

Presentation Prepared for the Innovative Quality Schools Conference on Teacher-Led
Schools

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Teacher-Led Schools: Are they worth it for teachers?

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Introduction

There are some things we know about teacher-led schools:

1. They are becoming more common and are increasingly being seen as a viable option by teachers, unions, school districts, charter school authorizers and policy makers.
2. Establishing or becoming a teacher in an existing teacher-led school gives teachers more professional freedom but also involves more collective accountability for over-all school functioning and performance.
3. They are hard work, initially and in the long run.

In this context teachers frequently ask: Are Teacher-led schools worth it for teachers?

In the search for an answer we'll ask ourselves five questions.

1. Why do professionals seek to control their own professional activities?

Education is one of the very rare professions where the dominant, but admittedly not universal, practice is control of professional activities from the outside. Ask yourself if there is any other profession where the professionals themselves have so little to say about what they do and yet have so much accountability for the results?

Among the participants at this conference there are teachers who have some, albeit limited, ability to influence their professional activity. The problem is that many have become conditioned to accept a very limited role yet they sense that they and their students would be better off if the situation were different. Still, because of their conditioning they have trouble imagining what "different" would look like.

To determine whether seeking a position in an established teacher-led school **or** creating one is worth it you need to ask yourself whether the stresses of living in an environment where you are held accountable for other people's decisions are greater than, or equal to, the stresses of working with colleagues at your school to collectively make your own professional decisions

and being held accountable for those decisions. One teacher I know who was given an excellent evaluation by her district at the end of the school year responded; “You are evaluating me on how well I did what you told me to do not how well I did what the kids needed to improve their learning.” She subsequently resigned from that position.

In the past few decades there has been an enormous amount of research by neuro-scientists, clinical psychologists and others to help us understand what it takes to make us pleased with ourselves as well as what it takes to keep us productive and motivated. This body of work leads us to understand some basic human needs.

In his 2009 book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, Daniel Pink gives us a glimpse into this research. Interestingly at the very same time Ron Newell and Mark Van Ryzin published a book, *Assessing What Really Matters in Schools*, using similar research findings and reaching similar conclusions.

Pink and Newell/Van Ryzin each are consistent with self-determination theory (in part begun by Abraham Maslow in the 1950’s) which is rooted in the notion of universal human needs. Pink’s book is written for a general audience and is directly applicable to teachers whereas Newell and Van Ryzin’s book specifically addresses students.

Pink’s research shows that we all need autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Autonomy as he and others use it should not be confused with independent action. Pink’s research and that of others confirms that we all have a need for interdependence as well as a need for control. “Autonomy” as used by most is the balance and interaction between the dual needs. Pink addresses this as well as anyone by stating that high performance in any organization requires control over task (what we do), time (when we do it), team (who we do it with) and technique (how we do it). This kind of autonomy along with mastery (becoming better at something that matters) and purpose (making a contribution to a greater cause) produces better results than extrinsic motivation such as pay for performance, etc.

Based on all of these findings we should not be surprised that teachers are often dissatisfied and the performance of students is not what it could be.

2. How have teacher’s responded to the need to control their profession?

When Kim Farris-Berg and I began the research for *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots* we found close to forty K-12 public schools that had some elements of teacher autonomy. Of these we studied eleven, chosen to provide geographic, grade level, learning program, district/charter, and union/non-union diversity. (See *Trusting Teachers*, pp. 192-195)

Five schools in the sample are 15 years of age, or older, including two chartered schools and three district schools. Two of these, a district magnet in New Haven CN and a district alternative school in San Francisco, are over *forty years old*.

Current research show that there are teacher-led schools in 17 states and that the number has grown since our first attempt to inventory them.

The bottom line is that you don't have to recreate the wheel. There have been pioneers out front and now settlers are beginning to appear who are learning from the pioneers.

3. What kind of control do teachers seek and need?

We need to ask ourselves how the research on basic human needs applies to teachers. We also need to ask what elements of school operations are crucial to school success.

In *Trusting Teachers* Kim Farris-Berg and I answered these questions through research which resulted in a definition of the culture that is necessary for a teacher-led school that seeks high performance **and** by identifying the elements of autonomy required if teachers were to be held accountable for all matters influencing whole school success.

Trusting Teachers lists ten elements of collective autonomy.

1. Selecting colleagues
2. Transferring and/or dismissing colleagues
3. Evaluating colleagues
4. Setting staffing patterns
5. Selecting leaders
6. Determining the budget
7. Determining the learning program
8. Determining salaries
9. Setting the schedule
10. Setting school level policy

It is important to note that we speak of *collective autonomy* which is quite consistent with the notions of interdependence found in the literature. Collective teacher autonomy means that control and accountability rest with the teachers as a group.

We also found that collective autonomy was always coupled with a corresponding understanding that it required accountability.

While not all teacher-led schools in the eleven we studied had every one of the ten autonomies many did. The teachers in schools where they did not have ten elements of autonomy indicated that they sometimes could create a work-around and sometimes were just thankful for the autonomy they had. There are of course challenges and frustrations when an element or two of autonomy which was not sought and/or given gets in the way of carrying out activities that teachers see as beneficial to the overall performance of the school.

Note that there is a body of research that states that having autonomy over all ten elements is required to enable a school to reach the highest performance levels.

4. What sort of agreements did these teachers use to secure their autonomy and accountability?

Among the eleven schools we studied we found six different means or arrangement by which teachers secured their autonomy. (See *Trusting Teachers*, pp. 24-25)

Each arrangement responded to local conditions, including the political environment. In the early years there were no examples of how it could be done and models were created locally. Teachers thought of themselves as “islands.” In more recent years when the matter has been given greater attention teachers and others are learning from the experience of others. Teachers can now develop arrangements based on the experience of others, what they desire and what is possible locally.

This shows that there are many different ways to develop a teacher-led school. Each arrangement in our study was developed by teachers and others in response to the local political environment and their personal sense of what was best. The six arrangements identified in *Trusting Teachers* are but a sample of how it may be done. Indeed current uncompleted research shows nine different arrangements and counting.

I find it very instructive to note that each of the five schools that have been in existence for over 15 years has a different kind of arrangement.

What should also be noted is that some of the arrangements have the potential to be quite long lasting and some, as the history of the schools has shown, are disrupted by changes in district or authorizer leadership.

The important lesson we learned is that every attempt must be made by teacher groups to develop strong bylaws and explicit written contracts between the district or charter school board and union, or the authorizer. The goal is to remove the grant of collective autonomy, as much as possible, from changes in outside leadership, attitudes and perspectives on the professional role of teachers.

5. What kind of a culture is necessary to create a school which is highly performing?

As stated earlier the right culture is a crucial element to create a high performing school.

A significant contribution of *Trusting Teachers* is the research done to define what characteristics are necessary for a high performance culture—in any setting including public education. The characteristics are:

1. Welcome authority and responsibility for making decisions and be accountable for the outcomes.
2. Take risks to try creative new things, challenge old processes and continuously adapt.
3. Seek clarity and buy in to the mission, values, goals and standards of practice.
4. Establish a culture of interdependence characterized by an open flow of ideas, listening to and understanding others, and valuing the differences.
5. Expect leadership from all and perceive leadership as in service to all.
6. Establish a culture characterized by a sense of common challenge and discovery, rather than a culture where experts impart information.
7. Learn from and be sensitive to the external environment
8. Be engaged, motivated and motivating
9. Set and measure progress toward goals and act upon results to improve performance.

As previously indicated there is copious research in clinical psychology, neuro-psychology and the evolution of the brain to give us confidence in saying that the culture and environment we inhabit forms us in rather profound ways---on the conscious and unconscious levels. Read, Pink's book, Drive, David Brooks', The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement, or Paul Gilbert's, The Compassionate Mind.

Brooks points out that organic systems exist when “different elements come together and produce something that is greater than the sum of the parts. . . . The pieces of a system

interact, and out of their interaction something entirely new emerges. . .” He continues, “If you surround a person with a new culture, a different web of relationships, then they will absorb new habits of thought and behaviors in ways that you will never be able to measure or understand”. This means that, for better or worse, the culture of the school— including the web of relationships between people within them—shapes teachers and students’ habitual thoughts and behaviors.

Brooks and others point out that we can’t separate, study and distinguish the importance of one cultural characteristic over the other. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts and all parts are necessary.

Getting the culture right doesn’t happen automatically and often is not given sufficient attention—especially in the long run. When there is trouble there is a temptation to go back to the “default” arrangement which seems more secure but may in fact undermine the effort.

You have to start with this kind of a culture. It is the *sine qua non* of any school that will be high performing, whether teacher-led or not. You can’t achieve the autonomy, mastery and purpose needed nor achieve the results you desire without getting this right. Collective teacher autonomy, that is being teacher-led, is not, in-itself a silver bullet however it does give teachers a better opportunity to create schools that will be high performing. The developing web of support for these teachers can only improve their chances of success.

Conclusion:

In conclusion we can now address the title of this presentation. Teacher-Led Schools: Are they worth it for teachers?

No one can answer that question for anyone else.

The answer is to be found by each teacher examining two separate but quite connected interior needs. They are: your circumstance and felt need for autonomy, mastery and purpose; **and** your perception of student’s needs and how those needs can be best met. Interestingly we find that the answer to the second question is often most paramount in teachers’ minds.

Support systems are developing and teacher-led schools are becoming more common. Teacher-led schools are no longer islands and there is a body of practical advice being created. It’s still hard to do but there are guides.

Politically teacher-led schools are becoming more viable as an ever increasing number of policy makers, school districts, unions and teachers search for solutions.

There is a danger in the increased interest in teacher-led schools on the part of “outsiders”. The whole idea behind the concept is that it must be driven by teachers, **not** policy makers, school districts or authorizers. Teachers can and must drive this because they understand their own needs and the needs of their students. Teachers must devise arrangements that work for themselves in their own world, not schemes designed by “outsiders.”

This is all about intrinsic motivation not extrinsic motivation.

I’d like to conclude with the words of one of the teachers interviewed for *Trusting Teachers*.

Stephanie Davis, who loved teaching at Craig High School in Janesville, Wisconsin, was ambivalent to negative about moving to TAGOS Leadership Academy a chartered school in Janesville. But she needed a job, so she took it. After one semester at TAGOS she had this to say:

“Suddenly I got it. I had a real opportunity at TAGOS. My voice mattered. I could lead [my colleagues], work together with them, to create a learning program that would *really* change how our students learn English Lit! I hadn’t really thought about how prescribed everything I was doing at Craig was. I had to use the prescribed book list in the prescribed order in the prescribed pace using a prescribed budget. There was so little opportunity to tailor what I was doing for the individual students I was working with, whether they were far beyond or far behind. I couldn’t hook them on literature by first handing them a book that reflects their interests. But here at TAGOS was a chance to do all the things I thought might work better. I could influence other aspects of the school, too. My voice would have an impact far beyond English Lit learning.” (*Trusting Teachers*, P. 5)

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