

PAR

TEACHERS WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING



TEACHERS GUIDE TO THE PEER ASSISTANCE AND REVIEW PROGRAM AND THE NEW TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEM

THE GOAL

MCEA is working with MCPS on an ambitious agenda for the recognition and support of teaching and teachers. Teaching is rocket science. It requires not only a rich understanding of content, but also a broad range of skills for differentiating instruction and meeting the varying needs of all students. Teaching is more complex – and more demanding – than most non-educators even realize. High quality teaching requires a commitment to continuous reflection and improvement. And a growing body of research indicates that nothing is more important for student success than the quality of teaching.

As a result, the professional development and teacher evaluation systems in the Montgomery County Public Schools have undergone a rapid, and radical change. This guide is designed to help MCPS teachers understand how the new systems work.

WHAT IS THE PEER ASSISTANCE & REVIEW (PAR) PROGRAM?

The PAR Program is a cornerstone of the new evaluation process within the “Professional Growth System”. Because the teachers’ union and the administrators’ association jointly run it, PAR represents a qualitative shift in how the school system supports and evaluates teachers. The program is run by a joint Panel of eight teachers recommended by MCEA and eight principals recommended by the principals’ association (MCAASP).

WHO DOES THE PAR PROGRAM SERVE?

The PAR program serves two groups of teachers.

- Novice teachers – a new teacher with no prior teaching experience.
- Experienced teachers who receive a below standard evaluation from their principal.



For both groups, the PAR program provides intensive assistance to the teacher, and is responsible for an independent assessment and recommendation for continued employment, continued assistance, non-renewal or dismissal.

HOW DOES THE PAR PROGRAM PROVIDE SUPPORT?

The assistance, as well as the performance review, comes not from a ‘specialist’ or administrator, but a fellow teacher. This peer educator, called a “Consulting Teacher” is an outstanding teacher on leave from the classroom for three years. Upon completing their three – year service to the PAR program, they return to the classroom. They are hired by the joint PAR Panel. In order to apply, a teacher must not only submit recommendations from their administrator, but from their MCEA building rep and teacher colleagues as well. Consulting teachers are expected not only to be master teachers, but also to be skilled in peer coaching, counseling, and adult learning.

Consulting Teachers work fulltime providing assistance to colleagues. They support a caseload of approximately 16 teachers. They . . .



- help teachers plan lessons and review student work
- model lessons
- provide resource recommendations
- team – teach
- conduct and debrief observations
- arrange for teachers to observe

other teachers

- work to assist their teachers to become successful

Consulting Teachers provide a level of support that is unprecedented within MCPS.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE YEAR OF PAR SUPPORT?

Following the year of assistance, the PAR Panel makes a recommendation for continued employment, another year of PAR support, non-renewal, or dismissal. Unlike traditional evaluation systems, that recommendation is not made solely by administrators nor based solely on a principal's evaluation. The consulting teacher provides an independent performance assessment – a “second opinion” so to speak. And the employment recommendation is made by the joint PAR Panel – a group that includes an equal number of teachers and principals. This system provides far more safeguards against arbitrary or capricious action than traditional evaluation systems. It also is based on the premise that other classroom teachers may be in the best position to judge whether a teacher's performance is adequate or not.

No teacher is dismissed or non-renewed from the school system for classroom performance issues unless he/she has had the opportunity of PAR support. This is a major change from previous policy in MCPS.

THE TEACHER EVALUATION SYSTEM

The PAR Program is just one part of the overall teacher evaluation system.

The system also includes:

- Clearer performance standards for teachers
- Less frequent formal evaluations
- More in – depth classroom observations
- Greater emphasis on ongoing professional growth

The performance standards for teachers (see box) are modeled on the standards developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards for national teacher certification.



The performance standards that under gird the new evaluation system are rather simple:

- Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
- Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
- Teachers are responsible for establishing and managing student learning in a positive learning environment.
- Teachers continually assess student progress, analyze the results and adapt instruction to improve student achievement.
- Teachers are committed to continuous improvement and professional development.
- Teachers exhibit a high degree of professionalism.

HOW DO EXPERIENCED TEACHERS GET INTO PAR?

Experienced teachers are referred to PAR only after receiving a “Below Standard” rating on a formal evaluation by their principal. Referral, however, is not an automatic inclusion in to the program. Upon referral to the PAR program, the PAR Panel assigns a consulting teacher to review the case. The consulting teacher is responsible for conducting an independent assessment of the teacher's skills. The CT does a minimum of two observations and then makes a recommendation to the PAR Panel for inclusion or non-inclusion into the program. The PAR Panel then makes the final decision after reviewing the documentation and recommendations from the consulting teacher and the principal. If the PAR Panel concludes that the principal's evaluation is not an accurate reflection of the teacher's performance and the teacher is not included in PAR, then the Office of Human Resources assists the principal in revising the evaluation to reflect a “Meets Standard” rating. In this way, the PAR referral process serves as a check-and-balance to the principal's evaluation rating.

Previously all tenured teachers were evaluated every three years. Now, after completing probation, a teacher's next formal evaluation comes after three years, the next one after four years, and subsequently an evaluation is performed every five years.

As in the past, a principal may request an evaluation in a non-evaluation year if, after performing two formal observations, there are concerns about a teacher's performance. Initiation of a special evaluation is not appealable. A special evaluation does not culminate in dismissal. It may, however, result in referral to the Peer Assistance and Review Program.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

All principals (and secondary resource teachers) are being trained in how to conduct more in-depth classroom observations. Each is spending a total of 36 hours in the “Observing and Analyzing Teaching” courses to ensure that all observers have the skills necessary to conduct meaningful observations – and to engage in meaningful dialogue with teachers about their teaching. Previously, observations were often perfunctory, and post-observation conferences often failed to focus on substantive discussions about instruction.

For a tenured teacher or a probationary teacher not assigned a consulting teacher, a minimum of three observations is required in an evaluation year. While formal observations are not required during non-evaluation years, teachers may be observed both formally and informally. For a probationary teacher in PAR and assigned a consulting teacher, at least two observations by the administrator or qualified observer must take place, as well as at least three observations by the consulting teacher.

Observations must last at least 30 minutes and at least one of the observations must be announced and include a pre-observation conference. The post observation conference (required for all observations) should be held within three days of the actual observation, unless delayed by mutual consent. The post observation conference may include such elements as: reflection on the lesson, clarifications, general dialogue, and goal setting. The actual observation report should be written after the conference to allow inclusion of conference discussion and should be submitted within 10 days of the post observation conference, unless delayed by mutual consent.



All teachers can now also enroll in the companion “Studying Skillful Teaching” course (formerly “Understanding Teaching”) to learn the language and frameworks being used to describe the complexity of teaching skills.

For more information on this course call:

MCPS Center for Skillful Teaching at 301-601-4800.

DUE PROCESS

The MCEA contract is very clear. Nothing in the PAR Program “shall diminish the rights granted to teachers...relatively to suspension and dismissal, and the right to appeal such personnel actions” (Article 14 Section H2e). Teachers being recommended for dismissal have the right to appeal to – and appear before – the PAR Panel. If they are still recommended for dismissal, they have a right to a meeting with the Superintendent (or his designee). If the Superintendent still recommends dismissal, the teacher can appeal to the county Board of Education, and a decision of the county Board can be appealed to the State Board of Education. MCEA members are entitled to assistance from MCEA staff throughout the PAR process and in case of appeal.

But because such adverse personnel actions are no longer made solely by administrators – nor based solely on a single principal’s evaluation – teachers’ rights are better protected. Arbitrary and capricious recommendations for dismissal are far less likely now, because teachers are guaranteed a “second opinion” from an independent consulting teacher, and they are also guaranteed almost a year of intensive support before any dismissal recommendation is made.

In a workforce as large as this, with approximately 10,000 classroom teachers, and in a system that is doing as much new hiring as MCPS is (as many as 1,000 new teachers a year) there are difficult decisions that have to be made. The Peer Assistance and Review Program is designed to ensure that there are adequate safeguards and the appropriate checks and balances, so that the right judgments are made.

SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

Because formal evaluations are now done less frequently; more time is devoted to professional growth during the non-evaluation years. MCPS' "Professional Growth System" is a wide-ranging initiative to support individual professional growth. In addition to PAR and the evaluation system, it includes:

- individual, multi – year professional development plans
- school – based staff development teachers to support job-embedded professional development
- school – based staff development substitute teachers to provide teachers with time to pursue their professional development plans
- a dramatic reduction in the traditional "drive-through, sit-and-get" pull-out training that disrupts instruction and has little long-term value – in favor of the job-embedded approach to professional development
- a shift to summer training (at per diem pay rates) for priority training – again reducing the frequency of disruptive pull-out training.

FINAL EVALUATIONS

The formal evaluation process is intended to be collegial and fully participatory. Teachers are encouraged to bring information and data to the process. Formal work on professional development plans (PDPs) is suspended in an evaluation year to provide time for reflection on personal review of practice.

The culminating document in an evaluation year is a written formal evaluation. The evaluation summary is based on formal observations, Professional Development Plans, and any other additional data relevant to teacher or student growth, including the use of any data maintained by the teacher. This data may be kept in a portfolio, or any method that is most useful to the individual.

The final evaluation summary concludes with a holistic rating of either "Meets Standard" or "Below Standard." The new evaluation is not meant to be a checklist. Teachers do not receive a "Meets Standard" or "Below Standard" for each of the six standards. The purpose of the new system is to eliminate the old "checklist approach," not rediscover it in a new form.

CONCLUSION

For MCEA, improving the quality of teaching and learning is a central part of our mission. Teachers will not do well if our students do not do well. Collectively, we must be part of the solution to the challenges facing public education – and not allow ourselves to be painted as part of the problem.

For the first time, the teachers union has been part of the design and implementation of the evaluation system in MCPS. And for the first time, we have an evaluation system with adequate safeguards that provides intensive assistance to those who need it; an evaluation system that recognizes the professionalism of teachers and our role in improving student achievement.



Members of the Peer Assistance and Review Panel

TEACHERS WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF TEACHING



FOR MORE INFORMATION . . .

. . . on the Peer Assistance and Review Program, the New Teacher Evaluation System, and the overall Professional Growth System, see:

- The MCPS Professional Growth System Handbook (the official evaluation system guide)
- The MCEA website: www.mcea.nea.org
- The MCPS Office of Human Resources website: www.mcps.k12.md.us/personnel
- Your MCEA UniServ Director

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