

# *Breaking Ranks* In Action: Students First

**Congratulations to the MetLife Foundation–NASSP Breakthrough Schools Class of 2010! This edition of *Principal Leadership* celebrates the group’s diversity, boundless energy, rich work ethic, and remarkable accomplishments.**

**A**t first glance, the 2010 MetLife Foundation–NASSP Breakthrough Schools (BTS) appear to have little in common: Five are middle schools, five are high schools, seven are public schools, two are public charters, and one is a private school. One urban high school has an enrollment of 200 students, and one suburban high school enrolls 3,600 students. Some of the schools have large Hispanic populations, others serve predominantly Black students, and one school’s student population is 99% Menominee American Indian. On the surface, the only factor that all the schools appear to share is that their student populations have large numbers of economically challenged students.

Look beyond those superficial differences, however, and you’ll find schools that are singularly focused on student outcomes: all 10 schools have experienced dramatic improvements in student achievement over relatively short periods of time. Digging into each school’s story reveals a significant common factor that can be replicated by any school that is committed to improving student outcomes: an adherence to the guiding principles for school renewal found in *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform (BRII)* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform (BRIM)*.

NASSP has long been recognized as the national leader in the secondary school change process, and 2010 finds the organization in its third

decade of providing guidance to middle and high school principals throughout the country through the widespread dissemination of the *Breaking Ranks* documents. The publications were designed as resource materials, so they are packed with recommendations, tools, and activities. As guides on how to initiate the change process through self-examination, detailed planning and critical follow-up, *BRII* and *BRIM* have proven invaluable to the BTS principals as they have introduced and implemented their continuous improvement models. The ultimate goal for all schools was the same: increased student achievement for success in middle school, high school, and beyond.

The 2010 schools are commended, in large part, for their successful implementation of the three core concepts of *Breaking Ranks*: collaborative leadership, including professional learning communities and strategic use of data; personalization of the school environment so that every student feels connected to his or her learning; and curriculum, instruction, and assessment that are aligned with state and local standards. Evidence of active engagement in all three of the core areas can be found in each school. Moreover, these schools demonstrate how the core concepts can be personalized and made school specific so that the implementation is meaningful to individual school communities. Some definitive examples of replicable strategies from each core area follow.



## Collaboration

**Brentwood High School.** Teachers created a cross-curricular literacy team as a way to consistently reach a large number of English language learners and special education students who were underperforming on state assessments.

**Franklin Towne Charter High School.** A five-year strategic professional development plan provided teachers with the skills they needed to improve classroom instruction.

**Menominee Indian Middle School.** Two teams composed of staff members from the school and from the county government and leaders from the Menominee and other tribes addressed significant attendance concerns by providing wraparound community services for families.

## Curriculum/Instruction/Assessment

**Fieldale-Collinsville Middle School.** To fully differentiate heterogeneous instruction, teachers integrated technology to seamlessly support grouping strategies.

**Mater Academy Charter Middle School.** A schoolwide instructional focus calendar that details which staff members are responsible for teaching specific skills each week is created every summer by the school's leadership team.

**San Miguel High School.** Teachers agreed to use common language across the curriculum to teach a set of common skills, such as persistence and collaboration, that are designed to promote student success at school and at work.

## Personalization

**San Diego Met High School.** Advisories are the core organizational structure of the school: teachers and advisers are committed to providing instructional, social, and emotional continuity to their students and families for four years.

**Park View High School.** An equity facilitation team teaches the basics of equitable education to help teachers create culturally responsive classrooms where all students are held to high expectations and given the resources to meet them.

**Ravenswood Middle School.** In response to

low participation in the before-school breakfast program, the Grab 'n' Go program was created to provide a nutritious snack and a daily 10-minute break for staff members and students.

## Integration of Core Areas

All 10 schools model the principle of integration of core areas, but **Tefft Middle School** exemplifies how this can be put to work in practice.

At Tefft, teachers collaborated to write and post quarterly learning targets. Next, teachers design formal and informal assessments that are aligned with state standards, conferencing with students about results and requiring students to keep data journals with individual learning goals. Finally, student-led parent conferences are held to reinforce student responsibility and home-school collaboration.

The strategies that the 2010 BTS employed can be successfully replicated in most secondary schools. In considering the ideas or approaches for your school, keep in mind another overarching common element that has helped to make students in those schools so successful: All decisions made by the leadership teams are based on student needs. After careful research and consideration, each decision is, in the end, made in response to the single question, What is best for our students?

The success of the Breakthrough Schools clearly demonstrates that neither implementation of new ideas nor support for the status quo should be accepted by principals and staff members without first answering that question. Decisions are not made based solely on school tradition, convenience to adults, master schedule concerns, or the easiest path. Decisions are based on student needs. This commitment to student-centered decision making is the key to success for all students in these diverse, challenging, and high-achieving secondary schools. **PL**

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