

FOR MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL LEADERS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Breaking Ranks®

A Field Guide  
for Leading  
Change

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF SECONDARY SCHOOL  
PRINCIPALS 

 **CSSR**<sup>SM</sup>  
The Center for Secondary School Redesign  
Personalizing education today, preparing students for tomorrow

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change

As a school leader, you are all too familiar with the problems associated with the reforms du jour. Some reforms are conceptually sound but poorly implemented, others should never have been seriously considered. Examples abound—a flexible, block schedule is in place but instruction is delivered in 45-minute segments, interdisciplinary teams have common planning time but teachers fail to address the instructional needs of the students, advisory time is used as a study hall, or participation in advanced classes does not reflect the school’s demographics. With the tremendous amount of time, effort, and resources that are being devoted to education reform, school leaders must develop the capacity to guide their schools in making deep, meaningful changes that result in higher student achievement that can be sustained over time.

*Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (2004) and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform* (2006) provide a framework to help schools become more student-centered by personalizing programs, support services, and academic challenges for every student. These publications identified three core areas for improvement:

- **Collaborative leadership** and professional learning communities;
- **Personalization** of the school environment
- **Curriculum, instruction, and assessment.**

Since 1996, *Breaking Ranks* has addressed the “what” of school reform through recommendations to principals about middle and high school change. In 2009, *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change* addresses the “how” of school change. Through a focus on collaborative leadership, this guide provides a process that school leadership teams will use to **implement and sustain change**. Leadership teams will work through these steps in a customized fashion to ensure a fit for the context and culture of their schools and the communities they serve.

### The Process to Break Ranks in Your School: A Synopsis

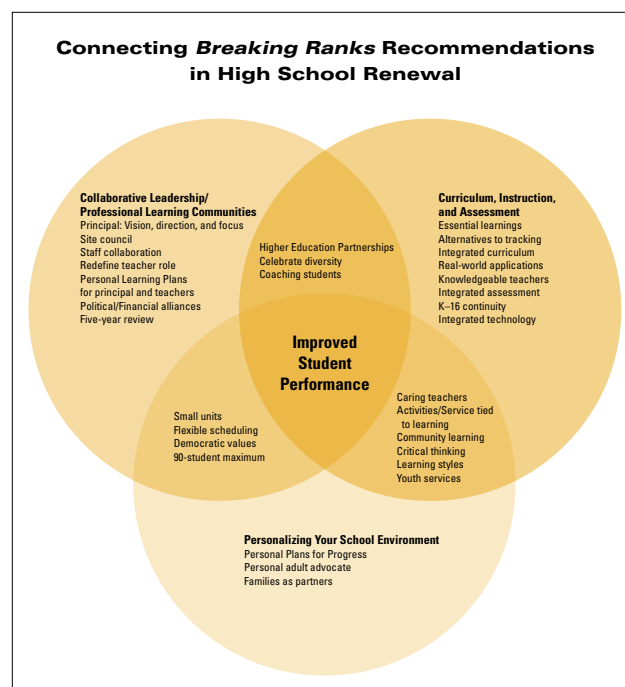
At the core, all efforts to change your school must ultimately be focused on improved student performance. To be successful, all steps of the *Breaking Ranks* change process must be based on a shared vision, promoted by collaborative leadership, and supported by professional development.

### 1. Gather and Analyze Data to Determine Priorities

Carefully examine all available data to determine priorities. To paint an accurate big-picture look at the school, data must be gathered from a wide variety of sources and used to determine the areas of greatest need. To be effective the data must be personalized—faces must be put on the numbers.

#### Gather Data:

- a. *Demographic data*: Ethnic population, mobility rate, poverty indicators, parents’ education, housing, etc.
- b. *Academic data*: State test scores; other testing data (SAT, ACT, PSAT, etc); district, school, and/or classroom assessments; failure rates; interim progress reports; observations of classroom practice—what’s actually happening in the classroom, etc.
- c. *Diagnostic assessment data*: Reading, writing, mathematics
- d. *Behavioral data*: Attendance, suspensions, referrals, expulsions, interventions, counselor visits, bullying issues, harassment, etc.



- e. *Miscellaneous data*: NASSP satisfaction surveys (staff members, parent, students—visit [www.principals.org](http://www.principals.org)), surveys of business/community, exit interviews/surveys, etc.
- f. *Student perception data*: Student shadowing, student forums, for example, NASSP’s Raising Student Voice and Participation model (RSVP).

### Analyze Data:

Sort by subgroups; look for patterns, growth/declines over time and correlations across subjects, equity of access to challenging classes, etc.

## 2. Explore Possible Solutions

From the priorities derived from analyzing the data, **explore possible solutions** that will lead to improved student performance. Consider categories such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, equitable access to programs, academic support, and interventions as potential goal areas. Conduct site visits and talk with other school leaders. (See *Breaking Ranks II* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*.)

## 3. Assess Readiness and Build Capacity

Determine what must be in place to successfully implement the needed changes. **Assess** staff needs, organizational structures, programs, curricula, and the like to determine the school’s **readiness** and overall **capacity** to address the identified priorities. **Build capacity** to address these needs through professional development, reallocating resources, revising schedules, etc.

## 4. Create and Communicate Improvement Plan

Based on stakeholder input and the information gained from the previous step, establish goals for an **improvement plan** that are designed to improve student performance. Incorporate those goals into all aspects of school improvement planning and ensure clear **communication** with all involved parties.

## 5. Implement the Plan

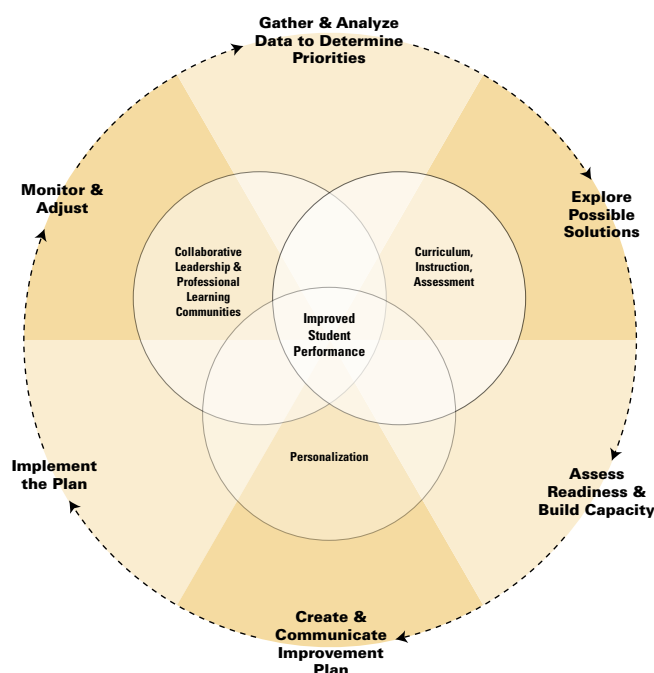
Just do it! (See *Breaking Ranks II* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* for proven strategies to guide implementation.)

## 6. Monitor and Adjust

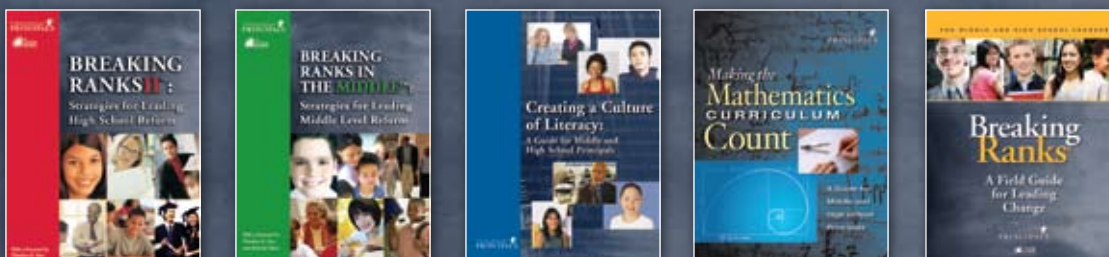
As the plan is implemented, determine regular check points to **monitor** progress. Repeat surveys as appropriate. As additional data is collected and analyzed, make **adjustments** or refinements as needed. Be sure to share results and progress.

## TOOLS

- General Questions for Your Team to Consider That May Require Data
- *Breaking Ranks* Team Staffing Protocol
- How Well Does Your School Serve Each Student Survey Instrument
- School Culture Evaluation Exercise
- Interview or Focus Group Protocol
- Solution Options Generation
- Site Visit Report Elements
- Change Leadership Success Factor Checklist
- Commitment to Change: Motivation Checklist
- Importance Versus Practice: *Breaking Ranks* Recommendations Survey
- Goal Status Questionnaire
- Role Change Worksheet
- Leadership Capacity Questionnaire
- High Level Implementation Plan Tool
- Detailed Implementation Plan
- Communication and Buy-In Planning Checklist
- Communication Planning Matrix
- Milestone Tracking Worksheet and Change Leadership
- Success Factor Checklist
- Change Activity Impact Worksheet



**NASSP has developed each of these books as a resource for principals and their leadership teams. All are based on the same framework and are compatible with one another and all provide the “what” for school change.**



**Breaking Ranks®: A Field Guide for Leading Change** is a “how to” book. It provides the missing steps in the process to bring about change in middle and high schools. In fact, based on the core areas of *Breaking Ranks* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*, this book gives school leadership teams tools to use and actions to take, yet it is compatible with any school improvement plan that states and districts develop.

The book is organized around a process circle that asks school teams to **gather data**, **explore possible solutions**, **assess readiness**, **create a plan**, and **implement the plan**, as well as **monitor and adjust the plan**. All while viewing the process through the lens of real school improvement plans with their successes and failures.

With the publication of this book, NASSP continues its highly successful *Breaking Ranks* series and promises additional pieces in the future.

For more information contact:

John R. Nori

Director, Program Development

National Association of Secondary School Principals

703-860-7263/ 800-253-7746, ext. 263

[norij@principals.org](mailto:norij@principals.org)

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF SECONDARY SCHOOL  
**PRINCIPALS**

  
The Center for Secondary School Redesign  
Promoting the quality of secondary education for all students