
SUPPORTING PRINCIPALS WHO BREAK RANKS

*Recommendations from Breaking Ranks II for Creating
Systems that Support Successful High Schools*

SUPPORTING PRINCIPALS WHO BREAK RANKS

*Recommendations from Breaking Ranks II for Creating
Systems that Support Successful High Schools*



1904 Association Drive • Reston, VA 20191-1537
800-253-7747 • Fax 703-476-5432
nassp@principals.org
www.principals.org

Keith Taton, *President*
Cynthia Rudrud, *President-Elect*
Gerald N. Tirozzi, *Executive Director*
Lenor G. Hersey, *Deputy Executive Director*
Rosa Aronson, *Director of Advocacy and Strategic Alliances*
Michelle C. Lampher, *Director of Marketing, Sales, and Publishing*
Michael Carr, *Associate Director of Public Relations*
Steven DeWitt, *Associate Director of Government Relations*
Robert N. Farrace, *Associate Director for Publications*
Scott Joftus, *Principal Author*
David Fernandes, *Production Manager*

Copyright 2004 National Association of Secondary School Principals

ISBN 0-88210-352-0

Introduction

NASSP's recent report *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*—a follow up to its seminal 1996 report *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*—was written as a field guide for high school principals and their leadership teams wishing to make their schools more student centered and rigorous. It offers high school principals seeking improvements in student learning recommendations in three areas:

- Collaborative leadership, professional learning communities, and the strategic use of data
- Personalizing the school environment
- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Breaking Ranks II calls on high school principals to take responsibility for increasing the academic achievement of all students and for ensuring that every student has the opportunity to meet his or her dream for success. It notes that many high schools and their principals have undertaken reforms to improve student achievement, demonstrating for policymakers that success is possible. The report also acknowledges, however, that “many schools have not undertaken reforms that have resulted in student achievement” (NASSP, 2004, p. xv).

This acknowledgement suggests two critical points. First, *all* high school principals, not just a few “early reformers,” must accept responsibility for ensuring that all students meet high standards and for taking the steps to make it happen. *Breaking Ranks II* offers strategies to principals for accomplishing this goal.

The second point is that relying exclusively on principals—no matter their commitment to or capacity for reform—will lead to the creation of a few high-performing schools within systems that allow and even perpetuate mediocrity. Although the commitment and skill of principals are essential to create and sustain a high-quality school in which every student meets rigorous academic standards and has meaningful connections to the school, commitment and skill alone are not sufficient. Some outstanding principals will succeed in any environment, but the majority of principals—like the majority of business and government leaders—require support if they are to succeed.

Moving from several isolated high-performing schools to a system of excellent schools benefiting all students requires a great deal from all levels of government. In this country's system of federalism, states have primary responsibility for providing public education, and states have created school districts to fulfill many of their administrative duties. As a result, districts have been granted a great deal of authority in the area of school improvement. Similarly, the federal government over the last few decades has intervened to a greater extent than ever before to ensure that all students—especially those who have been left behind by our education system—receive an excellent education. Consequently, this report addresses the challenges faced by district, state, and federal administrators and policymakers in ensuring that outstanding high schools are the norm in this country rather than the exception.

Systemic Improvement of High Schools: Challenges for Districts, States, and the Federal Government

As do principals in their own schools, district, state, and federal administrators and policymakers face significant barriers on the road to creating systems of excellent high schools. Challenges include a lack of overall capacity for school reform and, in particular, a lack of experience in sustaining and taking to scale successful models of high schools.

Lack of Overall Capacity

Until recently, the role of states in education has been “restricted to getting state and federal funds to the districts and performing certain narrowly prescribed regulatory functions” (Tucker, 2002, p. 11). The role of the district has also changed recently from that of bureaucratic control to a service orientation that helps to facilitate and sustain reform in schools (Odden, 1995). Many analysts argue that both states and districts have made progress in making this transition but still have a significant amount of work to do (Tucker, 2002; Hess, 1999; Goertz, 2000).

States and districts, then, are relative novices when it comes to school reform. The federal government is even less experienced, and further removed, from the reform process. Inexperience, however, is only part of the problem. Fullan (1991) has argued that school reform is an extremely complex process and that the appropriate balance among school autonomy, accountability, and leadership varies widely depending on local needs and responsibilities. Consequently, there is no standard process for the federal government, states, and districts to follow in working to improve the quality of schools. Implementation of reforms falters when the adoption of a reform is not preceded by careful consideration of each school’s culture or specific needs, or when educators at the local school site do not participate in important decisions about the reform process (Datnow and Stringfield, 2000). For reform to be successful, districts, states, and the federal government must negotiate the school reform process with individual schools, a difficult, uneven, and time-consuming process.

In addition, school reform requires that there be general agreement about the goals of reform. In a study of a district undergoing significant reform, however, Brouillette (1996) found that restructuring efforts were hampered by conflicting beliefs within communities about the goals for reform and concluded that more open and vigorous dialogue is necessary to forge consensus about and support for school reform. Districts, states, and the federal government, then, must help to foster this dialogue without contributing to the public’s confusion over the appropriate goals for school reform.

Another problem related to capacity has been the difficulty faced by policymakers and administrators in understanding the impact of policies on student-teacher interactions, the major element necessary for raising student achievement. The “opaqueness of the teaching and learning core” exacerbates the assessment of the impact of federal, state, district, or even school-initiated policy changes and therefore prevents well-informed decisions or the ability to hold individuals responsible for student outcomes (Hess, 1999).

Moreover, even if they completely understood the causes and implications of changes to the teaching and learning process, some have argued that federal, state, and district policymakers and administrators lack the tools to improve teaching and learning, as they have little formal authority to control teachers and classrooms and thus little real power to improve student learning (Hess, 1999).

Lack of authority and control among policymakers and administrators stems somewhat from the need to rely on the performance of individuals in various levels and positions in the school system. These individuals and levels are often poorly coordinated, creating a major obstacle to long-term school improvement (Datnow and Stringfield, 2000). For example, responsibilities for school reform are often split among various district offices—including those for curriculum, professional development, research and accountability, and state and federal programs—which communicate infrequently. Such fragmentation may result in inefficient, unsustainable, and/or contradictory support of schools and little—or unintended—impact of school reforms.

Lack of Experience with High School Reform

Improving the quality of schools is a long, difficult process that requires knowledge of best practice, skill in implementing reform strategies that include a variety of stakeholders, and persistence. Improving the quality of *high* schools has proven especially challenging. Even districts and states that have demonstrated success in raising student achievement and improving the quality of their schools have tended until very recently to focus almost exclusively on elementary schools and their students (Togneri and Anderson, 2003). With the exception of exit exams, high school policy has changed little over the last two decades, barely distinguishing high schools from other levels of schooling and continuing to track advantaged students into college and disadvantaged students into an uncertain future with few skills (Martinez and Bray, 2002; Cohen, 2001). As a result, although we have learned a great deal over the last couple decades about reform in elementary schools, high school reform is still largely uncharted territory (see, for example, McNeil, 2003).

Supporting Systemwide Change: Recommendations for Districts, States, and the Federal Government to Help High School Principals Break Ranks

Despite these obstacles, there is a significant role for districts, states, and the federal government to play in reforming high schools. States are constitutionally responsible for providing public education, and the federal government plays a critical role in ensuring that all students, especially those who have not been well served, receive an excellent education. The district's role in school reform, however, should not be minimized. Indeed, Fullan (1991) asserts that currently “the district administrator is the single most important individual for setting the expectations and tone of the pattern of [school] change” (p. 191). Although individual high schools can and have reformed themselves for short periods of time, the district is critical for establishing the conditions for continuous improvement (Fullan, 1991; Massell, 2000).

The district plays an important role in school reform both in cases in which school-based management is emphasized (Odden and Busch, 1998) and in which reforms are mandated from the federal or state levels (Odden, 1991). Researchers have found that districts not only implement federal and state policies, they do so quickly and effectively. Fuhrman, Clune, and Elmore (1991), for example, did not find long district delays in translating federal and state reform policies into practice or widespread resistance, and did find that, in many cases, districts actually went beyond what was required of them by law.

A key concept that has emerged in district implementation research is that of mutual adaptation. Mutual adaptation occurs when schools and districts change reforms initiated at the federal or state levels as much as the reforms change schools (Cuban, 1998). Adaptation

occurs even when reforms are comprehensive and highly specified (Datnow and Stringfield, 2000). According to this research, such adaptation is not only inevitable, it is desirable as schools and districts shape state and federal policies to meet local needs and to be consistent with local policies, regardless of the difficulty of implementation (McLaughlin, 1987; Fuhrman, Clune, and Elmore, 1991).

Where, then, should district, state, and federal administrators and policymakers begin in their efforts to help high schools “break ranks”? In general, districts must focus on instruction, teaching, and learning; create the conditions at the classroom and school level for collaborative teacher and principal professionalism; mobilize parents and communities; ensure coherent articulation with middle schools; utilize data; and, perhaps most important, use district resources to hire, promote, and support the outstanding teachers and administrators. Districts also must help schools overcome one of the greatest problems they face— “the fragmentation, overload, and incoherence resulting from the uncritical and uncoordinated acceptance of too many different innovations” —by helping schools select and implement only effective practices (Fullan, 1991, p. 197).

Districts, along with states and the federal government, also play a critical role in encouraging, or even pressuring, high schools to change and then supporting them in the process. Encouragement is required in most settings to focus attention on a reform objective; support is needed to enable implementation. Pressure from policy has been found to be important even in schools and districts that subscribe voluntarily to reform objectives simply because most institutions and individuals tend to resist change. In schools and districts where there is little support for a policy or where policy seeks to benefit poorly organized constituencies (e.g., low-income students), pressure from the state or federal government can provide necessary legitimacy for program officials. Administrators of Title I, for example, report that, even in communities with a high minority population, federal regulations provide necessary protection and legitimacy for compensatory program efforts (McLaughlin, 1987).

Encouragement by itself may be sufficient when policy objectives contain their own implementation directions or when policy implementation requires no additional resources or normative change, but pressure alone cannot effect those changes in attitudes, beliefs, and routine practices typically assumed by reform policies (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane, 2001). All other things being equal, reform is more likely to be implemented successfully by a high school when sufficient resources and guidance are provided and when the reform aligns well with local goals (Goggin, Bowman, Lester, and O’Toole, 1990). Schools need both incentives and nurturing, in other words, to effect positive change in school culture and instructional practices.

This is where states and the federal government can make the biggest impact on high school reform. They must provide leadership in creating an environment in which high schools and their students can thrive. Such leadership requires creating a coherent accountability framework and insisting on improvement, but it also requires resources for proven practices in such areas as leadership development, teacher training, alignment of standards and assessments, and support services. States must also begin to develop more coherent K–16 systems—thinking of high school as a bridge between elementary/middle school and postsecondary education rather than as an end point.

Breaking Ranks II outlines strategies for helping principals and teacher leaders transform their own high schools in three key areas: (1) collaborative leadership and professional learning communities; (2) personalization; and (3) curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The following sections offer recommendations for policymakers and

administrators at the district, state, and federal levels that will help high school principals implement the strategies outlined in *Breaking Ranks II* and ensure that all students meet rigorous state standards and graduate from high school prepared for college.

Collaborative Leadership and Professional Learning Communities

Breaking Ranks II reminds high school principals that comprehensive reform requires an extraordinary level of support from the community, school board, superintendent, families, teachers, and students. It also reminds principals about the importance of continuity and sustainability of reform. The need for support both from multiple stakeholders and for sustainability requires principals to work collaboratively with their staff to foster widespread ownership of reforms and independent responsible action by key players, and to prevent overload on any one person. The same is true for district administrators.

District administrators must play a leading role in setting a vision for the district (Togneri and Anderson, 2003), but that vision is meaningless without the participation and support of principals and teachers. Similarly, state and federal governments must provide a context amenable to developing professional learning communities. Specifically, district administrators and state and federal governments can support high school principals in implementing *Breaking Ranks II* recommendations in this area in several ways:

District Administrator Actions that Support *Breaking Ranks II* Recommendations for Collaborative Leadership and Professional Learning Communities

Build capacity and break educators' sense of isolation by:

- Convening principals periodically to facilitate discussions about and support for school improvement efforts
- Facilitating non-evaluative principal “walk-throughs” of other high schools
- Developing a coherent, data-driven professional development initiative that draws on internal expertise
- Helping to engage social science faculty at local colleges and universities in curriculum restructuring
- Participating in membership organizations that link the district to a larger policy context.

Encourage collaborative relationship with local colleges by:

- Working with high schools and local and state postsecondary institutions to align requirements and expectations for student achievement
- Developing educational programs for high-school students that enable them to take classes at local colleges or universities
- Working with high schools and local colleges and universities to create Early College High School models that integrate grades 9–14 in a single school.

Cultivate the next generation of school leaders by:

- Helping local colleges and universities place student teachers in district high schools and develop mentoring opportunities for principal candidates
- Encouraging local colleges and universities to recruit high-school teachers and principals as adjunct faculty in teacher-training programs.

Build bridges to the community by:

- Fostering relationships with local businesses and community-based organizations to raise resources, elicit support for school reforms, and provide students with internships and mentors
- Establishing a clear public relations strategy and make sure that school and district leaders are articulating it uniformly
- Helping schools develop external review panel and incorporate panels into districts review of schools.

Use data strategically by:

- Developing systems that report reliable, on demand data about schools and student achievement in ways that are easily understood by the general public
- Providing schools with high-quality data and training them to use data to drive reforms.

State and Federal Actions that Support *Breaking Ranks II* Recommendations for Collaborative Leadership and Professional Learning Communities

- Increase funding for professional development
- Take active steps to develop the next generation of school leaders, such as administering principal academies
- Encourage post-secondary institutions to offer high-quality educational leadership programs rooted in the reality of school leaders' and teachers' new responsibilities.
- Offer statewide or regional conferences focused on secondary schools
- Conduct a communications campaign to educate the public about the vital role of school leaders in the community.

Personalization

Learning ultimately results from the interaction of students with other individuals—students, family members, friends, community members, teachers, and administrators—and with ideas that come from a variety of sources (e.g., written materials and discussions). *Breaking Ranks II* provides high school principals with strategies for implementing structural and behavioral models that strengthen relationships among people (i.e., personalization) and between students and ideas through curriculum, instruction, and assessment (discussed in the following section).

District administrators can support high school principals in personalizing learning environments by focusing on the size of high schools, allowing students to choose the public high school that best meets their needs, facilitating students access support services, and ensuring that high schools are located in safe, learning-friendly environments. State and federal governments can help by providing resources and support in programs proven effective in serving the needs of all students, but especially those struggling to meet high standards. In particular, district administrators and state and federal governments can support high school principals in implementing *Breaking Ranks II* recommendations in this area in several ways:

District Administrator Actions that Support *Breaking Ranks II* Recommendations for Personalization

Create smaller learning communities by:

- Developing new small high schools
- Helping large high schools create schools-within-schools
- Raising public awareness about the benefits of personalized learning environments.

Provide more autonomy to schools and parents by:

- Granting high schools the freedom to develop programs tailored to meet the needs of their students while holding all high schools accountable for graduating students to high academic standards
- Allowing students and their families the freedom to choose the public high school that best meets their needs
- Providing students and their families with advisors who help them choose their high school and identify any necessary support services
- Helping high schools to engage students' families as partners in the students' education
- Providing professional development to counselors and advisors.

Coordinate services for student learning by:

- Working with other agencies in the community to coordinate the delivery of physical and mental health and social services for students
- Ensuring that facilities used by high schools are clean, attractive, safe, and well equipped.

State and Federal Actions that Support *Breaking Ranks II* Recommendations for Personalization

- Increase funding for initiatives, including the Smaller Learning Communities and Safe and Drug Free Schools programs, that contribute to safer and more personalized learning environments
- Support the efforts of local communities to build, renovate, and modernize school facilities
- Further develop programs, such as adolescent literacy programs, that directly address the high-school dropout problem.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Breaking Ranks II points out that a rigorous curriculum is the bedrock of learning and provides several critical benefits that have been shown to raise the achievement among students at all levels of learning (see, for example, Adelman, 1999). Moreover, a rigorous curriculum is meaningless without an effective delivery system (instruction) or method for measuring impact on student learning (assessment). Research also shows the importance of the principal in ensuring that schools deliver a rigorous, coherent, and meaningful curriculum and use data from assessments effectively to shape instruction (Cotton, 2004).

Districts, states, and the federal government have important roles to play in supporting principal efforts in these areas. Districts that have raised student achievement, at least among elementary school students, have put in place a systemwide approach to improving instruction (Togneri and Anderson, 2003). Similarly, there are effective ways in which states and the federal government can provide support to school and district efforts to improve the quality of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

District Administrator Actions that Support *Breaking Ranks II* Recommendations for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Ensure that all students graduate prepared for college and success in life by:

- Helping or empowering high schools to identify a set of essential learnings—above all, in literature and language, writing, mathematics, social studies, science, and the arts—in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to graduate
- Helping high schools to reach out to elementary and middle level schools as well as institutions of higher education to ensure each stage of the continuum understands what will be required of students at the succeeding stage
- Ensuring that assessment systems are of the highest quality
- Ensuring access to and use of formative assessments that are not high stakes but that provide timely data that help teachers and administrators focus instruction.

Demonstrate for students the relevance of classroom learning by:

- Helping high schools extend their academic programs beyond their campuses by connecting them with appropriate community resources.

Enhance educator quality by:

- Ensuring an equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers throughout the district
- Developing induction programs that support new teachers
- To the extent possible, maintaining consistency in staffing and reform efforts.

Create a culture of high expectations for all by:

- Creating school improvement teams composed of experienced educators that provide guidance and support to schools identified as needing improvement
- Supporting high schools' efforts to improve programs intended to increase the reading and writing skills of low achieving students.

State and Federal Actions that Support *Breaking Ranks II* Recommendations for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

- Identify knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in postsecondary education or the workforce. Link state academic standards and assessments to knowledge and skills necessary to successfully pursue postsecondary education or work
- Provide funding for programs that raise the reading and writing skills of high school students

- Increase funding for academic support services for low income, minority, and English as a second language students, as well as for students with disabilities
- Ensure that schools with high proportions of at-risk youth receive sufficient resources to address their academic needs
- Provide incentives for adoption of rigorous courses in high school
- Create incentives to attract and retain high-quality teachers in low-performing high schools
- Initiate programs in secondary schools that help lagging learners to read and write at grade level
- Make distinctions among schools identified as in need of improvement, provide assistance to schools that can benefit from it, and intervene aggressively in schools that cannot
- Support schools in providing career and technical courses that link learning to practice
- Raise public awareness about the challenges high schools face and how policymakers are addressing them.

Conclusion

With *Breaking Ranks II* and its predecessor, NASSP confirms that all high school principals must take responsibility for the quality of their schools and, ultimately, the success of their students. No other person is empowered or better situated to make the difficult decisions and take the tough actions necessary for ensuring that students graduate from high school prepared for college and success in life.

And yet principals clearly cannot accomplish this goal by themselves. *Breaking Ranks II* notes the importance of principals working collaboratively with all educators in the school and with community members to create learning environments in which all students can thrive. Gone are the days—if they ever existed—when principals could sit in their office and manage a school effectively.

But gone too are the days when district, state, and federal administrators and policymakers can simply mandate school change, administer legislated programs, and monitor school operations. A select few principals will succeed under these circumstances, but to ensure that every student has the opportunity to attend a high-performing high school, administrators and policymakers at the district, state, and federal levels must become active participants in the school-reform process. Without such involvement, high school reform will continue to sputter, occurring in isolated pockets and benefiting relatively few students. With the coordinated and focused efforts of principals, districts, states, and the federal government, however, high-performing high schools will flourish, raising the achievement of all students and, as a result, providing immeasurable benefits to our society as a whole.

References

- Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the toolbox: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Brouillette, L. (1996). *A geology of school reform: The successive restructurings of a school district*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Cohen, M. (2001, December). *Transforming the American high school: New directions for state and local policy* (Occasional paper). Boston: Jobs for the Future; Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute.
- Cotton, K. (2004). *New small learning communities: Findings from recent literature*. Reston, VA: Author.
- Cuban, L. (1988). *The managerial imperative and the practice of leadership in schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Datnow, A., & Stringfield, S. (2000). Working together for reliable school reform. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 5(1–2), 183–204.
- Fuhrman, S., Clune, W., & Elmore, R. (1991). Research on education reform: Lessons on the implementation of policy. In A. Odden (Ed.), *Education policy implementation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Fullan, M. (with Stiegelbauer, S.). (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Goertz, P. (2000). Implementing standards-based reform: Challenges for state policy. In T. Duggan & M. Holmes (Eds.), *Closing the gap: A report on the Wingspread Conference "Beyond the Standards Horse Race: Implementation, Assessment, and Accountability—The Keys to Improving Student Achievement."* Washington, DC: Council for Basic Education.
- Goggin, M. L., Bowman, A., Lester, J., & O'Toole, L. (1990). *Implementation theory and practice: Toward a third generation*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman/Little, Brown Higher Education.
- Hess, F. (1999). *Spinning wheels: The politics of urban school reform*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Martinez, M., & Bray, J. (2002). *All over the map: State policies to improve the high school*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership.
- Massell, D. (2000, September). *The district role in building capacity: Four strategies* (CPRE Policy Brief). Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- McLaughlin, M. W. (1987, Summer). Learning from experience: Lessons from policy implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 9(2), 171–178.
- McNeil, P. (2003). *Rethinking high school: The next frontier for state policymakers*. Queenstown, MD: The Aspen Institute.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2004). *Breaking ranks II: Strategies for leading high school reform*. Reston, VA: Author.
- Odden, A. (1991). New patterns of education policy implementation and challenges for the 1990s. In A. Odden (Ed.), *Education policy implementation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.
- Odden, A. (1995). *Educational leadership for America's schools*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Odden, A., & Busch, C. (1998). *Financing schools for high performance: Strategies for improving the use of educational resources*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Spillane, J. (2001). Challenging instruction for "all students": Policy, practitioners, and practice. In Fuhrman, S. (Ed.), *From the capitol to the classroom: Standards-based reform in the states*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. (2003, March). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools* (Leadership brief). Washington, DC: Learning First Alliance.
- Tucker, M. (2002, September). *Building the capacity of schools, districts, and states to educate all students to high standards: The case of the America's Choice School Design*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy.