Personalizing Your School Environment

Although some students might be able to make it through the childhood, young adolescence, and the teenage years despite the lack of personal connections, most students require a supportive environment—some more than others. Creating that environment is essential if a school is to bring learning to fruition for each student.

Each school must provide students with opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to the school, a sense of ownership over the direction of their learning, and the ability to recognize options and make choices based on their own experiences and understanding of the options. The following is a working definition of *personalization*:

> A learning process in which schools help students assess their own talents and aspirations, plan a pathway toward their own purposes, work cooperatively with others on challenging tasks, maintain a record of their explorations, and demonstrate their learning against clear standards in a wide variety of media, all with the close support of adult mentors and guides. (Clarke, 2003, p. 15)

Personalizing your school environment sets the stage for learning by addressing the school environment, climate, and culture with certain practices. Those practices are designed to prevent students from remaining anonymous; allow teachers to appreciate and foster each student's abilities, aspirations, and interests; encourage students to exercise and practice personal and social responsibility, decision making, and communication skills; and offer students opportunities to demonstrate their academic, athletic, musical, dramatic, and other accomplishments in a variety of ways. Implementing structural changes to foster these practices provides the "shell" in which productive interaction—relationships—can occur systematically.

What to Tackle First?

Scholars, school leadership teams, and management experts have long struggled with the question of what to tackle first: Collaborative leadership? Curriculum, instruction, assessment? Personalization? Without minimizing the importance of the debate, suffice it to say that the three are highly interconnected and change is needed in all three areas. In addition, modifications to culture must occur before change truly becomes effective. Unfortunately, schools don't have the luxury of sequentially addressing culture then addressing student learning needs—they must "build the plane while it is in flight." The process—the how of improvement—can have a profound effect on your culture, for better or worse. Each school will approach the challenge from a different perspective depending on factors specific to its situation.

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Although the approach may vary from school to school, the following cornerstones should be at the center of all initiatives in each school embracing the *Breaking Ranks* Framework:

- Leadership
- Professional development
- Culture
- Organization
- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Assessment
- Relationships
- Equity.

These interrelated cornerstones form the foundation for improving the performance of each student in your school. Each of these cornerstones—and their underlying recommendations—will be the focus of the next nine pages. They form the heart of "what" to change. Reflecting the interrelated nature of the schooling enterprise and the fact that changing one variable will have an impact in other areas, many of the underlying recommendations repeat. For example, "vision" is required for leadership as well as professional development and most of the other cornerstones. While this may seem repetitive, it provides a constant reminder of the interconnectedness as well as a "one-stop" place to see the associated recommendations for those who may be reviewing one cornerstone, such as "organization," as a group. Although all cornerstones must be addressed in a combined effort, to engage in conversations about all nine cornerstones at once would be impractical at best. Given the import and depth of impact of the underlying ideas, it would be just as easy to say "Read the book and react." To aid your exploration, the following pages are organized in this manner:

- Each page has one of the cornerstones, a brief description, and the *Breaking Ranks* Framework recommendations that are the "what" of improvement.
- Following the nine pages of cornerstones is the complete list of 29 recommendations organized by core area.
- These recommendations are further defined by the benefits, strategies, challenges, and progress measures for each recommendation (pp 42–71). This level of depth will be instrumental in helping your school discuss how best to implement each recommendation. Extensive discussions should take place about these recommendations.

> **Teaching versus Learning**
> Teaching involves demonstrating skills and presenting knowledge, but learning does not occur until the students engage and understand.
> Source: ICLE

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