

A Guide for Teacher-Powered Site Administrators

*Collaborative Leadership
for Thriving Teams*

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Topic 6: *Teacher Evaluation and Observation*

Many teacher-powered teams use peer observation as part of their professional learning and prioritize spending regular time in each other's classrooms. While some teams do have teacher evaluation autonomy—meaning they are able to evaluate each other—most teacher-powered teams work within the constraints of systems that require an administrator to evaluate teachers. Teacher-powered administrators must navigate teacher evaluation and observation carefully, keeping everyone accountable, making the evaluation process meaningful, and creating a culture where it is safe to reflect and grow as a teacher.

For more information about evaluation please see the Teacher-Powered Discussion Starter on the topic of "evaluation," at www.teacherpowered.org/starters.

“The teacher observation process has provided angst for teachers and principals for far too long. More than that, it’s been a waste of time in many schools, which is highly unfortunate because it is one of the times during the school day that teachers and principals can really learn from one another. Additionally, it has deep implications for other learning that could take place in the school.”

Peter DeWitt



Reflection Questions for Individuals

1. Thinking back on being observed and evaluated as a teacher, what parts of the process helped improve your teaching?

2. As a site leader, what type of feedback do you want to receive? What will help you improve?

3. Who are your own mentors? Is there anyone else you want to build a mentor relationship with this year? What first step will you take?



Team Conversation Starters

1. When dealing with teacher evaluation, what is expected of teachers and who sets these expectations? If you have mandated protocols do you also want a set of expectations that staff agreed upon and are evaluated on?
2. What roles do teachers play in evaluation and observation?
3. What support do teachers need when doing peer evaluation and/or observation?
4. How do you create a culture where the evaluation/observation process feels safe to everyone involved? What happens when there is conflict with the outcomes?



Common Challenges

Personnel confidentiality regulations and laws create challenges in teacher-powered schools used to operating with a transparent culture. These laws are in place to protect employees, and schools risk being out of compliance—or worse, lawsuits—if they are not followed carefully. Some teams create a personnel committee to handle all of these regulations and confidentiality issues, while others leave this area in the hands of the administrator knowing that they trust the principal to make decisions in line with their shared purpose. Whatever system your team chooses to use, make sure that everyone is trained in the appropriate laws and that you follow those carefully.

Many teacher-powered **teams describe themselves as family**. Colleagues become friends and often people have worked together for decades. This makes it extra hard to observe and evaluate each other unless there is a lot of trust and commitment to improving. It is better to call these tensions out in a neutral setting before they become problematic, for example a retreat. Acknowledging that this is hard and focussing on everyone learning allows teachers to be less defensive and more open to suggestion.

Another challenge in this area is when a team wants to be able to evaluate each other, but **the union, district, or state mandates that teachers are evaluated by an administrator**. Seeking out MOUs and waivers is one solution. Another way teams handle this is by having peer evaluation be part of the process, but still have the site administrator write and sign the final report. This hybrid process allows your team to be true to their collaborative culture, while still following protocol. For teams that use peer evaluation, the administrator is part of the review team for some teachers. At Mission Hill, the site principal is part of the peer review team for teachers in their first three years at the school, helping to ensure that new teachers are properly evaluated before being offered tenure.



Tips and Tricks

Hire Well (again!)

- The best way to prevent challenging evaluations is to **hire quality candidates who fit your team's culture from the start**. "We ask a lot of questions about how they deal with adult conflict, specifically looking for examples of when this happened. When the answer is pretty cookie-cutter like 'people can always come talk to me' then there is a red flag," shares Jeff.

Create a Transparent Process

- **A clear peer observation/evaluation process and structure is imperative** to make it successful. This must include a plan for covering teachers' classrooms so they can visit/observe their colleagues. Some teams set aside funds for substitutes, while other teams have the administrator regularly cover classes to allow teachers to observe each other. Alissa says, "My role is to facilitate the pre-conferences, observations, and post-conferences, teach the proper language of how to deliver the facts, and be the stand-in if an observing teacher needs a 'sub' in his/her classroom."

Everyone is a Learner

- Peer observation should be part of a lifelong learner mentality. **Teacher-powered teams embrace a growth mindset for themselves and their students**. When everyone is there to learn it takes away some of the defensiveness that can accompany observations. "I think teachers feel safe because the observer always shares at least one thing they learned and how they can use that to improve their own classrooms, so everyone is there to learn," writes Alissa.
- **Every professional needs coaching**, including teachers and administrators. Creating that mentorship culture improves instruction and outcomes. "Under a true coaching and collaborative method I know teachers will improve each year and students will make learning gain increases that are valuable," says Anna.

Be Consistent and Transparent

- There will be teachers that need improvement, teachers that aren't a good fit for your team, or even rarely teachers that violate more serious standards. **Being clear with your team about when you will step into a more official administrator role creates trust and understanding even when it is hard**. "If I feel that the school or the safety of our students or staff are in jeopardy I abide by the district policies. Doing so has been one of the most difficult parts of my job because it runs counter to our school culture—how we treat one another," shares Ayla.
- It is also vital that everyone on the team trusts the site administrator. **Being accessible, present, and transparent gives a strong foundation for the team**. "Transparency, presence, and accessibility have supported me in creating a space where our community can come share their concerns with the administrator," writes Letitia.

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