Foreword

Breaking Ranks II is not "just another report."

It is a working document—a detailed resource with suggestions for principals on how to proceed with improvement of the work of their schools, even with the *rethinking* that may be necessary prior to substantial *reform.*

It does not just exhort its reader to look hard at his or her school. It provides strategies for action, drawn from almost a decade of experience since the release of *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution.*

It focuses on the well-established facts that many teenagers are disengaged from the hard intellectual work expected by their schools and the larger community and unprepared for the harsh world beyond those schools. We are not doing as well as we want and as well as we should, not only for low-income youngsters, or for non-English speakers, or for adolescents with special needs, but for all of us. Good enough for yesterday will not serve as good enough for tomorrow—in every community, rich and poor, across the country.

It implicitly addresses the extraordinary political climate in which high school principals and their colleagues find themselves in 2004: an atmosphere of distrust, affront, and impatience, and an expectation that they will be judged by the performance of their graduates rather than merely on the basis of "delivering services."

It does not argue with the naysayers. It is not defensive. It takes the necessary high ground. It focuses on what we must do to improve what we do, to give it focus, to make it work well, to allow our secondary schools to graduate young people with the skills, habits, and convictions that are required in the rapidly changing American culture and global workplace.

It clusters its recommendations around three touchstones for effective secondary schools. These three drive all else.

First: The principal is the principal *teacher,* the first among many—part of a team of professionals. His or her job is to gather this community, to find its special genius, to press it hard, to nurture it, to depend on it. Learning is done child by child; our work is, by necessity, highly decentralized. We all will do well with it if we collaborate. Principals lead—better, *orchestrate*—this collaboration, encouraging the strengths and addressing the weaknesses within the adult community. This is no cop-out, no shifting of responsibility by the principal onto an amorphous "faculty" where the buck never stops anywhere. It is the relentless and sensitive pressure to get the best out of the community. It is more than a simple command such as *follow me* or *do as I say.* It is far subtler, far more respectful. It is reflected in the statement that "this is *our* school," not "this is *my* school."

Second: It is inconvenient that no two students are exactly alike and that no individual student stays exactly the same over her or his travel through the high school years. Batch processing does not work, at least for most adolescents. *Personalization* is a necessity, if for no other reason than the fact that each individual student takes that state test, meets that required standard, performs in that demanded fashion, sinks that basket, sings that solo, writes that essay, solves that problem—one by one. A good school emerges from the creative weaving of distinctive parts into a whole cloth rather than from a mindless assemblage of discrete programs, each protecting its independence.

Third: While our students differ in wonderful (and sometimes exasperating) ways, we serve them well by taking a "core mission" and playing it out in teaching and assessment in ways that reflect each student's strengths and weaknesses, learning styles, and special needs. That mission has to be lean and focused; the necessarily rich variety emerges from individual students' interests, abilities, and weaknesses, as these wax and wane over time. It requires that each student be known well. Student "anonymity" has been the most consistent criticism of America's high schools. It must end, whatever it takes.

Breaking Ranks II titles these three touchstones: "Collaborative Leadership and Effective Learning Communities," "Personalization," and "Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment." As the reader dips into the rich

detail of this report, he or she must keep these three essences clearly in mind. Get these right for *a* school—not *all* schools in some kind of predigested "model," but *our* school, the one that reflects the best of its setting, its community's values, its community's highest aspirations, and that prepares its students for a demanding world, one full of hazards and opportunities that none of us can fully predict.

"Breaking ranks" was the metaphor selected in 1996 to represent clearly the need to break from the all-too-familiar and often unproductive patterns of the past. *Breaking Ranks II* sets a fresh standard, a pattern around which we can now *close ranks*.

Theodore R. Sizer
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University Professor Emeritus, Brown University;
and Visiting Professor of Education, Harvard and Brandeis Universities

Breaking Ranks Revisited

*Good ideas serve only as fodder for intellectual debate if they
are not put to use. And so it is with school reform, a topic
about which millions of words have been written.... lifting
words off paper and putting them into operation in the
nation's high schools remains the most difficult and important
part.... Leadership requires that some people have the will
and ability to act.*

—Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution

Principals Set Course for Reform

With the goal of contributing to the success of all students, *Breaking Ranks: Changing
an American Institution* joined the school reform debate and entered the lexicon of
practitioners and policymakers interested in transforming high schools into zones
of achievement, high expectation, and continuous improvement. Its debut in 1996
signaled the beginning of a new opportunity for high school principals and their
school leadership teams to tackle the thorny issues involved in reform.

The product of nearly two years of deliberation by the Commission on the Restruc-
turing of the American High School, a panel composed of principals, assistant principals,
teachers, and students, *Breaking Ranks* provided a statement of principles and a template
for action. The commission's work was accomplished with the support of the National
Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and the Carnegie Foundation for
the Advancement of Teaching. Unique to the effort was the fact that the document was
not primarily a research document; rather, it was a set of principles designed by practi-
tioners keenly aware of the day-to-day realities of education.

Although the amalgamation of so many practitioners' perspectives may have been
unique to *Breaking Ranks,* many of the recommendations evolved from the groundbreak-
ing work of other practitioners and researchers who had tackled the topics individually or
espoused various models of reform. Anyone familiar with the work of the Coalition of
Essential Schools (CES), and Theodore Sizer's writing on the study of high schools,
specifically, *Horace's Compromise* (1984), would immediately discover commonalities in
the areas of personalization, school and class size, instruction, and assessment. The influ-
ence of Ernest Boyer's (1983) work, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in
America,* relating to the interdisciplinary nature of curriculum, can also be seen in the
recommendations. In addition, *A Nation at Risk* (National Education Commission on
Time and Learning, 1983), *Prisoners of Time* (National Education Commission on Time
and Learning, 1994), and *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Develop-

ment, 1989) all served to galvanize the debate around the need for reform and established substantive areas in which to undertake that reform.

As a roadmap for reform, *Breaking Ranks,* and the more than 80 recommendations it contained, has provided direction for high school principals around the country in making schools more student-centered by personalizing programs, support services, and intellectual challenges for *all* students. Clearly, the emphasis on a practitioner's view of reform struck a chord with principals and policymakers alike. Federal, state, and local policymakers, as well as accreditation organizations, have embraced many of the concepts and recommendations in *Breaking Ranks.*

Legislation, standards development, and other policy and structural initiatives are essential to systematic school improvement; however, addressing and implementing the necessary reforms clearly falls upon the shoulders of educators—teachers, aides, assistant principals, principals, the central office, and many others. Yet, within the school building, the principal bears ultimate responsibility for schoolwide implementation. *Breaking Ranks II* is a field guide for the principal and the school leadership team wishing to face this responsibility head-on by implementing the recommendations established in *Breaking Ranks.* However, the implications of *Breaking Ranks* reform go well beyond the high school campus. High school improvement teams will need to form much closer relationships with their elementary and especially middle school counterparts to ensure that high expectations and rigorous curriculum are the standard in earlier grades. High school teams also may learn from the well-tested middle school personalization practices. Just as high schools work with earlier levels of education on high expectations, high schools also need to establish closer relationships with higher education institutions to align curriculum and ascertain the expectations of colleges—and whether high school graduates are meeting those expectations.

To help principals accomplish whole-school reform, *Breaking Ranks II* focuses on the **implementation of those *Breaking Ranks* recommendations in which principals have a significant role.** Given this emphasis and the fact that many of the original recommendations were statements of principle addressing policymakers, many of the original 82 recommendations are beyond the purview of this publication. *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform,* will revisit the *Breaking Ranks* recommendations through the eyes of ordinary principals and teachers undertaking extraordinary reform initiatives consistent with those recommendations and offer strategies for school leadership teams to consider and adapt in accord with local conditions and expectations.

Why Reform Now?

Given the challenges of reform, why would a principal or school undertake *Breaking Ranks*-style reform? The answer has two components—mandate and enticement.

❑   First, the mandate: Public high schools in the United States are at a crossroads. Federal and state legislation have established benchmarks intended to improve achievement for all students—including those who in the past were accepted as part of the "normal" failure curve. Standardized testing will be one measure of whether or not the benchmarks have been met. In addition, an emphasis on raising achievement in subgroups of student populations, such as English language learners and special education students, will require a more comprehensive review of disaggregated data to ensure that all students are receiving the benefits of education. What will be judged is the percentage of students who meet the standard overall and within the subgroups, not—as has been the case—the average performance of the entire school.

This mandate will not be consistently met by schools if current conditions persist. *Breaking Ranks* championed the cause of *all students* achieving at high levels; federal and state legislation will require it. Equity of participation, the status quo, must be forced aside as equity of outcomes comes to the fore. *Breaking Ranks II* provides strategies to help all students achieve at high levels.

□   Second, and most important, the enticement: Realizing the educator's dream means realizing each student's dream. Most principals and teachers took their first step down the path to educating the nation's children because they wanted to make a difference in the lives of individual students by helping them acquire a love of learning. Unfortunately, that dream is not being realized by all students. The promise of *Breaking Ranks* reform is to promote a culture of continuous improvement in order to help each student become part of a community in which all students have the opportunity to achieve at high levels. In so doing, principals and teachers will make a deeper and more equitable difference in the lives of many more students and reap the rewards for fostering student learning.

Clearly, many high schools and the principals who lead them have been undertaking reforms to improve student achievement. Their success has shown policymakers that success on a grander scale is possible. Many schools, however, have failed to undertake reforms that could have resulted in higher student achievement. Time is of the essence; not only must federal and state benchmarks be met, but, more important, each minute wasted means less time is spent addressing the needs of students not achieving at acceptable levels. More than 13 million students currently in high school rely on principals and teachers to help them fulfill their dreams, to reach heights never before imagined, and to embrace a lifelong love of learning. Failure in these, the most important of life's courses, is not acceptable.

If the day after reading *Breaking Ranks II,* you see your work as being the same as what you did the day before, be assured that nothing of substance will change very much for very long. On the other hand, if you begin to see *yourself* differently in your work and in the way you help others see the wisdom of change, your school will change. Principals, in conjunction with their school leadership teams, have the choice of either raising the white flag of surrender or aggressively beginning the conversations to extricate themselves from adverse circumstances. *Adversity spawns discussion, discussion informs ideas, ideas may lead to change, the Changing of An American Institution.*

From *Breaking Ranks* to *Breaking Ranks II*
Although this publication is designed to stand alone and does not require prior knowledge of *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution,* the comprehensive nature of first volume and the depth and breadth in which it discusses necessary changes in high schools complement the present implementation tool. This publication is intended to assist principals in the following manner:

□   Provide strategies for implementing the recommendations

□   Illustrate possible entry points or areas in which to begin reform

□   Profile the successes, challenges, and results of schools implementing the recommendations.

To provide a practical, more manageable implementation tool for principals, several modifications to the original *Breaking Ranks* structure were necessary:

□ By focusing on only those recommendations over which principals have significant sway, *and* by combining recommendations with similar content, the number of recommendations contained herein have been reduced and condensed from the 82 in *Breaking Ranks* to 31. Although the original 82 recommendations remain important, repeating the recommendations over which principals have very little control could prove daunting to a principal who is confronted with the question: With which one of the 82 should I start?

□ Each of the 31 recommendations has been "clustered" or assigned to one of three core areas:

1. Collaborative Leadership and Professional Learning Communities (Chapter 2)

2. Personalization (Chapter 3)

3. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (Chapter 4)

These three core areas or clusters have evolved from the themes outlined in *Breaking Ranks* (NASSP, 1996, p. 5) "emphasizing that better education depends on personalizing the high school experience for students, lending coherency to their education, organizing time differently, using technology at every opportune point, revitalizing the ongoing professional education of teachers and administrators, and enhancing leadership at every level at which it can affect teaching and learning."

Organization of *Breaking Ranks II*

Recognizing that principals and others may not be able to steal enough time to read this guide in one sitting, or as one integrated unit, its organization becomes particularly important. This handbook has been organized with a three-step progression in mind: realize that your school needs to change if it wants to serve each student, help others to see that need, and implement the practices that support each student's improved performance.

Step 1: Realize the need. Schools are often told to change but rarely are asked whether they believe they need to change. Chapter 1 asks by way of a series of questions—questions not often asked by many schools—whether *your* school is doing all it can to reach each student. Following the school assessment is a vision for a fictional school that is attempting to reach each student. If you are not satisfied by your answers to the questions and would like to set your own vision for reaching each student, cornerstone strategies capitalizing on the interdependence of the 31 *Breaking Ranks II* recommendations are proposed. Thus, as an *intended* consequence, schools can adopt the cornerstone strategies and be well on their way to implementing the entire set of 31 recommendations.

Step 2: Help others see the need to change. Once you have taken the assessment, you may realize that your school must change. But how? Fundamental to the success of making the necessary changes is providing a collaborative process in which others also see the need for, and participate in, implementing the changes. Chapter 2 outlines the necessary steps to involve others in the change process through collaboration, review of data, and professional development. Skipping this step of the process may result in reforms that are either unsustainable or not well implemented.

Step 3: Promote improved student performance by providing opportunities for students to build relationships within the school and between themselves and what they learn. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss these relationships in detail, including the strategies and barriers to implementation of various practices.

For practitioners using this as a reference tool, the following may be helpful. If you are looking for:

□ The seven cornerstone strategies, see page 6.

□ The 31 *Breaking Ranks II* core recommendations, see pages 17–18.

□ Benefits, strategies, and challenges of implementing the recommendations, see the tables at the end of Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

□ Resources to support implementation of the strategies and recommendations, see pages 149–161.

□ Examples of specific schools implementing changes consistent with *Breaking Ranks*,

> Chapters 2, 3, and 4 contain an extended profile of a school's reform efforts written from the school's perspective—three profiles in all.
>
> In Strategies and Recommendations in Practice (pages 133–148) a variety of schools are highlighted along with specific practices consistent with *Breaking Ranks* recommendations. (Note that many schools other than those profiled in this section and at the end of Chapters 2, 3, and 4 have taken significant steps to change their approach to improving the performance of all students. The schools profiled are examples of schools that have made an effort to reach all students, some with greater success than others. Finally, as each of the schools in the extended profiles will attest, efforts are ongoing—reaching the promise of a more student-centered school with more personalized programs, support services, and intellectual rigor remains a goal on the horizon.)

For a reader tempted to "pick and choose" a single strategy or section from the handbook or focus on one chapter that discusses a specific area of interest, remember that implementing one or two recommendations is merely tinkering around the edges of school reform, and therefore ill-advised. Substantive reform will only be successful and sustainable if it is continuous, involves an ongoing and rigorous analysis of the entire school's needs, and takes into account the interdependence of elements within a learning community. A best practice implemented in isolation may not be sustainable over time if it relies on other changes that are never implemented. Those who take this handbook to heart must know and be prepared to face the challenge first voiced in *Breaking Ranks*, the challenge our profiled schools have begun to take on, the challenge lurking in the hallowed halls of tradition's estate:

> The cause of reform is hobbled by the inclination of educational institutions to resist substantial change. The rituals of high school, whatever their shortcomings, appeal to many people who suspect that substantial reform would undo the essence of teenhood. David F. Donavel, reflecting on the failure of restructuring in the high school in Massachusetts in which he worked as an English teacher, said: "The school, especially the high school, is nothing if not traditional and so has become the means by which people in our culture come to know who they are. Thus, any attempt at change violates our sense of who we are." What passes as change is frequently no more than tinkering around the edges. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* (The more things change, the more they remain the same.) And so it is with America's high schools: The more they change, the more things seem to remain the same. It is not by accident that this report titles itself *Breaking Ranks (NASSP, 1996, pp. 4–5).*

1 On the Road to Changing an American Institution

*There are many themes throughout this work, but if one
theme could be extracted that is overarching and paramount,
it is a message that the high school of the 21st century must be
much more student-centered and above all much more person-
alized in programs, support services, and intellectual rigor.*

— *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution, Executive Summary*

Why Break Ranks?

A quick turn through the evening news channels, eavesdropping on a dinner-party con-
versation, or a scan through the latest national education reports provides enough grist
for the "why change" mill. Yet the frequency and often abstract nature of these assaults
can also have a numbing effect. Furthermore, they tend to point out problems that
"some other" school might face. As a consequence of highlighting worst-case scenarios—
high dropout rates, the deplorable structural conditions in some schools, violence, poor
performance on standardized or state tests, and other indicators—"above average" schools
have often said:

> "We'll compare our performance to any of the surrounding high schools."

> "We have some of the best test scores in the state/country."

> "That could never happen at our school."

> "Our dropout rate is less than 5%."

> "Our school is above average in every standardized measure."

Clearly, measures of low, average, and high performance can be useful for some com-
parative analyses and setting benchmarks. The real measure of performance, however, is
how well your school is meeting the academic needs of each student within it. If 90% of
your student population ensures that you are ahead of local, regional, state, and national
benchmarks but the other 10% of the student population remains unchallenged, then it
may be time for your school to break ranks—not only because the 10% are being ill-
served, but because, more than likely, a large portion of the 90% could be performing at
higher levels if schools knew the strengths and weaknesses of each student and tailored
instruction accordingly.

Schools featured in the worst-case-scenario news stories and schools performing below average on state or national assessments *may* see the obvious—a need to change. Schools operating above those benchmarks or the schools that, *on average*, perform well enough to be highlighted in more positive local news stories often don't have the "negative pressure incentive" to review how things could be better. In fact, these schools often are under pressure from the community to "leave a good thing alone." Below is a list of questions that you as the principal, in conjunction with your school leadership team, may want to consider to assess how well your school is meeting the needs of individual students. If, after contemplating the answers to, and implications of, each question, your team decides each answer is satisfactory, then perhaps you have already broken ranks from the pack and have created a school more personalized in programs, support services, and intellectual rigor. The experience of principals undertaking reforms consistent with *Breaking Ranks* recommendations, however, belies the possibility of ever having completely "broken" ranks—because it is a process of continuous improvement.

How Well Does *Your* School Serve Each Student?

1. How many of the students who enter your school in ninth grade graduate in four years?

2. What percentage of your graduates must take remedial courses in college or a community college? What percentage of those finish college?

3. Does your leadership team successfully interact with "hard-to-reach" parents with activities such as home visits, weekend meetings, and meetings outside of regular business hours?

4. How many low-income and how many minority students are enrolled in advanced courses?

5. How many teachers from different disciplines work together on a regular basis?

6. Are the aspirations, strengths, and weaknesses of each student known by at least one faculty member or other member of your staff? How do you ensure that the staff member uses that information appropriately to help the student become successful in all classes and activities?

7. What percentage of the classes per week at your school are primarily lecture-driven?

8. Aside from student government, do students have a voice at your school?

9. Were you able to answer these questions and support the responses with data?

If you have completed this assessment and any complementary assessments that your school uses, and are satisfied that your school is doing everything it can for each student, then yours is a school that should be profiled in subsequent publications. If, on the other hand, you see room for improvement, setting a vision for that improvement is your next step.

What Might Your School Look Like After *Breaking Ranks*?

Defining a vision for your school should be a product of many thoughtful conversations within your school and within your community. There is no template of what a *Breaking Ranks* school might look like because school values differ from community to community. However, in the interest of spurring conversation within your school, the letter

below from a fictional principal attempts to paint a picture for students, school board members, school staff, the superintendent, and the larger community—and thereby get them involved. It details what the school might look like when the reforms have been implemented. This text may form the basis of a conversation among your leadership team and beyond about the vision for your own school.

> Our *Breaking Ranks* high school will be a learning community that reflects a culture born of respect and trust, where the spirit of teaching and learning is driven by student inquiry, reflection, and passion. Our efforts to cultivate that spirit will begin well before students enter freshman year or before they transfer into our school with a feeder schools–to–high school transition program—so that when students join us, they understand that each of them is expected to achieve to his or her highest potential. Before walking in the door the first day of school, each will have investigated the opportunities available and each will have already met with a teacher or other member of the staff to lay the groundwork for building a personal connection to the school.

> Rather than leave a student's high school experience and the outcome of that experience to pure chance, we believe we have the obligation to understand a teenager's personal needs and to challenge them by meeting those needs intellectually, socially, and personally. Some students have little problem finding a voice, but others struggle well into adulthood to find a productive voice. By providing a variety of structured experiences in which students can be actively engaged, we believe we can address a student's need to:
>
> ☐ *Express personal perspectives*
>
> ☐ *Create individual and group identities*
>
> ☐ *Examine options and choose his or her own path*
>
> ☐ *Take risks and assess the effects*
>
> ☐ *Use his or her imagination*
>
> ☐ *Demonstrate mastery.*[1]

> Chance is not a game that should be played with a student's life. High schools have been able to address some of these needs for some of their students since schooling began. We endeavor to entice each student to fulfill each of those needs.

> How often is it that only a few students express themselves—even though in theory all are "allowed?" Does that mean others don't want to? Are afraid to? Some would say, "part of growing up is finding the ability to express oneself, and if someone can't, then that's life." But what happens if one never learns that skill? Is that life? We think not! We will provide several arenas in which each student can express himself or herself in one-on-one and group settings—through our advisory program, our activities program, student exhibitions and presentations, and within each classroom.

> How often do students fall into the wrong cliques only because they want to belong to something? Although we cannot dictate friendships, clearly we have an opportunity to provide groups (project groups, advisories, etc.) in which each student feels a sense of belonging and perhaps where friendships will be fostered.

[1] Developmental assets noted by Clarke & Frazer (2003).

How often does each student have the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of a subject, a concept, an instrument, a sport? The "A" students, the valedictorian, the lead in the play or the band, the star on the football team all have those opportunities—and well deserved at that. But what about the students who haven't been working on a skill for as long, or who try just as hard and don't quite "make the cut?" We're not talking here about equality of rewards or giving everyone a star, but rather that each student should be encouraged to excel and should receive recognition for it—individually, and if appropriate, in a group setting. Our school has designed the practices to make this a reality in the classroom, in advisory settings, and through our student activities program. Students will be creating, developing, and publicly exhibiting projects that demonstrate their mastery of learning on a regular basis and will also be able to demonstrate their unique talents through a student activities program and a service-learning program tied directly to skills and knowledge needed to meet the larger learning goals for each student.

Our efforts to meet the needs of students are not made simply so that we can develop friendships with students and make them feel better about themselves. The business of education is about learning and achievement for each student. We believe that without these personal connections and our understanding of the motivations, aspirations, and learning styles of students, most students will never become engaged in their own learning and never really achieve their potential. The statistics about students who never complete high school—at least a quarter of all students—tell only a small part of the tale. What about those students who graduate, never having been challenged, and then go on to college only to drop out? Or those students who are bored day in and day out? Or those top-notch students who could have been seriously challenged by taking more challenging courses, or pursuing an internship or in-depth research project, or being mentored by an expert in the "field of their dreams," or taking courses at the nearby college or online, but instead are left to stare out the window and wait for the bell to ring while the teacher reviews materials the student has already mastered?

We need to reach each of these students their first day, their first week, their first month, and throughout high school. We can't wait until graduation to say, "she has a lot of potential—I hope she has an opportunity to use it in college." Our school will get to know the potential of each student through our Personal Adult Advocate program. Our emphasis on decreasing the total number of students per teacher will allow teachers more time to confer with parents and mentors to personalize each student's educational experience, and to be able to effectively advise a small group of students. Each advocate will work with students to develop and monitor individual Personal Plans for Progress that will detail the academic, social, and other aspirations and needs of students. The adult advocate will work with students, their parents, and their teachers to ensure that each student's potential is being realized in the classroom, on the field, in the community, and, most important, in the mind of the student.

Academic achievement in our school will be driven by students being engaged in classes, seminars, and lessons designed by teams of teachers who integrate the curriculum. Students will be encouraged to write in all classes and to attack challenges from various perspectives using their own strengths while addressing their weaknesses. There will be no tracking of students. Instead, students will be grouped heterogeneously and include educationally challenged and culturally diverse students

in all classes and students will have multiple opportunities to redo their work until the work meets the established standards. The school will support personal drive and aspiration by providing a rigorous curriculum, AP courses, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, college-credit courses, internships, and service-learning opportunities to all who are willing to take on the challenge. All students will have access to honors programs and students will earn honors credit by their distinctive performance.

Our school will be dramatically different from the traditional American high school, and that difference will be obvious to even the casual observer. Upon entering our "Breaking Ranks" high school, the level and intensity of questioning and listening by students and the teachers who are encouraging more questioning and listening will set our school apart from others.

At graduation, the teachers and administrators who joined the profession and have made their own sacrifices to make a difference in the lives of young people, the parents who have supported, cajoled and inspired their sons and daughters—now young men and women—and the students who have spent four years of their lives and are now preparing to leave home for perhaps the first time should ever have to say, "We missed an opportunity to challenge ourselves." At our school, those words will never be uttered because the work of each student and his or her portfolio will be the proof for everyone at graduation to see that at every step of the way, each student was challenged.

The vision you set for your school may differ significantly from that above, but a vision will remain simply a vision unless your school is willing to embark on significant changes to make that vision come to life. The success of "all" students lies at the heart of many contemporary goals within the education profession. However, at the heart of a family's vision, there has always been one constant—not the success of the amorphous "all students," but the success of "our son," "our daughter." Reaching that vision will require a strategic plan for change.

What Should We Change First?

Let's assume that you are convinced that your school can do a better job of improving student performance. Let's further assume that the observations made thus far and your own experience have convinced you that improving student performance is inextricably tied to student engagement, and engagement for each student can be accomplished only through a more personalized academic and intellectual program. Finally, let's assume that you see a need for significant change in your school. Where do you begin? Which should you change first: School culture? School structures? Instruction?

Scholars, school leadership teams, and management experts have long struggled with this question with few definitive answers. Some argue that most high schools are structured in a way that will not allow the change in culture necessary to adjust instruction to meet the needs of all students. Changing structures *can be* the first step in changing instruction and culture (although not the ultimate step). Others argue that the culture of the school has to change before anything else can be accomplished. Without minimizing the importance of the debate, for the purposes of this handbook, suffice it to say that the three are highly interconnected, change is needed in all three areas, culture change must occur before change truly becomes effective, and each school will approach the challenge from a different perspective based on

factors specific to the school's situation. Although the approach may vary from school to school, there are a number of common strategies that have proven effective in supporting efforts to improve student performance.

Seven cornerstone strategies have been gleaned from the experiences of schools implementing strategies consistent with *Breaking Ranks* recommendations. The strategies are designed to give your school possible "entry points" to pursue fundamental changes—clearly, your school's priorities and stage of reform may require different entry points or you may develop different strategies. This is merely one model of simplifying implementation by providing strategies that address more than one recommendation at a time. In other words, by implementing the strategy, you will have also implemented one or more *Breaking Ranks* recommendations. The strategies, not in any particular sequence in terms of implementation priority, are listed below.

Break Ranks:
Seven Cornerstone Strategies to Improve Student Performance

1. Establish the essential learnings a student is required to master in order to graduate, and adjust the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize that goal.

2. Increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and other school personnel by reducing the number of students for which any adult or group of adults is responsible.

3. Implement a comprehensive advisory program that ensures that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic and social progress with a faculty member.

4. Ensure that teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments to accommodate individual learning styles.

5. Implement schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively and that allow for effective teacher teaming and lesson planning.

6. Institute structural leadership changes that allow for meaningful involvement in decision making by students, teachers, family members, and the community *and* that support effective communication with these groups.

7. Align the schoolwide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the individual Personal Learning Plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for graduation.

Together, these seven cornerstone strategies, if implemented effectively, will form the foundation for improving the performance of each student in your school. The seventh strategy, regarding professional development, underpins all others—and in most cases is required for each of the other six strategies to be adequately implemented. Too often, professional development programs do not have a coherent or strategic purpose; instead, they relate to the interests of individual teachers. Placing professional development last allows the reader to see what the focus of the professional development program must be: acquiring the skills, knowledge, and disposition to implement the six previous strategies.

The strategies cross the somewhat artificial boundaries that have been established for the three clusters of recommendations (Collaborative Leadership and

Professional Learning Communities; Personalization; Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment). Although the recommendations within those three clusters align with the seven cornerstone strategies, the recommendations themselves are somewhat discrete and may be more easily implemented through a strategy that takes into account the interdependence of changes within a school—hence, the seven cornerstone strategies. Furthermore, even though each strategy has broad implications, from an appearance standpoint, seven strategies are considerably more palatable to discuss as first steps than are dozens of individual recommendations. (Imagine for a moment attempting to get your leadership team, your faculty, your school board, or your superintendent to discuss, adopt, and take ownership of 31 recommendations— all in one sitting.)

Let's take a closer look at the seven strategies to see how you can adopt them in your school.

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1. **Establish the essential learnings a student is required to master in order to graduate, and adjust the curriculum and teaching strategies to realize that goal.**

Actions to support this strategy include:

□ Devise a process to formulate essential learnings that takes into account state standards and the standards set by individual disciplines and the school community. Although state standards are often beyond your control, the process related to identifying the school community's essential learnings might be similar to the one outlined in *Providing Focus and Direction Through Essential Learnings* (Westerberg & Webb, 1997). [See Chapter 4 of this handbook for a possible model process for developing essential learnings in your school.]

Once the essential learnings have been established, actions to support adjusting the curriculum and teaching strategies to help students master the essential learnings might include:

□ Focus on mastery, not coverage; focus on what is learned, not simply what is taught. Use student exhibitions, portfolios, and senior-year or capstone programs to demonstrate mastery and learning rather than focusing on seat time or the Carnegie unit.

□ Raise the level of academic rigor in all classes. (See Appendix 1 for a school self-assessment tool that your team may want to use to assess perceptions about the level of rigor at your school; review the academic-rigor planning pyramid to pursue some activities to make your program more rigorous; and review a model graphic for reporting your attempts at rigor to the community.)

□ Open honors, AP, and IB classes to all students.

□ Initiate interdisciplinary instruction, teaming, and an appropriate emphasis on real-world applications.

□ Reorganize traditional departmental structures to integrate the school's curriculum to the extent necessary and emphasize depth over breadth of coverage.

□ Teach literacy across the curriculum.

□ Insist on heterogeneous grouping of classes.

□ Align student activities, service learning, and internships with essential learnings.

This strategy emphasizes the concept of "backward design," or beginning with the end in mind. Once a school has determined what it is that students should know or be able to demonstrate in order to graduate, the school can decide on the actions to take to ensure that students acquire the essential learnings. Development of challenging essential learnings is fundamental to providing a rigorous curriculum.

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2. **Increase the quantity and improve the quality of interactions between students, teachers, and other school personnel by reducing the number of students for which any adult or group of adults is responsible.**

Actions to support this strategy include:

▫ Reduce a large school into smaller units (houses, school-within-a-school, thematic units, ninth-grade academies or other exclusive structures) under the direction of teaching teams who can get to know the strengths and weaknesses of each student...

▫ Reduce the number of students for which an individual teacher is responsible (in some cases, this may mean reducing class size, but often more important is reducing the total number of students a teacher has during a semester/term/etc.)...

▫ Create and implement interdisciplinary teams of both teachers and students that encourage shared responsibility for student learning...

▫ "Loop" teachers with students so that a group of students and teachers are teamed together for more than one year (e.g., groups of teachers would remain with the same group of students for ninth and tenth grades).

Reducing the size of the school and reducing the number of students for which a teacher has responsibility may not, by themselves, automatically improve student performance, but they may have an effect on the school environment and level of distraction and the number of disciplinary infractions. A change in student performance is more likely if these initiatives are combined with other efforts that take advantage of the reductions. Debate will continue into the foreseeable future about the ideal school size and the ideal class size; however, few would argue with the premise that improving the quantity and quality of interactions between students and teachers is a good idea. Moreover, one might ask, "How many parents would contend that their son or daughter is receiving *too much* attention from teachers to address academic challenges?"

Although downsizing in and of itself is not a panacea for student improvement, recent research has made a compelling case for establishing smaller learning communities to set the conditions for improved student performance. In her analysis of the research, Cotton (2004) highlights the following benefits of smaller learning communities:

▫ **Achievement**—"Those attending small schools achieve at higher levels than do students in larger schools, both on standardized achievement tests and other measures.... Researchers observe that the effects of smallness on achievement are indirect, being mediated through such other small-school features as quality of the social environment and students' sense of attachment to the school."

▫ **Equity**—Poor and minority students have "notably higher achievement in small learning environments."

☐ **Affiliation/Belonging**—Students and teachers have the opportunity to get to know and care about each other. In a large school population in which there are often more than enough students to participate, it may go unnoticed that many students never participate, but in small learning communities (SLCs), student participation in school activities is genuinely needed.

☐ **Safety and Order**—"An obvious benefit of student affiliation and belonging is increased order and safety. The full range of negative social behavior—from classroom disruption to assault and even murder—is far less common in small schools...."

☐ **Truancy and Dropouts**—"School attendance and graduation rates are higher in small schools generally and better still in deliberately small schools."

☐ **Preparation for Higher Education**—More college-bound students are graduates of SLCs.

☐ **Cocurricular Participation**—While "in small schools generally, levels of cocurricular participation are higher, and students report both having more important roles...and deriving more satisfaction from those activities," many SLCs participate with the larger school in the activities program.

☐ **Teacher Attitudes and Satisfaction**—Teachers "feel in a better position to make a real difference in students' learning and general quality of life ... [and] have closer relationships with students and other staff; experience fewer discipline problems, and are better able to adapt instruction to students' individual needs."

☐ **Curriculum Quality**—Detractors of smaller schools stress that larger schools have more curricular offerings. Cotton's review of the research points out that in the core areas, SLCs are comparable to larger schools, and that in the larger schools, other offerings are often taken advantage of by a very small percentage of students. Furthermore, Cotton says, "Gladden (1998) takes the typical curriculum argument and turns the tables: 'Instead of being a deficit, the inability of small schools to differentiate students by offering a diverse curriculum seems to be an advantage. It forces small schools to teach a core academic curriculum in heterogeneous classes—and this factor is associated with a higher and more equitable level of achievement among students.'"

☐ **Costs**—Cotton counters the argument that small schools are not economical:

  • Required disciplinary and other administrative personnel required for larger schools "are so costly that, past a certain point, per pupil cost goes up—and keeps going up as the school grows larger."

  • Researchers in a large-scale study of small schools in New York City "reasoned that a more useful comparison than cost per student is cost per student graduated, and by this measure they found that small schools, with their much higher graduation rates, are the most economical schools of all."

3. Implement a comprehensive advisory program that ensures that each student has frequent and meaningful opportunities to plan and assess his or her academic and social progress with a faculty member.

Actions to support this strategy include:

☐ Beginning with incoming students (either ninth graders or "transfer" students), institute a comprehensive transition program between the "feeder schools" and the high school. This specialized program can be done in conjunction with the larger advisory program—or it can be a separate program—but it must provide an opportunity for an adult to get to know each student well so that the adult can continually assess whether the academic and school activities programs of the school are meeting the needs of the student.

☐ Establish a development program for advisors as well as a calendar, guidelines, and a proposed list of topics to be discussed in a small-group advisory setting or in an individual setting between an advisor or Personal Adult Advocate and an individual student.

☐ Provide opportunities for students to lead discussions about their own progress and their accomplishments in the advisory setting and in adviser/teacher/family progress checkups.

☐ Provide resources and time for students to research and investigate college opportunities and career choices.

☐ Require each student, in conjunction with his or her adviser *and* family, to prepare a Personal Plan for Progress that might include:

- Reflections on personal aspirations and an academic courses plan and school activities strategy that may lead to realization of those aspirations

- A review of personal learning styles

- Areas of strength and areas for improvement

- Specific products or portfolio items demonstrating accomplishment and progress in academic areas, school activities, sports, and school or community leadership. [See model Personal Plan for Progress in Appendix 2.]

Many schools either have an advisory program or have tried them in the past. Often these have been little more than "homeroom," opportunities to distribute paperwork, or time for school announcements. Effective, well-planned advisory programs can offer much more. In *Changing Systems to Personalize Learning: The Power of Advisories,* Osofsky, Sinner and Wolk (2003) reviewed the research and found the following beneficial effects of an effective advisory program:

☐ Academic achievement was improved, failing grades were reduced, and test scores increased

☐ More students took college entrance exams

☐ Forty-six percent [of teachers] believed they influenced several of their advisees to improve their grades

☐ Student attitudes improved significantly (75% by one measure)

☐ Student-teacher relations improved

☐ Number of dropouts declined

☐ Transition to high school was eased

☐ Liaison for the parents was provided.

(See Appendix 3 for five key dimensions of an effective advisory program.)

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4. Ensure that teachers use a variety of instructional strategies and assessments to accommodate individual learning styles.

Practices to support this strategy include:

☐ Conduct inventories of instructional strategies through observations to discover whether or not teachers are using a variety of strategies. (See Appendix 4.)

☐ Allow students to construct knowledge. In an example offered by *Breaking Ranks*, teachers offer a list of key questions to guide this inquiry or provide students with the titles of books and articles that are pertinent to uncovering the knowledge. A student is then responsible "for unlocking the knowledge, analyzing it, synthesizing it, and presenting it as a body of material for which he or she has taken possession."

☐ Provide development and teaming opportunities so that teachers learn how to incorporate seminars, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning, debates, field experiences, independent study, laboratories, reflection, and project-based learning into the traditional repertoire of lectures, question-and-answer periods, etc.

☐ Use standards-based assessments.

Many schools incorporate some of these practices to a limited extent, but how prevalent are they across the curriculum? How many teachers still rely on lecturing for every class? Do you have a way to assess how often teachers are using a variety of strategies? What systemic ways does your school assess students' individual learning styles? These are just a few of the questions that should be addressed as you review the practices associated with this strategy—practices proven to increase students' level of engagement and improve academic achievement.[2]

In addition to the benefit that learning is more memorable for students who are involved and engaged, the Education Alliance has found that schools with which they work that implement this strategy have:

☐ Fewer students dropping out

☐ Improved class attendance rates

☐ Fewer discipline referrals

☐ Improved teacher attendance

☐ Improved test scores.[3]

[2] Valerie E. Lee and Julia B. Smith's "High School Restructuring and Student Achievement" (as cited in *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution,* 1996).

[3] Education Alliance at Brown University. Roundtable discussion of benefits. July 2003.

5. Implement schedules flexible enough to accommodate teaching strategies consistent with the ways students learn most effectively and that allow for effective teacher teaming and lesson planning.

Actions to support this strategy include:

- Increase the time allowed for sustained learning by adjusting the length of class periods

- Adjust length of school day

- Adjust length of school year—trimesters or year-round school

- Institute a.m/p.m. structures—mornings for class instruction, afternoons for work- and community-based learning, student activities, professional development, and integrated team planning

- Integrate the curriculum to allow for more instructional time

- Implement teacher and student teaming

- Increase the frequency and improve the opportunities for common planning time for teachers

- Take advantage of community-based learning opportunities aligned with essential learnings (taking classes at local college, internships, independent study, etc.)

- Create small units to improve the quantity and quality of student-teacher interaction.

This strategy purposefully incorporates several concepts: flexible time, individual learning styles, and preparation for implementing effective teaching strategies. Flexible scheduling should support instruction; it should not be a goal in and of itself. Implemented in isolation from other instructional changes, flexible schedules will simply permit teachers to teach the same way they always have *for longer periods*. Without preparing faculty for flexible scheduling and without a comprehensive understanding of the use of various strategies to accommodate individual learning styles, flexible scheduling will not achieve its intended results. Conversely, done properly, "flexible scheduling and faculty teamwork allow for a level of depth and an interdisciplinary approach that provides students with a much richer educational experience." (Fine & Somerville as cited in Cotton [2004, p. 22.]) In general, flexible scheduling can also lower the overall frenetic pace of the school: students aren't racing from class to class (and don't need to be encouraged to do so, thereby eliminating opportunities for unnecessary confrontation), teachers have more than a three-minute time frame to switch their mindset from 9th-grade algebra to tenth-grade geometry, and roll call and other administrative tasks do not occupy such a high percentage of what should be learning time.

The Vermont High School Task Force, in its review of the research, discovered these additional benefits of flexible scheduling (2002, p. 34):

- "Students can concentrate on a smaller number of courses at one time, typically four instead of the usual six or seven;

- When teachers are responsible for smaller numbers of classes and students, they are able to establish closer relationships with their students, which has been found to be one of the most important influences on student motivation;

- Longer classes allow teachers to design and implement better project- and work-based learning opportunities.

- Collaboration among teachers and with business partners is facilitated."

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6. Institute structural leadership changes that allow for meaningful involvement in decision making by students, teachers, family members, and the community *and* that support effective communication with these groups.

Actions to support this strategy include:

- Formalize participation of students, teachers, family, and community members in site-based decision making teams, school leadership councils, strategic planning and school improvement teams, etc.

- Develop a program to support Personal Plans for Progress that allow students to plan their learning and the activities to support it.

- Institute conferences in which the students lead the discussion (e.g., students would lead the discussion about strengths and areas of improvement in the parent/teacher/student conference).

- Provide student government and other leadership forums with opportunities to be included in discussions of substantive issues.

- Offer families significant opportunities to monitor student progress on a regular basis (i.e., report cards are not enough).

- Encourage family and community members to become involved in curriculum and fiscal conversations.

- Meet with families on weekends, at home, or accommodate work schedules in other ways.

Schools should not underestimate the power that gaining the trust of families and parents can play in gaining the trust of students. Despite the research indicating that students whose parents stay involved tend to fare better academically and socially than others, families become less and less involved as students progress from elementary to middle school to high school. This disconnect has happened for any number of reasons but, as *Breaking Ranks* advises, commitment from both families and students is essential to improved student engagement:

> People more readily commit themselves to an institution that accords them
> a measure of influence over its operations.... [There is] merit in including
> students on various committees that determine policies that affect discipline,
> grading standards, and participation on sports teams. A high school that follows
> such a philosophy will do all it can, for example, to foster a viable student
> government. It will also convene forums in which students can share ideas
> about school reform and equip students with mediation skills so that they
> can help resolve problems in the school. Young people learn how to exercise
> responsibility by having the chance to do so. Students should know that things
> do not just happen to them; that they can act to affect outcomes. (p. 32)

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7. **Align the schoolwide comprehensive, ongoing professional development program and the individual Personal Learning Plans of staff members with the content knowledge and instructional strategies required to prepare students for graduation.**

Actions to support this strategy include:

☐ Align the schoolwide professional development program with the essential learnings, content and performance standards, and instructional strategies established in strategy 1.

☐ Ensure that each educator creates a Personal Learning Plan that addresses his or her need to grow, stressing knowledge and skills related to improved student learning and aligned with the school's essential learnings. Just as each student's Personal Plan for Progress provides opportunities for a student to reflect upon goals and progress toward reaching those goals, *Breaking Ranks* proposes that the Personal Learning Plan for each staff member will facilitate self-appraisal and that "self-reflection becomes more effective when pursued in a formal and systematic way." The plans should draw on

- Portfolios that teachers maintain of their teaching activities

- Observations by supervisors and colleagues

- Appraisals that students make of teachers

- Teachers' own professional reflections.

☐ Institute a formal, comprehensive orientation program for new and transfer teachers.

☐ Provide opportunities for teachers to teach teachers what they have learned from various professional development seminars, conferences, etc.

☐ Develop a mentoring process.

☐ Align the hiring process and subsequent professional development to ensure that skills of new teachers can meet the challenges incumbent in instituting the first six cornerstone strategies.

☐ Encourage frequent teacher-to-teacher observation with feedback tied to providing a specific course for professional development.

☐ Ensure that professional development is continuous and that each development opportunity is reinforced with follow-up activities.

As previously noted, professional development is critical to the success of the other six strategies: establishing and implementing essential learnings, improving the quality of interactions in your school, instituting an effective advisory program, using a variety of instructional strategies and assessments, implementing flexible schedules, and increasing the substantive involvement of families, students, and the community. How to support a comprehensive, ongoing professional development program in the context of building a professional learning community and bringing about changes in your school systematically through effective school leadership are discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Seven Strategies: A Good Beginning

Before proceeding to the "how-to" of change, a look at the comprehensive and inter-dependent nature of "what" must be changed is necessary. The seven strategies are just a beginning—albeit a complex and intensive beginning. *Breaking Ranks* reminds us that

> As a complex institution, the high school comprises many interlocking parts. Alter one element and you affect others. Thus, the recommendations that we offer... are best viewed as a series of connected proposals that in many instances depend on implementation in one area for success in another... Piecemeal change may lead to some positive results, but it is not apt to be as effective as efforts that reach into the various parts of the system, in other words, systemic reform. High schools need more than tinkering (p. 6).

The seven strategies outlined in this chapter provide a means for implementing the 31 core recommendations gleaned from *Breaking Ranks*. Assigning the recommendations to three clusters as we have done may simplify implementation and "digestion" of the material, but it is important to understand the interdependence of the recommendations. The following diagram listing an abbreviated version of the 31 recommendations within the three clusters provides a graphic illustration of that interdependence. (The complete text of each recommendation can be found immediately following the graphic.) Discussion of the three clusters and the recommendations supporting them are the focus of the remainder of this handbook.