

Secondary School Redesign

"A smaller learning community has the heart of an elementary school, the schedule of a middle school, and the curriculum of a high school."

- Bill Moore, Principal,
Roosevelt High School, Yonkers, New York



When the state of New York designated Roosevelt High School a "School in Need of Improvement," principal Bill Moore knew he had to push his staff to closely examine what wasn't working at the 1,600-student school in Yonkers, and find new ways to fix what was wrong.

"We had to ask ourselves, *what can we do to make this work?*" says Moore. "*How can we adapt things according to the needs of the kids?*"

That was four years ago. Since then, Roosevelt has been a Breaking Ranks™ school, working with The Education Alliance's Secondary School Redesign staff to implement recommendations determined by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) to promote more effective learning environments.

Breaking Ranks: A roadmap for reform

These 82 recommendations, published in the 1996 report *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* by NASSP, in partnership with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, include such strategies to personalize learning as implementing flexible scheduling, integrated curriculums, community involvement, and smaller learning communities, and providing each student with a personal adult advocate, personal progress plans, and lessons taught to individual learning styles.

School coaches from the Secondary School Redesign team are using these recommendations in their Breaking Ranks Project, which provides Breaking Ranks facilitators to more than 30 schools in the Northeast region. These coaches offer strategies from the latest research to help the school change team develop more effective learning communities. The Breaking Ranks coach also provides guidance to the school on what personalization means and how to make it happen at all levels of the school's system.

Through participating in the Breaking Ranks Project, Moore learned that his school was facing low parent involvement and particularly high rates of suspensions and tardiness. He and his staff decided to implement small learning communities, where students would remain together for all academic courses and have common teachers. "A smaller learning community has the

heart of an elementary school, the *schedule* of a middle school, and the *curriculum* of a high school," says Moore.

To learn how, they worked with Breaking Ranks facilitator Dale Worsley, who presented workshops, helped staff map out a four-year school plan, and met regularly with members to discuss progress.

Worsley stressed to the Roosevelt change team that in order to sustain change, the entire system must change. "With time, the staff has begun to see how each component fits into the overall picture," says Worsley. "Gradually a sense develops that something larger than any one individual or team is gathering force."

Breaking Ranks II, the next step

Like Roosevelt, high schools around the country are recognizing the need for an alternative to the traditional high school to address such pressing issues as student anonymity, high drop-out rates, low scores on achievement tests, escalating incidents of school violence, and students graduating without the skills they need to succeed in the workforce or college.

Breaking Ranks has been a guiding force in addressing these concerns throughout the nation and is deeply integrated into The Education Alliance's high school redesign work that has been putting students at the center of school reform initiatives for over five years.

"Because *Breaking Ranks* is a product of NASSP, it provides us the opportunity to get more mainstream acceptance of thinking very differently about high schools so they become more personalized," said Joe DiMartino, director of the Secondary School Redesign program at The Education Alliance. "NASSP has been a conservative organization, so when they step up and say that high school needs to change, people listen; it's the largest association of school administrators in the country."

And NASSP is stepping up again. This spring, after nearly two years of working with The Education Alliance's Secondary School Redesign staff, the NASSP National High School Task Force, and others on a sequel to *Breaking Ranks*, NASSP has just released *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform*.

"*Breaking Ranks II* is a 'field guide' to successful high school improvement for principals and their leadership teams," says Gerald Tirozzi, executive director of NASSP. "It provides research supported tactics to re-make schools into more student-centered personalized learning environments with intellectual rigor for *all* students."

Breaking Ranks II calls for increasing the academic achievement of all students and for ensuring that every student has the opportunity to meet his or her dream for success. The new report helps urban, rural, and suburban school principals accomplish this goal by providing strategies for implementing

the updated core recommendations; illustrating possible areas in which to begin reform; and profiling the successes, challenges, and results of schools implementing the recommendations.

Roosevelt, one of 33 schools profiled in the report, is included for successfully implementing the recommendations of family involvement and using data for assessment and improvement. "It has implemented a number of practices to build a sense of community within the school and with families: students and teachers are organized into teams and remain with these teams for four years, welcoming signs and greetings are provided in several languages, meetings are held in places and at times that are convenient for families...it created a schoolwide data team..." (*Breaking Ranks II*).

Other recommendations in the report include staff collaboration, small units, flexible scheduling, democratic values, celebrate diversity, caring teachers, community learning, critical thinking, and more.

Through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *Breaking Ranks II* will be disseminated to every high school in the country, enabling high school reform teams everywhere to follow the same blueprint for improving student achievement and engagement.

Making change work

Breaking Ranks recommendations have helped educators at Roosevelt learn how important it is to develop a culture in which students and teachers know each other and value learning. Students at Roosevelt are now graduating with more options and marketable skills. They earn licenses in computer training and public safety through internships available at local police and fire departments. As part of the initiative to engage the community, students teach courses in English and computer skills to parents on Saturdays.

"For kids who are coming from unstable backgrounds, the stability of the school and our program is something they instinctively crave," says Roosevelt English teacher Janice Young. "The school almost becomes a second home. It's the one constant in their lives. If you create a safe haven, you tend to get better results academically."

Breaking Ranks is a trademark of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP).

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