders have come under increasing pressure from conservative, anti-union forces to discipline our own ranks. As a result, teachers are being asked to collaborate with management in a way that actually exacerbates the problem. Rather than conceding to these forces, we can begin to re-capture the high ground in the debate over educational quality by publicly advocating (1) peer assistance programs, without peer review, (2) credentialing programs more relevant to the day-to-day teaching experience, and (3) a renewed focus on increasing educational funding and reducing poverty.

When UTLA members vote on this issue, we urge you to reject any proposal with a peer review component. Rather,

we should urge UTLA to develop a comprehensive peer assistance program as part of our contract.

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This newsletter is published by UTLA activists who believe that our union and public education are strengthened when UTLA is organized, mobilized, and visible. We believe that good salaries must be combined with real school reform that lowers class size, provides less crowded schools, and brings about a more rigorous and meaningful curriculum. We support the democratization of education and equal access to all levels of learning for all our students.

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