

Discussion Starters for Creating
a Teacher-Powered School:

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS



Securing and Sustaining Autonomy

Created by teachers in partnership with



and



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.

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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.

Securing and Sustaining Autonomy



The traditional model of school provides little autonomy for teachers. When teachers do have some measure of autonomy, it is usually limited to their work within the classroom with students. Rarely are teachers provided the authority to make decisions about issues that concern the entire staff or school. And, truth be told, some teachers may not be willing to take on the additional work required to make such decisions in traditional governance arrangements. They fear their decisions will be overturned with a change in leadership or because school, district, and/or union

leaders have a difficult time adapting their structures and policies to support change. Louise Sundin, 22-year president of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers (MFT) and long time AFT vice president, wrote a commentary in [Zero Chance of Passage](#) making this point. She chronicled story after story in which Minneapolis teachers advanced innovations only to see them “sucked back into the district, their uniqueness eliminated, turned back into plain vanilla by a bureaucracy that couldn’t tolerate... differences in delivery or design.” In these conditions, who can blame the teachers who don’t feel school-level decision making is worth their time and energy?

Teacher-powered schools offer new conditions. And some teachers are seizing the opportunity.

In teacher-powered schools, teachers are willing to take on the additional responsibilities required to design and run a school because they secure autonomy to collaboratively make decisions that impact whole school success in up to 15 areas. (See the list of autonomies in Figure 1). Autonomy, they assert, opens the opportunity for them to create a successful school with more certainty that they will be able to sustain their impact.

“Ask any teacher on our staff what the main benefit of this arrangement of teacher autonomy is and they would say: freedom. Freedom to teach the way we want to teach and to create the community we want to create. This freedom is precious and is what nourishes us all to do the hard stuff.”

—Alysia Krafel

**Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA**

Figure 1

Potential areas of autonomy

1. Selecting colleagues
2. Transferring and/or terminating colleagues
3. Evaluating colleagues
4. Setting staff pattern (including size of staff, allocation of personnel among teaching and other positions)
5. Selecting leaders
6. Determining budget
7. Determining the compensation of colleagues, including leaders
8. Determining learning program and learning materials (including teaching methods, curriculum, and levels of technology)
9. Setting the schedule (classes, school hours, length of school year, etc.)
10. Setting school-level policies (including disciplinary protocol, homework, etc.)
11. Determining tenure policy (if any)
12. Determining professional development
13. Determining whether to take, when to take, and how much to count district/CMO/authorizer assessments
14. Assessing school and district performance according to multiple measures (not only a mean proficiency score)
15. Determining work hours

What have the pioneers done?

Teams have secured varying combinations of autonomy.

There are over 75 teacher-powered schools in the United States. The teacher teams that run them can break from conventional approaches to teaching, learning, and school management—if that's what they choose to do—because they have secured final decision-making authority in one or more of 15 potential areas. Some teacher teams have secured all 15 areas of autonomy, and some have just a few. Some teams have full autonomy in nearly all areas, while others have a mix of full and partial autonomy in fewer areas. For example, at the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy (MSLA) in Denver, CO, the teacher teams have secured 11 of the 15 autonomies, but some are partial. For example, while the team determines the budget for the school, it only has budget autonomy over discretionary pots of funding (after district take-outs). Some teams that opted to open teacher-powered schools as charters have full budget autonomy, meaning that they have the ability to allocate all of the school's funding and determine the salary formula themselves.

To see which areas of autonomy are secured at each teacher-powered school, go to:

www.teacherpowered.org/inventory

Teams have secured their autonomy in a variety of ways.

As pioneers have learned of one another's teacher-powered schools, they have discovered that there is not necessarily one "right way" to grant or secure teacher autonomy. The way depends on many influencing factors including local political climates, existing state law, openness to trying things differently (especially among state, district, and union, and charter authorizer leaders), and preferences of teachers at the school. That said, some arrangements are more sustainable than others. For example, some are more susceptible to changes in leadership and management styles. The pioneering teacher teams considered these factors and decided what would work best for their context.

Case in point: the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative—a joint project of the Center for Teaching Quality and Education Evolving—has identified ten arrangements that the more than 75 teacher-powered schools have used to secure their autonomy, and there are certainly more that they have not yet uncovered. They include the following:

- Provision in collective bargaining agreement between district and local union
- Innovation Public Schools Act
- District Innovation Zone
- Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) between district and local union
- MOU among the school, district, and local union, in addition to a waiver from state statute
- Instrumentality charter contract
- Contract established when a chartered school board hires a teacher-powered cooperative
- Chartered school contract and/or chartered school bylaws
- Pilot school agreement
- Site-governance agreement between district school board and district school
- Goodwill of superintendent, principal, or governing board (informal)

"The State of Maine did not have the capacity to recognize our model, as there wasn't really a precedent for what we have done. Subsequently, the legislature has created a teacher-led schools category in the Innovation Public Schools Act that allows individual schools and districts to apply for this new status.

... Seems like we created a model that was outside of the box, so the state created a new box, that we now have to apply to get into!"

**—Kevin Brewster
Reiche Elementary School
Portland, ME**

For more details about the types of arrangements by which teachers secure autonomies, go to: <http://www.teacherpowered.org/inventory/arrangements>

Pioneers are clear that the source of autonomy is, at its very core, the teachers who pursue it. Their sentiments have been previously expressed by Kim Farris-Berg in a June 2013 Education Week blog titled, "[Teachers—Stop Waiting, and Start Calling the Shots](#)":

The vast majority of these teachers didn't wait for anyone 'higher up' to say, first, 'Teachers, we now grant you the opportunity to call the shots.' No! Instead, they took advantage of an existing opening to seize authority (even if it wasn't explicitly meant for them and even if it wasn't their preferred path). Or, they asked for and negotiated authority (even though it wasn't being offered outright).

These teachers are [explorers and pioneers](#) in their field. They have awakened to and taken a new opportunity, despite the risks, and they are willing to accept accountability for the results of their decisions. Like all pioneers, they are doing the arduous work to prepare the path and infrastructure for those who have thus far been reluctant to see the possibilities.

Importantly, these teachers have the courage to stand and act on principle for the sake of their students, despite the expectation that they will succumb to the dominant culture that seeks to control, from the top down, what teachers do and how they do it. They are bravely challenging the status quo regarding how learning, student assessment, and teacher evaluation happen, and how budgets are spent. They do not accept what 'teacher collaboration' and "student discipline" have come to mean in most schools, so they are asserting definitions more in line with high-performing cultures.

"The... source of the new autonomy was teacher vision itself.... These very bold teachers collectively conceived of the idea of a new, dynamic urban STEM school in which students and teacher forged a powerful relationship of learning and created post graduation outcomes that no one thought possible. Then, in a highly disciplined fashion, they began exercising AUTONOMY THAT DIDN'T EXIST in organizing a SCHOOL THAT DIDN'T EXIST."

**—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM School
Cincinnati, OH**

Teams strategically built support for securing autonomy.

In order to secure autonomy, the pioneering teams of teachers interacted with and influenced a number of decision-makers. Who those decision-makers were was dependent upon the type of autonomy arrangement they were seeking and what processes were (or were not) in place for creating new school models.

Some of the most influential people who have helped pioneering teacher teams secure autonomy to design and run a teacher-powered school are families and other community members such as local nonprofits, youth organizations, business groups, churches, and neighborhood associations. Those in the position to decide on whether a school or governance transition will be approved tend to be very interested in what families and other community members want from their schools. Many of the teacher teams worked with these groups to create a vision for what their teacher-powered school could do for students and the community, then built a coalition of support around that vision. Those who were effective at this were also successful in creating their schools.

“We brought together both potential supporters and detractors early and often.... Parents were dubious—they didn't want the best teachers leaving the classroom, they didn't know who'd be in ‘the office’ if there was a problem. As they witnessed our staff sharing our findings and answering their questions, they witnessed teachers stretching into leaders. Soon, they were our allies and remain our biggest supporters.”

**—Kevin Brewster
Reiche Elementary School
Portland, ME**

Teachers who pursued autonomy to design and run schools that would be connected to a school district generally had four groups of decision-makers that they and their coalitions had to influence: district administrators and their staff, school board members, local association leaders, and school review committees. Teachers who pursued autonomy via charter schools that would not be connected with districts worked with their coalitions to influence charter authorizers.

Frequently, teachers found that district or charter authorizer staff and/or committees (which included district or authorizer staff and sometimes other members of the community) reviewed proposals for new schools and schools that were seeking to convert their governance model from traditional to teacher-powered. The reviewing team made a final recommendation to the local school district board or charter authorizer board about whether to approve the proposal, and often the boards simply affirmed the recommendation in their decision. Those teacher teams that were able to develop relationships with staff and other committee members prior to the review process, and help them embrace the reasons for teacher-powered governance and other aspects of their proposed school design, were often able to get their schools approved. When their schools weren't approved, these relationships helped them learn the reasons so they could improve their proposals or, if necessary, pursue other pathways to autonomy.

Teams make decisions, and site governing boards provide oversight.

Whether a given teacher-powered school is a district or charter school, it typically has a governing board at the school site. In other words, most do not report to a district-level school board. The way that teacher teams interact with their governing boards varies.

“Avalon teachers still make up a majority of the school board... regarding interference, there basically isn't any. Decisions are made at the staff level and then brought to the board for further discussion. When things go well, the non-teaching members provide some important insight and then the discussion may go back to the staff for further changes.... In the early days, some of our board members wanted to give input on specific teachers and tenure at the school. Those discussions were forcefully squashed, and all decisions on personnel have stayed among the staff.”

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

“Our governance board has some decision-making autonomy, but really, the teachers have more. There have been times when the teachers have wanted to make big changes like having an early release day once a week for staff development/academic planning. The governance board did not stand in our way, but they did ask good questions that we needed to find answers to before we could proceed.”

**—Stephanie Davis
TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI**

Boards are generally accustomed to making a number of decisions concerning various aspects of the schools, which is a different role than what exists in a teacher-powered school. In teacher-powered schools, teachers make the decisions, and the governing boards—mostly made up of teachers, parents, community members, and students—generally play an advisory role. That said, they do provide careful oversight to ensure teams are meeting their mission, vision, values, and goals. This is especially true in the area of finance, as they often do have legal fiduciary responsibilities, but they rarely need to intervene because teachers make good decisions. Their advice and willingness to play an arm's distance role is highly valued by teams.

The pioneering teachers have experienced that teachers are generally good at governance. That said, the work of governance tends to be relatively new to many teachers, and taking on these responsibilities takes a significant amount of work. Teams have found that one way to ensure time is used effectively is to continuously determine people's strengths and match them with the specific leadership needs of the team and school, especially in times of transition. Some have taken the time to document how this works in [organizational and procedural charts](#).

When a governing board sees and hears about how teachers create and maintain strong decision-making processes and structure, they gain confidence in the team's abilities. Teams sense that having their governing board's trust makes it less likely that the board will try to intervene and override decisions in areas where teachers have autonomy. As a first step, a board might challenge teachers to resolve a problem themselves rather than imposing a solution.

Want to know more details about autonomy arrangements and interactions between teachers and their governing boards? Visit the Teacher-Powered Schools Lab in the [CTQ Collaboratory](#).

Teams work hard to maintain their autonomies.

Because schools have been structured in the same way for over 100 years, the pioneers express that they feel a certain gravitational pull to return to old ways of operating. Teacher teams in teacher-powered schools are mindful of this tension and take steps to resist returning to conventional ways of operating because it seems simpler. There are two main sources of the pull to return to a traditional model of school governance that have the potential to usurp autonomies: the system (as it is upheld by district, union, and charter authorizer leaders) and factions of teachers.

Systemic tension

Even when autonomy has been secured, there tends to be a “dance” to determine the limits of freedom between the teacher teams running teacher-powered schools and district, union, and charter authorizer leaders. These leaders frequently work within the structures and policies in place, which were created with the mindset that all schools operate “the same.” Yet when these leaders embrace teacher-powered schools and other school governance models into their portfolios, the “sameness” mindset is effective for only a portion of the portfolio—the portion that is traditionally governed. When these leaders fail to embrace an adaptive mindset, or don't know how to put a value for adaptation into practice well, teacher teams sometimes find themselves jumping through hoops or complying with top-down structures in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves and maintain their autonomy. In other words, to maintain their autonomy they sometimes they feel compelled to only partially use it. This can affect their choices in practice in any number of areas: their schedule, how they take attendance, how they report student progress, who they share communications with, what job descriptions say, and numerous other things.

Some teams have learned to be extremely careful to identify when they find themselves bending to alleviate systemic tensions in order to avoid conceding autonomy “one bite at a time.” It is rare that a teacher team will have one or more areas of autonomy revoked outright, though it has happened (not because teachers

were using it poorly, but because those who granted teachers autonomy succumbed to political tensions themselves). What happens more often is that teacher teams gradually concede on several small issues that can lead to giving up a good chunk of autonomy in the long run.

For example, one team running a teacher-powered school had created an extended day for four days a week so that students would have a half-day on the fifth day and staff could engage in all of the leadership activities that a teacher-powered school requires. Suddenly, in the school's fifth year, the district decided it was going to charge an exorbitant amount of money for bus transportation since the school had a non-traditional schedule. The vendor had probably changed the cost for this "outlier," and the district leaders opted to pass the cost along. This was a case of systemic tension. Rather than working with leaders from teacher-powered schools to determine alternatives, and with other schools that might have wanted alternative schedules, the district simply worked within a "sameness" mindset. District leaders could have led a discussion about what a new deal with the vendor might look like or opened the opportunity for teacher-powered schools to work with different vendors. In this case the teacher team did not have budget autonomy or the ability to choose their own vendors in the first place, which some would consider their first concession. Without that autonomy, this one change caused the team to decide to return to a traditional schedule (second concession). Doing this meant they had to eliminate some of the learning activities that were contributing to student and school success (third concession). They didn't advocate for alternatives (fourth concession). This team found that the decision-making constraints that came from these concessions affected their motivation so dramatically that they vowed to protect their remaining areas of autonomy much more vigorously.

"Defending autonomy is one of our most important tasks. Had we not had as much freedom as we have, we would not be the school we are."

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

Teacher tension

Nearly every teacher now in the profession went to, or worked in, a school where the principal made all of the "important" decisions. Even in cases where teachers are eager to take responsibility in exchange for autonomy, there can be challenges in learning how to effectively use those autonomies in practice. There is also a tendency, especially when people get tired or are under stress, to revert to wanting the principal or lead teachers to make the decisions, approve teachers' decisions (thus taking on the burden of accountability themselves), or take care of the problems, such as disciplining students, listening to

parents' concerns, or handling disagreements among teachers. Teachers reported that leaders have a similar tendency toward traditional structures. Effective teams have had to "call out" their colleagues who are in principal or lead teacher roles

when they act in a top-down fashion rather than as a supporter and implementer of the team's shared purpose.

Teams know they must pay as much attention to these kinds of “inside” tensions as they do “outside” tensions. They've found that when their teacher-powered schools are maintaining their commitment to collaborative leadership, teacher language aligns with that. Teachers report that when team conversations are dominated by language that separates people into “camps,” or separates some members of the team from the whole (“just us” vs. “all of us”), there is a clear signal that the team may be reverting to a traditional model. Effective teams then take steps to revisit their shared purpose, review their collaborative practices, and even engage in team-building exercises.

TIPS

- 1. Secure as much autonomy as you can during the design and approval phase of your school.** Take care not to limit your goal to pursuing only the areas of autonomy that are easy to secure. Seek to secure as many areas as possible. Many teams, reflecting on their design and approval phases, now believe that they did not realize that they needed certain freedoms until after their schools were approved. It is much easier to secure autonomy on the front end than it is to go back for more.

“I advise getting what you can and as much as you can in the beginning because there will be entities that will try to take away your autonomy.”

—Eric Hendy

**San Francisco Community School
San Francisco, CA.**

This does not mean you will necessarily ask for total autonomy in your actual proposal. It does mean that you should try and do everything possible to persuade the district, union, and charter authorizer staffers, who will likely advocate for your proposal to their leaders, why you need what might be viewed as the more controversial areas of autonomy well in advance of submission. If you sense that these leaders will not approve the proposal if your team asks for a particular area, then your team will need to decide if you still want to design and run a school under those conditions.

Once your team has secured many areas of autonomy, it can be challenging to know how to leverage all of them right away. Know that your team can focus on developing a few of them initially and phase in others over time. Just be up-front with stakeholders (parents, authorizers, community, etc.) about which ones your team will develop first. That way they know that your team has the intention of using them all and that it takes time to implement them effectively. A word of caution: be careful about not using autonomies, and be especially careful about telling those who granted you autonomy that they are not necessary. These actions can be detrimental to others who are also attempting to design

and launch teacher-powered schools, and who might have a different vision for how to use that area of autonomy—one your team might learn from and want/need to use.

- a. **Must-have areas of autonomy.** Many pioneering teachers felt so strongly about securing the following areas of autonomy that they indicated if teams can't secure these, they may not want to take on the responsibility and accountability associated with teacher-powered schools.

- i. **Selecting colleagues.** Teacher-powered schools are dramatically different than traditionally-structured schools. Not only do teams need to collaboratively take on responsibility and accountability for whole school success, but these teams also frequently design unique learning programs that require specific pedagogical skills and abilities. These two factors make it absolutely crucial that teacher teams secure the autonomy necessary to be able to choose their own colleagues.
 - ii. **Evaluating colleagues.** Teacher teams must also have the ability to evaluate how well staff members are implementing the teacher-powered structures and living up to the instructional expectations of the collective. Securing evaluation autonomy also creates a built-in opportunity for staff development, as teacher-powered schools tend to design and use one process for both improvement and evaluation. See the Evaluation Discussion Starter, page 85.
 - iii. **De-selecting colleagues.** Along with being able to select and evaluate staff members, teacher teams must also be able to deselect (or recommend for transfer) those who are unwilling or unable to thrive in the teacher-powered environment.
- b. **Other high-priority areas of autonomy.** The pioneers identified the following areas of autonomy as being high priority, only slightly lower than the “must-haves.”
 - i. **Determining budget.** The way that money is spent in any organization reflects its priorities. In order to ensure that your team priorities are reflected in the budgetary allocations, your team will need to have budget autonomy. For instance, many districts utilize Title 2 money for district-run professional

“Schools often mistakenly compromise (when seeking autonomies)... because they want to open, get off the ground, get approval, etc. You need to study the ‘areas of autonomy’ list closely, and discuss what you could potentially do with them, to understand how important it is you think long term when you negotiate.”

**—Aaron Grimm
Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN**

development. Many teachers in teacher-powered schools prefer to design and run their own professional learning, as their learning needs are different than those in traditional schools. Securing budget autonomy allows teams to make these types of adjustments.

ii. **Determining learning program.**

Many teacher-powered school teams have designed a learning program that is tailored to the specific needs of the students that they serve. In order to do this, teacher teams must secure this area of autonomy. It is worth noting that there is a connection between budget autonomy and learning program autonomy. Securing both of these areas of autonomy will allow your team to tailor the program to the students in the school *and* to move money so that financial resources reflect the learning priorities.

- iii. **Selecting leaders.** Just as teacher teams need to be able to select colleagues, so, too, they need to be able to select their leader(s). Teacher-powered schools aspire to model democratic principles (read more about this in the Collaborative Management Discussion Starter, page 32), and one key way they can do that is by having the opportunity to decide who their leaders will be.

“Being able to move dollars around in ways that benefit the students, whenever that needs to happen, is a huge help.... For example, if we decided that all teachers attending a conference is more beneficial than spending money on a guest speaker for professional development, we could make that choice with a quick vote to access those funds immediately.”

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

“My gut says that staffing is the non-negotiable—the hill to die on—the one that I would fight extremely hard for. You need the right people on the bus and you also need the ability to get them.”

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

2. Formalize the areas of autonomy that your team has secured.

Whenever possible, create a formal document that identifies the specific autonomies that were provided for your school. When autonomy is not formalized during the design and launch phase of the school, teams risk being able to sustain it through changes in leadership or when leadership finds them too difficult to manage because they are not “the same.” Creating a formal “paper” trail in the form of an MOU, contract, charter, or other

legal document can help avoid challenges that may come over time due to a lack of institutional memory. See sample agreements in the [storming section](#) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School*.

3. Build networks and relationships in order to secure and maintain autonomy.

One of the greatest opportunities for growth for teacher leaders is learning to navigate the policy landscape associated with getting a new teacher-powered school or a transition to a teacher-powered governance model approved. Perhaps the most effective way to heighten your team's chances at approval is to build strategic relationships with those people who are either the district, union, or charter authorizer decision-makers, or those who influence them. These decision-makers and the people who influence them need to believe that the model you have designed will address their needs and interests and at the same time be successful. The more faith they have in your team and those who support your team, the more likely it is that they will support your school model.

a. **Begin building your support network as soon as possible in the design phase of the school.** In order to build the support that you need, you must be sure to know who you are, what you bring to the table, and how you are different (not better) than other options that are currently available. You must also be able to articulate these things in a way that quickly captures district, union, and charter authorizer leaders' attention and builds their confidence in your team's ability to be successful. Here are a few key points to keep in mind:

- i. Be ethical in everything you do and say. Showing integrity in all that you do is one of the most effective ways to build support for the autonomies you are trying to secure.
- ii. Defend, don't attack. If someone questions your team's ideas or the school model, consider it an opportunity to teach them about what you are trying to do. Provide the rationale and, when possible, the research behind your decisions; and always connect those decisions to student learning. As one pioneering teacher put it, everyone is an "ally in waiting."
- iii. Build an emotional bank account with district, union, and charter authorizer decision-makers. Relationships matter. Creating relationships with those who

"The time to start building external support is before you start to propose the school. The networks that get things to happen are personal. Find people for your team who already have connections to the groups or individuals you need to negotiate with. Start from a good foundation. Then build the school."

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

make decisions provides an opportunity for your team to respond to any concerns that they may have about the model or the autonomies that you are trying to secure before they make a final decision. Relationships also provide you an avenue through which you can show support from others as the school is built, through the launch process, and beyond.

- b. **Connect with outside organizations when possible.** Where available, influential outside organizations may not only help with developing support from decision-makers, but they may also be able to help your team with design and planning issues. For example, the Wisconsin Innovative School Network does this for Wisconsin teams, the Coalition of Essential Schools has supported Boston and Los Angeles pilot school teams, and there are lawyers that specialize in organizational structures (cooperatives, LLCs, nonprofits, etc.) you can hire to consult with your team.

“Having a staff that is ‘on the same page’ about teaching, learning, and how to run a school is invaluable. Once you have that, being able to move dollars around in ways that benefit the students, whenever that needs to happen, is a huge help.”

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

- c. **Communicate with existing teacher-powered schools.** Now that over 75 teacher-powered schools have been identified, the newest teams have the opportunity to rely on the experience of those who’ve gone before. There is no need to re-invent the wheel by trying to figure out how to secure autonomies your team will need. Use the Teacher-Powered Schools Inventory at www.teacherpowered.org/inventory to find schools that have secured autonomy and connect with them. Talking with them may be helpful in learning about whom to build relationships with and what strategies are successful. Also, learning more about these teachers’ experiences will give your team a sense that you are *normal*, and that your experience is *normal* when you feel so far out of your traditional background but have nothing you can compare your teacher-powered experiences to. This is very useful in keeping your team sane and together. Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts, Facetime, and the CTQ Collaboratory provide inexpensive ways to connect with others.
- d. **Leverage personal networks.** Some of the most powerful strategies for identifying and creating supporters are based on who knows whom. Tapping into personal networks, even if it is just to make an email introduction or initial phone call, provides an opportunity for your team to start the conversation on a positive note. Remember, even when connections are made through personal networks, your team still needs to tell the story about your school in a compelling and succinct way.

e. **Leverage community relationships.** Positive relationships with people across the community who understand your values and intentions are important for securing and sustaining autonomy. They provide an opportunity to show broad-based support for your school and can help influence others. The more support you can show from people who are not on the payroll, the better. Cultivate them from the beginning and always be up front about what you are doing. And, have patience! Building value throughout the community does not come easily or quickly, but the time investment is likely to pay off tenfold. (See the Shared Purpose Discussion Starter, page 4). The more you tell the story of what you are doing, the easier it will be to tell in a compelling way. Here are some ideas for developing community relationships:

- i. Get students into communities as soon as possible once school opens, or ask graduates of teacher-powered schools to support your efforts.
 - ii. Support teachers to remember that they can be some of the strongest community relationship builders. An overwhelming percentage of Americans trust teachers, especially those in their neighborhood schools. When teachers take an idea or message directly to the community they serve, they are powerful voices and can quickly build support for your team's school model.
 - iii. Get local politicians into the school. Local politicians are frequently eager to see and learn how their policies are impacting teachers and students. They are also quite influential with others, even if they are not the ultimate approvers of your school. Getting them into your school to see how students are being served will help to ensure ongoing support.
- f. **Connect with families; they are frequently your strongest advocates.** Education decision-makers listen to parents and families. The more support that you can generate with parents, the more likely it is that your model will be approved and that your team will get the autonomies that you seek. Support parents in understanding how your team's school model will positively impact their children and how elevating their voice can support your team in securing autonomy.

“Relationships allow people to listen to new ideas with open minds because they trust your intentions and have seen your work, follow through, success, etc.”

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

For more details about how the pioneers built support for their schools, see the [storming section](#) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School*.

4. Be vigilant about conceding autonomies once they are secured. Rarely have schools had autonomies taken away in one noticeable action. More often, teams concede their autonomy one small step at a time. Be mindful of those small steps and attentive about the degree to which those small steps are adding up to the relinquishing of a significant amount of autonomy. Surrendering autonomy most commonly happens as a result of tension from two sources: the system and the teachers.

- a. **System tensions.** Teacher-powered schools that exist in larger systems, like districts or charter management organizations (CMOs), are subject to significant amounts of systemic tension related to operating in a traditional top-down model. There are many policies and processes that hold traditional structures and cultures in place. Unless teacher teams are mindful of resisting requests to operate more traditionally, it is very easy to fall into a trap of conceding autonomy one step at a time. Pioneers suggest that teams should be especially aware of the following:

- i. **Communications from districts or CMOs.** Most communications from larger systems are sent to all of the school principals who then address what the communication is about. In teacher-powered schools, decision-making authority is distributed differently. Your team will need to think about how to manage this flow of information that is traditionally structured to go through one person, including having a plan in place for how communications will be distributed and addressed so you can handle any needs in a timely manner. Your team should also take care to consider whether you actually do need to address what's outlined in the communication or if you are exempt because of your autonomy. Don't feel pressured to respond simply because the request has been made. If you must follow up with the district or CMO to tell them you will be doing things in a different way, deliver this in a way that is respectful and remind them of the agreement you have in place to support your case. Remember that the district and CMO are likely not malicious but are simply not taking the time to adapt to the different governance structure at your school.

“Getting families on board early on also built strong allies and a support system. They provided us a vision for why we’re doing what we’re doing.”

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

“Reach out to others who have done this before. Use their mentorship and expertise to help guide your ship. If nothing else, they can assure you that ‘this is normal and all part of the process’ when things get tumultuous.”

**—Aaron Grimm
Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN**

- ii. **Schedules.** If your school schedule is different than the traditional schools in your district or CMO, then members of your team will need to be able to articulate to those managing the larger system your autonomy arrangement, the values behind your design decision, and the impact the decision has had on students and families. Be prepared for frequent pressure to conform to the schedule because it makes it easier for district or CMO staff and administrators when every school is the same. You might hear from the professionals who are tracking attendance, allocating course credits, and managing transportation contracts, for example. Make your case to all of them! Help them to learn what a teacher-powered school is and offer to work with them to find ways to get them the information they need, even if you can't give it to them how everyone else does.

“Have students—both current and graduates—publicly discuss how transformational your learning environment can be. If you have schools you are trying to emulate, teams will have current or former students they can put you in touch with to testify to their experiences during your approval process.... We get students into the community as much as possible and invite community groups to use our facilities because this allows us to connect with the community mouthpieces (the people who know everyone and gossip).”

—Aaron Grimm

**Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN**

- b. **Teacher tensions.** While teachers are eager to take on the challenge of being in a teacher-powered school, it is most likely that they are accustomed to operating in a traditionally structured school. As a result, it can be quite easy to slip into operating in traditional ways and undermining the potential for change that exists due to the autonomy that your team likely fought hard to obtain. Kevin Brewster from Reiche School said that for those who want to maintain their autonomy, complacency is the enemy. Here are some recommendations for how to avoid this:
 - i. Engage staff members in a significant amount of team building. These team-building activities help to cultivate and sustain a collaborative culture and can reinforce the team's shared purpose. This will also help avoid situations that can lead to “us vs. them” dynamics. Traditional school structures separate people in a variety of ways that lead to these dynamics. Dividing students by grade levels, siloing classrooms, and categorizing adults as teachers or leaders are some examples. Teacher-powered schools are collaborative environments where separation is eliminated, or at the very least, minimized. Team building exercises will help recalibrate staff behaviors.

- ii. Create opportunities for teachers to get into one another's classrooms. Reinforcing the collaborative nature of the work of your team will help to preserve the unique aspects of your team's teacher-powered school. Once team members see the value of collaborative activities, they will work harder to fully utilize and preserve the autonomy that allows such activities to happen.
- iii. Use collaborative documents, like Google Docs, to give and receive feedback on different aspects of the school. Once again, modeling and reinforcing the collaborative nature of the work will help to avoid returning to traditional structures and an "us vs. them" mentality.
- iv. Be sure that everyone understands the autonomies that your team has secured and be in agreement publicly about why your team needs them and how they benefit students. If staff members do not have a common understanding about what your autonomies are and how your team uses them, it is very easy to slip back into traditional ways of being.

“At each level of development, I do an exercise that I call IAT (I Assume That...). Every member of the team throws five of their own personal ‘operating assumptions’ up on a chart so all can be seen together. Prompts for writing these might be, ‘IAT all of my colleagues would...’ or ‘IAT none of my colleagues would ever...’. This exposes everyone's fears and reveals what might need more explicit attention, like transparency or intentionality.”

**—Virginia Rhodes
Hughes STEM School
Cincinnati, OH**

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Review the 15 autonomies identified in Figure 1 with your team (page 2). Discuss the benefits and challenges associated with securing each one. Do your best to get out of your traditional-governance mindset and imagine what you will want when you are sharing responsibility and accountability with a team over the long-term.

Decide what autonomies are "must haves"
—if you can't get them, you won't move
forward with your school.

Work with your team to develop messages about why each of the autonomies that you intend to secure is important to your school and students. Learn to communicate these messages quickly and positively, without putting down other approaches.

Research the ways in which your team can secure autonomy in your local context. Are there state or district policies that provide for new school models? Can your team secure a Memorandum of Understanding or other waivers from aspects of the collective bargaining agreement and state statute? Does your local association's collective bargaining agreement have language that allows for a teacher-powered school? Does your state or district have pilot schools or an innovation zone? Does your district authorize charter schools, or can you pursue a charter school in another way? Are your state, district, and union leaders willing to explore opening one of these alternatives to support your journey? Remember, most of these options didn't exist before the pioneers asked!



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

Discuss the benefits and challenges associated with the available means for securing autonomy. Decide which option(s) are best for your team.

Research the processes that are in place to get approval for your team's school proposal or proposed transition in governance structure. What documents need to be completed? Who makes the final decision? Are there committees or staff members who make preliminary recommendations about approval? Work with your team to create a plan for navigating the approval process.

Think broadly. Who are the influential people and organizations in your local context that will support your teacher-powered school efforts? Who are the decision-makers about your team's school and the autonomies that you are seeking? What do they need to know before they make a decision to support your work? Create a plan for connecting with both influential people and decision-makers.

Specifically, how will your team engage with parents and the community to build support? Are there ways that the families your school will serve already connect with one another within the community (e.g. at sporting events, churches, or neighborhood gatherings)? If so, how will you leverage those opportunities to connect with larger groups of people?

What structures will your team have in place to remain mindful of the pressures to concede autonomy? How will your team address systemic tensions? How will you avoid or address tension that comes from teachers?

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