Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School:

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS

Defining Success

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...

STEPS TO CREATING A TEACHER-POWERED SCHOOL

FORMING
Forming your team and setting a shared 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.

TEACHERPOWERED.ORG/GUIDE

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.

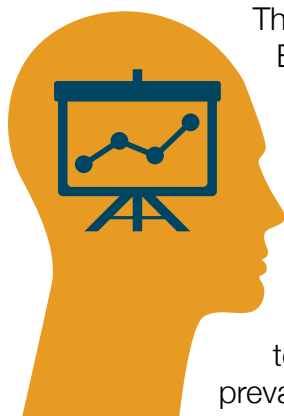### Would you like to join a CTQ Content Lab (or multiple)? Which ones?

☐ 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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Defining Success

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.

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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

1. As your team designs your shared purpose (mission, vision, values, and goals), take time to develop a common understanding of how your team defines a **successful student and school**. If that definition includes attributes beyond what can be measured using standardized tests (the industry standard), then clearly articulate what those attributes are and why they are important. If your team already has shared purpose documents, then use them as a basis for your discussion.

2. **Identify tools**, using both qualitative and quantitative data sources, for measuring success in the areas that your team has identified as high priority. Develop a plan for what you will do with that data and how it will be used.

Sometimes these tools can help shape your teams' discussion about what is important to measure. For example, your team might not have considered measuring everything The Hope Survey measures—but perhaps the survey design will point your team in some new directions. Alternatively, you might decide to use The Hope Survey but only pay attention to specific data points.

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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.

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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

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READJUSTING FOR GREATER SUCCESS

"When school-wide things are not working, we set aside time to specifically address the concern. We lay out the concern so that everyone has the same understanding about what 'isn't working' and our goal in the end. We brainstorm ways to work toward fixing the issue, and then we make an action plan or action steps toward that."

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

"We use a variety of data: state test scores to standing-in-line pop quizzes, paper surveys to conferences with families, daily mood of a person to overall mood of the school, and so on. And we then talk about these things at staff meetings so that we can make adjustments. Sometimes a family yells at us, sometimes a family celebrates us, and that's a pretty loud bullhorn as to what's going on."

—Eric Hendy
San Francisco Community School
San Francisco, CA

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.

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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**

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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?

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