

# A Guide for Teacher-Powered Site Administrators

*Collaborative Leadership  
for Thriving Teams*

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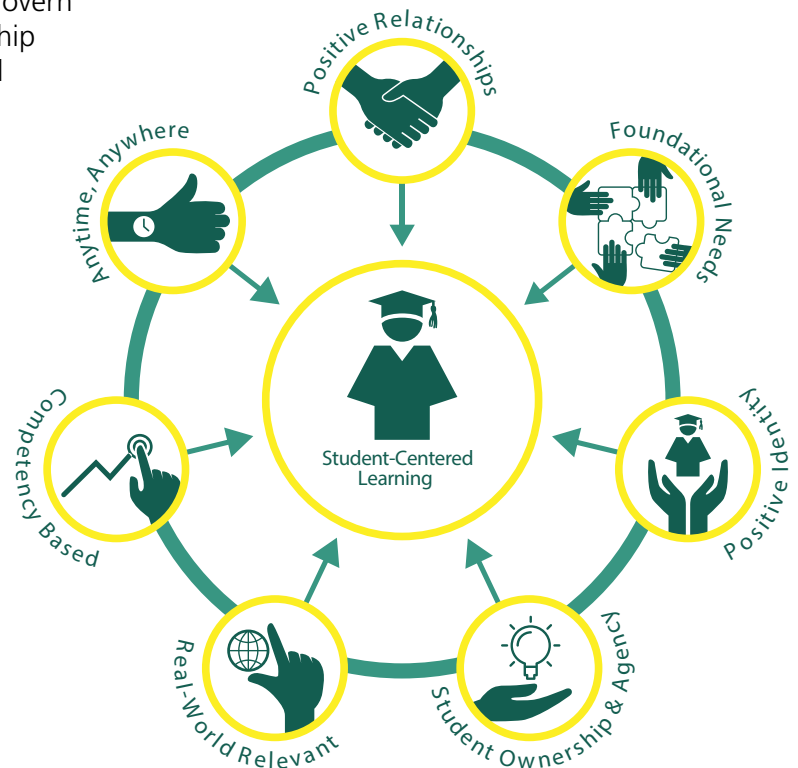
teacher-  
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# What is a Teacher-Powered School?

Teacher-powered ([www.teacherpowered.org](http://www.teacherpowered.org)) is a governance structure in which the team of teachers has collective autonomy to design, create, and make final decisions in areas impacting student success. Teams gain autonomy in multiple ways ranging from charter contracts, to district pilot school agreements, to MOUs with unions and districts, to state waivers, and even in some cases informally by leadership goodwill. The collaborative leadership piece also looks different at each school because the individual teams get to decide what is best for their staff and their students. No two teacher-powered schools are governed identically. **It is not a model one can replicate; it must be created as a collaborative process.**

What all teacher-powered schools have in common is that they are student-centered and their teams are committed to keeping students at the center of all design and decision-making. We use Education Evolving's Seven Principles of Student-Centered Learning ([www.educationevolving.org/learning](http://www.educationevolving.org/learning)) to understand what student-centered means in practice. At teacher-powered schools each team implements some or all of these principles in the ways best suited for their communities.

There are also common teacher-powered practices that many teams use in helping them govern their schools. Collaborative leadership between administrators, teachers, and support staff; distributed leadership structures; rotating leadership positions, engaging in peer observation; including student voice and choice; embracing a culture of transparency; seeing themselves as lifelong learners; engaging families in design and decision-making; and reimagining the roles of teachers and administrators are common practices found at successful teacher-powered schools. This guide focuses on this last teacher-powered practice of reimagining the roles of teachers and administrators. What does this mean? What does it look like? Where do you start?



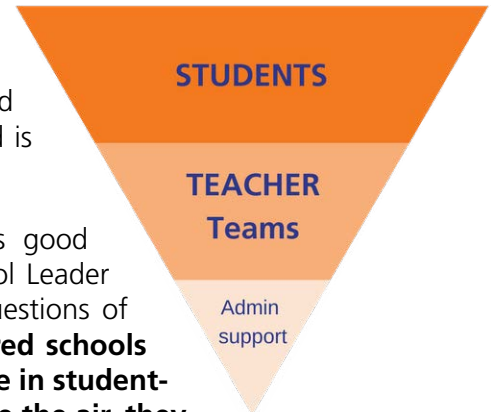
## Reimagining the Roles of Administrators

Several teacher-powered administrators have described the role as “servant leadership,” meaning that they see themselves in a servant position to their teacher teams. Alissa Cheek, principal of Tri-County Early College in Murphy, NC shares, “Although I never planned on being an administrator, when I became one, I knew I wanted to find a way to lead more as a servant and supporter.” Instead of leading from the front, teacher-powered principals often lead from the back or the middle, building up their teams and supporting their teachers in what they have collectively decided is best for students.

Teacher-powered also embraces the philosophy that what is good for students is good for educators. Buffy Cushman-Patz, School Leader and Founder of SEEQS: the School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability in Honolulu, writes, **“Leaders in teacher-powered schools use the same practices in leadership that good teachers use in student-centered classrooms: they incorporate all voices, they share the air, they act as a guide-on-the-side rather than a sage-on-the-stage.”** The only way I really started to feel comfortable as a new leader was realizing that the same things that made me a good teacher made me a good leader. I already had the skillset, I just needed to apply it differently. Now I think of it as parallelism: this idea that structures that work at one level of an organization work at all levels of an organization. So my leadership is guided by the question, ‘how would I work with students to approach this?’ It seems like that might come across as condescending, but it doesn’t. It works really well.”

Most Americans grew up in traditional school systems and, even for those who embrace an innovative mindset, challenging the hierarchical status quo can be daunting. Research and experience tells us that traditional teaching methods don’t work well for all students. We need new and engaging ways to meet students’ 21st century needs. The same is true for teachers. Ayla Gavins, principal at Mission Hill K-8 School in Boston, MA writes, “Working in a progressive, democratically run school opened my world to what was possible for children and the adult educators.” Teacher-powered administrators actively create environments where teaching, learning, and leading at their schools works for everyone—students, teachers, and support staff.

The goal of the Teacher-Powered Schools Network is to support, encourage, and be a resource for teacher-powered administrators and their teams. Leading teacher-powered teams is a delicate dance, balancing the needs of everyone in the building, using well-developed skills, creating a culture of trust and accountability, and thinking long-term about sustainability. “Within all of these topics is the underlying issue of sustainability. A constant area of concern around leadership at our school is making sure everyone contributes to the school while not feeling overwhelmed.” writes Jeff Austin. This guide will help you do all of this and create schools where students and adult educators thrive.



## Topic 4: *Leading from the Back, the Middle, and the Front*

**“Management is about persuading people to do things they do not want to do, while leadership is about inspiring people to do things they never thought they could.”**

**Steve Jobs**

Successful teacher-powered administrators take Steve Jobs’ distinction between management and leadership to the next level by knowing when to lead from the back, the middle, and the front.



### *Reflection Questions for Individuals*

1. When and how do you decide to take a more active “lead” role in decisions?

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2. Is there an experience you had on this topic that pushed your thinking on what it means to be a “leader among leaders”?

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3. Who do you know that leads well from the middle or the back? Describe what that looks and feels like.

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### Team Conversation Starters

1. What does leading from the middle or back look like with your team?
2. In what ways have teachers taken on some of the instructional leadership and operations duties that traditionally fall on a principal? How has the admin role shifted? Who keeps people accountable?
3. Which shared or distributed leadership structures does your team use (or plan on using) that spread out traditional responsibilities of the principal?
4. In what ways does your team keep students at the center of both instructional choices and operations management?



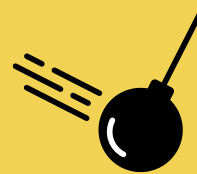
### Common Challenges

Time is always a challenge. People have good intentions, but **finding time for follow through is often difficult**. As Irene says, “They’re on when we are *in* a meeting but they’re so busy teaching in *between* meetings.” One solution to this is to be clear during the meeting what the next steps are and how much time they will take. When people commit to take on leadership, have them also reflect on other commitments they already have. Having open conversations about what is on everyone’s plate allows teams to identify when responsibilities need to be shifted.

Another common challenge for teacher-powered administrators is **supporting each teacher in their unique needs**. “Navigating the push-pull of different teachers’ needs... Some teachers think I’m not supportive enough with difficult parents, others want less intervention. Some teachers want me to be harder on discipline issues, others think it’s just right. Some teachers think it’s best to retain a student that’s far below grade level, others think that’s rarely a good idea, if ever. Some teachers like to assign homework, others don’t which leads to weird transitions from grade to grade for students,” shares Irene. It often feels like you can’t make everyone happy all the time. When this struggle becomes too much, take it back to the whole team for a discussion on whether it makes sense to establish a common practice across teachers or whether teacher autonomy in this area is important. Trust that teachers know what’s best for their kids and can have the hard conversations necessary to make the right decision. If necessary bring in a facilitator to help the team navigate the hard conversations so you, as the administrator, don’t have to take on that role on a topic filled with tension.

Another challenge is **being clear about what the teachers expect from their administrator.** They hired you for a reason. What is it? Which decisions and areas of responsibility do teachers want to hold onto and which could they not care less about? Disagreements and misunderstandings about expectations can be particularly challenging. At Chrysalis, the team began using a “decision tree” several years ago to set a common understanding for which decisions would be delegated to the administrator and which decisions team members should participate in. The idea of a decision tree comes from the book *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott. At Chrysalis, leaf decisions (like renewing transportation contracts) are delegated to the administrator. Stem decisions (such as approving large purchases) are delegated to the administrator, but she reports back to the staff to make sure there are no objections before moving forward. Branch decisions (like setting playground expectations) are delegated to a committee. Trunk decisions (like setting the annual budget) are delegated to a committee that reports back before moving forward. Finally, root decisions (like hiring and evaluating teachers and the administrator) require full participation by the whole team.

### **Myth: *Every decision is made as a team***



Collaborative leadership does not mean every decision is made as a team. In most schools, that would be impossible.

The reality is that there

are hundreds of decisions that get made daily at each site and, even for very small schools, group decision-making isn't feasible for every decision. Shared decision-making is about creating a set of guiding principles and values for your team and then distributing decision making responsibility among your colleagues. Teacher-powered teams have created processes and structures that allow them to know what decisions need to be made as a whole team, which ones are made by committee or small group, and which ones individuals are trusted to make. Being transparent and clear about these processes and practices **leads to effective and efficient collaborative leadership.**



## Tips and Tricks

### Hire Well

- “With people who are interested in learning, engaging, and improving the idea of ‘leading from the back’ becomes much more feasible,” writes Jeff. During your hiring process, be thinking ahead and **evaluate candidates on their leadership and collaborative potential.**

### Create Space and Set the Expectations

- Letting go and **creating opportunities for others to lead** is an important part of leading from the middle and the back. “My job now is to make sure there is space for *others* to lead from the middle,” says Buffy. As Jeff puts it, there is a “need to push some people into the space—create a culture where teachers see that there is an expectation that they lead.”
- Take the time to **set expectations about which decisions teachers want a part in and which can be delegated.** Every year, Chrysalis brings out the decision tree and the teachers modify their selections from the year before. Priorities shift over time and the decision tree changes as the school and the pressures facing it evolve.

### Use Distributed Leadership Structures

- **Specific governance organization structures and intentional practices support collaborative leadership** and cultivate a shared value for group leadership. Letitia reflects, “I think over time I’ve gotten savvier at highlighting areas where shared leadership is needed as opposed to the traditional model where the principal is the leader and primary decision maker. Having teachers identify the value in a structure/practice/activity and then leading them into how we can collectively invest in it brings teachers around to seeing from another vantage how the leadership must be shared with participation from all.”

### Facilitate with Protocols

- Most teacher-powered teams take advantage of modern technology and use shared documents and agendas. They have **protocols for how decisions are made based on their shared value for collaborative leadership.** Alissa says, “In these protocols, everyone has a role and sometimes I lead, sometimes I keep time, but always I am part of the discussion and solution. There is never a mandate from ‘the top.’”
- A good teacher-powered administrator **takes on the facilitator role from the back while others lead.** “My role is to facilitate so that everyone’s time is as well spent as it possibly can be, and to share the lead as much as possible. I have a strong sense of each team member’s strengths and what they bring to the table, and whenever possible, I listen and participate as a part of the team while a colleague presents, leads a discussion, or shares something with us,” writes Buffy.

### Know When to Take an Active Role

- Leading from the front is also important, the key is **knowing when to do it**. Ayla shares, “I take a more active lead role in decision-making when the decision making process used by a team is damaging to relationships, when we have a deadline to meet and we’re not even close to consensus, when there is a high-stakes decision to be made and our team doesn’t understand the urgency (usually because they weren’t present for the context of the high-stakes item coming directly from an external source), and when it’s my idea that people have approved I take the lead in shaping what the proposed idea will look like.”
- Another time teacher-powered administrators need to **lead from the front is when the team is veering away from their co-created shared purpose**. Jeff writes, “As far as when I just step in and make decisions, I usually do that when it seems like the idea is not guided by our vision.”

### Keep the Focus on Students and Learning

- “The most important thing that happens in a school is what happens in the classrooms. Leading from the back means being willing to do whatever it takes to provide a powerful teaching and learning environment for both teachers and students,” writes Alissa. Teacher-powered administrators prioritize students and learning and sometimes this means doing things from the middle or back. Covering a class so teachers can do peer observation, or **doing the unseen work so teachers and students can focus on learning** allows everyone to succeed.

### Act as a Shield

- Many teacher-powered administrators share that an **important part of their job is to run interference** or act as a shield for their team, so their teachers can focus on the students. One leader writes of conflict with district leaders, “I do not share this struggle with the teachers. I want to protect the positive relationship they have with our superintendent and board members. That feels a little dishonest in a teacher-powered school but I feel if they knew, it would create a distraction from the teaching and learning process through negative or even rebellious feelings. I struggle often with my decisions in what to share and what not to share, but I decide, wrong or right, by asking myself the question, ‘Is my decision best for my students?’” It is a hard balance and each leader and team needs to make their own decisions about how much interference to run.



We all know we need to take care of ourselves, but it is hard to do when there are so many other people and tasks to take care of. School leaders carry a large emotional, mental, and physical workload (does anyone actually sit at their desk during the school day for long periods?). To be a long-term successful leader you *must* prioritize yourself and intentionally encourage your team to do the same. This doesn't require tons of time or money, but it does require discipline.



### *Reflection Questions for Individuals*

1. What conditions do you need in place to work as your best self?

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2. What are some physical signs that you are stressed and overworked?

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3. How do you prioritize your time and energy between those constant, urgent needs at a school and the long term bigger picture needs?

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### *Team Conversation Starters*

1. Spend time sharing with each other what you need to be at your best.
2. Having fun together is important. How often does your team want social events as a group? Brainstorm ideas and schedule them.
3. What expectations do you have of each other's time outside of the school day? Can everyone agree that these are reasonable?
4. A teacher may take on more or less responsibilities each year depending on personal circumstances or life stage. How does your team want to handle this? What is fair and does not breed resentment?



## Common Challenges

The most common challenge in all of these topics is the shortage of time. We are all short on time, but we aren't getting any more of it. Rather, we have to reflect carefully and see how we can better use the time we have. Ayla explains this well: "A challenge for me is balancing the time it takes to help a student learn how to tie their shoe with writing for publications, speaking at conferences, doing my own learning... Instead of more time, I'd like to know my working style better. When do I work most efficiently? What's easy for me? What takes me a long time to do?" **Part of self-care is figuring out how you work at your best.** Prioritizing this will help you and your team.



## Tips and Tricks

### Set Boundaries

- **Know your limits and your needs.** Irene at Chrysalis has a daily alarm on her phone that alerts her to literally leave school and go home. The to-do list is always endless, so taking time to eat dinner with your family, enjoy coffee with a friend, or simply take a walk helps you get closer to that elusive work-life balance.

### Prioritize Based on Your Shared Purpose

- Engaging in **common readings and experiences** allows your team to remain focused on your school purpose while still taking care of yourselves as individuals. "The text for the summer is always something around self-care, mindfulness, being our best selves in an effort to restore, refresh and re-center us around why we were all called to do this work in the first place, but the frame is around attending to who we are as individuals, bringing our gifts, talents and capacities to our work, so we can come together to collectively focus on our shared purpose as a school," writes Letitia.
- "Burnout is inevitable when a leader is overwhelmed with work that doesn't contribute to his or her inner purpose. If you find this becoming your reality, reexamine your 'why.' Determine if your work as a leader is corresponding with that purpose," writes Buruti Kafele in "Avoiding School Leadership Burnout". When you lose sight of the real reason you are in this profession, you experience burnout quickly. **Find a photo, a quote, or a symbol and post it somewhere you will see it often to remind you of your purpose.**


### Spend Time With Students


- Almost all educators go into teaching because of the students, and yet sometimes we lose track of that, even when we are student-focused. Go spend time with your students, sit with them at lunch, join them in an after school club, hang out on the playground or in the halls. **It will help re-center you.** After a long day Jeff shared with another administrator seeking advice, "Spend some time with your students today. I did that and felt tons of appreciation. It helped."


**"Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch."**


**Parker Palmer**

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