

Reforming American High Schools

What, Why, and How



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The International Center for Leadership in Education has worked with high schools across the country, including 30 model high schools that participated in the “Bringing Best Practices to Scale” initiative, co-sponsored by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This work has shown us that a school usually needs to progress through three consecutive stages in order to achieve high academic standards for all students. These three stages involve:

1. Convincing educators, parents, and community members as to *why* a school needs to change.
2. Using good data to determine *what* needs to change after people understand why. Data drives decisions in the following areas:
 - What the vision is for education in the school
 - What will be taught
 - What the organization of instruction will look like
3. Determining *how* to change the school once people understand and embrace the *why* and the *what*. This final stage involves:
 - How to create a strategic, collaborative plan
 - How to manage change

Regrettably, many schools begin their improvement efforts in the reverse order — by first deciding how to do things differently. That is, they find a “solution” without articulating the need or problem. Yet, if staff and stakeholders do not believe the school must change or understand what needs to change, the suggestion for *how* to change is likely to be ineffective or rejected, because it is, in effect, a solution to a problem that has not been acknowledged.

I. WHY We Need to Change High Schools

High school reform begins with a desire by some — and at least a willingness of others to be led — to change what currently exists. The leaders in our most successful high schools, both administration and staff, embrace change as exciting and challenging rather than intimidating and threatening. These educators seem to understand that what exists in schools today needs to be updated to keep pace with society. They recognize that students and adults must continually learn new things and that some of the skills we teach and use today will soon be as outdated as the skills needed to operate a typewriter or a slide rule. Technological change is inevitable, and they are ready to deal with it.

The leadership groups in the 30 model schools also seem to understand instinctively that they will have to make the changes without substantially more resources. They approach the entire endeavor, not by feeling overwhelmed, but rather with a sense of excitement and a desire to rise to the occasion.

Effective change agents understand that our schools follow an agrarian calendar and were designed for the industrial age — not a good match with preparing students for the digital age. In many districts, schools are not designed to deal with today’s technology, the global and media-driven world we live in, or the equity issues facing education. The rules and regulations under which these schools operate are held over from a time that has passed.

Working in the context of a digital society — with ubiquitous access to the Web, smartphones, global positioning systems, digital streaming, wireless connectivity, and smart TVs — requires breakthrough thinking. The leaders of the 30 high schools have accepted the reality that today’s students will have to

work harder, faster, and smarter than their predecessors to enjoy success in adult roles and that schools need to reinvent themselves to prepare students to meet the future demands that will be placed upon them. The old rules simply do not apply. True leaders of change have no use for the viewpoint that “it has always been done this way and therefore must continue to be done this way.”

The leaders in these schools who have achieved success at scale focus on the future. They understand the importance of not being caught with an outmoded product, as IBM was in the 1980s or Kodak was in 2000s. Kodak, which announced layoffs in 2004 of almost one-quarter of its workforce, was unprepared for the widespread adoption of digital photography, the magnitude of which the company was reportedly slow to comprehend. IBM was on top of the world in the 1980s because it had created the Information Age with its once state-of-the-art mainframe computers. However, IBM fell victim to the very age it had created: evolving customer desires drove responsive competition to create new products and systems while IBM basked in the glow of an old order that had changed.

In times that move as quickly and as unpredictably as our own, our lives have become stress-filled. We have to deal with deadlines, new accountability requirements, and demands to do more with less. Today’s technology will be tomorrow’s “antiques,” and it is not an exaggeration to say that more extensive scientific and technological advances will occur in the next few years than have happened in the last two centuries. Dealing with these advances requires a different education system from the one in which we were educated, the same traditional system that remains in place in many schools today. The high-performing schools clearly understand these realities and — rather than feel threatened by them — seem to embrace them.

II. Determining WHAT to Change

Creating the Vision

After highly successful schools have shared with stakeholders an awareness of the economic and human reasons why education programs must change, the schools must use that knowledge to develop a student-focused vision and common focus that helps to identify what changes will be needed. The vision helps create a collaborative spirit among staff and community. The purpose of the school is clearly defined. Priorities begin to emerge to guide the work of the school.

Throughout our country’s history, the purposes of education have been expanded in response to societal needs. Today, there is general consensus about four roles of education:

1. Fostering intellectual development
2. Preparing students to be informed, caring, and productive citizens
3. Preparing students for higher education
4. Preparing students for the world of work.

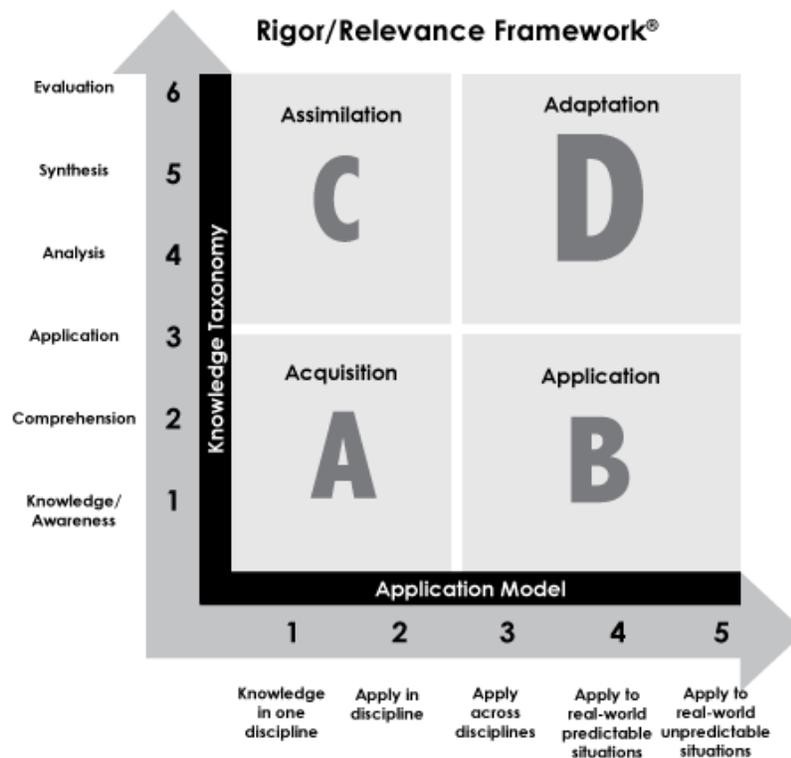
In high-performing schools, the leaders recognize that fostering intellectual development and preparing students to be responsible citizens continue to be high priorities. They also understand that a primary purpose of secondary education for the last 50 years — getting students ready for higher education — remains an imperative. More recently, however, they have come to recognize the importance of preparing students for work, because careers are a common denominator for all students and because the academic skills used in the workplace are often a higher level than and different from those needed for college.

Moreover, the high-performing schools in the study retained many of the traditional rules and regulations. At the same time, they have created an absolute passion about the need to raise standards, but these standards are different from those in the past.

Changing the Mind-Set

Successful schools recognize that today’s education system was designed for another time and place in which people typically had lifetime jobs that required predictable skills performed in a familiar environment. Over the past 40 years, our society and our economy have gone through dramatic changes that require workers to possess different sets of skills from those that the education system has traditionally provided. As the demands on the education system to raise standards have become steeper, the tendency has been to rely on the old tried-and-true curriculum content and teaching approaches. The problem is, of course, that the old methodology was intended for an education system whose job was to select and sort students, not to try to get all of them to achieve high standards of proficiency.

Successful schools tend to envision a system focused on the future. The goal is to teach students how to think — not simply what to know. In addition, learning how to learn and how to embrace change are critical skills that will enable individuals to thrive in our changing society. The schools that have achieved success also understand that they need to teach students to do things not simply by rote, but rather with a deeper levels understanding. In effect, they need to help students apply high levels of cognitive knowledge to real-world unpredictable situations. That means academic rigor applied in open-ended ways that are relevant to the 21st century. On the International Center’s widely used schema, the Rigor/Relevance Framework, that optimal mode of learning is graphed at the upper right. Quadrant D is the highest level intersect of academic rigor and engaging relevance.



Teachers and administrators in the high-performing schools passionately embrace visionary thinking as exciting. Accordingly, they are willing to put their “all” into it. They understand that staying focused on the vision means sometimes needing to stretch the rules — while still working within the regulations, an important distinction. Their vision and passion drive the entire school to achieve success.

Determining What to Teach

Once these highly successful schools had created a student-focused vision embraced by all, they got on with the serious business of identifying what should be taught. Many schools independently came to the conclusion that their curriculum is overcrowded. They worked diligently, using data, to make hard decisions about what is essential for all students to know, what is *nice* to know, and what should be taken off their plate.

Of all of the competency areas, literacy was first on the list at more than half of the highly successful schools we visited. Literacy includes the need for students to be able to read, write, speak, listen, and observe well if they are to be effective lifelong learners. Writing is a key enabling skill, and schools are committed to writing across disciplines.

In reading, many of the schools observed have used data to identify the requirements that students must meet to be successful in their post-high school experiences. As a result, these schools are making a major commitment to reading across the curriculum in grades 9–12.

In addition, several of the schools studied found that a large percentage of entering 9th grade students were not proficient enough in reading to benefit from the instructional materials used at the high school. For those students, a major commitment was made in 9th grade to an intensive literacy program, including remedial reading and intensive writing. The schools seemed to recognize that if strong literacy skills are not developed by the time these students enter 10th grade, they will struggle academically and will be headed toward underachievement, frustration, and possibly even dropping out of school. The schools are deeply committed to teaching reading in the content area, and teachers are trained and expected to teach reading within their individual disciplines in virtually all courses in these high schools.

The 11th and 12th grades in the 30 high schools also look different from many other high schools across the country. In the successful schools, we found a deep commitment to comprehensive and rigorous 11th and 12th grade academic programs. These grades are not stacked full of electives. Instead, students take advanced mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies courses. Often, the schools require a major “senior project” for graduation, as well.

Optimum Organization of Instruction

After a determination was made to treat all four years as a rigorous academic experience for all students and to make literacy a centerpiece, the schools recognized that students needed to understand how to apply those academic proficiencies. Therefore, most developed small learning communities — typically theme academies. Academics are taught within the context of the theme. The schools have found that when they built programs around students’ interests, learning styles, and aptitudes, the students do better in school.

The next step in making these schools successful was the use of a curriculum framework that moves beyond the “what” of curriculum to the “how” of instruction. One example is the International Center for Leadership in Education’s Rigor/Relevance Framework.

The International Center has stated for many years that relevance is critical if we want to get students to rigor. Relevance can help create the conditions and motivation needed for students to make a personal investment in rigorous work for optimal learning. Simply put, students invest more of themselves, work harder, and learn better when the topic is connected to something that they already know and in which they have an interest. The model high schools do more than talk the talk of relevance; they also walk the walk. Nearly all of the schools have invested substantial effort and resources to improve instruction as a way to bring relevance to academic subjects. They have also created multiple opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and community service.

While rigor and relevance are critical to the success of these schools, they are not sufficient. Rigor and relevance are linked with relationships. Rigor has a tendency to increase as the degree of relevance and the quality of relationships improve. Rigor requires students to make a substantial personal investment in their own learning. Students involved in rigorous learning are deeply engaged in thought, critical analysis, debate, research, synthesis, problem-solving, and reflection. In other words, they are exercising their cognitive abilities to the maximum.

Strong relationships are critical to academic success for students. Relationships are important because students are more likely to engage in rigorous learning when they know that teachers, parents, and other students actually care how well they do. They are willing to continue to try hard when they are connected, encouraged, supported, and assisted — much in the same way that a personal trainer might work with an exerciser.

The work of the 30 model high schools in building and strengthening relationships was equally as noteworthy as their efforts to bring relevance to their education programs. The driving force in relationship-building appears to be such guiding principles as respect, responsibility, honesty, trustworthiness, compassion, loyalty, optimism, adaptability, courage, contemplation, initiative, and perseverance. The greater the emphasis on these attributes, the more readily students seem to develop a “comfort level” with the school environment — a sense of security, personal responsibility, shared respect, and predictability that enables learning.

When guiding principles are deeply embedded in the culture of the school and underpin all human interactions, positive relationships, better collaboration, and an overall sense of caring, support, and teamwork are the result. Student alienation and strained relationships among adults and with students are minimized. The more that guiding principles were embedded into the functioning of the school, the higher the school had ascended on the relationship framework, as depicted in the chart that follows.

Relationship Framework	
Learning Relationships Support for Students	
0. Isolated	Students feel significant isolation from teachers, peers, or even parents. Students lack any emotional, social connection to peers and teachers.
1. Known	Students are known by others, frequently called by name. Teachers know students and their families, interests, aspirations, and challenges. Students are known by peers that they interact with in school.
2. Receptive	Students have contact with peers, parents, and teachers in multiple settings. Teachers exhibit positive behaviors of “being there” that show genuine interest and concern.
3. Reactive	Teachers, parents, and peers provide help to students when requested, but support may be sporadic and inconsistent among support groups.
4. Proactive	Others take an active interest in a student’s success. Teachers take initiative to show interest and provide support. Students and others express verbal commitment for ongoing support and validate this commitment with their actions.
5. Sustained	There is extensive, ongoing, pervasive, and balanced support from teachers, parents, and peers that is consistent and sustained over time.
6. Mutually Beneficial	Positive relationships are everywhere and commonplace among the way that students, teachers, and parents interact and support the student as learner.

It is important to note that the model schools did not waiver from their primary goal of raising the academic achievement of students or back away from improving performance on standardized tests in the process of increasing the relevancy of the curriculum and creating a culture of strong relationships and mutual support. Their academic content steadfastly reflects high expectations for all students, is non-negotiable, and is based on the knowledge and skills students will need to demonstrate in their lives after graduation.

III. Determining HOW to Change

Schools that have first gone through a process of discovering **why** they must change followed by an analysis of data which identifies **what** they must change are far better positioned to determine **how** they need to change. The real challenge in changing high schools is breaking free of traditions and assumptions that have become standard operating procedures in many of our schools — traditions such as students having summers off, periods being 45 minutes long, and courses being the same number of weeks in length. Many of the traditional rules, while deeply engrained in the American education system, are not based upon what research shows is the most effective and efficient way to educate our children. All decisions based on traditions regarding such issues as class size, independent and mutually exclusive departments for each discipline, and bell schedules need to be challenged and then changed if they are not aligned with the vision of the school and the needs of the students.

Creating an environment in which educators at every level and students feel safe in questioning current practices and procedures is an important component in the processes that the successful schools use to

stay on a path of continuous improvement. In fact, some highly successful schools of a decade ago that implemented many of the strategies identified in this paper have faded as models. As we look in retrospect at why they are no longer regarded as innovators, we find that they almost always became institutionalized in terms of their rules and regulations, policies and procedures, and thinking. To maintain success over a long period of time, schools need to engage in reflective thinking constantly - to question and evaluate not only their established ideas, strategies, procedures, and programs but also even the more recently embraced improvements. The truly successful schools seem to possess a restlessness and ongoing passion for continuous improvement. They shun any sense of “having arrived” at success and continually strive to improve and reinvent themselves.

Finally, we found that change leaders in high-performing schools look at the process of how to change quite differently from many other schools. These leaders are willing to take risks as necessary because they believe there is no choice but to change. They understand that playing it safe is more dangerous than taking a risk and that there is no protected harbor from the storm. Therefore, they take control and steer the ship through the storm, rather than simply trying to keep it afloat in turbulent waters.

Creating the Plan

The leaders in the high-performing schools seem to recognize that if they wait to get *everyone* on board and fully accepting of all provisions of a school improvement plan, they will never move forward. So instead, many embrace the concept that one-third of the faculty will be excited about a new plan, one-third will be cautious but open-minded, and one-third will say, in effect, “any changes will be made over my dead body.” The high-performing schools engage the top third in an open, transparent process to help conceptualize, create, and implement a strategic plan for change. They communicate widely and frequently and involve the middle third by asking them to analyze, evaluate, and volunteer to pilot components of the plan. This approach typically influences the middle group to join in the change process within a year. The schools then find that, over time, many of the bottom third come aboard.

One approach of high-performing schools is to get everyone to understand that the plan laid out is not perfect and that, moreover, there *is* no perfect model or plan. Any plan will need evaluation and adjustment constantly. This notion that the plan will need to be modified as the school moves forward appears to be the key to bringing the middle third aboard. In addition, successful change leaders have found that admitting up-front that the plan will need frequent adjusting helps with the cynics in that bottom third who might otherwise say every time a change is made, “I told you it wouldn’t work.”

The high-performing schools help us to understand the importance of developing a plan that, while based on needs, plays to the strengths of the faculty, the community, the school, and the students involved. Many school reform efforts spend too much time trying to figure out how to compensate for weaknesses rather than capitalizing on strengths. In fact, trying to overcome weaknesses first actually skews the picture. Change becomes more difficult when schools are overly concerned with what is most problematic. By focusing on the positive, people become more energized and are able to move ahead — even though they know the solution is not perfect. This constant adjusting of the plan moves it from being a good plan to becoming a great plan over time.

A second challenge that many successful schools have faced is the problem of too much to do in too little time. While funding will always be an issue, the biggest single deficit schools face is lack of time. That is another reason why high-performing schools maximize their impact by focusing on the areas in which they can make the greatest change and playing to their strengths. Playing to strength also invigorates people so that they are willing to give more time and energy.

Managing Change

While managing change is difficult in all organizations, it is especially problematic in institutions with long and rich traditions, such as public education. Traditions, and the rules and regulations that surround them, become anchors that are difficult to pull up so that the “ship” can be redirected.

By their nature, educators are not typically great risk takers. Therefore, they want to make sure that any change being contemplated is well thought out, carefully researched, and clearly better than what currently exists. In effect, they need to believe that the present system is wrong and that there is a better solution. The problem with trying to implement change is that seldom is there an absolute right or wrong relative to organizational structure. There are “almost rights” and “often wrongs.” However, in tradition-driven systems, almost right and often wrong are not good enough to convince all segments of the population. The question is how large is the margin of error?

To manage change in an organization with deep-seated traditions and widespread fear of change requires extraordinary leadership. Education leaders need to recognize that playing it safe to avoid risks actually places the school and students in greater peril than not attempting change at all.

Since the 1983 report on the state of American education, *A Nation at Risk*, we have had two decades of pressure from business leaders, political leaders and others to change the public education system. Because of the inability of schools to change as quickly as others would like, there is continued erosion in support for the public schools from those key stakeholder groups. The biggest fear educators may need to confront is that if we do not make some substantive changes, we will lose the best of what we now have — as well as miss the chance to address those areas that need improvement. Therefore, we must have leaders who cannot be seduced into ignoring what they know we *should* do.

The model high schools in our study have demonstrated the importance of building a culture of high academic expectations for all students, a tradition of continuous improvement, powerful structures of teaching and learning, collaborative leadership, and student support. As other schools begin to make changes, they must constantly analyze how they are doing. Along the way, they must revamp, refine, and when necessary redirect the decisions and plans in place. The real error would be *not* to learn from missteps and not take appropriate corrective action. Failure is not a crime, but failure to learn from failure is unacceptable. The difference between the best leaders and the rest of the leaders is not how many mistakes they have made, but whether they have learned from, dealt with, and adjusted their course as needed.

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