

The New York Times

June 5, 2011

ON EDUCATION

Helping Teachers Help Themselves

By MICHAEL WINERIP

ROCKVILLE, Md.—The Montgomery County Public Schools system here has a highly regarded program for evaluating teachers, providing them extra support if they are performing poorly and getting rid of those who do not improve.

The program, Peer Assistance and Review—known as PAR—uses several hundred senior teachers to mentor both newcomers and struggling veterans. If the mentoring does not work, the PAR panel—made up of eight teachers and eight principals—can vote to fire the teacher.

Sitting in on two cases last week, I could not tell from the comments which of the panel members were teachers and which were principals. In one of the cases, 11 of the 12 panel members present voted to follow a principal's recommendation and discipline the teacher; in the other, they decided in a 10-to-2 vote to reject a principal's recommendation and support the teacher.

In the 11 years since PAR began, the panels have voted to fire 200 teachers, and 300 more have left rather than go through the PAR process, said Jerry D. Weast, the superintendent of the Montgomery County system, which enrolls 145,000 students, one-third of them from low-income families. In the 10 years before PAR, he said, five teachers were fired. "It took three to five years to build the trust to get PAR in place," he explained. "Teachers had to see we weren't playing gotcha."

Doug Prouty, the teachers' union president, said, "It wouldn't work without the level of trust we have here."

Nancy S. Grasmick, Maryland's state superintendent of schools, called PAR "an excellent system for professional development." Senior staff members from the United States Department of Education have visited here to study the program, and Montgomery County officials have gone to Washington to explain how it works. In February, the district was one of 12 featured in Denver at a Department of Education conference on labor-management collaboration.

Dr. Weast, who calls the United States secretary of education, Arne Duncan, "a good friend," said, "He's told me,

'Jerry, you're going where the country needs to go.'"

Unfortunately, federal dollars from the Obama administration's Race to the Top program are not going where Dr. Weast and the PAR program need to go. Montgomery County schools were entitled to \$12 million from Race to the Top, but Dr. Weast said he would not take the money because the grant required districts to include students' state test results as a measure of teacher quality. "We don't believe the tests are reliable," he said. "You don't want to turn your system into a test factory."

Race to the Top aims to spur student growth by improving teacher quality, which is exactly what Montgomery County is doing. Sad to say, the district is getting the right results the wrong way.

It does not seem to matter that 84 percent of Montgomery County students go on to college and that 63 percent earn degrees there — the very variables that President Obama has said should be the true measure of academic success. It does not seem to matter that 2.5 percent of all black children in America who pass an Advanced Placement test live in Montgomery County, more than five times its share of the nation's black population.

The 12 states that were awarded the billions of dollars in Race to the Top grants are using student scores as a measure of teachers' worth. New York has decided that state tests will count for up to 40 percent of a teacher's grade; Maryland does not have a magic number yet.

Mr. Duncan's supporters have marveled at how he has used Race to the Top money to pressure states into adopting his education agenda. Dr. Grasmick, the Maryland superintendent, said the administration made it clear that if a state wanted to win a grant, the proposal had to include a formula for calculating student growth. Maryland toed the line and was awarded \$250 million.

Asked if the state could make an exception for Montgomery because of the PAR program's history of success, Dr. Grasmick said Gov. Martin O'Malley had been told that

no modifications were allowed. Nor are districts permitted to appeal to federal officials, said Ann Whalen, director of the Implementation and Support Unit at the Education Department.

So here is where things stand: Montgomery's PAR program, which has worked beautifully for 11 years, is not acceptable. But the Maryland plan—which does not exist yet—meets federal standards.

Dr. Weast said a major failing of Race to the Top's teacher-evaluation system is that it is being imposed from above rather than being developed by the teachers and administrators who will use it. "People don't tear down what they help build," he said.

Maybe that is why Race to the Top has been divisive in so many places. In Maryland, teachers' unions in 22 of the 24 districts refused to sign the state's grant proposal. In New York and New Jersey, the competition has made the war between the unions and state officials even nastier.

Every politician who micromanages education today should visit a PAR meeting.

At a session on Thursday, a principal recommended that the panel give a tenured middle school teacher a year to improve before deciding whether to dismiss her. The principal argued that the woman did not meet three of the district's six teaching standards: how to effectively teach the students, how to assess students and help them grow academically, and how to act professionally.

Among other things, the principal told the panel that the teacher's lesson plans were too vague and created on the fly; that her students were not being challenged; that her assess-

ment of them was weak, and that most were given A's; and that she repeatedly missed meetings and did not work well with her colleagues.

A senior teacher testified that she had not noticed problems when observing the classroom. The middle school teacher then defended herself and was questioned by the panel, which discussed the case after she left.

Panel members said they were concerned that the teacher had not saved her lesson plans from year to year; that the principal had given her an improvement plan in October, but she had not begun to carry it out until January; and that she complained about having insufficient curriculum materials, but had not tried to correct the problem.

After 90 minutes, panel members voted to provide her with weekly mentoring visits from a senior teacher, with the caveat that if she did not show improvement she could be dismissed.

Administrators and union officials credited the good will developed through PAR for some of the district's other successes. Five years ago, the district created a budget committee, half of whose members belonged to unions. Last year, when Larry Bowers, the district's finance director, said the schools could not afford a scheduled 5.3 percent raise, the teachers' union agreed. "Saved us \$89 million," Mr. Bowers said.

Mr. Prouty, the union president, said he knew Mr. Bowers was telling the truth. "We formulate the budget; we know where the money is, which makes us much more trusting," said Mr. Prouty, whose members also agreed to forgo a raise next year.