



Leadership for Teaching and Learning

How Teacher-Powered Schools Work and Why They Matter



BY BARNETT BERRY AND KIM FARRIS-BERG

Since 1996, teaching quality has dominated school reform conversations. That year, the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future called for a comprehensive approach to teacher development.¹ The commission advanced five major recommendations to overhaul the profession, which, taken together, reflected the need to design schools that could escalate the spread of teaching expertise.

But over the past 20 years, federal and state reforms have drawn on heavy-handed attempts to close the achievement gap through

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top-down management of teachers.* Such approaches have often included high-stakes accountability systems that mandate what to teach and how to teach it and that evaluate teachers on the basis of annual standardized test scores.² In short, policymakers have focused on fixing teachers more than on maximizing their expertise and leadership potential.

No wonder classroom teachers across the nation are frustrated. In a 2013 poll by Scholastic, nearly all participating teachers responded that they teach in order to “make a difference in the world,” yet more than 80 percent reported that the number one challenge they face is the “constantly changing demands on teachers and students,” surely reflecting the onslaught of teacher-fixing initiatives.³

One of teachers' greatest sources of frustration is their lack of authority to determine how to meet those demands in ways that

*For more on the intersection between top-down policy and teacher professionalism, see “Escaping the Shadow” in the Summer 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/summer2015/mehta.

will benefit students. A 2015 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that between the 2003–2004 and 2011–2012 school years, the proportion of teachers who believed they had low autonomy increased from 18 percent to 26 percent. The perceptions of low autonomy were particularly pronounced among teachers who work in cities and with low-income populations.⁴

In a 2015 survey conducted jointly by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Badass Teachers Association, 73 percent of the 30,000 teachers surveyed reported that they “often” experience stress at work. These respondents, the survey found, are unlikely to have the authority to make decisions on their own or to be able to count on their managers for support, and they are likely to leave work physically and emotionally exhausted.⁵ Similarly, a 2014 Gallup poll revealed that only 31 percent of U.S. teachers are actively “engaged” in their jobs, scoring “dead last” among 14 occupational groups in agreeing with the statement that their opinions count at work.⁶

But there is a growing movement to transform the profession with teachers serving as the *agents* of change—rather than being the *targets* of it. Simultaneously, growing numbers of policymakers are becoming aware that deeper learning outcomes for all students will only be achieved with their teachers leading the transformation of schooling.⁷

A convergence of research also supports the benefits to students when teachers can make significant schoolwide decisions. In this article, we present teacher-powered schools as one notable school governance model that supports student learning and enhances the leadership, engagement, and professionalism of educators.

The History of Teacher-Powered Schools

Early efforts to advance professional communities of educators and site-based management of schools suggested that teachers ought to have more substantial roles—but stopped short of pro-

posing that teachers design and run schools. In the 1980s, Ted Kolderie, founder of Public School Incentives, and Ruth Anne Olson, a consultant to the organization, developed the idea of teacher ownership of professional practices, much like those that doctors, attorneys, and architects have created.

Public School Incentives published two major reports advancing this idea,⁸ and Olson spent a few years gauging interest among teachers and school districts. At the time, she found very little. However, in 1986, *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (published by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy) foresaw that schools with teacher autonomy would be in operation by the 21st century and would become increasingly common over time.⁹

A handful of public schools where teachers informally shared collective autonomy appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. Momentum picked up after the Minnesota legislature passed the nation’s first charter school law in 1991, which required that teachers make up a majority of each charter school’s board. A group of entrepreneurial individuals from the Le Sueur and Henderson, Minnesota, area developed and proposed Minnesota New Country School, a charter school with a self-directed, project-based learning model for students in grades 6–12.

At the suggestion of Kolderie and attorney Dan Mott, they also formed a workers’ cooperative called EdVisions. Members of the cooperative—teachers—would have both responsibility and accountability for running the school. In winter 1993, the Le Sueur-Henderson school board voted to authorize the school, enabling the charter school’s board to contract with EdVisions to run it. Today, Minnesota has 16 schools where teachers have collective autonomy, mostly in the charter sector though not part of large charter school chains.

In 1994, partially in response to the Massachusetts legislature passing a charter school law the year before, the Boston Teachers

Resources for Designing Teacher-Powered Schools

Learn from pioneering teams via the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative (www.teacherpowered.org), a partnership between the Center for Teaching Quality and Education Evolving:

- “Steps to Creating a Teacher-Powered School” (www.teacherpowered.org/guide) is an online do-it-yourself guide to transforming your school into a teacher-led school (or reconfiguring an existing one). It covers the big steps—and major decisions—involved in getting your school off the ground. Hundreds of hyperlinked resources identify questions to discuss, relevant research to explore, and sample governance documents to review.
- An inventory of teacher-powered schools (www.teacherpowered.org/inventory) offers information about more than 90 schools implementing the model.
- And a virtual community (www.teacherpowered.org/community) welcomes you to ask questions, share resources, and find mentors.



Union and Boston Public Schools negotiated a formal memorandum of understanding that today gives authority to the governing boards of Boston's 30 pilot schools to try unconventional models of teaching and learning with at-risk students. In some of these schools, the governing boards have decided to delegate their authority to teachers, who collaboratively make the decisions influencing their schools' success. This agreement between the union and the school district gave rise to pilot schools like the Boston Teachers Union School and the democratically run Mission Hill K-8 School, which teacher, author, and public advocate Deborah Meier founded with colleagues.

When the Los Angeles Unified School District and United Teachers Los Angeles replicated Boston's pilot school arrangement in 2007, a number of school governing councils embraced collective autonomy for teachers.

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In the years between the initiation of Boston's and Los Angeles's pilot school programs, more teachers unions and school districts across the nation arranged ways for teachers to call the shots. Today, more than half of the schools with collective teacher autonomy are district schools.

In 2008, researchers Edward J. Dirkswager and Kim Farris-Berg (one of the authors of this article) worked with Kolderie and his colleagues to observe the growing number of public schools where teachers had collective autonomy. The two sought to learn how teacher teams were getting—and then using—this autonomy. Ultimately, they wrote a book about their positive findings: *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots* (2012). At about the same time, Barnett Berry (also an author of this article), with Ann Byrd and Alan Wieder, wrote *Teacherpreneurs: Innovative Teachers Who Lead but Don't Leave*, highlighting the promising work of Lori Nazareno and her colleagues who designed and run the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy in Denver Public Schools.

The two books generated increased awareness of what were then known as “teacher-led schools” but also made clear that there was not yet a movement. The existing schools saw themselves as islands, unaware of teams elsewhere with similar values and modes of operation.

To connect these teams and encourage them to learn from one another, expose more teachers to the opportunity, track progress, and provide start-up and continuous improvement resources, the

Center for Teaching Quality (founded by Berry) and Education Evolving (cofounded by Kolderie and Joe Graba) jointly created the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative in 2014. Each year, the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative hosts well-attended national and regional conferences so educators can share their innovations. At present, it is a fairly informal network. As the movement grows, we envision development of formal supports and more informal networking, including increased support for teacher and administrator unions as well as school districts that are looking to open the door to teacher-powered schools.

We coined the term “teacher-powered” to refer to schools collaboratively designed and run by teachers (although the term could also apply to teachers' collective autonomy in departments within a school or in programs within a district). The initiative advances the teacher-powered movement as it has been shaped by pioneering teachers and engages those pioneers in creating resources for teachers to come.

The Importance of Teacher Collaboration to School Success

Over the last several decades, researchers have consistently found a strong link between a lack of teacher autonomy and high rates of attrition from the teaching profession. In particular, Richard Ingersoll, drawing on 20 years of data, has shown that a primary reason teachers move from high-poverty schools to wealthier ones—as well as leave the profession altogether—is a lack of professional autonomy and faculty decision-making influence.¹⁰

While Ingersoll's research has not addressed the links between teacher autonomy and student and school success, other studies point the way. This research presents clear evidence of how teacher collaboration leads to gains in student learning.* And providing collective autonomy to teams of teachers is one way to enable educators to put this research into practice.

For example, Matt Ronfeldt and colleagues found that teachers working in schools with better-quality collaboration—as determined by teachers' perceptions of its extent and helpfulness—improve student outcomes in math and reading. Their study, grounded in multiple measures (including test score data and 9,000 teacher observations), revealed that teachers who worked in schools with better-quality collaboration tended to be more effective at improving achievement gains regardless of their individual ability to collaborate.¹¹

In an in-depth study of the ABC Unified School District in California, Saul Rubinstein found that stronger teacher collaboration is correlated to student achievement.¹² When Rubinstein and colleagues analyzed collaboration in the district, they found that those schools with the strongest partnerships also had the highest levels (what they referred to as “density”) of teacher-to-teacher communication—meaning that more teachers discussed student performance data, curriculum articulation, instructional practice, and teacher mentoring than in schools with weaker partnerships. Notably, they found that teachers in the schools with stronger partnerships had nearly two times the “communication density” as schools with weaker partnerships.¹³ And drawing on longitudinal data, Matthew Kraft and colleagues concluded that student outcomes improve

*For more on collaboration, see the Winter 2013–2014 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2013-2014.

when “teachers feel supported by their colleagues, work together to improve their instructional practice, [and] trust one another.”¹⁴

Just as important, Dylan Wiliam discovered that teachers improve instruction the most when they have opportunities to apply what they learn. Also, they are most influenced by those who have pedagogical “credibility as a coach.” His research showed that teachers improve their teaching when instructional feedback is provided in ways that prompt *thinking* instead of triggering emotional responses, and when careful attention is given to follow-up action and support to improve teaching practices.¹⁵

Ben Jensen and his research team concluded that top-performing nations drive school improvement and student achievement by creating highly structured professional development systems. In these countries, teachers have opportunities to lead their own learning.¹⁶

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For example, in Japan, schools have multiple cycles of lesson study each year that are “organized and owned” by teachers themselves. As Motoko Akiba and Bryan Wilkinson noted,¹⁷ teams of teachers in Japan spend two to three months for each cycle of lesson study, completing two cycles per year on average. While this form of professional development has allowed Japanese teachers to think deeply about content and student learning, and has given them the opportunity to learn from each other, most American teachers have not been prepared to reflect on their instruction and provide feedback on their colleagues’ teaching, and are not supported in such work.*

Research shows that American educators have had more success with peer review. Like lesson study, peer review requires that educators observe their peers and provide constructive feedback. Jensen’s research reflects what scholars have found regarding the positive impact of peer review processes in the United States,¹⁸ which can lead to higher teacher retention and more sustained school improvement. John Papay and Susan Moore Johnson concluded in 2012 that when fully implemented, peer assistance and review (PAR) programs[†] retained more novice teachers and dismissed more underperforming ones than did comparison districts.¹⁹ In an in-depth study of PAR programs in two California districts (San Juan and Poway), Daniel Hum-

phrey and colleagues discovered that “peer review offers a possible solution to the lack of capacity of the current system to both provide adequate teacher support and conduct thorough performance evaluations.”²⁰

Tony Bryk and colleagues found that social trust among teachers, parents, and school leaders improves much of the routine work of schools and is a key resource for long-term gains in student learning. Developing trust requires “mutual dependencies” among teachers who demonstrate, through collective action, their obligations to each other (as well as other reform partners).²¹ And this kind of trust helps teachers, who are often isolated from each other in their individual classrooms, “cope with difficult situations.”^{22‡}

Similarly, in a study of more than 1,000 teachers in 130 New York City elementary schools, Carrie Leana found that “students showed higher gains in math achievement when their teachers reported frequent conversations with their peers that centered on math, and when there was a feeling of trust or closeness among teachers.” And students whose teachers were more effective and had stronger ties with their peers showed the highest gains in math achievement.²³

These studies and more reach the same conclusion. As Kara Finnigan and Alan Daly have found, “teaching and learning are not primarily individual accomplishments but rather social endeavors that are best achieved and improved through trusting relationships and teamwork, instead of competition and a focus on individual prowess.”²⁴

It’s almost as if researchers have now proven what educators and parents have always known. Communities have responded favorably to schools where teachers have collective autonomy to make significant decisions, welcoming the changes for students and families. A 2013 national survey conducted by Widmeyer Communications investigated the public’s opinions regarding “teacher-powered schools” where “teams of teachers collaboratively decide on the curricula, the allocation of resources, and the form of leadership,” and also “choose their colleagues, handle evaluation, determine the schedule, and set school-level policy,” all hallmarks of a true profession. More than 85 percent of respondents believe such arrangements are “a good idea.”²⁵

The public recognizes that school reform, as we know it, isn’t working and that disruptions to teaching and learning are not paying off.²⁶ The achievement gaps between different groups of students have not closed substantially. And while more students are graduating from high school, too few have the skills necessary for success in college and career.²⁷ Parents share educators’ frustrations with the overemphasis on standardized testing.²⁸ And with so many teachers leaving the profession, school administrators are struggling to find qualified replacements.²⁹

Teacher-Powered Schools: Collective Autonomy as a Means to Change

Teacher-powered schools offer a powerful antidote to more than two decades of top-down school reforms. The Center for Teaching Quality and Education Evolving have created the Teacher-

*For more on lesson study, see “Growing Together” in the Fall 2009 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2009/dubin.

†For more on peer assistance and review, see “Taking the Lead” in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2008/goldstein.

‡For more on how the social aspects of schools shape teaching and learning, see Kara Finnigan and Alan Daly’s blog entry at www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/all-world%E2%80%99s-stage-how-churn-undermines-change.

Powered Schools Initiative to raise awareness of the opportunity for teachers to take on leadership roles and to nurture the efforts of teacher teams. More than 90 teacher-powered public schools are located in 18 states across the country, and the initiative is aware of another 30 under development. They serve students of all grade levels in urban, suburban, and rural environments, and include both district and charter schools. A growing number have been launched and supported by teacher unions, including some that are exploring taking on the role of professional guilds.

Teacher-powered schools offer compelling evidence that teachers can and do create schools that increase their engagement in teaching, inspire powerful student learning, and directly address social justice issues.³⁰ Many of the teacher teams that started teacher-powered schools took advantage of existing openings to seize authority, while others asked for and negotiated

to document whether the team of teachers at the school exercises full or partial decision-making authority in certain areas.³² It then designates a school as “teacher-powered” if teachers have this authority in any area.

Through its interviews with teachers in these schools, the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative has identified at least 10 arrangements through which teachers have gone about securing autonomy to design and run teacher-powered schools, a testament to the fact that each group of teachers must determine what will work best. Some groups secure formal autonomy through site-based management arrangements with their school district, and others take advantage of state laws such as Maine’s, which allows innovation schools, and other states’ which authorize charter schools. Other arrangements are initiated by union locals, in partnership with school districts. AFT locals in Cincin-



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authority (even though it wasn’t being offered outright). These teachers are explorers and pioneers in their field. They have awakened to and taken advantage of new opportunities, despite the risks, and they are willing to accept accountability for the results of their decisions. Like all pioneers, they are doing arduous work to prepare the path and infrastructure for those who have thus far been reluctant to pursue similar possibilities.

In teacher-powered schools, teams of teachers have secured autonomy to collaboratively design and lead many aspects of teaching and learning. Keeping students at the center of their decisions, they make choices about a wide array of factors, including the design of the instructional program and professional development, colleague selection, budgeting, and whether to give (and how much to count) district assessments. In many teacher-powered schools, teachers also evaluate their colleagues through peer review processes, as is often the case in other professions. While some teams running teacher-powered schools opt to have a principal or lead teacher, these administrators are chosen by the team—and view themselves as “servant leaders” who share decision-making responsibilities.³¹

In developing its online inventory of schools, the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative conducts a formal interview process

nati (Ohio), Saint Paul and Minneapolis (Minnesota), and Rochester (New York), as well as the United Federation of Teachers in New York City, have contract language that supports teacher autonomy, such as allowing them to design and run schools.

A Look at Two Boston Schools

One AFT local with members in teacher-powered schools is the Boston Teachers Union (BTU). In Boston, teacher teams in these schools have informal autonomy, meaning their autonomy depends on the goodwill of their superintendent and their school’s governing board, which has formal autonomy to make school-level decisions via a pilot school agreement. The governing board, and ultimately the superintendent, holds teachers accountable for meeting goals, but teachers can choose *how* to meet the goals in the areas in which they have autonomy. Just as important, the governing boards at these schools are partially composed of teachers.

At Mission Hill K-8 School,[§] for example, the board is made up of 21 people; approximately 30 percent are teachers, 30 percent

[§] To learn more about Mission Hill K-8 School, watch “A Year at Mission Hill,” a 10-part video series available at www.missionhillschool.org/a-year-at-mission-hill.

are students, 30 percent are community members, and 10 percent are parents. Teachers in these arrangements generally feel confident that their autonomy is secure, although there have been cases where autonomy has been pulled back during leadership transitions. This sometimes causes teams to seek a more formal autonomy arrangement, so they can continue the practices they have fostered in their teacher-powered schools.

At both Mission Hill and the BTU School, the boards honor the choices of the teacher teams while providing crucial arm's-length oversight. For instance, the teacher teams establish the school vision and the instructional approach. They also allocate and manage any funds that remain after complying with the negotiated salary schedule and state and federal mandates. What's more, they select their colleagues and leaders, and have partial authority to evaluate them. They even determine other school-

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level policy, such as homework and disciplinary approaches (adhering to state law, of course) as well as allocating staff members and setting school and staff schedules.

Finally, teacher teams annually decide upon their working conditions when they create their "election-to-work agreement," which specifies teachers' responsibilities and commitments to their school for the coming school year. Each team holds a serious discussion about what it will take to ensure the success of its school, such as additional work hours or attendance at meetings.

In the end, election-to-work agreements vary from one school to another and from the negotiated work agreement for traditional schools. Local affiliate leaders are careful to negotiate individual teachers' ability to opt out of the arrangement and return to their district's hiring pool. For teacher-powered schools to succeed, it's important for educators to want—not be required—to work in such schools.

Securing teachers' collective autonomy is an important part of starting a teacher-powered school, but even more important is what teacher teams do with the opportunity—what choices they make together. Research shows that teacher teams tend to make decisions that emulate those made in high-performing organizations, including accepting ownership (autonomy *and* accountability), sharing purpose, innovating, collaborating, engaging in effective leadership practices, assessing performance, and func-

tioning as learners (as opposed to experts who believe they already know all the answers).³³ It's also true that teams are able to put evidence of what will improve teaching and learning into practice, often without much bureaucratic hassle.

To foster a culture of mutual dependency, as suggested by Tony Bryk's research, teams put in substantial effort to build and maintain a strong shared purpose (consisting of mission, vision, values, and goals) and then delegate specific decision-making authority to various individuals and committees on the team. These individuals and committees are expected to act according to the team's shared purpose and any decision-making rules or processes it has established. If the individuals and committees do not meet expectations, the team can revoke their decision-making authority.

In this context, teacher-powered teams engage in better quality collaboration, focused on more holistic measures of learning rather than just standardized test scores. These teacher-powered teams exemplify Matt Ronfeldt's findings that better quality collaboration among teachers jointly assessing student work improves academic achievement. At the BTU School, for example, the Literacy Leadership Committee and Math Leadership Committee take on the responsibility of examining schoolwide data to determine strengths and areas for growth. The committees also create the professional development needed for improvement, a practice that Ben Jensen found to drive school improvement in top-performing nations.

As third-grade teacher Taryn Snyder explains, "Last year, the Math Leadership Committee designed and led professional development around vertically aligning problem-solving strategies for word problems from kindergarten through eighth grade, ensuring a smooth transition in terms of scholars' mathematical strategies and language from grade to grade. We've done similar professional development focusing on particular math strands as well, for example, tracing the Operations and Algebraic Thinking and the Fractions standards from kindergarten through eighth grade. This gives all faculty members insight into how their math instruction creates a foundation for the more rigorous standards of the next several grades."

At Mission Hill, the team of teachers has established a peer review system that encourages instructional risks in a context of ongoing coaching and support from colleagues, as framed by Carrie Leana's and Dylan Wiliam's research. Each teacher works with a peer review team (including an administrator, a teacher selected by the whole team, and a teacher selected by the individual). In deep consultation with these peer reviewers, the teacher outlines exactly how she will seek to improve her work with her students and help the full team accomplish its learning goals. On several occasions during the year, this peer review team observes her, not only to determine the best ways to coach and mentor her but also to learn from her.

Mission Hill first- and second-grade teacher Jenerra Williams, who is also a lead teacher, says, "The purpose of our system is for teachers to identify places in their practice where they want to improve. Their peers have conversations with them, come in to observe, look at student work, and give feedback. We feel that evaluation should be driven by an authentic need that the teacher has, and they should be evaluated by people who are closest to the children and the teaching of the school—which is other teachers."

As teachers' professional experiences become more authentic, they can better focus their school design choices on students'

needs. Teachers at Mission Hill choose three thematic units for each school year, with each theme giving students the opportunity to learn multiple school subjects. The teachers ask individual students to choose from a set of activities selected to go with each theme. When physical science is the theme of focus for the morning, for example, students can choose from spin art, making pancakes, building and testing boats or bridges, or observing bee flight from a hive in Williams's classroom.

Mission Hill teachers have decided that students will stay with the same teacher for two years, which improves their ability to monitor student progress as well as provide necessary accommodations for varying skill levels (and student mobility). The goal is that after four years and 12 themes, Mission Hill students will have learned what they need to meet all the state and district standards for the four corresponding grade levels. Teachers set individual learning goals with each student and monitor progress with portfolio assessments and public demonstrations of learning.

Teachers can go public with their desire to design and run schools, and continue developing their skills in leading school reform, by using online resources created by the Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative. At the same time, principals can shift their efforts from serving as instructional leaders to developing teacher leaders and providing opportunities for them to organize schools in ways that maximize the spread of effective practices.

Additionally, union leaders can lead the negotiation of autonomy agreements for teacher-powered schools and can assist members in learning how to collaboratively transform curricula, assessments, schedules, and budgets. District administrators can work with teachers unions to form agreements that encourage teacher-powered schools, and they can rethink the use of professional development dollars to support teachers in learning how

to improve schools from within the system, in partnership with parents and community leaders. And the U.S. Department of Education, with a redesigned approach to school improvement, can provide incentives for teachers and unions to create and support a fund for the creation of teacher-powered schools.

The era of top-down school reform has reached a turning point and is being replaced with a focus on finding new and more-effective models of student learning. Who better than teachers—through schools powered by their teaching expertise and knowledge of students—to show us the way forward? □

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