



Basics of the Process

On the following pages of this booklet, you will find a detailed description of the Statewide Peer Review protocol for the New York State Academy for Teaching and Learning. Here, however, we present the process more generally in order to emphasize its basics. Our purpose here is not simply to describe the Academy's Statewide Peer Review protocol for the benefit of those who want to try it, but also to promote the culture of peer review in the schools, school districts, and professional networks of New York State.

Standards-Based Examination of Student Work. The Statewide Peer Review protocol reviews more than just teaching plans. The real focus is on how these plans play out in the experiences of diverse students struggling to achieve high standards and how these plans align with existing core curriculum. The standards offer direction and are central to the discussion. The presence of actual student work—chosen to illustrate a variety of achievement levels (developing, proficient, distinguished)—brings the standards to life, connects them with the actual world of the classroom, and provokes among peers a certain kind of meaningful conversation.

Diversity of Reviewers. Reviewers in the Statewide Peer Review protocol include both teachers experienced in the presenting teachers' subject and grade level and those with other expertise including instructional technology integration. At first, the third-grade teacher may worry that he/she will have little to contribute to the high school science teacher's review, or vice versa, but such concerns are quickly allayed by experience. Indeed, teachers whose own work seems at first far afield provide some of the most useful perspectives on the teachers' and student work they review. Diversity of teaching setting can help enormously, too: different schools and different districts are represented, and a mix of urban, suburban, and rural practitioners are included.

Warm and Cool Feedback. The Statewide Peer Review protocol deliberately cultivates and juxtaposes responses that are supportive and empathetic, and that emphasize the promise of a learning experience (warm), with responses that are questioning and comparative, and that emphasize the ways in which the learning experience might be enriched (cool)¹. The deliberate effort to keep these separate and in balance can seem, at first, needlessly artificial to those preparing for a review. But most who experience the process appreciate the benefits of such artifice—the encouragement it offers to seek out deeper levels of promise and shortcoming, and to give each kind of response its due. At the same time, the artificiality supports a safe environment to examine and discuss the actual work of students and teachers.

Evidence-Based Discussion. The protocol asks the Teacher Presenter and the Reviewers to speak about the learning experience in terms of specific evidence identified in the samples of student work and learning experience. The focus on evidence allows the discussion to move beyond abstract comments, assumptions, and quick judgments to

a deeper understanding of how the learning experience helps students to achieve the intended learning standard.

Authentic Conversation. The Statewide Peer Review protocol—with its balance of warm and cool perspectives and its focus on students’ as well as teachers’ work—encourages the peers to acknowledge their intimate awareness of how difficult it is to teach all students to reach high standards. This acknowledgment in turn provides the basis for an honest and open conversation about how to do such difficult work. It lowers defenses, activates a richer flow of ideas, and ends up boosting teachers’ confidence. The result is that teachers leave the peer review process not only with some fresh approaches to their work, but also with a renewed willingness to maintain the struggle to teach well. Ultimately, the latter is even more important than the former.

¹ Joseph P. McDonald, “Three Pictures of an Exhibition: Warm, Cool, and Hard,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, February 1993, pp. 480-485.