Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School:

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS

Cultural Integration

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.

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How to use...

STEPS TO CREATING A TEACHER-POWERED SCHOOL

FORMING
Forming your team and setting a [...] vision.

STORMING
Storming to design your school, rally support, and secure approval.

NORMING
Norming to launch your school and refine how you operate.

PERFORMING
Performing like you knew you would... and working to get even better.

TRANSFORMING
Transforming teachers and teaching, schools and schooling.

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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.

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Cultural Integration

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.

PROVIDING MENTORSHIP AND SUPPORT

> "New staff need to see that everyone has a voice in decisions and a responsibility to weigh in on them."
>
> —Nora Whalen, Avalon School, St. Paul, MN

"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

"We have a Summer Institute before school starts. We craft a combination of PD, grade-level planning, and committee work. We revisit values and beliefs and set schoolwide goals, as well as outline the upcoming year's objectives. New team members are invited and expected to contribute."

—Kevin Brewster
Reiche Elementary School
Portland, ME

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.

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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.

"Figure out the most critical points of need for new teachers. As experienced educators, we all come to know the cyclical nature of schools. Certain issues present themselves at certain predictable times of the year. Newer faculty and staff need to have these timings foretold in order to anticipate and plan."

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH

"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.

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.

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"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.

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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.
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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

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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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