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Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Learning High School Reform, by NASSP and the Educational Alliance

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and legislation aimed at improving student learning that do not first identify what is meant by actual learning.

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BREAKING RANKS II: STRATEGIES FOR LEADING HIGH SCHOOL REFORM

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
AND THE EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE

AUTHOR, 2004

\$22.00, 220 pages

Reviewed by Vicki Kilgarriff

This publication is the follow-up to the 1996 *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, which challenged secondary school leaders “interested in transforming high schools into zones of achievement, high expectation, and continuous improvement” (p. xiii) to tackle the issues of school reform. The goal of the first book was to point out that all students were not learning and to make educators believe that they could. Nearly 10 years later, this follow-up focuses on achievement strategies to make sure that secondary school students are meeting the benchmark standards that federal and state legislation now require: “Most principals and teachers took their first steps down the path to educating the nation’s children because they wanted to make a difference in the lives of individual students by helping them acquire a love of learning” (p. xv).

This publication is about change and reform of educational systems, curriculum, and structures to be sure, but it is equally about personal change and reform beginning in the heart and attitude of each individual educator: “If you begin to see yourself differently in your work and in the way you help others see the wisdom of change, your school will change” (p. xv). From the outset, *Breaking Ranks II* pays attention to its own advice to determine the needs, to help others recognize the needs, and to work together to promote improved student performance. The principal of the school is the leader, orchestrating change and motivating the school constituents to come along.

If few are following, however, who exactly is the principal leading? Principals can be blind-sided from many directions: staff who think things are working well as they are, parents who are comfortable with what is in place as long as their child is passing, and the tradition and history of a school which has little interest in becoming anything different.

A critical task for a principal, seasoned or novice, is to challenge his or her staff to reach beyond the status quo and ask challenging questions: does every student graduate in 4 years; what percentage of students take remedial courses; are leadership and staff successfully including hard-to-reach students and parents in the education plan; how many teachers from different disciplines work together on a regular basis; what percentage of classes per week are primarily lecture driven; are the hopes, strengths, weaknesses of each student known by at least one staff member in addition to counselors; and how is that information used appropriately to help the student become successful in classes and activities? A school that organizes around a fear of knowing these answers, or a staff that fears to address these questions is a school that risks the outcome and future of its students.

Breaking Ranks II offers that

the business of education is about learning and achievements for students...without personal connections and our understanding of the motivations, aspirations, and learning styles of students, most students will never become engaged in their own learning and never really achieve their potential. (p. 4)

Connections are only made by talking to each other. A strength of this publication is in its advice to create opportunities for conversation about change. Without conversation and collaboration, recommendations can become to do lists which can de-energize those involved. Instead, the reader is encouraged to motivate and provide the impetus to get something started. Teachers and supporting staff have a difficult time owning, understanding, supporting, and implementing what they have had no stake in developing.

There are certain presuppositions in *Breaking Ranks II* in which the reader is invited to share: every student counts, every student can learn, and every student should be taught. Principals are urged to be radical leaders of redesign and reform, to facilitate that every student and teacher will be consulted, acknowledged, and accountable. This is a dynamic vision of what the learning environment and all of its constituents can have a hand in creating. Some will buy it at any price because they do believe; others will say it cannot work, it is too much work, or it is the fad for this educational decade; and others will be too tired to try.

Some of the most readable parts of *Breaking Ranks II* are the school profile sections titled, "In Their Own Words." These give an insider's view of schools that have successfully broken ranks by effecting systemic, coherent, student-centered change. Readers are provided with practices to look for, with data to support outcomes, and frank narratives detailing the bumpy road and roadblocks put up by parents, teachers, and others.

In format, this publication is essentially a handbook of information, suggestions in the form of recommendations to be implemented. The data are organized, clear, helpful, and focused. Some readers will feel they are reading lesson plans; others will feel they are reading strategic plans. For those who learn by seeing ideas mapped or webbed, charted or tabled, this publication works effortlessly. Other readers may feel overwhelmed at the volume of ideas presented and be quick to put the book down, preferring it in small doses. The beauty here is that all readers, whether teachers, principals, or parents, can access the information. If education and organization for the successful achievement of every learner can be prescribed in a how-to book, then *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* should soon be appearing in offices of principals across the nation.

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RADICAL SIMPLICITY: SMALL FOOTPRINTS ON A FINITE EARTH

JIM MERKEL
NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS, 2003
\$17.95, 288 pages

Reviewed by Frank W. O'Linn

What do St. Francis of Assisi, Zen master Ling Chi, and naturalist author Henry David Thoreau have in common with a former military weapons engineer? The answer can be found in Merkel's blueprint for sustainable global living, *Radical Simplicity: Small Footprints on a Finite Earth*. Merkel, a former engineer, couples scientific inquiry with a passion for peace and justice and a concern for the environment to create an instruction manual for those