



Evidence for Teacher-Powered Schools

A Practical Route to
Better and More Equitable
Student Outcomes

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Introduction

Teacher-powered schools — that is, schools collectively designed and run by teams of educators — are a powerful, practical route to better and more equitable student learning.



teacher-powered.

adjective

1. collaboratively designed and implemented by teachers.
2. teachers having collective autonomy to make the decisions influencing the success of a school, project, or professional endeavor.

Learning must improve. Scores on assessments of important foundational skills in reading and math have remained mostly flat for decades.¹ Further, a growing chorus calls for schools to develop a deeper set of knowledge and skills students need to thrive in college, careers, and life in the 21st century² and to develop and sustain individual and community identity.³

Learning must also be more equitable. Important measures of academic learning show unacceptable gaps in opportunities and outcomes based on race, ethnicity, income, geography, learning differences, and other factors.⁴ But this characterization of inequity is only part of the story. Most schools are not yet places where students find paths to their own passion and purpose, build their identity and sense of self, develop tools to understand and challenge injustice in society, and ultimately pursue self-actualization.⁵ They should be.

At the heart of it, teacher-powered schools lead to better and more equitable learning because they **tap the energy and brilliance inherent in school communities**. At teacher-powered schools, educators partner with students, families, and communities to create student-centered learning experiences that honor, support, and develop each student for who they are—as a learner and as a person.

They're also a *realistic* strategy for change. Observers have tracked concerted efforts at school reform for six decades now. Sadly, examples of sustained, positive change over this period are nearly impossible to find.⁶ Teacher-powered schools are rooted in building capacity, meaning, and shared ownership in communities—ingredients shown to be critical for successful change.

The purpose of this paper is to show evidence of why teacher-powered schools are a realistic change strategy for better and more equitable school and student outcomes.

And now, in the year 2020, we need better learning, more equitable schools, and a realistic strategy for change more than ever. We've experienced a health pandemic followed by civil unrest and uprisings that made even more visible the deep racial injustice that's been a part of our country since its founding. Teacher-powered schools provide a way to meet these challenges with the full power and potential inherent in communities.⁷



At the heart of it, teacher-powered schools lead to better and more equitable learning because they tap the energy and brilliance inherent in school communities.

The paper begins with a description of key characteristics of teacher-powered schools. Then, in Part 1, we show how the idea is a manifestation of concepts with strong evidence in academic research. Finally, in Part 2, we offer a qualitative analysis of school and student outcomes at teacher-powered schools.

What Is a Teacher-Powered School?

Teacher-powered is a type of school governance structure where teams of educators have autonomy to design, create, and make final decisions in areas impacting student success.

15 Areas of Autonomy

Program

1. Learning Program
2. School Level Policy
3. Professional Development
4. Determining Assessment
5. Broadening Assessment

Personnel

6. Selecting Colleagues
7. Evaluating Colleagues
8. Transferring or Terminating Colleagues
9. Setting Tenure Policy
10. Selecting Leaders

Administrative

11. Budget
12. Staff Pattern
13. Compensation
14. Work Hours
15. Schedule

While we recognize other important efforts focused on teacher leadership and professionalism—for example, offering teachers leadership roles without leaving the classroom, amplifying teacher voices, and fostering professional learning communities — teacher-powered schools are unique in that educators have formal, collective autonomy to truly call the shots. Teacher-powered schools are thus akin to “professional partnerships” we see in other fields, such as law firms, physician practices, and architectural groups.

We know of at least 150 teacher-powered schools around the country,⁸ along with many more we have not yet investigated. And the movement is growing, with more schools opening and converting each year.

Among these schools, there is no one way to do or be teacher-powered. Many have formal leaders such as principals who help coordinate the team; some do not. Many have teachers in a union; others do not. Some are district schools; others are charter schools. Some make most decisions as a full team; others divide up their decisions among staff positions or committees. Each school looks different because each team has found a form of teacher-powered that works for their students, educators, and community.

Yet, movements require shared language and common ground. In an attempt to identify commonalities across schools, we’ve created two primary lenses that we use to describe teacher-powered governance models.

Figure 1. Fifteen teacher-powered areas of autonomy secured by educator teams, grouped into three high-level categories: program, personnel, and administrative.

First, we look at the areas in which the team of educators at a school collectively have decision making authority. We've identified fifteen such areas, which we call **teacher-powered autonomies**.⁹ We've also studied the institutional and legal arrangements teachers use to secure these autonomies.¹⁰

Second, we look at the structures, processes, and cultural characteristics used by educator teams to run their schools and make decisions *within* these areas of autonomy. We call these **teacher-powered practices** and have identified nine of them.¹¹

9 Teacher-Powered Practices

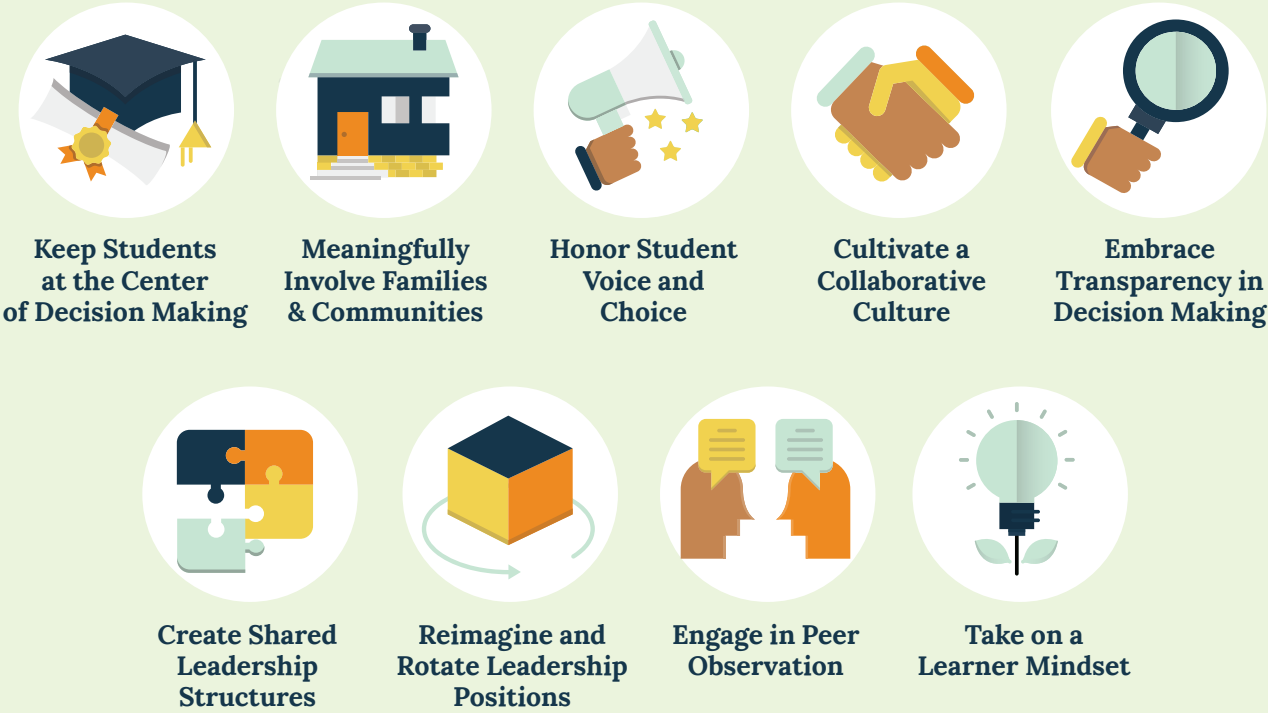


Figure 2. Nine teacher-powered practices used by educator teams.

In sum, a teacher-powered school is one that uses teacher-powered practices, to make decisions in one or more teacher-powered autonomies, in partnership with and for the benefit of the students and communities they serve.

Our Approach to Showing Evidence

In the remainder of this paper, we present evidence that teacher-powered schools lead to student and school success using a two-pronged approach.

First, in Part 1, we **review published academic research** to show that teacher-powered schools are a manifestation of ideas already well-studied in the literature—namely, school-based decision making,

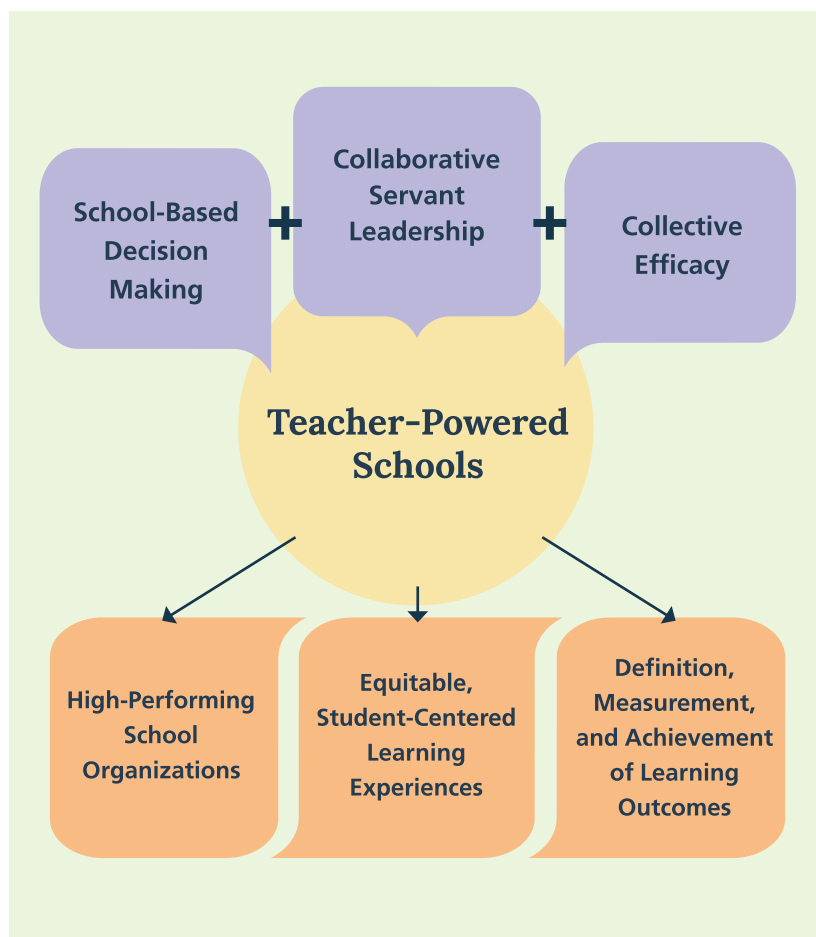


Figure 3: How teacher-powered schools—as a manifestation of school-based decision making, collaborative servant leadership, and collective efficacy—lead to high performing school organizations, equitable student-centered learning experiences, and ultimately improved student outcomes.

collaborative servant leadership, and collective efficacy—and that these ideas in turn show links with better and more equitable school and student outcomes.

Then, in Part 2, we **present a qualitative meta-analysis** of two decades worth of teacher-powered school records from school inventory interviews, site visits, two surveys of teachers, our internal school characteristics database, and additional interviews conducted for this paper. We conclude that teacher-powered schools are high-performing organizations; create equitable, student-centered learning experiences; and ultimately lead to better student learning outcomes.

Before we begin, a note of acknowledgment is in order.

Much of this paper builds on findings from *Trusting Teachers With School Success*,¹² a book on teacher-powered schools by Kim Farris-Berg and Edward J. Dirkswager with Amy Junge (who is also an author on this paper). We are deeply indebted to the leadership and insights of these authors. And finally, above all, we owe gratitude to the many educators in teacher-powered schools across the country who have shared their stories and expertise with us.



Part 1

Evidence from Research: What We Read

As you saw in the prior section, teacher-powered is a novel idea: educator teams having final authority to collectively make decisions. At the same time, it draws on and is a manifestation of at least three main well-studied ideas: school-based decision making, collaborative servant leadership, and collective efficacy. In this section, we show how teacher-powered schools embody these constructs and draw on the academic literature that shows each is linked with improving school and student outcomes.

Teacher-Powered as School-Based Decision Making

For an educator team to use any of the autonomies or practices of the teacher-powered model, the authority to do so must first flow to the team of teachers. As such, a teacher-powered school is, by necessity, at least partially an autonomous school. We explore here the evidence for this dimension of teacher-powered.

Numerous phrases have been used to describe this autonomy: school-based management, site-based management, decentralized decision making, portfolio schools, pilot schools, schools as the unit of change, and others.¹³ The last several decades have seen oscillations between centralized, top-down control and decentralized, school-based control on both a nationwide and individual district level.¹⁴



Teacher-powered draws on and is a manifestation of at least three main well-studied ideas: school-based decision making, collaborative servant leadership, and collective efficacy.

Much of the original research on school-based decision making from the 1980s and 1990s finds its effects on students, teachers, and schools mixed but generally positive; however, methodological issues plague these studies, given decentralization initiatives were often implemented concurrently with other reforms, making it hard to isolate their effects.¹⁵ Notably, research from this era finds that positive effects were more often found where *teachers collectively* had more control of schools, rather than a single leader.¹⁶

More recent investigations of school autonomy initiatives, in particular in large urban districts, have shown more promising results.¹⁷ Some influential studies show that school autonomy can, under the right conditions, be the key ingredient in change.¹⁸ Districts such as New York City,¹⁹ Denver,²⁰ Boston,²¹ New Orleans,²² and others have centered school autonomy in reform efforts.²³ While these districts are not without their own controversies and challenges—many of which, as we describe in the following section, teacher-powered schools can help to overcome—overall they show promising results in terms of student achievement and other outcome indicators.



Teacher-powered schools provide a much-needed answer to these challenges of school-based decision making

Cross-national studies also suggest benefits to more decentralized school systems. Higher performing nations tend to have higher levels of both school and teacher autonomy,²⁴ especially among economically developed nations.²⁵ Additionally, in research on organizations more broadly, decentralized decision making is linked with improved socially responsible organization performance and overall productivity.²⁶ This is especially true in organizations (such as schools) that perform “knowledge work”,²⁷ which require high levels of professional judgment²⁸ and continual innovation on practices.²⁹

An overarching conclusion from our review is that decentralized decision making is sound on an organizational theory and cross-national analysis level, and has been documented as a key lever for positive change at school,³⁰ district,³¹ and national³² levels. At the same time, it hasn’t been a panacea and hasn’t worked everywhere.³³ Why not?

Studies that have probed deeper on this variation identify a key issue being the lack of “true” autonomy, wherein schools are ostensibly self-governing but face barriers from districts³⁴ or states.³⁵ And—perhaps even more importantly—the lack of site-level capacity to use that autonomy, because of poor leadership,³⁶ lack of shared vision and collaborative sense of purpose,³⁷ or deep, toxic problems with school culture.³⁸

Put frankly, teacher-powered schools provide a much-needed answer to these challenges of school-based decision making. Namely, teachers use formal arrangements, as described above, to *secure true autonomy* for their schools.³⁹ And, they *expand their capacity* to use that autonomy through collaborative servant leadership and collective efficacy as we describe in the following two sections.

Teacher-Powered as Collaborative Servant Leadership

While teacher-powered schools do involve school-based decision making, they differ from conventional approaches in that *authority and leadership are shared among educators* at each school site. We explore here the evidence for this dimension of teacher-powered.

Leadership, defined generally, has substantial impact on the performance of organizations,⁴⁰ including in education.⁴¹ An approach to leadership gaining attention in recent years is one in which the focus shifts from the actions of a single leader, to the *function* of leadership and the sharing of that function among a team.⁴² The literature on these approaches is expansive, falling under a collection of terms with overlapping meanings, including collaborative, distributed, collective, shared, and servant leadership.⁴³

Collaborative leadership models have been shown to be linked with student learning,⁴⁴ though quantitative analysis in this area is relatively new.⁴⁵ The collegial relationships in these models lay a groundwork of shared ideas and commitments,⁴⁶ high teacher job satisfaction and intention to stay,⁴⁷ enhanced organizational commitment,⁴⁸ and other factors that are in turn linked with improved learning outcomes. These findings are consistent with a larger body of research beyond education, which show links between collaborative leadership and improved organization and team performance.⁴⁹



In short, positive places for educators to teach and lead become productive places for students to learn and grow, in a self-reinforcing cycle.

A practice common within these leadership approaches, and one heavily documented in teacher-powered schools,⁵⁰ is that of servant leadership.⁵¹ Servant leaders see their role as developing the inherent potential and purpose in all people, and clearing barriers they face.⁵² In part due to its central role at corporations like Starbucks, Southwest Airlines, and others, the approach has been widely studied in recent years. A 2019 review of over 200 quantitative studies found overwhelming evidence⁵³ of links to employee engagement,⁵⁴ turnover reduction,⁵⁵ well being,⁵⁶ and ultimately the performance of individuals,⁵⁷ teams,⁵⁸ and organizations.⁵⁹



At teacher-powered schools, the focus on collaborative and servant leadership means ultimately that individual educators have more opportunities for leadership.⁶⁰ This expansion of leadership roles at the individual teacher level has been linked with higher organizational commitment,⁶¹ responsibility,⁶² and persistence during program implementation.⁶³ Ultimately, these benefits can lead not only to marked differences in academic outcomes,⁶⁴ but also helping students to understand and internalize how a democratic society works.⁶⁵

In general, the link between leadership and school success rests heavily on and is mediated by its effects on other school conditions, such as culture, climate, shared commitment, and more.⁶⁶ School culture and climate are, in turn, linked with improved school outcomes.⁶⁷ Namely, teachers having larger, collaborative roles leads to improved school climate, which ultimately results in higher achievement.⁶⁸

In short, positive places for educators to teach and lead become productive places for students to learn and grow, in a self-reinforcing cycle. We describe this phenomenon further below.

Teacher-Powered as Collective Efficacy

When a team of people come together in shared purpose, authority, and trust to collaboratively solve a problem greater than themselves something truly remarkable can happen. Collaborative leadership becomes collective efficacy.⁶⁹

Self efficacy is one's belief in their ability to make positive change.⁷⁰ It develops in a self-reinforcing cycle: as a person experiences success in an activity, they build skills and confidence, which in turn make them more likely to persist, adapt, and improve in similar future situations.⁷¹ Self efficacy develops in environments where people experience autonomy and trust, including among teachers in schools.⁷²

“*Teacher-powered, wherein educators have the autonomy to make decisions they know work for their students, is collective efficacy in action.*”

Collective efficacy carries this idea of self efficacy into a team context.⁷³ As researcher Peter DeWitt writes, “[Collective efficacy] can have a marked positive impact on student learning. It’s important to understand, however, that collective efficacy doesn’t just happen, especially in schools that are beset by low morale and top-down mandates. It requires a great deal of trust, which must be built over time, and an intentional effort by educators to buck the status quo.”⁷⁴

A recent meta-analysis of studies of collective efficacy found it to have a substantial links with student learning,⁷⁵ with an *effect size larger than essentially all other known school-based determinants*.⁷⁶ Teacher-powered, wherein educators have the autonomy to make decisions they know work for their students, is collective efficacy in action.

Researchers have sought to understand why self and collective efficacy are such powerful predictors of individual and organizational performance. Ultimately, it comes down to the manifestation of deep, core elements of what it means to be human.⁷⁷ When individuals have opportunities for ownership and success as co-leaders of an organization, they feel valued and bring their best selves to work, building on natural human needs for autonomy, purpose, and ultimately self-determination.⁷⁸

Lastly, collective efficacy overlaps with another large body of research: that of how successful change and improvement happens within public education. In one of the most widely cited education books of all time, change scholar Michael Fullan concludes: successful change happens when people create shared meaning.⁷⁹ Collaborative leadership for collective efficacy is shared meaning in action.⁸⁰



Part 2

Evidence from Practice: What We See

In this section we shift to a qualitative analysis of records from interviews, site visits, surveys, databases, and other records related to teacher-powered schools from the last two decades. While this analysis is subjective, it is based on a systematic analysis of our internally collected data. This descriptive, qualitative approach is necessary to paint a full picture of the impact of and evidence for teacher-powered schools.

Our goal here was to identify common themes regarding the impact teacher-powered schools have on school and student outcomes. In our analysis, we included themes that we document occurring in at least 90 percent of identified teacher-powered schools. In short, we see teacher-powered models are associated with high-performing school organizations; equitable, student-centered learning experiences; and ultimately improved student learning outcomes. We describe each in turn, below.

Themes Observed at Teacher-Powered Schools

High-Performing School Organizations

- Co-create a shared purpose
- Collaborate to share the load and build ownership
- Accept accountability and hold each other to high standards
- Commit to ongoing growth and learning
- Continually innovate and adapt

Equitable, Student-Centered Learning Experiences

- Put positive relationships first
- Acknowledge and support students' foundational needs
- Partner with families and communities to co-create culturally sustaining, identity-affirming environments
- Orient learning around problems in the real world
- Honor student agency and interests to maximize motivation

Definition, Measurement, and Achievement of Learning Outcomes

- Collect and use data to drive improvement
- Prioritize learning growth through adapted approaches, while maintaining high expectations
- Broaden and deepen concepts of achievement
- Measure these expanded concepts of achievement

Figure 4. Teacher-powered models are associated with high-performing school organizations; equitable, student-centered learning experiences; and ultimately improved student learning outcomes.

High-Performing School Organizations

Teacher-powered schools exhibit characteristics of high-performing organizations. This point was made originally in *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots*.⁸¹ Authors Farris-Berg, Dirkswager, and Junge reviewed research on organizational effectiveness and identified eight characteristics associated with high performance. Then, using site visits, interviews, and a survey of teachers in teacher-powered schools, they showed that teacher-powered schools exhibit those same characteristics.

Our own qualitative research and analysis for this paper reaffirm this finding. In particular, we find that teacher-powered schools:

✦ **Co-create a shared purpose.**

Shared purpose—a school’s mission, vision, and set of goals—is the foundation of any successful team. At teacher-powered schools, educator teams collaboratively create, reassess, and continually revise their shared purpose; it lives in each decision, permeating the culture of the school. And this shared purpose is fluid, evolving with the needs of their students and the times. Teams are willing to “define what’s hindering progress and to consider and commit to new ways of doing things, all within the context of their shared mission, value, and goals.”⁸² When surveyed, 97 percent of teachers at teacher-powered schools reported that their team was excellent, very good, or good (on a seven-point Likert scale) when asked if their school culture reflected their shared purpose.⁸³ During the Covid-19 pandemic, when schools shifted to distance learning, teams had to design new learning experiences that were still authentic to the school’s co-created shared principles. For example, teams ensured that students’ foundational and social-emotional needs were being met first and gave students space online to process their experiences in constructive ways.

✦ **Collaborate to share the responsibility and build ownership.**

As teams create leadership structures that include teachers at each level, shared ownership becomes part of their culture. Instead of just encouraging teacher leadership for token tasks or roles, teacher-powered schools make it an integral, authentic part of their organization. Some schools have flat leadership structures, others use committees or teams to divide up the work, and others use a hybrid of these approaches.⁸⁴ All teacher-powered schools instill *collective* agency in their teams. Programs and initiatives need the often-discussed “buy-in” of the people doing the work; teacher-powered schools elevate this concept and create true ownership of decisions—because the teachers are actually making them.

✦ **Accept accountability and hold each other to high standards.**

Nearly every time we visit a teacher-powered school, we hear some version of the famous Spider-man quote, “with great power comes great responsibility.” When surveyed, 92 percent of teachers in teacher-powered schools rated their fellow teachers’ willingness to accept responsibility for decisions as excellent, very good, or good. The same percentage also rated their colleagues’ willingness to accept accountability for student outcomes as excellent, very good, or good.⁸⁵ When teachers have collective autonomy, they are willing to be accountable to their students, families, and colleagues.

✦ **Commit to ongoing growth and learning.**

A key characteristic of high-performing organizations is that they see themselves as continually learning.⁸⁶ Teacher-powered teams adopt a learner mindset for themselves and model this for their students. They commit to collaborative servant leadership and improving their potential as teachers and as leaders. Their commitments to professional growth is evident in the ways they participate in peer observation, encourage informal feedback, and often use 360-degree evaluations from fellow teachers, students, and families. Many teams use a hybrid evaluation system combining what is required by their state with a supplemental evaluation that provides feedback on the teams’ agreed-upon values, skills, and learning outcomes. A study of the professional life of teachers at teacher-powered schools found that 96 percent of teachers report that they get regular, meaningful feedback and 87 percent regularly observe their colleagues.⁸⁷

✦ **Continually innovate and adapt.**

Teacher-powered schools use their autonomy to be flexible, creative, and responsive to student needs. Without layers of bureaucracy and mandates (from districts, unions, or states), teams can apply their learner mindsets to put ideas into action. Farris-Berg writes, “Some [teachers] had been involved with improvement efforts where teachers had input, but no real authority. Without authority, they said it wasn’t worth the time investment required to learn new things and innovate.”⁸⁸ The challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic provide an excellent example of how teacher-powered teams were better prepared than many traditional schools to pivot quickly to distance learning. They already had practices and structures in place to make decisions quickly and adapt their learning program, as well as the culture of trust needed to move the school forward cohesively.⁸⁹



Avalon School

St. Paul, MN



[Avalon](#) is a public 6-12 charter school in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Since the school opened in 2001, it has been designed and run by their team of teachers with complete autonomy in all 15 areas. Their employee handbook describes teacher responsibilities well: “As a ‘teacher as owner’ model, all employees share in the business operations, including but not limited to: governance, finances, payroll/personnel, facility/equipment, and property maintenance, as well as participation on various business operation committees.”

Avalon is a high-performing organization according to the criteria set out in *Trusting Teachers*. Their flat leadership structure centers on their commitment to creating a student-centered learning environment and preparing students for college and life. All decisions come back to this central question: what is best for students? Long-time advisor Tim Quealy says, “I think students really have to be at the center, you have to find ways to amplify their voices, and one of the most effective ways to do this is by amplifying the voices of those working directly with them, their teachers. No two communities will look the same or have the same needs—flexibility, constant reflection, and strong shared vision are all vital.”⁹⁰



Avalon is also committed to professional growth as a staff. They use a 360-degree teacher evaluation system each year to assess members of their team, soliciting feedback from students, families, and their colleagues. Their physical space features walls of windows into each classroom and teachers regularly walk into each other’s rooms, informally observing and listening

to student and teacher interactions. Regularly scheduled peer observation also occurs, offering a chance to set goals, process student interactions, and provide feedback on lessons.

While running a school is a lot of work, Avalon has a very low turnover rate—another indication of a high-performing organization. According to their 2018-2019 Annual Report:

The twenty-seven licensed teaching staff account for over 249 years of experience at Avalon—an average of over 9 years of experience at Avalon per staff member. Of these twenty-seven licensed teaching staff, twenty-six will return next year—an incredible 96 percent retention. As extraordinary as this retention is, it is no aberration: our average teacher attrition is just 5 percent annually. With a program as unique and innovative as Avalon's, this low turnover is critical: it allows for a consistent and reliable core community to make decisions, operate the school, and form critical, long-term relationships with students and families.⁹¹



High teacher retention is important on many levels, including financially.⁹² Resources that are typically spent recruiting, hiring, and training new teachers can go instead to students. Carrie Bakken, an advisor at Avalon, writes, “teacher retention is also incredibly cost effective because we are not consistently hiring and mentoring new staff. Avalon School has earned several finance awards from the Minnesota Department of Education and from our charter authorizer because so much of our money goes directly to the classroom.”⁹³

Why do teachers stay at Avalon if they have more work than traditional teachers? Because it is work they design, create, and own. They are deeply invested in not only their classrooms, but their school as a whole. A 2010 case study on Avalon found that “teachers reported that the job they have now is the best one they’ve ever had.”⁹⁴ This echoes survey findings that 90 percent of teachers agreed that teaching at their current teacher-powered school was the most enjoyable job they’d ever had.⁹⁵



**Washtenaw Alliance
for Virtual Education**
Ypsilanti, MI



To the east of Avalon is [Washtenaw Alliance for Virtual Education \(WAVE\)](#) in Ypsilanti, MI. Created as an alternative for students who were struggling in traditional schools, WAVE uses a hybrid virtual and in-person approach to learning. Teachers at WAVE root their shared purpose in a belief in the inherent potential of their students, and in helping those students to address the challenges that held them back.

Monique Uzelac and Sarah Giddings, two WAVE leaders, describe how they put their shared purpose into action: “At most schools, the needs of their students are only addressed Monday-Friday during typical ‘business’ hours. At WAVE, our supports go beyond our walls and are available around the clock.”⁹⁶ And while working conditions and schedules look different at teacher-powered schools, teachers don’t necessarily report working more hours.⁹⁷ Still, such working conditions would often raise complaints at other schools, but at WAVE it was a decision the teacher team made together. Teachers, like all professionals, are more satisfied with their working conditions when they co-create them.

WAVE uses their autonomy to adapt, innovate, and implement their co-created shared purpose of serving non-traditional students. Sarah shares, “At my school, I have been able to create—along with an amazing team of educators—an environment where teachers and students have the power, risk-taking ability, and encouragement we need to be successful. We do this through a hybrid system that includes both standards-

and project-based programming and both online and face-to-face programming in order to serve the unique needs of our student population.”⁹⁸



WAVE educators feel shared ownership for the success of every student regardless of whose class they are in. Students at WAVE report that they succeed in this environment because of teachers’ commitment to their growth not only academically but as a whole person. WAVE student Olivia writes, “Teachers are really into helping you, even if they are not the regular teachers for that subject. Very cool that you can earn credit in multiple areas, and it is flexible with your schedule. The staff is very supportive with everything, school and life.”

Similar to Avalon, WAVE has an exceptionally high teacher retention rate, with 100 percent retention for the last several years.⁹⁹ Giddings explains why low teacher turnover is important to their students, “My students deserve quality educators who have the support and flexibility to build strong relationships and are not enticed to leave. Although my student population may seem difficult, none of the academic staff in my program have left in the six years I have taught here.”¹⁰⁰ WAVE is a school where both students and teachers thrive.

Equitable, Student-Centered Learning Experiences

Teacher-powered schools are not just high functioning organizations for the sake of strong performance. They are high functioning toward the end of facilitating *equitable, student-centered learning experiences for students*.¹⁰¹ Namely, we observe that teacher-powered schools:

✦ Put positive relationships first.

Authentic relationships are the foundation on which all learning is built, providing the sense of security, connection, and belonging requisite to human development.¹⁰² Teacher-powered teams invest time and resources for each student to have strong positive relationships with multiple adults on campus and with their peers. Many use daily advisories, community circles, and town hall meetings to model and build positive relationships with and among students. These relationships improve both the experience students have in school and also the decision-making of teachers, because they know their students well and can make decisions tailored to their needs.

✦ Acknowledge and support students' foundational needs.

Teacher-powered teams focus on seeing the whole child, scaffolding learning around each student's own experiences in the world, and establishing trust with the student and their family.



Student-Centered Learning & Educational Equity

Many of the themes we observe in teacher-powered schools closely align with Education Evolving's seven principles of student-centered learning.

We define equity as each student having what they need to reach their full potential. Student-centered learning—that is, learning designed based on each individual student's assets and needs—is thus, by definition, equitable learning.

Read more at: www.educationevolving.org/learning and www.educationevolving.org/equity

Many teacher-powered schools serve students who face foundational hardships, including homelessness, food scarcity, trauma, lack of access to quality healthcare, and economic challenges. Many teacher-powered schools use a community school approach¹⁰³ to partner with local organizations, mobile health clinics, social service agencies, and other service providers to meet the foundational needs of their students.

✦ **Partner with families and communities to co-create culturally sustaining, identity-affirming environments.**

Many teacher-powered schools are part of diverse communities and strive to bring their vibrant cultures into the school setting. Family and community members become an integral part of the school, often sitting on school design teams, hiring committees, site leadership committees, and serving as mentors to students and partners to teachers. This inclusive, participatory approach means teacher-powered schools often attract students and families who don't feel seen or served in traditional schools. For example, several teacher-powered schools focus on LGBTQ students, offering them a space safe from bullying where they can explore their identity.

✦ **Orient learning around problems in the real world.**

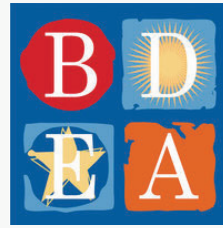
Teacher-powered teams engage students in self-directed projects, interdisciplinary work, and learning outside of the classroom—approaches that help students connect learning to their own lives. To support these innovative programs, many teacher-powered schools orient their learning around competencies or learning targets, rather than courses or seat time. There are few things more relevant for students today than the current political and social tensions and uprisings, including not only the pandemic and protests against police brutality, but also gun violence, immigration/DREAMERS,¹⁰⁴ environmental social justice, and LGBTQ rights. Teacher-powered schools support students' interest in these movements, helping them think critically about the topics and channeling their ideas into action, including participating in protests and marches.

✦ **Honor student agency and interests to maximize motivation.**

Many teacher-powered teams use learning approaches that enable and grow student agency, such as project-based learning, service learning, internships and community-embedded learning, youth participatory action research, and more. These models allow students more opportunities to choose topics and/or methods of study in keeping with their interests, and in so doing maximize motivation and engagement.¹⁰⁵ Several teacher-powered schools describe themselves as “student-powered” schools, where students own not just their academic learning, but also their school community.



Boston Day and Evening Academy Boston, MA



[Boston Day and Evening Academy](#) (BDEA) opened in 1995 and in 1998 became a Horace Mann Charter School within Boston Public Schools (BPS). BDEA teachers are BPS employees and union members. Their charter status gives them the autonomy to create a student-centered learning environment for students not finding success in conventional models, including students who are over 18, have previously left school, are pregnant or have young children, experience homelessness, or have chronic attendance challenges. BDEA uses a competency-based learning program focused on credit recovery, student choice, and individual and group projects.



To meet students' foundational needs, the school offers wraparound services for students through dozens of community partners who assist with expanded learning opportunities, meeting foundational needs, and offering family support.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the BDEA Student Services Team provides home visits for struggling students on an as-needed basis, seven days a week.

The school facilitates real world relevant learning through dual enrollment partnerships with local colleges, as well as internships and field trips arranged by a dedicated Community Field Coordinator. Each year,

BDEA has a Project Month during which all classes use experiential and project-based learning, giving students and teachers an opportunity to collaborate across classes and disciplines.

A key component of BDEA's success has been their multiple and varied measurements of learning. Within their competency-based system, each student has an individualized learning plan with benchmarks; as students demonstrate mastery, benchmarks are checked off. Seminars, portfolios, capstone projects, and symposiums are all used to evaluate and document student learning. Students are also required to participate in career exploration, including post-graduate planning for college and/or vocational training.

BDEA does not use traditional high school grade levels; instead students are grouped into a cohort based on when they enrolled in the school. Enrollment is open throughout the year and graduations are celebrated quarterly as students complete their requisite competencies. Passing Massachusetts state exams in ELA, math, and science is also required, however students do not take these state exams at any set grade level; rather they take them once they have demonstrated they have learned the content.



High School for Recording Arts St. Paul, MN



Nationally recognized [High School for Recording Arts \(HSRA\)](#), a charter school in St. Paul, Minnesota has served students since 1998. David T.C. Ellis, a well known recording artist, started HSRA's predecessor organization, Studio 4, as an out-of-school educational program that aimed to keep students in school, build on their skills and passion around music, and prepare them for life beyond school. Studio 4 evolved into HSRA, where students complete high school credits in a learning space centered on music, state of the art recording technology, digital arts, and passions unique to students' own cultures.



The teacher-powered team at HSRA strongly identifies as a student-centered school rooted in student voice and choice. Similar to Boston Day and Evening Academy, competency-based education is the foundation of HSRA's educational program. Students complete independent projects, participate in internships, write and record music, and even create video and audio advertisements and other products for local companies in order to complete competencies required for graduation. Oftentimes a student will meet standards across multiple disciplines with a single project.

Joey Cienian, Director of Educational Programming, described, "Young people come in disempowered, [thinking] 'school is something that happens to me... We want students to develop the skills and knowledge they need to be successful—we all do—but we don't create structures that achieve that.'" ¹⁰⁷ When a student arrives under-credited, HSRA relies on more than standardized assessments to see the full picture of where that student is in their learning. "We take a step back and build a relationship with that student. We figure out their story before we figure out their plan," explains Cienian.

From there, the school's dynamic structure creates space for students to join at a place appropriate for them, without sending them back to the start. The team also prioritizes community partnerships to meet the needs of their students. For example, there is an onsite health clinic, Legal Rights Center, and domestic abuse support group. They also use partnerships to provide work opportunities for their students, including those with State Farm, Little Village Foundation, Rock the Cause, Wilder Foundation, and the Sierra Club.

Definition, Measurement, and Achievement of Learning Outcomes

Teacher-powered schools not only improve the learning experiences of students; those improved experiences also result in better definition, measurement, and achievement of *learning outcomes*.

Below, we describe some of the specific themes we observe toward this end. Namely, teacher-powered schools:

Outcomes Data at Teacher-Powered Schools

A quantitative study of learning outcomes specifically at identified teacher-powered schools is beyond the scope of this paper. That said, see Part 1, above, for an extensive review of research that makes the connection between elements of the teacher-powered model and improved student and school outcomes, on a quantitative level.

✦ Collect and use data to drive improvement.

Analyzing and acting on data is an important part of school improvement. It is equally important that it is done well, and that the data collected reflect the outcomes desired. Sifting through the mountains of available data on students to identify the human narratives they illustrate is key to truly understanding how to support students. Teacher-powered teams look at both traditional measures (including math, reading, and science

proficiency and growth, graduation rates, suspension rates, etc.) as well as broadened data sets including portfolios of student work, performance assessments, and social-emotional learning instruments (including the Hope Survey,¹⁰⁸ the Search Institute's Developmental Assets,¹⁰⁹ Habits of Mind rubrics,¹¹⁰ and more).

✦ Prioritize learning growth through adapted approaches, while maintaining high expectations.

Teacher-powered schools recognize that many of the challenges preventing students from reaching proficiency can be traced back to students not receiving the support they need, when they need it. Teams prioritize and achieve *growth* in learning by simultaneously meeting students where they're at while holding high expectations for where they're headed. Many teams track longitudinal data to get a true sense of progress; for example, a student may test as not proficient in reading at their current grade, but did make 3 years of growth in the 2 years at that school. This type of analysis allows teams to see where they are being successful and where to adjust when they aren't getting the results they want.

✦ **Broaden and deepen concepts of achievement.**

Much of the education policy discussion equates “outcomes” to student scores on standardized tests of reading and math. To be sure, literacy and numeracy are critically important foundational skills, especially for elementary age students.¹¹¹ But stopping there in the definition of outcomes is irresponsible. A wide spectrum of student characteristics—such as critical thinking, problem solving, persistence, growth mindset, and others—have strong links with success in life and society, and those characteristics can be intentionally developed in schools.¹¹² Teachers confirm the importance of these expanded concepts of achievement, with 95 percent of teachers at teacher-powered schools reporting that students are learning skills to use in a democratic society, and 97 percent say that teachers are modeling leadership skills needed to solve collective problems.¹¹³

✦ **Measure these expanded concepts of achievement.**

A challenge with these expanded concepts of achievement is that they are hard to measure. Teacher-powered schools address this head-on by developing and using 21st century assessment approaches, including social-emotional surveys, performance assessments, portfolios, and other tools. For example, one of the Search Institute’s Developmental Assets is reading for pleasure. One school initially saw in their data that the percentage of students who read outside of class was relatively low. The team then partnered with local organizations to form book clubs during lunch and afterschool for students and by the next year a much higher percentage of students reported reading for pleasure—and subsequently improved on other measures of learning.



**Tri-County Early
College**
Murphy, NC



Located in rural North Carolina, [Tri-County Early College \(TCEC\)](#) has received national attention for their success, including being named a Super XQ Schools finalist, becoming a member of the highly-selective Global Schools' Alliance, and receiving an "A" rating by the Department of Public Instruction in North Carolina (only 4 percent of NC schools achieve this). The design decisions of the TCEC educator team yielded a school where students are successful on a variety of outcome measures, both traditional and broadened.



After adjusting their learning program in 2016 to be project focused, competency-based, and organized around advisories (small groups led by teachers), they received their highest state School Performance Grade ever, and students showed significant growth in all state-tested areas (biology, math, and English). According to the North Carolina School Report Card,¹¹⁴ TCEC exceeded academic growth set by the state in 2018 and met academic growth in 2019. They also outperformed the local district and state in biology, math, and English on state exams with 82, 92, and 67 percent of students being proficient at grade level in those respective subjects.

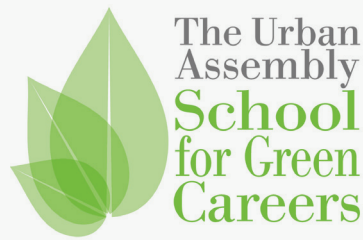
The school describes their success this way: "Although we allow a great deal of student autonomy, we hold our students accountable to the same academic rigor within the disciplines and their practice of skills ties directly to their content learning. Even within a framework of student autonomy and the minimal use of standardized quizzes and tests, our students manage to beat the local, state, and sometimes national averages in specific content knowledge."¹¹⁵

Similar to other teacher-powered schools, TCEC uses their collaborative leadership structure to design learning that is student-centered and relevant to the youth in their community. The educator team chooses to use a STEM-focused learning program, where students own each part of their education and earn college credit while still in high school. Many students graduate high school with an associate degree from the local community college concurrently. They're also required to give back, with 100 hours of community service needed for graduation. Student outcomes have improved both on traditional measurements, but also in terms of preparedness for work and civic life in the 21st century.



**The Urban Assembly
School for Green
Careers**

New York, NY



[The Urban Assembly School for Green Careers](#) (UAGC) is located in Manhattan's upper west side and serves a diverse group of high school students; 59 percent identify as Hispanic/Latinx, 28 percent as Black, 9 percent White, and 2 percent Asian. Approximately 83 percent of students face economic hardship.¹¹⁶ Six years ago, UAGC was a failing school in New York City, ranking in the bottom one percent of schools. Their teacher team was determined to turn the school around and realized they would need to radically restructure their learning and leading to do this.



Since converting to a teacher-powered shared leadership model five years ago, their graduation rate has climbed dramatically and their students are now finishing school with documented evidence of preparedness for college and life. In 2018 their graduation rate reached 78.8 percent, including a graduation rate for students with disabilities of 90.6 percent. In 2019 their graduation rate rose to 83 percent, and in 2020 their projected graduation rate is 95.6 percent, outperforming their borough and city.

In 2019, their academic performance was in the top 20 percent for reading and top 30 percent for math among all high schools in New York, with 89 percent and 74 percent of students scoring at or above proficiency on state exams of reading and math, respectively. Equally important, 96 percent of families say that the school staff works hard to build trusting relationships with families like them, and 94 percent say that teachers work closely with them to meet their child's needs.¹¹⁷ This astounding success was made possible by moving the decisions to the teacher team, who had a clear picture of what their students and community wanted and needed.

Brent Chamberlain writes, "As part of a group of empowered teachers, I helped lead an effort to transform the school by emphasizing freedom for teachers and students, rather than answering struggle and failure with more oppression."¹¹⁸ Using the Schools Based Option and later the PROSE opportunity¹¹⁹ (co-operated by the district, teachers union, and administrative union), the UAGC team was able to adjust their schedule, curriculum, and school level policies to better meet the

needs of their students. Their learning model prioritizes learning growth personalized to each student's academic needs. They also use a unique pedagogy where small groups of students read texts aloud and simultaneously critically analyze and debate them.

Much of their program links back to themes of environmental injustice, and in particular ensuring equitable access to quality living and natural resources. Students gain skills in collaborative problem-solving, critical reasoning, empathy and awareness of how to interrupt injustice, and practical knowledge of green industries and environmental issues.

In a New York Times article, Urban Assembly English teacher Kate Louis describes how she uses this autonomy to better engage her students:

In most writing classrooms, teachers normally have to follow curriculum programs that dictate units of study... We let students have complete freedom to write on topics of their own choice in forms of their own choosing — so the classroom space promotes democratic processes that can foster selfhood. And because the conversations students have about experiences are, essentially, the first drafts of their writing, they are instructed how to be thoughtful about making good choices to sit with people who will inspire rich conversations about writing ideas, and to find spaces in the classroom conducive to talk.¹²⁰

UAGC prepares students not just to graduate high school, but for a life beyond school where they can be contributing members of a democratic society.





**Baldwin Hills Elementary
Pilot & Gifted/
High Ability Magnet
Los Angeles, CA**



**BALDWIN HILLS ELEMENTARY
PILOT & GIFTED MAGNET SCHOOL**



[Baldwin Hills Elementary](#) provides another example of an educator team who collaboratively converted their traditional school to a teacher-powered model where students and adults in the building thrive. The school serves 97 percent students of color, and over 70 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Among their staff, over 90 percent identify as educators of color.

Baldwin Hills' redesign began in 2014, when the team took advantage of an opportunity offered by Los Angeles Unified School District to become a pilot school in order to gain site autonomy. Baldwin Hills educators, in partnership with families and students, created an academically rigorous, culturally responsive instructional program focused on meeting the needs of all students in their community. Principal Letitia Davis describes their academic philosophy as:

Culturally responsive pedagogical practices, paired with engaging scholars in 21st century skills and competencies, is the frame upon which we build our curriculum. Our students read texts, explore histories, and see reflections of who they are culturally as their first teaching—and as the foundation upon which all other learning is set. This level of relevance shows the level of value we place on our students, recognizing their worth and value as children of color, and it is a means not just to bring about affirmation and validation but to push the level of rigor.¹²¹



This change to culturally affirming curriculum and instruction has allowed students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Since the redesign in 2016, students have made progress on traditional measures like state exams, and broadened measures such as STEAM projects, portfolios, and school climate surveys.



In 2020 Baldwin Hills was recognized as a CA Distinguished School for closing the achievement gap. Davis says their school as “is unique and has a reputation for being a gem among LAUSD schools because of our success educating African-American and Latino children. Though high achieving, we believe there should not be a ceiling on achievement and that we can do more when given the autonomy to make decisions that directly impact the children we know so well and teach.”

Student engagement has also increased with changes to the curriculum. Parent Tünette Powell says her son used to struggle with writing but not anymore. “The 4th grade teacher started using poetry and hip hop to get him to fall in love with writing and to find his voice. He starts getting fours in writing and I’m just like oh my god, and now he’s so arrogant about his writing as if he’s always been good at it, but it’s like that’s just an example of being able to bring in curriculum that is relevant and that is culturally relevant and means something to kids. That’s been really important for us.”¹²² The teachers focus on social justice, building on students’ cultural identities, and working with community partners to make learning authentic and relevant in all areas.



Conclusion and Next Steps

As asserted in the introduction and demonstrated in this paper, teacher-powered schools provide a powerful, practical path to better and more equitable learning outcomes. They do so by tapping the inherent power and potential in educators, students, and families at the school community level.

Teacher-powered is a unique and important idea. At the same time, it is not fully a new idea. As we saw in Part 1, it is a manifestation of several well-studied concepts, which we see in academic research have deep links with student and school outcomes. In short, teacher-powered schools put into practice much of what research shows to work best for running organizations and making change.

As shown in Part 2, the conclusions we draw from research corroborate what we observe in the network of teacher-powered schools. Namely, we see schools operating as highly effective organizations; creating student-centered learning experiences that honor each student for who they are; and ultimately lead to both strong academic and broader/deeper student outcomes.

While this paper makes a case that there already is strong evidence for teacher-powered schools as a route to improved outcomes, there's more work to do. We need to understand better what works in teacher-powered schools, and under what conditions. And we must continue making the case for the true power of the teacher-powered movement.

We suggest a few specific ideas for next steps:

- ✦ Develop and pilot better measures of outcomes that matter for student and school success, including social-emotional learning instruments, validated performance and portfolio assessments, college and career readiness rubrics, and more.
- ✦ Collectively create, use, and report on a shared teacher-powered schools performance framework, using these new measures. Help schools reflect and learn from other schools using the same framework.
- ✦ Conduct more research specifically on outcomes at schools in the teacher-powered network. For example, explore how student outcomes at network schools compared to other local schools.
- ✦ Illuminate the relationship between teacher-powered schools and equity. Ask: how are teacher-powered schools closing the achievement gap for traditionally underserved students? Are they contributing to student, family, and community liberation and self-determination?

From what we've learned, from research and experience, these next steps are worth it. Let's take them together.

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