

Discussion Starters for Creating
a Teacher-Powered School:

LESSONS FROM THE PIONEERS



Shared Purpose

Created by teachers in partnership with



**CENTER FOR
TEACHING QUALITY**
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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.

Project team

- Kevin Brewster, co-lead teacher at Howard C. Reiche School (Portland, ME)
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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.

Shared Purpose



Each teacher-powered school has a shared purpose that is composed of the mission, vision, values, and goals of the school. Teacher teams use this shared purpose to guide their actions and decisions around everything that happens in the school. While the notion of having a purpose is not completely foreign to traditional schools and school leaders, in teacher-powered schools, teachers use their autonomy to “take the words off the wall” and translate them into action in significant and substantive ways.

Teacher-powered teams emphasize that it’s not just the shared purpose statement that matters—it’s the process of *developing* the shared purpose. Through this process—and later reflecting on how this process took place—teams begin to learn the skills and dispositions needed for effective collaboration.

“What we’re really talking about is the story behind how our school got to be where it is today. It’s really important that personnel and other people have a similar take on this story if your school is going to be successful.”

—Aaron Grimm

**Minnesota New Country School
Henderson, MN**

“Our current mission and vision was written by current staff and approved by our current governance board. However, it has its roots in the beginning of our school and the many schools visited by the founders.”

—Stephanie Davis

**TAGOS Leadership Academy
Janesville, WI**

DEFINING YOUR SHARED PURPOSE

TIPS

1. Identify a group of people who will serve as the **design team** for your teacher-powered school. These people will not necessarily be the founding staff members of the school, but they should provide strong thought leadership around the school model that you wish to create.

2. Engage the design team in the process of developing the **shared purpose**—mission, vision, values, and goals—of the school. Be sure to identify solid evidence of what living the shared purpose would look and sound like. Take your time during this process! It should ultimately guide the design of everything else in the school, and it can take months to finalize.

3. Investigate schools and teams that could be models for what you are trying to create. Consider using or revising some language of their shared purpose statements as you develop your own. Some sources used by existing teacher-powered schools include Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, Co-Nect, Paedeia Training (Socratic Seminars), universities, and community organizations.

What have the pioneers done?

Teachers report that in the design phase of teacher-powered schools, there is frequently an individual or small group of thought leaders who drive the creation of the school's initial shared purpose. Over time, that shared purpose usually evolves as additional team and community members come on board and put the vision into practice.

Whether your team is in the initial design phase or the evolutionary phase, the shared purpose doesn't have to be completely built from scratch. Nor does it need to be borrowed exclusively from elsewhere. A growing number of teacher-powered schools and innovative school models can provide example statements as a starting place for building on your team's own shared purpose.

Most teacher-powered schools take a significant amount of time developing their shared purpose (sometimes months). This is because team members are still getting accustomed to one another's personalities and working styles, and learning to proactively address conflict. As teams work through the challenges of unifying their perspectives into a shared purpose, they learn a lot about what they want their student and teacher experiences to be. Teams often report that the cohesive foundation they have worked to create becomes the bedrock on which everything else for the school is built—and that the stability of this foundation has a lot to do with the school's future success.

See the [storming section](#) of *Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School* for more information on creating a shared purpose and the [norming section](#) for improving how your team's shared purpose is used in decision making.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Who are the key stakeholders that should be part of our design team? Do we want a team composed of like-minded people or different perspectives?

Who are the students and families that our school will serve? What do they need? (Responses to these questions should guide the development of your team's shared purpose.)

Why does our school need to exist? What need(s) will it meet? What is the mission of our school?

When our school is fully operational, what should it look like when we walk through it? What should it feel like? Sound like? What is our vision for students' and teachers' experiences?

What other schools or organizations exist that have similar values or goals? What might our team borrow from them?



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

ENSURING TEAM COHESION AROUND SHARED PURPOSE

What have the pioneers done?

Teacher-powered teams report that individuals' acceptance of the shared purpose does not ensure that everyone understands how and why it is practiced within the school. This is particularly problematic when you consider the issue of sharing the purpose with other members of the team. As a result, most teacher-powered teams take the time to develop a collective understanding of how the shared purpose is put into practice. They create structures and processes to help current and new staff members not only understand the shared purpose but also enact it in their everyday behavior and practice.

TIPS

- 1. Document institutional history:** the story of how and why your school's shared purpose came into existence. This includes the design of both the instructional approach and the leadership model of the school. This history is crucial for sustaining the shared purpose over time and making well-informed adjustments as the need arises. This documentation can also be used for training new personnel and people who are newly elected to a committee within the school.
- 2. Each year, conduct **summer or mid-year retreats**** over multiple days with time dedicated to professional learning related to the school's shared purpose. You might also include time for whole-team strategic goal setting, grade-level team collaboration, team building, and more. When possible, hire new personnel prior to the retreat to ensure that they can carry on the shared purpose; even when founders move on. Having this concentrated time together will help build a cohesive team and give all members of the staff focused time and space to process and embody the mission, vision, and values of the school. Whenever possible, compensate staff members for their participation.
- 3. A teacher-powered school's **shared purpose**** is maintained by striving to "live" it in daily decision making. Some teacher-powered teams literally place purpose statements on the table at every meeting or professional development session. They connect all meeting agenda or professional development items to specific aspects of the statement in order to keep a focus on the purpose. If a topic or item isn't connected to the purpose, teams should seriously consider whether it is worth everyone's time.

One way to "live" the shared purpose is to demonstrate it in behavior. Identify behaviors for students and staff that could be considered evidence of living the shared purpose.
- 4. Some teacher-powered schools have created "**fishbowl**"** environments where anyone can literally see or walk in to observe what teachers and students are doing. This allows for constant informal mentoring and coaching and is an opportunity to provide feedback on how well individuals are living the shared purpose. This is likely to be a very different environment than what many teachers are accustomed to, so be up front about the nature of your school's "fishbowl." Clearly explain why it is important to your school's culture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will our team develop cohesion around the shared purpose? How will new teachers and personnel learn about the institutional history of our school?

What methods will we use to support members of our school community (students, teachers, support staff) in “living” the shared purpose?

What does evidence of “living” the shared purpose look like for teachers? Students? Support staff? What behaviors would we expect to see in students and staff members if they are embodying the shared purpose?

What structures will be put in place to ensure that professional development and meetings are aligned to the shared purpose?

“The shared purpose was developed by representatives of our school community, and when there is a hard choice, it is where we go for guidance. When we hire new staff, we are looking for folks who can live these principles. It is now part of our culture, and it is spread by living up to the ideals on a daily basis.”

—Kevin Brewster, Howard C. Reiche School, Portland, ME



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EVOLVING THE SHARED PURPOSE AS THE SCHOOL MATURES

TIPS

The shared purpose of your school should be solid enough to be “lived” by students and teachers every day. Making changes to the purpose is a significant undertaking and should only be taken on when the school is ready for major shifts in instructional approach.

Well before this happens, **create a plan.** Under what circumstances will the team make adjustments to the current shared purpose or transition to a new one?

Develop processes for regularly giving feedback and reflecting on how well the current purpose is serving your students and community. Because the shared purpose is the bedrock on which everything else is built, when the reflection process consistently signals a need for change, it’s time to make a serious commitment to evolving the shared purpose.

What have the pioneers done?

Some teacher-powered schools have been in existence for as long as 40 years. It’s not reasonable—nor in the best interest of students—to expect that any school would remain the same for that long. While teacher-powered schools have (and live by) a strong shared purpose, they also have processes in place to adjust and adapt as the needs of their students and the community evolve.

“In our state, there is pressure to have charter developers specify all the structures for a charter school before the doors open. We think this is a serious error. The templates have to grow or the school can not thrive as the living thing that it is. There is no way you can know all the structures you will need until you get out there and do the work. There has to be room to grow and change—particularly in dealing with the question of how do you know you are on track. The track will change and evolve in a natural way over time.”

—Alysia Krafel
Chrysalis Charter School
Palo Cedro, CA

“SFCS staff, parents, and students continually work together to learn about and practice inclusive ways of being to create a school culture that supports all students in meeting high standards of academic achievement and community responsibility.”

—Eric Hendy
San Francisco Community School (SFCS)
San Francisco, CA

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How will we collect feedback from students, staff, parents, and the community about how the overall purpose of the school is meeting their needs?

What will the process be for deciding to make adjustments vs. redesigning the school's shared purpose? How will those decisions be made? How will this process be made transparent to families and the community?

Who (committees, the whole team, etc.) will be responsible for the adjustment or redesign of the shared purpose when needed? How will they ensure that they have the support of the entire school community (personnel, students, families, and the community)?

“While personality types can differ, if you trust that you are working toward the same mission and goals, it’s much easier to build consensus. This means that there will undoubtedly be tough discussions, but you have to have [those].”

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



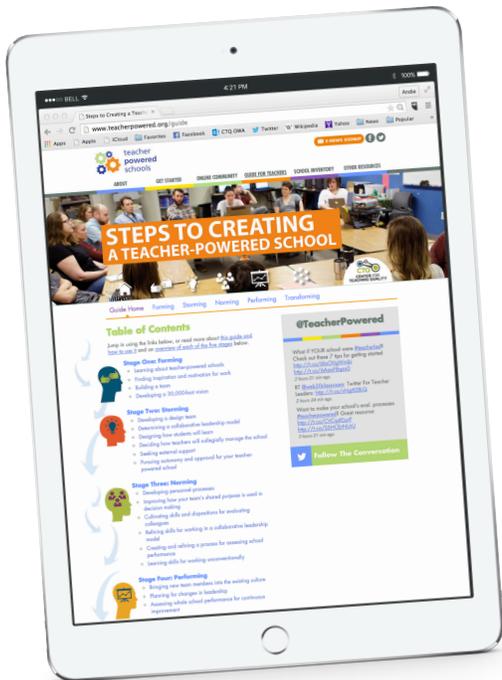
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