Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School:

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS

Instructional Approaches

Created by teachers in partnership with

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

- ⊙ Kevin Brewster, co-lead teacher at Howard C. Reiche School (Portland, ME)
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- ⊙ 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)
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- ⊙ Jenerra Williams, teacher at Mission Hill K-8 School (Boston, MA)

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How to use...

STEPS TO CREATING A TEACHER-POWERED SCHOOL

TRANSFORMING
Transforming teachers and teaching, schools and schooling.

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

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

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

FORMING
Forming your team and setting a joint vision.

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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.

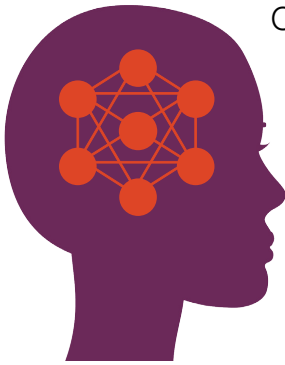### Would you like to join a CTQ Content Lab (or multiple)? Which ones?

☐ 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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LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS

Instructional Approaches

One of the most striking features of teacher-powered schools is the focus on a teaching and learning environment that is both personalized and "humanized." Teacher-powered teams place a high value on creating a climate where students can take ownership of their own learning and identify areas of passion and interest. Teachers in teacher-powered schools often view themselves as "unfinished learners" who must work together to achieve school success.

Simultaneously, teachers in these schools often emphasize their intention to meet the needs of the whole child in order to develop all the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students will need to be successful in life. Academic content is important, but it is not the only thing teachers value. Teacher-powered schools frequently establish goals that include navigating by joy, seeing the light shine in students' eyes, and wanting students to enjoy their school experience.

"Being a teacher in a teacher-led school mostly requires things that aren't a part of educational trainings—a willingness to hear others, compromise, give more of yourself and your time than your contract specifies, build trust and relationships, share your ideas, say when you don't agree, admit when you are wrong, have a sense of humor, etc."

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

"Everyone is nourishing the light in everyone else. That results in a kind, respectful, gentle environment where motivation to engage and learn is the natural result."

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

COLLEGIAL MANAGEMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

What have the pioneers done?

Decision making

Teacher-powered teams make decisions about teaching and learning that impact both individual student and whole-school success. In order to make decisions efficiently, many teams have developed clearly defined processes and pathways so that everyone knows who is responsible for which decisions.

That said, every team relies on more than one means for making decisions. Some teams use consensus processes like "fist to five" and majority voting and even create decision-making structures where special teams are tasked with making specific decisions. Some schools use processes that include the entire staff, while others assign specific responsibilities to different committees of teachers. For example, some schools have personnel committees for hiring and evaluation, and technology committees for handling technology needs. Deciding which processes to use often depends on the size of the school and the specific decisions that need to be made.

Many schools have also developed a means for communicating decision-making processes to newly-hired personnel. After all, this is likely the most significant difference between traditionally structured and teacher-powered schools. Not only must teachers understand the decision-making structures, but they must also learn to trust their teammates to make the right decisions for students and the school while following established processes, even if everyone isn't involved in every decision.

"Conflict is a very normal part of group growth and functioning, so stop being annoyed or 'working around' a seemingly problematic colleague or their ideas. Skip straight to high levels of training in communications skills."

—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM High School
Cincinnati, OH

In the decision-making process, teacher-powered teams establish cultures that embrace conflict and confrontation as part of the work—while making sure to support team members in developing healthy confrontation and conflict resolution skills. Since team members share responsibility and accountability for outcomes, they have a vested interest in decisions impacting students and the school. As a result, there is tremendous potential for disagreement and conflict during decision making.

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The ability of team members to work through disagreements and conflict is crucial. Schools frequently seek specific training in how to reach consensus and settle conflicts. Nearly all teachers in teacher-powered schools have indicated that they use their shared purpose as the touchstone for settling conflict.

An added benefit to working through disagreements is that students get to see adults model solutions-oriented conflict resolution and are then better able to develop those skills for themselves.

Teaching and shared purpose

While teachers in teacher-powered schools make decisions that influence whole-school success, this does not mean that they have free reign to do whatever they please. Most teacher-powered schools have developed structures that foster a balance between order and chaos. While teachers in these schools enjoy high levels of autonomy in their work, they must also align their practices and decisions with the overall shared purpose of the school, which is created by the entire team. Individual teachers do have the opportunity to be creative and exercise autonomy with their own students, but only within specific parameters set by the larger group.

Because teacher teams make decisions that impact whole-school success, it's crucial that time spent in meetings is meaningful and productive. As a result, there is a high level of intentionality and structure present during school and committee meetings.

Teacher roles

Teachers usually structure teacher-powered schools in a way that reworks how student and teacher time are used. They build a community of unfinished learners made up of both students and teachers. This student-centered approach to teaching is often very different from approaches found in today's teacher preparation programs, which often embrace the assembly-line structure of traditional schools in which teachers and students do what they're told. As a result, teachers in teacher-powered schools must develop skills to facilitate and document student progress in ways beyond traditional age-grade structures. In addition, these teachers take on leadership roles that have an impact beyond their own classrooms—including roles supporting disciplinary, social, administrative, and other needs.

"We adopted the '48-hour rule.' If you have an issue or problem with a colleague, you must deal with it directly and quickly. You can't sit on it and let it fester. Deal and clear the air and move on. Occasionally LTs (Lead Teachers) must be brought in to facilitate the conversation, not solve the problem."

—Kevin Brewster
Reiche Community School
Portland, ME

"Our visionary constructed the school to be a chaord. A chaord, in nature, is the structure that dances between order and chaos and is the most lively place for growth and change."

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

TIPS

1. Develop a process for how staff will make efficient decisions about issues concerning teaching and learning. Download the sample organizational charts in the [norming section](#) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School* to see examples of how decisions are made and who makes them. Use them as a basis for your team's discussions.

2. Seek opportunities for staff to learn how to embrace and resolve conflict as a way to improve the school. Take care not to make assumptions about the ability of team members to be able to resolve conflict in a respectful way that aligns with the shared purpose. Create a process for how different types of conflicts and disagreements will be handled. View more resources in the [norming section](#) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School*.

3. Develop a clear way for all school personnel to know how much autonomy they have in different situations (classroom, advisory groups, decision-making teams, etc.). Clearly define the team's shared purpose and goals, and develop team expectations for how individuals will keep personal goals in balance with team goals.

4. Consider how your team will structure or seek external learning experiences for teachers to support their shift from traditional instructors ("sages on the stage") to learning facilitators ("guides on the side"). Provide ample opportunities for teachers to model the behaviors, attitudes, and skills that you want to develop in students.

5. Consider how you will support teachers' shift from assuming responsibility not just for subject-area or grade-level teaching but also for handling disciplinary, social, administrative, and other school needs.

6. Address the following topics in meetings where decisions need to be made about instruction:

- Align agenda items to the school's purpose (mission, vision, values, and goals).

- Let the full team know in advance what decisions will be made at each meeting. This allows for informal conversation and information gathering before the meeting takes places, which helps facilitate informed decision making.

- Build trust. You will need to have some uncomfortable meetings as you learn how to collegially manage the school. But these meetings will get better as everyone learns to embrace and resolve conflict. Create opportunities for team members to learn conflict resolution skills in the context of meetings.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will decisions be made about teaching and learning? Will we use whole group or team structures (or both)? Which structures will be used for which decisions?

If we are going to use a team structure for decision making, what teams will we have? How will these teams align with our shared purpose? How will we decide who is on what team?

How will team members learn to embrace and resolve conflict? What happens if someone is not able to do that? What supports and training will we provide?

How will we create a balance between chaos and structure along with alignment to the shared purpose? How will that structure or process be communicated to team members and new hires?

What structures and protocols will we put in place to ensure efficiency and productivity during all meetings?

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

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RESISTING PRESSURE TO CONFORM

TIPS

1. Work as a team to create **common language and messaging** that explains how and why the school's instructional approach is different. Having fixed messaging helps in a variety of contexts when interacting with fellow team members, parents, community members, school boards, and district personnel. It also helps create a clear message (or brand) for the school, which, in turn, can help resist pressures to conform. When everyone is clear about the specific characteristics of the school, what makes it unique, and why it is successful, it is harder for detractors to find inconsistencies and apply pressure.

2. Some schools have a team, such as an **Instructional Leadership Team**, whose responsibility is to deal with district mandates related to instruction. This group may not have teachers from every grade level or department, but they are trusted to make decisions based on what is best for students within the context of the school's shared purpose. This team decides whether they are going to comply with, ignore, or object to mandates (or object and comply anyway).

What have the pioneers done?

Teachers in teacher-powered schools often report that they feel continuously pressed to conform to traditional school structures and instructional practices. This pressure can come via state and district mandates, community and parent expectations, and teachers' previous experiences with traditional school models.

For example, most districts still report student progress by courses. Yet many teacher-powered schools have created learning programs in which students learn standards typically covered in one district course over a series of projects and grade levels, thereby requiring a reporting system based on progress toward standards, not courses.

In addition, most teachers have worked in schools where the principal made the final decision on matters of teaching and learning. Moving to a school where teachers make critical decisions—especially difficult ones around compensation or evaluation—can sometimes result in teachers wanting to return to traditional structures because they are familiar and easier to handle.

Most teacher-powered schools have secured autonomy—sometimes in the form of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs), charter or pilot school contracts, or waivers—in order to insulate themselves against the pressures to conform to traditional models. The areas of autonomy that teacher teams can secure and which impact the learning program may include budget, curriculum, personnel, scheduling, length of day and/or year, assessments, and more. See the National Inventory of Schools with Teacher Autonomy for the full list.

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3. Consider identifying a person or organization outside the school who can act as an intermediary between the school and district in negotiating "sticky" issues. This could be a community advocate, a union/association official, or a district person who is "in your corner." For example, the Center for Collaborative Education does this for Boston Pilot Schools, and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association does this for the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy.

4. Parents can be your school's greatest advocates. When parents are happy with their children's learning experiences, they are more likely to publicly resist efforts to change the school. Vocal parents are frequently quite influential in stakeholder decision-making processes.

Develop ongoing relationships with parents by keeping them well informed about issues concerning the school and providing them with opportunities to be actively engaged in their children's education. Teams should also get creative about finding opportunities to develop parents' advocacy skills, which can be put to use when teachers are being pressured to conform.

5. Develop relationships with school board members and other key stakeholders. Meet with them to see what their hopes and concerns are about schools in the district and what they want to see in your teacher-powered school. Share your anticipated successes and ways that your school will address their concerns. Create ongoing relationships with key stakeholders who understand your model to build allies whom you can call upon for advice or intervention when pressures mount.

6. Be sure to secure the areas of autonomy that you school needs in order to operate in the ways it was designed. Wherever possible, do not rely solely on the word or memory of district officials regarding specific freedoms or autonomies your school has been granted. Remember that those positions change, and memories can be short.

Get autonomy agreements in writing and approved by the appropriate decision makers. At the very least, you should seek budget, staffing, and school leader selection autonomies, though your local context will determine what autonomies are needed and attainable. Learn about pursuing autonomy in the storming section of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School.*

7. Explore ways to opt out of state and district mandates around curriculum and instruction. Many districts have processes in place to grant waivers or special status that allows schools to opt out of district requirements. For example, Denver Public Schools has a process in which schools can apply for autonomy from curriculum mandates. Schools must submit a plan for how they will meet standards and pay for materials. Schools providing sufficient evidence of potential for success are granted that autonomy. Investigate your state and district policies to see if such provisions exist.

8. While you won't likely be able to obtain exemptions from state standards, you may be able get autonomy for how to implement those standards. You can also look to unique models (Montessori, Expeditionary Learning, etc.) to learn how to gain similar flexibilities that your team would like to have.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will we support team members in aligning with the shared purpose and articulating that shared purpose to a variety of audiences?

How will we deal with district mandates, especially those that tend to pressure schools to conform to a traditional model? Who will be responsible for handling these mandates, and how will they communicate these mandates with the entire team?

What areas of autonomy will we need in order to implement our learning program? How can we secure those areas of autonomy? Who might be willing to help us secure those areas of autonomy?

Who are the key stakeholders who have a vested interest in the success of our school? What are their hopes and fears? How might our school live up to their hopes and assuage their fears?

How will we support parents to become actively involved in the school and serve as advocates for our school's model?

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