

teacher  
powered  
schools



# Teacher-Powered Schools: Generating Lasting Impact through Common Sense Innovation

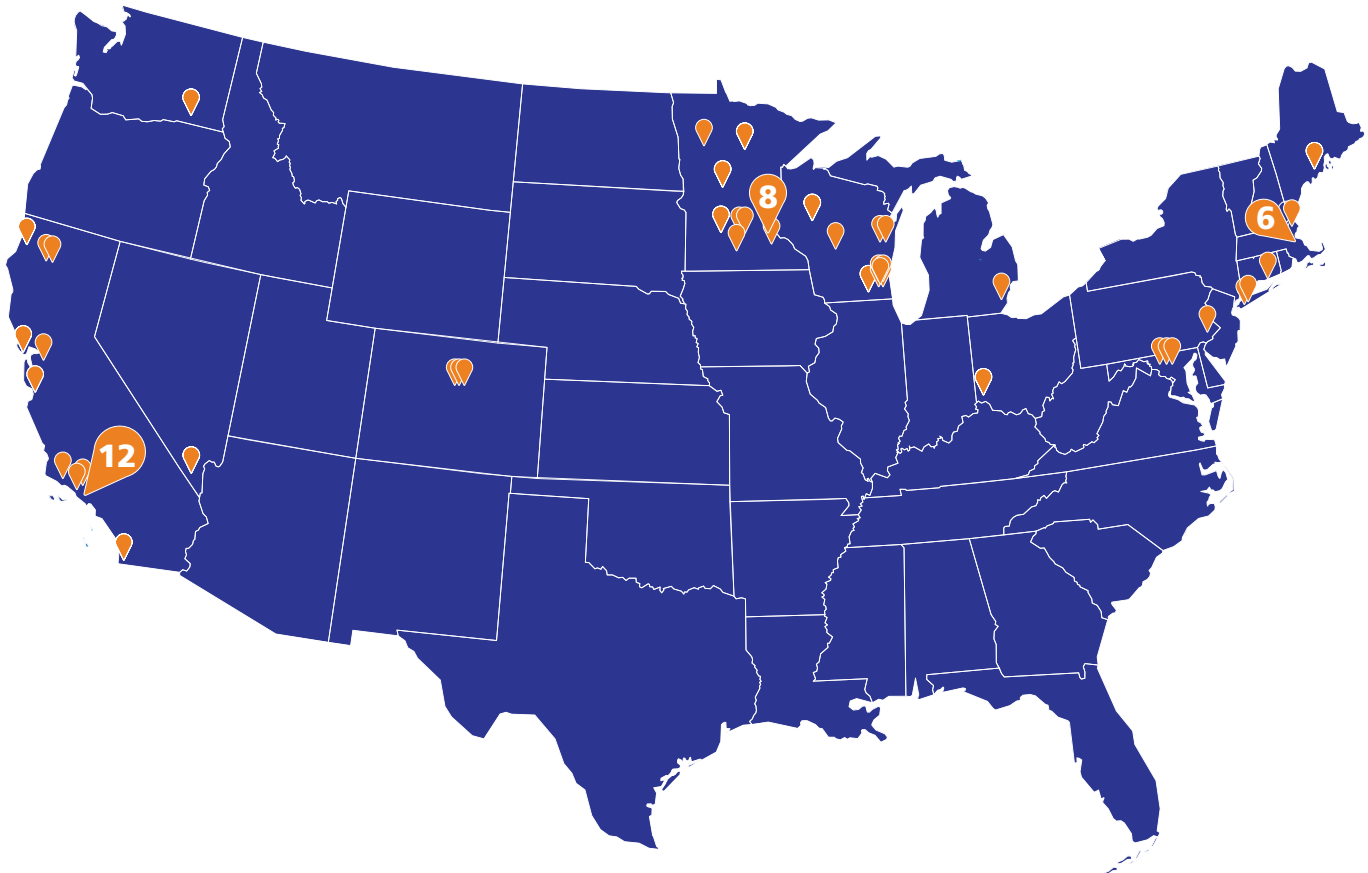
A Report by Education Evolving | May 2014

# Teacher-Powered Schools An Initiative from Education Evolving and the Center for Teaching Quality [www.teacherpowered.org](http://www.teacherpowered.org)

"Problems have not arisen by themselves, but are the product of circumstances. Only by 'modifying the circumstances' can one disperse the difficulties they create."

*-Jean Monnet, Memoirs*

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# Understanding teacher leadership through Teacher-Powered Schools

American teachers are ready and eager to play a larger and more important role in improving student learning — and the American public very much wants them to do so.

Over the past decade a growing body of research has confirmed that the quality of teaching is the single most powerful influencer of student learning. As a result, policymakers have turned their attention to increasing the effectiveness of teachers. The general consensus is our nation needs teachers who are ready, willing, and able to take on new, professional roles to transform teaching, schools, and schooling.

The trouble is, while these teachers exist, the vast majority of them do not have the authority to lead this transformation.

For most of the past 150 years we offered teachers one deal: we won't give you professional authority, but we won't hold you accountable either. In recent years, however, we have been asserting something different: we won't give you professional authority, but we will hold you accountable. Tying teachers' evaluations to test scores when teachers don't control the curricula, budget, or selection of colleagues is a prime example of this deal. Many teachers are strongly resisting this deal, as most faulty professionals would.

## Teacher-powered schools offer teachers a new deal:

we will offer you collective authority if, in turn, you accept collective accountability. As this paper will show, a majority of teachers are interested in implementing this arrangement in

**The initiative for Teacher-Powered Schools is designed to grow awareness, support, and action for collaborative teacher leadership in public/charter schools and districts nationwide through the professional partnership model. These teacher leaders have secured the authority to design and run their schools, making them directly responsible for the success of their school.**

their districts and communities. Some already have.

Across the country, a growing number of educators are exploring meaningful opportunities to transform student learning in provocative new ways, through teacher-powered schools. These teacher teams have secured authority to design and run their schools — making the decisions influencing school and student success — using a professional partnership model. With this authority, teachers become directly responsible for the success of their school, increasing their

passion for the job and their ability to make the dramatic changes in school that are needed to improve student learning. Today there are **more than 70 teacher-powered schools** operating across the country, from California to Minnesota and Colorado to Massachusetts, serving students from preschool to age 21. Some operate within school districts, and others operate as charter schools. Some have union-affiliated teachers, while others do not. There are teacher-powered schools in 14 states, in urban, suburban, and rural settings.

The types of teacher-powered arrangements vary widely. Teachers can secure authority to design and run whole schools, a department within a school, or a program that spans several schools. When this paper uses the term “schools,” readers should infer all of these options.

The amount of autonomy secured by teams of teachers at these schools also varies. Typically, teacher teams use formal or informal agreements to secure autonomy for their schools, and then collectively share that authority among their team. Some teacher teams are charged with all decision-making responsibilities in ten identified areas of autonomy, including budgeting, selection and dismissal, evaluation, creating curricula, and developing school policy.<sup>1</sup> Some teams have full autonomy in many of the ten areas and partial autonomy, or no autonomy, in others. The process and agreements by which teachers obtain their autonomy is influenced by local and state political climate, teachers' activism, and the openness of unions, school districts, and charter schools to innovate.

Teacher-powered schools have been documented in such accounts as *Trusting Teachers with School Success*, by Kim Farris-Berg and Edward J. Dirks-wager; *Creating the Capacity for Change*, by Ted Kolderie; and *Teacherpreneurs*, by Barnett Berry, Ann Byrd, and Alan Wieder. They serve as a common sense solution that cut across some of the longest-standing K-12 political and ideological divides. Teacher-powered schools can alleviate the tense political landscape because, when teachers share full responsibility and accountability for school success, they address the many hot-button teacher policy issues themselves.

For example, bringing responsibility and accountability together in teacher-powered schools gives teachers the opportunity to address in innovative ways the quality of entrants to the profession, tenure policies, evaluation, achievement, and assessment. Farris-Berg and Dirks-wager found that teachers do well with this opportunity, creating school cultures that emulate the characteristics of high-performing organizations — leaving no need for messy attempts to micromanage change and accountability from the top-down.

Teacher-powered schools are also supported by leaders from all sides of the current major education policy discussions, rising above the usual conflicts among districts, charters, unions, and federal, state and local governments. Along with other

<sup>1</sup> *Trusting Teachers with School Success*, pg. 19-20.

improvement strategies, leaders from all of these bodies back the idea of trusting teachers in teacher-powered schools to make the decisions that matter most for schools and student success. While many education reform initiatives are met with skepticism and critics, teacher-powered schools are supported broadly by teachers, parents and the general public.

Teacher-powered schools are about fulfilling one of the nation's greatest responsibilities: educating a citizenry that can meet the needs of the community and rise to the challenges of the 21st century global economy. Public education needs innovation and transformation to fulfill this responsibility. Teacher-powered schools are important vehicles for driving authentic, systemic change in a field that is in dire need of a tune up.

## Teacher-Powered Schools align accountability with authority in K-12

Ever since the 1983 report "Nation at Risk" sparked broad concerns over the quality of education in the United States, local, state and federal policymakers have mandated various versions of new standards, more testing, and more accountability intended to raise student achievement and close achievement gaps. Over the past decade, as a growing body of research confirmed that the quality of teaching is the single most powerful in-school factor influencing learning, policymakers have turned their attention to increasing teacher effectiveness. This has led to efforts that link compensation to effectiveness, reduce tenure protections, weaken seniority rules and tie the evaluations of teachers to student growth measures. The National Council on Teaching Quality reported last fall that 35 states and the District of Columbia now require student achievement to be a significant or even the most significant factor in teacher evaluations.<sup>2</sup>

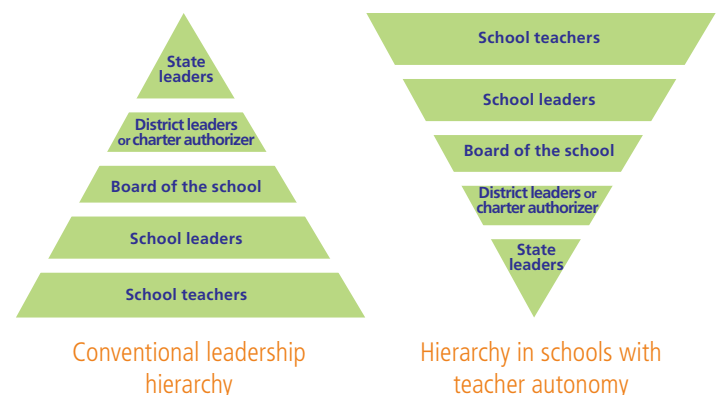
These policies, combined with state accountability measures required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, have limited teachers' professional autonomy to make the best decisions on behalf of their students.<sup>3</sup> The study noted that seasoned teachers often report that they can no longer teach a rich and varied curriculum because of fears their students' test scores will suffer – their own fears, that their principals' fears, and their district and state leaders' fears. Teachers are at the bottom of a hierarchical leadership pyramid, and each level of leadership imposes a new layer of accountability upon them, without providing teachers with commensurate autonomy. In short, teachers are being held accountable for the outcomes of decisions they do not make.

Richard Ingersoll, professor of Education and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, described the impact on teachers and teaching in an Educational Leadership article entitled, "Short on Power, Long on Responsibility" (2007), which reported findings from his investigations of longitudinal SASS data:

"Top-down reforms draw attention to an important set of needs — for accountability on the part of those doing the work. But these kinds of reforms sometimes overlook another equally important set of needs — for autonomy and the good will of those doing the work. Too much organizational control may deny teachers the very power and flexibility they need to do the job effectively, undermine their motivation, and squander a valuable human resource — the high degree of commitment of those who enter the teaching occupation. Having little say in the terms, processes, and outcomes of their work, teachers may doubt they are doing worthwhile work — the very reason many of them came into the occupation in the first place — which may contribute to high rates of turnover. Consequently, accountability reforms may not only fail to solve the problems they seek to address, but actually end up making things worse."

All of Ingersoll's predictions are now playing out. Mandated accountability and evaluation policies, imposed by policymakers in an effort to determine effectiveness, have fueled some teachers' resistance to top-down reforms. Teachers report having little influence on policy and even in their own workplaces frequently feel their experience and knowledge is not recognized or honored. A spring 2014 report from the Gallup organization found that, of 12 professions, teachers are least likely to agree with the statement, "My opinion seems to matter at work."<sup>4</sup>

Ingersoll and his colleagues have noted that teaching has far higher annual turnover than many higher-status occupations — e.g., lawyers, engineers, architects, professors, and pharmacists. That's not surprising. While the teaching workforce has been highly educated for the past 50 years, teaching is still set up as an industrial era job lacking most of the hallmarks of a profession. In medicine, law, engineering and other fields, practitioners have a great deal of influence over training, licensure, standards of practice, and accountability measures. They also enjoy a great deal of autonomy to apply their professional expertise to specific cases and situations. When it comes to teaching in the United States, however, it is assumed that a teacher's job is to implement and support whatever federal, state, and district leaders decide.



<sup>2</sup> "State of the States: Connecting the Dots: Using evaluations of teacher effectiveness to inform policy and practice," National Council on Teacher Quality, 2013. [http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/State\\_of\\_the\\_States\\_2013\\_Using\\_Teacher\\_Evaluations\\_NCTQ\\_Report](http://www.nctq.org/dmsView/State_of_the_States_2013_Using_Teacher_Evaluations_NCTQ_Report)

<sup>3</sup> "The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Challenges for School Leadership," MetLife, 2012. <https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/foundation/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2012.pdf>

Most people assume “teacher voice” means having input in or being the face of decisions that are ultimately made by someone else. Most assume teachers don’t want to define these arrangements differently, and neither does anyone else.

Teacher-powered schools rise above these assumptions, inverting the hierarchical leadership triangle and, in doing so, align teachers’ accountability with commensurate autonomy. They recognize that concepts of “teacher leadership” and “teacher professionalism” need not be stuck in the confines of the boss-worker framework, as is too often the case. Extending the opportunity for teachers to design and run teacher-powered schools recognizes that a good number of **K-12 public school teachers are ready to collectively design and manage whole schools, departments within schools, and programs that span several schools.** It opens the door for teachers to transform K-12 public schooling.

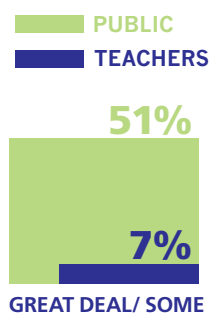
Critics may claim “all teachers aren’t ready for this.” That’s true. But that’s not a good reason to deny the opportunity to teachers who are ready to work with their colleagues to design and run teacher-powered schools. Over time, as more teachers take the opportunity, and as teaching takes on more and more of the characteristics of other professions, teachers will embrace the challenge of ensuring quality throughout the profession. It’s also very possible that the opportunity itself will attract high-quality entrants.

No one is suggesting that we go “all in,” ignoring other possible means to improvement. But why ignore the possibility that teacher-powered schools could be one of the keys to transforming K-12 teaching and learning?

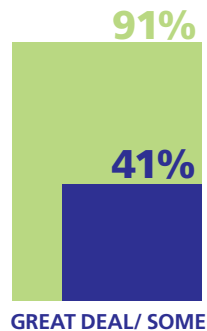
## Strong support among teachers and the public for Teacher-Powered Schools

The American public is ready to know how teachers can transform public education. A new national opinion survey,<sup>5</sup> commissioned by Education Evolving, a Minnesota-based education policy design and advocacy group, and conducted by Widmeyer Communications, a Finn Partners Company, found that 91 percent of Americans believe teachers should have a “great deal” or at least “some” authority in their schools.

How much authority do teachers have?



How much authority should teachers have?



Specifically, more than 90 percent of Americans think teachers should have a “great deal” or at least “some” authority to tailor instruction to individual students, and that teachers should have a great deal or some authority over curriculum and choices of technology.

The public also expresses overwhelming support for giving teachers the authority to select their colleagues and even control their school’s budget (80 percent and 72 percent, respectively).

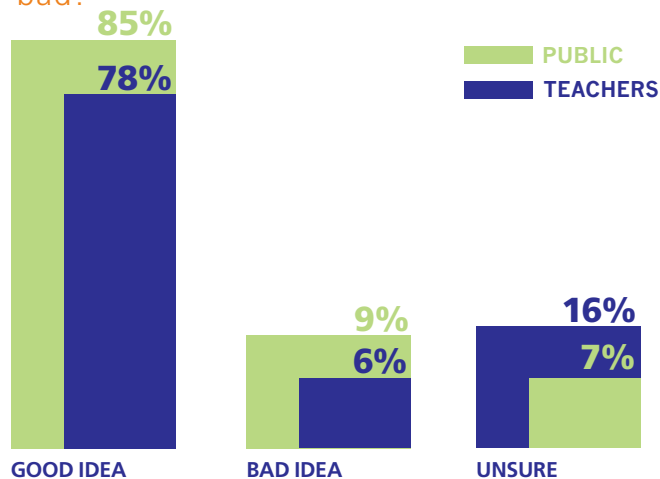
Data show that the public thinks teachers should have a greater role and more trust implementing changes within schools

	Authority Teachers Should Have to Implement	Trust in Teachers to Implement
	Great Deal/Some	Great Deal/Some
Tailor instruction to individual students	94%	79%
Select textbooks/instructional materials	92%	82%
Shape curriculum	90%	80%
Select classroom technology	90%	80%
Implement Common Core State Standards	82%	75%
Making staffing & scheduling decisions	80%	77%

In addition, the public puts a great deal of trust in teachers to carry out these responsibilities effectively; 81 percent of those surveyed trust teachers “some” or a “great deal” to properly use this authority to make “schools run better.”

The survey also asked respondents their views on a school model specifically designed to give teachers the authority to make decisions in the areas mentioned above, as well as others. Respondents were told: “In teacher-powered schools, teams of teachers collaboratively decide on the curricula, the allocation of resources, and the form of leadership. They choose their colleagues, handle evaluation, determine the schedule, and set school-level policy.” Eighty-five percent of the American public believes such arrangements are a “good idea.” More than half (54 percent) of the public said they are “very interested” in seeing teacher-powered schools in their community.

Based on this information, do you feel the concept of teacher partnership is a good idea or bad?



<sup>4</sup> “State of American Schools: The Path to Winning Again in Education.” Gallup, Inc. 2014. <http://products.gallup.com/168380/state-education-report-main-page.aspx>

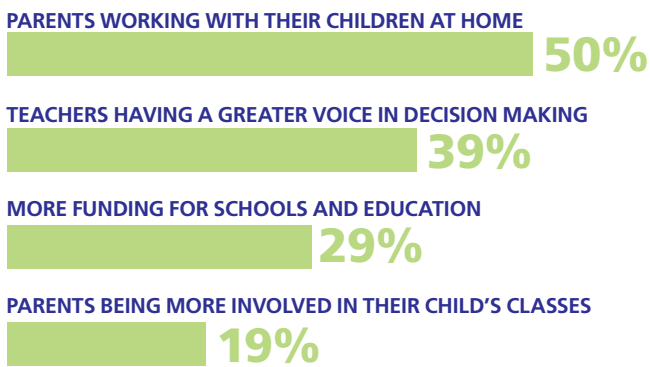
<sup>5</sup> For more information on methodology, see Appendix A.

# The experts support giving teachers collective authority to design and run schools

Surprisingly, the public is even more enthusiastic about such arrangements than teachers are, likely because teachers report a healthy amount of skepticism regarding transformation of their field. Still, an overwhelming 78 percent of teachers say teacher-powered schools are a good idea, and 1 in 5 teachers say they are ready to implement teacher-powered schools today. When asked to rank a percent of their interest in entering into a teacher-powered arrangement, a majority (54%) of teachers said they were “very interested,”. Nearly 3 in 4 teachers said at least some of their colleagues would be interested in implementing a teacher-powered school.

Second only to increased parental involvement, teachers say that giving teachers more “voice” in school-based decisions is the single change that would most improve student learning.

**In your opinion, which one or two changes would have the biggest payoff for student learning?**



The research also included a series of focus groups among teachers. Focus group participants imagined the impact they could have if given the opportunity to make meaningful decisions in how their schools are designed and operated. They cited more consistency among classes, the ability to find the best programs, setting policies and schedules that work, better representing the interests of students, and saving money for the district in the long run. Specifically, teachers noted:

- “I would work on developing a positive school culture. More consistency among classes. Providing time to work collaboratively on units.”
- “I’d work at finding the best programs to use in the teaching of curriculum areas, bringing respect back into the classroom amongst students and teachers and students-to-students.”
- “I like the idea of sitting with other teachers and deciding what we teach, putting a curriculum together, setting policies and schedules that work... all of it.”
- “I would have more personnel – someone specifically to do grant writing, fund raising (sic) and material gathering – getting more bodies in the classroom.”
- “We’d save money because teachers would be able to evaluate these things and say this isn’t going to work, or this part is going to work ...”

- “You’d see a decrease in wasteful money spent by Boards of Educations because I don’t think teachers would be purchasing and jumping into trends and schemes and program of the day.”
- “With teachers making the decisions, the kids would be better represented. I have not met a teacher who did not care about all the kids.”

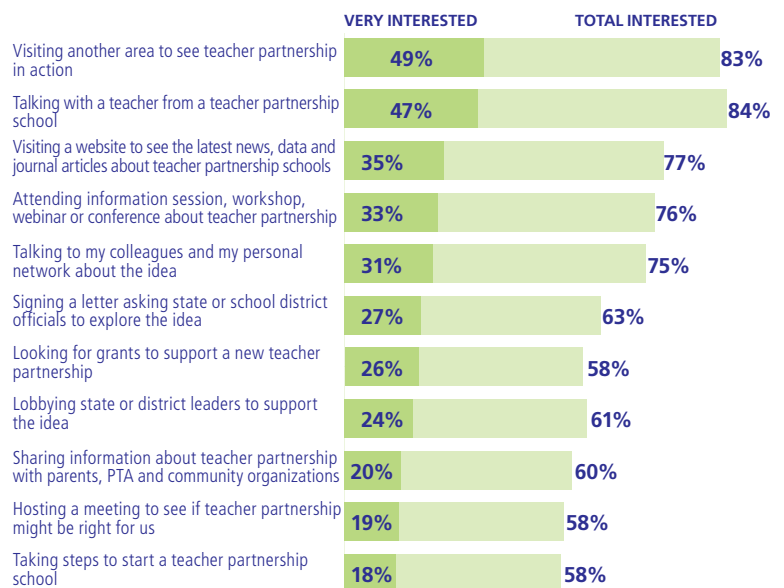
When asked in the survey which areas of change teachers would personally be most excited to address in their school, 51 percent of teachers reported shaping curriculum and 35 percent reported new instructional approaches. Unsurprisingly, nearly 1 in 3 teachers (32 percent) also responded that increasing collaboration among other teachers would be among the most exciting areas of change to address in their school.

Illustrating the importance of leading without leaving the classroom, teachers also reported that teacher-powered schools have the best chance for success at the school level (48 percent), followed by the district or department level (16 percent and 13 percent, respectively). They highlighted the importance of involving multiple stakeholders to ensure greater success, including their principals, school district leaders, union leaders, superintendents, and state policymakers.

Veteran teachers with solid experience and footing in their field were most likely to find teacher-powered schools to be a very good idea, and levels of union participation was not found to affect whether or not teacher-powered schools were a good idea overall. Furthermore, attitudes were generally found to be consistent across locations, genders, ages, and experience levels.

Relatively few teachers have seen teacher-powered schools, meaning that there is opportunity for their interest to grow even further through more exposure. In the survey, teachers indicated their preferences for learning more about teacher-powered schools and opportunities:

**Teachers are most interested in firsthand information and seeing partnership in action.**



The power of professional collaboration and autonomy to improve performance is well-established in many fields. For example, in the book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, author Daniel H. Pink draws upon four decades of research to make a strong case that the “secret to high performance and satisfaction — at work, at school, and at home — is the deeply human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things, and to do better by ourselves and the world.”<sup>6</sup> External rewards (such as money) or sanctions (such as job loss) do little to motivate people to put forth their best efforts in their work.

With few exceptions, including the books mentioned in this paper’s introduction, the body of literature on teacher leadership, teacher autonomy, and teacher professionalism fails to contemplate the idea that teachers could have collective authority to design and manage full schools as they do in teacher-powered schools. Many researchers assume that greater professional roles for teachers can only exist within the traditional boss-worker (employer-employee) framework. Still, the body of literature on this topic builds the case for teacher autonomy and collaboration. Included below is a small sample:

Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert of Stanford University found in their 2001 study of professional learning communities, “Fundamental to building strong learning communities in American high schools is locating within them collective authority and responsibility for decisions about how to conduct their work with students and colleagues ... Authorizing high school communities to make teacher assignment policy and decisions collectively is likely to engender shared responsibility and to reveal issues of equity that are otherwise hidden or ignored.”<sup>7</sup>

McLaughlin and Talbert also documented that in some strong professional communities teachers “centered their work on students and shared responsibility for students’ mastery of content and progress in the curriculum. They developed ‘innovative’ methods of instruction that achieved a better ‘fit’ of course work to students without compromising expectations for students’ conceptual learning ... In these communities teachers innovate to engage learners and have increased success with non-traditional students.”<sup>8</sup>

In a 2011 article originally published in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, C. R. Leana reports research that indicates “social capital, particularly the forms of strong, trusting relationships between teachers, is a significant predictor of improved student performance. The research indicates that teachers are more likely to seek support and assistance from their peers than their school principal or experts outside their school. The development of collegial relationships, therefore, supports collaborative learning among staff and can also build the expertise or human capital of school staff as a whole.”<sup>9</sup>

As William Ouchi noted in his 2003 book, *Making Schools Work*, high-performing schools have a “burning focus on student achievement,” and everyone delegates authority to those below (superintendents to principals; principals to teachers). But teachers’ autonomy does not go unchecked—collaboration with colleagues and support from leaders is essential. “Teacher[s] who [are] on the receiving end of that increased autonomy [are] tightly bound into a network ... They do have lots of independence and freedom to act, but at the same time, they’re part of a network that both checks them and supports them,” Ouchi wrote.<sup>10</sup>

## Communities create conditions for Teacher-Powered Schools

Teacher-powered schools harness the collective wisdom, expertise, and experience of the many different stakeholders in K-12 public education — including principals and local school leaders who act in service to the teachers. In this way and others, these schools serve as a community-driven solution to improving student achievement while also elevating the possibilities of the teaching profession for teachers.

In addition, the policies and provisions set by states, districts, charter authorizers, unions, and associations in support of teacher-powered schools — namely, the means by which teachers can secure collective autonomy to make the decisions influencing school success — vary greatly based on the unique characteristics of each community. The case studies within this brief illustrate some of these alternatives, including:

- Provision negotiated in collective bargaining agreement between district and local union
- MOU between districts and local unions
- MOU among the school, district, and local union, in addition to a waiver to state statutes
- Instrumentality charter contract, with MOU among the school, district, and local union
- Contract between chartered school board and Teacher-Powered School
- Chartered school contract and/or chartered school bylaws
- Pilot school agreement
- Site-governance agreement between the district school board and district school
- Informal agreement based upon the goodwill of superintendent, principal, or governing board

As previously noted, teacher-powered schools exist across the country, and many have been operating for decades. The following are four teacher-powered schools, each serving a different group of students in varied autonomy and authority arrangements. These case studies serve to provide insight on how to engage communities in creating and implementing teacher-powered schools with success.

<sup>6</sup> Pink, Accessible at <http://www.danpink.com/books/drive>.

<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin and Talbert 2001, 139.

<sup>8</sup> McLaughlin and Talbert 2001, 11 and 19.

<sup>9</sup> Leana, Abstract.

<sup>10</sup> Ouchi 2003, 124.

## **Avalon School – St. Paul, Minnesota**

### *Teacher-Powered arrangement: Chartered School Contract and/or Bylaws*

When teachers in St. Paul, Minnesota pursued the idea of a teacher-powered school, they wanted full autonomy and authority to decide every aspect of the school structure — from hours to curriculum, from budget to selecting colleagues and from leadership structure to discipline policies. The group of teachers decided to pursue a charter school — one designed by teachers and operated by teachers, but for students in grades 6-12. This led to the opening of Avalon, a teacher-powered charter school.

Avalon opened in 2001, and is focused on providing all teachers and staff within the school a voice in all school-based decisions that impact student learning. Regardless of job title — whether teacher, office manager or social worker — at Avalon each staff and faculty member has a seat at the table and a vote on policies. The school operates with a 1-5 voting scale, where all decisions must receive a three or higher on average to be considered for moving forward. The process, as teacher and program coordinator Carrie Bakken noted, has the respect of all involved and has never been intentionally delayed.

“The process has led to high retention. We’ve maintained about a 95 percent or higher retention rate,” noted Bakken. “We also have a lot of pre-service teachers who train at Avalon and want to stay.” The school utilizes pre-service teachers or those in transitional teaching programs as educational assistants in the classroom.

“For many, this is what they always thought teaching was like or should be,” said Bakken.

Despite the obstacles over the years, such as transitioning to a new building and significant budget cuts, the school continues to implement its self-directed, project-based learning model to inspire students. Bakken observed that the self-directed learning has helped students see the relevance in their learning.

## **Denver Green School – Denver, Colorado**

### *Teacher-Powered arrangement: MOU & state waiver*

Denver Green School opened in 2010 with the goal of innovating student learning experiences through project-based and service learning curriculum. The collective leadership — made up of seven founding partner teachers and six full partner teachers chooses and designs their own curriculum based on math and reading. Focused on sustainability, and (like other teacher-powered schools) has redesigned the school schedule by extending the school day four days a week and shortening the day at the end of each week to make time for shared governance. The teachers also designed their teacher-powered school to serve Pre-K through eighth grade students, as well as students with special needs through its autism center.

“Our school is about creating a lasting, generative impact and teaching students how to make the world a better place,” said Jeff Buck, a founding partner and sustainability coordinator at Denver Green School. “We focus on helping students learn skills like reading, writing, how to calculate and analyze information, and then taking what they’ve learned and applying it to a solution to make positive change.”

To achieve authority and autonomy, the founding partners sought waivers through Colorado’s Innovation Schools Act, which allowed teachers to move away from the traditional school governance structure of principal management. Their local district held a seminar on proposal writing, which helped the founding partner teachers create the vision for their teacher-powered school. Once their proposal was submitted and approved by state law, teachers sought waivers from local district policy, as well as collective bargaining agreements, in order to maintain a high level of autonomy in Denver Green School.

Although the school’s program design must be approved by the Denver School Board, the teachers maintain a high level of authority over school operations and their decisions have not been vetoed. Decisions about budget, schedule, curriculum and personnel are made by the 13 full partners of the school, noted Buck, but other teachers have full authority to decide how to teach in their classrooms and meet the needs of their students. The school’s partners gather input from what they refer to as the “big house,” or the entirety of school personnel, parents, students, and local leaders.



## **Hughes STEM High School – Cincinnati, Ohio**

### ***Teacher-Powered arrangement: Provision in collective bargaining agreement between district and local union***

In 2009, Hughes STEM High School opened in an attempt to bring high-quality, STEM-focused learning to a high-poverty area in Cincinnati. A group of local teachers banded together and applied for a \$3.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation to promote the STEM focus of the school's curriculum. Once awarded the funding, teachers utilized an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) provision in the collective bargaining agreement (between the Cincinnati School Board and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers) to create their teacher-powered school.

The school design process took more than a year of planning by the teachers, and the approval process was often less than easy. District and union leadership were essential in ensuring the school proposal was ultimately approved.

Hughes STEM HS operates with a district-approved principal, but all decisions are made collectively by teachers and the principal to maintain authority and autonomy for teachers. According to the ILT provision, the principal cannot veto what the group of teachers decides. As noted by Virginia Rhodes, Hughes STEM's first principal as a teacher-powered school, "You can't build the village that teaches the whole child without collaboration from all involved."

In 2013, Hughes STEM HS graduated its first four-year student cohort, and, as Rhodes noted, the school's unique culture has impacted student learning. Through project-based learning and continuity among the collective teacher leadership, many of the school's at-risk students have become more engaged in their learning and are showing growth.

## **Mission Hill K-8 School – Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts**

### ***Teacher-Powered arrangement: Pilot school***

In the late 1990s, teacher Deborah Meier decided to team up with colleagues to create a school that allowed all adults involved in education the opportunity to participate equally in positively influencing student learning. Because of Meier's local reputation for success, the idea, which could have been greeted with skepticism, was well-received by local district leaders and the community.

Mission Hill K-8 School opened its doors in 1997 as a democratically-run, teacher-powered school. Over the past 17 years, Mission Hill has served K to grade 8 students in their urban district. As a pilot school, Mission Hill still remains a part of its local district, but has additional autonomy that some other district schools do not. A governing board, consisting of a council that represents parents, faculty, students and other community members, oversees the school to ensure the teacher team continues to meet the needs of students effectively but delegates decision-making authority to the teacher team. The teachers and the principal they selected collaborate on all decisions, including curriculum, staffing, and the school's schedule. They involve all local education stakeholders in decisions regarding principal selection, determining the school's mission, and approving staff-developed budget and human resources plans.

Ayla Gavins, Mission Hill's principal, noted that there have been growing pains in recent years as the school has grown and expanded enrollment. What once was a small, connected culture now faces challenges similar to what larger schools face – staff expansion and physical distance in larger buildings.

"We have to be very thoughtful and strategic about how we communicate among the staff now," said Gavins. "We created an organizational chart to show how we cross-pollinate information from meeting to meeting so that no one is out of the loop."

Gavins also noted that while teacher retention is high at Mission Hill, the school has brought in new staff over time with different interpretations of the school's mission. Yet the team remains committed to developing a shared purpose and using that purpose as a basis of their decision-making. "We keep discussing new ideas and including those that the teacher collective feels strongly will improve learning for students."

## A culture of high performance

Although the arrangements for collective autonomy vary, and no two schools are exactly the same, there are many important similarities among the more than 60 current teacher-powered schools operating across the country.

Kim Farris-Berg and Edward J. Dirkswager, in *Trusting Teachers with School Success*, found when teachers are able to make the decisions that matter most they create a school culture that emulates the characteristics of high-performing organizations. Teachers who design and run teacher-powered schools:

- **Accept ownership and accountability, and embrace a shared purpose.** When teachers are empowered to make the decisions that matter most for their students, they are also likely to take ownership of, and accept accountability for, the results. Teacher teams also create their shared purpose, and use it as the basis of their decision making. They take pride in the outcomes they bring forth from this commitment, the hallmark of a rewarding career.
- **Innovate.** Trying new things, challenging outdated processes, and taking educated risks are a must for high-performing organizations. As existing teacher-powered schools have demonstrated, schools are no exception.
- **Collaborate to effectively lead.** Teacher-powered schools redesign typical leadership and governance structures. The “principal” or “lead-teacher” or “leadership committee” is selected and held accountable by the teachers, while the teachers are held accountable for driving student outcomes. Most important teacher-powered schools provide opportunities for teachers to lead schools without leaving teaching.
- **Engage and motivate.** Teacher-powered schools provide an opportunity to knock down traditional barriers that can so often isolate teachers in order to ensure they can engage in productive and meaningful ways with their colleagues and students. At a time when Gallup reports that 70 percent of teachers report they are not “engaged” in their work, teacher-powered schools offer an opportunity to plug back in.
- **Redefine success.** Given their shared mission and responsibility in delivering a top-notch education to students, teacher-powered schools can redefine how we measure student success and effective teaching. For example, many teacher-powered schools require students to develop and defend learning portfolios, weigh in on satisfaction surveys, and master learning standards at an 80 percent level – all in addition to meeting the requirements of state-based assessments. Meanwhile, teacher-powered schools often evaluate

their colleagues and leadership through a system of peer-to-peer or 360-degree evaluation, paired with ongoing coaching and mentoring throughout the school year.

## Teacher-Powered Schools find hard work and confrontation ensure quality and innovation

In focus groups, teachers working in teacher-powered schools discussed the benefits, while also noting that they require commitment and a willingness to work hard. One teacher noted, “It is not for the faint of heart but is oh so rewarding when it connects all the pieces for the learners and the community.”

Much like any new organization, a newly established teacher-powered school experiences growing pains as teachers work to develop their management processes and structures, learning programs, and build their team culture. Over time, “each person’s place in the running of the school becomes clear,” one teacher said. “Each of us has different skills to offer that need to be used to their own and to the school’s best advantage.”

Collective decision-making is not always easy, but teams state that getting comfortable with conflict and confrontation ensures quality, buy-in, and innovation. As one teacher notes, “We hire all of our staff to bring something new to the table, so of course not everyone sees everything in the same fashion. This will allow for conflict, but we all try to keep in mind that we need to make the best decisions for the students.”

“It is challenging at times, as we all have a lot of input and great ideas,” another said. “Deciding what to go with can take time. But in the end the decision is usually the best, as we have all weighed in on it.”

## Take Action: Trust. Collaborate. Transform

**The results are clear: schools thrive when teachers have the authority to lead collaboratively as partners and make the decisions that matter most for student success.** Teacher-powered schools are designed and managed by teachers and inspired by students. They set into motion the type of groundbreaking change and innovation that federal and state policymakers have been striving to achieve for decades.

And change and innovation cannot be delayed. Now is the time for teachers to step up and call the shots in their schools. Successful models of teacher-powered schools span the nation and are redefining what success looks like in classrooms and schools.

Teacher-powered schools are emerging as a force to transform teaching and learning. They are proof that characteristics of high-performing cultures need not be mandated from the top, but can be created by the teachers who take the initiative and make teacher-powered schools happen.

**Now is the time for teacher-powered schools to forge a new national attitude toward teachers** — one that truly trusts teachers with student and school success — if teachers will take the opportunity.

### Trust in the Possibilities

Research shows teachers are ready for teacher-powered schools; they just need to discover ways to initiate teacher-powered arrangements in their communities. Learn more about how teachers took the initiative to start their own teacher-powered schools, at [www.teacherpowered.org](http://www.teacherpowered.org), and take the next steps with colleagues and local leadership to start your own teacher-powered school.

### Collaborate Among Colleagues

Our research noted teachers believe increased collaboration among their colleagues would be a game changer in education. Teachers can share information about teacher-powered schools with colleagues, district leaders, union/association leaders, charter authorizers, and school boards to identify ways to put teacher-powered schools in practice. Develop a vision, mutual goals, a timeline and protocols for your teacher-powered school. To view Center for Teaching Quality's step-by-step guide for creating your own teacher-powered school, visit [www.teachingquality.org/teacherpowered](http://www.teachingquality.org/teacherpowered).

### Transform Student Learning and the Profession

The public and teachers revealed that teacher-powered schools provide strong opportunities for impacting student learning. If they lead collaboratively through teacher-powered schools, teachers can transform education through their expertise and leadership.

Learn more at  
[www.teacherpowered.org](http://www.teacherpowered.org)

## APPENDIX A: Methodology

From December 2013 through February 2014, Education Evolving, the Minnesota-based education policy design and advocacy shop, contracted with Widmeyer Communications, a Finn Partners company, to conduct opinion research to better understand views of the public and teachers on collective teacher autonomy, teacher-led schools and teacher professional partnerships.

Widmeyer conducted seven in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, which included a union leader, reform advocate, principal, superintendent, and state school superintendent. All interviews were conducted by phone under the condition of anonymity and lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Immediately following these in-depth interviews, a series of focus groups were conducted among K-12 public charter and districts school teachers. Three focus groups were conducted among teachers in traditional K-12 arrangements. The fourth was conducted among those who practice in teacher-powered schools. Each group lasted 90 minutes with 8-10 teachers participating in each.

Upon conclusion of the focus groups in November 2013, an online national survey of 643 K-12 traditional public or public charter school teachers was administered, with a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level. In January 2014, a nationally representative survey of 1,000 adults across the United States was conducted via telephone using a random digit dial (RDD) sample. This survey had a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points at a 95 percent confidence level.

## APPENDIX B: Additional Resources & Reading

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