## Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School:

# LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS



## Collaborative Management

Created by teachers in partnership with





#### **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**

- Kevin Brewster, co-lead teacher at Howard C. Reiche School (Portland, ME)
- Stephanie Davis, teacher at TAGOS Leadership Academy (Janesville, WI)
- Aaron Grimm, teacher at Minnesota New Country School (Henderson, MN)
- Eric Hendy, teacher at San Francisco Community School (San Francisco, CA)
- Alysia Krafel, co-founder and teacher at Chrysalis Charter School (Palo Cedro, CA)
- Virginia Rhodes, former principal at Hughes STEM High School (Cincinnati, OH)
- Cheryl Suliteanu, CTQ Virtual Community Organizer and teacher at Oceanside Unified School District (Oceanside, CA)
- Nora Whalen, teacher at Avalon School (St. Paul, MN)
- Jenerra Williams, teacher at Mission Hill K-8 School (Boston, MA)

#### 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

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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?

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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.

Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School:

#### LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS

## Collaborative Management

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.

"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

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.

"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 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 decisionmaking 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?



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 "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

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

"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 Chrysalis Charter School Palo Cedro, CA

"Our school tries to come to a consensus with all decisions. We talk and talk, and talk some more. While some may feel this is inefficient, I feel it is far more inefficient to have a top-down model that some teachers undermine because they disagree with what is being passed down the pipeline. If teachers have a voice, they are much more likely to buy in."

—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI

through bureaucratic channels, only to rarely secure approval.

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 <u>storming section</u> 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.

"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

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

"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

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.

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.

"Take note all you folks who are starting out: The outside world automatically views the administration team as the single leader in charge."

> —Alysia Krafel Chrysalis School Palo Cedro, CA

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.

"One thing that was extremely helpful for me as a new teacher was going to a different school that was run just like ours to see how it operated. It is easier to learn when you are the outsider observing and asking questions, rather than having to learn while you are also doing your job with students."

—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI

#### 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

"If money weren't an issue, I would build in even more time for us to spend in a retreat setting or spaces that lent to more community and relationship building during professional development time. I'm not speaking of a workshop with an outside facilitator, but time with each other to build trust, understanding, etc."

—Jenerra Williams

Mission Hill K-8 School

Boston, MA

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 ce

"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

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.

#### **TIPS**

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 <a href="Teacher-Powered Schools Inventory">Teacher-Powered Schools Inventory</a> 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.

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.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

"Only by weighing control over who is chosen, cost, team members' skills, training, availability, and the desire and ability for the founding and other teachers to do leadership and administrative work themselves, can a team determine if there should be an administrator, and if so, what the administrator will do and won't. Clarity on this is essential."

-Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM School, Cincinnati, OH

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.

ldeally, 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.

"Those selected to be in school leadership positions have to resist answering questions or solving problems like a principal."

Nora WhalenAvalon School, St. Paul, MN

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.

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** 

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