

IMPROVING OUR PRACTICE

Peer Assistance and Review in Seattle

BY DREW DILLHUNT



SIMONE SHIN

Early on the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 15, 2015, following four months of contentious negotiations, a six-day strike, and hours of late-night deliberation, the Seattle Education Association (SEA) and Seattle Public Schools (SPS) reached a tentative contract agreement. The agreement, approved by the full membership the following Sunday, included a slate of bread-and-butter gains such as significant pay increases and lower student-teacher ratios. However, the contract also reflected an intentional shift by the union—guided by thousands of individual conversations with members—to expand the field of issues SEA would bargain well beyond the frame of traditional industrial unionism.

As a result, the new collective bargaining agreement also boasted an array of gains focused explicitly on social justice and racial equity. The agreement included 30 minutes of guaranteed, daily recess for all elementary students in the district (students of color continue to receive significantly less recess time on average than their white counterparts). It also guaranteed dedicated training and financial support for 30 racial equity teams in schools across the district. These teams support an ongoing analysis of how racism manifests itself at the building level; they work collaboratively to “interrupt the status quo by mitigating, disrupting, and dismantling the school system’s initiatives that uphold racism.”¹

This shift toward social justice unionism helped to connect the bargaining process to the core values of the membership and communicated to the larger community that SEA was committed to prioritizing the needs of students and families,² even where that meant smaller traditional gains for members in terms of compensation and benefits.

On that final night of bargaining, the only issue left on the table was the indirect use of student test scores in teacher evaluations—a measure introduced in Seattle five years earlier to meet the requirements of the federal Race to the Top Program. The language in the 2010 collective bargaining agreement governing student growth measures had been developed collaboratively by SEA and SPS to ensure that while student growth scores could lead to a closer look at teacher practice, they would remain confidential and would not directly impact evaluations.³ By the time the 2015 teacher strike arrived, however, the push from the SEA membership to have student test scores completely decoupled from teacher evaluation had swelled significantly.

The following morning at the bargaining table, the district bargaining team suggested Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) as a possible way forward that promised to satisfy the interests of both sides by separating student test scores from teacher evaluation while introducing a growth-oriented approach to accountability. It was from that suggestion that the two sides hammered out the remaining section of the tentative agreement:

SPS and SEA agree to develop a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program using an interest-based bargaining process during the term of this collective bargaining agreement. The PAR . . . working group will . . . design authentic indicators of teacher performance and discuss the role of assessments in teacher evaluation. SPS and SEA agree to eliminate . . . District-Determined Growth Ratings for the term of this contract.⁴

These three sentences—the last lines to be added that early morning—were not the portion of the tentative agreement most talked about by the media, the community, or even by the membership of SEA. Nonetheless, this short piece of exploratory language not only helped to finalize the collective bargaining agreement, it also had a significant impact on the working relationships between the three constituent groups guiding the work of teacher evaluation: the Seattle Education Association,

the central office of the Seattle Public Schools, and the Principals' Association of Seattle Schools. The interest-based bargaining process called for in this language would be the first of many steps in establishing the kinds of collaborative relationships needed to begin co-constructing systematic solutions to complex problems.

Professional Unionism

Driven throughout by the social justice unionism of the SEA membership, the 2015 collective bargaining process closed with an unexpected invitation from SPS to embark on a collaborative journey of professional unionism. Where traditional unionism understands accountability for the profession as an external responsibility and the exclusive arena of principals and managers, professional unionism strives to “look beyond the self-interest of individual teachers” by framing teachers as “professionals who uphold high teaching standards” while navigating “the interdependency of teachers with the local school authorities.”⁵ PAR systems, and the interest-based work required to develop and sustain them, sit squarely in the domain of professional unionism. (See p. 103.)

That October, the PAR working group, composed of 14 educators (seven SEA members, four district administrators, and three building principals), traveled to Montgomery County, Maryland, for a training at the Montgomery County Education Association titled “Leading to Organize: PAR & Teacher Evaluation.”

During our first four days working with Montgomery County Public Schools, we expected our counterparts there to tell us about how PAR worked in their system. Instead, what they talked to us about was the larger Professional Growth System, of which PAR was just one part. Everyone we talked to in the system—be they teacher union members or district administrators—told us narratives unique to the role they played, and each story had a deeply shared sense of what it meant to be a professional in that district. These shared stories reflected a shared vision and mission around this work, which our system clearly did not yet have.

Most importantly, the entire Professional Growth System was framed through a model of distributed leadership, where those closest to the work drive the work—where educator voice is central to decision-making at all levels of the system. Distributed leadership empowers what Alma Harris has described as “collective influences” to positively impact organizational outcomes.⁶ This immediately resonated as a key interest for the SEA members in the PAR working group.

We were pleased to discover that nearly all of the components of Montgomery County's Professional Growth System were already in place in Seattle. Unlike many of the other visiting districts, SPS already had a robust mentoring program for new-to-profession teachers and a parallel program for coaching experienced teachers who received below-proficient evaluation ratings, as well as a building-based teacher leadership program codified in the 2010 collective bargaining agreement. All three of these components already had dedicated financial and logistical support in our system. While there was plenty of work to do coordinating these components under a shared vision, we wouldn't need to build these components from the ground up.

What stood out to the working group most clearly was what our system was missing. A key component of the Professional Growth System in Montgomery County is their foundational coursework series. The series includes two courses on effective teaching practices (all teachers in the district take this course) and another on observing classroom practice and giving effective feedback (expected of all building evaluators and consulting teachers). These courses are designed and facilitated by teacher-leaders. We had nothing parallel to this in our system.

“Evaluation alone will not improve practice,” writes Linda Darling Hammond; “productive feedback must be accompanied by opportunities to learn.”⁷ Any effective system of teacher evaluation and accountability must have at its core a system of growth-oriented supports. That system of supports must explicitly communicate and actively engage teachers in learning not just the standards of effective teaching, but also the *how* and *why* of effective teaching.⁸ Ensuring an effective teacher in every classroom is impossible where we don’t yet have a shared vision or language of effective teaching.

We left Montgomery County convinced that in order to develop an effective PAR system, we had to commit to undertaking the much broader and larger project of developing a truly coordinated system of professional growth by developing foundational coursework and fully integrating that coursework with our already existing components of support.

Identifying Shared Interests

Back in Seattle, the number of voices represented in the working group expanded, with each constituency identifying additional members to more fully represent the many perspectives in the system. The group of nearly 40 educators who agreed to be part of designing the new professional growth system included classroom

teachers, mentor teachers, union leadership, union staff, building principals, and central office administrators. The next step was to develop a plan.

Given the fractured trust that still characterized the relationship of our three constituent groups as a result of the recent strike, Ellen Holmes, our NEA facilitator, encouraged us to take time to independently caucus as three separate constituent groups (SEA, central office, and the principals’ association) both prior to and following our shared work together back in Seattle.

This intentional caucusing helped to normalize the reality that we would continue to have positional differences around some issues (e.g., compensation and class size) even as we identified significant overlaps in our shared interests.

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differences in our constituent groups allowed us to better see our shared interests when we met as a full group. This process slowly fostered a sense of trust in our relationships with one another. We were able to lean into productive conflict around our shared work. The process acknowledged that we didn't need to agree on everything, or even most things, in order to work productively together toward our shared interests.

From our list of shared interests—which, to the surprise of many of us, was not a short one—emerged five distinct working groups, each focused on a specific component of the coordinated professional growth system we were now designing. These components included Foundational Coursework, the Teacher Leadership Cadre, the Consulting Teacher Program, the PAR Panel, and the Professional Growth and Educator Support System (PGES) Steering Committee. The five proposals developed in these groups would eventually be formalized as the SPS Professional Growth and Educator Support System in the 2018–19 SEA collective bargaining agreement.

Unsurprisingly, the three-year path leading from the launch of the PAR working group to the adoption of those proposals was neither simple nor straightforward. Members left the working group; new members joined. We relaunched the interest-based bargaining process and we developed norms all over again. A new superintendent took the helm of the district just prior to the ratification of the one-year contract in which the proposals from the PAR working groups were codified in the collective bargaining agreement. Yet, as a result of the shared commitment to the work by all three constituent groups and because of the principled relationships that had been developed, the work continued to grow and our shared interests began to coalesce into a shared vision.

Peer Assistance and Review

Classroom teachers who are released from their building to provide individualized coaching and assessment of instructional practice, known as consulting teachers, are the core of any PAR program. In Seattle, these teachers serve for a term of no longer than five years and must return to a classroom assignment for at least three years before being eligible to reapply. Consulting teachers are chosen for their teaching and leadership skills and receive ongoing training around effective mentoring.

Because Seattle already had a well-established mentoring program, the biggest change that has resulted from the shift to PAR is the addition of the consulting teacher summative assessment of teacher practice. Assessment had not previously been part of the mentor role. The PAR program was piloted over the course of the 2017–18 school year with 10 participating classroom teachers, all of whom had already received a full year of mentoring (but had not yet reached a fully proficient overall evaluation rating).

The 10 teachers who agreed to participate in the pilot were offered the opportunity to receive a second year of consulting teacher support with the understanding that they would engage in and give feedback on the newly expanded consulting teacher role. The PAR pilot allowed the assessment processes outlined in the pro-

posals to be launched on a small scale under low-stakes conditions with ongoing feedback from participating teachers. It also allowed the eight consulting teachers who took part in the pilot to share their perspectives on how a shift to PAR, and the inclusion of the summative assessment, might affect their practice as mentors and their learning-focused relationships with participating teachers.

In parallel, Seattle piloted the PAR Panel, a deliberative body composed of eight SEA members and eight members of the principals' association. The panel serves as the designee of the superintendent and makes consensus-based decisions about continuing contract offers, additional consulting teacher support, and non-renewal. All panel decisions are made in closed deliberations informed by anonymized principal evaluations and consulting teacher assessments. The identity of the classroom teacher, the building evaluator, and the consulting teacher are not known by the panel.

Over the course of the pilot year, the panel finalized its norms and engaged in practice cases. The PAR Panel also worked with SEA's Center for Racial Equity to begin the ongoing work of developing tools and protocols to explicitly name implicit bias as it shows up during the panel's consensus-based decision processes.

In the fall of 2018, following the ratification of the new collective bargaining agreement, Seattle's PAR program launched at full scale, serving both new-to-profession teachers and experienced teachers not currently meeting the performance schedule. Experienced teachers who were already working with a consulting teacher prior to the shift to PAR were given the opportunity to opt into PAR (which all of them did).

In order to truly cultivate distributed leadership, the design of a PAR program must be the result of an ongoing interest-based process at the local level. As a result, the mechanics of each PAR program, including how teachers enter into PAR, vary widely from district to district.⁸ In Seattle, all new-to-profession teachers are automatically entered into PAR and receive a full year of consulting teacher support. That support can be extended to a second year—and in rare cases a third year—by the PAR Panel. Building evaluators may also refer experienced teachers with provisional contracts (three or less years of service in the district) for PAR support following two observations where significant performance concerns are identified and communicated explicitly to the classroom teacher.

Experienced teachers with continuing contracts are required to enter PAR only as the result of an overall below-proficient summative evaluation. However, experienced teachers with continuing contracts may also choose to request PAR in coordination with their evaluator, as soon as significant concerns are raised, in order to access early consulting teacher support. Teachers with continuing contracts generally receive consulting teacher support for one to two years.

Having the PAR program explicitly named in the collective bargaining agreement has guaranteed significant and consistent financial support from the central office for developing and sustaining the new PGES. In 2018, when all five components were added to the collective bargaining agreement, existing programs were consolidated, which streamlined the work and allowed us to hire three additional consulting teachers, bringing their total number to 21. This has allowed the con-

sulting teacher program to ensure manageable consulting teacher caseloads (an average ratio of 1:17) as the assessment role of PAR is added to their work.

As a result, there are now 26 SEA members housed in the human resources department, coordinating and implementing the work of the PGES. This has been an essential step not only in ensuring that the PGES is a coordinated system but also in maintaining the connectivity between SEA and the central office needed for this interest-based work.

Foundational Coursework

During the final months of the working group's three-year design period, we finalized the overarching vision statement for the Seattle PGES, which would ultimately appear in the collective bargaining agreement.

Seattle Public School Educators believe that education is a civil right. Our Professional Growth and Educator Support System . . . is designed and managed by those who work closest with students . . . and centered on quality student learning for all.¹⁰

While this language is deeply connected to our core values of educational equity and distributed leadership,¹¹ it does not in itself ensure any substantive change in our systems. What it does do is explicitly formalize those values as the foundation of our shared work in the PGES. This provides a dependable space from which to ask the question “Is the current design of our systems aligned with our professed values?” Where the answer to that question is “No,” we must commit to change.

This vision statement has already had an impact on the development of the foundational coursework, which all new-to-profession teachers and all teacher leaders are expected to complete. While the design team's initial focus was almost exclusively on supporting educators in developing their practice as culturally responsive teachers,¹² we quickly realized that in order for the learning activities to align with the vision of “education [as] a civil right,” participants would also need ongoing opportunities to develop and sustain their racial equity literacy—understanding that an examination of our own unconscious and dysconscious beliefs as teachers must be at the center of any culturally responsive practice.¹³

This realization led the design team to create an initial draft of what would eventually become Seattle's Foundational Beliefs for Supporting Student Learning.¹⁴ These five foundational beliefs, intended to guide the work of all educators in our system, explicitly name the ongoing impact of racism in our system and the necessity of active countermeasures in all parts of that system. The adoption of these five beliefs by SPS has in turn supported both consulting teachers and building principals as they work to more explicitly communicate what effective culturally responsive practice looks and sounds like in the classroom.

The SPS foundational beliefs document continues to be an avenue for the work of the PGES to come alongside the already well-established anti-racist leadership within SEA and SPS. During the pilot of the foundational coursework,

members of the SPS Department of Racial Equity Advancement engaged in the course as participants and provided actionable feedback on the coursework. This process helped not only to refine the content but also to make the facilitation of the coursework more culturally responsive. A key shift was beginning to intentionally disrupt the white supremacy norms (e.g., individualism, discomfort with feelings, and “product over process”) that are consistently baked into the way we deliver learning to students and adults alike.¹⁵

Professional Unionism as Anti-Racist Work

School systems in the United States were never designed to serve all students. Peer Assistance and Review and the other professional structures will not inherently disrupt racist policies and practices. They must be explicitly designed to do so—otherwise they will simply reinforce and deepen existing patterns. In Seattle Public Schools, as in many districts across the country, teachers of color are disproportionately identified as having performance concerns. This pattern of disproportionality exists both in districts with PAR and in districts without it.

In a truly anti-racist professional growth system, we should expect that disproportionality to disappear over time. In order for this to happen, our PGES will need to come fully alongside the already established anti-racist leadership within SEA and SPS. We’ve been in partnership with the University of Washington from the very beginning of this work to collect baseline data to analyze the impact of the changes we’ve implemented. We will need to continue to ask hard questions to see if the systems we’ve created are doing the anti-racist work they were intended to do. If not, those systems will need to be redesigned.

Ultimately, the lessons we’ve learned as a system through this process are not about the importance of implementing a PAR program. Rather, our lessons as a system have been about the power of engaging in productive conflict using an interest-based approach, about implementing a model of distributed leadership where those closest to the work, in this case classroom teachers, drive the work.

It’s too early to make any definitive claims about the impact the new PGES is having on teacher growth and student learning in Seattle Public Schools. However, what we do know is that, as a result of consulting teacher assessments, 59 new-to-profession teachers (roughly a quarter of those supported) have already been recommended for additional consulting teacher support, which they would not have otherwise received. This year, the consulting teacher program was also able to offer new-to-profession teachers of color the option of requesting a consulting teacher of color (an option that 23 teachers of color took advantage of).

Distributed leadership has already begun to create collaborative spaces within the PGES where collective influence is not only possible but also encouraged. The leadership of the PAR Panel and the PGES Steering Committee, for example—both composed of SEA, central office, and principals’ association members—led to specific changes in how teacher evaluations are written to ensure they more clearly communicate a full picture of teacher practice. As long as Seattle’s PGES continues to develop in alignment with the core values outlined in its vision statement, this

collective influence will expand. However, only with members continuing to push from within—as well as from without—will we be able to fully interrupt and redesign our systems in ways that are explicitly anti-racist and which allow us to meet the needs of all educators and all students in our district. 🌱

Drew Dillhunt is PAR/PGES coordinator for Seattle Public Schools.

ENDNOTES

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³ Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Seattle Public Schools and Seattle Education Association Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees (2010–2013, Article XI, Section E). Seattle Education Association. seattlewea.org/file_viewer.php?id=2227

⁴ Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Seattle Public Schools and Seattle Education Association Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees (2015–2018, Article XI, Section F). Seattle Education Association. seattlewea.org/file_viewer.php?id=2198

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⁶ Harris, Alma. 2013. *Distributed Leadership Matters: Perspectives, Practicalities, and Potential*. Corwin: p. 116.

⁷ Darling-Hammond, Linda. 2013. *Getting Teacher Evaluation Right: What Really Matters for Effectiveness and Improvement*. Teachers College Press: p. 99.

⁸ Danielson, Charlotte. 2013. *The Framework for Teaching Evaluation Instrument* (2nd edition).

⁹ Johnson, Susan et al. *A User’s Guide to Peer Assistance and Review*. Harvard Graduate School of Education. gse.harvard.edu/~ngt/par

¹⁰ Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Seattle Public Schools and Seattle Education Association Certificated Non-Supervisory Employees (2018–2019, Article II, Section D). Seattle Education Association. seattlewea.org/file_viewer.php?id=20236

¹¹ See *Educational Equity: A Definition*. National Equity Project. nationalequityproject.org/resources/featured-resources/educational-equity-a-definition

¹² Using *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* (Hammond, 2014) and *The Skillful Teacher* 7th edition (Saphier, et al., 2017) as core texts.

¹³ King, Joyce. 1991. “Dysconscious Racism: Ideology, Identity, and the Miseducation of Teachers.” *Journal of Negro Education* 60(2): p. 133–146. doi.org/10.2307/2295605

¹⁴ See *Foundational Beliefs for Supporting Student Learning* (2019, version 2.0). Seattle Public Schools. seattleschools.org/FoundationalBeliefs

¹⁵ Okun, Tema. 2010. *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching About Race and Racism to People Who Don’t Want to Know*. Information Age.

¹⁶ Smith, Allison. 2019. “The Counternarrative of Teacher Evaluation: The Kangaroo Court, the Salem Witch Trials, and the Scarlet Letter.” *Education Sciences* 9(2): p. 147. doi.org/10.3390/educsci9020147; Drake, Steven, Amy Auletto, and Joshua Cowen. 2019. “Grading Teachers: Race and Gender Differences in Low Evaluation Ratings and Teacher Employment Outcomes.” *American Educational Research Journal* 56(5): p. 1800–1833. doi.org/10.3102/0002831219835776

¹⁷ “Driving Diversity with Data.” 2019. University of Washington College of Education. education.uw.edu/research-that-matters/2019/diversity-data#cb01