



National Association of
Secondary School Principals



Breaking Ranks[®]

*The Comprehensive Framework
for School Improvement*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



FOR K-12 SCHOOL LEADERS

Breaking Ranks®

The Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement

In the more than 15 years since principals, teachers, students, and other school leaders first came together to formulate the original *Breaking Ranks* recommendations, significant strides have been made to achieve that panel's goal of making schools more student centered by personalizing programs and support systems and meeting the intellectual challenges of each student. 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. The *Breaking Ranks* Framework exists today in its evolved state: a framework that can support all schools in the K–12 continuum. It 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*.

One Framework for Responsible K–12 School Improvement

How can one framework for school improvement work equally well in schools of different grade levels? 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.

The *Breaking Ranks* Framework encourages each school to adopt proven and accepted practices to ensure that students become engaged in highly challenging academic pursuits. Many challenges 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.



Framework at a Glance

KEY QUESTION:

Why Does Your School Need to Improve?

Breaking Ranks Framework:

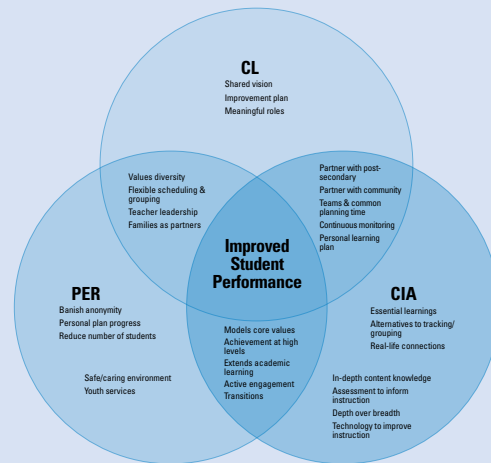
How Well Does Your School Serve Each Student?

KEY QUESTION:

What Needs to Improve?

Breaking Ranks Framework:

Nine cornerstones for improvement and 29 interconnected recommendations within three core areas: Collaborative Leadership; Personalizing Your School Environment; Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

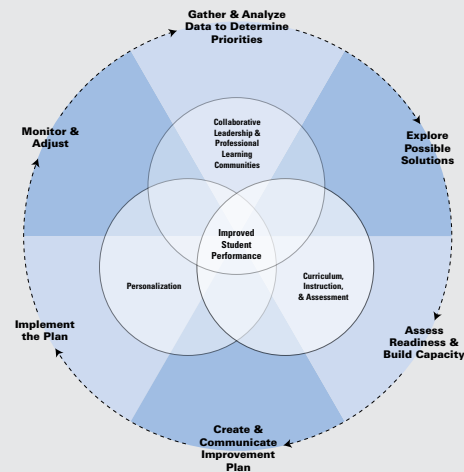


KEY QUESTION:

How Do We Improve Our School?

Breaking Ranks Framework:

Six stages for systematic school improvement



KEY QUESTION:

Who? Do You and Your Team Have What It Takes to Create a Culture for School Improvement?

Breaking Ranks Framework:

Work to create a culture that will support improvement and examine your own leadership in these 10 skill areas:

Setting instructional direction	Organizational ability
Teamwork	Oral communication
Sensitivity	Written communication
Judgment	Developing others
Results orientation	Understanding own strengths and weaknesses

KEY QUESTION:

Why Does Your School Need to Improve?

Making learning personal for each student and learning how best to accomplish that is at the heart of the *Breaking Ranks* Framework. A school can only accomplish personalized learning within an environment that supports it. By analyzing how well your school is currently doing, your team can set benchmarks for future success. Your leadership team and others must begin by asking and answering important questions about how well your school serves each student. [See Appendix 1.]

KEY QUESTION:

What Needs to Improve?

To achieve the greatest gains in school improvement, the *Breaking Ranks* Framework calls on school leaders to focus simultaneously on three core areas:

- Collaborative leadership
- Personalizing your school environment
- Curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Schools operate within the parameters of these three core areas, but as educators well know, there is considerable overlap and interdependence. As a complex institution, the school comprises many interlocking parts, as portrayed by the Venn diagram of the three core areas. Alter one element and you affect others. Because each school has its own dynamics, altering an element in one school may have profoundly different results than a similar change in another school. Therefore, the recommendations made in the *Breaking Ranks* Framework are best viewed not as a model but as a series of connected and interdependent proposals. Be forewarned: piecemeal change may lead to some immediate positive results, but it is not apt to be as effective or sustainable as efforts that reach into all parts of the system—in other words, systemic reform. Schools need more than tinkering.

At the foundation of this interconnected *Breaking Ranks* Framework lie nine cornerstones that should guide implementation of improvement initiatives. Think of them as the foundational concepts upon which the *Breaking Ranks* Framework is built:

- Leadership
- Professional Development
- Culture
- Organization

- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Assessment
- Relationships
- Equity.

KEY QUESTION:

How Do We Improve Our School?

Too often when implementing reforms, schools neglect to focus on the importance of altering school culture. Principals, teachers, and other school leaders are dedicated professionals who believe passionately in educating each student. Despite a long history of reforms, however, not every school has arrived at the point of serving each student. Every school leader has studied and reviewed plans or implemented reforms that appear, on the surface, to be thoughtful and to promise substantive impact. Yet when the plan becomes reality, the results are less significant than expected, the plan itself is too difficult to implement, or the resources needed are missing. In effect, those seeking to improve become so obsessed with the plan that they lose sight of the outcomes or the resulting changes cannot be sustained.

School improvement requires more than 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. Leaders at all levels must foster this transformed environment. A great idea does not create a great culture; however, great leadership teams acting on a good idea can have a lasting impact. The *Breaking Ranks* Framework provides a well-defined process that will not only help implement recommendations made in this book but also help to foster a culture of excellence and continuous improvement within your school.

The process consists of six stages:

- Gather and analyze data to determine priorities
- Explore possible solutions
- Assess readiness and build capacity
- Create and communicate improvement plan
- Implement the plan
- Monitor and adjust.

Culture: the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.

Source: Merriam Webster online

Framework at a Glance *(continued)*

Each of these stages is important to your improvement efforts. Neglecting any one will cause considerable harm to your school culture and individual improvement initiatives. Although you cannot neglect any stages, you may also not be able to address them sequentially. School improvement is a messy undertaking with no linear path to success. Engage in each of the six stages—you may cover each more than once—but adapt to your school's own circumstances and culture.

KEY QUESTION:

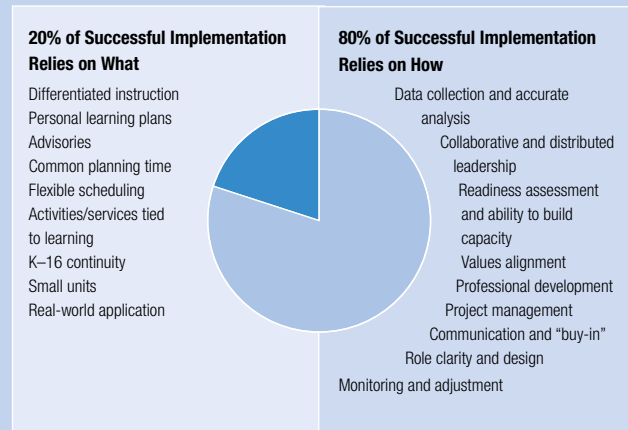
Who? Do You and Your Team Have What It Takes to Create a Culture for School Improvement?

One person alone cannot reach each student and help each student succeed. We need leaders who lead in many different ways and in numerous circumstances to implement the *Breaking Ranks* Framework. Principal, teacher, and student leadership are invaluable to the effort. Collaboration within grade levels, across grade levels, and across schools provides the backbone for the sustainability of the Framework. The old top-down, organizational chart-driven schools were good at sorting students for success, but they are simply too restrictive and too bureaucratic to respond to the needs of individual students. They were good at organizing but very bad at customizing. To reach every student, schools need to make learning personal for each individual.

Many middle schools have long operated with this backbone of collaboration in place. In the past 15 years, more high schools have begun to adopt similar practices, thanks in large part to school leaders and leadership teams who are willing to break ranks from the top-down norm. Those schools appreciate that school improvement can only occur if the culture permits it. Effective personal and team leadership can have a profound and lasting impact on school culture. Such teams operate under various names and in myriad formats—from leadership teams to professional learning communities. The names are not important but the collaboration is vital.

Principals and other school leaders must look within themselves to ensure that they have the necessary skills,

Implementation Success Relies on How



attitudes, and mind-sets to lead improvement. Leaders must believe that all students can achieve at high levels and that all staff members with the proper skills and mind-sets can support that achievement. For more than three decades, NASSP has been assessing and studying the skills of school leaders. As a result of that experience, analyses of the principalship, observation, and research, NASSP has identified 10 skills that encompass the bulk of what school leadership entails: setting instructional direction, teamwork, sensitivity, judgment, results orientation, organizational ability, oral communication, written communication, developing others, and understanding your own strengths and weaknesses.

Conscientious reflection will help you collaborate and delegate more effectively and be more appreciative of the contributions that others can make. Focused practice will enable you to become more effective in certain areas so that you can stop putting out fires (even those that you may have started or contributed to) and start reaping the benefits of collaborative planning. By constructively and systematically asking for focused feedback—in addition to the “How am I doing?” feedback—you can build consensus and culture, rather than dissension and controversy.

The 10 skills will be discussed within the context of the Framework; however, for a more in-depth look at how to improve your own skills, see the companion book *10 Skills for Successful School Leaders* (available from www.nassp.org).

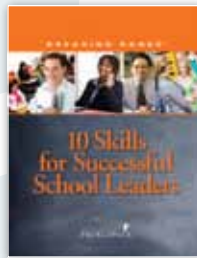
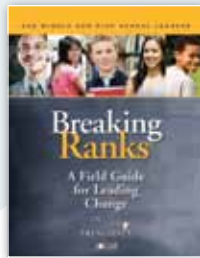
Breaking Ranks®

The Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement

The sixth in the NASSP *Breaking Ranks* series for school improvement, this new book combines all the elements needed to make substantive, sustainable school change that brings improved student performance.

Breaking Ranks: The Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement will help school leaders determine why their school needs to sustain improvement, what specifically needs to change, how their team can implement changes, and who must be equipped to lead and make those changes. Learn how to conduct ongoing and rigorous analysis of your school's needs and determine an integrated approach to school improvement that will be successful and sustainable.

Each school is unique. This new comprehensive guide can provide all schools—elementary, middle level, and high schools—with a framework for school- or systemwide improvement.



NASSP has developed these additional Breaking Ranks resources for principals and their leadership teams.

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