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Breaking ranks: Changing an American institution

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Abstract (Summary)

The recommendations from "Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution" are presented. This is a report of the NASSP Study of the Restructuring of the American High School.

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PROLOGUE: What Makes This Report Special

Many have had their say about how to improve America's high schools--governors, legislators, policymakers, scholars from higher education, members of professional disciplinary associations, editorial writers, and a host of independent authors. Now, we believe, the time has come for those mainly responsible for the day-to-day operations of high schools to lay out their plans for educational form. Thus, this report, unlike those previously issued, embodies a vision developed primarily by high school principals. It draws strength and authority from the fact that it arises from the inside and does not descend on high schools from the outside.

In the end, practitioners must carry the weight of the effort when it comes to high school renewal. Those who have sat in the principal's office have the best overview of what it takes to make high schools better. Their jobs require that they involve themselves in the instructional program, supervise and evaluate teachers, interact with parents, work with students, deal with the central administration, and in some places, oversee budgets and governance. In other words, they know what is practical and what is impractical. They are familiar with the challenges and the obstacles.

This report is unencumbered by politics or ideology. The driving force behind each recommendation is the single-minded consideration of what is best for the education of the country's teenagers, the life blood of the nation, as they are poised on the brink of adulthood. The Commission that formulated these proposals included principals, other administrators, and teachers; it also was one of the few panels of its kind to have students as members. The document is grounded in the experiences of those most profoundly involved in the American high school.

Lending additional significance to the words on these pages is the sponsorship of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, a membership organization that stands ready to launch a movement to implement the recommendations. Other reports offering proposals for school renewal have arrived like bolts of thunder unleashed by Zeus, briefly incandescent but quickly fading from view. In this instance, however, the secondary school principals group will work in the months and years ahead to illuminate a set of recommendations meant to carry high schools into the next century.

The report, almost two years in the making, is the beginning, not the end, of a process that will endure for the rest of this decade and into the next to restructure high schools in ways that will contribute to the academic success--and, ultimately, the success in life--of young Americans.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals in releasing this document commits itself to remain involved for the long haul. Few other reports on educational reform have had the leverage for change that the principals provide for this report. We realize that implementation of the recommendations will be difficult and complicated. We hope, however, that the report will serve as a template for examining existing policies and practices and that it will stir action when and where needed.

Therefore, these pages constitute a canvas on which we paint the broad brush strokes of high school reform; superintendents, school board members, principals, teachers, students, parents, and other members of high school communities around the country must fill in the details that fit their particular circumstances. No document of this sort can hope to serve as more than a manifesto for action. Whatever steps they take, those who respond to the urgings of the Commission must be willing to depart from the status quo where appropriate. The very title of the report, *Breaking Ranks*, conveys a recognition that old ways that no longer work must yield to change. The changes should be guided by a sense of purpose.

What goals ought today's high schools to embrace? This question might be answered in hundreds of different ways. Certain themes, however, are apt to appear and reappear on any short list of the purposes of high schools. These nine purposes represent our vision for this nation's high schools and for the recommendations set forth in this report:

- I. High school is, above all else, a learning community and each school must commit itself to expecting demonstrated academic achievement for every student in accord with standards that can stand up to national scrutiny.
- II. High school must function as a transitional experience, getting each student ready for the next stage of life, whatever it may be for that individual, with the understanding that, ultimately, each person needs to earn a living.
- III. High school must be a gateway to multiple options.
- IV. High school must prepare each student to be a lifelong learner.
- V. High school must provide an underpinning for good citizenship and for full participation in the life of a democracy.
- VI. High school must play a role in the personal development of young people as social beings who have needs beyond those that are strictly academic.
- VII. High school must lay a foundation for students to be able to participate comfortably in an increasingly technological society.
- VIII. High school must equip young people for life in a country and a world in which interdependency will link their destiny to that of others, however different those others may be from them.
- IX. High school must be an institution that unabashedly advocates in behalf of young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

PRIORITIES FOR RENEWAL

CURRICULUM: Offering Essential Knowledge, Integrating It, and Making Connections to Real Life

The core of the high school curriculum must offer both the substance and the practicality to prepare students for an uncertain future. The curriculum should resist artificiality and strive to meet individual needs without compromising larger goals.

1. Each high school community will identify a set of essential learnings--above all, in literature and language, mathematics, social studies, science, and the arts--in which students must demonstrate achievement in order to graduate.
2. The high school will integrate its curriculum to the extent possible and emphasize depth over breadth of coverage.
3. Teachers will design work for students that is of high enough quality to engage them, cause them to persist, and, when successfully completed, result in their satisfaction and their acquisition of learnings, skills, and abilities valued by society.

4. The content of the curriculum, where practical, will connect itself to real-life applications of knowledge and skills to help students link their education to the future.
5. Assessment of student learning will align itself with the curriculum so that students' progress is measured by what is taught.
6. Each student will have a Personal Plan for Progress to ensure that the high school takes individual needs into consideration and to allow students, within reasonable parameters, to design their own methods for learning in an effort to meet high standards.
7. The high school will promote cocurricular activities as integral to an education, providing opportunities for all students that support and extend academic learning.
8. A high school will reach out to the elementary and middle schools from which it draws students to help those schools understand what kind of foundation students need for success in high school and to respond to the needs of the lower schools for policies at the high school that reinforce earlier education.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES: Engaging Students in Their Own Learning

Responsibility for implementing instructional strategies ultimately rests in the hands of individual teachers who should prepare themselves well and be able to utilize a variety of strategies, in addition to lecturing for effective student learning. The principal will lead a constant search for better instruction, setting standards for acceptable teaching practices and providing support, resources, and ongoing professional development to facilitate effective teaching strategies.

1. Each high school teacher will have a broad base of academic knowledge with depth in at least one subject area.
2. Teachers will know and be able to use a variety of strategies and settings that identify and accommodate individual learning styles and engage students.
3. Teachers will be adept at acting as coaches and as facilitators of learning to promote more active involvement of students in their own learning.
4. Teachers will teach in ways that help students to develop into competent problem solvers and critical thinkers.
5. Teachers will convey a sense of caring to their students so that their students feel that their teachers share a stake in their learning.
6. Teachers will utilize technology in their instruction in ways that improve student learning.
7. Teachers will integrate assessment into instruction so that assessment does not merely measure students, but becomes part of the learning process itself.

* * *

SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT: Creating a Climate Conducive to Teaching and Learning

School environment should be a catalyst for ensuring that students pursue their education under circumstances that foster the very difficult work of teaching and learning. This means that the principal and everyone else responsible for the high school must create a climate favorable to education, whether it occurs inside or outside the main building and do everything possible to sustain that climate.

1. The high school community, which cannot be value-neutral, will advocate and model a set of core values essential in a democratic and civil society.
2. Experiences in high school will acknowledge multiple talents and ways of learning to help students achieve the meaningful success that leads to further achievement.

3. Every high school student will have a Personal Adult Advocate to help him or her personalize the educational experience.
4. The school will accord meaningful roles in the decision-making process to students, parents, and members of the staff to promote an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.
5. In order to maintain a positive environment, each high school will ensure that any student who brings a weapon into a high school, sells illegal drugs in the school, or behaves violently in the school will immediately forfeit the right to attend that particular school.
6. Agreements that school systems negotiate with teachers, principals, and other personnel will be accompanied by a Student Impact Statement to help warrant that contracts and other agreements consider the best interests of students.
7. Every school system will ensure that facilities used by its high schools are clean, attractive, safe, and well equipped.

TECHNOLOGY: Making Way for Electronic Learning

Technology is revolutionizing education and educators cannot afford to regard it as a frill or simply as an add-on. Careful planning should begin immediately in each high school to employ technology throughout the school and to integrate it into all aspects of the Program. Boards of education must provide funds for the purchase of current technology and for enabling teachers to pursue ongoing education in technology.

1. School leaders will work with others to develop and implement a long-term strategic plan for use of technology in the school. The plan, including a code of ethics, will allow for ongoing changes in technology and adapt itself to continual changes in the school program.
2. Schools will make technology integral to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, accommodating different learning styles and helping teachers to individualize the learning process.
3. High schools will equip individual classrooms with the technology necessary to prepare students for life in the 21st century.
4. Budget allocations will be adequate to maintain current technology and to provide for ever-changing technology needs, including sufficient funds to permit access to all students and to use technology to deliver student services.
5. Technology will be a key part of both initial and continuing teacher education to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to integrate technology into the curriculum and to adapt it to instructional strategies. To achieve these ends, school districts will hire teachers who can use technology to obtain information and who can incorporate technology into teaching and learning.
6. Every high school will designate a technology resource person to provide technical assistance and to consult with the staff to assist them in finding the people, information, and materials that they need to make best use of technology.

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ORGANIZATION AND TIME: Restructuring Space and Time for a More Flexible Education

The manner in which a high school organizes itself and the ways in which it uses time create a framework that affects almost everything about teaching and learning in the school.

1. High schools will create small units in which anonymity is banished.
2. Each high school teacher involved in the instructional program on a full time basis will be responsible for contact time with no more than 90 students during a given term so that the teacher can give greater attention to the needs

of every student.

3. High schools will develop flexible scheduling that allows for more varied uses of time in order to meet the requirements of the core curriculum.
4. The Carnegie unit will be redefined or replaced so that high schools no longer equate seat time with learning.
5. The high school will reorganize the traditional departmental structure to meet the needs of a more integrated curriculum.
6. Each high school will present alternatives to tracking and to ability grouping without restricting the range of courses and learning experiences it offers.
7. The academic program will extend beyond the high school campus to take advantage of learning opportunities outside the four walls of the building.
8. Schools will operate on a 12-month basis to provide more time for professional staff development, collegial planning, and the added instruction needed to promote better student learning.

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ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY: Individual, Collective, and Institutional Outcomes

Accountability demands that a high school have a set of objectives and assess and report the extent to which they are met. The purpose of this accountability is to ensure that teaching and learning serve the needs of students to the fullest extent.

1. The high school will assess the academic progress of students in a variety of ways so that a clear and valid picture emerges of what they know and are able to do.
2. The school will review each student's Personal Progress Plan continually and indicate the extent of progress toward graduation and post-secondary transition options.
3. High schools will guarantee that students can meet performance standards in entry-level jobs. Recent graduates who fail to meet these basic standards will have the opportunity to return to school for additional studies.
4. Each high school will report annually to the community, disclosing schoolwide assessment results and other pertinent information.
5. At least once every five years, each high school will convene a broadly-based external panel to offer a Public Description of the school, a requirement that could be met in conjunction with the evaluations of state, regional, and other accrediting groups.
6. Students will evaluate teachers and instruction on an ongoing basis in a variety of ways, providing regular feedback with regard to how effectively student learning goals are met.
7. Supervision of teachers will be thorough and ongoing, making use of the expertise of master teachers as well as administrators.
8. Principals and other administrators will use the highest standards of teaching as the criteria against which to evaluate teachers for determining their continued employment.
9. The high school staff will assess the principal and the administrative team's performance periodically in a variety of ways, providing regular feedback with regard to how effectively school goals are met.

* * *

A WEB OF SUPPORT

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT; Helping School Staff Members Fulfill Their Potential

Teachers, administrators, and other educators who are part of a high school must regard their own learning as integral to their professional role. This is especially so at a time when roles will change in conjunction with restructuring. The school district should help educators to create a learning community in which substantive professional development, linked primarily to content knowledge and to instructional strategies, plays an on-going part in their work.

1. Every high school will be a learning community for teachers and for the other professionals it employs.
2. Each educator will create a Personal Learning Plan that addresses his or her need to grow, stressing knowledge and skills related to improved student learning.
3. The high school--with the help of the school district--will provide adequate funding, time, and other resources to ensure that professional development is a continuous, ongoing process.
4. The principal of a high school, as a model for the staff, will pursue his or her own ongoing professional growth while helping to lead the professional development for the entire school.
5. The support staff of a high school--secretaries, custodians, cafeteria workers, and others--will also be encouraged and assisted in their own career growth and drawn into the larger school community as adults who can promote the well-being of students.

DIVERSITY: Finding Strength in Differences

An understanding of and respect for diversity should be absorbed into the fabric of each high school, whatever the composition of its enrollment. Schools ought to help students to see diversity in its broadest sense as an expression of the American experience. Diversity should be considered in connection with the school's curriculum, instructional practices, and staffing. In the end, education ought to equip students for the interdependency of life in the 21st century.

1. The principal, the school community, and the school board will promote policies, practices, and decisions that recognize diversity in accord with the core values of a democratic and civil society and within the mission of teaching and learning.
2. The curriculum will expose students to a rich array of viewpoints, perspectives, and experiences.
3. The teachers, adjunct teachers, paraprofessionals, support staff, volunteers, and members of the community who staff the high school will represent a wide array of talents, perspectives, and backgrounds.
4. The school will offer its staff substantive, ongoing professional development to help them deal with issues of diversity.

* * *

GOVERNANCE: Streamlining the Operations of Schools and School Districts

Enlightened governance is indispensable to reforming education. Boards of education and superintendents are responsible for developing within each high school the capacity to support the very difficult work of school-level change. Responsibility for implementing policies in each school should reside at the school.

1. Boards of education will essentially follow the model of corporate boards in business and industry. They will take responsibility for adopting goals, policies, and standards of accountability; for approving the district's budget; and for hiring and monitoring the superintendent, who will be free to run day-to-day operations.

2. The superintendent will work collaboratively to build a vision for improving teaching and learning and attaining educational goals. He or she will educate the community about the needs of schools and nurture the development of shared leadership throughout the district.

3. Each high school will establish a site council to work with the principal in reaching decisions to make the school an effective organization for student learning.

* * *

RESOURCES, Providing for Sufficiency

The learning goals that a high school sets for its students should drive the fiscal process, determining both the purposes of expenditures and the amounts of money spent. Government at the local, state, and federal levels is responsible for providing adequate resources so that schools may realize these learning goals. Furthermore, government should distribute funds equitably so as to recognize the varying needs of particular communities and individual students.

1. Sufficiency of funding for education will be the top priority of state fiscal policy.

2. New programs mandated for high schools will be restricted to those that support learning objectives identified in national goals or endorsed by district and state policies. Furthermore, programs mandated by government should be fully funded from the level at which the mandate originates.

3. The agencies responsible for education at the local, intermediate, state, and federal levels will emphasize service to the individual schools.

4. Schools will go beyond regular, official funding sources to seek out supplemental resources wherever possible.

5. Decisions regarding budget and staff allocations will be made at the site level, in accord with policy parameters set at the central level so as to ensure the input of those who know the situation best.

* * *

TIES TO HIGHER EDUCATION: Seeking Unity in Purpose

The fortunes of secondary Education and higher education are inextricably linked and institutions on both levels must cooperate in all ways for the mutual benefit of students.

1. High schools will engage in structured and formal communication with higher education to better serve the articulation of student learning.

2. Secondary and higher education will collaboratively develop new and consistent standards concerning college admissions requirements.

3. High schools will build partnerships with institutions of higher education to provide teachers and administrators at both levels with ideas and opportunities to enhance the education, performance, and evaluation of educators.

4. High schools will hire educators who have prepared for teaching by studying in high schools that model best practice.

5. Research by those connected with colleges of education should, whenever possible, concern itself with issues of teaching and learning affecting children in elementary and secondary schools in order to help improve practice.

6. High schools will hire only those teachers whose classroom preparation is provided in colleges and universities in which the teacher education program bears the stamp of external accreditation.

* * *

RELATIONSHIPS: Reaching Out To Form Alliances in Behalf of Students

A high school builds its success on a series of strong and positive relationships with and among those both inside and outside the building. These relationships start with the ways in which teachers, students, and others in the school relate to each other and continue through the links that the school forms with parents, public officials, community agencies, business representatives, neighboring schools, and others on the outside.

1. A high school will regard itself as a community in which members of the staff collaborate to develop and implement the school's learning goals.
2. The high school will engage students' families as partners in the students' education.
3. High schools, in conjunction with agencies in the community, will help coordinate the delivery of health and social services for youth.
4. The high school will develop political and financial relationships with individuals and organizations in the community to foster ongoing support for educational programs and policies.
5. The high school will foster productive business partnerships that support and supplement educational programs.
6. High schools will form partnerships with agencies for youths that support and supplement the regular programs of the schools.
7. The high school will require each student to participate in a service activity in the community or in the school itself that has educational value.

* * *

LETTING LEADERSHIP BLOSSOM

LEADERSHIP Attributes That Need Nourishing

For the success of school reform, leadership must diffuse itself throughout the school community. The principal occupies the pivotal position, but restructuring cannot prevail unless it draws on the strengths of teachers and others associated with the high school.

1. The principal will provide leadership in the high school community by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning.
2. Selection of high school principals will be based on qualities of leadership rooted in established knowledge and skills that result in dedication to good instructional practice and learning.
3. Current principals will build and refine the skills and knowledge required to lead and manage change.
4. The principal will foster an atmosphere that encourages teachers to take risks to meet the needs of students.
5. The superintendent and other central office administrators, as well as school board members, will exercise leadership in support of the planning, implementation, and long-range momentum of improvement at the school level.
6. Teachers will provide the leadership essential to the success of reform, collaborating with others in the educational community to redefine the role of the teacher and to identify sources of support for that redefined role.
7. The leadership of students, parents, and others in the school community will enhance the work of the principal,

who should recognize this potential for leadership by nurturing and supporting it.

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