

Discussion Starters for Creating
a Teacher-Powered School:

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS



Selection and Hiring

Created by teachers in partnership with



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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.

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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.

Discussion Starters for Creating a Teacher-Powered School:
LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS

Selection and Hiring



In teacher-powered schools, teachers' autonomy to select and de-select personnel (otherwise known as hiring and dismissal; see sidebar at right) is essential because the teacher team shares accountability for school and student success. If teams don't have selection autonomy, there is a strong possibility that team members will feel less accountable because they don't have control over the quality and capacity of their team.

Selecting and de-selecting personnel in teacher-powered schools is significantly different than in traditionally structured ones. Teacher-powered schools are characterized by high levels of collaboration and shared leadership, so staff members require unique skills and abilities. Not only must teachers be good at their craft, they must also have the ability to collaborate, lead, and adapt. Since teachers in these schools set many of their own working conditions, they are also responsible for ensuring that these conditions cultivate teacher quality.

Many schools have included in their autonomy agreements the ability to de-select staff members. This most often comes in the form of annual, school-level contracts, which schools can choose to not renew at the end of the year. Many teams believe that they need to be able to de-select staff members in order to maintain the vision for their unique school model.

The pioneers of teacher-powered schools are very deliberate about creating selection processes that

Selection vs. Hiring: What's the Difference?

In this discussion starter, we've opted to use "select" to describe the action of teachers bringing new members onto their teams. This is the terminology typically embraced by teachers in district and charter school settings where teachers are members of a union and operate according to a collective bargaining agreement. Similarly, teachers can be "de-selected," which means that they are placed into a hiring pool in their district, making them eligible to work at another school.

In contrast, teams in charter schools without union ties tend to use the words "hiring" and "dismissal." Teachers who are dismissed lose their jobs entirely and do not go into a district hiring pool.

Having thought about the issue thoroughly, the pioneers of teacher-powered schools encourage teams to choose the terminology that best suits their context. Regardless of the autonomy that teams secure, teachers generally create or embrace similar approaches to the work of selecting and hiring.

ensure they get people with the right qualifications. While these processes can be very time intensive, teachers feel that it is time well spent.

Investing time in selection on the front end yields positive results—and potentially prevents teams from having to spend hundreds of hours dealing with a problem that arises when a new hire isn't a match for the school.

'Staff' vs. 'Personnel'

Why does this discussion starter use the word “personnel” instead of “staff”?

While some teachers use “staff” to describe their team, others feel strongly that the term connotes working for an organization or boss, rather than co-ownership. (Think about traditional staff meetings and their top-down nature.)

Instead, these teachers refer to “teams” and “selecting new team members.” For example, EdVisions Cooperative of Minnesota has embraced the term “personnel” to signify this change in perspective.

In this discussion starter, we followed these teams’ lead. Teacher-powered teams co-own the work—and it may be necessary to embrace new terminology to assert that truth.

DESIGNING A SELECTION PROCESS

“Whether a teacher is chosen or assigned their position, teacher-powered schools give all teachers ownership. I think even a mediocre teacher could be better in a teacher-powered school because they have a stake in that school; and some ownership. When we recognize the strengths of our coworkers and create an atmosphere of mutual respect and professionalism, things can turn out great.”

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

What have the pioneers done?

When designing teacher-powered schools, many teacher teams focus on securing as much autonomy as possible. Some teams secure complete autonomy in selection and de-selection, while others must adhere to the processes put in place by their collective bargaining agreement. Autonomy for the selection and de-selection of personnel is often combined with the right to not renew teachers’ contracts on an annual basis. In district settings, teachers whose contracts are not renewed by their teacher teams go back into the district’s hiring pool.

Whatever level of autonomy they have secured, teams generally follow these seven steps:

1. Identify the qualities your team is looking for in candidates and your goals for the selection process.

Every teacher-powered school has a unique instructional model and leadership structure. As a result, there are particular skills and abilities that personnel need to possess if the school and its students are to be successful. Teacher teams should spend time identifying those skills and abilities so that they know what they are looking for and can communicate those needs to candidates.

Teams must also determine the ideal composition of staff, factoring in school needs and the team's staffing goals. For instance, teams might need to increase the number of teachers with leadership and collaboration experience. Or, teams may seek teachers with particular teaching expertise in a grade level, subject area, or special area, such as special education or technology. Likewise, the team may seek to match the staff's demographics more closely to the student population or strike a better balance between the number of veteran teachers and early career teachers.

2. Identify candidates for open positions.

When teaching positions become open at teacher-powered schools, they are often posted through avenues within the local context (such as district job boards). However, staff members actively seek out candidates via other means. These include posting positions in education publications and job boards (several schools use [Ed Join](#) and [SchoolSpring](#)) and spreading word through personal and professional networks.

"We took into consideration the skill set necessary for the position and also the disposition needed. This changes depending on the position being filled. We want a good balance of skills amongst the team and we want a variety of personalities to appeal to the variety of students we serve. The number one thing we were looking for when hiring a new teacher was a focus on building relationships with students."

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

"We begin the process by posting the position on the Boston Public Schools H.R. pages. We also pull out and look at old resumes from previous hiring rounds. We share the position by word of mouth through our networks both in and outside of the school system. We may also reach out personally to folks who we think would be good for the position."

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

After operating for a number of years, schools are able to draw from their networks, or “known factors,” when they have staff openings. These networks might include people who have been student teachers at the school, strong candidates who applied previously but were not selected, people who indicated interest when touring the school, or teachers with whom other staff members are familiar.

3. Highlight teacher-powered elements (and other distinctive characteristics) of your school.

Working in a teacher-powered school is so different from traditionally structured schools that pioneers find it critical to inform candidates what it’s like to work in one. Taking the time to help candidates understand the nature of the job has two benefits: it helps them determine whether they’d like to invest more time in the selection process, and it gives uninterested candidates an opportunity to remove themselves from the running. Both outcomes save significant time for team members involved in the process.

“Candidates have an opportunity to ask questions. We’re looking to see if they ask more questions on what it means to work in a teacher-powered school. Do they understand the significance of this choice? Most candidates are amazed and excited by the prospect of some freedom and professional respect. We warn them about both the workload and the soul load of this job. You really cannot wrap your head around a teacher-powered school until you do it.”

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

One way that teams share the cultures of their schools is hosting “meet and greets” or campus tours designed specifically for potential candidates. At these events, team members thoroughly explain how their schools and instructional approaches differ from traditional schools—and what that means for the roles and responsibilities of teachers. During these meetings and tours, teams often begin evaluating candidates and asking a series of questions. Do candidates present themselves as lifelong learners? How do they act toward students? Are they open to collaboration? Do they grasp the concepts of teacher power and shared responsibility? Or are they snickering on their way out the door about how they’d never be able to trust their colleagues?

4. Clarify who is responsible for selection and de-selection and how you will include the school community.

While the pioneers agree that having a thorough selection process is important, they also find that creating the time to engage in this process has been challenging. Engaging in all or most of the steps outlined in this section is extremely time intensive

and can be a daunting task, especially for teachers who are already shouldering significant workloads.

To address this challenge, many teams elect personnel committees or designate other elected leaders to handle the process of selection. Teams expect that the personnel committee will invite members of the school community—including all teachers and administrators at the school, students, parents, aides, and other personnel—to participate in this process. It's valuable for these stakeholders to have the option to participate, but teams also know that, realistically, this isn't always possible. To ensure everyone feels valued, the time at which the school community is invited to participate should be determined before beginning the selection process.

“While our Personnel Team is responsible for posting and collecting resumes for open positions, we invite all school personnel, board members, students, and interested parents to our interviews.”

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

Here are a few ways personnel committees can make the school community feel welcome to participate in the selection process:

- Invite teachers who will be working directly with the candidate (such as grade-level or subject-area teams) to actively participate in the main interview or have a separate interview session that specifically pertains to their work;
- Include students and parents in the screening process, if possible; and
- Anyone who is going to be involved in the selection process should receive training about how to participate in a way that aligns with legal requirements. For example, there are state and federal laws about what can and cannot be asked or discussed during interviews.

“This afternoon I had a family conference that included one of our new special education hires. The student felt immediately connected to the hire because he had helped hire her. There was instant buy-in.

This is our incentive to have some of our most challenging students take part in the interview process. I cannot tell you how critical it is to have students involved in hiring special education personnel—especially educational assistant positions.”

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

5. Conduct formal sit-down interviews.

Formal interviews can help teacher teams get a feel for candidates' potential to fit within the school community. For example, teams may want to know:

- Will the candidate fill gaps in skills and personalities among existing personnel?
- Will he/she focus on building relationships with students?
- Will the candidate be open to the work involved in a teacher-powered school?

“The interview process we designed took about 1.5 times as long as traditional interviews, but there was so much difference in the result that there was no interest in doing it the ‘faster’ way. It was an awful time strain, and we all stayed late to get these done, but teachers were so motivated to get the kind of teachers who matched their energy level rather than whoever was sent by the district.”

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

“Our team described our collaborative approach and made it clear that teaching in our school would be very challenging. Candidates were warned that this was not a school in which a teacher could choose to shut the classroom door and do their own thing. Classrooms would be a ‘fishbowl’ environment with university professors, grad students, and undergrads strolling through, observing both through glass and electronically.”

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

Sometimes selection committees use predetermined questions to ensure a fair and equitable process for all candidates (not to mention ensuring that schools do not violate any state or federal hiring laws). Others use a mix of predetermined questions and conversation.

To learn more about the interview process and read some teams' questions for candidates, see the [norming section](#) of Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School.

6. Include candidate observation as part of the selection process.

Teacher teams nearly always include an observation of candidates teaching with students. Sometimes teams include an observation of candidates working with potential colleagues.

For example, teachers at Hughes STEM High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, have created a process for observing candidate pairs engaging in a short, real-world task in which they must produce a one-week plan for a course.

Observing candidates in this way allows the Hughes STEM team to evaluate each candidate's collaboration skills. It also allows candidates to get further insight into what it would be like to work in the school.

In the interest of time, some teams only observe candidates who made it through the formal sit-down interview. Other teams, in the interest of seeing *everything* a candidate can do, include observations as part of the interview process. These teams have found that candidates who shine in interviews don't necessarily excel in teaching students (and vice versa).

Many teams make a point to debrief with students about their experiences and observations from working with candidates. Similarly, some teams debrief with candidates about their experiences working with students.

7. Engage in group discussion to evaluate candidates and make the selection decision.

Once candidates have been interviewed and observed, the personnel committee (or whoever has been selected by the group to be responsible for hiring at the school) meets to discuss the candidates. Teams consider the different input gathered throughout the process and ultimately make new personnel selections.

There is general consensus among the pioneers of teacher-powered schools that teams should take the time to review the goals set by the team at the beginning of the process — as well as the team's shared purpose — and evaluate final candidates in this context. To help this process, some teams have developed a set of reflection questions that guide their internal evaluation of candidates.

“One of the best teachers we ever hired did rather poorly in the formal interview. He came across as not really strong and maybe a bit too withdrawn. But when he taught the kids, he lit up and connected with them within 30 seconds of starting his lesson. His lesson was fantastic. Since then, he’s had to work on his ability to interact with adults a bit, but this worked itself out as he got to know us better. Now he is one of our stars.”

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

“‘Talk and hash’ works to bring everyone into the game. We love it, too, even though we complain sometimes about how long it takes. I don't think anyone would not want to be involved when hiring a new teacher. It's too much like getting married. This new person is going to affect you and your school's success, so you better pay attention.”

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

TIPS

1. Secure as much autonomy as possible for selection and de-selection. Even when decision makers say that certain autonomies are not possible, look for exceptions within your local context and investigate what is actually stated in district policy and collective bargaining agreements.

This area of autonomy is worth paying significant attention to and pushing back on. In districts that do direct placements, try to secure an agreement that teachers cannot be placed at your school. If this is not possible, try to secure an agreement that your school will only be subject to direct placements if your school puts teachers back in the placement pool.

“Reiche had been run as a traditional school for nearly 40 years before transitioning to our current teacher-powered governance model. So our initial staff was already in existence. During the year of exploration, the Superintendent made it clear that anyone who was not on board could transfer without penalty or hassle.”

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

“The district will often send teachers who have been released from other schools because they were not high contributors. But they have a right to be interviewed and ultimately must be placed.

We interviewed everyone we were obligated to interview, and sometimes they were right for the job. But when they weren't, we asserted our right to reject a candidate who, for example, made it clear that he would not do any science labs in a STEM school. These were upheld in hearings if necessary as we pressed our case with district administration. We had carefully designed our process not to conflict with the contract, while pushing its limits right up to the edge when necessary for innovation.”

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

2. If your team works at a school that is converting from a traditional governance structure to a teacher-powered governance structure, be sure to try to negotiate with the district and union to allow teachers to transfer out without consequences. Working in a teacher-powered school is not for everyone. Teachers should not be punished for returning to a traditionally structured school—nor should your team have to face the consequences of working with people who will resist transition to a new culture.

3. Develop a staff selection process with the following steps:
 - Identify the qualities that your team wants to see in candidates before you pursue them and evaluate who is right to add to the team;
 - Determine how your team will work to identify and recruit teachers who possess the qualities that you are seeking;
 - Create experiences for candidates so that they are required to demonstrate those qualities in a real-world context; and
 - Include members of your school community in the process.
4. Build structures that will provide time for teachers who are involved in the selection process to engage in the work in a thoughtful manner. This process is very time consuming and can make or break your school! Possibilities include:
 - Hiring substitute teachers or providing other coverage for teachers to review applications;
 - Providing opportunities for teachers to trade time spent interviewing for other work time; and
 - Inviting teams to co-create the interview questions and participate in the discussions in which candidates are reviewed and selected.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Research the selection and de-selection processes and procedures typically required by the collective bargaining agreement, your district, or your charter school authorizer. What do the documents say? What is required? What aspects of these requirements might need to be addressed or unbundled when seeking autonomy?

How will your team secure the autonomy needed to select and de-select personnel? With whom does your team need to talk? What process will you pursue? Will the autonomy agreement take the form of a waiver (via a Memorandum of Understanding) or specific language in a charter contract or bylaws? Something else? Who will be your allies and helpers in carrying out this process? Who will need more convincing? How will you approach this group?

If your team chooses NOT to secure selection autonomy (or is unable to do so), what are the potential consequences, and how will your team prepare to face those? For example, how will your team maintain the school culture it has cultivated if you must accept direct placements or other personnel who were not selected by your team? Is it worth the effort to try to be a teacher-powered school without having this area of autonomy?

When considering your team's shared purpose and learning program, what qualities does your team want personnel to possess?

How will your team determine whether candidates have those qualities? How will you structure a selection process that allows you to observe whether candidates have those qualities, rather than taking their word for it?

How might your team involve non-teaching personnel, students, parents, and other members of the school community in the selection process?

Research state legal requirements or state-focused human resources materials regarding interview processes. How will these requirements influence your selection and de-selection processes?

How will your team arrange the time for everyone to engage in the selection process?



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

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