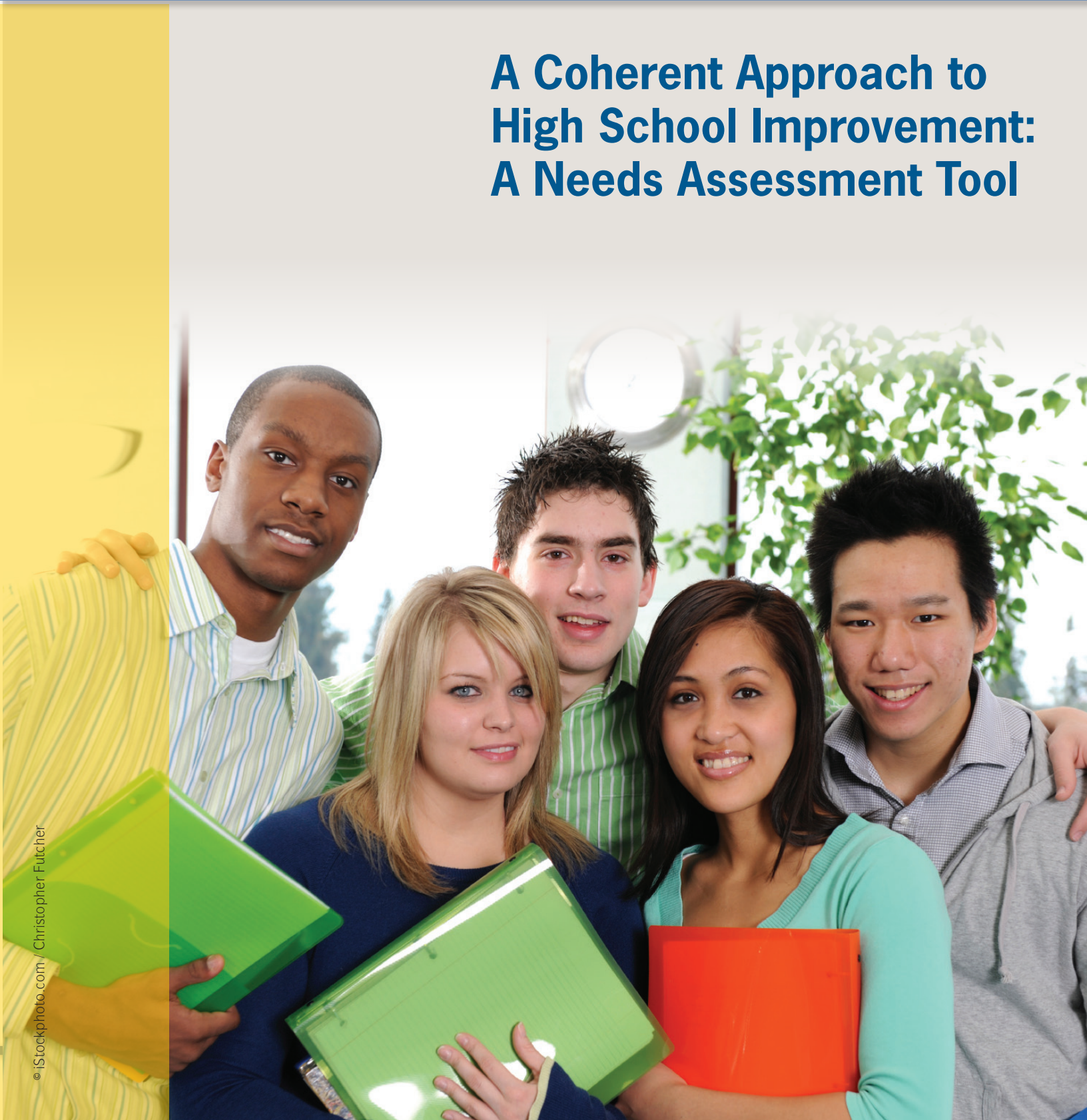


A Coherent Approach to High School Improvement: A Needs Assessment Tool



A Coherent Approach to High School Improvement: A Needs Assessment Tool

Prepared by Lindsay Fryer and Amy Johnson of AIR*

WHAT IS THE TOOL?

High school improvement initiatives often focus on specific intervention strategies, programs, or priority topics (e.g., dropout intervention). However, research shows that systemic and sustainable improvement can only be achieved when initiatives are implemented with consideration for the broader education contexts in which they operate. The National High School Center has developed *A Coherent Approach to High School Improvement: A Needs Assessment Tool* to help districts and schools, in alignment with state goals, assess current high school education policies and practices, identify areas of strengths and limitations, and implement coherent school reform initiatives.

The foundation for this needs assessment tool is the National High School Center's *Eight Elements of High School Improvement: A Mapping Framework*. This framework was developed to support researchers, policymakers, and practitioners at all levels in their efforts to maximize the achievement of all high school students. The document outlines eight core elements that can be used as a lens for mapping school, district, and state high school improvement efforts in a comprehensive, systemic manner. The eight elements of high school improvement are:

- Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction
- Teacher Effectiveness and Professional Development
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Organization and Structure
- Assessment and Accountability
- Student and Family Supports
- Leadership and Governance
- Resources for Sustainability

The U.S. Department of Education also has identified four overarching education reform priority areas under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). They are: (a) Turning Around Struggling Schools; (b) Effective Teachers and Leaders; (c) Data Systems; and (d) Standards and Assessments. The eight elements of high school improvement contain many characteristics that address the four ARRA priority areas. This self-assessment can assist users in aligning their high school reform efforts with the ARRA priorities. Focusing reform efforts on both the ARRA priority areas and the eight elements of high school improvement will help ensure that improvement plans coherently address accelerated learning for all students and strategically position schools to receive government funding under various initiatives, such as Race to the Top, State Fiscal Stabilization Funds, Investing in Innovation, and School Improvement Grants.

WHO SHOULD USE THE TOOL?

This needs assessment tool is designed to help school and district staff guide the development of high school improvement goals and strategies, with appropriate support from state education agencies. While this tool is directly focused on high school improvement at the school and district levels, state education agencies play an important role in building the capacity of schools and districts to support and align continuous improvement efforts.

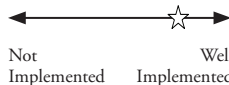
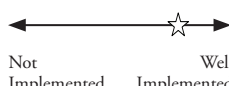
* This self-assessment tool is based on the National High School Center's *Eight Elements of High School Improvement: A Mapping Framework* by Joseph R. Harris, Ph.D., Phyllis L. Cohen, and Todd D. Flaherty, Ed.D.

HOW IS THE TOOL USED?

The tool is comprised of two primary sections that address each of the eight core elements of high school improvement; the first section is a self-assessment process and the second section focuses on next steps. The “Self-Assessment” section of the tool details specific Characteristics of Effectiveness, grouped into themed Areas of Focus, which represent important school or district practices. The initial step in using this tool involves completing the Self-Assessment section to determine the extent of implementation of each of the eight elements. Users will (a) consider the specific evidence that their school or district displays in addressing each Characteristic of Effectiveness and (b) rate the level of evidence based on the following scale: “little or no evidence,” “some evidence,” or “substantial evidence.” Evidence may include such practices as programs offered, policies in action, or initiatives that a school or district has in place that address the specific Characteristic of Effectiveness under review.

Users can then indicate their “Overall Self-Assessment” for each Area of Focus on a continuum between “not implemented” and “well implemented” based on the collective evidence ratings designated for the Characteristics of

Example of a Completed Self-Assessment Section

	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Self-Assessment	Screening and Progress Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage and support continuous progress monitoring through both formal and informal assessments 		X		
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If needed, develop a plan to implement high-quality assessment systems 			X	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the early identification of students with special needs and those at risk of failure so that placement and tiered interventions appropriately meet the needs of students 		X		
	Regular Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include formative assessments that are embedded in instruction, as well as interim and summative assessments 	X			
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May include school-based portfolios or projects; interim or benchmark exams (which often are implemented at the district level); and end-of-course exams, state or district standards-based assessments, and high-stakes competency or exit exams 		X		
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measure higher order learning and accumulated complex skills and accomplishments 		X		

Effectiveness. For example, if most ratings fall under the “substantial evidence” column, then the school or district is exhibiting signs that this Area of Focus is well implemented. If ratings are evenly distributed across the three columns, or mainly in the category of “some evidence,” then the Area of Focus is partially implemented. Users can indicate their Overall Self-Assessment by placing a mark in the appropriate position on the continuum in the column (see the star in the example on page 3). This Overall Self-Assessment clearly depicts a school’s or district’s implementation status of the collective Areas of Focus and eight elements. When the Self-Assessment section of the tool is completed, a school or district will be able to holistically evaluate its practices in each Area of Focus and uncover strengths and gaps in current policies in an efficient and explicit manner.

The second step is to complete the “Next Steps” section of the tool, which can be used in strategic planning for future improvement efforts based on the structure of the *Eight Elements of High School Improvement: A Mapping Framework*. Following the Overall Self-Assessment, the Next Steps section offers an approach to determine specific policies and practices that potentially address system gaps that relate to each key element. Users also can designate appropriate stakeholders to involve in the planning and development process. Users should not feel constrained to the space provided and can add pages as needed to complete the assessment.

Example of a Completed Self-Assessment Section

	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve
Next Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Response to Intervention programs • Early Warning Systems Initiative • Formative assessments • College and work readiness assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-level longitudinal database • Screening assessment tools • Targeted professional development (e.g., data analysis, implementation of intervention programs) • Staffing, time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State education agency • District superintendent • School administrators • Designated school Early Warning Systems team • Teachers and guidance counselors • External school and district consultants • Local college/business partners

In completing *A Coherent Approach to High School Improvement: A Needs Assessment Tool*, a school or district will be able to focus strategic planning for improvement initiatives that are systemic and sustainable, and incorporate all of the eight elements of high school improvement in a comprehensive manner.

1. Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction Designed to Meet Rigorous Standards

Everyone in the system is responsible for ensuring that all students have access to rigorous curricula and instruction that include the following:

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Alignment and Coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align to local, district, state, and national standards that look toward the depth of knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for students to thrive in emerging economic, citizenship, and community contexts 				↔ Not Implemented Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If needed, develop a plan to implement high-quality standards within the curricula 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is organized around student instructional needs and aligns with instruction in other content areas to support thematic and project-based learning, tiered instruction, etc. 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align vertically with prerequisite content, cognitive skills, curricula, and follow-up coursework 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt easily to a variety of high school organizational structures 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interface with the existing school curricula and quality of instruction 				
Instructional Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate multiple research-based high school instructional strategies—such as scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and double dosing—for all students, including those with special instructional needs 				↔ Not Implemented Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve continuous progress monitoring/formative assessment and the differentiation of teaching to meet the needs of multiple learners 				

1. Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction Designed to Meet Rigorous Standards (continued)

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Instructional Supports (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate new modalities for learning and information sharing, including technology and universal design for learning Incorporate cognitive skills development, including note-taking, outlining, content summarizing and synthesis, study skills, and test-taking skills Address both academic and workplace literacy skills across all content areas and provide students with knowledge of a variety of career pathways Include academic supports (e.g., tutoring and co-curricular activities) and extended learning opportunities (e.g., summer bridge programs, after-school and supplemental educational services, and Saturday academics) Offer opportunities and supports that enable all students to enroll in advanced coursework to prepare them for college and career pathways^a 					<div style="text-align: center;"> \longleftrightarrow Not Implemented Well Implemented </div>
Next Steps	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve			

^a Advanced coursework and college preparation opportunities include Advanced Placement courses; International Baccalaureate programs; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses that incorporate rigorous and relevant project-, inquiry-, or design-based contextual learning opportunities; early-college high schools; dual-enrollment programs; and thematic learning academies that prepare students for college and careers.

2. Assessment and Accountability

Balanced assessment and accountability systems that cover a broad range of formal and informal assessment policies and practices aligned across multiple levels and that include the following:

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Screening and Progress Monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage and support continuous progress monitoring through both formal and informal assessments 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If needed, develop a plan to implement high-quality assessment systems 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support the early identification of students with special needs and those at risk of failure so that placement and tiered interventions appropriately meet the needs of students 				
Regular Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include formative assessments that are embedded in instruction, as well as interim and summative assessments 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May include school-based portfolios or projects; interim or benchmark exams (which often are implemented at the district level); and end-of-course exams, state or district standards-based assessments, and high-stakes competency or exit exams 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measure higher order learning and accumulated complex skills and accomplishments 				
Timely Access to Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide timely and effective feedback and access to data so that district leaders, teachers, students, and parents can capture and evaluate student knowledge and skills, plan for future educational programs, and adapt instruction to better meet the needs of students 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give teachers and students access to college and work readiness assessments to best plan high school courses of study 				
Evaluation and Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collect and report longitudinal data at the school and district levels to measure short- and long-term student growth for student-, teacher-, and/or program-based impact evaluations, including new interventions and initiative 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop longitudinal data systems that include unique teacher and student identifiers to align and track teacher and student data 				

2. Assessment and Accountability (continued)

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
	Evaluation and Accountability (continued) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include both internal and external accountability provisions, including teacher and program performance measures, rewards, and consequences (depending on local, district, and state contexts) • Track information about students who transfer, drop out, and graduate from high school, as well as information about students who enroll in college, to observe rate changes over time • Track information on students who are not tested on the state exams to maintain records of students who are exempt from testing • Conduct periodic reviews to ensure that curriculum is implemented with fidelity, has the intended impact on student achievement, and is modified if ineffective • Implement an audit system that ensures data quality 					Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
Next Steps	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve			

3. Teacher Effectiveness and Professional Development

Teacher quality and professional development systems that recognize a teacher's need for deep content and pedagogical knowledge and include a broad set of recruitment, preparation, induction, professional growth, and retention policies and practices, as well as the following:

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Rigorous Content and Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that teachers' credentials meet rigorous standards related to accredited teacher education programs, teacher certifications, licensure requirements, and/or high-quality alternative pathways to teaching 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote knowledge of adolescent development, varied and effective pedagogy for high school students, and the ability to motivate students and work with diverse student needs effectively and empathetically 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide teachers with skills in assessing students and adjusting instruction accordingly 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote effective classroom management skills 				
Ongoing Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are based on standards for staff development and adult learning and pass quality reviews 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase the abilities of and opportunities for teachers to work together to improve classroom practice and help all students connect information across disciplines and programs, such as Title I, special education, and services for English language learners 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are embedded at the school and classroom levels and are connected and offered throughout the school year 				
Retention Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help teachers develop and build on their classroom and leadership skills and abilities over time and, preferably, in collaboration with other teachers and instructional leaders 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer competitive compensation via transparent and fair compensation systems 				

Next Steps	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve

4. Student and Family Supports

All high school students need guidance and supports that address the whole child, including physical and socioemotional needs, through positive conditions for learning that include the following:

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Supporting Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate formal and informal guidance programs, including peer and professional counseling and mentoring 				<div style="text-align: center;"> ← Not Implemented Well Implemented → </div>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish early warning systems that include attendance, academic, and behavior monitoring where feasible to identify at-risk students and provide appropriate interventions 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support wraparound and English language services that extend beyond the classroom 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote health and physical education and co-curricular activities 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide family-focused services and outreach that engage parents and family members in programs and services 				
Supporting Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support students as they transition into and out of high school 				<div style="text-align: center;"> ← Not Implemented Well Implemented → </div>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide appropriate socioemotional services to students 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster a positive school climate, including safe schools and respectful environments (e.g., anti-bullying) 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultivate student voice and leadership in the classroom, school, co-curricular activities, and community 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respect and honor the strengths and resources of the student's family and community 				

Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve

5. Stakeholder Engagement

High schools exist in unique social, political, and cultural contexts, and high school improvement efforts should incorporate stakeholder engagement strategies that include the following:

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Fostering Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage the interests, needs, skills, and resources of multiple stakeholders, such as district and school staff, students, parents and family members, guardians, community organizations and members, business partners, social service agencies, and institutions of higher education 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster relationships among districts, high schools, midlevel and elementary schools, postsecondary educational institutions (e.g., dual enrollment agreements), the workforce, families, and communities 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that all appropriate stakeholders are at the table during critical planning and decisionmaking activities 				
Promoting Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate multiple communications strategies that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and support two-way communications 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are designed with contingencies of stakeholders in mind 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate technologies to more creatively and effectively support stakeholder engagement 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge and draw on the strengths of various stakeholder groups 				

Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve

6. Leadership and Governance

Promoting and supporting high-quality instructional and organizational leadership at the building and district levels require exercising leadership and approaches to governance that include the following:

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Management Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enact enabling policies and codify a vision, mission, and/or strategic plans for scale-up and sustainability Promote distributed leadership, encouraging multiple roles for teacher leaders and tackling organizational change where necessary Clarify decisionmaking authority at all levels and recognize the expectations, requirements, compensation, and recognition of faculty and staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate alternative structures to address management, discipline, and other functions of running high schools traditionally performed by principals Develop strategies and skills to lead and support required organizational change 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
Leadership Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide principals with adequate knowledge, time, and interpersonal skills to work with teachers as they define curricular and instructional goals and develop instructional strategies Shift the focus of state, district, and local policymakers and education agency staffs to support comprehensive high school improvement centered on strengthening the instructional core 					Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented

Next Steps	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve

7. Organization and Structure

Many high school improvement initiatives are enhanced by or may necessitate changes from the organization and structure of traditional, comprehensive high schools toward operational structures that include the following:

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Organizational Alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support effective teaching and learning and personalization through physical and operational changes, such as the creation of small schools and smaller learning communities, freshman academies, career academies, career-tech high schools, and other alternative structures Support teacher organizational changes beyond traditional departmental structures, such as common planning periods, professional learning communities, and co-teaching Support the difficult process of culture changes as roles, responsibilities, relationships, and patterns of engagement change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incorporate alternative time/scheduling approaches such as block scheduling, year-round schooling, and double dosing, especially in core academic courses Include students with special needs in the general curriculum with access to rigorous content through co-teaching, tiered intervention structures, and adaptive supports Provide increased opportunities to learn, such as virtual courses, dual enrollment opportunities, and work-based internships 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
Instructional Alternatives						

Next Steps	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve

8. Resources for Sustainability

Critical to any high school improvement initiatives are the identification and commitment of adequate fiscal and other resources that include the following:

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Short-Term Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define priorities and allocate needed resources for sustainability over time Adequately staff the initiatives and acknowledge the need for workload equalization and/or reduction Provide appropriate time and necessary fiscal support for initiatives to be implemented and take hold 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
Long-Term Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grow both the physical and human capital within the system to implement and sustain high school reforms Continuously upgrade facilities, tools, and materials to keep pace with the changing economy, technology, and citizenship expectations Continuously develop teacher and principal knowledge and skills to incorporate these changes within their instructional leadership practices Move effective practices to full implementation and scale-up 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented

Next Steps	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve