

The *Breaking Ranks* Framework

AN OVERVIEW

Good ideas serve only as fodder for intellectual debate if they are not put to use.... Leadership requires that some people have the will and ability to act.

—*Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*



he release of *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* in 1996 signaled the beginning of a new opportunity for principals to tackle the thorny issues involved in school reform. Designed by a broad range of practitioners and researchers who were keenly aware of the inner workings of high schools, it provided a statement of principles and a host of recommendations for school improvement. Many of the recommendations evolved from existing practices at middle level schools as well as the groundbreaking 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 and Theodore Sizer's writing on the study of high schools, specifically *Horace's Compromise* (1984), will recognize commonalities in the areas of personalization, school and class size, instruction, and assessment. The influence 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 Development, 1989) all served to galvanize the debate about the need for reform and established substantive areas in which to undertake that reform.

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 *Breaking Ranks* concepts and recommendations. Legislation, standards development, and other policy and structural initiatives are essential to systemic school improvement; however, doing the work of school improvement clearly falls upon the shoulders of educators—teachers, aides, assistant principals, principals, the central office personnel, and many others. To assist educators in doing the important work of improving schools, NASSP has published several companion pieces to address the “who” and “how” of implementing the “what” contained in *Breaking Ranks*. These works include:

- *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*
- *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform*
- *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change*
- *10 Skills for Successful School Leaders*
- *Creating a Culture of Literacy*
- *Making the Math Curriculum Count.*

In the more than 15 years since principals, teachers, students, and other school leaders first came together to formulate the original recommendations, significant strides have been made to achieve that panel’s goal of making schools more student centered by personalizing programs, support services, and intellectual challenges for each student. The many lessons about school improvement resulted in adjustments and refinements. This body of knowledge and experience—referred to hereafter as the “*Breaking Ranks* Framework”—will undoubtedly continue to adapt to changing expectations and further learning about what works and how it works in school communities.

This book, which is informed by research and proven practice, provides a detailed description of the *Breaking Ranks* Framework as it exists today in its evolved state: a framework that can support all schools in the K–12 continuum. This book builds upon what NASSP has learned since *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* were released. In addition to incorporating and updating many of the key aspects of those books, this work also incorporates key components of two subsequent books in the series: *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change* and *10 Skills for Successful School Leaders*. As a result, this big-picture view of the Framework points the reader to an abundance of resources and further practice materials that are available in the companion pieces.

Building Relationships Between Students and Ideas

On any given day, I think every adolescent is at-risk in some way.

—George Marnik

A significant component of what happens in schools—or in the business world for that matter—is social or personal. Accomplishments are based on a number of factors, including confidence, effort, knowledge, rewards, consequences, and satisfaction. Schools must appreciate that those variables and dozens of others change for students every day—and often many times during any given day—thereby potentially putting any student at risk. A thorough understanding of where a student is coming from is often difficult to reach, yet a school culture that systematically encourages that understanding will make great strides in helping students learn. Teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships are tools within the classroom to generate excitement about ideas and learning.

Personalizing the school environment is an entry point to improving how a student interacts with and directs his or her own learning and encompasses the oversight, coaching, and motivational strategies that are associated with student-centered curriculum, instruction, and assessment. A student must have opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to the school, a sense of ownership over the direction of his or her learning, and the ability to recognize options and make choices that are based on his or her own experience and understanding of the options. **The *Breaking Ranks* Framework is designed to improve student performance by making learning personal**—by helping schools build better relationships within the school, opening the door to learning, and helping students build a more profound and productive relationship with ideas.

One Framework for Responsible K–12 School Improvement

How can one framework for school improvement work equally well in schools of different grade levels? No self-respecting educator would dare to espouse that schools serving elementary, middle level, or high school students should look the same. It boggles the mind to imagine high school

students singing a “clean up” song commonly used in kindergarten or middle level students quietly sitting through a lecture given in an AP History class.

The attractiveness of the *Breaking Ranks* Framework is that it does not prescribe a specific model that a school must follow, but rather builds upon the individual school’s data to assess strengths and identify needs so that a customized plan for school success can be developed. Regardless of grade level, all schools must address the three core areas of **collaborative leadership; personalizing your school environment;** and **curriculum, instruction, and assessment** to improve student performance. Only by addressing each of these three overlapping areas can improved student performance occur. Furthermore, it must be done in a manner that recognizes the specific academic and developmental needs—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive—of the students being served by the school. This is no easy task for any school. Schools with English language learners and other special populations have additional challenges. Consider the demands placed on a high school whose students’ literacy skills range from beginning to college-level readers. The challenge is to engage each student at his or her level. Students have varying levels of knowledge and different learning styles that require teachers to use a host of teaching practices and techniques to engage each student on any given day.

All schools that hold true to the *Breaking Ranks* Framework will create a personalized, safe, inclusive, caring environment that is staffed with adults who understand and appreciate the unique characteristics of each age group. Those schools know that the teacher-student relationship is the key to learning but that personalizing the environment does little to promote improved student performance unless it is combined with high expectations and a rigorous and relevant curriculum supported by strong collaborative leadership. Educators in high-performing schools at all levels understand the unique development characteristics of students and use that knowledge “as a foundation for establishing school beliefs and core values and for setting leadership priorities that focus on learning and school improvement” (Clark & Clark, 2008, p. 1).

The *Breaking Ranks* Framework calls upon all schools to implement proven policies, practices, and structures to ensure that all students have a relationship with a trusted adult in the school and to eliminate the possibility of students remaining anonymous. Teaming, advisory programs, flexible schedules, opportunities for student leadership, parent and community involvement, and effective guidance services have, if properly implemented, all proven effective. Many such practices have come directly from reforms in middle level education and have proven effective at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The *Breaking Ranks* Framework encourages each school to adopt these proven and accepted practices to ensure that students become engaged in highly challenging academic pursuits.

As the following sections attest, there are many challenges that differ between elementary level, middle level, and high schools, yet the *Breaking Ranks* Framework is comprehensive and flexible enough to implement at all levels. The Framework also makes sense as a way to further the alignment of policies and successful practices of schools across grade levels. It outlines ways for K–12 school leaders to engage in substantive conversations around alignment, transitions, and other school issues. To make the most of the flexibility of the *Breaking Ranks* Framework, principals and teacher leaders must understand and address the respective school and community cultures as well as the differences between sending and receiving schools and how the schools can collaborate.

At the Elementary Level...

One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.

—Dr. Seuss

Elementary schools have the distinctive challenge of working with students with the widest range of ages and developmental needs. Programs designed for the early grades (K–2) look quite different from those for the older children, and schools that are configured as K–8 have the additional responsibility of serving middle level students.

It is often said that the achievement gap begins before students enter school, and that is nowhere more apparent than in the early grades of an elementary school. Children begin school with a wide range of abilities and background experiences, and many low-income and minority students lag behind their peers in health, social, and emotional development; language and literacy skills; and mathematical thinking. This presents unique challenges to all elementary schools but especially those with a K–8 grade configuration. Imagine the challenge of keeping social development and cognitive growth in mind while helping some students *learn to read* while teaching others how to *read to learn*.

Because students start school with diverse backgrounds, elementary schools have the additional challenge of teaching the youngest students how to “do” school. Teachers in the early elementary grades must not only focus on basic academics but also address social and emotional needs by teaching students the skills needed for self-control, the language necessary to express their feelings and thoughts, and the skills required to interact with others in a positive manner. Such skills are often taught in upper elementary as well as to students just entering kindergarten. Each elementary student’s learning needs must be identified and each must understand how to learn most effectively and advocate for him- or herself. In addition, students with disabilities are frequently in the early phases of the identification process and don’t yet have IEPs, which means that elementary educators have the tough challenge of determining the best practices to meet each student’s individual needs.

As students progress through the grades, their early school experience is crucial to their continued academic success. It is vital that adults who work with elementary level students remember that every child is different and begins school with different needs and motivations. Although some students begin school eager to learn and less rebellious than their older counterparts, schools face a major challenge in encouraging and working with those who struggle without dampening their self-esteem and enthusiasm for learning.

Providing students with quality instruction is a universal mission of all schools, but the wide range of student ages and development at the elementary level presents some unique challenges. The knowledge and skills needed to be an outstanding kindergarten teacher are different than those needed to successfully teach fifth graders, but both teachers must understand the needs of their students and the demands of the subjects they teach—quite a challenge, but also an opportunity to make connections across subjects. Leaders of elementary schools must be savvy about those differences and provide the professional development and support needed to ensure student success at every level, in every subject. Fortunately, students begin elementary school literally clinging to their parents, so many elementary schools have developed practices to leverage those high rates of parent participation. As students progress through the grades, however, parent involvement often decreases, so schools need to work diligently to solicit parent voice. Two of the stories in this book as well as the many stories and examples in *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* provide ideas that are applicable to elementary schools.

At the Middle Level...

At no other time in the life cycle are the changes of finding one's self and losing one's self so closely aligned.

—Erik Erikson

Those educators who work with middle level students, regardless of the grade configuration of the school, must realize that their school is neither a miniature high school nor an elementary school—it must be designed to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of young adolescents. It's far too easy to forget that students entering the middle level are only five or six years removed from their teddy bears and those leaving are only a few short years away from the rigors of college.

Other than from birth to age three, 10- to 15-year-olds are experiencing the most rapid, significant changes of their lives—changes that are physical, social, emotional, and cognitive in nature. Schools that work successfully with middle level students understand and recognize that the students are seeking new levels of independence and can be highly peer centered; that the changes they are experiencing affect their thinking and behavior; and that each young adolescent is maturing on his or her own timeline—a student who appears to be physically mature may in reality be emotionally immature and a very concrete learner who finds it difficult to grasp abstract concepts.

This understanding of young adolescent development also affects decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Because adolescents live in the moment, the curriculum must capitalize on their personal interests and help them build connections between their lives and the world in which they live. The curriculum should be relevant, challenging, and interdisciplinary—and learning must be assessed through multiple measures, including real-life application and demonstration of knowledge and skills, and not solely based on state test scores. Instruction should be as varied and diverse as the students themselves; should take advantage of the young adolescent's need for movement and social interaction; and should be engaging, thought provoking, and interactive in nature.

But just as no two snowflakes are identical, neither are two middle level schools. Although the foundation of a school that serves middle level students must be based on knowledge of the young adolescent, school leaders must also take into account the unique nature of their school and their students and keep that nature at the heart of their decision making. As you put the *Breaking Ranks* Framework into practice at your middle level school, refer to the stories and examples of three unique schools in *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*.

At the High School Level...

Adolescence is a period of rapid changes. Between the ages of 12 and 17, for example, a parent ages as much as 20 years.

—Author Unknown

Compared with middle schools, high schools tend to be larger and more complex, which makes it easier for adults as well as students to become isolated from one another and focused on meeting their own individual needs. It is commonly said that high school teachers are a group of independent contractors brought together by a common parking lot.

Driven by the complexity of course content and the number of specialists required to teach myriad course offerings, the culture of high schools—particularly large high schools—can easily evolve into rigidly compartmentalized, adult- and content-focused subunits instead of a culture that is student and learning focused. Rather than developing a customized learning approach

for every student, high schools may—and often do—lapse into what more closely resembles an impersonal assembly-line process.

High schools usually encompass more grade levels than middle schools, and they also have a wider range of student ages. High student mobility—the result of a number of societal factors—has resulted in interrupted schooling that causes some students to take more than four years to graduate. Today, it is not uncommon for high schools to have a significant number of 19-year-old seniors. The developmental difference between a 14-year-old ninth grader, who may more closely resemble a middle level student than a high school student, and a 19-year-old senior, who may look more like an adult than a high school student, is dramatic.

As dramatic are the differences between one high school and another. The practices that make learning personal within your school may differ from those in another school. Regardless, making that personal connection is critical. As you put the *Breaking Ranks* Framework into practice at your high school, refer to the stories and examples found in *Breaking Ranks II* for examples of three schools that used the Framework to successfully improve learning.

A Change in Culture

If schools are to improve—and they must—then school culture must evolve from an adult-focused, activity-oriented school environment to a student- and learning-focused culture. Schools must move from the assembly line to mass customization. Although each school is unique, high-performing schools—elementary, middle level, and high schools—will integrate the *Breaking Ranks* Framework into the culture of their schools.

School leaders must first recognize the critical role that a school's belief system plays in the sustainability of school improvement efforts. Second, they must carefully examine the process they are using to implement the change. Fullan (2005) described this type of change as the reculturing of schools:

Sustainability is very much a matter of changes in culture: powerful strategies that enable people to question and alter certain values and beliefs as they create new forms of learning within and between schools, and across levels of the system. (p. 60)

Changing the attitudes, values, and beliefs that drive a school requires courage and effort. Underpinning this shift must be the core belief that each student should be challenged to achieve at high levels.

Expectations and Mind-Sets

The reality is that we can talk about culture and high achievement, and we can conduct high-quality professional development activities until we are blue in the face, but if teachers and other school leaders don't really believe or expect that each and every student can achieve at high levels, our efforts are doomed to failure.

In *Mindset*, Dweck (2006) noted that what people believe about success drives their behavior. One group, "fixed mind-set," believes that ability is something you either have or you don't and that ability is the best predictor of success. Those with a fixed mind-set worship talent and believe that no matter how hard one works, the level of achievement is limited by one's innate ability.

Dweck and other researchers have learned that the opposite is true: in the real world, work and effort create ability. Dweck discovered that some people have a "growth mind-set." They believe that success is the result of time, work, and deliberate practice. Her research has found that those

with a growth mind-set were resilient learners who viewed problems as challenges and opportunities to learn. On the other hand, those with a fixed mind-set gave up easily and spent most of their time protecting their self-image. School leaders must do everything possible to help teachers acquire a growth mind-set. Once that is accomplished, our schools will be unstoppable.

Initiatives Affect Culture and Culture Affects Initiatives

Understanding that each initiative—and how it is implemented—could and should affect your school culture is essential. In the highly connected modern school, every action prompts a reaction or, more likely, multiple reactions. The key to the successful use of the *Breaking Ranks* Framework is to avoid the pick-and-choose mentality of, “Oh, I’ll try this.” Undertaking an initiative in the core area of personalizing your school environment without fully understanding and addressing how to support and make the most of it with accompanying modifications in the areas of collaborative leadership or curriculum, instruction, and assessment may prove to have unintended consequences. Consider what happens when a proven best practice that has worked well in many other schools is attempted in a school that implements the same practice poorly. The resulting failure demonstrates the importance of focusing on the “how.” An initiative that is based on solid research, implemented within a collaborative process, and introduced with fidelity to the implementation procedures stands a greater chance of success and effectiveness. A focus on the collaborative process will help ensure that your school anticipates how one initiative will affect other core areas—an effect that may differ from another school implementing the same initiative.

Too often when implementing improvement initiatives, schools neglect to focus on the importance of altering school culture. A positive school culture can allow improvements to take hold, flourish, and be sustained. Changing culture requires more than being the first person with a great idea. Transformations do not take place until the culture of the school permits it—and no long-term significant change can take place without creating a culture to sustain that change. The question for education leaders at all levels is this: How can we foster cultural changes within schools so that we can lead improvement and enhance student learning? A great idea does not a great culture make; however, great leadership teams can have a lasting impact by creating a culture that challenges and educates each student.

The *Breaking Ranks* Framework is not a model or a mandate. The *Breaking Ranks* Framework is taking all of the programs, practices, and initiatives that provide incremental change and inserting them into a larger framework for improvement that alters the system and culture in fundamental ways. What is required is, according to Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), “deep change [that] alters the system in fundamental ways, offering a dramatic shift in direction and requiring new ways of thinking and acting” (p. 66)—what they also refer to as “second-order change.” What most schools instead produce is “first-order change”: “incremental change [that] fine-tunes the system through a series of small steps that do not depart radically from the past” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 66). The sad fact is that many of the changes being implemented are short lived with no lasting results. By focusing on the process as well as the reform initiatives, we hope to upend the oft-expressed sentiment coined by Irene Peter, “Just because everything is different doesn’t mean anything has changed.”

As a first step, the *Breaking Ranks* Framework prompts schools to ask some very basic questions about how the school is meeting the needs of each student. Subsequent focus is on creating a culture for the individual, the leadership team, and the school community that supports individual learning and an environment of success. The Framework at a Glance that follows illustrates the various components of the *Breaking Ranks* Framework. Each of these steps will be covered in greater detail in the remaining chapters.