High-Performing High Schools: Patterns of Success

By: Jewell E. Cooper, Gerald Ponder, Sherri Merritt, Catherine Matthews

Cooper, J., Ponder, G., Merritt, S. & Matthews, C. (2005). High-Performing High Schools: Patterns of Success. *National Association of Secondary School Principals. NASSP Bulletin*. 89 (645), 2 - 23.

Made available courtesy of SAGE Publications:
http://www.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?prodId=Journal201773

*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Abstract:
What makes high schools successful in a high-stakes accountability environment? This case study used documents, interviews, and site visits to create profiles of 11 diverse North Carolina high schools with records of high performance on state assessments. Profiles were analyzed by themes or patterns of success recurring in the data. The analysis indicated five patterns of success: relationships and connections; safety nets and family feeling, data-directed dialogue and collaborative instruction; departments as drivers; and collaborative leadership. Implications for educational practice are provided.

Article:
Since the publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983, the call for school reform has been in the forefront of education and social policy in the United States. Subsequent reports have highlighted the grave state of affairs in our nation's high schools (e.g., Achieve, Inc. & National Governors Alliance, 2005; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2003; Johnson, Farkas, & Beers, 1997; Johnson & Immerwahr, 1995; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 1996; Sizer, 1984). The number of students leaving school and becoming disengaged has been so high that some studies report 12th-grade enrollments of one-third to one-fourth the size of 9th-grade classes (Greene, 2001; McPartland & Jordan, 2001). Symptoms of this disengagement include constant class cutting and disrespect for teachers (Fallis & Opotow, 2003; McPartland & Jordan, 2001), chronic violence and high teacher- and principal-turnover rates (Haselswerdt & Lenhardt, 2003; Noguera, 2002; Norton, 2003; Patterson, Roehrig, & Luft, 2003; Schaefer-Schiumo & Ginsberg, 2003), and lack of preparation for college and the world of work (DiMartino, Clarke, & Lachat, 2002; Jackson, 2004; Kirst, 2004; Wayman, 2002). The achievement gap between rich and poor and between White students and students of color remains large in many states (Barton, 2004; Ortiz, 2004; Rothstein, 2004). High school dropout patterns disproportionately include students of color (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Disla, 2004; Greene & Forster, 2003; Heubert, n.d). With school populations growing ever more diverse in ethnicity, language, class, and capability, the problems of student disengagement and lack of success threaten to grow exponentially.

North Carolina's high schools face these same challenges. Although the overall dropout rate in North Carolina for the 2003-04 school year decreased to 5.25% (see www.ncpublicschools.org), less than 65% of the state's ninth graders graduate from their high schools 4 years later, earning the state a high school completion ranking of 42nd among the 50 states in 2004 (United Health Foundation, 2004). Most high schools in North Carolina have experienced heightened academic diversity in the last decade, with large numbers of English language learners (ELL) migrating into the state and average family incomes dropping because of job losses in the textile, furniture, and tobacco industries--long standing and important bases for the state's economy.

Yet North Carolina aspires to the same information and service-driven economy as other states. Research, technology, and biotechnology require knowledgable workers, and the state's secondary and postsecondary educational institutions are key players in the new economy. After years of effort, the percentage of students going to college in North Carolina has increased dramatically; however, the effects of increased numbers of college-bound students are being undermined by corresponding increases in high school dropout rates. This

phenomenon is least partially associated with North Carolina's high-stakes accountability system, which is now layered with "gateways" for promotion and end-of-course tests and exit exams as requirements for graduation.

The purpose of our study and our charge from the North Carolina Center for School Leadership Development was to find schools that could serve as cases of success to be used as resources to mentor other schools. The schools we identified were the state's "high-performing high schools"--those that outperformed expectancy formulas based on demographics. Policymakers wanted to know what those particular schools were doing and why they were so successful, so practices could, if possible, be scaled up. In the first phase of the study, profiles of these schools were constructed from available reports and other documents as well as from site visits and interviews with principals, teachers, students, and parents so that administrators and teachers in other schools could "see" pictures of performance and gather ideas for enhancing student accomplishment. In the second phase, the profiles were analyzed to (a) estimate the extent to which these schools had implemented the recommendations for high school reform from Breaking Ranks (NASSP, 1996) or to ascertain the effect of the Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) High Schools That Work initiative and (b) find patterns or themes of success in the data.

Conceptual Framework

"As a pivotal institution in the lives of young people, the high school can serve as a linchpin in efforts to improve the American condition, touching the lives of almost every teenager, and consequently, contributing to the betterment of the country." So begins Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution, published by NASSP in 1996. This report serves as a call to action for many high schools across the country. On the basis of a review of available research, the study emphasized six major themes:

1. Personalization--Making sure that teachers and students get to know one another, varying instruction to meet individual needs, and providing personal advocacy
2. Coherency--Identifying essential knowledge and aligning the curriculum to reflect those priorities
3. Time--Scheduling classes in a flexible fashion
4. Technology--Providing teachers and students the tools they need to flourish in an information society
5. Professional development--Improving instruction through ongoing, continuing education
6. Leadership--Putting vision into practice through collaboration (p. 5).

Since the publication of Breaking Ranks, these recommendations have guided a number of reform initiatives. Those initiatives include ninth-grade and career academies, smaller schools, personalized learning, and alternative schools for at-risk and special needs students. In North Carolina, the SREB initiative High Schools That Work has been especially active in promoting practices that implement the Breaking Ranks recommendations. Data from two recent reports indicated that these practices result in improved student achievement and school climate (Bradby & Dykman, 2002; Frome, 2001).

What the Research Shows: Breaking Ranks in Action (NASSP, 2002) offered a body of research that provided better insight into the priorities stated in Breaking Ranks (NASSP, 1996). What the Research Shows suggests that educators should do the following:

* Design a high quality, connected curriculum along a continuum across grade levels and subject levels that complements assessment
* Use a variety of instructional strategies that collectively encourage higher-level thinking skills
* Integrate assessment into instruction
* Continue professional development to incorporate technology into lesson plans
* Connect learning across grade levels and subject areas.

* Understand that small class sizes are most effective for "creating a climate of support and caring" (p. 31)
* Maintain a system of accountability
* Allow students to evaluate teachers periodically and permit staff members to evaluate the performance of the principal and the administration for the purpose of a complete accountability system
* Maintain and sustain a safe school climate with written plans that are articulated and available to the school community.

Case Study

Based on the North Carolina state accountability system results from 2001 and 2002, 11 schools in the state were identified as high performing using criteria that included the following:

* A combination of schools that have demonstrated a consistently high performance composite across time and with increasingly high levels of improvement
* Schools from the three major regions of the state (East, Piedmont, West)
* Schools with varied socioeconomic status and demographic representation
* Schools of varied sizes and location (rural, urban, suburban).

Table 1 presents a summary of the participating high schools.

To begin these case studies, the research team asked each high school to submit archival documents such as a master schedule listing courses and teachers, the most recent school improvement plan, faculty and student handbooks, student publications, Web page addresses, and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reports. After analyzing these documents, members of the research team scheduled site visits to conduct walk-throughs-- which included observations of teaching, leadership, student support, and outreach practices at each school--and to conduct semi-structured as well as informal interviews with administrators, teachers, students, and parents in order to complete the school profiles. Visits to each school lasted 1 or 2 days.

Data Analysis

Research members categorized data from archival documents using eight questions that synthesized the themes from Breaking Ranks and the High Schools That Work initiative. On the basis of this analysis, another set of questions were generated to pose during interviews with members of the school community as well as to guide the site observations for points of clarification. Using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), each member of the research team coded interview transcripts and observation notes from the schools he or she visited. After consultation with the research team, researchers then developed new categories and subcategories and re-coded data as necessary to reflect any changes made in the coding system (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Researchers then conducted a second phase of analysis on archival documents from their assigned schools using the revised coding scheme.

Table 1. Profile of North Carolina High Schools Nominated for the North Carolina Center for School Leadership Development High School Study

School Name/

#TCHRS(PC =

% Free& % of

performance County/ PC

PC Reduced- Minority

	composite)	District	2001	Growth	2002	Growth	Price Meals	Enrollment
Performance composite	AC Reynolds/98	Buncombe	80.3	Expected	87.7	Expected	16	14
80+in 2001 & 2002	Grimsley/107	Guilford	80.4	Exemplary	81.6	High Growth	18	36
	Topsail/43	Pender	85.2	Exemplary	88.3	High Growth	18	13
Most Improved								
Performance composite	Hayesville/36	Clay	78.1	Expected	81.9	Expected	29	1
75-79 in 2001 & 2002	North Johnston/50	Johnston	79.9	Exemplary	80.9	Expected	24	25
	JH Rose/111	Pitt	75.1	Expected	82.2	High Growth	31	45
	Surry Central/49	Surry	76.9	Expected	82.1	Expected	21	15
	Athens Drive/126	Wake	78.8	Expected	80.9	Expected	14	30
2002 Most Improved High Schools	Thomasville High /50	Thomasville City	66.6	Exemplary	77.2	High Growth	56	58
Most Improved								
	Fairmont High/54	Robeson	47.3	Expected	62.9	High Growth	63	71
Most Improved								
	Lakewood High/41	Sampson	60.5	Exemplary	68.5	High Growth	46	46

After the second phase of analysis, the researchers met to identify the principal themes that emerged from the collective data, and the team selected illustrative examples to use in the summary report. In addition, each member of the research team wrote a case report for his or her assigned school. Using these case reports, the researchers conducted member checks with principals, teachers, and students at the sites to confirm their interpretations. This report presents those confirmed results.

Results

The guiding question for students, teachers, and administrators at the 11 high schools was, "How has your school achieved its success?" Although participants sometimes highlighted examples that were unique to their schools, five major themes from the responses are consistent across all 11 schools, regardless of size, location, or demographics.

Relationships and Connections

In these schools, success is seen as comprehensive and is based on caring relationships among faculty members and students. All of the schools' mission statements cited elements of lifelong learning, reaching high potential, and belief in students' capabilities to succeed. Although they recognized the importance of test scores, members of these school communities defined their accomplishments broadly, reporting that their schools are places where students, teachers, and community members are "invited" to succeed. Participants attributed their accomplishments to these inviting climates rather than to any specific program or strategy. One of the administrators at Topsail explained:

[The key to success is to] surround yourself with good people and support them and direct them. ... See, I don't think there's a special program that's going to solve your problems. I think it's special teachers that will help the problems because I have found that the caring, passionate, inviting teacher, even if the kids are academically average, will produce good results.

The principal at Fairmont echoed this theme:

Most of our gains on test scores are because the student and the teacher work together well. That's a combination that has to happen because you can train teachers to a certain extent, but personality has a lot to do with it. They've got to have a caring personality. They have to be willing to learn, be open-minded. The student has to relate to them. There has to be a lot of personal engagement in the classroom between the two.

A student at Lakewood underscored the importance of relationships:

This is a great school. I know it's small compared to other schools, but I think that's a plus, not a minus. I know every teacher and student and they know me. We all get along--in and out of class. But in class, it's pretty serious. We work hard for every teacher in the school.

At Hayesville, a student on the Principal's Advisory (a communication committee set up by the principal to respond to students' concerns) captured this feeling by saying, "This place is like that bar on TV, Cheers. Everybody knows your name."

At the 11 schools, participants attributed their success to caring relationships. A teacher at Thomasville defined the nuances of this relationship by reporting the following:

There is a balance here--it's like having a really strong focus on student behaviors, meaning that we are strong on discipline. But, we are also strong on caring. Our discipline is tempered with compassion.

Participants' caring relationships and connections also were evident in school documents and classrooms. For example, at Grimsley, the school published a newsletter every 6 weeks and mailed it to each student's home to be certain it was received. Each newsletter contained information on events, accomplishments, and opportunities at Grimsley as well as how parents and guardians could volunteer to help with the many Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) activities. The newsletter also shared information about school initiatives such as the school-based health center and the Futures Center, a PTSA-sponsored resource center that has

college applications, scholarships, résumy instructions, applications for special programs such as the North Carolina Governor's School, and applications for special summer programs and internships. The Futures Center was manned by parent volunteers. The Grimsley faculty handbook included a calendar of all Jewish holidays and a description of the major Jewish festivals. This information not only acknowledged the large population of Jewish students who attended the school but also served to educate the faculty about different cultures. At Topsail, administrators sent postcards to teachers on a regular basis, offering appreciation for specific contributions. Teachers likewise received a stack of blank postcards and were encouraged to send similar notes home to students.

At Rose, connections were made through the recognition that not all students were immediately college bound and that they might hold interests outside of traditional core subjects. As a result, workforce development programs and industry co-op programs were implemented. For example, within the school, there was a student-run store (open from 3:15-3:45 p.m. each school day) where snacks were sold. There was also a café and a floral shop where horticulture students took orders from the community and made floral arrangements. The students in the graphics arts department designed invitations, brochures, and flyers for school and community groups. At Fairmont, to help the school community better connect with Spanish-speaking students and their families, the staff newsletter advertised a Spanish course for staff members.

Likewise, students at Athens Drive had the opportunity to form relationships and connections that might not be possible in an isolated classroom setting. An on-site day care facility allowed students in child development courses to complete internships, and student members of the Business Alliance Committee were essential in planning and implementing Aviation Day for students interested in that career field. Special-needs students were given the responsibility of assisting media-center staff and participated in occupational therapy activities with a one-on-one tutor as they filled drink machines and made cookies to share. Throughout all of these activities, students developed a sense that they were an integral part of the school collective and had a connection to others in the community.

Safety Nets and Family Feeling

A second key aspect of the success at all 11 schools was the development of support systems for both students and teachers. Each of the schools featured an extensive safety net to support students who might otherwise fall through the cracks in the system. One of the administrators at Grimsley said, "A safety net for students who are struggling or who are underachieving must be implemented to ensure student growth. The role of administration is to monitor, support, and tweak programs constantly." A teacher at North Johnston reinforced this idea of continuous improvement when he said, "It's about teaching the kids who are here now but also preparing for the kids who are coming."

All of the schools offered a wide range of options for tutoring. At North Johnston, one student noted, "I never had a class where I wasn't offered after-school tutoring whether I needed it or not." Another student reported that the teachers there "wouldn't let me do bad," and would intervene to prevent failure. According to the SACS report, teachers at North Johnston were given a confidential list of students who did not pass the eighth-grade state competency test, and subject-intervention plans were completed for each student. At these schools, it was common for students to receive tutoring beyond the core classes. The North Johnston student newspaper periodically publicized the "SAT Soiree," an in-school SAT preparation opportunity for students who were interested. The Reynolds school- improvement plan noted that teachers of ninth-grade English gave underachieving students a weekly supervised plan of study, and parents and guardians were asked to document the time their child spent studying. The teacher newsletter at Fairmont publicized the availability of tutorial services for homeless students. Another unique safety net was Sunday School at Grimsley. Each Sunday from 1:00-6:00 p.m., Grimsley opened its doors to allow students to participate in make-up time, which was filled

with planned instruction that they had missed during regular school hours. Students were made aware of this opportunity through the school's daily bulletin and in a weekly written correspondence from the principal.

An essential part of the safety net at each of these schools was an intentional system for mentoring and advocacy. A counselor at Grimsley described their system as follows:

Every student on this campus should have one adult here. If you felt like you were having a bad day or you had a problem, whom would you seek out? Whether it's your coach, whether it's the teacher who teaches you, whether it's a teacher that you've just bonded with, even if it's one of my students that Mr. --coaches, someone has to be there for the student. As long as it's somebody, an adult that you feel 'I can go to' on this campus, I've got an avenue.

At Surry Central, the principal described the development of the second-chance program at the school:

The state requires that all grading periods during a semester be averaged to determine whether a student passes or fails the semester. Well, it didn't take rocket science or very long for our struggling students to realize that if they failed the first 6 weeks very badly, there was no way for them to mathematically pass the semester. So we developed a second-chance program in which, if students improved significantly, went to tutoring at least 5 hours per week, and made 75 or better in the second 6 weeks, we would go back and change the first 6 weeks grade to a 70 so they could still pass the semester.

Students also described their teachers as being personally supportive. One student at Fairmont explained that there were several teachers who were "very open-minded" and could be viewed as "a very helpful resource" if ever a student had a problem or question. 'You can always count on them," a student said.

In these schools, caring for students was intertwined with caring for teachers. Teachers reported a "family feeling" among the faculty and staff members. A comment from one of the teachers at A.C. Reynolds revealed the following:

As a staff we work well together. I've worked at three different schools and, by far, this is the school that I've meshed well with everyone together. The principal has said this several times on the announcements, 'Our family, our family.' We are a family basically. I think that's one reason we do so well. We are really good at that I think.

At Rose, the family feeling extended beyond the school walls. As cited in the school newspaper, members of the school community participated in social studies class-sponsored service projects where they wrote letters to U.S. troops deployed overseas as well as to disabled veterans in nursing homes. They also organized care packages to send to troops stationed in Afghanistan.

This family feeling was also evident in the collegial nature of faculty collaboration. Department members assisted one another in preparing professional growth plans at Reynolds. English department newsletters at Fairmont announced ongoing grammar workshops for teachers and an in-house Web page called "English Extras," which contained many links to Web sites that could assist teachers as they planned meaningful, standards-driven instruction. Further, as noted in the school improvement plan at North Johnston, all English teachers received, read, discussed, and planned lessons based on Constance Weaver's Teaching Grammar in Context (1996) and Lessons to Share on Teaching Grammar in Context (1998).

At all of the schools, strong community connections provided an important layer of support for students and

teachers. A parent in the Lakewood school community summarized the importance of these connections by saying that "this is a great school. It's our community school. I can walk in here as a parent and know all of the teachers and most of the students." A second community member added, "I don't have any children attending Lakewood. But I can tell you about the school, its teachers, and kids. It's a big part of [our community]."

Data-Directed Dialogue and Collaborative Instruction

At all levels, the support systems in these schools use student data to direct decisions. The use of data in driving instructional decision making was cited in all the schools' improvement plans and student handbooks. Administrators met with school improvement and department teams to review state and local data reports. The school improvement teams used data to make decisions and set priorities. Departments supplemented formal data reports with their own assessments to revise curricula and make instructional improvements. At Thomasville, for example, every 6 weeks teachers with classes that had standardized, state-mandated end-of-course exams administered a criterion-referenced test that was grounded in their respective curriculum. The test questions were developed by faculty committees in each department and paralleled the standard course of study (i.e., the North Carolina curriculum guide), daily objectives, and the content taught throughout each course. When describing how she used the tests, one teacher at Thomasville said, "Yes, the EOC tests are important. [To help students prepare], I need to know where my students stand on given items. The criterion tests do that and the results enable me to adjust what I teach and when I teach it."

Using data to guide instruction has become a habit of mind for teachers at these schools. A teacher at Topsail noted:

Working under [the principal] I have become data driven. I like to see where we did in the layout of the end-of-course testing. When [another teacher] and I were teaching geometry together we would compare our classes. We would give the same tests. We would rate them. When we got our scores, we looked to see which area did one succeed in, which one was lower. We exchanged ideas. How can we bring it up? What do we need to do? What have I done? Just reflecting back on all that, it's all done through the data. It's amazing what kind of information you can get from that.

At each of the sites, school improvement teams used data to guide their decisions. A member of the school improvement team at Rose suggested the following:

One of the great things about this group [school leadership team] is that I think we have genuine feedback. Our feedback is utilized and the decisions we make are oftentimes significant. It's not a rubber-stamping of decisions made elsewhere all the time. There is some of that but we do actually make, I think, some significant decisions. These people--I mean the entire school staff--that are here work extremely hard to represent their department's needs and concerns and the needs and concerns of the whole school and the students of the school as well.

The support systems for students and teachers at these schools enabled collaborative instructional improvement. Formally and informally, teachers assisted each other with instruction. School improvement plans noted that trained mentors were assigned to new teachers. A beginning teacher at A.C. Reynolds described how her colleagues provided instructional guidance:

Even though I felt very well prepared academically, once you get in there sometimes it's different and so it was really important for me that I had such support from people that taught the same thing as me, but also from other areas. I can't tell you how many teachers stopped by my room last year or whose room I would go by and say, "Look, here's this problem that I'm having," and I had all that support.

Teachers at all of the schools highlighted the ways they collaborated to improve instruction. At Thomasville, a teacher noted:

Becoming better teachers is always something on our minds here at Thomasville. What's great is that we all have something to share in our efforts. I've presented successful lessons to others during our faculty meetings, and I've learned from others about what works for them in their classes.

At Reynolds, workshop documents showed that faculty members were provided with in-house workshops on the Internet, video editing, digital camera use, NC WiseOwl use, Web quests, Web page creation, and Microsoft Office software. According to the school improvement plan, teachers in each core subject area met regularly to compare pacing and content with teachers in the same subject area.

In addition to this collegial support, each of the schools developed an extensive system of instructional assistance. Teachers of exceptional children and school counselors worked closely with other teachers and administrators to coordinate and monitor efforts to meet the needs of individual students. Grade-level counselors monitored the performance of each student assigned to them, sent notices home, scheduled parent conferences, participated in those conferences, conducted orientations and preregistration meetings, and called home when students missed classes. At North Johnston, retired teachers were hired to provide acceleration. The process at A.C. Reynolds was typical:

Interviewer: Let's say I haven't done so well in school, and I come as a new student, and I'm just kind of bewildered and not doing my work.

Teacher: The counselor would organize a meeting. We would sit down. We would look at what their particular expectations are. If it's a transfer student, we would look at what their grades were previously and talk about where and what they have covered in the book. We would see if they are up to speed and, if not, then I could possibly revise my own curriculum to get them up to speed with my own class. I have a student information sheet, phone numbers, and where they set their own goals and expectations. Sometimes, I e-mail parents and call parents if we need to talk to them too.

Finally, data-directed dialogue not only occurred among teachers and staff members but also included parents and guardians, who were considered important stakeholders. Results from parent surveys conducted by the staff at Fairmont helped to guide the school's direction and in-class instruction. For example, data from parent surveys indicated that parents wanted more internships for more students. Occupational students routinely were placed in internships in the community but parents of college-bound students requested opportunities for internship experiences for their children; therefore the internship program was expanded to accommodate parental requests. Other actions influenced by the parent surveys included an emphasis shift from dance to theater; a Web-based concept focus for each class so that parents would have an idea about topics their children were studying in classes; a flyer listing all graduation requirements and options (4-year plan); and an expansion of online courses being offered to students. The school also implemented of a fifth period (lasting from 3:15 p.m.-5:05 p.m., Monday through Thursday) that allowed students to retake a course they might have failed so that they could remain on track for graduation, take an additional course to fulfill graduation requirements early, or have the option of a shortened school day during their senior year.

Departments as Drivers

In the supportive and enabling climates that these schools have created, academic departments are the major vehicles for instructional improvement. It is not surprising to find academic departments as curricula and instruction leaders given the historic organizational pattern of high schools, which replicates the discipline-based organization of programs and curricula at colleges and universities. But the research team found it encouraging that departments in these schools have found ways to put students and their learning ahead of subject-centered barriers to success.

Each of the schools featured strong, hardworking departments engaged in both vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment. At Athens Drive, for example, the principal reported that she works "through the department chairs and takes their lead on curriculum issues." At Hayesville, in the far western mountains of the state, the mathematics department chairperson invited the researcher to observe as her four department faculty members collaborated with one another and with local businesses to develop computer-based tutoring programs, design lessons with examples and problems from the daily lives and tasks of the students and the community, and ensure Web-based links to the world through pen pal exchanges and cooperative learning with students in other areas.

In the improvement plans for each of the schools, departments assumed the task of reviewing their end-of-course test data and designing work plans to produce improved results. At Rose, department members of "tested" areas pored over data from student assessments to find areas in which students had not done well. They then planned together as departments to address the problems, and they worked interdepartmentally to learn what others were doing. Documentation from the math department showed that they held demonstration sessions for other departments on the goals and tactics of reform math. At Topsail, each department developed scope and sequence plans for each course. The departments also developed prioritized curricula that aligned closely with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (the state curriculum guide). Department faculty members met monthly to review lesson plans and share instructional strategies.

Departments were also given the freedom--and responsibility--to make decisions that help students learn the content area and experience success on the end-of-course exams. An English teacher at A.C. Reynolds noted:

We work as a department team. ... And so we teach the same curriculum, maybe not in the same way and not in the same order, but all of the works are the same. The vocabulary is the same. Very often, the language tests are the same. So there's...consistency across the board.

At Surry Central, the assistant principal for instruction was part of a district-developed web of communication regarding priorities and support for teachers who were implementing the school district's prioritized curriculum. The assistant principal at Surry Central met with the associate superintendent and assistant principals from other high schools to analyze ways to support teachers. School meetings were held by department. The department agendas provided discussion questions for faculty members and tied the discussions to student data. They also provided staff development and support in such areas as benchmarks and assessment, tutoring, and goal analysis. This process is highly centralized and structured in a top-down fashion. But the data from the walkthroughs, discussions with individual faculty members, and results from a focus group of teachers held without administrators present indicated that all teachers were aware of this system of pressure and support and that a substantial majority of the teachers valued this highly structured system because it led to obvious student success. All of the teachers with whom the research team spoke--individually or in focus groups--believed that such structured and systemic measures benefited students and supported shared goals among faculty members and administrators to help students learn and succeed. As the English department head replied when asked if this centralized system diminished the status and autonomy of high school teachers, "This is a different day. It takes a department--and the school, and the district--to help many young people succeed. We don't feel lessened; we feel part of something bigger."

Collaborative Leadership

Although they differed in their styles, the principals of these 11 schools demonstrated strong, collaborative leadership. In their interviews, principals described their roles as instructional leaders. The principal of Thomasville captured the essence of this view:

I need to give them the tools needed to do their job at teaching these students. I'm confident of their abilities because they are strong teachers. We have done a good job at building a group of students who want to learn, who value learning. It's an expectation we have developed. Each teacher and each department knows what is best for the students. My efforts need to be focused on letting them teach and letting the students learn. For instance, our class sizes are small where it's beneficial, in our CP [college preparation] courses, and larger in our advanced placement and honors courses. I've worked on bringing in programs that support the teachers' efforts but don't necessarily mandate how they should teach.

All of the principals emphasized the power of teamwork and their role in managing systems rather than micromanaging details. In these settings, teachers expressed a willingness to take risks to improve the quality of their teaching. A teacher at Athens Drive said, "Our administration encourages us to be risktakers," and a teacher at Rose explained:

We have a great faculty and staff, and we've got a lot of teachers that have progressive ideas. For the most part, the atmosphere here encourages experimentation and allows people to try different things. I think that's the other thing that has given us the opportunity to have success. We go out on a limb. Sometimes things work, sometimes they don't. But I think you have a lot of people here who try to take nontraditional risks to better improve education and motivate both teachers and students.

Teachers in these schools were recognized as leaders. At Fairmont, the teacher handbook identified leadership opportunities available to teachers, such as mentor, peer teacher, team leader, school improvement team member, and lead subject-area teacher. At Rose, teachers served on the Principal's Cabinet, a four-person faculty-staff group assigned to voice faculty concerns that are not related to curriculum and instruction, such as discipline, cafeteria concerns, assemblies, and hallway traffic, etc. Members who served in the Principal's Cabinet included those in such areas as career and technical services and guidance counseling, thus providing more leadership opportunities for faculty members who did not teach core courses.

Students were leaders as well. At Fairmont, the student and teacher handbooks and walkthrough observations confirmed that students were provided with leadership and participatory opportunities through affiliations with school clubs, honor societies, and sports activities. Parents and the community were also acknowledged as leaders and supporters of these schools. Teacher and student handbooks noted parental and community service on advisory boards; school leadership teams; and school-based parent, guardian, and community clubs designed to support sports activities. Community partnerships strengthened the schools' leadership capacity.

Each of the principals also emphasized the need for continuous improvement. After his first year at Grimsley, the principal stated the following:

Grimsley is an outstanding high school, rich in tradition with leadership that refuses to accept the status quo. We're constantly looking at ourselves in an honest and open manner so that we can continually strive to improve. To go from really good to great will take looking at ethnic/minority students, economically disadvantaged students as well as students within the achievement gap and putting together programs and strategies in an environment in which those students can experience success.

Discussion

The results of the case studies affirmed and illustrated Langer's (2000) conclusion that successful reform results "from the hard and ongoing work of dedicated professionals who were dreamers and doers" (p. 436). The dreamers and doers in these 11 schools achieved high performance on North Carolina's measures of accountability. In all 11 schools, principals, teachers, students, and parents stated that their school achieved success in the following ways:

* In a comprehensive fashion on the basis of caring relationships among faculty members and students
* By developing support systems for students and teachers
* Through collaborative instructional improvement
* By encouraging strong, hardworking departments
* Through the use of data to direct decisions
* Through collaborative leadership.

Our analysis also confirmed one of Noguera's (2004) findings that there is a gap between ideas and implementation in high school reform. The data from our study indicated that although the recommendations of Breaking Ranks and the High Schools That Work initiative are often consistent with practices that produce engagement and success among students in these schools, these consistencies are more the result of coincidence and synchronicity than intentionality. None of the principals or teachers we talked with at these schools actively attributed their reform efforts to Breaking Ranks or High Schools That Work. Instead, successful practices that led to high performance across a range of high schools--at least in this study--resulted more from the principal's openness to ideas and experimentation; a purposeful focus on student success over a broad range of valued academic, social, and personal development outcomes; low ego needs with an eagerness to share credit and support collaboration; and a deep trust that if individual teachers and academic departments engage regularly and reflectively in data-directed dialogue about their practice, they will find ways to improve student performance.

That does not mean, however, that reforms consistent with Breaking Ranks and High Schools That Work did not exist in these schools. We found substantial alignment between curriculum and assessments, caring environments created by teachers and school leaders, and "personal adult advocates" for students. Likewise, we found evidence of alternatives to tracking and ability grouping through second-chance and student-support programs. Teachers and administrators used these programs to access continually updated information about student progress and engagement so they could act quickly to extend help to and reengage at-risk students. We also found consistent and intentional structures and processes to involve students, parents, and faculty members in genuine and important decision making. All of these are Breaking Ranks priorities for high school reform.

These reforms resulted from a kind of pragmatic experimentalism, energized by a "success for all" value system held by principals and other school leaders. The drivers for these reforms, according to the participants in this study, were the state's accountability system and the explicit definitions of academic success the end-of-course tests provided, along with the knowledge that it takes more than drill and practice to keep students in school and experiencing success.

Neither principals nor teachers make successful schools by themselves. Students and parents also have to share the power, purpose, and pride of high performance. If ever specific reforms or the directions of change were prompted or guided by Breaking Ranks or any other reform initiative, that impetus has now become integrated into the tacit, "We don't know what we know" dimension of knowledge about practice in these schools.

Perhaps the most striking disconnect with the Breaking Ranks recommendations is in the area of technology. Other than one or two dramatic instances (e.g., a high school's leadership in wiring substantial parts of a small community in western North Carolina), innovative and extensive use of technology was not a prominent feature in these schools. Computers played an important support role in managing student data on which student support systems and faculty discussions about instruction were based. There were also labs and some distributed workstations for teaching and learning in the schools, but none of them were exemplars of wired or wireless connectivity. Instead, the connections in these schools were energized by relationships among and between

teachers, students, administrators, and community members. The relationships are tempered by performance expectations, and these relationships make the difference in performance.

Implications

For all of their success, these 11 schools are still only islands of excellence. High schools will continue to be on the front lines of reform and concern in North Carolina as well as in other states where the levels of knowledge and skills gained in secondary schools are important to the workforces and communities of the world. Breaking Ranks provides ideas and informed directions for high school reform, whether the ideas and directions are explicitly used as roadmaps or serve only as part of the broader discussion on the course of progress. The lessons and themes from this multiple case study of 11 high-performing North Carolina high schools can also serve to inform, affirm, and challenge high schools to develop more caring, collaborative communities of practice that promote greater engagement and success for high school students.

This study draws several implications for schools, principals, and teacher leaders who want to move their high schools to places of greater student engagement and success.

Start with "productive conversations." Perkins (2003) described the concept of productive conversations as dialogues with a purpose, such as student learning that is based on reciprocal sharing of information and ideas among people in an atmosphere of openness and respect, and that focus on ways to move forward and solve problems. Our finding of data-driven dialogues about student learning is a good example of these conversations. In these schools there is no effort to blame either students or teachers for past failures. Instead, there is a dialogue among educators--teachers and supportive administrators, especially, but also at times other stakeholders--about how to diagnose student learning difficulties and solve problems of achievement.

Build on what is there. There is no need to restructure. Departments can be drivers of change and success. They have to be "purposed" to produce student success instead of ensuring the replication of gaps in student participation and achievement that already exist. In this study, the data show that departments can lead the way in creating clarity in their own curriculums for students and in linking with other departments to learn about and improve the total instructional program of the school.

Connect the dots and the disconnected. Our data show that student participation, engagement, and eventual success are powered by connections and relationships. There are close connections between principals and teachers, faculty members and students, and students and other students between the curriculum, instruction, and assessments; and, in many cases, between the school and community. These connections start with simple but intentional acts of caring and are then built into good relationships. They result in a school's willingness to give struggling students a second chance and in collaborative and distributed instructional leadership. These connections result in more empowered teachers and students and in a commitment to learning and success. They begin, usually, with principals who believe that student success in school, work, and society starts with adults who are capable; who care about their work, their students, and each other; and who are committed to linking their students to enabling webs of support.

Build systems and networks. The schools in this study have systems to support student learning and to improve teacher quality. Some are within the schools while others are districtwide. All, however, have structures and systems in place that are genuine ways to challenge and monitor the learning of both students and teachers. The ideas and proven power of networks and systems are not new; however, they still are not widespread. But "breaking ranks" will mean having to break with the past in order to link schools, systems, and states in larger-

scale and more sustainable reforms (Fullan, 2004). Those policies, practices, and studies remain largely yet to be done.

References

Achieve, Inc., & National Governors Association. (2005). An action agenda for improving America's high schools. New York: Author.

Alliance for Excellent Education. (2003). Progress report on American high schools. Washington, DC. Retrieved on March 5, 2005, from www.all4ed.org/publications/ProgressReportOnAmericanHS.pdf

Barton, P. E. (2004). Why does the gap persist? Educational Leadership, 62(3), 8-13.

Bradby, D., & Dykman, A. (2002). Effects of high schools that work practices on student achievement. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Educational Board.

Croninger, R. G., & Lee, V. E. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. Teachers College Record, 103, 548-581.

DiMartino, J., Clarke, J., & Lachat, M. A. (2002). Creating student-centered high schools. Principal Leadership, 2(5), 44-55.

Disla, L. C. (2004). As strong as the weakest link: Urban high school dropout. The High School Journal, 87(2), 16-24.

Fallis, R. K., & Opotow, S. (2003). Are students failing school or are schools failing students? Class cutting in high school. Journal of Social Issues, 59, 103-119.

Frome, P. (2001). High schools that work: Findings from 1996 and 1998 assessments. Raleigh, NC: Research Triangle Institute.

Fullan, M. (2004). Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Greene, J. P. (2001). High school graduation rates in the United States. New York: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. Retrieved March 5, 2005, from www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm

Greene, J. P., & Forster, G. (2003). Public high school graduation and college readiness rates in the United States. New York: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. Retrieved March 5, 2005, from www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/ewp-03.pdf

Haselswerdt, M. V., & Lenhardt, A. C. (2003). Reframing school violence: Listening to voices of students. The Educational Forum, 64, 326-336.

Heubert, J. P. (n.d.). High-stakes testing: Opportunities and risks for students of color, English-language learners, and students with disabilities. Retrieved November 10, 2004, from www.cast.org/publications/ncac/ncac-highstakes.html

Jackson, A. (2004). Preparing urban youths to succeed in the interconnected world of the 21st century. Phi Delta Kappan, 86(3), 210-213.

Johnson, J., Farkas, S., & Beers, A. (1997). Getting by: What American teenagers really think about their schools. New York: Public Agenda.

Johnson, J., & Immerwahr, J. (1995). First things first: What Americans expect from the public schools. New York: Public Agenda.

Kirst, M. W. (2004). The high school/college disconnect. Educational Leadership, 62(3), 51-55.

Langer, J. (2000). Excellence in English in middle and high school: How teachers' professional lives support student achievement. American Educational Research Journal, 37(2), 397-440.

McPartland, J. M., & Jordan, J. (2001). Restructuring for reform: The talent development model. Principal Leadership, 1(6), 28-31.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Association of Secondary School Principals. (1996). Breaking ranks: Changing an American institution. Reston, VA: Author.

National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2002). What the research shows: Breaking ranks in action. Reston, VA: Author. Retrieved February 15, 2004, from www.principals.org/s_nassp/sec.asp?CID=706&DID= 47130

Noguera, P. A. (2002). Beyond size: The challenge of high school reform. Educational Leadership, 59(5), 60-63.

Noguera, P. A. (2004). Transforming high schools. Educational Leadership, 61(8), 26-31.

Norton, M. S. (2003). Let's keep our quality school principals on the job. The High School Journal, 86(2), 50-56.

Ortiz, F. I. (2004). Essential learning conditions for California youth: Educational facilities. Teachers College Record, 106(10) 2015-2031.

Patterson, N. C., Roehrig, G. A., & Luft, J. A. (2003). Running the treadmill: Explorations of beginning high school science teacher turnover in Arizona. The High School Journal, 86(4), 14-22.

Perkins, D. (2003). King Arthur's round table: How collaborative conversations create smart organizations. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Rothstein, R. (2004). A wider lens on the Black-White achievement gap. Phi Delta Kappan, 86(2), 104-110.

Schaefer-Schiumo, K., & Ginsberg, A. P. (2003). The effectiveness of the warning signs program in educating youth about violence prevention: A study with urban high school students. Professional School Counseling, 7(1), 1-8.

Sizer, T. (1984). Horace's compromise: The dilemma of the American high school. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. M. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

United Health Foundation. (2004). America's health: State rankings (2004 ed.). Retrieved November 11, 2004, from www.unitedhealthfoundation.org/shr2004/Findings.html

Wayman, J. C. (2002). The utility of educational resilience for studying degree attainment in school dropouts. Journal of Educational Research, 95(3), 167-178.

Weaver, C. (1996). Teaching grammar in context. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

Weaver, C. (1998). Lessons to share on teaching grammar in context. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.