

# AISD REACH Program Update, 2011-2012: The Peer Observation Program



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2011–2012, the REACH program expanded to include a new element, peer observation for teachers. Full-time peer observers were hired and trained to conduct classroom observations and to rate classroom teaching practices. In Spring 2012, staff in the Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) conducted focus groups with peer observers, veteran and new REACH principals, and REACH teachers to better understand the peer observation program and relationships between educators and peer observers, and to develop recommendations for improving the program. DRE staff also conducted a spring survey of REACH participants' attitudes toward the peer observation program and other REACH program elements. Finally, teacher ratings from peer observers' announced and unannounced observations were summarized. Themes gathered from the focus groups and survey data are presented first, followed by analyses of the peer observation data.

Teachers generally provided positive responses to focus group questions about the peer observation program. Survey data also reflected teachers' positive attitudes toward the program; however, some teachers expressed concerns that peer observers did not share their teaching content areas. Principals expressed some concerns about how the peer observers' role fit on their campus, but also spoke favorably about the program. Peer observers felt rewarded by their unique position although they would have liked more support and additional training about effective teaching in non-core areas. All groups agreed that the observation rubric should be revised, peer observers should serve fewer teachers, and additional training should be provided to peer observers to better serve non-core area teachers.

Teachers generally scored lower during the unannounced observations than during the announced observations, although average differences were small. Additionally, some peer observers rated teachers higher or lower, on average, than did others. This could reflect either a difference in the quality of teaching across the campuses they served or could reflect differences in rating methodology across observers. Teachers received moderately consistent ratings during the announced and unannounced observations, suggesting both that teaching may be somewhat consistent and also that teaching may differ in quality from day to day. The same conclusions may be drawn for observers; that is, peer observers both may be consistent in their ratings and may differ from day to day.

Data from administrators' observations suggest a somewhat weak relationship between PDAS and peer observation ratings, which likely reflects differences in the descriptors that define what administrators and peer observers are supposed to rate.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....  | i   |
| <b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....  | iii |
| <b>OVERVIEW OF THE PEER OBSERVATION PROGRAM</b> .....                                     | 1   |
| Why were peer observers added to Reach? .....   | 1   |
| What was the process for conducting peer observations? .....                              | 1   |
| How was the peer observation rubric developed? .....                                      | 1   |
| What was included on the peer observation rubric? .....                                   | 2   |
| <b>COMMON THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND SURVEY DATA</b> .....                              | 2   |
| Peer Observation was valuable. ....   | 2   |
| The pre- and post-observation conferences were valuable. ....                             | 4   |
| Peer observer training was critical. ....   | 7   |
| Principals and teachers had concerns about the accuracy of peer observation ratings. .... | 7   |
| Teachers had mixed feelings about using peer observations in their appraisals. ....       | 10  |
| The peer observation rubric should be revised. ....                                       | 10  |
| Additional peer observers are needed to better support the program. ....                  | 12  |
| <b>PEER OBSERVATION SCORES</b> .....  | 14  |
| <b>RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROGRAM CHANGES</b> .....  | 19  |
| <b>APPENDIX</b> .....   | 20  |

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1. Reach teachers and principals thought the peer observation was a good idea. ... 2

Figure 2. Reach teachers felt supported by and comfortable with their peer observer. ... 3

Figure 3. Teachers valued the feedback they received from their peer observers. .... 5

Figure 4. Reach principals were familiar with the rubric and received adequate training about the program. .... 8

Figure 5. Reach teachers were more confident in the peer observers’ ratings than were principals. .... 8

Figure 6. Reach teachers and principals believed the components on which teachers were rated are fair. .... 11

Figure 7. Most teachers scored between 39 and 47 on the announced and unannounced peer observations. .... 14

Figure 8. Announced observation total scores were slightly higher, on average, than unannounced scores for most observational domains. .... 15

Figure 9. Announced observation total scores were higher, on averaged, than unannounced scores, and some peer observers tended to rate teachers higher or lower than others. .... 16

Figure 10. Peer observers and administrators rated teaching according to somewhat different criteria. ....

## OVERVIEW OF THE PEER OBSERVATION PROGRAM

### Why were peer observers added to REACH?

In an effort to improve teacher effectiveness, several school districts redesigned teacher observations to ensure that conversations about teaching practices and professional development opportunities occur as a means of improving classroom teaching practices (e.g., [The Widget Effect](#) [Weisenberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009] and the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project's [report](#), [Kane & Staiger, 2002]). Although classroom observations are included in Austin Independent School District's (AISD) Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS), the role of the peer observer was designed to provide additional feedback regarding observations of instructional practice, student climate, and professional expectations. Seven peer observers each were assigned to conduct classroom observations and conferences with approximately 200 REACH teachers.

### What was the process for conducting peer observations?

Throughout the 2011–2012 school year, peer observers formally observed their assigned teachers during two separate 45-minute lessons and provided them with critical feedback concerning their teaching and opportunities for growth. To get to know and build trust with their assigned teachers, peer observers first met each assigned teacher, held a pre-observation conference with each teacher, and then conducted scheduled walk-throughs at their assigned schools. Peer observers conducted one announced and one unannounced classroom observation, which were rated using a rubric composed of 13 dimensions that identified best practices in teaching. Teachers were rated on a 1 to 4 scale (with 3 indicating they exhibited proficient skills in that area) with a maximum total score of 52. Teachers received a financial stipend if their combined score across the two observations exceeded the established standard. The announced and the unannounced observations were followed by a post-observation conference (usually scheduled within 48 hours following the observation) to discuss teachers' strengths and weaknesses during the observation, goal setting, and professional development opportunities.

### How was the peer observation rubric developed?

The peer-observation rubric was created by a committee of AISD teachers, principals and administrators to identify and measure specific actions/skills that exemplify best practices in education. This committee incorporated several dimensions of the PDAS rubric, but provided more weight to instructional practice and classroom climate. In 2011–2012, the rubric also was used by administrators at three schools piloting a new teacher appraisal system that will expand to include nine additional schools in 2012–2013. For more information about the new teacher appraisal system, please click [here](#).

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the specific skills required for the different ratings within each dimension, please refer to the Appendix.

### What was included on the peer observation rubric?

Teachers were rated on 13 broad dimensions:<sup>1</sup> engaging students, monitoring students' understanding, differentiating instruction, developing problem-solving & critical thinking skills, promoting rigorous academic expectations, providing relevant feedback to students, designing effective lesson plans and assessments, implementing classroom routines, managing students' behavior, fostering a safe learning environment, establishing a positive classroom climate, and communicating with parents.

### COMMON THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND SURVEY DATA

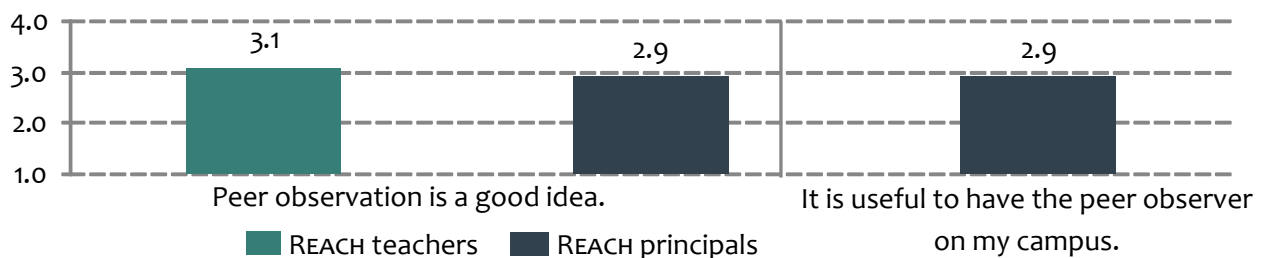
#### Peer Observation was valuable.

Teachers and peer observers maintained overwhelmingly positive impressions of the peer observation program. Principals' impressions of the program were mostly positive. When asked if the peer observation program was a good idea, principals and teachers

*"I feel I can grow more by having constructive criticism. I think [the peer observation program] has been a positive experience."*  
~ REACH teacher

agreed (Figure 1). More importantly, during focus groups, several teachers described how their teaching had improved because of the peer observation program. In fact, one teacher said the peer observation program was "the best part of [REACH]" because it was so beneficial to her teaching.

**Figure 1.** REACH teachers and principals thought the peer observation program was a good idea.



Source. Spring 2011–2012 REACH Survey

Note. Survey responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), with favorable responses greater than 3.0

Other teachers appreciated the program because they thought their peer observer not only served to enrich their own teaching, but also "improved school morale" on their campus. However, some teachers were frustrated with the fact that their peer observer was not experienced or trained in their specific teaching areas. One teacher stated, "I had a peer observer, and support peer observations. My only concern is the training and back-

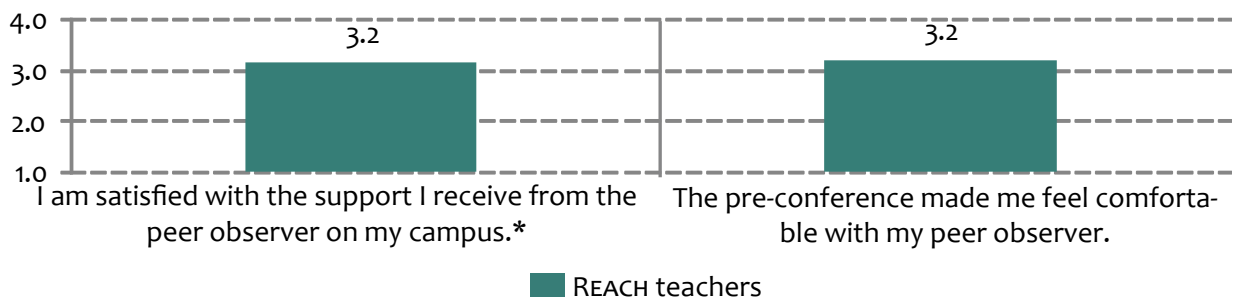


ground experience of the peer observers. I want to continue learning and perfect my craft, but the peer observer is only beneficial if they have the experience in my area.” The other major concern teachers discussed during focus groups and in open-ended survey responses was the timing of peer observations. Some teachers had not yet received their unannounced visit by mid-May and thought this time conflicted with student testing. They also were concerned that their students were less likely to cooperate during classroom observations at the end of the school year, potentially resulting in a lower score.

For the most part, teachers appreciated having an unknown peer conduct classroom observations because that provided them with unbiased feedback about their teaching. One teacher who was skeptical of being observed by an unknown peer at the beginning of the school year nevertheless stated, “I came to see the value of these observations.” Another teacher said it was “eye-opening to see someone who doesn’t know you give you that kind of feedback.” Another explained, “I was relieved to have a completely objective professional come to my classroom and assess my skills as a teacher.” Teachers also appreciated that peer observers were “advocating for ‘best practices’ in teaching” instead of subject-specific strategies, which allowed them to identify effective teaching across all content areas. These feelings were mirrored in the survey data. Specifically, teachers felt supported by and comfortable with their peer observer (see Figure 2). A minority of teachers were confused by all the observations conducted on their campus and did not understand “the differences... between all the observations” (e.g., CATCH, bilingual education).

*“[I] felt like I was being critiqued on good instructional practices and it felt less bias[ed] since our observers did not know us personally, only through our teaching practices.” ~ REACH teacher*

**Figure 2.** REACH teachers felt supported by and comfortable with their peer observer.



Source. Spring 2011–2012 REACH Survey

Note. Survey responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with favorable responses greater than 3.0

\* This item ranged from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 4 (very satisfied), with favorable responses greater than 3.0.

*“Teachers are happy they are getting feedback from another teacher. There is no hierarchy. I feel like we have ‘street cred’ because we used to be teachers and they feel like our observations are more objective.” ~ Peer observer*

Peer observers echoed teachers’ predominantly positive attitudes toward the program during their focus group. Nearly all the peer observers discussed how they believed their teachers appreciated the peer observation experience (particularly the post-observation conference) and they believed teachers found their feedback constructive, rewarding, and validating. Several peer observers said their teachers appreciated the feedback they received because they rarely receive this

type of in-depth professional development experience following an observation. One peer observer thought teachers were open to the program because peer observers “emphasize that [they are] a fellow teacher... [and are] not from downtown,” and because they document “things that only a teacher would notice.” Peer observers reported that these skills allowed teachers to feel they were being observed by a colleague they could trust. Peer observers generally were pleased with the high quality of instruction they observed across grade levels and subject areas.

Although principals reported that peer observers were useful on their campus (Figure 1), some expressed concerns about the program during focus groups. For example, one principal stated, “I don’t think [the peer observation program] works against us, but I don’t think it works for us. Or if it does, I don’t know how it works for us.” Some principals’ main concern with the program was the lack of alignment between their ratings of teachers and peer observers’ ratings of teachers, particularly when a teacher was placed on a growth plan. One principal thought peer observers should meet with principals to discuss teachers who are on growth plans and should calibrate their ratings prior to classroom observations. Although REACH program staff attempted to coordinate calibration sessions between peer observers and administrators, the sessions did not occur due to scheduling challenges.

*“It’s kind of hard to have a peer observation, especially if you have a teacher that you want to put on a growth plan.”*

*~ REACH principal*

### **The pre- and post-observation conferences were valuable.**

As described earlier, peer observers first met with their teachers during a pre-observation conference to get to know each other and to develop rapport. Then, following both the announced and the unannounced observations, peer observers conducted a post-observation conference to discuss teachers’ performance during the observation and ratings on the observation rubric. During focus groups, a majority of teachers reported the



feedback they received during these conferences made them better teachers. They appreciated the pre-observation conference because it made them feel comfortable with both their peer observers and the peer observation process. One teacher stated, “I actually like being observed by one of my peers because of the constructive, open, and candid, feedback. In my preconference, my peer observer was very precise and explicit about what I was to expect during the observation.” The initial trust established during the pre-observation conferences was essential for the more difficult conversations during the post-observation conferences.

*“I enjoyed hearing about my classroom and getting valuable feedback. We need more of that, as we don't often get it. To be a better educator, feedback is important.”*

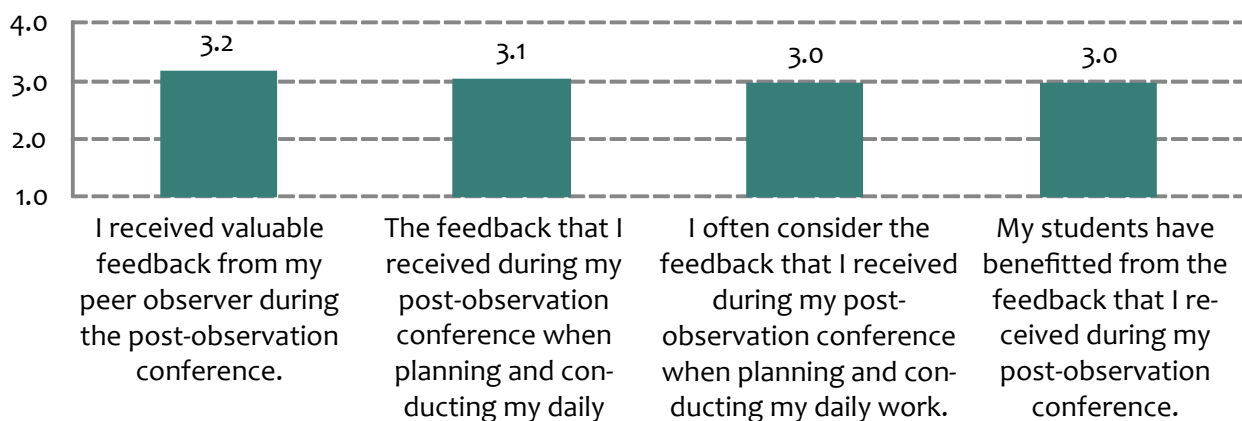
*~ REACH teacher*

Importantly, results from both surveys (Figure 3) and focus groups suggest teachers truly valued the feedback from their peer observers. One teacher described that the feedback provided during post-observation conferences was the type “necessary for teachers

*“[Peer observation] is the opportunity [for teachers] to be reflective about their teaching...So many [teachers] say that they never get to do that.” ~ Peer observer*

to further reflect and make changes in their teaching.” Teachers also found value in hearing ways in which they excelled in their teaching practice, for example, because it “reinforced things I was already doing,” or because it “emphasized that I was ‘on the right track’ with my teaching.”

**Figure 3.** Teachers valued the feedback they received from their peer observers.



Source. Spring 2011–2012 REACH Survey

REACH teachers

Note. Survey responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with favorable responses greater than 3.0.

*“It was valuable to be evaluated by a peer who truly understood what it's like in overcrowded classrooms filled with a larger proportion of reluctant learners than ever before.” ~ REACH teacher*

In addition to valuing the constructive feedback peer observers provided during the post-observation conferences, teachers also reported their instruction had improved and that students had benefitted from the changes they made to their teaching because of the peer observation program. Indeed, several teachers reported they immediately implemented changes based on their peer observers' recommendations during the post-observation conference. Others described how they used specific professional development tools that were discussed during their post-observation conference to improve their teaching.

During the focus groups, teachers were asked to compare the feedback they received from peer observers with other types of observation feedback (e.g., PDAS). Most teachers preferred the feedback they received from their peer observer over the PDAS feedback received from administrators. Teachers preferred the feedback from their peer observers because it was clearer and more detailed than the feedback from their administrators. Several teachers noted that administrators were “too busy to give that kind of feedback.”

While most teachers described positive experiences with the peer observers' feedback, some described challenges. Although it was standard practice for peer observers to e-mail the rubric in advance of the pre-conference and to e-mail results prior to the post-conference, some teachers were frustrated because their peer observer failed to discuss the rubric during their pre-conference or did not provide feedback in a timely manner. One teacher reported “it would have been helpful to see the rubric before [the observations]” to better prepare and feel more comfortable with the process. Others were unhappy their peer observers were not trained in their specific content areas. For example, one teacher thought the feedback she received was useless because the peer observer “never taught English before, [and] did not know the content [specific to my class] but still told me what I was doing was wrong.” Another felt “like I had an elementary teacher giving me elementary advice for a high school classroom.” It should be noted that teachers who expressed concern with content-area mismatches were mainly at the high school level, where elective and special area courses are common, and that four of the five elementary peer observers were experienced elementary teachers. However, some pre-kindergarten (pre-K) teachers were concerned that their peer observer did not have pre-k experience, and suggested that peer observers take into account the developmental stage of their students.

Because so much of the peer observation program hinges on the ability of peer observers to provide constructive feedback to teachers, peer observers were asked to describe their experiences with providing potentially difficult feedback to teachers. As was the case with teachers, almost all peer observers reported the post-observation conference was their “favorite part” of the job because it was the “most beneficial part [for teachers].” Peer observers believed teachers responded so favorably to their feedback because they “are so used to the district people coming in and pointing out all the things that they aren’t doing [in the classroom],” and are lacking constructive feedback to help them improve. Importantly, peer observers noted that when they provided skeptical teachers with feedback about their teaching, the teachers adopted a more positive attitude towards the peer observation process.

#### **Peer observer training was critical.**

The peer observers attributed their success to the effective training they received from the Office of Educator Quality. Peer observers felt their training was excellent and prepared them for the types of conversations they would have with teachers. For example, peer observers appreciated the video norming (i.e., the process that ensured their observations and ratings were consistent and reliable across their own and their colleagues’ observations) practiced during their meetings to reinforce which actions and behaviors characterized each score on the observation rubric. Peer observers also were pleased with the way district staff modified training based on their needs (e.g., bringing in the director of physical education [PE] to discuss best practices in PE). In addition, peer observers valued their ongoing training because it provided them with the opportunity to collaborate with each other, discuss the accuracy of their observation scores, and discuss ways to connect with teachers.

#### **Principals and teachers had concerns about the accuracy of peer observation ratings.**

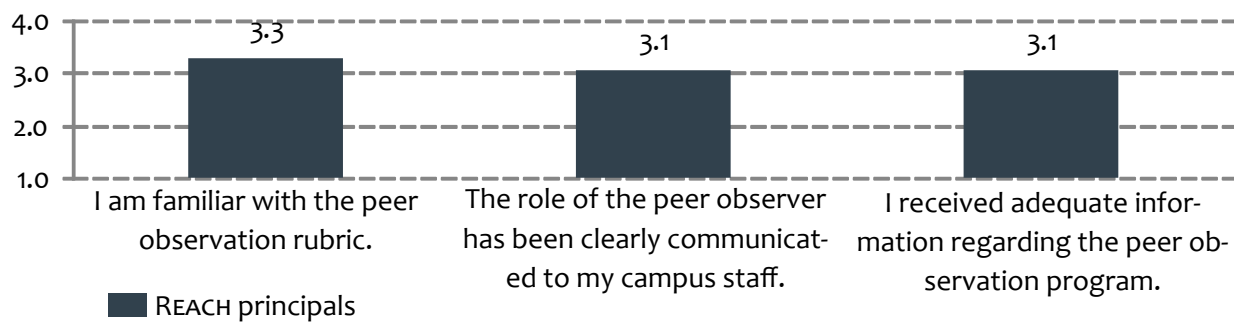
Survey results suggest principals were familiar with the peer observers’ observation rubric, thought the role of the peer observer was clearly communicated on their campus, and received adequate information from district staff regarding the peer observation program (Figure 4). However, during the focus groups, many principals indicated little knowledge of or involvement with the activities of their peer observers, and some expressed concerns. For example, some principals expressed frustration that they were not allowed to meet the peer observers and discuss specific teachers with them before the observations occurred. They thought doing so could have provided the peer observers with

*“I wish that someone had explained... how we are supposed to manage the [peer observation] feedback.”*  
~ REACH principal

expressed concerns. For example, some principals expressed frustration that they were not allowed to meet the peer observers and discuss specific teachers with them before the observations occurred. They thought doing so could have provided the peer observers with

critical information that might have focused their observation on key areas of concern. Despite the fact that doing so might have introduced bias to the peer observation process (see [The Widget Effect](#) [Weisenberg et al., 2009] and the MET project’s [report](#) [Kane & Staiger, 2012]), some principals advocated for “a way that we could meet with [the] peer observer and talk about what they are rating in the classroom.” Although each peer observer did request to meet with his or her assigned school principal at the beginning of the school year to establish protocols for discussion during the year, many principals declined.

**Figure 4.** REACH principals were familiar with the rubric and received adequate training about the program.



Source. Spring 2011–2012 REACH Survey

Note. Survey responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), with favorable responses greater than 3.0.

On the spring REACH survey, teachers and principals were asked to rate the accuracy of peer observers’ ratings. Data suggest that REACH principals were somewhat less confident in their peer observers’ ratings than were teachers (Figure 5). This pattern also emerged in the focus groups. For example, one principal recounted an experience with a teacher on that campus who had argued that he or she “got all my points with [the peer observer]” when contesting the principal’s low scores on PDAS that resulted in a growth plan for the teacher. Most strikingly, a principal at one of three campuses where adminis-

**Figure 5.** REACH teachers were more confident in the peer observers’ ratings than were principals.



Source. Spring 2011–2012 REACH Survey

Note. Survey responses ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), with favorable responses greater than 3.0.

trators used the same rubric as peer observers to rate classroom observations was concerned that administrators' classroom observation ratings were consistently lower than were the peer observers' ratings of the same teachers. However, only two principals requested to view the peer observation ratings for their teachers, despite the offer to all principals during their monthly principal meetings to do so.

A lack of communication between principals and peer observers also was evident during the peer observers' focus group. In most cases, peer observers reported little communication and collaboration with principal(s). When peer observers discussed inconsistencies in the way peer observers and principals rated teachers, the issue primarily concerned teachers who were placed on a growth plan. For example, one peer observer worked with a principal who was worried that the peer observers "were going to come in and suddenly tell [teachers who were on a growth plan] that they were 'excellent' and 'wonderful,' and as a result, undermine [the principals'] authority." Similarly, another peer observer discussed a conflict with an assistant principal regarding a teacher who had been placed on a growth plan but received a very positive evaluation from the peer observer. Rather than changing the score, the peer observer told the administrator that the peer observation is separate from PDAs ratings and said that "if somebody is on a growth plan, you have an awful lot of evidence to put them on the growth plan, and one observation... isn't going to undermine [that]."

*"You're comparing apples and oranges if you're [looking at the peer observation rubric] versus PDAs. There are some aspects that are similar, but I'm looking for a certain set of criteria on a rubric, and [the administrator is] looking for something else."*

*~ Peer observer*

Teachers had fewer issues concerning the accuracy of peer observers' ratings than did principals (Figure 5); however, some teachers were concerned that "different observers were giving different scores" and that ratings needed "to be more uniform." A few teachers also expressed concerns similar to those of principals regarding whether teachers on a growth plan should be eligible to participate in the peer observation program. One teacher was concerned that a teacher who was placed on a growth plan received the same score as did a teacher who was not on a growth plan. Another teacher similarly thought "there may be a conflict between the peer observation [and administrators' ratings for]... a teacher who is on a growth plan. This is serious and definitely needs to be addressed." In general, however, teachers were less aware than were principals of the conflict some principals had with peer observers' ratings. In fact, some teachers thought their "administrators don't care what the peer observers have to say" even when the feedback from peer observers

conflicted with feedback from administrators.

Some teachers expressed concern regarding the number of observations peer observers conducted; one argued that “although I received a good observation from the peer observer, I still feel that the process is not entirely fair. It is very difficult to capture the skills and challenges of a teacher in a single unannounced visit. I believe... [teachers should be observed during] a series of unannounced visits to get a better picture of what goes on inside a teacher’s classroom.” These teachers suggested that additional observations would allow peer observers to gain a more holistic understanding of their teaching. On the other hand, some teachers suggested that the program eliminate the unannounced observation because it placed the teacher at a disadvantage. Interestingly, as discussed in the MET project’s [report](#) (Kane & Staiger, 2012), single observation ratings were not considered as stringent as multiple classroom observations; therefore, the MET project’s authors argued that multiple classroom observations are better estimates of a teacher’s typical classroom practice.

#### **Teachers had mixed feelings about using peer observations in their appraisals.**

Finally, when teachers were asked if the peer observers’ scores should be used in their formal evaluations, responses were mixed. Although teachers valued the feedback they received, many thought peer observers’ scores should be kept out of their official appraisal. This position was primarily based on the fact that teachers felt that the supportive and constructive relationships they had built with their peer observers would be compromised if their ratings were made official. One teacher stated, “I would like to continue [participating in] this program... [but would like to make] sure that there would be no threat of it being added to a formal observation. I... [would like for it] to remain a true peer evaluation and have the administration kept out so there would be no threat of punishment for a poor observation.” Other teachers thought the principals should be the only ones providing “official” observation ratings because they “know us better” than do peer observers. However, other teachers noted that including more observers would provide additional information to their appraisals, and acknowledged that appraisals might be less subject to bias if more people and multiple measures were included.

#### **The peer observation rubric should be revised.**

Teachers, principals, and peer observers all voiced similar concerns regarding the peer observation rubric. Although teachers and principals agreed that the dimensions used to rate teachers were fair and reflected effective teaching strategies (Figure 6), all groups thought the rubric should be revised. Teachers’ main concern with the observation rubric was with the lack of alignment between the dimensions included on the rubric and effec-



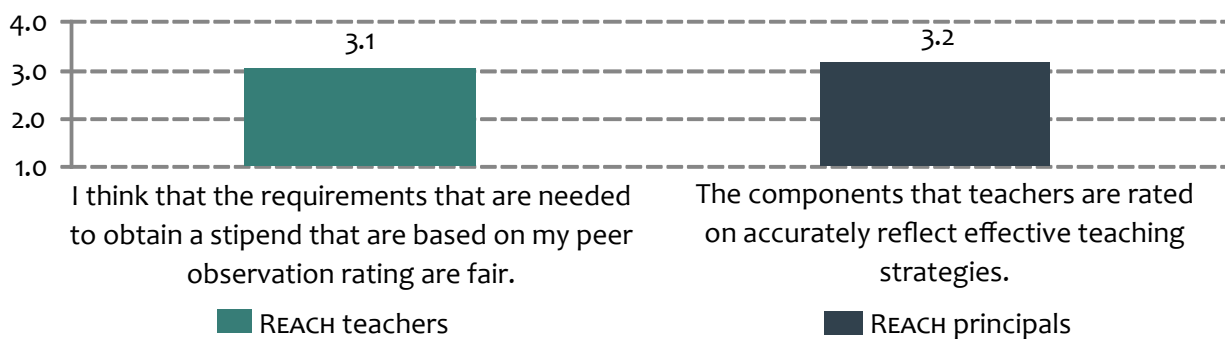
tive teaching strategies for special education and special area teachers. One teacher said that although “I like the idea of a peer observer... I feel there should be a different rubric

*“I think the rubric by which the evaluation is graded is unfairly used for all grade levels when it should be grade-level appropriate.” ~ REACH teacher*

for special education teachers and special area teachers.” During one focus group, some PE teachers discussed how the peer observation rubric contradicted requirements of another district initiative that requires classroom observations, and that requires students to be physically active during a majority of their PE class.

They also expressed concern for the safety of their students if they were to adhere to the expectations of the peer observation rubric, arguing that it can be “dangerous to have guided learning in PE,” depending on the activity.

**Figure 6.** REACH teachers and principals believed the components on which teachers are rated are fair.



Source. Spring 2011–2012 REACH Survey

Note. Survey responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with favorable responses above 3.0.

Some principals voiced concern that the rubric was less strict than PDAS and may have resulted in inflated ratings. To address this issue, principals suggested the program include time for principals and peer observers to meet and discuss the dimensions on the rubric and to learn what peer observers are looking for in their observations. Principals also suggested meeting with the peer observers to calibrate observation ratings using the peer observation rubric. One principal gave the example that, “even with seasoned principals and with seasoned [assistant principals], it’s important for the principal and the [assistant

*“That calibration piece [between principals and peer observers] is missing.” ~ REACH principal*

principal] to do walkthroughs together... [and] calibrate [their ratings of teachers]” and suggested that peer observers and principals conduct similar walkthroughs together. Despite the attempts REACH

program staff made to coordinate such calibration opportunities, principals did not participate.

Although peer observers agreed that the rubric was a useful tool that helps teachers identify ways to improve their teaching (e.g., what actions and skills are required to move from a 1 [the lowest rating] to a 4 [the highest rating]), they thought the rubric should be revised. For example, peer observers thought that the language of the rubric should be clarified to ensure that peer observers interpret the rubric similarly; redundancies in descriptions of the 13 dimensions should be removed; and dimensions that are difficult to observe (e.g., parent-teacher communication and data use) should be removed. Most notably, peer observers disagreed with the rule that in order to be eligible for the stipend, teachers cannot receive a score of 1 on any of the 13 dimensions (i.e., even if all remaining scores are 4, the highest score possible on the rubric) and thought the rule should be changed. When asked if the rubric made it difficult for them to rate teachers in different subject areas, peer observers admitted they were intimidated by this prospect at first; however, they found that, in fact, in the words of one peer observer, “good teaching is good teaching. No matter if it is French III or dance.”

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*“I don’t know that its appropriate for us to score teachers on things like parent communications, data, things that we [can’t observe]... [We] can only go by what the teachers tell us [they do].” ~ Peer observer*

#### **Additional peer observers are needed to better support the program.**

Teachers and peer observers agreed that the district should hire more peer observers to better support the number of teachers eligible for peer observation. As described earlier, each of the seven peer observers was assigned more than 200 teachers to observe during the 2011-2012 school year. The number of teachers assigned to each peer observer was higher than that originally assigned because one of the eight original peer observers left the position in the first semester of the school year, leaving the remaining seven peer observers to absorb the loss.

Unfortunately, some peer observers had difficulty with the increased case load and were unable to manage their observations as effectively as did others. During focus groups, several teachers were aware that their peer observer was “spread too thin” and was “overwhelmed” by the caseload. As a result of their peer observers’ increased caseload, some teachers had not received their unannounced observation by the beginning of May and thought “May is too late [for observations].” Of those teachers who had received all their observations, several complained because it had taken weeks or months to receive

feedback from their peer observer, leaving inadequate time to improve before their next observation. This made it difficult for them to imagine how they were going to use the feedback in any real way during the school year. To address this issue, one teacher recommended that REACH staff “decrease the number of schools assigned to each [peer] observer so that [the peer observer] can give timely feedback.”

Not surprisingly, when asked which aspect of the program they would most like to change, peer observers unanimously agreed it was their large case load. Several peer observers thought the additional teachers created “a scheduling nightmare” because they had to schedule up to 1,000 meetings with teachers over the course of the year. To make the process more efficient, some peer observers conducted pre-conferences with teams of teachers, rather than conducting them one-on-one; however, they thought doing so reduced the overall

*“I think the biggest [challenge] that we have to overcome is the size of our case-load. So, [in thinking of ways to improve our work,] a smaller case-load would be a good place to start.” ~ Peer observer*

quality of the pre-conference. Despite these setbacks, one peer observer liked that the addition of teachers allowed her to work with teachers in grades ranging from pre-K through 12, so she could see the entire spectrum of teaching across grades. Ultimately, the peer observers believed they could be more effective in their work if they were assigned fewer teachers.

Peer observers also suggested that working on only one campus, or on the same campuses to which they

were assigned during the 2011–2012 school year, might lessen their work load next year. One peer observer would “prefer being on one campus to be able to continue that relationship [with my assigned teachers]” because “schedules are different at different campuses, and routines, and culture,” thereby making it difficult to understand where each teacher is coming from and how best to serve him or her. Another peer observer agreed, stating that, “it is really hard to get to know each campus” when on travels between so many campuses. If the number of teachers assigned to each peer observer were reduced, peer observers likely would get to know the culture of the campuses they serve, build rapport more effectively with teachers and better understand the needs of their teachers.

During their focus groups, principals were asked if they had heard any discussion by

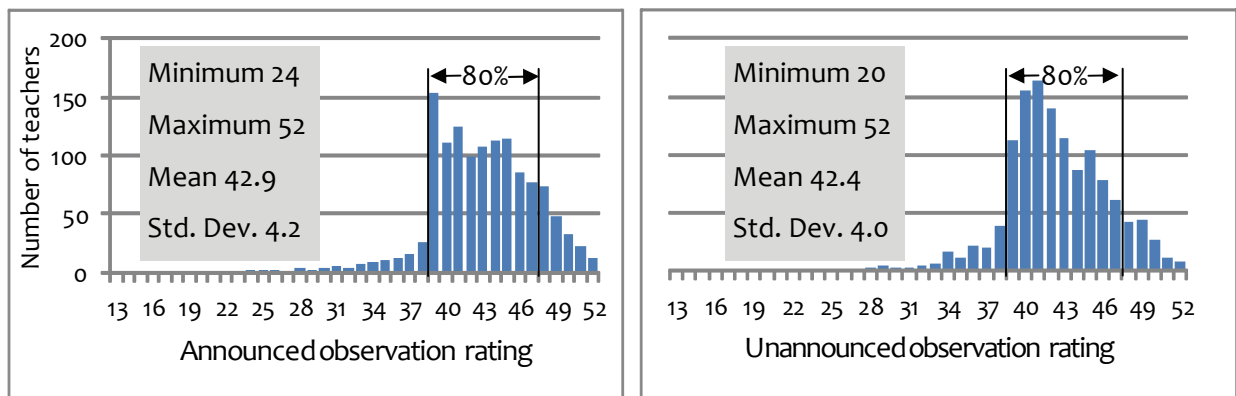
*“I think peer observations are a great idea if they are implemented appropriately, but one peer observer for two very large schools isn't enough to make a difference. [My peer observer] is stretched too thin, and it's too difficult for [her] to do her job effectively with that many teachers to observe and meet with.” ~ REACH teacher*

teachers regarding the program. Most principals said they had heard “no complaints”; however, a few principals said they had heard that some of their teachers had problems with the timing of the observations. One principal was worried about teachers who had received their first observations right before the winter break, which could have resulted in lower ratings because of traditionally poor student behavior at the end of the year. Other principals were worried because so many of the observations occurred in the spring, which conflicted with student testing. One principal was concerned because she “got feedback that [my teachers] didn’t get feedback.” Although the principals did not directly discuss it, these issues likely were related to peer observers’ increased case loads. Alternatively, peer observers reported that many teachers did not respond quickly to their requests for post-conferences following the e-mail distribution of observation results.

### PEER OBSERVATION SCORES

Teachers received total scores that ranged from 20 to 52 on a scale from 13 to 52 possible points (i.e., 1 to 4 on each of the 13 domains). For each observation, approximately 10% of teachers earned a score of 48 or greater, and approximately 10% of teachers earned a score of 38 or below. For each observation about 80% of teachers scored between 39 and 47 (Figure 7). Analyses were conducted to examine the data for differences in scores between announced (first) observations and unannounced (second) observations, and also to explore differences in ratings provided by different peer observers. Scores were slightly lower, on average, for the second, unannounced observation ( $t = 5.18, p < .01$ ), although the difference represented less than 1 point on a scale from 13 to 52.

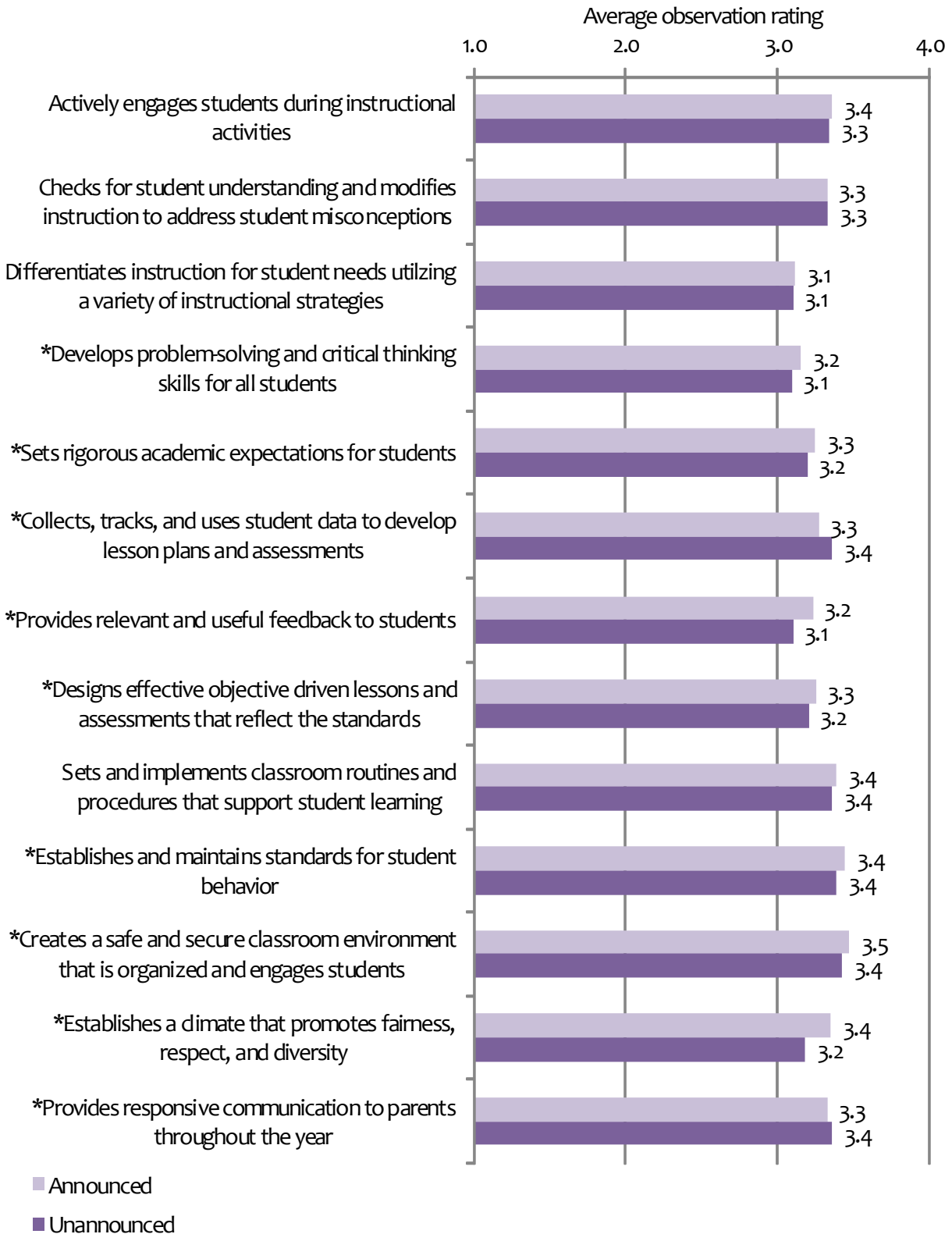
**Figure 7.** Most teachers scored between 39 and 47 on the announced and unannounced peer observations.



Source. 2011–2012 Peer Observation database

Not only were overall observation scores slightly lower, on average, for unannounced than for announced observations, scores for most individual observational domains also were lower (Figure 8).

**Figure 8.** Announced observation total scores were slightly higher, on average, than unannounced scores for most observational domains.

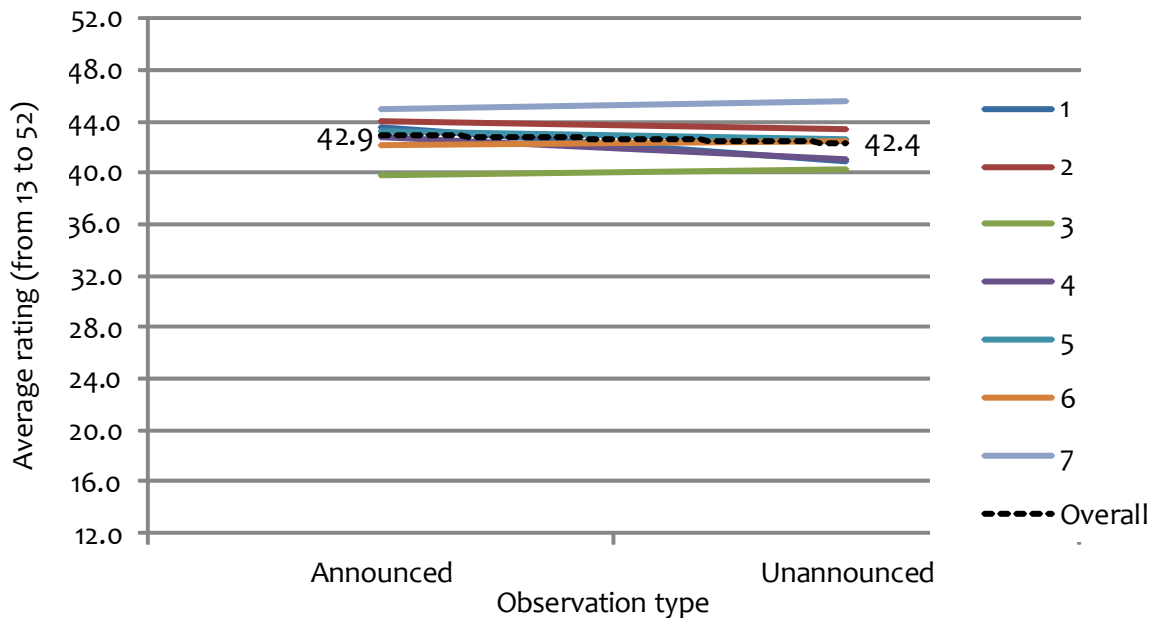


Source. 2011–2012 Peer Observation database

\*significant at  $p < .01$

Most differences were statistically significant; however, ratings did not differ by more than 0.2 on a scale from 1 to 4 for any domain. Unannounced observations were conducted after the first round of feedback from announced observations, so teachers had opportunities to incorporate peer observers' suggestions before the unannounced observation. However, ratings generally could have been higher for lessons teachers prepared for a forthcoming announced observation than for lessons teachers did not know would be observed. A comparison of ratings from pre- to post-observation was thus confounded by the differences between announced and unannounced observations. Future analyses of changes in ratings from the first to second observation will benefit from the programmatic change for 2012–2013 to conduct two unannounced observations only.

**Figure 9.** Announced observation total scores were higher, on average, than unannounced scores, and some peer observers tended to rate teachers higher or lower than did others.



Source. 2011–2012 Peer Observation database

Some observers tended to rate teachers higher or lower than did others (Figure 9;  $F = 25.49$ ,  $p < .01$  and  $F = 51.95$ ,  $p < .01$  for announced and unannounced, respectively). The disparity in average ratings among observers was similar for announced and unannounced observations, which ranged from 39.9 to 44.9 (5.0 points) for announced and 40.4 to 45.6 (5.2 points) for unannounced observations. It is important to note, however, that observers served different schools; therefore, differences in peer observer ratings may reflect differences in teaching across campuses. Indeed, the observer who had significantly higher ratings than did most other observers had ratings that did not differ statistically from the



ratings of the other observer at the same campus.

The consistency of individual teacher ratings across peer observations was moderate, with a correlation of  $r = .52$  ( $p < .01$ ). Again, the programmatic change to conduct only unannounced observations in the future will provide a better opportunity to examine change and or consistency over time. The analyses indicated a weak relationship between administrator PDAS ratings and ratings of announced and unannounced peer observations ( $r = .30$  and  $r = .28$ , respectively;  $p < .01$ ). However, the observational protocols for peer observation and PDAS were different. Even when limiting administrator ratings to only the PDAS dimensions similar to those in the peer observation rubric, alignment was weak ( $r = .29$  and  $r = .26$  for announced and unannounced peer observations, respectively;  $p < .01$ ). The weak relationship may reflect the differences in the descriptors that defined what observers should rate for PDAS and for the peer observation rubric (see Figure 10 for an example). Thus, the limited alignment of ratings is not surprising. Future analyses will examine the relationships among peers', administrators', and students' ratings using the same criteria.

**Figure 10.** Peer observers and administrators rated teaching according to somewhat different criteria.

Example rubrics for rating the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

| Peer Observation Domain  | 1   | 2   | 3  | 4   |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| Develops problem-solving and critical thinking skills for all students | Creates limited situations or no opportunities to challenge students to think independently or critically about the content.  | Creates situations that challenge students to think independently or critically about the content some of the time.   | Creates situations that challenge students to think independently or critically about the content.   | Creates situations that challenge student to thinking independently or critically and students communicate their reasoning processes.     |
|  | Does not develop and use various instructional strategies that challenge students and provide opportunities to engage in problem solving and critical thinking about the content. | Develops and uses one or two instructional strategies that challenge students and provide opportunities to engage in problem solving and critical thinking about the content. | Develops and uses various instructional strategies that challenge students and provide opportunities to engage in problem solving and critical thinking about the content. | Embeds problem-solving and critical thinking skills into the lesson so that mastery requires students to utilize these skills.            |
|  | Does not probe for higher-level thinking through questioning strategies.  | Probes for higher-level thinking through questioning strategies occasionally.   | Probes for higher-level thinking through questioning strategies.   | Students exhibit higher-level thinking through their questioning of each other.   |
|  | Does not provide time in the lesson for students to analyze, problem solve, and draw their own conclusions.   | Provides very little time in the lesson for students to analyze, problem solve, and draw their own conclusions.   | Provides time in the lesson for students to analyze, problem solve, and draw their own conclusions.  | Provides time in the lesson for students to design and implement inquiries and problem solving to analyze and draw their own conclusions. |
| PDAS Domain  | Unsatisfactory<br>Less than half of the time  | Below Expectations<br>Some of the Time  | Proficient<br>Most of the time   | Exceeds Expectations<br>Almost all of the time  |
| [part of] Domain II: Learner-Centered Instruction                      | Instructional strategies promote critical thinking and problem solving.   | Instructional strategies promote critical thinking and problem solving.   | Instructional strategies promote critical thinking and problem solving.  | Instructional strategies promote critical thinking and problem solving.   |

Source. Teacher Evaluation System: AISD REACH 2011–2012; Professional Development and Appraisal System Teacher Manual, Texas Education Agency

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND PROGRAM CHANGES

Feedback suggests teachers, principals, and peer observers found value in the peer observation program, and that observations were moderately consistent across time points and observers. Program recommendations, along with planned program changes for 2012–2013 (in italics), are as follows:

- **Peer observers should receive additional training about non-core area subjects (e.g., PE, special education, bilingual education) and differentiate the rubric based on school level.** *REACH program staff have established collaborative training opportunities for peer observers and curriculum specialists in the departments of PE, fine arts, gifted and talented, and socio-emotional learning, and have requested such collaboration with staff in the departments of English language learner and special education.*
- **Peer observers and administrators should calibrate ratings on the observation rubric so they can agree on what actions and behaviors peer observers are looking for during each observation, as it relates to the rubric. Additionally, principals should maintain communication with peer observers throughout the school year.** *REACH program staff will host mandatory calibration sessions for principals and peer observers, and will request that principals and peer observers meet at least once per semester to discuss the observation process.*
- **The peer observation rubric should be revised.** *REACH program staff have revised the observational rubric to exclude unobservable domains (i.e., those pertaining to data use and parent communication) and to include more specific language for some observational domains.*
- **District administrators should use caution when adding peer observation scores to teachers' appraisals, and should take precautions to avoid creating mistrust between teachers and peer observers.** *The pilot teacher appraisal system for 2012–2013 will include peer observation results for teachers at twelve REACH campuses. Peer observers will continue to provide teachers with actionable, detailed feedback and to establish rapport with teachers. Analyses are underway to examine the relationships among peer observation, administrator observation, student feedback, and measures of student growth.*

## APPENDIX

Table A1. Results for paired t-tests examining differences in announced and unannounced observation scores for each domain.

| Observational domain   | Mean announced observation rating | Mean unannounced observation rating | t       |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Actively engages students during instructional activities                                    | 3.4                               | 3.3                                 | 0.94    |
| Checks for student understanding and modifies instruction to address student misconceptions  | 3.3                               | 3.3                                 | 0.97    |
| Differentiates instruction for student needs utilizing a variety of instructional strategies | 3.1                               | 3.1                                 | 0.77    |
| Develops problem-solving and critical thinking skills for all students                       | 3.2                               | 3.1                                 | 3.48**  |
| Sets rigorous academic expectations for students   | 3.3                               | 3.2                                 | 3.23**  |
| Collects, tracks, and uses student data to develop lesson plans and assessments              | 3.3                               | 3.4                                 | -7.31** |
| Provides relevant and useful feedback to students  | 3.2                               | 3.1                                 | 7.96**  |
| Designs effective objective driven lessons and assessments that reflect the standards        | 3.3                               | 3.2                                 | 3.22**  |
| Sets and implements classroom routines and procedures that support student learning          | 3.4                               | 3.4                                 | 1.28    |
| Establishes and maintains standards for student behavior                                     | 3.4                               | 3.4                                 | 2.70**  |
| Creates a safe and secure classroom environment that is organized and engages students       | 3.5                               | 3.4                                 | 2.80**  |
| Establishes a climate that promotes fairness, respect, and diversity                         | 3.4                               | 3.2                                 | 10.06** |
| Provides responsive communication to parents throughout the year                             | 3.3                               | 3.4                                 | -3.53** |

\*\* significant at  $p < .01$

Note.  $n = 1277$

## REFERENCES

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