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## Peer-Review Programs Catch Hold As Unions, Districts Work Together

By Ann Bradley  
Columbus, Ohio

The techniques Jennifer Bouknight learned in education school didn't work. Her 3rd and 4th graders were too rowdy to sit at tables, rather than desks. A hands-on science experiment turned into "two-by-fours swinging around the room." By December, she was in tears, ready to quit.

But with help from a consulting teacher assigned to her as part of an innovative program here, Ms. Bouknight has survived her first year of teaching at Heyl Elementary School. Her mentor provided encouragement, professional articles, and seasoned advice on everything from organizing reading groups to parent conferences to classroom management.

"I could talk to her about anything," the first-year teacher said recently. "She was there for me when I needed her."

In the end, Ms. Bouknight received a good evaluation from her consulting teacher that will allow her to continue to teach—a decision once left solely to principals. Since the 1980s, teachers in a handful of urban districts with peer-assistance and -review programs have borne this responsibility, helping new teachers as well as veterans who are having problems. In both cases, the consulting teachers can recommend dismissal.

In the past year, the idea of peer review has rocketed into the policy spotlight amid a greater focus on accountability in education. Bob Chase, the president of the National Education Association, has embraced it as a way for teachers to take greater responsibility for school quality—what he calls the "new unionism." Last summer, delegates to the NEA's convention voted to drop their opposition to the practice, which stands conventional unionism on its head by giving teachers a role in evaluation.

The American Federation of Teachers has long supported peer review, although relatively few of its affiliates have negotiated such programs.

Last month, a conference here sponsored by the Columbus Education Association—an NEA affiliate that has operated a peer-review program for 12 years—drew more than 500 teachers and union staff members from some 30 states. John Grossman, the president of the CEA, joked



An Occasional Series

that he organized the meeting in self-defense after being overwhelmed with inquiries from interested educators.

Columbus leaders

were joined by officials from three AFT affiliates—Toledo, Ohio, which pioneered peer review in 1981, Cincinnati, and Rochester, N.Y.

The state of Ohio has appropriated \$4.8 million over the past two years for grants to districts interested in planning or implementing peer review. Union leaders in Columbus and Toledo are writing sample contract language that could be used in districts of various sizes.

"We've come along fast within NEA," said Mr. Grossman, who defied his state and national organizations in launching the program in 1986. "Once that embrace happens, it's a bear hug."

### A Helping Hand

With the increased attention to peer review, however, has come confusion over its purpose. While the idea of teachers helping to dismiss peers who don't measure up has caught hold, the programs actually devote much more time and resources to mentoring new teachers.

Peer review is about "helping people to succeed," Mr. Chase said here in a speech at the conference.

"To characterize peer assistance and review as getting rid of bad teachers," he cautioned, "is a gross misrepresentation of what it's all about."

Indeed, the number of veteran teachers referred to the programs for "intervention" is typically very small.

Yet experts say peer review offers one solution to a problem that has long vexed school administrators and education poli-

cymakers: how to identify and deal with teachers who aren't performing to the levels their students need or that higher standards of teaching demand.

In Toledo, 52 experienced teachers out of a pool of about 2,600 have been placed in intervention over 16 years. All but 10 have left the classroom. About 10 percent of Toledo's intern teachers are rejected for a second year of teaching.

Since its inception 12 years ago, 178 teachers have entered the Columbus district's intervention program, out of a teaching force of 4,800. Of those, 43.8 percent left the program in "good standing." The others resigned, retired, received disability retirements, or were terminated. There is no limit on the length of time that Columbus teachers can stay in intervention, as long as they are deemed to be making progress.

At the same time, 3,312 new teachers participated in Columbus' intern program and 3,094 received satisfactory evaluations, a success rate of 93 percent. The intern program is limited to one school year.

New teachers stay on the job far longer in Columbus than in typical urban districts that lack such programs, where about 50 percent of new hires leave after five years. In Columbus, 80 percent of new teachers remain on the job five years later, Mr. Grossman said.

### A Broader View

While it hasn't received much attention, that aspect of peer review is likely to become increasingly important as districts around the country confront increased demands for new teachers to replace those retiring and to keep up with enrollment growth. The Columbus district expects to hire some 700 new teachers in the coming school year.

The district works closely with Ohio State University, which provides training for the consulting teachers and a series of six free workshops for first-year teachers.

Proponents say peer-review programs also provide a welcome career opportunity

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for the top-notch teachers who are chosen to serve as consulting teachers. They receive a stipend in addition to their regular salaries.



In Columbus, such consultants work for three years and then return to the classroom—but with a much broader view of their district and of high-quality teaching than they had before, participants say.

Lisa Hobson, who is finishing her first year as a full-time consulting teacher here, has a caseload of 22 educators. One is a veteran in intervention, while the others are new teachers, three of whom taught elsewhere before landing jobs in Columbus.

"It's a *very* interesting job," said Ms. Hobson, a 14-year veteran. "I've learned more about teaching than at any time in my career. It's given me a lot of time to think about what causes a classroom to work and not to work."

### No 'Dipstick'

Union leaders say peer-review programs are far superior to what Mr. Grossman calls the "dipstick" evaluations conducted by harried principals.

Because they receive extensive training, consulting teachers do a thorough job of documenting teachers' performance, which often results in poor teachers deciding to resign rather than fight for their jobs.

In Columbus, consulting teachers spend a minimum of 50 hours observing teachers in the classroom.

But in Rochester, the local union representing administrators filed a lawsuit, which was ultimately unsuccessful, arguing that evaluation was the job of principals. Since then, administrators have accepted the idea of peer review.

Ohio's laws for teachers are so stringent that unions previously could—and did—find procedural ways to overturn many dismissals initiated by administrators.

Tom Mooney, the president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, says his union fought "costly, ugly arbitrations" over teacher dismissals in part because they appeared to be random and in part to show the American Federation of Teachers affiliate's strength to ward off competition from the NEA.

But that approach ignored the fact that some Cincinnati teachers had serious

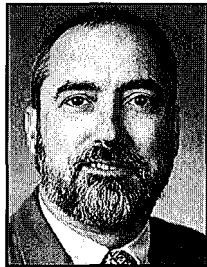
problems, he said. Those teachers received no help from either the union or the district. In addition, the CFT had railed against bureaucracy, but it needed to show it was serious about teacher quality in exchange.

"It's pretty tough to say that we ought to have a predominant say in programs, curriculum, methods, and books," Mr. Mooney said at the conference, "and then say the review of professional practice is somebody else's job."

Proponents of peer-review programs argue that they save money by reducing the number of arbitrations and court cases surrounding dismissals. In Ohio, it can cost a district between \$75,000 to \$200,000 to fire a tenured teacher, according to Richard L. Logan, a labor-relations consultant for the Columbus Education Association.

Unions still offer their members help if they contest peer-review decisions. In states with collective bargaining, unions have a legal "duty of fair representation" that some have interpreted to mean they must fight all dismissals.

In fact, experts say, unions must simply show that they use fair and consistent procedures in evaluating members' grievances. In 12 years, Cincinnati has had only three cases of teachers contesting their dismissals, Mr. Mooney said.



**Tom Mooney**

Such cases are handled separately from the joint union-district panels that govern peer-review pro-

grams.

With the exception of Toledo's program, peer review is not seen as a substitute for periodic teacher evaluations by principals.

The Toledo Federation of Teachers earlier this year fought a proposal by the district administration to institute regular evaluations of tenured teachers. Instead, principals can refer teachers for a performance review and assistance if they feel it's necessary, subject to the approval of the board of review that governs the program.

### More Protection

Procedures for referring teachers for intervention vary. In Columbus, most of the teachers who undergo intervention asked for the assistance themselves, often on the heels of a poor evaluation from their principals.

In Cincinnati, a principal with concerns about a teacher's performance must refer the teacher for intervention, rather than "zap" her with special evaluations, Mr. Mooney said. The process offers teachers more resources and protection, and it guarantees "a serious investigation," he said.



**John Grossman**

Intervention is intended for teachers with instructional problems, not those who are frequently late or absent or who exhibit substance-abuse problems, union leaders say. Those issues are addressed by employee-assistance programs and other means.

### Critical Attention

As interest in peer review spreads, skeptics are questioning whether all the hoopla is merited. They point out the relatively small number of teachers who are "weeded out" under peer review.

"There's some evidence to support Chase's claims about his union's commitment to getting poor teachers out of the classroom—but not a lot," concludes writer Robert Worth in an article in the May issue of *The Washington Monthly*. Mr. Worth argues that unions should focus on reforming the state tenure laws that make it "extremely difficult to fire problem teachers."

Observers also are skeptical that peer review will spread, despite the recent publicity. The programs require a high level of union-management trust and cooperation and could be difficult logistically for small districts to manage, unless they pool their resources.

Myron Lieberman, a longtime union critic, argues in a forthcoming book that it's difficult to evaluate peer-review programs, since districts have varying criteria for their success.

And he complains that it is also hard to gauge the true costs of the programs, which include the salaries and stipends of the consulting teachers, office expenses, and the like, as well as savings from reduced litigation.

Balancing those costs are the benefits—equally hard to measure—of ridding a district of ineffective teachers, and of helping young teachers like Ms. Bouknight remain in the profession.

"The culture of my school is that you don't work with the other teachers," the first-year teacher said. But her mentor "helped by building me up inside."