NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL ALLIANCE

A CALL TO ACTION

Transforming High School for All Youth



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WASHINGTON, DC

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The Vision of the National High School Alliance

A nationwide commitment to fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all youth in the nation's high schools and communities.

The Mission of the National High School Alliance

To work collectively in shaping policy, practice, and research by mobilizing the resources, knowledge, and capacity of individuals and organizations and by promoting public engagement that fosters high academic achievement, closes the achievement gap, and promotes civic and personal growth.

Contact and Ordering Information

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Copies of this report are available for free and may also be downloaded from the HS Alliance Web site. To order copies, write, fax, e-mail, or mail requests to:

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Please visit our Web site at *http://www.hsalliance.org* to learn more about the National High School Alliance.

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Introduction

The National High School Alliance is a partnership of leading national organizations, working both individually and collectively, to realize a nationwide commitment to their shared vision of fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all high-school-age youth in our high schools and communities. The National High School Alliance helps the partners realize their commitment by serving as a vehicle for mobilizing resources, networks, knowledge and capacity. As a forum for professional discourse and collaborative effort, the National High School Alliance creates new space in which strategies for promoting change can emerge and be mobilized through partner networks.

The National High School Alliance has produced this document, A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth, to provide leaders at the national, state, district, school, and community levels with a common framework around which to engage a diverse cross-section of stakeholders in the hard work of transforming high schools for all youth.

CORE PRINCIPLES

- Personalized Learning Environments
- Academic Engagement of All Students
- Empowered Educators
- Accountable Leaders
- Engaged Community and Youth
- Integrated System of High Standards, Curriculum Instruction, Assessments, and Supports

To create deep and lasting change, *all six core principles must be addressed.* The principles are interdependent and must function as part of a comprehensive plan focused on ensuring that all students are ready for college, careers, and active civic participation.

A Call To Action

In *A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth,* the National High School Alliance identifies six core principles and recommended strategies that will foster high academic achievement, close the achievement gap, and promote civic and personal growth among all high-school-age youth in our high schools and communities. At the center of the framework is the Alliance's belief that the purpose of high school is to ensure that all high-school-age students are ready for college, careers, and active civic participation.

A Call To Action represents the collective knowledge of the National High School Alliance partners. It is designed to provide policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and the general public with a framework for guiding the complex process of transforming the traditional, comprehensive high school. A central premise of *A Call to Action* is that deep and lasting change requires a systemic approach. High schools and districts cannot do this work alone: they need engaged and invested families, business communities, and policymakers who are committed to ensuring that all students have access to the resources and supports they need. *A Call to Action* provides a common framework around which leaders and stake-holders at all levels can jointly plan, implement, assess, and continually improve policy systems and practices that incorporate, connect, and align the best of both bottom-up (school and community-based) and top-down (state and federal policy-based) solutions.

Core Principles

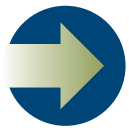
The National High School Alliance believes that there is no one-size-fits-all model that will be effective and sustainable in all contexts. Thus, *A Call To Action* provides a set of core principles around which a broad range of context-specific designs and strategies can be interpreted to meet local needs. These principles, however, are non-negotiable. To create deep and lasting change, *all six core principles must be addressed.* The principles are interdependent and must function as part of a comprehensive plan focused on ensuring that all students are ready for college, careers, and active civic participation.

Recommended Strategies

For each core principle in *A Call To Action,* specific strategies are recommended. The strategies represent the partners' research- and implementation-based knowledge of the effective policies and practices that drive the transformation of high schools.

Principles and Strategies To Transform High Schools for All Youth

A comprehensive plan to transform high school for all youth addresses each of the six, interdependent **Core Principles** in ways that meet the context-specific needs of each state, district, school and community in their efforts to ensure that all students are ready for college, careers, and active civic participation. The central ideas of each principle are described below, followed by a set of **Recommended Strategies** for developing effective policies and practices that drive the transformation of high schools.



Personalized Learning Environments

Personalized learning environments support all students' achievement in meeting high academic standards and successful quality post-secondary transitions by designing curriculum, supports, structures, and a learning climate focused on student needs and development. A personalized environment is characterized by the following: an academically rigorous curriculum; instruction that is relevant to real-world contexts and that builds upon student and community assets; a network of adults who work together and with students to access the necessary academic and social resources; interactions among and between adults and students defined by trust, respect, open communication, and clear, shared expectations; and a safe and welcoming climate.

Though research indicates that positive and supportive relationships with adults are highly motivating for high-school-age youth, and are necessary features of a successful learning environment, the structures and norms of the traditional high school mitigate against such supportive relationships. The large size of high schools has been identified as one of the key obstacles to personalization. While restructuring for "smallness" is not a panacea, doing so creates conditions in which key attributes of a personalized learning environment can operate. Creating a personalized learning environment for each student—one that recognizes the link between supportive relationships and high academic achievement—presents a significant challenge to existing school structures and ingrained habits of interaction. Thus,

personalization for all students in all high schools requires that supports, policies, and investments be coordinated at a systemic level.

Recommended Strategies:

- Structure school size and schedules so that all students and all teachers are in small learning environments—ideally, 400 students or less in a 9-12 high school
- Develop academically rigorous curricula that meet or exceed standards, are relevant to real-world contexts, and build on student and community assets
- Build capacity of teachers to identify the needs of—and provide appropriate supports and accommodations for—multiple student populations
- Establish teacher teaming and looping structures
- Develop a personal learning plan for each student
- Work across the school system to address student needs at critical transitions, in particular the transition from the middle grades to high school and from high school to post-secondary education
- Identify an advocate/advisor for each student and their family
- Involve students in decision-making about their academic development
- Build student capacity and provide opportunities for students to exercise leadership and civic engagement



Academic Engagement of All Students

Academic engagement is strengthened when educators and students co-construct learning experiences that are relevant to economic, social, and political dynamics at local, national, and global levels. It is also vital, particularly for students who are most at risk for disengagement and dropping out, that curriculum and instruction value and connect learning to students' cultural and linguistic contexts. Academic engagement is also fostered through networks of adults who actively connect students with resources, guidance, and information needed to make decisions about course-taking, post-secondary education, and career pathways. Low-level courses and general or non-academic tracks—which are common in traditional, comprehensive high schools—foster and deepen student disengagement. To reverse this trend, low-level courses and non-academic tracks should be eliminated so that all students have access to academically rigorous and relevant curriculum and instruction. Students should be engaged in disciplined inquiry, which requires problem-solving, higher-order thinking, and the capacity to construct, rather than merely reproducing knowledge.

Recommended Strategies:

- Engage all students in a rigorous, standards-based core academic curriculum
- Emphasize project-based learning and other engaging, inquiry-based teaching methods that provide opportunities for students to master academic content, learn workforce skills, and develop personal strengths
- Eliminate non-academically rigorous courses and tracks
- Differentiate instruction and provide supports that meet the varied learning needs of multiple student populations
- Connect curriculum to real-world contexts that build upon student and community resources
- Provide individualized guidance, information, and resources on career pathways and opportunities for participating in workplace-based learning
- Structure schedules for extended/flexible instructional time blocks
- Use multiple measures to assess student outcomes, including performance-based assessments



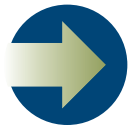
Empowered Educators

Communities of practice are critical mechanisms for empowering educators and for transforming the culture of traditional, comprehensive high schools into a personalized learning environment for all students. They are characterized by the collaborative work of educators who continuously seek, share, and act on their learning in order to improve their practice for the purpose of improved student outcomes. Communities of practice help transform school culture by providing ongoing, job-embedded professional development and support, which teachers need to learn and apply new practices, and by fostering a sense of collective responsibility for all students' achievement. Communities of practice are most likely to emerge in smaller schools, which are typically designed with a communal, rather than bureaucratic, decision-making structure.

Recommended Strategies:

- Schedule common planning time for collaborative development of curriculum and instruction, assessment of student work, and analysis of student performance data
- Build educators' capacity to use data and research to inform instructional practice and to guide professional learning priorities and needs
- Empower instructional staff with authority to define professional development needs and to make decisions about curriculum, teaching methods, and classroom environment
- Differentiate instruction and provide supports to meet the learning needs of multiple student populations

- Utilize communities of practice as a mechanism for transforming the way educators are prepared, inducted, and retained



Accountable Leaders

Leaders at all levels of the education system must be accountable to, and work in partnership with, the communities and youth they serve. To foster ownership in the difficult process of transforming high schools, state, district, school, community, youth, and municipal leaders must work together to articulate a shared vision for all high-school-age youth, and to define accountability at each level. A strategic plan designed around this shared vision holds leaders at all levels of the education system accountable for allocating necessary resources; establishing equitable practices and policies that ensure all youth, schools, and communities have access to quality resources; and for using data to monitor and communicate progress to all stakeholders. Accountable leaders resist the temptation of quick-fix solutions, choosing instead to engage stakeholders around the challenges of transforming schools and districts into systems that are responsive to and accountable for the success of all youth, including the most vulnerable populations.

Recommended Strategies:

- Engage state, district, school, community, youth, and municipal leaders in articulating a shared vision for all high-school-age youth and in defining accountability at each level
- Allocate resources necessary to support both short- and long-term implementation of policies and practice
- Use data to monitor and communicate progress to all stakeholders
- Assess the impact of any reform policy or practice on equitable distribution of resources, particularly the allocation of high-quality teachers
- Assess the impact of any reform or policy practice on all populations of students, particularly those traditionally marginalized such as English-language learners and students with disabilities
- Develop strategic, systemic approaches for addressing both dropout prevention *and* dropout recovery for vulnerable student populations
- Enact policy to support the retention of school and district leaders and teachers who will sustain the shared reform strategy and vision for all high-school-age youth
- Provide structures and supports to foster distributed leadership and communities of practice among educators, which leads toward continual improvement of instruction
- Enact policies for the recruitment, preparation, and development of leaders in education to ensure accountability in the preparation of all youth for college, careers, and active civic participation



Engaged Community and Youth

School and system leaders cannot do the hard work of high school transformation alone. All facets of the community—parents, industry, post-secondary education, government agencies, and intermediary organizations, including low-income, minority populations that have been traditionally marginalized in civic and school affairs, and youth—are needed to articulate a shared vision for all high-school-age youth and to establish a network of accountability that ensures progress towards achieving that shared vision. A network of accountability functions across several dimensions. *Educators* are accountable to one another as professionals—for continually improving practice—and accountable to students and their families—for supporting and challenging them to achieve and develop at high levels. *Students* are accountable to their schools and communities—for articulating their vision of a transformed high school and for committing to their own academic success and achievement at high levels. *School leaders* are accountable to the community—for engaging all facets of community in the process of articulating a shared vision for all high-school-age youth, for equitably distributing resources, and for communicating progress towards this vision. *Community stakeholders* are accountable to schools—for participating in the articulation of a shared vision for all high-school-age youth, for committing resources to realize this vision, and for ensuring that the school system is held accountable for its progress and equitable distribution of resources. Finally, *school leaders and community stakeholders* are jointly accountable to government—for meeting requirements of state and federal accountability systems.

Recommended Strategies:

- Engage with education leaders to articulate a shared vision for all high-school-age youth
- Commit community resources and establish partnerships with the school and district to support this vision
- Hold education leaders accountable for allocating resources and establishing equitable policies that ensure all youth, schools, and communities have access to quality resources
- Hold education leaders accountable for communicating data on youth outcomes
- Communicate data on community needs and concerns to education leaders
- Organize and build community capacity—particularly within low-income, minority populations that have been traditionally marginalized in civic and school affairs—to assume a more formal role as active and knowledgeable participants in the process of improving outcomes for all high-school-age youth
- Organize and build youth capacity to exercise leadership and participate in decision-making that affects their schools and communities



Integrated System of High Standards, Curriculum, Instruction, Assessments, and Supports

An integrated system of standards, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and supports provides a critical foundation for high school transformation. It mandates common expectations for all students; clearly communicates parameters for success in each successive year of school and for successful transition into post-secondary education and careers; and outlines how students will learn, be assessed, and receive support. A key challenge in creating an integrated system is to ensure that state-level policies for standards and accountability do not constrain, but rather support, school and community efforts to transform high schools into personalized and engaging learning environments for all students. One important way that states can do this is by mandating the use of multiple measures in determining student promotion and graduation, with an emphasis on performance-based assessments such as capstone projects, portfolios, and public exhibitions. Performance-based measures are by their very nature personalized, and can be used to assess skills that standardized assessment cannot, such as leadership and written and oral communication. Further, performance-based assessments help to drive the continuous improvement of curriculum and instruction by necessitating a community of practice among educators and by involving the community in the school.

Recommended Strategies:

- Establish clear and rigorous standards aligned with curricula and entrance requirements for post-secondary education and careers
- Develop and utilize multiple assessments, including performance-based measures (e.g., portfolios, public exhibitions, capstone projects), that align with standards
- Plan intended outcomes and assessment strategies before initiating a learning activity or project
- Build students' capacity to critique their own work and learning process
- Provide accelerated learning opportunities to help all students meet or exceed standards
- Integrate literacy instruction throughout the curriculum in a way that is tailored to the needs of adolescent learners
- Eliminate academic tracking

Taking Action

The National High School Alliance urges policymakers, practitioners, and researchers at the national, state, district, school, and community levels to work together, using this document as a framework for guiding the complex process of transforming our nation's traditional, comprehensive high schools. Its structure of core principles and recommended strategies is intended to keep the focus on the nation's, and the world's, most valuable resource—youth. It is also designed to remind those engaged in crafting solutions that no single policy or program will be sufficient. In order to create deep and lasting change, all six of the core principles must be addressed.

The National High School Alliance recognizes that a truly comprehensive plan for transforming all high schools will require significant financial investments. Such an endeavor will also require an investment of our best thinking, creativity, and commitment over time. It will be no small feat to transform a century-old institution—and the assumptions underlying its design. What we must create is a system of learning designed to nurture the academic and social development of every young person. We cannot afford to do otherwise.

A Call to Action is intended to be a living document, one that can be deepened and informed over time by those who use it. Uniquely positioned as a nonpartisan, "network of networks," the National High School Alliance partners will build capacity for change by engaging their respective networks in the application of this framework. Through these implementation efforts, the partners expect to learn more about the change process at each policy level. This information will be used to deepen the original document and/or to develop additional tools.

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Pathways to College Network

Public Education Network

Rural School and Community Trust

Southern Regional Education Board, High Schools That Work

What Kids Can Do



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