Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS

Created by teachers in partnership with

CTQ CENTER FOR TEACHING QUALITY
TEACHERS TRANSFORMING TEACHING

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About

*Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School: Lessons from the Pioneers* are products of the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative (TPSI), a joint project of Center for Teaching Quality and Education|Evolving. They were developed with support from the Ford Foundation, the Labrador Foundation, and the National Education Association. TPSI prepared these practical tools for teachers who are beginning or continuing the journey of designing and managing teacher-powered schools. There are eight *Discussion Starters* in all, covering the following topics:

- Shared Purpose
- Securing Autonomy
- Collaborative Management
- Instructional Approaches
- Defining Success
- Selection and Hiring
- Cultural Integration
- Evaluation

To determine the content of each *Discussion Starter*, a team of teachers from across the nation—most of whom are pioneers of teacher-powered schools—shared their knowledge, experiences, reflections, and ideas in the CTQ Collaboratory. Through dialogue, they decided what ideas and language were important to know for teams engaging in school design or ongoing school improvement. Lori Nazareno and Kim Farris-Berg of CTQ’s School Redesign Team facilitated the process.

**Project team**

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How to use...

The Discussion Starters are designed to be used in conjunction with Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School, a comprehensive guide featuring more than 300 resources as well as step-by-step guidance for teacher teams navigating the five stages of designing, running, and continuously improving a teacher-powered school. The Discussion Starters are provided at appropriate steps within the guide. Together, the Steps guide and Discussion Starters help teacher teams discover the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and processes they will need in order to be successful.

Collaborating with team members is key when using the Discussion Starters. We recommend printing copies and inviting team members to take notes as you work together through the discussion questions. We also encourage you to join the CTQ Collaboratory (www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory) to connect with other teachers who are starting and continuously improving teacher-powered schools. In the Teacher-Powered Schools lab, your team can start a Wiki to capture your ideas, facilitate decision making, record your team’s answers to the discussion questions in these guides, and document your journey. You can also create discussion threads to ask members for advice and ideas as you work through the concepts and questions.

Joining the Collaboratory is free and easy and takes just three minutes. When you sign up, make sure to click the Teacher-Powered Schools box so you can join the conversation right away.

Would you like to join a CTQ Content Lab (or multiple)? Which ones?

- Communications Lab
- CTQ-Global
- Teacher-Powered Schools

Good luck to your team as you work together to make bold design decisions that will positively influence the success of your team, school, and students.
Each teacher-powered school has a shared purpose that is composed of the mission, vision, values, and goals of the school. Teacher teams use this shared purpose to guide their actions and decisions around everything that happens in the school. While the notion of having a purpose is not completely foreign to traditional schools and school leaders, in teacher-powered schools, teachers use their autonomy to “take the words off the wall” and translate them into action in significant and substantive ways.

Teacher-powered teams emphasize that it’s not just the shared purpose statement that matters—it’s the process of developing the shared purpose. Through this process—and later reflecting on how this process took place—teams begin to learn the skills and dispositions needed for effective collaboration.

“What we’re really talking about is the story behind how our school got to be where it is today. It’s really important that personnel and other people have a similar take on this story if your school is going to be successful.”

—Aaron Grimm
Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN

“Our current mission and vision was written by current staff and approved by our current governance board. However, it has its roots in the beginning of our school and the many schools visited by the founders.”

—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI
DEFINING YOUR SHARED PURPOSE

What have the pioneers done?

Teachers report that in the design phase of teacher-powered schools, there is frequently an individual or small group of thought leaders who drive the creation of the school’s initial shared purpose. Over time, that shared purpose usually evolves as additional team and community members come on board and put the vision into practice.

Whether your team is in the initial design phase or the evolutionary phase, the shared purpose doesn’t have to be completely built from scratch. Nor does it need to be borrowed exclusively from elsewhere. A growing number of teacher-powered schools and innovative school models can provide example statements as a starting place for building on your team’s own shared purpose.

Most teacher-powered schools take a significant amount of time developing their shared purpose (sometimes months). This is because team members are still getting accustomed to one another’s personalities and working styles, and learning to proactively address conflict. As teams work through the challenges of unifying their perspectives into a shared purpose, they learn a lot about what they want their student and teacher experiences to be. Teams often report that the cohesive foundation they have worked to create becomes the bedrock on which everything else for the school is built—and that the stability of this foundation has a lot to do with the school’s future success.

See the storming section\(^1\) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School* for more information on creating a shared purpose and the norming section\(^2\) for improving how your team’s shared purpose is used in decision making.

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**TIPS**

1. Identify a group of people who will serve as the **design team** for your teacher-powered school. These people will not necessarily be the founding staff members of the school, but they should provide strong thought leadership around the school model that you wish to create.

2. Engage the design team in the process of developing the **shared purpose**—mission, vision, values, and goals—of the school. Be sure to identify solid evidence of what living the shared purpose would look and sound like. Take your time during this process! It should ultimately guide the design of everything else in the school, and it can take months to finalize.

3. Investigate schools and teams that could be models for what you are trying to create. Consider using or revising some language of their shared purpose statements as you develop your own. Some sources used by existing teacher-powered schools include Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools, Co-Nect, Paedeia Training (Socratic Seminars), universities, and community organizations.
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Who are the key stakeholders that should be part of our design team? Do we want a team composed of like-minded people or different perspectives?

Who are the students and families that our school will serve? What do they need? (Responses to these questions should guide the development of your team’s shared purpose.)

Why does our school need to exist? What need(s) will it meet? What is the mission of our school?

When our school is fully operational, what should it look like when we walk through it? What should it feel like? Sound like? What is our vision for students’ and teachers’ experiences?

What other schools or organizations exist that have similar values or goals? What might our team borrow from them?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. [www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory](http://www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory)
ENSURING TEAM COHESION AROUND SHARED PURPOSE

What have the pioneers done?

Teacher-powered teams report that individuals’ acceptance of the shared purpose does not ensure that everyone understands how and why it is practiced within the school. This is particularly problematic when you consider the issue of sharing the purpose with other members of the team. As a result, most teacher-powered teams take the time to develop a collective understanding of how the shared purpose is put into practice. They create structures and processes to help current and new staff members not only understand the shared purpose but also enact it in their everyday behavior and practice.

1. Document institutional history: the story of how and why your school’s shared purpose came into existence. This includes the design of both the instructional approach and the leadership model of the school. This history is crucial for sustaining the shared purpose over time and making well-informed adjustments as the need arises. This documentation can also be used for training new personnel and people who are newly elected to a committee within the school.

2. Each year, conduct summer or mid-year retreats over multiple days with time dedicated to professional learning related to the school’s shared purpose. You might also include time for whole-team strategic goal setting, grade-level team collaboration, team building, and more. When possible, hire new personnel prior to the retreat to ensure that they can carry on the shared purpose; even when founders move on. Having this concentrated time together will help build a cohesive team and give all members of the staff focused time and space to process and embody the mission, vision, and values of the school. Whenever possible, compensate staff members for their participation.

3. A teacher-powered school’s shared purpose is maintained by striving to “live” it in daily decision making. Some teacher-powered teams literally place purpose statements on the table at every meeting or professional development session. They connect all meeting agenda or professional development items to specific aspects of the statement in order to keep a focus on the purpose. If a topic or item isn’t connected to the purpose, teams should seriously consider whether it is worth everyone’s time.

One way to “live” the shared purpose is to demonstrate it in behavior. Identify behaviors for students and staff that could be considered evidence of living the shared purpose.

4. Some teacher-powered schools have created “fishbowl” environments where anyone can literally see or walk in to observe what teachers and students are doing. This allows for constant informal mentoring and coaching and is an opportunity to provide feedback on how well individuals are living the shared purpose. This is likely to be a very different environment than what many teachers are accustomed to, so be up front about the nature of your school’s “fishbowl.” Clearly explain why it is important to your school’s culture.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will our team develop cohesion around the shared purpose? How will new teachers and personnel learn about the institutional history of our school?

What methods will we use to support members of our school community (students, teachers, support staff) in “living” the shared purpose?

What does evidence of “living” the shared purpose look like for teachers? Students? Support staff? What behaviors would we expect to see in students and staff members if they are embodying the shared purpose?

What structures will be put in place to ensure that professional development and meetings are aligned to the shared purpose?

“The shared purpose was developed by representatives of our school community, and when there is a hard choice, it is where we go for guidance. When we hire new staff, we are looking for folks who can live these principles. It is now part of our culture, and it is spread by living up to the ideals on a daily basis.”

—Kevin Brewster, Howard C. Reiche School, Portland, ME

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
Evolving the Shared Purpose As the School Matures

What have the pioneers done?

Some teacher-powered schools have been in existence for as long as 40 years. It’s not reasonable—nor in the best interest of students—to expect that any school would remain the same for that long. While teacher-powered schools have (and live by) a strong shared purpose, they also have processes in place to adjust and adapt as the needs of their students and the community evolve.

“In our state, there is pressure to have charter developers specify all the structures for a charter school before the doors open. We think this is a serious error. The templates have to grow or the school can not thrive as the living thing that it is. There is no way you can know all the structures you will need until you get out there and do the work. There has to be room to grow and change—particularly in dealing with the question of how do you know you are on track. The track will change and evolve in a natural way over time.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

“SFCS staff, parents, and students continually work together to learn about and practice inclusive ways of being to create a school culture that supports all students in meeting high standards of academic achievement and community responsibility.”

—Eric Hendy
San Francisco Community School (SFCS)
San Francisco, CA

TIPS

The shared purpose of your school should be solid enough to be “lived” by students and teachers every day. Making changes to the purpose is a significant undertaking and should only be taken on when the school is ready for major shifts in instructional approach.

Well before this happens, create a plan. Under what circumstances will the team make adjustments to the current shared purpose or transition to a new one?

Develop processes for regularly giving feedback and reflecting on how well the current purpose is serving your students and community. Because the shared purpose is the bedrock on which everything else is built, when the reflection process consistently signals a need for change, it’s time to make a serious commitment to evolving the shared purpose.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will we collect feedback from students, staff, parents, and the community about how the overall purpose of the school is meeting their needs?

What will the process be for deciding to make adjustments vs. redesigning the school’s shared purpose? How will those decisions be made? How will this process be made transparent to families and the community?

Who (committees, the whole team, etc.) will be responsible for the adjustment or redesign of the shared purpose when needed? How will they ensure that they have the support of the entire school community (personnel, students, families, and the community)?

“While personality types can differ, if you trust that you are working toward the same mission and goals, it’s much easier to build consensus. This means that there will undoubtedly be tough discussions, but you have to have [those].”

—Aaron Grimm, Minnesota New Country School, Henderson, MN

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
ENDNOTES:

1 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/governance/purpose

2 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/norming/purpose
The traditional model of school provides little autonomy for teachers. When teachers do have some measure of autonomy, it is usually limited to their work within the classroom with students. Rarely are teachers provided the authority to make decisions about issues that concern the entire staff or school. And, truth be told, some teachers may not be willing to take on the additional work required to make such decisions in traditional governance arrangements. They fear their decisions will be overturned with a change in leadership or because school, district, and/or union leaders have a difficult time adapting their structures and policies to support change. Louise Sundin, 22-year president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) and long time AFT vice president, wrote a commentary in Zero Chance of Passage making this point. She chronicled story after story in which Minneapolis teachers advanced innovations only to see them “sucked back into the district, their uniqueness eliminated, turned back into plain vanilla by a bureaucracy that couldn’t tolerate… differences in delivery or design.” In these conditions, who can blame the teachers who don’t feel school-level decision making is worth their time and energy?

Teacher-powered schools offer new conditions. And some teachers are seizing the opportunity.

In teacher-powered schools, teachers are willing to take on the additional responsibilities required to design and run a school because they secure autonomy to collaboratively make decisions that impact whole school success in up to 15 areas. (See the list of autonomies in Figure 1). Autonomy, they assert, opens the opportunity for them to create a successful school with more certainty that they will be able to sustain their impact.

“Ask any teacher on our staff what the main benefit of this arrangement of teacher autonomy is and they would say: freedom. Freedom to teach the way we want to teach and to create the community we want to create. This freedom is precious and is what nourishes us all to do the hard stuff.”

—Alysia Krafel  
Chrysalis Charter School  
Palo Cedro, CA
What have the pioneers done?

Teams have secured varying combinations of autonomy.

There are over 75 teacher-powered schools in the United States. The teacher teams that run them can break from conventional approaches to teaching, learning, and school management—if that’s what they choose to do—because they have secured final decision-making authority in one or more of 15 potential areas. Some teacher teams have secured all 15 areas of autonomy, and some have just a few. Some teams have full autonomy in nearly all areas, while others have a mix of full and partial autonomy in fewer areas. For example, at the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy (MSLA) in Denver, CO, the teacher teams have secured 11 of the 15 autonomies, but some are partial. For example, while the team determines the budget for the school, it only has budget autonomy over discretionary pots of funding (after district take-outs). Some teams that opted to open teacher-powered schools as charters have full budget autonomy, meaning that they have the ability to allocate all of the school's funding and determine the salary formula themselves.

To see which areas of autonomy are secured at each teacher-powered school, go to: www.teacherpowered.org/inventory

### Potential areas of autonomy

1. Selecting colleagues
2. Transferring and/or terminating colleagues
3. Evaluating colleagues
4. Setting staff pattern (including size of staff, allocation of personnel among teaching and other positions)
5. Selecting leaders
6. Determining budget
7. Determining the salaries and benefits of colleagues, including leaders
8. Determining learning program and learning materials (including teaching methods, curriculum, and levels of technology)
9. Setting the schedule (classes, school hours, length of school year, etc.)
10. Setting school-level policies (including disciplinary protocol, homework, etc.)
11. Determining tenure policy (if any)
12. Determining professional development
13. Determining whether to take, when to take, and how much to count district/CMO/authorizer assessments
14. Assessing school and district performance according to multiple measures (not only a mean proficiency score)
15. Determining work hours
Teams have secured their autonomy in a variety of ways.

As pioneers have learned of one another’s teacher-powered schools, they have discovered that there is not necessarily one “right way” to grant or secure teacher autonomy. The way depends on many influencing factors including local political climates, existing state law, openness to trying things differently (especially among state, district, and union, and charter authorizer leaders), and preferences of teachers at the school. That said, some arrangements are more sustainable than others. For example, some are more susceptible to changes in leadership and management styles. The pioneering teacher teams considered these factors and decided what would work best for their context.

Case in point: the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative—a joint project of the Center for Teaching Quality and Education Evolving—has identified ten arrangements that the more than 75 teacher-powered schools have used to secure their autonomy, and there are certainly more that they have not yet uncovered. They include the following:

- Provision in collective bargaining agreement between district and local union
- Innovation Public Schools Act
- District Innovation Zone
- Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) between district and local union
- MOU among the school, district, and local union, in addition to a waiver from state statute
- Instrumentality charter contract
- Contract established when a chartered school board hires a teacher-powered cooperative
- Chartered school contract and/or chartered school bylaws
- Pilot school agreement
- Site-governance agreement between district school board and district school
- Goodwill of superintendent, principal, or governing board (informal)

“The State of Maine did not have the capacity to recognize our model, as there wasn't really a precedent for what we have done. Subsequently, the legislature has created a teacher-led schools category in the Innovation Public Schools Act that allows individual schools and districts to apply for this new status.

… Seems like we created a model that was outside of the box, so the state created a new box, that we now have to apply to get into!”

—Kevin Brewster
Reiche Elementary School
Portland, ME

For more details about the types of arrangements by which teachers secure autonomies, go to: http://www.teacherpowered.org/inventory/arrangements
Pioneers are clear that the source of autonomy is, at its very core, the teachers who pursue it. Their sentiments have been previously expressed by Kim Farris-Berg in a June 2013 Education Week blog titled, “Teachers—Stop Waiting, and Start Calling the Shots”:

The vast majority of these teachers didn’t wait for anyone ‘higher up’ to say, first, ‘Teachers, we now grant you the opportunity to call the shots.’ No! Instead, they took advantage of an existing opening to seize authority (even if it wasn’t explicitly meant for them and even if it wasn’t their preferred path). Or, they asked for and negotiated authority (even though it wasn’t being offered outright).

These teachers are explorers and pioneers in their field. They have awakened to and taken a new opportunity, despite the risks, and they are willing to accept accountability for the results of their decisions. Like all pioneers, they are doing the arduous work to prepare the path and infrastructure for those who have thus far been reluctant to see the possibilities.

Importantly, these teachers have the courage to stand and act on principle for the sake of their students, despite the expectation that they will succumb to the dominant culture that seeks to control, from the top down, what teachers do and how they do it. They are bravely challenging the status quo regarding how learning, student assessment, and teacher evaluation happen, and how budgets are spent. They do not accept what ‘teacher collaboration’ and "student discipline" have come to mean in most schools, so they are asserting definitions more in line with high-performing cultures.

“The… source of the new autonomy was teacher vision itself…. These very bold teachers collectively conceived of the idea of a new, dynamic urban STEM school in which students and teacher forged a powerful relationship of learning and created post graduation outcomes that no one thought possible. Then, in a highly disciplined fashion, they began exercising AUTONOMY THAT DIDN'T EXIST in organizing a SCHOOL THAT DIDN'T EXIST.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM School
Cincinnati, OH

Teams strategically built support for securing autonomy.

In order to secure autonomy, the pioneering teams of teachers interacted with and influenced a number of decision-makers. Who those decision-makers were was dependent upon the type of autonomy arrangement they were seeking and what processes were (or were not) in place for creating new school models.
Some of the most influential people who have helped pioneering teacher teams secure autonomy to design and run a teacher-powered school are families and other community members such as local nonprofits, youth organizations, business groups, churches, and neighborhood associations. Those in the position to decide on whether a school or governance transition will be approved tend to be very interested in what families and other community members want from their schools. Many of the teacher teams worked with these groups to create a vision for what their teacher-powered school could do for students and the community, then built a coalition of support around that vision. Those who were effective at this were also successful in creating their schools.

“\textit{We brought together both potential supporters and detractors early and often…. Parents were dubious—they didn’t want the best teachers leaving the classroom, they didn’t know who’d be in \textit{the office} if there was a problem. As they witnessed our staff sharing our findings and answering their questions, they witnessed teachers stretching into leaders. Soon, they were our allies and remain our biggest supporters.}”

\textit{—Kevin Brewster}  
Reiche Elementary School  
Portland, ME

Teachers who pursued autonomy to design and run schools that would be connected to a school district generally had four groups of decision-makers that they and their coalitions had to influence: district administrators and their staff, school board members, local association leaders, and school review committees. Teachers who pursued autonomy via charter schools that would not be connected with districts worked with their coalitions to influence charter authorizers.

Frequently, teachers found that district or charter authorizer staff and/or committees (which included district or authorizer staff and sometimes other members of the community) reviewed proposals for new schools and schools that were seeking to convert their governance model from traditional to teacher-powered. The reviewing team made a final recommendation to the local school district board or charter authorizer board about whether to approve the proposal, and often the boards simply affirmed the recommendation in their decision. Those teacher teams that were able to develop relationships with staff and other committee members prior to the review process, and help them embrace the reasons for teacher-powered governance and other aspects of their proposed school design, were often able to get their schools approved. When their schools weren’t approved, these relationships helped them learn the reasons so they could improve their proposals or, if necessary, pursue other pathways to autonomy.
Teams make decisions, and site governing boards provide oversight.

Whether a given teacher-powered school is a district or charter school, it typically has a governing board at the school site. In other words, most do not report to a district-level school board. The way that teacher teams interact with their governing boards varies.

Boards are generally accustomed to making a number of decisions concerning various aspects of the schools, which is a different role than what exists in a teacher-powered school. In teacher-powered schools, teachers make the decisions, and the governing boards—mostly made up of teachers, parents, community members, and students—generally play an advisory role. That said, they do provide careful oversight to ensure teams are meeting their mission, vision, values, and goals. This is especially true in the area of finance, as they often do have legal fiduciary responsibilities, but they rarely need to intervene because teachers make good decisions. Their advice and willingness to play an arm’s distance role is highly valued by teams.

The pioneering teachers have experienced that teachers are generally good at governance. That said, the work of governance tends to be relatively new to many teachers, and taking on these responsibilities takes a significant amount of work. Teams have found that one way to ensure time is used effectively is to continuously determine people’s strengths and match them with the specific leadership needs of the team and school, especially in times of transition. Some have taken the time to document how this works in organizational and procedural charts.

“Avalon teachers still make up a majority of the school board… regarding interference, there basically isn’t any. Decisions are made at the staff level and then brought to the board for further discussion. When things go well, the non-teaching members provide some important insight and then the discussion may go back to the staff for further changes…. In the early days, some of our board members wanted to give input on specific teachers and tenure at the school. Those discussions were forcefully squashed, and all decisions on personnel have stayed among the staff.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN

“Our governance board has some decision-making autonomy, but really, the teachers have more. There have been times when the teachers have wanted to make big changes like having an early release day once a week for staff development/academic planning. The governance board did not stand in our way, but they did ask good questions that we needed to find answers to before we could proceed.”

—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI
When a governing board sees and hears about how teachers create and maintain strong decision-making processes and structure, they gain confidence in the team’s abilities. Teams sense that having their governing board’s trust makes it less likely that the board will try to intervene and override decisions in areas where teachers have autonomy. As a first step, a board might challenge teachers to resolve a problem themselves rather than imposing a solution.

Want to know more details about autonomy arrangements and interactions between teachers and their governing boards? Visit the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab in the CTQ Collaboratory.

Teams work hard to maintain their autonomies.

Because schools have been structured in the same way for over 100 years, the pioneers express that they feel a certain gravitational pull to return to old ways of operating. Teacher teams in teacher-powered schools are mindful of this tension and take steps to resist returning to conventional ways of operating because it seems simpler. There are two main sources of the pull to return to a traditional model of school governance that have the potential to usurp autonomies: the system (as it is upheld by district, union, and charter authorizer leaders) and factions of teachers.

Systemic tension

Even when autonomy has been secured, there tends to be a “dance” to determine the limits of freedom between the teacher teams running teacher-powered schools and district, union, and charter authorizer leaders. These leaders frequently work within the structures and policies in place, which were created with the mindset that all schools operate “the same.” Yet when these leaders embrace teacher-powered schools and other school governance models into their portfolios, the “sameness” mindset is effective for only a portion of the portfolio—the portion that is traditionally governed. When these leaders fail to embrace an adaptive mindset, or don’t know how to put a value for adaptation into practice well, teacher teams sometimes find themselves jumping through hoops or complying with top-down structures in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves and maintain their autonomy. In other words, to maintain their autonomy they sometimes feel compelled to only partially use it. This can affect their choices in practice in any number of areas: their schedule, how they take attendance, how they report student progress, who they share communications with, what job descriptions say, and numerous other things.

Some teams have learned to be extremely careful to identify when they find themselves bending to alleviate systemic tensions in order to avoid conceding autonomy “one bite at a time.” It is rare that a teacher team will have one or more areas of autonomy revoked outright, though it has happened (not because teachers
were using it poorly, but because those who granted teachers autonomy succumbed to political tensions themselves. What happens more often is that teacher teams gradually concede on several small issues that can lead to giving up a good chunk of autonomy in the long run.

For example, one team running a teacher-powered school had created an extended day for four days a week so that students would have a half-day on the fifth day and staff could engage in all of the leadership activities that a teacher-powered school requires. Suddenly, in the school’s fifth year, the district decided it was going to charge an exorbitant amount of money for bus transportation since the school had a non-traditional schedule. The vendor had probably changed the cost for this “outlier,” and the district leaders opted to pass the cost along. This was a case of systemic tension. Rather than working with leaders from teacher-powered schools to determine alternatives, and with other schools that might have wanted alternative schedules, the district simply worked within a “sameness” mindset. District leaders could have led a discussion about what a new deal with the vendor might look like or opened the opportunity for teacher-powered schools to work with different vendors. In this case the teacher team did not have budget autonomy or the ability to choose their own vendors in the first place, which some would consider their first concession. Without that autonomy, this one change caused the team to decide to return to a traditional schedule (second concession). Doing this meant they had to eliminate some of the learning activities that were contributing to student and school success (third concession). They didn’t advocate for alternatives (fourth concession). This team found that the decision-making constraints that came from these concessions affected their motivation so dramatically that they vowed to protect their remaining areas of autonomy much more vigorously.

“Defending autonomy is one of our most important tasks. Had we not had as much freedom as we have, we would not be the school we are.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

Teacher tension
Nearly every teacher now in the profession went to, or worked in, a school where the principal made all of the “important” decisions. Even in cases where teachers are eager to take responsibility in exchange for autonomy, there can be challenges in learning how to effectively use those autonomies in practice. There is also a tendency, especially when people get tired or are under stress, to revert to wanting the principal or lead teachers to make the decisions, approve teachers’ decisions (thus taking on the burden of accountability themselves), or take care of the problems, such as disciplining students, listening to parents’ concerns, or handling disagreements among teachers. Teachers reported that leaders have a similar tendency toward traditional structures. Effective teams have had to “call out” their colleagues who are in principal or lead teacher roles.
when they act in a top-down fashion rather than as a supporter and implementer of the team’s shared purpose.

Teams know they must pay as much attention to these kinds of “inside” tensions as they do “outside” tensions. They’ve found that when their teacher-powered schools are maintaining their commitment to collaborative leadership, teacher language aligns with that. Teachers report that when team conversations are dominated by language that separates people into “camps,” or separates some members of the team from the whole (“just us” vs. “all of us”), there is a clear signal that the team may be reverting to a traditional model. Effective teams then take steps to revisit their shared purpose, review their collaborative practices, and even engage in team-building exercises.

TIPS

1. Secure as much autonomy as you can during the design and approval phase of your school. Take care not to limit your goal to pursuing only the areas of autonomy that are easy to secure. Seek to secure as many areas as possible. Many teams, reflecting on their design and approval phases, now believe that they did not realize that they needed certain freedoms until after their schools were approved. It is much easier to secure autonomy on the front end than it is to go back for more.

This does not mean you will necessarily ask for total autonomy in your actual proposal. It does mean that you should try and do everything possible to persuade the district, union, and charter authorizer staffers, who will likely advocate for your proposal to their leaders, why you need what might be viewed as the more controversial areas of autonomy well in advance of submission. If you sense that these leaders will not approve the proposal if your team asks for a particular area, then your team will need to decide if you still want to design and run a school under those conditions.

Once your team has secured many areas of autonomy, it can be challenging to know how to leverage all of them right away. Know that your team can focus on developing a few of them initially and phase in others over time. Just be up-front with stakeholders (parents, authorizers, community, etc.) about which ones your team will develop first. That way they know that your team has the intention of using them all and that it takes time to implement them effectively. A word of caution: be careful about not using autonomies, and be especially careful about telling those who granted you autonomy that they are not necessary. These

“I advise getting what you can and as much as you can in the beginning because there will be entities that will try to take away your autonomy.”

—Eric Hendy
San Francisco Community School
San Francisco, CA.
actions can be detrimental to others who are also attempting to design and launch teacher-powered schools, and who might have a different vision for how to use that area of autonomy—one your team might learn from and want/need to use.

a. **Must-have areas of autonomy.** Many pioneering teachers felt so strongly about securing the following areas of autonomy that they indicated if teams can’t secure these, they may not want to take on the responsibility and accountability associated with teacher-powered schools.

   i. **Selecting colleagues.** Teacher-powered schools are dramatically different than traditionally-structured schools. Not only do teams need to collaboratively take on responsibility and accountability for whole school success, but these teams also frequently design unique learning programs that require specific pedagogical skills and abilities. These two factors make it absolutely crucial that teacher teams secure the autonomy necessary to be able to choose their own colleagues.

   ii. **Evaluating colleagues.** Teacher teams must also have the ability to evaluate how well staff members are implementing the teacher-powered structures and living up to the instructional expectations of the collective. Securing evaluation autonomy also creates a built-in opportunity for staff development, as teacher-powered schools tend to design and use one process for both improvement and evaluation. See the Evaluation Discussion Starter, page 85.

   iii. **De-selecting colleagues.** Along with being able to select and evaluate staff members, teacher teams must also be able to deselect (or recommend for transfer) those who are unwilling or unable to thrive in the teacher-powered environment.

b. **Other high-priority areas of autonomy.** The pioneers identified the following areas of autonomy as being high priority, only slightly lower than the “must-haves.”

   i. **Determining budget.** The way that money is spent in any organization reflects its priorities. In order to ensure that your team priorities are reflected in the budgetary allocations, your team will need to have budget autonomy.

   “Schools often mistakenly compromise (when seeking autonomies)... because they want to open, get off the ground, get approval, etc. You need to study the ‘areas of autonomy’ list closely, and discuss what you could potentially do with them, to understand how important it is you think long term when you negotiate.”

   —Aaron Grimm
   Minnesota New Country School
   Henderson, MN
For instance, many districts utilize Title 2 money for district-run professional development. Many teachers in teacher-powered schools prefer to design and run their own professional learning, as their learning needs are different than those in traditional schools. Securing budget autonomy allows teams to make these types of adjustments.

ii. **Determining learning program.**
Many teacher-powered school teams have designed a learning program that is tailored to the specific needs of the students that they serve. In order to do this, teacher teams must secure this area of autonomy. It is worth noting that there is a connection between budget autonomy and learning program autonomy. Securing both of these areas of autonomy will allow your team to tailor the program to the students in the school and to move money so that financial resources reflect the learning priorities.

iii. **Selecting leaders.** Just as teacher teams need to be able to select colleagues, so, too, they need to be able to select their leader(s). Teacher-powered schools aspire to model democratic principles (read more about this in the Collaborative Management Discussion Starter, page 32), and one key way they can do that is by having the opportunity to decide who their leaders will be.

“My gut says that staffing is the non-negotiable—the hill to die on—the one that I would fight extremely hard for. You need the right people on the bus and you also need the ability to get them.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN

“Being able to move dollars around in ways that benefit the students, whenever that needs to happen, is a huge help…. For example, if we decided that all teachers attending a conference is more beneficial than spending money on a guest speaker for professional development, we could make that choice with a quick vote to access those funds immediately.”

—Jenerra Williams
Mission Hill K-8 School
Boston, MA

2. **Formalize the areas of autonomy that your team has secured.**
Whenever possible, create a formal document that identifies the specific autonomies that were provided for your school. When autonomy is not formalized during the design and launch phase of the school, teams risk being able to sustain it through changes in leadership or when leadership finds them too difficult to manage because they are not “the same.” Creating a formal “paper” trail in the form
of an MOU, contract, charter, or other legal document can help avoid challenges that may come over time due to a lack of institutional memory. See sample agreements in the storming section\(^8\) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School*.

3. **Build networks and relationships in order to secure and maintain autonomy.** One of the greatest opportunities for growth for teacher leaders is learning to navigate the policy landscape associated with getting a new teacher-powered school or a transition to a teacher-powered governance model approved. Perhaps the most effective way to heighten your team’s chances at approval is to build strategic relationships with those people who are either the district, union, or charter authorizer decision-makers, or those who influence them. These decision-makers and the people who influence them need to believe that the model you have designed will address their needs and interests and at the same time be successful. The more faith they have in your team and those who support your team, the more likely it is that they will support your school model.

a. **Begin building your support network as soon as possible in the design phase of the school.** In order to build the support that you need, you must be sure to know who you are, what you bring to the table, and how you are different (not better) than other options that are currently available. You must also be able to articulate these things in a way that quickly captures district, union, and charter authorizer leaders’ attention and builds their confidence in your team’s ability to be successful. Here are a few key points to keep in mind:

   i. Be ethical in everything you do and say. Showing integrity in all that you do is one of the most effective ways to build support for the autonomies you are trying to secure.

   ii. Defend, don’t attack. If someone questions your team’s ideas or the school model, consider it an opportunity to teach them about what you are trying to do. Provide the rationale and, when possible, the research behind your decisions; and always connect those decisions to student learning. As one pioneering teacher put it, everyone is an “ally in waiting.”

   iii. Build an emotional bank account with district, union, and charter authorizer decision-makers. Relationships matter. Creating relationships with those who

   “The time to start building external support is before you start to propose the school. The networks that get things to happen are personal. Find people for your team who already have connections to the groups or individuals you need to negotiate with. Start from a good foundation. Then build the school.”

   —Alysia Krafel
   Chrysalis Charter School
   Palo Cedro, CA
make decisions provides an opportunity for your team to respond to any concerns that they may have about the model or the autonomies that you are trying to secure before they make a final decision. Relationships also provide you an avenue through which you can show support from others as the school is built, through the launch process, and beyond.

b. **Connect with outside organizations when possible.** Where available, influential outside organizations may not only help with developing support from decision-makers, but they may also be able to help your team with design and planning issues. For example, the Wisconsin Innovative School Network does this for Wisconsin teams, the Coalition of Essential Schools has supported Boston and Los Angeles pilot school teams, and there are lawyers that specialize in organizational structures (cooperatives, LLCs, nonprofits, etc.) you can hire to consult with your team.

“Having a staff that is ‘on the same page’ about teaching, learning, and how to run a school is invaluable. Once you have that, being able to move dollars around in ways that benefit the students, whenever that needs to happen, is a huge help.”

—Jenerra Williams
Mission Hill K-8 School
Boston, MA

c. **Communicate with existing teacher-powered schools.** Now that over 75 teacher-powered schools have been identified, the newest teams have the opportunity to rely on the experience of those who’ve gone before. There is no need to re-invent the wheel by trying to figure out how to secure autonomies your team will need. Use the Teacher-Powered Schools Inventory at www.teacherpowered.org/inventory to find schools that have secured autonomy and connect with them. Talking with them may be helpful in learning about whom to build relationships with and what strategies are successful. Also, learning more about these teachers’ experiences will give your team a sense that you are normal, and that your experience is normal when you feel so far out of your traditional background but have nothing you can compare your teacher-powered experiences to. This is very useful in keeping your team sane and together. Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Facetime, and the CTQ Collaboratory provide inexpensive ways to connect with others.

d. **Leverage personal networks.** Some of the most powerful strategies for identifying and creating supporters are based on who knows whom. Tapping into personal networks, even if it is just to make an email introduction or initial phone call, provides an opportunity for your team to start the conversation on a positive note. Remember, even when connections are made through personal networks, your team still needs to tell the story about your school in a compelling and succinct way.
e. **Leverage community relationships.** Positive relationships with people across the community who understand your values and intentions are important for securing and sustaining autonomy. They provide an opportunity to show broad-based support for your school and can help influence others. The more support you can show from people who are not on the payroll, the better. Cultivate them from the beginning and always be up front about what you are doing. And, have patience! Building value throughout the community does not come easily or quickly, but the time investment is likely to pay off tenfold. (See the Shared Purpose Discussion Starter, page 4). The more you tell the story of what you are doing, the easier it will be to tell in a compelling way. Here are some ideas for developing community relationships:

   i. Get students into communities as soon as possible once school opens, or ask graduates of teacher-powered schools to support your efforts.

   ii. Support teachers to remember that they can be some of the strongest community relationship builders. An overwhelming percentage of Americans trust teachers, especially those in their neighborhood schools. When teachers take an idea or message directly to the community they serve, they are powerful voices and can quickly build support for your team’s school model.

   iii. Get local politicians into the school. Local politicians are frequently eager to see and learn how their policies are impacting teachers and students. They are also quite influential with others, even if they are not the ultimate approvers of your school. Getting them into your school to see how students are being served will help to ensure ongoing support.

f. **Connect with families; they are frequently your strongest advocates.** Education decision-makers listen to parents and families. The more support that you can generate with parents, the more likely it is that your model will be approved and that your team will get the autonomies that you seek. Support parents in understanding how your team’s school model will positively impact their children and how elevating their voice can support your team in securing autonomy.

   “Relationships allow people to listen to new ideas with open minds because they trust your intentions and have seen your work, follow through, success, etc.”

   —Jenerra Williams
   Mission Hill K-8
   Boston, MA

For more details about how the pioneers built support for their schools, see the storming section⁹ of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School.*
4. Be vigilant about conceding autonomies once they are secured. Rarely have schools had autonomies taken away in one noticeable action. More often, teams concede their autonomy one small step at a time. Be mindful of those small steps and attentive about the degree to which those small steps are adding up to the relinquishing of a significant amount of autonomy. Surrendering autonomy most commonly happens as a result of tension from two sources: the system and the teachers.

a. System tensions. Teacher-powered schools that exist in larger systems, like districts or charter management organizations (CMOs), are subject to significant amounts of systemic tension related to operating in a traditional top-down model. There are many policies and processes that hold traditional structures and cultures in place. Unless teacher teams are mindful of resisting requests to operate more traditionally, it is very easy to fall into a trap of conceding autonomy one step at a time. Pioneers suggest that teams should be especially aware of the following:

i. Communications from districts or CMOs. Most communications from larger systems are sent to all of the school principals who then address what the communication is about. In teacher-powered schools, decision-making authority is distributed differently. Your team will need to think about how to manage this flow of information that is traditionally structured to go through one person, including having a plan in place for how communications will be distributed and addressed so you can handle any needs in a timely manner. Your team should also take care to consider whether you actually do need to address what’s outlined in the communication or if you are exempt because of your autonomy. Don’t feel pressured to respond simply because the request has been made. If you must follow up with the district or CMO to tell them you will be doing things in a different way, deliver this in a way that is respectful and remind them of the agreement you have in place to support your case. Remember that the district and CMO are likely not malicious but are simply not taking the time to adapt to the different governance structure at your school.

“Getting families on board early on also built strong allies and a support system. They provided us a vision for why we’re doing what we’re doing.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN

“Reach out to others who have done this before. Use their mentorship and expertise to help guide your ship. If nothing else, they can assure you that ‘this is normal and all part of the process’ when things get tumultuous.”

—Aaron Grimm
Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN
ii. **Schedules.** If your school schedule is different than the traditional schools in your district or CMO, then members of your team will need to be able to articulate to those managing the larger system your autonomy arrangement, the values behind your design decision, and the impact the decision has had on students and families. Be prepared for frequent pressure to conform to the schedule because it makes it easier for district or CMO staff and administrators when every school is the same. You might hear from the professionals who are tracking attendance, allocating course credits, and managing transportation contracts, for example. Make your case to all of them! Help them to learn what a teacher-powered school is and offer to work with them to find ways to get them the information they need, even if you can’t give it to them how everyone else does.

“Have students—both current and graduates—publicly discuss how transformational your learning environment can be. If you have schools you are trying to emulate, teams will have current or former students they can put you in touch with to testify to their experiences during your approval process…. We get students into the community as much as possible and invite community groups to use our facilities because this allows us to connect with the community mouthpieces (the people who know everyone and gossip).”

—Aaron Grimm
Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN

b. **Teacher tensions.** While teachers are eager to take on the challenge of being in a teacher-powered school, it is most likely that they are accustomed to operating in a traditionally structured school. As a result, it can be quite easy to slip into operating in traditional ways and undermining the potential for change that exists due to the autonomy that your team likely fought hard to obtain. Kevin Brewster from Reiche School said that for those who want to maintain their autonomy, complacency is the enemy. Here are some recommendations for how to avoid this:

i. Engage staff members in a significant amount of team building. These team-building activities help to cultivate and sustain a collaborative culture and can reinforce the team’s shared purpose. This will also help avoid situations that can lead to “us vs. them” dynamics. Traditional school structures separate people in a variety of ways that lead to these dynamics. Dividing students by grade levels, siloing classrooms, and categorizing adults as teachers or leaders are some examples. Teacher-powered schools are collaborative environments where separation is eliminated, or at the very least, minimized. Team building exercises will help recalibrate staff behaviors.
ii. Create opportunities for teachers to get into one another’s classrooms. Reinforcing the collaborative nature of the work of your team will help to preserve the unique aspects of your team’s teacher-powered school. Once team members see the value of collaborative activities, they will work harder to fully utilize and preserve the autonomy that allows such activities to happen.

iii. Use collaborative documents, like Google Docs, to give and receive feedback on different aspects of the school. Once again, modeling and reinforcing the collaborative nature of the work will help to avoid returning to traditional structures and an “us vs. them” mentality.

iv. Be sure that everyone understands the autonomies that your team has secured and be in agreement publicly about why your team needs them and how they benefit students. If staff members do not have a common understanding about what your autonomies are and how your team uses them, it is very easy to slip back into traditional ways of being.

“At each level of development, I do an exercise that I call IAT (I Assume That…). Every member of the team throws five of their own personal ‘operating assumptions’ up on a chart so all can be seen together. Prompts for writing these might be, ‘IAT all of my colleagues would...’ or ‘IAT none of my colleagues would ever…’. This exposes everyone's fears and reveals what might need more explicit attention, like transparency or intentionality.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM School
Cincinnati, OH
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Review the 15 autonomies identified in Figure 1 with your team (page 2). Discuss the benefits and challenges associated with securing each one. Do your best to get out of your traditional-governance mindset and imagine what you will want when you are sharing responsibility and accountability with a team over the long-term.

Decide what autonomies are "must haves" — if you can’t get them, you won’t move forward with your school.

Work with your team to develop messages about why each of the autonomies that you intend to secure is important to your school and students. Learn to communicate these messages quickly and positively, without putting down other approaches.

Research the ways in which your team can secure autonomy in your local context. Are there state or district policies that provide for new school models? Can your team secure a Memorandum of Understanding or other waivers from aspects of the collective bargaining agreement and state statute? Does your local association’s collective bargaining agreement have language that allows for a teacher-powered school? Does your state or district have pilot schools or an innovation zone? Does your district authorize charter schools, or can you pursue a charter school in another way? Are your state, district, and union leaders willing to explore opening one of these alternatives to support your journey? Remember, most of these options didn’t exist before the pioneers asked!

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
Discuss the benefits and challenges associated with the available means for securing autonomy. Decide which option(s) are best for your team.

Research the processes that are in place to get approval for your team’s school proposal or proposed transition in governance structure. What documents need to be completed? Who makes the final decision? Are there committees or staff members who make preliminary recommendations about approval? Work with your team to create a plan for navigating the approval process.

Think broadly. Who are the influential people and organizations in your local context that will support your teacher-powered school efforts? Who are the decision-makers about your team’s school and the autonomy that you are seeking? What do they need to know before they make a decision to support your work? Create a plan for connecting with both influential people and decision-makers.

Specifically, how will your team engage with parents and the community to build support? Are there ways that the families your school will serve already connect with one another within the community (e.g. at sporting events, churches, or neighborhood gatherings)? If so, how will you leverage those opportunities to connect with larger groups of people?

What structures will your team have in place to remain mindful of the pressures to concede autonomy? How will your team address systemic tensions? How will you avoid or address tension that comes from teachers?
ENDNOTES:

3 http://www.zerochanceofpassage.com/

4 http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/civic_mission/2013/06/teachers__stop_waiting_start_calling_the_shots.html

5 http://inspirationalwriting.info/explorerpioneer.htm

6 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/leadership

7 http://www.teachingquality.org/content/cycle-4-question-1-autonomies-part-1

8 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/autonomy/securing

9 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/support
It can be difficult for many people to imagine how teachers would go about collaboratively managing a school. Hierarchical leadership structures dominate the education space and have had a major impact on how our society at large, and especially teachers, view the profession.

Some common assumptions are that school leadership must exist within the “boss-worker” framework where the principal enforces state and district mandates and teachers can only handle classroom leadership. This framework perpetuates assumptions that teachers are not capable of leading beyond the classroom and that they are so petty they need to have someone in charge to help them sort out their disagreements.

Yet many teams that design and run teacher-powered schools are able to effectively build capacity for leadership among their colleagues, who share responsibility and accountability for school success.

Collaborative management is an essential characteristic of any teacher-powered school, permeating all aspects of school culture and leadership. This discussion starter addresses the design and cultivation of structures and practices that positively impact teachers’ collaborative leadership of schools. Readers should note that the larger discussion about collaborative management is much broader than what is covered here. All of the discussion starters in this series explain the fundamentals of collaborative management as they relate to teacher-powered schools.

What have the pioneers done?
Teachers from pioneering teams report that they learned how to collaboratively manage while on the job. This was not an ideal situation, but at the time, there were very few resources to support teams in learning how to collaboratively manage teacher-powered schools. Now, as a network of teams across the country is emerging, so too is an understanding of how teams effectively cultivate and maintain collaborative leadership structures in schools. Some of their most prominent practices follow.

“Students cannot practice being citizens unless they are given opportunities to learn. Therefore we must model and practice it within our school culture.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN
Prioritization of democratic principles

Teacher-powered schools are committed to functioning as democracies by providing all members of the team an opportunity to actively participate in making decisions influencing the school’s success. When teachers design schools with a real responsibility for their success, there’s no need to cultivate “buy-in.” Teachers own what they create. As Carrie Bakken at Avalon School puts it, “The only power we don’t have is the power to complain, because if we don’t like something, we can change it for the better.”

Teacher-powered teams feel strongly that collaborative management models the way most students will work in their future jobs and careers, as well as the way citizens behave in a democracy. After all, most professionals don’t operate in silos. Instead, they hone their skills as collaborators, learning to value how democratic decision-making yields an informed result that considers the needs of the whole community.

In collaborative management scenarios, team members learn when to challenge their team and when to compromise. They recognize when to maximize individuals’ strengths and minimize the team’s weaknesses. They allow for individuals to cultivate new ideas for the team’s benefit. They make mistakes but lean on the collective knowledge of the group to find solutions.

“When students see and hear their teachers co-creating their work environment and the policies that govern it, they learn collaborative management skills themselves. They begin to understand what active participation in a democracy looks like.

Cultivation of efficient, democratic decision-making practices

The first scenario that many people envision when they hear about collaborative leadership is a slow, unproductive decision-making process. How can a teacher-powered school be an effective school-governance structure when teachers have to make every little decision together?

“My question to colleagues who want to start their own schools is this: Does your school or district have a mission or vision that includes preparing students for democracy? Or do you include this kind of wording in your own goals for this new school? ‘Career preparation’ and ‘becoming lifelong learners’ language now seems to dominate the main goals of districts and schools. Is this at the expense of advancing our aim to be a democratic society?”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM School
Cincinnati, OH

“Consensus and leadership require trust in the process of the group to yield a decision that is higher quality than any one person could have come up with alone.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA
But collaborative management and shared governance do not equate to 100 percent agreement among the entire team about every issue. Instead, teams work hard to build and maintain a strong shared purpose (consisting of mission, vision, values, and goals) and then delegate decision-making authority to various individuals and committees on the team. These individuals and committees are expected to act according to the team’s shared purpose, and any decision-making rules or processes that the team determines must be followed. If the individuals and committees do not meet expectations, the team can revoke their decision-making authority.

Key to the success of this model is absolute transparency about what decisions have been made and why. Sean Woytek, a California teacher working in a teacher-powered school while simultaneously designing another, defined transparency and his working arrangement this way: “I can’t be involved in everything, nor do I care to be. I’m satisfied if I can sit down and either read through or talk with someone who is involved and know what occurred. I’m not satisfied with just the public display—I want to be able to know the entire process. And if I want to get involved, I want to have the ability to get involved.” To ensure transparency, some teams use Google Docs to post agendas and meeting minutes containing this kind of information, which all team members can view at any time. Teams also make clear that anyone is welcome to attend any meeting in which decisions are being made on behalf of the team.

Some teams prefer that whole-team and committee meetings use a consensus process to make decisions, while others prefer majority voting. One frequently cited process is “fist-to-five.” When making a decision, the facilitator states the proposition that is on the table. Everyone in the group then gives the proposal a rating from a fist (a “No” vote) to a 5 (“This is a great idea that I am willing to incorporate into our school”). As long as all votes are a three (“I am not in total agreement but am comfortable moving forward”) or higher, the proposal is carried forward.

In schools that use some form of consensus process, teachers find that they are willing to go along with a decision that is made this way (even if they are not in 100 percent agreement) because they know that they can tweak or re-visit those decisions if they do not work out. They also know that their input was heard and considered and the decision may go their way the next time around. Teachers emphasized that this is quite different from feeling locked in to a decision because of the time it takes to process proposals.

“Consensus doesn’t mean that everyone agrees on the decision. Sometimes it means that folks are willing to move forward on the proposal at hand because they know they can go back—over time, with a collection of observations and data—and make changes to the decision. They are willing to go with the best plan at the moment. I like not feeling ‘locked in.’”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN
“Negative energy that results from top-down decision making must be counted in the time it takes to run a school. Disgruntled people do not work at their best. There is in fact a very high cost and efficiency lost in the top-down model that almost nobody accounts for. We only count the time we spend in meetings. If you count it that way, top-down seems more efficient. The truth may be otherwise. Resentment has a very high cost in time.”

—Alysia Krafel
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“Negative energy that results from top-down decision making must be counted in the time it takes to run a school. Disgruntled people do not work at their best. There is in fact a very high cost and efficiency lost in the top-down model that almost nobody accounts for. We only count the time we spend in meetings. If you count it that way, top-down seems more efficient. The truth may be otherwise. Resentment has a very high cost in time.”

—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI

Consensus processes can take time, but teachers agree that the healthy, productive culture cultivated by this process is worth the time commitment. Some teachers pointed out that there is uncounted time and productivity lost when people undermine decisions because they do not buy into them, or when people spread negative energy because they do not understand the reasons why people make decisions and feel powerless to change things. To teacher-powered teams, the benefits of consensus far outweigh the costs.

Team delegation of authority to various leaders among leaders

In teacher-powered schools, everyone is considered a teacher leader who shares responsibility and accountability for school success. Teams cultivate a strong shared purpose and then delegate some decision-making authority to various individuals and committees on the team who act according to the shared purpose and decision-making policies. When designing these policies, teams often reserve some decision making for the whole team, such as significant changes in the learning program or selection of the school leaders and committee chairs. Whole teams also define the purview of each committee and individual teacher’s authority.

Examples of committees include: professional development, student engagement, peer observation and evaluation, technology, and climate and culture. Sometimes teams create committees to ensure they are addressing their team’s values and goals. For example, the San Francisco Community School team created a committee to define equity and set goals and objectives for ensuring equity for students at the school. Find more examples of committees in the storming section of Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School. Frequently, teachers self-select which
committees they join based on their interests or because they notice a need they would like to fill or address. Some teams use working-style assessments to help teachers identify their areas of strength and ensure a balance of strengths across the total membership of each committee. Term limits of two or three years are sometimes used to encourage individuals to learn all of the dimensions of school leadership. Teams using term limits have discovered that once teachers have served on a committee, they have a higher degree of respect for the work of that committee and a greater appreciation for what it takes to run that aspect of the school.

Some teacher-powered schools have a “head team,” while most decide to select one or more principals or lead teachers to carry out certain functions. In the case of a head team, frequently a representative from each committee and each grade level or subject area is selected to be a member. This team is then charged with ensuring alignment of all work to the shared purpose and facilitating appropriate communication among committees. This model is most commonly seen in large schools where getting everyone around one table to make decisions is particularly difficult. Other schools have a head team that works in concert with a principal or lead teacher. Some leaders serve long tenures, while others are subject to term limits.

Whatever the arrangement, the power structure is very different from a traditionally operated school. In teacher-powered schools, leaders are not the ultimate authority on all things. Instead, they serve more as facilitators of the team’s collective decisions. They answer to—and in most cases are selected by—the teachers. Some teams desire having someone in the principal role to help handle administrative responsibilities like paperwork, compliance, and operational issues. This is especially important when a team of teachers finds they may not be well equipped to, or do not care to, assume these responsibilities.

“Honestly, being our school leader means very little except more paperwork and more district involvement. We are all lead teachers and have the ability to do all the things the school leader does.”

—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI

Teachers report that effective “leaders among leaders” in a teacher-powered school, especially those working in a principal or lead teacher position, know how to lead from the middle or the back. These leaders don’t need, or want, to be out in front of the group setting the agenda or making the decisions. They prefer to step aside and facilitate the team toward collective decisions.

“To put it succinctly, we have many leaders. This helps distribute the workload and ensures that decisions take into account many different viewpoints.”

—Aaron Grimm
New Country School
Henderson, MN
These leaders have a deep understanding that people will own what they help create, so they support the team in creating and implementing their own vision. This type of leader recognizes that collective effort is the bedrock on which the teacher-powered structure is built and is an absolute necessity for the school to function effectively and efficiently. Strong leaders also resist the temptation to take charge just because district leaders view them as bosses and seek to hold one individual accountable. Instead, they act on behalf of their team, even if district leaders fail to understand or adapt to what teacher-powered collaborative management means.

During times of school leader transition, teachers recommend that teams create opportunities for the incoming leader to be trained or mentored by the previous leader. This can be achieved by creating overlapping staffing assignments (which can last up to a year) where the previous leader remains at the school while the new leader transitions in. Another way to achieve this overlap is to choose new leaders well before a term limit ends and provide release time for the incoming leader to transition into the role. These overlapping staffing assignments help to avoid abrupt changes in approach or philosophy that often occur in traditionally structured school leader transitions.

“Observation and nurturing of good practice

Teachers who have designed, launched, and worked in teacher-powered schools agree that visiting and forming relationships with other teacher-powered schools is incredibly valuable. These connections, made online and in person, allow participants to learn strategies for developing a strong collaborative management culture. Teams can see how other teams “do” collaborative management in practice and glean ideas about what works and what doesn’t. Pairing with successful schools helps prevent new schools from having to build their structures completely from scratch, as many of the currently existing teacher-powered schools had to do.

Teams with strong collaborative management cultures also create the time, space, and opportunity to nurture good leadership practices. These teams intentionally allocate time and money to go on retreats to learn and plan with one another. Providing an environment where the team can focus on creating a strong sense of community, as well as learn how to lead collaboratively, is a critical aspect of many teams’ development strategy. Many
teams report that investing this time and money on the front end helps to avoid challenges that could arise otherwise.

**Development of effective meeting management practices**

When teachers have school leadership responsibilities in addition to their teaching responsibilities, and when all teachers have the right to influence decision making, efficient meeting management is crucial to prevent burnout and show respect for team members’ time. Many teams refer to the ways in which, over the years, they have developed the structure and function of their meetings to improve their capacity to collaboratively manage their schools. Here are some of their principles and practices:

- Meetings frequently open with team building activities or warm ups so team members can learn to work with one another and learn more about who everyone is as an individual beyond their work persona. These exercises serve as reminders that everyone is human and has a life and personality that might not be seen in their day-to-day work. These also help to build and nurture relationships among staff members that can help to prevent conflict later on.

- A talking stick and a time keeper can help ensure people know when to talk and when to listen.

- Meeting protocols are developed, communicated, and adhered to in order to support people in learning how to work with one another. These include time keeping, rules of order, behavior expectations, and more.

- Every so often, meeting facilitation training for the whole team is a very effective way to get things “on track” without any one team member dominating the process of efficiency improvement.

- Anyone can add to meeting and retreat agendas, and it is usually someone’s role to shape all the suggestions into an agenda before the meeting. Google Docs can be especially helpful with this. This person might shift suggestions for whole-team discussions to committee discussions, table certain items until a later date, and more. All of these decisions, and the reasons for this person’s decisions, are clearly communicated and can be reversed.

“Humans love to talk. It’s in our nature. And it can be hard to slow people down at a meeting. A talking stick is an easy tool to help do that, and it’s a great way to include team members who may shy away from speaking up. It’s also a great way to respect everyone’s time.”

—Jenerra Williams
Mission Hill K-8 School
Boston, MA

“Humanity is at the core of our school. We cannot keep our humanity with our kids if we don’t show it for one another.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH
TIPS

1. Identify and connect with at least one currently operating teacher-powered school in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab in the Center for Teaching Quality Collaboratory. If possible, make arrangements to visit the school or engage in conversations with its founders or team members. If a visit isn’t possible, consider taking a virtual tour.

“If we are going to have hard conversations, then we need to be able to have the easy ones, too.”
—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN

Prioritize building relationships with teams that have autonomy arrangements and learning programs like the ones your team is pursuing. While collaborative management structures are relatively common across schools, autonomy arrangements and learning programs are not. To make the best use of your networking time, find mentor teams who are a good match in these other areas. The Teacher-Powered Schools Inventory provides information about the autonomy arrangements for more than 70 schools so you can find a good match. Many schools in the inventory have team members involved in the Collaboratory.

Give serious consideration to engaging in organizational development training, even if it’s not directly related to education. This type of training will support your team members in growing their understanding of how organizations work and what makes them effective. Schools are sophisticated, dynamic organizations, so organizational development training can be extremely helpful for those seeking to successfully design and manage them.

2. This is definitely an area where the professional development needs of personnel in teacher-powered schools differ from the needs of personnel in traditional schools. If the local context dictates professional development, then this is an area of autonomy that your team will want to secure. In addition, your team will need to allocate appropriate financial resources to the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed.

A helpful book that relates to this topic is Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens

“I’d recommend professional development that exposes teachers to what in business and management schools is often called ‘Organizational Development.' Teachers in a co-leading environment need the skills of forming basic operating principles, aligning purpose with practice, marketing, negotiations, evaluation, and supervision. Knowing the basics then allows teacher leaders to make sure these elements are built into their design and structure. Knowing what phases any organization goes through can increase the tolerance for rough times; knowing what working-condition factors tend to produce greater retention could surprise some people but certainly save the huge energy required to replace team members.”

—Virginia Rhodes, Hughes STEM School, Cincinnati, OH
When Teachers Call the Shots, by Kim Farris-Berg, Edward J. Dirkswager, and Amy Junge. The authors found that teachers who secure autonomy to design and run schools cultivate cultural and management characteristics that emulate those found in high-performing organizations.

3. Develop a means to ensure that committees’ and other leaders’ work is aligned with the shared purpose and other design decisions that the team is continuously improving upon. Your team should develop clear expectations about how committee members and leaders will make their work transparent, as well as opportunities for committees to interact and share their work (such as Google Docs or a whole-team meeting). The peer observation and evaluation committee, for example, might have a good idea about the kinds of learning the professional development committee ought to be developing or pursuing.

4. Consider having at least two- to three-year staggering terms for all committees and leadership positions. Term limits can enhance understanding and appreciation of various leadership positions. Staggering terms can prevent loss of committee knowledge and momentum.

5. Determine the leadership structure at your school by thoroughly considering the options. Teams should weigh multiple factors to decide whether to have a principal, lead teacher, head team, administrative personnel (who handle compliance, paperwork, payroll, etc.), or other leadership at their school.

6. Document the reasons for all decisions about committees and “leaders among leaders.” Codify how committee members and leaders are selected and deselected (ideally by the whole team), any term limits, what the committee leaders’ responsibilities are (and aren’t), and how leaders will work with the team in various contexts (meeting management, evaluation, disciplining students, etc.). This will help future teams make well-informed decisions when it comes time to reflect, and possibly change, structures.

7. Determine the right mix of school leaders and committee memberships by considering a range of strengths and working styles. Intentional inclusion of multiple perspectives and strengths can help to provide space for new ideas to emerge and ensure
that the work will get done. A group of like-minded folks can sometimes have challenges with approaching things anew.

Ideally, during the design and approval phase of your school, include a plan for how leader transitions will be carried out. Or, if your school already exists, take steps now to add this to your autonomy agreement. Teams’ collaborative management culture can be destroyed easily when a leader who doesn’t value such a culture is appointed according to contract rules and without consideration for the school’s teacher-powered management. It is essential to secure approval for a plan that identifies the process by which new school leaders will be selected and outlines how leaders who are new to the school will be integrated into the culture (see Cultural Integration, page 75). For example, at Chrysalis Charter School, teachers decided to select a new school leader one year before the existing leader left, allowing time for a more seamless transition.

Develop a process to determine how newly selected school or committee leaders will build capacity for collaborative, whole-group management and whether they have the ability to “lead from the middle or back.” Building capacity requires a leader to know when and how to lead from somewhere besides the front. Books that might prove helpful are *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* by Margaret Wheatley, *Leaders Eat Last* by Simon Sinek, and *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom. School leaders must be able to think strategically about the type of leadership approach that is most helpful in any given situation and know how and when to support the development of emerging leaders. They must have the ability to resist being the person with the answers and authority, even when the district office pressures them to accept accountability on behalf of the team.

Allocate resources in order to have a team retreat or focused time away from school on an at least an annual basis. Teams agree that taking the time for planning and bonding has a positive impact on their collaborative management, allowing more time for new ideas to be heard, positive culture to be reinforced, and consensus and buy-in to develop. Opinions about the best timing for a retreat vary. Some teams recommend the end of the school year to provide opportunities to reflect on what went well and what needs to be redesigned (before it’s forgotten). This can allow time to identify team or other community members to work on redesign over the summer or to get going immediately when the school year starts.

Other teams recommend holding retreats just prior to the start of the school year in order to provide opportunities for cultural integration of new team members while engaging in strategic planning for the school year. Some of these teams are careful to collect team
members’ agenda items by a deadline at the end of the prior school year so knowledge about items is not lost over the summer.

11. Pay specific attention to how meeting structures and processes are designed. Be sure to align the structures to the functions desired. For example, if meetings are intended to practice democratic structures, be sure that they are designed to do so. If they are intended to help build capacity or help team members learn how to work together, then ensure that the meeting structure will accomplish those goals.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Which teacher-powered schools are most closely aligned with the school that your team is designing? How will you connect with the teams that manage those schools? What is your plan for using those teams’ valuable time wisely? What specific strengths and weaknesses and group dynamics have you noticed among your team members? How does this influence what you need and hope to learn from discussing and observing collaborative management with other teams?

How will teachers at the school learn how to collaboratively manage it? How will they learn how to manage administrative and cultural responsibilities that are normally assigned to a principal? How will those responsibilities be divided among the team?
What decision-making processes will your team put in place? Will you seek to create consensus? If so, how do you define consensus? Will there be a place for majority voting? Which process will be used for what decisions?

What decision-making structures will your team put in place? Will there be committees? If so, how will you decide which committees your team should have? How will each committee know what their charge is, including what decisions they can and cannot make? Where will the answers to these questions be documented?

How will your team determine who will be a member of each committee? Will teachers self-select, be nominated and elected, or a mix? Will your team use assessments to determine strengths, weaknesses, working styles, etc., and then make an effort to ensure committee memberships are well balanced? Where will the answers to these questions be documented?

How will you ensure committees and other leaders are acting in alignment with the team’s shared purpose? How will committees’ and leaders’ decisions be communicated to other staff members? How will your team ensure transparency? Where will the answers to these questions be documented?

How will your team decide whether to have a principal or other leader(s)? If you do choose to have a principal, what will s/he do? What will s/he not do? To whom will s/he answer? If you decide not to have a principal, how will the responsibilities normally carried by the principal be distributed? Where will the answers to these questions be documented?
How will your team choose its founding leader(s)? How will subsequent leaders be selected? What autonomy agreements or other arrangements need to be in place in order for your team to be able to select its leaders or to ensure any selected leaders are chosen with great consideration for the teacher-powered school governance? What will the process do to ensure a smooth transition between leaders?

How will your team determine whether a candidate for school leader is able to “lead from the middle” and build capacity for shared leadership across the team?

Will your team have a retreat? If so, what resources need to be allocated? Where will those resources come from? What does your team intend to accomplish from the retreat? Do your goals influence when the retreat ought to be scheduled or when the agenda should be set?

What meeting structures and processes will your team put in place to make sure time is spent efficiently? How do those structures reflect your priorities?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
ENDNOTES:

10 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/leadership

11 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMQmKHmlqY4

12 http://www.teacherpowered.org/inventory
One of the most striking features of teacher-powered schools is the focus on a teaching and learning environment that is both personalized and “humanized.” Teacher-powered teams place a high value on creating a climate where students can take ownership of their own learning and identify areas of passion and interest. Teachers in teacher-powered schools often view themselves as “unfinished learners” who must work together to achieve school success.

Simultaneously, teachers in these schools often emphasize their intention to meet the needs of the whole child in order to develop all the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students will need to be successful in life. Academic content is important, but it is not the only thing teachers value. Teacher-powered schools frequently establish goals that include navigating by joy, seeing the light shine in students’ eyes, and wanting students to enjoy their school experience.

“Being a teacher in a teacher-led school mostly requires things that aren’t a part of educational trainings—a willingness to hear others, compromise, give more of yourself and your time than your contract specifies, build trust and relationships, share your ideas, say when you don’t agree, admit when you are wrong, have a sense of humor, etc.”

—Jenerra Williams
Mission Hill K-8 School
Boston, MA

“Everyone is nourishing the light in everyone else. That results in a kind, respectful, gentle environment where motivation to engage and learn is the natural result.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA
COLLEGIAL MANAGEMENT OF
TEACHING AND LEARNING

What have the pioneers done?

Decision making

Teacher-powered teams make decisions about teaching and learning that impact both individual student and whole-school success. In order to make decisions efficiently, many teams have developed clearly defined processes and pathways so that everyone knows who is responsible for which decisions.

That said, every team relies on more than one means for making decisions. Some teams use consensus processes like “fist to five” and majority voting and even create decision-making structures where special teams are tasked with making specific decisions. Some schools use processes that include the entire staff, while others assign specific responsibilities to different committees of teachers. For example, some schools have personnel committees for hiring and evaluation, and technology committees for handling technology needs. Deciding which processes to use often depends on the size of the school and the specific decisions that need to be made.

Many schools have also developed a means for communicating decision-making processes to newly-hired personnel. After all, this is likely the most significant difference between traditionally structured and teacher-powered schools. Not only must teachers understand the decision-making structures, but they must also learn to trust their teammates to make the right decisions for students and the school while following established processes, even if everyone isn’t involved in every decision.

“Conflict is a very normal part of group growth and functioning, so stop being annoyed or ‘working around’ a seemingly problematic colleague or their ideas. Skip straight to high levels of training in communications skills.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH

In the decision-making process, teacher-powered teams establish cultures that embrace conflict and confrontation as part of the work—while making sure to support team members in developing healthy confrontation and conflict resolution skills. Since team members share responsibility and accountability for outcomes, they have a vested interest in decisions impacting students and the school. As a result, there is tremendous potential for disagreement and conflict during decision making.
The ability of team members to work through disagreements and conflict is crucial. Schools frequently seek specific training in how to reach consensus and settle conflicts. Nearly all teachers in teacher-powered schools have indicated that they use their shared purpose as the touchstone for settling conflict.

An added benefit to working through disagreements is that students get to see adults model solutions-oriented conflict resolution and are then better able to develop those skills for themselves.

**Teaching and shared purpose**

While teachers in teacher-powered schools make decisions that influence whole-school success, this does not mean that they have free reign to do whatever they please. Most teacher-powered schools have developed structures that foster a balance between order and chaos. While teachers in these schools enjoy high levels of autonomy in their work, they must also align their practices and decisions with the overall shared purpose of the school, which is created by the entire team. Individual teachers do have the opportunity to be creative and exercise autonomy with their own students, but only within specific parameters set by the larger group.

Because teacher teams make decisions that impact whole-school success, it’s crucial that time spent in meetings is meaningful and productive. As a result, there is a high level of intentionality and structure present during school and committee meetings.

**Teacher roles**

Teachers usually structure teacher-powered schools in a way that reworks how student and teacher time are used. They build a community of unfinished learners made up of both students and teachers. This student-centered approach to teaching is often very different from approaches found in today’s teacher preparation programs, which often embrace the assembly-line structure of traditional schools in which teachers and students do what they’re told. As a result, teachers in teacher-powered schools must develop skills to facilitate and document student progress in ways beyond traditional age-grade structures. In addition, these teachers take on leadership roles that have an impact beyond their own classrooms—including roles supporting disciplinary, social, administrative, and other needs.
TIPS

1. Develop a process for how staff will make efficient decisions about issues concerning teaching and learning. Download the sample organizational charts in the norming section\(^{13}\) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School* to see examples of how decisions are made and who makes them. Use them as a basis for your team’s discussions.

2. Seek opportunities for staff to learn how to embrace and resolve conflict as a way to improve the school. Take care not to make assumptions about the ability of team members to be able to resolve conflict in a respectful way that aligns with the shared purpose. Create a process for how different types of conflicts and disagreements will be handled. View more resources in the norming section\(^{14}\) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School*.

3. Develop a clear way for all school personnel to know how much autonomy they have in different situations (classroom, advisory groups, decision-making teams, etc.). Clearly define the team’s shared purpose and goals, and develop team expectations for how individuals will keep personal goals in balance with team goals.

4. Consider how your team will structure or seek external learning experiences for teachers to support their shift from traditional instructors (“sages on the stage”) to learning facilitators (“guides on the side”). Provide ample opportunities for teachers to model the behaviors, attitudes, and skills that you want to develop in students.

5. Consider how you will support teachers’ shift from assuming responsibility not just for subject-area or grade-level teaching but also for handling disciplinary, social, administrative, and other school needs.

6. Address the following topics in meetings where decisions need to be made about instruction:
   - Align agenda items to the school’s purpose (mission, vision, values, and goals).
   - Let the full team know in advance what decisions will be made at each meeting. This allows for informal conversation and information gathering before the meeting takes places, which helps facilitate informed decision making.
   - Build trust. You will need to have some uncomfortable meetings as you learn how to collegially manage the school. But these meetings will get better as everyone learns to embrace and resolve conflict. Create opportunities for team members to learn conflict resolution skills in the context of meetings.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will decisions be made about teaching and learning? Will we use whole group or team structures (or both)? Which structures will be used for which decisions?

If we are going to use a team structure for decision making, what teams will we have? How will these teams align with our shared purpose? How will we decide who is on what team?

How will team members learn to embrace and resolve conflict? What happens if someone is not able to do that? What supports and training will we provide?

How will we create a balance between chaos and structure along with alignment to the shared purpose? How will that structure or process be communicated to team members and new hires?

What structures and protocols will we put in place to ensure efficiency and productivity during all meetings?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory.

www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
RESISTING PRESSURE TO CONFORM

TIPS

1. Work as a team to create common language and messaging that explains how and why the school’s instructional approach is different. Having fixed messaging helps in a variety of contexts when interacting with fellow team members, parents, community members, school boards, and district personnel. It also helps create a clear message (or brand) for the school, which, in turn, can help resist pressures to conform. When everyone is clear about the specific characteristics of the school, what makes it unique, and why it is successful, it is harder for detractors to find inconsistencies and apply pressure.

2. Some schools have a team, such as an Instructional Leadership Team, whose responsibility is to deal with district mandates related to instruction. This group may not have teachers from every grade level or department, but they are trusted to make decisions based on what is best for students within the context of the school’s shared purpose. This team decides whether they are going to comply with, ignore, or object to mandates (or object and comply anyway).

What have the pioneers done?

Teachers in teacher-powered schools often report that they feel continuously pressed to conform to traditional school structures and instructional practices. This pressure can come via state and district mandates, community and parent expectations, and teachers’ previous experiences with traditional school models.

For example, most districts still report student progress by courses. Yet many teacher-powered schools have created learning programs in which students learn standards typically covered in one district course over a series of projects and grade levels, thereby requiring a reporting system based on progress toward standards, not courses.

In addition, most teachers have worked in schools where the principal made the final decision on matters of teaching and learning. Moving to a school where teachers make critical decisions—especially difficult ones around compensation or evaluation—can sometimes result in teachers wanting to return to traditional structures because they are familiar and easier to handle.

Most teacher-powered schools have secured autonomy—sometimes in the form of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), charter or pilot school contracts, or waivers—in order to insulate themselves against the pressures to conform to traditional models. The areas of autonomy that teacher teams can secure and which impact the learning program may include budget, curriculum, personnel, scheduling, length of day and/or year, assessments, and more. See the National Inventory of Schools with Teacher Autonomy for the full list.
3. Consider identifying a person or organization outside the school who can act as an intermediary between the school and district in negotiating “sticky” issues. This could be a community advocate, a union/association official, or a district person who is “in your corner.” For example, the Center for Collaborative Education16 does this for Boston Pilot Schools17, and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association18 does this for the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy.

4. Parents can be your school’s greatest advocates. When parents are happy with their children’s learning experiences, they are more likely to publicly resist efforts to change the school. Vocal parents are frequently quite influential in stakeholder decision-making processes.

Develop ongoing relationships with parents by keeping them well informed about issues concerning the school and providing them with opportunities to be actively engaged in their children’s education. Teams should also get creative about finding opportunities to develop parents’ advocacy skills, which can be put to use when teachers are being pressured to conform.

5. Develop relationships with school board members and other key stakeholders. Meet with them to see what their hopes and concerns are about schools in the district and what they want to see in your teacher-powered school. Share your anticipated successes and ways that your school will address their concerns. Create ongoing relationships with key stakeholders who understand your model to build allies whom you can call upon for advice or intervention when pressures mount.

6. Be sure to secure the areas of autonomy that you school needs in order to operate in the ways it was designed. Wherever possible, do not rely solely on the word or memory of district officials regarding specific freedoms or autonomies your school has been granted. Remember that those positions change, and memories can be short.

Get autonomy agreements in writing and approved by the appropriate decision makers. At the very least, you should seek budget, staffing, and school leader selection autonomies, though your local context will determine what autonomies are needed and attainable. Learn about pursuing autonomy in the storming section19 of Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School.

7. Explore ways to opt out of state and district mandates around curriculum and instruction. Many districts have processes in place to grant waivers or special status that allows schools to opt out of district requirements. For example, Denver Public Schools has a process in which schools can apply for autonomy from curriculum mandates. Schools must submit a plan for how they will meet standards and pay for materials. Schools providing sufficient evidence of potential for success are granted that autonomy. Investigate your state and district policies to see if such provisions exist.

8. While you won’t likely be able to obtain exemptions from state standards, you may be able get autonomy for how to implement those standards. You can also look to unique models (Montessori20, Expeditionary Learning21, etc.) to learn how to gain similar flexibilities that your team would like to have.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will we support team members in aligning with the shared purpose and articulating that shared purpose to a variety of audiences?

How will we deal with district mandates, especially those that tend to pressure schools to conform to a traditional model? Who will be responsible for handling these mandates, and how will they communicate these mandates with the entire team?

What areas of autonomy will we need in order to implement our learning program? How can we secure those areas of autonomy? Who might be willing to help us secure those areas of autonomy?

Who are the key stakeholders who have a vested interest in the success of our school? What are their hopes and fears? How might our school live up to their hopes and assuage their fears?

How will we support parents to become actively involved in the school and serve as advocates for our school’s model?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory.

www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
ENDNOTES:

13 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/norming/assessment
14 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/norming/personnel
15 http://www.teacherpowered.org/inventory
16 http://www.ccebos.org
17 http://www.ccebos.org/pilotschools/schools.htm
18 http://www.denverclassroom.org
19 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/autonomy
20 http://www.montessori.org
21 http://www.elschools.org
The era of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top emphasized the use of student standardized test scores to measure the success of students and schools. Not surprisingly, student standardized test scores remain the prevalent means by which districts and states determine student and school success.

Teacher-powered schools, in contrast, have a broader view of student and school success, taking into account the social, emotional, and physical well-being of students. While teacher-powered teams utilize standardized test scores as one of their measures of success, they typically decide not to make them the sole measure. Instead, teachers determine what a successful education experience for students should look like at their school and then identify ways to measure performance against their definition of success.

For example, many teacher-powered teams pay close attention to the vibe or mood at their school, believing that these factors say a lot about the school’s overall health. This sort of measure, while informal, is crucial for understanding the school’s climate and culture and is valued as an indicator of success.

“The main way we know what is working is by the light in people’s eyes and hearts. If the light is not shining, we have a problem. If people are unhappy, something is not working, and we have an issue to solve. This goes from two kids on the playground, to the parents in the parking lot, to the teachers in their talk.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

“Academically, we are always tearing apart our data to look for trends and identify successes and challenges. That is done on a meta level by our Instructional Leadership and other Leadership Teams. On the micro level, it’s done by Grade Level Teams and individual teachers. We also look at the big, high-stakes tests. We are always looking at data, identifying students, cohorts, classes, and grade levels and asking, ‘Why?’ Why is that group struggling? Why are those kids flying? Again, the key is reflection.”

—Kevin Brewster
Reiche Community School
Portland, ME
MEASURING SUCCESS

What have the pioneers done?

Teacher-powered schools define success in dramatically different ways than traditional schools and districts. On an ongoing basis, teacher teams assess the social, emotional, and physical well-being of their students and view the development of these aspects of the whole child as equally important as academic achievement. Some indicators of success used by teacher-powered schools include results of The Hope Survey, student engagement, student and teacher turnover rates, parent comments (formal and informal), students’ happiness level, and the degree to which students want to be at school.

Developing measures of success is often part of the school design process. When developing their shared purpose, teacher teams identify what they—and the families they will serve—value and how they will determine success around those values. Once teams are clear on those concepts, members then seek out or create processes and instruments that can be used to measure progress toward their unique definition of success.

In most teacher-powered schools, teacher teams’ definition of success includes graduation rates and mean proficiency scores from standardized tests. These data measures are treated as a helpful source of information about whole-school success. Yet teams are usually more interested in individual students and their growth. As a result, these teachers employ status and individual growth measures, recognizing that growth takes time.

“Of course there is a level of proficiency we want to see children achieve. That level is not just based on a score but also on who the child is and where they are developmentally. When things are not working with children, we bring that specific child or group of children to the forefront of our conversations in our age pair. We have team meetings with the intention of gathering insight, ideas, and action plans to help the student move forward. We also talk specifically with the child about what isn’t working and his or her take on it. What isn’t working? Why? What could you do differently? What can the teachers do differently?”

—Jenerra Williams
Mission Hill K-8 School
Boston, MA

Teacher teams have expressed that the choice to move beyond a narrow definition of success—one that is based on standardized test scores—seems natural to them. But this choice can also be nerve-wracking because such scores are frequently the primary focus of district officials. Teams resolve this tension by focusing on helping students perform well enough on standardized assessments so the school can avoid sanctions—but they resist efforts from external forces to over-emphasize test scores or make them the driver of teaching efforts at the school.
This is a conscious effort. Teachers have described this work as “flying under the radar.” Teacher teams believe that keeping a low profile allows them to maintain the flexibility of implementing their unique approaches without being micromanaged by others who might not have the same values.

Teacher teams also take great care to balance formalizing structures for determining success—which can become too rigid—against being too organic. While formulas can clearly delineate whether students (or the school) meet pre-determined goals, these formulas are not necessarily suited to providing a comprehensive picture of success. On the other hand, not having any goals or formal structures makes it nearly impossible to determine and report success. Alysia Krafel noted, “The big challenge is to keep formal structures from becoming rigid and recreating the box we worked so hard to get out of.”

“Happiness monitoring is not silly. We are emotional creatures. We have to be satisfied and have positive emotional balance in order to do this intensely creative work. No organization can thrive if people are unhappy. People are always dubious when we say we navigate by the light, but it is very effective at keeping Chrysalis on track.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA
TIPS CONTINUED...

3. Be proactive in communicating with all stakeholders about how you will measure the success of your students and school. Clearly articulate what you value and how you will measure any attributes that go beyond academic measures. In your formal agreements for school and teacher autonomy, your team could go as far as asking that your school accountability measures include data from a broader array of tools—and that all of that data be considered by district leaders or charter authorizers when evaluating your school’s success.

4. Consider how you will use information that is not measurable when evaluating your school’s success. Characteristics like “vibe” and “the light in the students’ eyes” are not measurable, but they can provide valuable information about what is and isn’t working for students.

5. Set clear expectations with parents, district officials, and other stakeholders about why new approaches to teaching and learning—especially when implemented alongside significant structural changes in school leadership—will take time to produce significant student learning gains. Both students and teachers need time to acclimate to a new “normal” and a wider range of success measures.

6. Consider the degree to which you want to be visible in your district versus “flying under the radar.” Be aware that different stages of the school’s development may call for different approaches. For instance, during the design phase, you may want to have low visibility, while during the launch phase, you may want high visibility. Each approach has its benefits and drawbacks.

- **High visibility**
  - Benefits—Your team can build excitement about your school and model. This can help with enrollment and generating support for your school and team.
  - Drawbacks—Your model and performance may be highly scrutinized, which makes you an easy target for naysayers.

- **Low visibility**
  - Benefits—Your team can frequently operate as it sees fit, with minimal interference from others who may want to micromanage the school.
  - Drawbacks—Your school may not be able to quickly develop support from stakeholders or may struggle with enrollment.

7. Develop a plan for how your school will have enough structure to be productive while staying flexible enough to be responsive to student and community needs. Structures should be in place so that decisions are made efficiently and your team can continuously improve. Yet those structures should not be so rigid that they don’t allow for adjustments based on the needs of students and the school community. Creating this balance can be quite challenging and thus requires attention during the design phase of your school.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What does our team’s shared purpose suggest about how we should define and measure success? Are we comfortable with standardized tests being the measure of our success? If not, what else might we want to measure?

How will we measure any additional areas of success (formally and informally)? How will we use that data? How will we ask others (district leaders, charter authorizers) to use the data?

How will we respond to standardized test data, especially if it does not meet external measures of success? How will it fit into our larger definition of student and school success?

How will we handle messaging and communicating our approach to measuring success with parents, district officials or charter authorizers, and other stakeholders?

What level of visibility do we want for our school as we design it? As we move toward opening? Once we are up and running? How will this be reflected in our public relations and reporting?

How will we create a system for measuring success that is formalized enough to be useful but flexible enough to be responsive to student and school needs?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
What have the pioneers done?

In teacher-powered schools, teacher teams put structures in place for analyzing both qualitative and quantitative student data sources. The results of that analysis are then used to create action plans for addressing areas of need. While structures vary from school to school, all teacher-powered schools have formalized structures to examine and utilize a wide range of data sources to guide instruction and inform school decisions.

Teacher teams also put structures in place that support all members of the school community (students, parents, school personnel) in engaging in continuous reflection. Many schools regularly survey their students, teachers, and families in order to get feedback and reflection on various aspects of the school’s design and implementation. Information gathered from these observations is then used to make improvements and better meet the needs of students and the community. As a result of this ongoing reflection and data analysis, teachers recognize that the school design process is never complete.

When reflection processes reveal that change is needed, teacher teams identify and test ways to improve their school. To do this, many teacher-powered schools establish processes for individuals or small groups of teachers to bring ideas forward and run pilots to test their ideas. This ensures that implementing the strategy on a smaller scale will have a positive impact (before rushing in to school-wide implementation). Based on the result of the pilots, larger groups of teachers then make decisions about how to proceed and whether to scrap, adjust, or scale the strategy.
**TIPS**

1. Develop structures and processes that provide time and space for teachers to analyze data and create action plans based on the information obtained from that analysis. Create formal structures for ongoing reflection for all members of the school community, and build a process for how that information is going to be used. Promote the notion—and create a culture—that recognizes that the school is always in a process of continuous improvement.

2. Develop a process for how new ideas are identified, piloted, and scaled within the school. Keep in mind that any changes must still align with the shared purpose. To ensure your team does this well, develop a process to determine how proposals for change align with the shared purpose.

When an adjustment is needed for the whole school, the first step is to collectively diagnose what the needs are and then make a plan of action. Unless the issue is very small, teams should not start discussions with the whole group about how to improve without having engaged in the following processes:

- Pilot ideas in small teams. When significant change is needed or wanted, piloting an idea—with one classroom or group, in one grade level, or in some other space—is critical to testing and refining new approaches before rolling them out to the larger community.

- Students, parents, teachers, and other school personnel should all help determine what works well, what needs improvement, and what should be dropped completely. Survey students and families about the pilot, and invite them to help determine whether the change should be rolled out across the school. This way, adjustments can be made before the whole community goes through the change.

3. Pay attention to informal observations and the “vibe” of the school. “When tensions rise, patience thins, teachers muse about transferring, and everyone seems exhausted. These are all indicators that improvements are needed,” pointed out Virginia Rhodes from Hughes STEM High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. Consider developing a quick way to check in with community members—such as hosting informal chats with parents or conducting “walking” interviews with members of the school community about how things are going.

“Students come to Avalon credit deficient, skills deficient, and depressed. We have to relight the fire within them and sometimes that takes a long time, longer than what the traditional system is willing to take. Due to this, our graduation rates have taken a hit—but we don’t care about these numbers. What we care about is who these students are as they walk across the graduation stage, not when they do.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN

**DEFINING SUCCESS**
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What process will we use to analyze data?
What data will we analyze? How will we create time and space for teachers to engage in this work?

What will we do with the data once it is analyzed? What process will be used for action planning? Will data and analysis be shared with students and families? How?

What opportunities will members of our community have to engage in reflection? What process will we use (surveys, focus groups, comment boxes, etc.)?

How will we approach new ideas or needed improvements? Will there be a pilot process? If so, what structures will we put in place for those who want to pilot something? How will we determine whether to adjust, scale, or scrap an idea? Who will make those decisions?

How will we structure informal reflection and gauge the “vibe” or climate of the school? How will that data be collected from students? Parents? Staff? What will we do with that information?

How will we build a culture of continuous improvement? What structures will we put in place?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
ENDNOTES:

22 http://www.teachingquality.org/content/hope-survey
In teacher-powered schools, teachers’ autonomy to select and de-select personnel (otherwise known as hiring and dismissal; see sidebar at right) is essential because the teacher team shares accountability for school and student success. If teams don’t have selection autonomy, there is a strong possibility that team members will feel less accountable because they don’t have control over the quality and capacity of their team.

Selecting and de-selecting personnel in teacher-powered schools is significantly different than in traditionally structured ones. Teacher-powered schools are characterized by high levels of collaboration and shared leadership, so staff members require unique skills and abilities. Not only must teachers be good at their craft, they must also have the ability to collaborate, lead, and adapt. Since teachers in these schools set many of their own working conditions, they are also responsible for ensuring that these conditions cultivate teacher quality.

Many schools have included in their autonomy agreements the ability to de-select staff members. This most often comes in the form of annual, school-level contracts, which schools can choose to not renew at the end of the year. Many teams believe that they need to be able to de-select staff members in order to maintain the vision for their unique school model.

**Selection vs. Hiring: What’s the Difference?**

In this discussion starter, we’ve opted to use “select” to describe the action of teachers bringing new members onto their teams. This is the terminology typically embraced by teachers in district and charter school settings where teachers are members of a union and operate according to a collective bargaining agreement. Similarly, teachers can be “de-selected,” which means that they are placed into a hiring pool in their district, making them eligible to work at another school.

In contrast, teams in charter schools without union ties tend to use the words “hiring” and “dismissal.” Teachers who are dismissed lose their jobs entirely and do not go into a district hiring pool.

Having thought about the issue thoroughly, the pioneers of teacher-powered schools encourage teams to choose the terminology that best suits their context. Regardless of the autonomy that teams secure, teachers generally create or embrace similar approaches to the work of selecting and hiring.
The pioneers of teacher-powered schools are very deliberate about creating selection processes that ensure they get people with the right qualifications. While these processes can be very time intensive, teachers feel that it is time well spent.

Investing time in selection on the front end yields positive results—and potentially prevents teams from having to spend hundreds of hours dealing with a problem that arises when a new hire isn’t a match for the school.

DESIGNING A SELECTION PROCESS

What have the pioneers done?

When designing teacher-powered schools, many teacher teams focus on securing as much autonomy as possible. Some teams secure complete autonomy in selection and de-selection, while others must adhere to the processes put in place by their collective bargaining agreement. Autonomy for the selection and de-selection of personnel is often combined with the right to not renew teachers’ contracts on an annual basis. In district settings, teachers whose contracts are not renewed by their teacher teams go back into the district’s hiring pool.

‘Staff’ vs. ‘Personnel’

Why does this discussion starter use the word “personnel” instead of “staff”?

While some teachers use “staff” to describe their team, others feel strongly that the term connotes working for an organization or boss, rather than co-ownership. (Think about traditional staff meetings and their top-down nature.)

Instead, these teachers refer to “teams” and “selecting new team members.” For example, EdVisions Cooperative of Minnesota has embraced the term “personnel” to signify this change in perspective.

In this discussion starter, we followed these teams’ lead. Teacher-powered teams co-own the work—and it may be necessary to embrace new terminology to assert that truth.

("Whether a teacher is chosen or assigned their position, teacher-powered schools give all teachers ownership. I think even a mediocre teacher could be better in a teacher-powered school because they have a stake in that school; and some ownership. When we recognize the strengths of our coworkers and create an atmosphere of mutual respect and professionalism, things can turn out great."

—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI

"What have the pioneers done?"
Whatever level of autonomy they have secured, teams generally follow these seven steps:

1. **Identify the qualities your team is looking for in candidates and your goals for the selection process.**

   Every teacher-powered school has a unique instructional model and leadership structure. As a result, there are particular skills and abilities that personnel need to possess if the school and its students are to be successful. Teacher teams should spend time identifying those skills and abilities so that they know what they are looking for and can communicate those needs to candidates.

   Teams must also determine the ideal composition of staff, factoring in school needs and the team's staffing goals. For instance, teams might need to increase the number of teachers with leadership and collaboration experience. Or, teams may seek teachers with particular teaching expertise in a grade level, subject area, or special area, such as special education or technology. Likewise, the team may seek to match the staff's demographics more closely to the student population or strike a better balance between the number of veteran teachers and early career teachers.

2. **Identify candidates for open positions.**

   When teaching positions become open at teacher-powered schools, they are often posted through avenues within the local context (such as district job boards). However, staff members actively seek out candidates via other means. These include posting positions in education publications and job boards (several schools use Ed Join and SchoolSpring) and spreading word through personal and professional networks.

   "We took into consideration the skill set necessary for the position and also the disposition needed. This changes depending on the position being filled. We want a good balance of skills amongst the team and we want a variety of personalities to appeal to the variety of students we serve. The number one thing we were looking for when hiring a new teacher was a focus on building relationships with students."

   —Stephanie Davis
   TAGOS Leadership Academy
   Janesville, WI

   “We begin the process by posting the position on the Boston Public Schools H.R. pages. We also pull out and look at old resumes from previous hiring rounds. We share the position by word of mouth through our networks both in and outside of the school system. We may also reach out personally to folks who we think would be good for the position.”

   —Jenerra Williams
   Mission Hill K-8 School
   Boston, MA
After operating for a number of years, schools are able to draw from their networks, or “known factors,” when they have staff openings. These networks might include people who have been student teachers at the school, strong candidates who applied previously but were not selected, people who indicated interest when touring the school, or teachers with whom other staff members are familiar.

3. Highlight teacher-powered elements (and other distinctive characteristics) of your school.

Working in a teacher-powered school is so different from traditionally structured schools that pioneers find it critical to inform candidates what it’s like to work in one. Taking the time to help candidates understand the nature of the job has two benefits: it helps them determine whether they’d like to invest more time in the selection process, and it gives uninterested candidates an opportunity to remove themselves from the running. Both outcomes save significant time for team members involved in the process.

One way that teams share the cultures of their schools is hosting “meet and greets” or campus tours designed specifically for potential candidates. At these events, team members thoroughly explain how their schools and instructional approaches differ from traditional schools—and what that means for the roles and responsibilities of teachers. During these meetings and tours, teams often begin evaluating candidates and asking a series of questions. Do candidates present themselves as lifelong learners? How do they act toward students? Are they open to collaboration? Do they grasp the concepts of teacher power and shared responsibility? Or are they snickering on their way out the door about how they’d never be able to trust their colleagues?

“Candidates have an opportunity to ask questions. We’re looking to see if they ask more questions on what it means to work in a teacher-powered school. Do they understand the significance of this choice? Most candidates are amazed and excited by the prospect of some freedom and professional respect. We warn them about both the workload and the soul load of this job. You really cannot wrap your head around a teacher-powered school until you do it.”

——Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

4. Clarify who is responsible for selection and de-selection and how you will include the school community.

While the pioneers agree that having a thorough selection process is important, they also find that creating the time to engage in this process has been challenging. Engaging in all or most of the steps outlined in this section is extremely time intensive
and can be a daunting task, especially for teachers who are already shouldering significant workloads.

To address this challenge, many teams elect personnel committees or designate other elected leaders to handle the process of selection. Teams expect that the personnel committee will invite members of the school community—including all teachers and administrators at the school, students, parents, aides, and other personnel—to participate in this process. It’s valuable for these stakeholders to have the option to participate, but teams also know that, realistically, this isn’t always possible. To ensure everyone feels valued, the time at which the school community is invited to participate should be determined before beginning the selection process.

Here are a few ways personnel committees can make the school community feel welcome to participate in the selection process:

- Invite teachers who will be working directly with the candidate (such as grade-level or subject-area teams) to actively participate in the main interview or have a separate interview session that specifically pertains to their work;
- Include students and parents in the screening process, if possible; and
- Anyone who is going to be involved in the selection process should receive training about how to participate in a way that aligns with legal requirements. For example, there are state and federal laws about what can and cannot be asked or discussed during interviews.

“This afternoon I had a family conference that included one of our new special education hires. The student felt immediately connected to the hire because he had helped hire her. There was instant buy-in.

This is our incentive to have some of our most challenging students take part in the interview process. I cannot tell you how critical it is to have students involved in hiring special education personnel—especially educational assistant positions.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN
5. **Conduct formal sit-down interviews.**

Formal interviews can help teacher teams get a feel for candidates’ potential to fit within the school community. For example, teams may want to know:

- Will the candidate fill gaps in skills and personalities among existing personnel?
- Will he/she focus on building relationships with students?
- Will the candidate be open to the work involved in a teacher-powered school?

“The interview process we designed took about 1.5 times as long as traditional interviews, but there was so much difference in the result that there was no interest in doing it the ‘faster’ way. It was an awful time strain, and we all stayed late to get these done, but teachers were so motivated to get the kind of teachers who matched their energy level rather than whoever was sent by the district.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH

“Our team described our collaborative approach and made it clear that teaching in our school would be very challenging. Candidates were warned that this was not a school in which a teacher could choose to shut the classroom door and do their own thing. Classrooms would be a ‘fishbowl’ environment with university professors, grad students, and undergrads strolling through, observing both through glass and electronically.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH

6. **Include candidate observation as part of the selection process.**

Teacher teams nearly always include an observation of candidates teaching with students. Sometimes teams include an observation of candidates working with potential colleagues.

For example, teachers at Hughes STEM High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, have created a process for observing candidate pairs engaging in a short, real-world task in which they must produce a one-week plan for a course.
Observing candidates in this way allows the Hughes STEM team to evaluate each candidate’s collaboration skills. It also allows candidates to get further insight into what it would be like to work in the school.

In the interest of time, some teams only observe candidates who made it through the formal sit-down interview. Other teams, in the interest of seeing everything a candidate can do, include observations as part of the interview process. These teams have found that candidates who shine in interviews don’t necessarily excel in teaching students (and vice versa).

Many teams make a point to debrief with students about their experiences and observations from working with candidates. Similarly, some teams debrief with candidates about their experiences working with students.

7. Engage in group discussion to evaluate candidates and make the selection decision.

Once candidates have been interviewed and observed, the personnel committee (or whoever has been selected by the group to be responsible for hiring at the school) meets to discuss the candidates. Teams consider the different input gathered throughout the process and ultimately make new personnel selections.

There is general consensus among the pioneers of teacher-powered schools that teams should take the time to review the goals set by the team at the beginning of the process—as well as the team’s shared purpose—and evaluate final candidates in this context. To help this process, some teams have developed a set of reflection questions that guide their internal evaluation of candidates.

“One of the best teachers we ever hired did rather poorly in the formal interview. He came across as not really strong and maybe a bit too withdrawn. But when he taught the kids, he lit up and connected with them within 30 seconds of starting his lesson. His lesson was fantastic. Since then, he’s had to work on his ability to interact with adults a bit, but this worked itself out as he got to know us better. Now he is one of our stars.”

— Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

“Talk and hash’ works to bring everyone into the game. We love it, too, even though we complain sometimes about how long it takes. I don’t think anyone would not want to be involved when hiring a new teacher. It’s too much like getting married. This new person is going to affect you and your school’s success, so you better pay attention.”

— Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA
1. Secure as much autonomy as possible for selection and de-selection. Even when decision makers say that certain autonomies are not possible, look for exceptions within your local context and investigate what is actually stated in district policy and collective bargaining agreements.

This area of autonomy is worth paying significant attention to and pushing back on. In districts that do direct placements, try to secure an agreement that teachers cannot be placed at your school. If this is not possible, try to secure an agreement that your school will only be subject to direct placements if your school puts teachers back in the placement pool.

“The district will often send teachers who have been released from other schools because they were not high contributors. But they have a right to be interviewed and ultimately must be placed.

We interviewed everyone we were obligated to interview, and sometimes they were right for the job. But when they weren’t, we asserted our right to reject a candidate who, for example, made it clear that he would not do any science labs in a STEM school. These were upheld in hearings if necessary as we pressed our case with district administration. We had carefully designed our process not to conflict with the contract, while pushing its limits right up to the edge when necessary for innovation.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH

2. If your team works at a school that is converting from a traditional governance structure to a teacher-powered governance structure, be sure to try to negotiate with the district and union to allow teachers to transfer out without consequences. Working in a teacher-powered school is not for everyone. Teachers should not be punished for returning to a traditionally structured school—nor should your team have to face the consequences of working with people who will resist transition to a new culture.

“Reiche had been run as a traditional school for nearly 40 years before transitioning to our current teacher-powered governance model. So our initial staff was already in existence. During the year of exploration, the Superintendent made it clear that anyone who was not on board could transfer without penalty or hassle.”

—Kevin Brewster
Reiche Elementary School
Portland, ME
3. Develop a staff selection process with the following steps:
   - Identify the qualities that your team wants to see in candidates before you pursue them and evaluate who is right to add to the team;
   - Determine how your team will work to identify and recruit teachers who possess the qualities that you are seeking;
   - Create experiences for candidates so that they are required to demonstrate those qualities in a real-world context; and
   - Include members of your school community in the process.

4. Build structures that will provide time for teachers who are involved in the selection process to engage in the work in a thoughtful manner. This process is very time consuming and can make or break your school! Possibilities include:
   - Hiring substitute teachers or providing other coverage for teachers to review applications;
   - Providing opportunities for teachers to trade time spent interviewing for other work time; and
   - Inviting teams to co-create the interview questions and participate in the discussions in which candidates are reviewed and selected.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Research the selection and de-selection processes and procedures typically required by the collective bargaining agreement, your district, or your charter school authorizer. What do the documents say? What is required? What aspects of these requirements might need to be addressed or unbundled when seeking autonomy?

How will your team secure the autonomy needed to select and de-select personnel? With whom does your team need to talk? What process will you pursue? Will the autonomy agreement take the form of a waiver (via a Memorandum of Understanding) or specific language in a charter contract or bylaws? Something else? Who will be your allies and helpers in carrying out this process? Who will need more convincing? How will you approach this group?
If your team chooses NOT to secure selection autonomy (or is unable to do so), what are the potential consequences, and how will your team prepare to face those? For example, how will your team maintain the school culture it has cultivated if you must accept direct placements or other personnel who were not selected by your team? Is it worth the effort to try to be a teacher-powered school without having this area of autonomy?

When considering your team’s shared purpose and learning program, what qualities does your team want personnel to possess?

How will your team determine whether candidates have those qualities? How will you structure a selection process that allows you to observe whether candidates have those qualities, rather than taking their word for it?

How might your team involve non-teaching personnel, students, parents, and other members of the school community in the selection process?

Research state legal requirements or state-focused human resources materials regarding interview processes. How will these requirements influence your selection and de-selection processes?

How will your team arrange the time for everyone to engage in the selection process?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory.
www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
ENDNOTES:

23 http://www.edjoin.org

24 http://www.schoolspring.com/

25 http://www.teacherpowered.org/guide/norming/personnel
In education, there is often a cultural assumption that teachers’ jobs are the same at every school. That job looks something like this: there is a principal who serves as manager and makes most decisions related to school success, while teachers stay alone in their classrooms with students all day long. Few, if any, of these colleagues will visit one another’s classrooms to observe teaching.

Many of today’s teachers grew up watching their teachers do the work under this assumption—and they were also likely trained for that same job. Not surprisingly, when many candidates apply to teacher-powered schools, they are most familiar with—and loyal to the concept of—that traditional job.

But in teacher-powered schools, the job of teaching is different. All teachers work as a team, sharing responsibility and accountability for school success. Their mindset shifts from “my classroom” to “our school.” As a result, teacher teams design shared leadership structures that support their schools, applying innovative approaches to learning and teaching.

As part of this work, teams must consider how to integrate new personnel into the school culture they have carefully created. New team members at teacher-powered schools need access to people and information that will support their learning and cultural integration. But teams should also consider how new hires can provide new perspectives and ideas for advancing the team’s shared purpose.

The pioneers of teacher-powered schools acknowledge the difficulty of joining a new community—especially a well-established one that operates in a fundamentally different way than traditional schools. Team members must find ways to make new personnel feel welcomed and informed about the different avenues of support available to them.
“Everyone mentors everyone else on an ongoing basis because we share students, are in and out of one another’s classrooms frequently, and go on field trips and weekly field studies together. Out of these shared experiences rises the context of true support and mentoring. Since every member of the team affects the outcome of everything else, mentoring emerged naturally as a way to make sure new members were successful. We can’t afford to have someone on the team who doesn’t fit our model or who doesn’t know what they’re doing.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

“What have the pioneers done?”

Nearly all teacher-powered schools provide some sort of mentorship for new teachers. Teams believe that it is crucial to support new team members since teachers are co-responsible and co-accountable for the success of the school (not just the students in their classrooms). There is a shared sentiment and understanding that it is everyone’s responsibility to ensure their colleagues’ success.

Planning meetings and retreats

Teams place a high value on modeling their culture—especially collaborative behavior and decision making—for new team members. In many schools, this modeling starts with beginning-of-the-year planning meetings and retreats.

During these first interactions with the team, new team members can see and experience how distributed leadership works—which is key to successful cultural integration. Most teams believe that new hires will best be integrated into the culture by experiencing it. At the same time, teams make an effort to bring past context and history into the conversation and encourage new voices and ideas.
Approaches to mentoring

Teams take a variety of approaches in how they address mentorship throughout the school year. Some teams see the mentor role as an informal one in which new team members can seek out any colleague to share successes, ask advice, or talk through a situation. Other teams assign mentors “as needed,” such as when new team members need to be briefed on the collaborative decision-making process.

“Each new team member has a one-on-one with the principal. That conversation includes a welcome, question and answer time, and sharing of expectations.”
—Jenerra Williams  
Mission Hill K-8 School  
Boston, MA

Other teams create formal, structured roles in which mentors support team members in understanding and implementing the school’s unique academic and leadership model. These teams intentionally pair new teachers with mentors in an effort to retain personnel and ensure that time is dedicated toward this important task. Some teams also take advantage of state- or district-run mentorship guidelines and programs, which sometimes provide stipends to mentors.

Alternatively, many teams provide a combination of informal and formal mentoring for new team members.

When it comes to mentorship responsibilities, some teams pay mentors, while others do not. Teams that pay see this as a sign of the priority that mentorship takes in their school. Those that do not pay tend to see mentorship as a fundamental aspect of being part of the team—not an “extra” duty.

Teams with formal mentorship programs typically follow these four steps:

“In addition to mentoring and modeling, the Personnel Committee checks in with all team members a minimum of two times per year, or on an as-needed basis.”
—Aaron Grimm  
Minnesota New Country School  
Henderson, MN

1. Clarify the support avenues available to new team members.

Many teacher-powered schools have multiple supports for new personnel. These include:

- A formal welcome meeting;
- All-school personnel, or “house” meetings;
- Frequent informal observations and check-ins with an administrator, lead teacher, or personnel committee; and
- A formal mentor who supports the new team member in understanding the instructional and leadership characteristics of the school.
2. Determine the frequency and timing of mentor meetings and check-ins.

The beginning of the school year is a challenging time for all teachers, especially those new to a school. This feeling is amplified at a teacher-powered school because new team members are adjusting to an unconventional culture of teaching and learning.

Teams frequently establish regular check-ins (sometimes even daily) for new personnel at the beginning of the year. These teams find that investing significant time early on is worthwhile because of the ideas new team members can bring to the school if they are encouraged. As the year progresses and new team members settle into their roles, teams typically decrease check-in frequency. Check-ins also tend to become more informal.

Some teams also consider other times of year when new teachers are likely to need support. Teams discuss these times with new team members and plan their mentorship cycles and activities accordingly.

“You have to be intentional about mentoring. Often times, the people who would serve as the best mentors are the busiest, most dedicated people at your school. You have to find time for these leaders to work with new team members, while also growing mentorship skills across the team.”

—Aaron Grimm
Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN

3. Consider the best way to match new team members with mentors.

There are numerous factors to consider—including grade level, content area, experience, personality traits, and working styles (to name a few). Each team sets its own priorities for how to pair mentors with new team members.

“You have to be intentional about mentoring. Often times, the people who would serve as the best mentors are the busiest, most dedicated people at your school. You have to find time for these leaders to work with new team members, while also growing mentorship skills across the team.”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH

4. Consider different mentoring needs for those completely new to teaching and those coming from schools with traditional governance.

Team members who are new to teaching require support for both the instructional and leadership aspects of the school. Veteran teachers may need less support on the instructional side but might take longer to assimilate to a teacher-powered school’s culture and leadership structure, which are likely distinct from their previous experiences.
“We recently had two new team members who came from traditionally structured schools. These two took a little longer than the brand-new teachers to believe that they really had a voice in how things were run. They were so used to being told how the budget would work, how large the classes would be, and what the working structure would be that it took them a while to gain confidence in their own ability to know what to do and assert new ideas among colleagues. The brand-new teachers had no previous experience, so they adapted more quickly.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

TIPS

1. Create a plan for how new team members will have opportunities to integrate into the culture of the school, including how they will develop a sense of shared responsibility and accountability for whole-school success. Keep in mind that teachers from traditionally structured schools are most likely accustomed to only being responsible for the students in their own classroom. Consequently, new team members may need support in shifting from a mindset of “my” to “our” students.

2. Create a mentorship program for new team members and define its purpose. Consider whether mentors will be assigned by the team (or a group or individual acting on behalf of the team) or chosen by the mentees. Determine whether there will be a formal mentorship structure or only organic interactions, and whether mentors’ work will be guided by team goals or the goals of mentees (or both). The choices your team makes about these issues should help your team determine whether the school will pay mentors.

3. Consider to whom new team members should go with specific questions or challenges—and how you will inform new team members about who those people are. For example, if your team distributes leadership across committees or individuals, determine how new team members will learn about which committee or individual to go to for which issues.

4. Determine the different types of support structures that your team wants to put in place. Consider how mentorship is different for team members who are new to teaching and team members who are veteran teachers. Identify the potential challenges each new team member may face and develop a plan for how to support them. Also, consider how to best match mentors with new team members. Evaluate the skills and abilities that mentors have and how well they match the specific needs of new personnel.
5. Create opportunities to model the ways in which your school and team operate so that new team members can see them in action. One of the best ways for teachers to understand how a teacher-powered school is different from a traditionally structured school is to see and experience it for themselves. Most often, teachers are accustomed to needing to get approval for almost any decision that they make, with principals being the ultimate decision makers. It’s important for team members to have a clear understanding of the scope of their decision-making authority (both individual and team) by seeing others leading.

“It’s a good idea to have new teachers rotate through several key committees and the central council or decision-making body, even if they are not assigned to it, so that they can gain insight and context to the daily experience. By practicing transparency, the school gains a chance to allow open communication norms to develop—rather than the best source of information for teachers becoming ‘the grapevine.’”

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM School
Cincinnati, OH

6. Resist the temptation to accommodate new team members’ mistakes and break from the school culture rather than taking the time to explain how things work. For example, if team members are expected to handle disciplinary matters as they observe them—but instead a new team member sends a student to the lead teacher or principal’s office—the lead teacher must take the time to bring the student back to the teacher and explain how he/she is expected to handle the situation. Sometimes it seems easier to bend the rules and “help out” new teachers, but this doesn’t support cultural integration—and it damages the school culture in the longer term.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will your team support new personnel in shifting to a mindset of shared responsibility for whole-school success? What activities will new team members do to help them cultivate that mindset?

What does your team see as the purpose of your school’s mentorship structure? Why does it exist? What do you want it to accomplish? How will it be structured? Will mentors be paid? Why or why not?

Where will new team members go to access support? How will they know which people to go to for specific issues? Will one person be expected to be the “go-to” mentor for everything? Or will different people be responsible for providing support for various issues?

How will support differ for new teachers versus veteran teachers? How will supports be differentiated based on the needs of individual team members? How will your team match mentors with mentees?

What opportunities will your team take to model the ways in which your school operates? What opportunities will new members have to experience these differences for themselves?

Continue the conversation in the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab on the CTQ Collaboratory. www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory
CLARIFYING RESPONSIBILITIES OF NEW TEAM MEMBERS

What have the pioneers done?

Generally speaking, new teachers do not have as many responsibilities as teachers who have been at their schools for a while—but they certainly have the same rights. When new teachers are comfortable, and veteran teachers feel these teachers are ready, new teachers slowly take on more responsibilities (and are encouraged to do so). Teams understand that the sooner these duties are added, the sooner new teachers can feel and assume ownership of the school, which is important for a high-performing culture.

Teacher-powered teams strive to create a climate that supports new team members in coming out of their shells to actively engage in leading the school—while ensuring that they develop an understanding of why the school operates the way it does. Mentors should work with new team members to explain the history and reasoning for the design of the school, especially before new hires propose any fundamental changes to the way the school operates. Grounding new team members’ experience in the history of the school’s learning and management models helps ensure that any ideas new team members propose will be aligned with the team’s shared purpose.

“We try to not weigh down new team members too much with school management jobs outside of teaching (such as facilities, finance, hiring, and evaluation). But they can participate fully in determining all recommendations those committees bring to the whole team. Their main focus the first year is teaching and building relationships with students, families, and colleagues.

It often comes down to the mentor to encourage the new hire to take it slow. The adjustment time is several months. After that—post-honeymoon—we are pretty open about talking about one another's work loads and trying to be balanced.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN
It’s important that new team members have a sense of ownership as soon as possible after joining the school. However, teams find it can be a delicate balance to develop new colleagues’ sense of ownership and not overwhelm them with a new model of teaching and learning.

Just as teachers differentiate supports for students, so too should veteran team members differentiate supports for new team members. Figuring out what strengths and challenges each new team member brings to the table is usually teams’ first step in designing individualized supports.

**TIPS**

1. Create a plan for learning about the strengths and needs of new personnel — and how you will activate and support them. Tapping into new teachers’ strengths and putting them into action — especially around a smaller, specific project — can be a powerful first step in developing their sense of ownership in the school.

2. As part of these supports, develop a plan for helping new team members learn why the school is designed the way it is — and communicate the limits of team members’ ability to propose fundamental changes to how the school operates. Sometimes teachers are attracted to the teacher-powered model because they believe that it will give them complete individual autonomy. Oftentimes, these new team members lack an understanding that their work and contributions must align to the shared purpose of the school — and that it’s not necessarily appropriate to try to impose every one of their own ideas on the entire team.

“At our school, teachers need to have at least three years of experience to be on the Personnel Team. New teachers wouldn’t be expected to chair a site-based management team (teams that administratively run our school). We ask new teachers to get comfortable with their teaching responsibilities before taking on other duties. After that point, all teachers and other personnel are asked to join at least two site-based management teams and one professional development team.

New teachers have the same rights regarding voting on issues. There can be hesitancy from some new teachers to exercise this power initially — because having a voice as a new person isn’t common, especially in teaching.”

—Aaron Grimm
Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What leadership responsibilities will new team members have from day one, and which will be phased in over time? How will their roles and experiences be structured to ensure that they feel like full-fledged members of the team without being overwhelmed by the differences between a teacher-powered and a traditionally governed school?

How will new team members learn the history behind the school’s culture and practice in order to understand why it operates the way it does? How will you support new team members in learning to lead while limiting the ability to propose fundamental changes to the school model early on? How will you communicate that, while the school and team have certain autonomies, this does not mean that teachers have unlimited individual autonomy?

How will your team determine the strengths and needs of new team members? How will your team use that information to build and differentiate supports? What activities and practices (formal or informal) can you design to engage new teachers in spreading their wings?

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Teacher evaluation policies have undergone substantial transformation in states and school districts across the country. One of the most significant shifts is moving from a binary labeling of teacher performance as “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” to a process that identifies different levels of effectiveness. Another change involves heavy reliance upon student learning outcomes, which previously were rarely taken into account in teacher evaluations.

These changes have brought forth major debate about how to best achieve greater teacher quality, which research shows is linked to improved student learning. A frequent point of contention is whether the purpose of teacher evaluation is to identify and fire “bad” teachers or to help support teachers as they improve their practice and develop over time.

Many education stakeholders believe that the instruments currently being developed can be used for both purposes. While this may be true, the processes needed to achieve both outcomes likely need to vary across different contexts. For example, in some contexts, it is difficult for teachers who feel they are at the bottom of the hierarchy to be vulnerable and share where they need support with someone who is also their official evaluator. However, in teacher-powered schools—where there are high levels of trust—these processes can coexist; allowing teachers or designated teams of teachers to evaluate one another.

Teacher teams designing and running teacher-powered schools—many of whom have secured full or partial autonomy to design their evaluation policies—have long understood that teacher quality impacts student and school success. As a result, these teams have chosen to take greater responsibility and accountability for student and whole-school outcomes. Many teams choose to use the evaluation process to both inform personnel decisions and identify teachers’ strengths and areas for improvement in instruction and collegial management.

Teams view these decisions as a “both/and” situation, not an “either/or” choice. They want the ability to encourage colleagues’ improvement and deselect colleagues who are not improving or committed to the team’s shared purpose. These teachers understand that, across 15 potential areas for autonomy, their ability to select colleagues and ensure their development is the most important. After all, student and school success—and therefore teams’ success—depend on teacher quality.
DESIGNING AN EVALUATION PROCESS

What have the pioneers done?

Evaluating instructional practice

Most teams design a peer observation and feedback process in a way that is intended to improve teachers’ instructional practice. Sometimes the whole team participates, but most of the time a select group of colleagues takes part (such as a personnel committee trained in state evaluation laws or a team that includes all teachers from a grade level or subject area and an elected school leader). When selected groups evaluate, feedback is sometimes gathered from a broader peer group via surveys or other rubrics that are designed or chosen by the whole team. If one exists, sometimes teams adapt their district’s rubric for peer review or for individual teachers. Once all the data are gathered, the group doing the evaluation discusses teachers’ results with each individual in a private formal meeting.

“We have a peer evaluation system where teachers evaluate one another. The purpose of that system is for teachers to identify places in their practice where they want to improve. Their peers have conversations with them, come in to observe, look at student work, and give feedback. We feel that evaluation should be driven by an authentic need that the teacher has, and they should be evaluated by people who are closest to the children and the teaching of the school—which is other teachers.”

—Jenerra Williams
Mission Hill K-8
Boston, MA

The peer review process frequently has a mentoring and coaching component that allows teachers to focus on a collaborative approach to improving teaching and learning in their school. For example, some processes provide opportunities for teachers to identify particular areas in which they would like to develop their knowledge and practice over a period of time. Then a team of peer observers watches them teach and provides feedback on how the individual is progressing toward his or her goals at various stages.

Often, new teachers at teacher-powered schools are automatically assigned a mentor to ensure they feel supported as they put their instructional and collegial management knowledge into practice. Throughout these processes, teacher teams take responsibility for supporting one another’s success, which encourages trust among colleagues.

Even in schools where a principal or lead teacher is officially responsible for evaluation (in contexts where teams were unable or chose not to secure evaluation autonomy), some teacher teams have created a peer observation and feedback process that feeds into the final evaluation process. Colleagues may formally agree to this in Elect-to-Work Agreements at the site level, or sometimes the process is more informal. In these cases,
notes or actual scores from colleague observations are considered when determining a teacher’s final evaluation score (which is kept private).

One reason why teachers support peer evaluation—and, in some cases, 360-degree evaluation that includes student and parent feedback—is because the teaching and learning environment in teacher-powered schools already tends to be like a fishbowl. Classrooms are typically open to colleagues and visitors, and as a result, teachers feel comfortable having their colleagues watch them teach.

This environment builds a culture of openness and trust that is absolutely crucial when using the same process for evaluation and growth. In this atmosphere, informal mentoring happens regularly, making formal peer evaluation processes less threatening than they might be in an environment where administrators and peers evaluate based on “snapshot” observations of teachers’ performance.

The implementation of peer observation and evaluation processes also addresses two challenges that most schools face: efficient use of time and money. Peer observation processes serve not only as data collection points for evaluation but also as effective professional development opportunities for both the observer and the observed. At the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy in Denver, several times a year the staff hires two substitute teachers for two days so that teacher teams can observe one another. The former co-lead teacher described it as “the most cost effective $500 dollars we ever spent on professional development. Many schools spend 10 times that much and get less than half the impact on instruction.”

For a more complete overview of teams’ practices and to review resources that teams created for their evaluation processes, see “Determining an approach to evaluation and tenure” in the Steps to Creating A Teacher-Powered School guide. www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/governance/evaluation

“We have always felt that we should be evaluated by one another, not by our principal, who is rarely at our school. This year we decided to finally do some evaluations on ourselves and one another. Even though they are not linked to anything that has to do with pay or how our district views us as teachers, these evaluations actually mean more to us and will help us be better teachers at our school for our students.”

—Anonymous

Engaging in this process also nearly negates the need for additional professional development sessions that address instructional practices. Because the process is job-embedded and addresses the exact needs of each individual teacher, there is no need to engage in professional development that doesn’t align with the school’s best practices.
Evaluating teachers for more than their instructional abilities

Teachers’ responsibilities in teacher-powered schools include both instruction and collegial management. They operate on the premise that school success is as much dependent upon the contributions of all personnel as it is on teachers’ instructional practices.

As a result, teams with full evaluation autonomy often choose to include assessments of both instructional practice and contributions to school management. Areas for evaluation might include teachers’ work in their specific school management positions as well as their contributions to the team as a whole. There are no surprises as teacher teams with evaluation autonomy choose and design these rubrics themselves.

When possible, teacher-powered teams have de-emphasized the use of student test scores for teacher evaluation. While student learning outcomes are considered in evaluations, that assessment is made in a holistic way that extends well beyond standardized test scores. These teachers understand that, by having responsibility and accountability for school success, teacher teams as a whole are responsible for addressing many factors that influence student outcomes. Teams choose the curriculum, allocate the budget, select leaders, set the schedule, and more.

“We typically focus our feedback on what we see, looking at both teaching and learning and management aspects (what role that person has in running the school). We collect job performance evaluations from our parents and students, team members write written evaluations of one another, and we gather in small teams to conduct 360-degree reviews. We don’t rely on test data, attendance data, or records of student credit completion.”

—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN

“One thing we do NOT do is tie value added scores to teacher pay. We feel this is a pernicious practice that undermines teacher unity.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

Teams also understand that a single teacher does not determine the whole of a student’s learning. Rather, there is a collective effort among a team of adults (multiple teachers, parents, family members, and more) that determines student success on standardized test measures and beyond. Individual teachers have a role in student learning—and that role is worthy of examination—but teams do not hold individuals responsible solely via students’ test score outcomes.
Training teachers to conduct evaluations

As teacher evaluation systems have become more sophisticated, some teacher teams have found an increasing need to provide training for teachers in the skills and dispositions required for conducting observations and providing feedback. Observation instruments can now identify with greater granularity what it means to be an effective teacher, and the evaluation process can require significantly greater amounts of evidence to determine performance levels.

Teams in teacher-powered schools who are using these instruments have come to realize that because teachers have not historically been engaged in teacher evaluation, most have not been trained in how to use the instruments and engage in the process. When possible, these teams try to connect with state- or district-delivered evaluator training that address the use of evaluation instruments.

Most teams with a peer observation process design and provide their own training for the process of how to conduct observations. One team, for example, prioritizes calibration training in the collection of non-judgmental data. Non-judgmental data is information about the facts of what happened. It is not labeled as “good” or “bad.” For example, non-judgmental data might be “the three boys in the back of the room took five minutes to get started on the assignment,” or “20 of 25 students were ready to start the next activity when time was called.” The post-observation conversation would then involve the teacher and observer working together to make sense of what that data means for students and their learning.

“Observation skills must be taught to be helpful. The most useful skill is to be able to watch a lesson and non-judgmentally take data. Data as to what students are doing, rather than making judgments, is most useful to the teacher being evaluated.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

This process helps teams get past the “culture of nice,” which occurs when teachers don’t want—or don’t know how—to have open, honest conversations about instructional practice. The “culture of nice” can be particularly evident when there is a definite need for improvement, but the teachers involved are not equipped for engaging in those types of conversations.

For a more complete overview of teams’ practices and to review resources that teams created for their evaluation processes, see “Cultivating skills and dispositions for evaluating colleagues” in the Steps to Creating A Teacher-Powered School guide.

www.teacherpowered.org/guide/norming/evaluation
Create an open environment with ample opportunities for teachers to visit one another's classrooms and observe one another teaching. Structure classrooms and the school environment to support teachers in sharing their wisdom and teaching practice. Teacher-powered schools are highly collaborative, democratic environments where the wisdom of the whole is emphasized over individual accomplishments.

Develop a process and tools for evaluating both the instructional practices and larger, collegial management contributions that come with working in a teacher-powered school. In teacher-powered schools, contributions to the functioning of the school can be nearly as important as effective teaching practices.

The evaluation process can be used for both teacher evaluation and professional growth—but only in a climate of trust. Create an open, honest community with clear processes for handling confrontation, and trust will be more easily cultivated. Focusing on building trust among colleagues will allow for teachers to emphasize growth in the evaluation process.

Provide opportunities for teachers to self-identify at least one area of growth. If there is high confidence in the evaluation tool, consider having teachers select an area of growth from that. Then create processes and structures that help teachers and those who conduct the evaluation process work together to address those areas of growth.

Develop a process for peer observations. For example, teachers could work in teams of three to observe one another and provide feedback and coaching: one chosen by the individual being evaluated, one serving as the team’s choice, and one chosen by the elected school leader. Teams could also allocate funding to hire substitute teachers several times a year and provide coverage for teachers so that they can observe one another. Teams would then share what they learned privately, providing feedback and coaching in their teams of three.

The concept of teachers observing and evaluating one another may be new (and uncomfortable) to many teachers. Be sure to provide training for teachers on conducting observations and providing meaningful and actionable feedback (staying within any policies set by the team and sometimes by the district and state). If teachers will also score one another, provide calibration training in the collection of non-judgmental data. This will be crucial to surpassing the “culture of nice” so that teachers can give one another meaningful feedback that leads to instructional improvement.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will your team create a climate of trust and openness? Will teachers be allowed to close their door and “do their own thing,” or should they expect colleagues to enter their classroom and observe them at any time? If teachers will work in a “fishbowl” environment, how will this be communicated? What formal documentation might be created to indicate that teachers accept this environment (e.g. an Elect-to-Work Agreement)?

How will your team evaluate not only instructional practices but also other contributions that teachers make to overall school success? Will you design a rubric or choose one that already exists? What weight will this component carry (50/50, 60/40, or something else)? Will this require a waiver from district policy, state policy, or the collective bargaining agreement?

Will your school have a peer observation and evaluation system or a 360-degree one? If neither, what system will you use? How will your evaluation system be structured? If you do peer or 360-degree evaluation, how will you provide time for teachers to observe one another and give feedback? What weight, if any, will teacher observation scores have relative to any required “official evaluator” (in cases where the team did not secure autonomy to conduct evaluations as a group)?

What training will your team provide for teachers in conducting effective observations and providing actionable feedback? How will your team support teachers in getting past the “culture of nice”?

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