

High-quality high schools

We believe that high schools should be learning communities that engage all students. To help schools meet their reform goals and foster high standards for all students, we conduct studies, develop resources, and work directly with school staff and other stakeholders. Our Breaking Ranks project, for example, promotes more effective learning environments through such strategies as developing personalized learning plans for students, engaging teachers in collaborative leadership roles, and helping school leaders use data to make strategic decisions. In this story, a Breaking Ranks coach and school staff strategize large-scale change to a smaller learning community in an urban high school.

“*[The three-day workshop on student advisories was] a great resource—it caused a light bulb to go off and forced me to reevaluate the idea of having a learning center (advisory).*”

High School Teacher, Rhode Island

“*As a result of the LAB working with us, we are well on the way to a much stronger team structure that will be able to meet the needs of our students. This structure will then open the door for us to have deeper conversations dealing with student data and how to adjust teaching methodology to address the needs of diverse learners.*”

Principal, Secondary School, New York

Guiding Schools Toward Lasting Change

“Anonymity is the power to rebel,” says Janice Young, an English teacher reflecting on the challenge of educating students in the large urban environment of Roosevelt High School in Yonkers, New York. “When

you’re not known to anyone, who’s then there to hold you accountable?”

Like Young, many educators are realizing that schools need to create an alternative environment to the traditional

high school, in which students often feel alienated or lost.

Throughout the nation, traditional high schools face extremely high drop-out rates, low scores on international achievement tests, escalating

incidents of school violence, and students graduating without the skills they need to succeed in the workforce or college—all pointing to the urgent need for high school reform.

But what would an alternative school look like, and how does a community go about

improve their test scores, and graduate with confidence.

The Alliance’s approach draws on research from the report *Breaking Ranks: Changing An American Institution*, which offers a blueprint for an effective American high school. Published in 1996

prised of 5 to 10 school staff, the Alliance coach presents workshops on what personalization means and how to make it happen at all levels of the school’s system.

Educators at Roosevelt embarked on a campaign to personalize their programs when the state designated them as a School in Need of Improvement in 2000. The designation pushed staff to closely examine what was not working at the 1600-student, urban school and to consider new ways of working.

“We had to ask ourselves, ‘What can we do to make this work?’” says Principal Bill Moore. “How can we adapt things according to the needs of the kids?”

To achieve the goals of a more personalized environment and smaller learning communities at Roosevelt, the Alliance provided guidance to Moore and his staff. The Alliance coach, Dale Worsley, 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. It does not work to change only the schedule, a few classrooms, or even the size of a school.



creating it? The Education Alliance is guiding teachers and administrators in finding out just how to make this ideal a reality.

At 23 schools in the northeast region, the Breaking Ranks project is helping educators restructure their schools into smaller learning environments that allow students to make a personal connection to their education. When students feel that what they’re learning in school is relevant, they are more likely to attend class, learn skills,

by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in partnership with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Breaking Ranks* has become a guiding force in high school restructuring throughout the nation.

In the Alliance’s *Breaking Ranks* project, coaches share strategies from the latest research to help school staff develop more effective learning communities. Working with a school change team—com-

Nor is it enough to add a new program or outline a fresh set of standards. The nature of personalization requires a broader approach, one in which large-scale transformation grows out of small innovations, and schools adapt existing systems to fit a new set of priorities and values.

“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.”

The Alliance has designed a series of workshops to help school change teams understand six major strategies for personalization and plan an approach that will engage people at each level of the system. Each workshop corresponds to one of the six areas the school must change: student engagement, advising and guidance, teaching methods, curriculum design, leadership roles, and community engagement. The workshops help teams examine different perspectives on a given issue, then use research and theory to assert their own organizing purpose.

This process, says Worsley, helps get the entire school community on the same page. “The more staff is involved in the

change process, the more they are willing to accept the consequences of change,” he says.

The Alliance is in its third year of working with Roosevelt. The first step was collecting and analyzing school data. After reflecting with the coach, the change team found that parent involvement was low and that the school had particularly high rates of suspensions and tardiness. They decided to implement small learning communities, where students would remain together for all academic courses and have common teachers. This set-up allowed for common planning time among teachers with the same students and also created opportunities for parents to meet the people involved in their child’s education.

By learning to see how layers of the system interact, a change team, over time, can become skilled in adjusting small parts of the system and preparing the whole structure to support personalized learning. For example, the Roosevelt team learned that its tardiness problems were partially due to problems with public transportation. In response, the school instituted a policy where those students who had difficulty arriving on time began their school day at the start of second period. Not only did tardiness

and suspension rates go down, but students’ test scores rose.

The move toward personalization also enhanced professional development at Roosevelt. Teachers regularly observe programs at other schools and bring back best practices to share. In addition to serving on the change team, Roosevelt staff members now serve on numerous subcommittees, including a data committee and an “out-of-the-box” committee.

Educators at Roosevelt have learned how important it is to develop a culture in which students and teachers know each other well and value learning. Students at Roosevelt are now graduating with more options and marketable skills. They earn licenses in computer training and public safety, with 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 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.”