

Discussion Starters for Creating
a Teacher-Powered School:

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS



Evaluation

Created by teachers in partnership with



**CENTER FOR
TEACHING QUALITY**
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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
- Defining Success
- Securing Autonomy
- Selection and Hiring
- Collaborative Management
- Cultural Integration
- Instructional Approaches
- 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...



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.

Evaluation



Teacher evaluation policies have undergone substantial transformation in states and school districts across the country. One of the most significant shifts is moving from a binary labeling of teacher performance as “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” to a process that identifies different levels of effectiveness. Another change involves heavy reliance upon student learning outcomes, which previously were rarely taken into account in teacher evaluations.

These changes have brought forth major debate about how to best achieve greater teacher quality, which research shows is linked to improved student learning. A frequent point of contention is whether the purpose of teacher evaluation is to identify and fire “bad” teachers or to help support teachers as they improve their practice and develop over time.

Many education stakeholders believe that the instruments currently being developed can be used for both purposes. While this may be true, the processes needed to achieve both outcomes likely need to vary across different contexts. For example, in some contexts, it is difficult for teachers who feel they are at the bottom of the hierarchy to be vulnerable and share where they need support with someone who is also their official evaluator. However, in teacher-powered schools—where there are high levels of trust—these processes can coexist; allowing teachers or designated teams of teachers to evaluate one another.

Teacher teams designing and running teacher-powered schools—many of whom have secured full or partial autonomy to design their evaluation policies—have long understood that teacher quality impacts student and school success. As a result, these teams have chosen to take greater responsibility and accountability for student and whole-school outcomes. Many teams choose to use the evaluation process to both inform personnel decisions and identify teachers’ strengths and areas for improvement in instruction and collegial management.

Teams view these decisions as a “both/and” situation, not an “either/or” choice. They want the ability to encourage colleagues’ improvement and deselect colleagues who are not improving or committed to the team’s shared purpose. These teachers understand that, across 15 potential areas for autonomy, their ability to select colleagues and ensure their development is the most important. After all, student and school success—and therefore teams’ success—depend on teacher quality.

DESIGNING AN EVALUATION PROCESS

What have the pioneers done?

Evaluating instructional practice

Most teams design a peer observation and feedback process in a way that is intended to improve teachers' instructional practice. Sometimes the whole team participates, but most of the time a select group of colleagues takes part (such as a personnel committee trained in state evaluation laws or a team that includes all teachers from a grade level or subject area and an elected school leader). When selected groups evaluate, feedback is sometimes gathered from a broader peer group via surveys or other rubrics that are designed or chosen by the whole team. If one exists, sometimes teams adapt their district's rubric for peer review or for individual teachers. Once all the data are gathered, the group doing the evaluation discusses teachers' results with each individual in a private formal meeting.

“We have a peer evaluation system where teachers evaluate one another. The purpose of that system is for teachers to identify places in their practice where they want to improve. Their peers have conversations with them, come in to observe, look at student work, and give feedback. We feel that evaluation should be driven by an authentic need that the teacher has, and they should be evaluated by people who are closest to the children and the teaching of the school—which is other teachers.”

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

The peer review process frequently has a mentoring and coaching component that allows teachers to focus on a collaborative approach to improving teaching and learning in their school. For example, some processes provide opportunities for teachers to identify particular areas in which they would like to develop their knowledge and practice over a period of time. Then a team of peer observers watches them teach and provides feedback on how the individual is progressing toward his or her goals at various stages.

Often, new teachers at teacher-powered schools are automatically assigned a mentor to ensure they feel supported as they put their instructional and collegial management knowledge into practice. Throughout these processes, teacher teams take responsibility for supporting one another's success, which encourages trust among colleagues.

Even in schools where a principal or lead teacher is officially responsible for evaluation (in contexts where teams were unable or chose not to secure evaluation autonomy), some teacher teams have created a peer observation and feedback process that feeds into the final evaluation process. Colleagues may formally agree to this in Elect-to-Work Agreements at the site level, or sometimes the process is more informal. In these cases,

notes or actual scores from colleague observations are considered when determining a teacher's final evaluation score (which is kept private).

One reason why teachers support peer evaluation—and, in some cases, 360-degree evaluation that includes student and parent feedback—is because the teaching and learning environment in teacher-powered schools already tends to be like a fishbowl. Classrooms are typically open to colleagues and visitors, and as a result, teachers feel comfortable having their colleagues watch them teach.

This environment builds a culture of openness and trust that is absolutely crucial when using the same process for evaluation and growth. In this atmosphere, informal mentoring happens regularly, making formal peer evaluation processes less threatening than they might be in an environment where administrators and peers evaluate based on “snapshot” observations of teachers' performance.

“We have always felt that we should be evaluated by one another, not by our principal, who is rarely at our school. This year we decided to finally do some evaluations on ourselves and one another. Even though they are not linked to anything that has to do with pay or how our district views us as teachers, these evaluations actually mean more to us and will help us be better teachers at our school for our students.”

—Anonymous

The implementation of peer observation and evaluation processes also addresses two challenges that most schools face: efficient use of time and money. Peer observation processes serve not only as data collection points for evaluation but also as effective professional development opportunities for both the observer and the observed. At the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy in Denver, several times a year the staff hires two substitute teachers for two days so that teacher teams can observe one another. The former co-lead teacher described it as “the most cost effective \$500 dollars we ever spent on professional development. Many schools spend 10 times that much and get less than half the impact on instruction.”

For a more complete overview of teams' practices and to review resources that teams created for their evaluation processes, see “Determining an approach to evaluation and tenure” in the *Steps to Creating A Teacher-Powered School* guide.

www.teacherpowered.org/guide/storming/governance/evaluation

Engaging in this process also nearly negates the need for additional professional development sessions that address instructional practices. Because the process is job-embedded and addresses the exact needs of each individual teacher, there is no need to engage in professional development that doesn't align with the school's best practices.



Evaluating teachers for more than their instructional abilities

Teachers' responsibilities in teacher-powered schools include both instruction and collegial management. They operate on the premise that school success is as much dependent upon on the contributions of all personnel as it is on teachers' instructional practices.

As a result, teams with full evaluation autonomy often choose to include assessments of both instructional practice and contributions to school management. Areas for evaluation might include teachers' work in their specific school management positions as well as their contributions to the team as a whole. There are no surprises as teacher teams with evaluation autonomy choose and design these rubrics themselves.

When possible, teacher-powered teams have de-emphasized the use of student test scores for teacher evaluation. While student learning outcomes are considered in evaluations, that assessment is made in a holistic way that extends well beyond standardized test scores. These teachers understand that, by having responsibility and accountability for school success, teacher teams as a whole are responsible for addressing many factors that influence student outcomes. Teams choose the curriculum, allocate the budget, select leaders, set the schedule, and more.

“One thing we do NOT do is tie value added scores to teacher pay. We feel this is a pernicious practice that undermines teacher unity.”

**—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA**

“We typically focus our feedback on what we see, looking at both teaching and learning and management aspects (what role that person has in running the school). We collect job performance evaluations from our parents and students, team members write written evaluations of one another, and we gather in small teams to conduct 360-degree reviews. We don't rely on test data, attendance data, or records of student credit completion.”

**—Nora Whalen
Avalon School
St. Paul, MN**

Teams also understand that a single teacher does not determine the whole of a student's learning. Rather, there is a collective effort among a team of adults (multiple teachers, parents, family members, and more) that determines student success on standardized test measures and beyond. Individual teachers have a role in student learning—and that role is worthy of examination—but teams do not hold individuals responsible solely via students' test score outcomes.

Training teachers to conduct evaluations

As teacher evaluation systems have become more sophisticated, some teacher teams have found an increasing need to provide training for teachers in the skills and dispositions required for conducting observations and providing feedback. Observation instruments can now identify with greater granularity what it means to be an effective teacher, and the evaluation process can require significantly greater amounts of evidence to determine performance levels.

Teams in teacher-powered schools who are using these instruments have come to realize that because teachers have not historically been engaged in teacher evaluation, most have not been trained in how to use the instruments and engage in the process. When possible, these teams try to connect with state- or district-delivered evaluator training that address the use of evaluation instruments.

Most teams with a peer observation process design and provide their own training for the process of how to conduct observations. One team, for example, prioritizes calibration training in the collection of non-judgmental data. Non-judgmental data is information about the facts of what happened. It is not labeled as “good” or “bad.” For example, non-judgmental data might be “the three boys in the back of the room took five minutes to get started on the assignment,” or “20 of 25 students were ready to start the next activity when time was called.” The post-observation conversation would then involve the teacher and observer working together to make sense of what that data means for students and their learning.

“Observation skills must be taught to be helpful. The most useful skill is to be able to watch a lesson and non-judgmentally take data. Data as to what students are doing, rather than making judgments, is most useful to the teacher being evaluated.”

—Alysia Krafel

**Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA**

For a more complete overview of teams’ practices and to review resources that teams created for their evaluation processes, see “Cultivating skills and dispositions for evaluating colleagues” in the *Steps to Creating A Teacher-Powered School* guide.

www.teacherpowered.org/guide/norming/evaluation

This process helps teams get past the “culture of nice,” which occurs when teachers don’t want—or don’t know how—to have open, honest conversations about instructional practice. The “culture of nice” can be particularly evident when there is a definite need for improvement, but the teachers involved are not equipped for engaging in those types of conversations.

TIPS

1. Create an open environment with ample opportunities for teachers to visit one another's classrooms and observe one another teaching. Structure classrooms and the school environment to support teachers in sharing their wisdom and teaching practice. Teacher-powered schools are highly collaborative, democratic environments where the wisdom of the whole is emphasized over individual accomplishments.
2. Develop a process and tools for evaluating both the instructional practices and larger, collegial management contributions that come with working in a teacher-powered school. In teacher-powered schools, contributions to the functioning of the school can be nearly as important as effective teaching practices.
3. The evaluation process can be used for both teacher evaluation *and* professional growth—but only in a climate of trust. Create an open, honest community with clear processes for handling confrontation, and trust will be more easily cultivated. Focusing on building trust among colleagues will allow for teachers to emphasize growth in the evaluation process.
4. Provide opportunities for teachers to self-identify at least one area of growth. If there is high confidence in the evaluation tool, consider having teachers select an area of growth from that. Then create processes and structures that help teachers and those who conduct the evaluation process work together to address those areas of growth.
5. Develop a process for peer observations. For example, teachers could work in teams of three to observe one another and provide feedback and coaching: one chosen by the individual being evaluated, one serving as the team's choice, and one chosen by the elected school leader. Teams could also allocate funding to hire substitute teachers several times a year and provide coverage for teachers so that they can observe one another. Teams would then share what they learned privately, providing feedback and coaching in their teams of three.
6. The concept of teachers observing and evaluating one another may be new (and uncomfortable) to many teachers. Be sure to provide training for teachers on conducting observations and providing meaningful and actionable feedback (staying within any policies set by the team and sometimes by the district and state). If teachers will also score one another, provide calibration training in the collection of non-judgmental data. This will be crucial to surpassing the “culture of nice” so that teachers can give one another meaningful feedback that leads to instructional improvement.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will your team create a climate of trust and openness? Will teachers be allowed to close their door and “do their own thing,” or should they expect colleagues to enter their classroom and observe them at any time? If teachers will work in a “fishbowl” environment, how will this be communicated? What formal documentation might be created to indicate that teachers accept this environment (e.g. an Elect-to-Work Agreement)?

How will your team evaluate not only instructional practices but also other contributions that teachers make to overall school success? Will you design a rubric or choose one that already exists? What weight will this component carry (50/50, 60/40, or something else)? Will this require a waiver from district policy, state policy, or the collective bargaining agreement?

Will your school have a peer observation and evaluation system or a 360-degree one? If neither, what system will you use? How will your evaluation system be structured? If you do peer or 360-degree evaluation, how will you provide time for teachers to observe one another and give feedback? What weight, if any, will teacher observation scores have relative to any required “official evaluator” (in cases where the team did not secure autonomy to conduct evaluations as a group)?

What training will your team provide for teachers in conducting effective observations and providing actionable feedback? How will your team support teachers in getting past the “culture of nice”?



Continue the conversation in the **Teacher-Powered Schools Lab** on the CTQ Collaboratory.
www.teachingquality.org/collaboratory

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