


# Mentoring Magic

Peer assistance and review helps  
Baltimore County Public Schools  
increase teacher retention and  
student achievement

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**T**eacher effectiveness directly impacts student achievement. Like all schools, Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) aims to develop and retain highly qualified teachers. To achieve that goal, BCPS has implemented Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) as its mentoring program for new teachers and tenured teachers in danger of receiving an ineffective rating.

PAR is a support process for developing skilled teachers to positively influence student outcomes and increase teacher retention. It incorporates consulting teachers (mentors) and administrators, fellow educators, and professional development opportunities to establish an individualized evaluative system that is fair, equitable, and transparent. PAR supports a culture that encourages quality teacher retention, professional growth, and highly effective instruction. It is a vehicle to improve teacher quality by having expert teachers mentor and provide guidance to their peers.

#### **Creating a Peer Assistance and Review Program**

A partnership between the Council of Administrative and Supervisory Employees, the Teachers Association of Baltimore County, and Baltimore County Public Schools was established in August 2012 to design the components of Baltimore County Public Schools' PAR program. The PAR Implementation Team began the work of establishing the program in January 2013. PAR was initiated for first-year teachers without prior teaching experience in all Baltimore County Public Schools during the 2013–2014 school year. During the 2015–2016 school year, PAR was expanded to include tenured teachers identified through the Tenured Teacher Review process.

Teachers' competencies are evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative measures. The PAR Program supports the qualitative portion of the BCPS Teacher



**TEACHER  
RETENTION  
PRE-PAR:  
86–89%**

**TEACHER  
RETENTION  
AFTER PAR  
INTRODUCTION:  
93–95%**

Evaluation System. BCPS uses Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching to evaluate the qualitative portion of a teacher’s professional practice.

The essential roles in the PAR program are consulting teachers and the PAR Panel. The responsibilities, duties, and functions of these roles are described below:

### Consulting Teachers

Consulting teachers (CTs) are teachers who have consistently demonstrated the ability to deliver effective or highly effective instruction for a minimum of five consecutive years. CTs are provided intensive professional development regarding observation, feedback, and reflective conferencing skills so they are

prepared to evaluate and mentor other teachers. CTs also receive training in how to write and present reports on teacher performance. All first-year CTs are assigned a CT mentor.

The primary function of a consulting teacher is to provide the consistent support necessary to develop skilled teachers who positively influence student outcomes. The process of building teacher capacity begins with an assessment of client teacher needs, followed by the development of client goals aligned with the domains of professional practice: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities. Ongoing coaching and support leads to a review of teacher progress.

CTs provide information about strategies for teaching and suggestions about resources based

# 10 TIPS FOR MENTORING TEACHERS

1. **Build a positive, trusting relationship.** Be empathetic without letting teachers lose sight of the fact that student achievement (both academic and socio-emotional) is impacted by teachers’ actions.
2. **Establish individualized goals.** All teachers are dealing with a unique combination of students, schedules, strengths, and challenges. Ongoing conversations about the teachers’ goals—aligned with the district’s evaluation rubric—are essential to personalizing the supports provided by consulting teachers. Determine goals and establish timelines for implementation. A goal may be to implement a new strategy. The timeline may be, “I’ll start on Monday and implement for a full week.” Then, follow up and reflect on the outcomes.
3. **Use reflective questioning.** Carefully considered questions, based on observations and evidence, can help client teachers become adept at independently reflecting on their practice and goals.
4. **Video record an informal observation.** Often, the video is viewed together, and teachers are able to identify their own needs and goals, even before the mentor speaks.
5. **Co-plan and co-teach.** Modeling is a powerful tool.
6. **Allow time for peer observation.** Sometimes a client teacher does not fully understand the feedback they receive until they can see a discussed strategy “in action.”
7. **Give choices.** Some expectations are non-negotiable; each teacher, for instance, must have a classroom management plan. But they can choose which one fits their style. Rather than giving teachers the “philosophy” with no hands-on ideas, provide some concrete strategies that can be quickly implemented.
8. **Create a safe space.** Teachers need leeway to try new things, and time and space to reflect on their efforts.
9. **Highlight successes.** Using data to identify successes in every lesson—regardless of how much work is still needed—is highly effective. Consulting teachers should help clients see their strengths and successes, as well as opportunities for growth.
10. **Use summative reports to track progress.** Help teachers see the big-picture view of their growth. Together, look for new patterns and trends, revisit goals, and adjust course as necessary.

## PAR supports a culture that encourages quality teacher retention, professional growth, and highly effective instruction.

upon BCPS' philosophy, frameworks, initiatives, and priorities. They conduct a minimum of two consulting teacher classroom observations, offer informal feedback, and participate in peer observations, co-teaching, and co-planning. CTs document all support provided in a Client Teacher Contact Log.

CTs regularly communicate with school-based instructional leaders, including principals, to prioritize support for client teachers. At the beginning of the year, CTs initiate communication with the principal of each client teacher in order to schedule a conference to discuss the PAR process and the CT's role in supporting the client teacher. CTs touch base with each client principal at least quarterly.

### The PAR Panel

The PAR Panel consists of 18 members appointed by the superintendent: nine teacher representatives recommended by the teachers association and nine school-based principals recommended by the Council of Administrative and Supervisory Employees. The PAR Panel provides oversight and guidance for the program as well as selection of and support and supervision for the consulting teachers. Panel members are accountable to their respective organizations for regular updates and ensuring organizational and institutional support of the PAR program.

The PAR Panel meets monthly and makes recommendations on PAR inclusion for probationary and tenured teachers. The panel also hears midyear and final summative presentations from CTs and makes final employment status recommendations to the superintendent. The three employment recommendations that the PAR Panel can make are:

1. **Renewal/continuation of contract:** Exit the PAR program at the end of the evaluation period with continued employment.


2. **Second year in PAR:** An additional year of PAR, as determined using the Criteria for Second Consecutive Year of PAR.
3. **Nonrenewal/termination:** Nonrenewal or termination of contract at the end of the evaluation period.

These recommendations are based on the principal's formal evaluation, the CT reports, presentations before the PAR Panel, and other supporting data. The superintendent or his or her designee reviews and submits a recommendation to the board of education regarding all final decisions on the matters related to an individual teacher's employment status.

### PAR Takes Pressure Off Principals

PAR provides a second set of eyes to the traditional evaluation model. Principals still conduct regular structured observations and evaluations of teachers. But parallel peer review mitigates personal bias in evaluation that is often seen as subjective and provides an opportunity for discussion and appeal when teachers feel they have been unfairly evaluated.

PAR also boosts teacher retention and effectiveness. Before PAR, BCPS retained an average of 86–89 percent of new teachers each year. After PAR, BCPS new teacher retention rates have risen to 93–95 percent per year. Rising retention rates mean that principals can spend less time hiring, and students benefit from teacher expertise.

On its surface, PAR appears to have the ability to reverse a principal's teacher evaluation decisions through the review process. But at BCPS, few evaluations are appealed each year due to conflicting ratings. Of the approximately 650 teachers who receive PAR services annually, no more than four cases are appealed each year because the CT and principal disagree on the rating of a teacher. Rather than an obstacle to principal evaluation, the PAR process confirms principal expertise and provides an avenue for discussing and supporting the growth of new teachers and tenured teachers performing at less than effective levels. 

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