

Peer Assistance: A Background Paper

Adapted from Facilitating the Dialogue on Peer Assistance and Peer Review
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What is peer assistance?

Peer assistance programs help teachers help teachers. In peer programs, experienced, highly accomplished veteran teachers provide sustained, intensive assistance to teachers who need assistance. Assisting teachers are typically called *consulting teachers* and the teachers receiving assistance are called *participating teachers*.

Peer programs generally identify two categories of teachers in need of assistance:

- First-year teachers and other teachers new to a school system.
- Veteran teachers experiencing problems with their teaching.

Peer assistance aims to help new and veteran teachers improve their knowledge and skills. A formal peer assistance, or mentoring, program links new teachers – or struggling veteran teachers – with consulting teachers who provide ongoing support through observing, sharing ideas and skills, and recommending materials for further study.

- **The decision to implement peer assistance is a decision that needs to be and should be made at the local level.**

A peer assistance program isn't the only way to improve the quality of teaching. Nor is peer assistance a necessary component of a program to improve teacher quality. But for many school districts, peer programs could make a significant contribution.

Could peer assistance make a significant contribution in your school district? Whether or not a peer program could make a contribution in your district is a question that can only be answered at the local level, after a thorough examination of current district efforts to improve teacher quality.

Do current efforts to ensure teacher quality exist in your district? If so, are they effective? How might a peer program support or expand upon these efforts?

These and other important questions also need to be addressed. Is your district under public pressure to address teacher quality issues more aggressively? Are increases in the number of new, inexperienced teachers expected? Are there significant numbers of veteran teachers struggling and asking for help? Are teachers, in general asking for more support on professional matters?

If your answers to these questions suggest a real need to explore peer assistance and review, the next step is considering how a peer program would fit into a comprehensive plan for promoting quality teacher. No district should start down the peer assistance and review road without such a comprehensive plan.

➤ **A comprehensive teacher quality plan?**

Peer assistance programs can contribute to better teaching, but these programs cannot do – and should not be expected to do – the job alone.

Efforts to improve the quality of teaching begin with the recruitment of talented candidates into teaching and continue through ongoing skills development and renewal for veteran teachers. These steps toward quality can be placed on what amounts to a “continuum” of the teaching profession. The continuum starts with recruitment and preparation, progresses to certification and induction into the profession, then moves through professional development.

Peer assistance programs are part of this continuum of the teaching profession – and can truly succeed only in the context of this continuum. School districts eager to help improve the quality of teaching need to consider this full continuum. That means, at the most basic level, asking three simple questions:

1. What should the district do to promote quality teaching?
2. What can realistically be achieved?
3. What is the best way to do it?

Once a district has answered these critical questions, the stage is set for taking an “inventory” of actual conditions in local schools. Several additional questions need to be addressed here.

➤ **What kind of relationship exists between local leaders and school district officials?**

A collaborative relationship between NEA local affiliate leaders and school district officials is absolutely essential for the success of any peer assistance program.

A local association considering peer assistance needs to examine its relationships with the local school board, the local central administration, and individual worksite administrators. Are these relationships cooperative? Acrimonious? Where are the difficulties?

Any peer assistance program must be a joint effort between a local association and the school district. No joint effort can succeed without a relationship of mutual respect and trust. Examining past history and current behaviors can help determine whether such respect and trust exist.

The best possible starting point for planning and implementing a peer assistance program is a collaborative, or interest-based bargaining, relationship between a local association and school officials. The process of focusing mutual energies on problem solving offers local association and district leaders a vehicle for addressing the inevitable complexities and uncertainties that come with peer assistance.

If an interest-based approach has been the basis for bargaining for some time, the experience resolving difficult issues that the parties will have gained will prove invaluable in designing a peer program that works.

➤ **Are resources available for a successful program?**

A district considering peer assistance needs to consider whether adequate resources are available for a program's successful implementation. These resources include: people, time, physical space, and funding.

A good peer assistance program will also demand hard dollars for release time, training consulting teachers, and administrative support. If a school district is unable or unwilling to allocate adequate funds for these activities, peer assistance cannot succeed.

What makes peer assistance successful?

Collaboration and support for the final product – by both management and faculty – are the key ingredients to the success of any peer assistance program.

Peer programs should be carefully negotiated through the collective bargaining process.

➤ **Negotiating peer assistance**

A local affiliate can establish a peer assistance program by bargaining provisions in an initial or successor comprehensive agreement, or through the work of a special bargaining subcommittee created to deal solely with this issue.

A subcommittee should be composed of equal numbers from both sides – or be weighted to the bargaining agent. Given the time and energy necessary to deal with such a complex issue as peer assistance, placing responsibility for hammering out the details with a bargaining subcommittee can make a great deal of sense.

The peer assistance program created by the subcommittee should be included in the collective bargaining agreement, or, alternatively, in a separate memorandum of understanding. In either case, the critical features of the program should be legally binding on both parties and enforceable through the grievance procedure and arbitration clause of the collective bargaining agreement.

➤ **Defining the purpose**

The purpose of a peer assistance program needs to be clearly defined in the collective bargaining agreement or memorandum of understanding. Generally, the intent is to improve the education of students by improving the performance of teachers. A program should focus on helping newly hired teachers become better professionals and assisting veteran teachers in professional difficulty.

The goal of a peer assistance program, in other words, is helping teachers, not terminating them, and this point should be repeatedly stressed.

Once a peer assistance program has been agreed upon by the parties, the program must be administered jointly by management and the bargaining agent or local association. This joint administration is absolutely critical. The prime instrument for joint administration is the governance committee.

➤ **Governance committee powers and responsibilities**

All key administrative details of a peer assistance program – especially the day-to-day management guidelines – need to be agreed to by the representatives of the NEA local affiliate and the school district who serve on the joint governance committee.

This governance committee should have the responsibility for managing the program. These responsibilities should include:

- adopting administrative guidelines,
- assigning consulting teachers to participating teachers,
- monitoring the progress of the program,
- evaluating the work of consulting teachers,
- evaluating the overall effectiveness of the program,
- making recommendations for changes in the program, and
- ensuring fair treatment for all participating teachers.

➤ **The governance committee budget**

The agreement between the parties should provide a budget for the joint committee. If the cost of implementing a peer assistance and review program cannot be absorbed within the existing school district budget, then the agreement between the parties should provide for supplemental allocations.

Having these resources in hand will both help the program function smoothly and enhance the governance committee's clout and prestige.

➤ **Composition of the governance committee**

How many members should serve on the governance committee? Should there be equal representation or representation weighted to one side? The KNEA resolution on peer assistance specifies that local association representatives should be at least equal in number to management representatives.

In deciding the appropriate number of governance committee members, a local association should look at its previous experience with governance committees. What functions did these committees serve? How many members did they have? What problems did these governance committees encounter, or, alternatively, how well did these committees function?

The role of the governance committee chairperson or presiding officer is critical and should be defined in the collective bargaining agreement or memorandum of understanding.

This chairperson or presiding officer could be appointed by the association, the school administration, or the governance committee itself. Either party could be given the right to veto the other party's appointee. The chair could be rotated from meeting to meeting, or annually, between the association and the school administration.

➤ **Selecting the governance committee members**

How will the governance committee members be appointed? The KNEA resolution on peer assistance recommends that the local association representatives be appointed by the association.

➤ **Governance committee meetings**

The frequency, time, and place of governance committee meetings should be addressed in the committee guidelines, as well as the responsibility for calling meetings and ensuring fulfillment of basic administrative chores attendant to the meetings.

➤ **Administrative support of the governance committee**

The governance committee will need administrative assistance to handle committee correspondence, plan meetings, provide support for the meetings, and produce and distribute meeting minutes.

Who gets assisted in peer programs?

There are generally three groups of teachers worthy of peer assistance: the newly hired, those veteran teachers who are not performing satisfactorily, and those veteran teachers who decide on their own that they need assistance – perhaps in implementation of professional development learnings. The decision on which groups need to be included in the program is a local decision.

The easiest groups to identify will be the newly hired and the voluntary placements. The deficient veteran teacher group presents the biggest challenge.

➤ **How should veteran teachers who need help be placed in the program?**

First the governance committee should develop list of “indicators” or standards of effective instruction to guide the educators who decide whether a veteran teacher should be placed in the peer assistance and review program.

There are several options for determining how deficient veteran teachers will be placed in a peer assistance program.

The best approach may be dividing the process into two stages. In the first stage, a teacher is nominated for referral into the program. In the second stage, a determination is made whether to actually place the nominated teacher in the program. Each stage could be handled in a variety of ways.

A deficient teacher could be nominated by other teachers, administrators, a combination of both, or teachers nominate themselves.

Whatever the nomination procedure, the first stage process needs to incorporate safeguards that prevent teachers from being inappropriately nominated and placed in a peer assistance program. All teachers need to feel that the process functions fairly, without abuses. Without safeguards in place, no peer program will long enjoy teacher support.

What sort of safeguards need to be built into the process? One existing peer assistance program requires the local association president and a designated central school district administrator to meet and agree on a nomination made by others before the nomination is forwarded to the

governance committee for consideration. The governance committee reviews the nomination and determines whether the teacher ought to be placed in the peer assistance program.

➤ **How should new teachers be placed in a peer program?**

All beginning, first-year teachers should participate in a local district's peer assistance program as part of a high quality new teacher induction system.

A local group could also consider including new-to-the-district teachers who are not in their first year of teaching, but permit consulting teachers to release such teachers from the program, once the consulting teacher sees no need for the new-to-the-district teacher to remain in the program.

➤ **Who needs help first?**

What considerations should a local take into account in deciding whether to focus initially on new teachers or veteran teachers experiencing serious teaching difficulties?

In existing peer assistance programs, well over 90 percent of participating teachers are new teachers. A local that decides to support a program only for first-year teachers will have a substantially larger number of program participants than a local that decides to begin with a program only for veteran teachers in trouble.

From a program administration standpoint, a program with smaller numbers of participants might seem more "doable." On the other hand, a small program for veteran teachers in trouble is likely to be more controversial, at least in the early stages. Assistance programs for new teachers are likely to reach 5-10 percent of a faculty in any given school year. Over a 10-year period, such programs could directly benefit about half a school faculty.

Who does the assisting?

The teacher assigned to assist participating teachers is the "consulting teacher." The importance of the consulting teacher cannot be overemphasized.

The consulting teacher must be a highly skilled practitioner, recognized as such by fellow teachers, with a track record of working productively with others.

➤ **The qualifications of a consulting teacher**

Consulting teachers should meet several key criteria. Every consulting teacher should:

1. have taught successfully for a specified number of years,
2. be able to demonstrate outstanding classroom teaching,
3. have an extensive knowledge of classroom management and instructional techniques,
4. be able to communicate effectively both orally and in writing, and
5. have the ability to work cooperatively and effectively with others.

Consulting teachers, notes the NEA Peer Assistance and Review Resolution, should be considered highly skilled practitioners by colleagues and have the same, or parallel, area of expertise as the participating teacher the consulting teacher is asked to help.

➤ **Selecting consulting teachers**

Consulting teachers should be selected by the joint committee. A teacher interested in becoming a consulting teacher should be able to apply personally or be nominated by colleagues.

The consulting teachers selected should reflect the diversity of the teaching staff.

The program needs to consider whether application/nomination for consulting teacher positions will be accepted at any time, or only during a specified time period during the school year.

Applications and nominations should be accompanied by references, and the disposition of all written applications and nominations should be addressed in the joint committee operating guidelines. Should the applications and nominations be kept on file for a specified period? If so, for how long? The joint committee needs to address these and similar questions

➤ **The term of consulting teachers**

The joint committee should determine the term of appointment for consulting teachers. In setting this term, the committee ought to consider how the length of the appointment may affect the credibility of the consulting teacher. The longer consulting teachers are away from the daily frontlines of teaching, the less credible they may become.

Some peer assistance programs bar consulting teachers from accepting administrative positions for some specific period of time after their term as consulting teacher expires. Provisions like these send a clear message to all teachers in a district that consulting teachers will be returning to the classroom.

The joint committee also needs to consider how consulting teachers will return to their classroom assignment after the end of a consulting term. Will consulting teachers have the right to their old assignment? If so, for how long? If not, what reasonable assignment guarantees should they be accorded?

➤ **Training consulting teachers**

Comprehensive training for consulting teachers is a prerequisite for peer assistance success. The NEA Peer Assistance and Review Resolution calls for extensive and ongoing training in both current instructional methods and mentoring and coaching skills.

A joint committee should determine a specific training program and process. Local colleges and universities can be resources in developing such a program. These institutions may offer graduate-level courses for consulting teachers – or those who aspire to become consulting teachers.

➤ **The workload of consulting teachers**

Whether consulting teachers should be released from their teaching responsibilities and perform consulting work full time is a decision that must be based on local needs.

In order to know how many consulting teachers will be needed, the joint committee should estimate the number of participating teachers who will enter the program. In any case, a joint committee needs to develop guidelines that address consulting teacher workload and worktime.

➤ **Paying consulting teachers**

Consulting teachers should be properly compensated. This compensation could be structured in the form of supplemental pay tied to a supplemental contract. Both the structure and level of compensation need to be determined jointly by the KNEA local affiliate and the school district.

The compensation level should reflect the workload of the consulting teacher and provide a strong incentive for teachers to become consulting teachers.

➤ **Evaluating consulting teachers**

The work of consulting teachers should be evaluated under the direction of the joint committee.

How should peer programs operate?

The exact nature of the peer assistance process needs to be spelled out in guidelines adopted by the joint committee and distributed to all teachers. These guidelines should note the purpose and nature of the process, how it is initiated, what is involved, who is responsible for what, and how long the process lasts.

Participating teachers, notes the NEA Peer Assistance and Review Resolution, should be accorded rigorous and extensive assistance over an appropriate period of time.

The assistance process should begin with the placement of the participating teacher in the program and the assignment of a consulting teacher by the joint committee. The timelines spelling out the “appropriate period of time” should be clearly set forth. Participating teachers need to know the exact length of the assistance period and understand fully the benchmark events, such as classroom observations and interim reports, built into the process.

Guidelines also need to address the role of the building principal or immediate supervisor of the participating teacher. Any personnel who will be responsible for recommending teachers who need peer assistance should, of course, be provided these guidelines.

The guidelines should specify whatever meetings are necessary to support the peer assistance process. These meetings would include, for instance, sessions where the consulting teacher meets with the building principal, or immediate supervisor, and the participating teacher.

The joint committee also ought to develop a list of indicators, or standards of effective instruction, that would help identify the situations that might trigger recommendations for assistance. This list of indicators would help teachers better self-analyze their own strengths and weaknesses – and motivate them to improve.

A consulting teacher helps a participating teacher improve instructional performance. This assistance will typically include:

- setting and discussing performance goals with the participating teacher,
- observing the classroom performance of the participating teacher,
- meeting with the supervisors of the participating teacher,
- using school district resources to assist the participating teacher and the consulting teacher,
- monitoring the progress of the participating teacher,
- making status reports to the joint committee, and
- demonstrating good practice to the participating teacher.

The consulting teacher assesses the progress of the participating teacher and makes all necessary recommendations to the joint committee about continuing support for the participating teacher.

Consulting teacher activities, as well as participating teacher responsibilities, should be set forth in written guidelines to make sure all parties interested in and critical to the peer assistance process understand their roles. These guidelines should not hamstring the ability of consulting teachers to help participating teachers. Consulting teachers need enough flexibility to exercise their professional judgement and skill.

➤ **Ensuring fair treatment**

The fair treatment of participating teachers is critical to the success of a peer assistance program. Fair treatment demands that the participating teacher must have full knowledge and understanding of the peer assistance program and an understandable explanation of his or her rights. The NEA Peer Assistance and Review Resolution emphasizes that due process protections must run throughout the process.

The joint committee plays a vital role in ensuring fair treatment. The joint committee must constantly monitor the peer assistance program to ensure that it is being implemented fairly and properly, that both the letter and spirit of the program are being honored. This oversight responsibility of the joint committee can include hearing and resolving individual complaints from participating teachers of unfair treatment.

In any peer assistance program, consulting teachers need to document the ongoing assessments of participating teachers. The program, for its part, must have in place clear rules on the allowable use of these documents and other communications. All consulting and participating teachers need to understand these rules.

Existing peer assistance programs take different approaches to these rules on the allowable use of documents generated in the peer assistance process. Whatever the approach chosen, participating teachers should receive copies of any material that is submitted to the joint committee by a consulting teacher or evaluator.

Moreover, participating teachers should be afforded an opportunity to respond to such material, at their option, either in writing or by appearing before the joint committee.

To the extent that the challenge by the participating teacher places any relevant facts in dispute – involving either the operation of the program or the substance of the evaluation – the joint committee should resolve that dispute before recommending to the school district that an adverse employment action be taken.

The NEA Peer Assistance and Review Resolution notes that rigorous and extensive assistance, over a reasonable period of time, must be furnished before any recommendation to terminate a participating teacher.

➤ **How should peer programs be evaluated?**

Any peer assistance program, as well as the work of the joint committee, must have an assessment and evaluation process built in. This process should actively involve participating teachers, consulting teachers, teachers generally, school administrators, parents, and even the community at large.

The program guidelines should spell out how and when such assessment and evaluation will take place, in what form, and how the results will be disseminated.

What variations of peer assistance can one consider?

Peer assistance programs may vary in their “audience.” Programs include either new teachers or veteran teachers experiencing serious difficulties or both.

Programs for only first-year teachers that perform only a peer assistance function are sometimes referred to as *mentoring* programs.

Generally, there are two broad considerations for local affiliates interested in establishing mentoring programs.

First, a mentoring program needs to provide high-quality, sustained assistance to the new teacher. Some programs, in an effort to save money, offer mentor teachers little or no additional time to actually provide assistance.

The second consideration: A local needs to ensure that the rules on allowable uses of documents, products, and communications between mentor teachers and new teachers are clearly established in writing and communicated to all program participants. New teachers must know, before the fact, whether remarks they make to a mentor teacher may be shared with the school officials who can decide their continued employment.

The Seattle STAR program takes this approach to providing peer assistance: in the STAR program, neither the consulting teacher nor the joint committee make formal recommendations for retention or non-retention to the school district. Instead, the school district handles all retention and dismissal decision without such input, and a “data curtain” provision prevents school district access to any documents developed in the course of a consulting teacher’s efforts to help a participating teacher.

Consulting teachers in the STAR program do sometimes counsel participating teachers out of the profession. The Seattle Teachers Association has even helped secure non-teaching jobs for many of these individuals.

Veteran teachers participate in the STAR program on purely a voluntary basis, which makes issues around safeguards less pressing since inappropriate referrals of veteran teachers are no longer a danger.

There is no single “best” approach to helping inexperienced or struggling teachers succeed. Some places may choose to adopt alternatives that are modest in scope, either as a first step to a more ambitious peer effort or as an alternative to a more comprehensive approach.

The bottom line: Every local district and association needs to develop a program appropriate to local needs and context, or choose not to develop a program at all, if the time and place are just not right.

➤ **Helping all teachers**

Some teachers teach poorly and need help to become more effective. But all teachers, even the most skilled, can teach better. In any profession, the need for professional growth is a given. No practitioner can remain truly effective without developing professionally.

Schools have a responsibility to help all members, not just those who most need help because they are either new to the profession or struggling in their professional practice. Fortunately, one need not choose between helping some and helping all.

Many places that have pioneered peer assistance programs for new teachers and veteran teachers in trouble have also develop separate, voluntary programs to foster the professional development of faculty who aren't new or in trouble.

High-quality professional growth and skill enhancement experiences should be the norm for all teachers, from the time they enter a preservice program to the day they retire.