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

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

Prepared by Lindsay Fryer and Amy Johnson*

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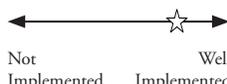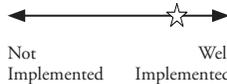
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* This self-assessment tool is based on the National High School Center's *Eight Elements of High School Improvement: A Mapping Framework* by Joseph R. Harris, Ph.D., Phyllis L. Cohen, and Todd D. Flaherty, Ed.D.

HOW IS THE TOOL USED?

The tool should be used as a starting point for identifying high school improvement priorities and building awareness of areas where more attention is needed. 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 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 following example table). 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.

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**	• Encourage and support continuous progress monitoring through both formal and informal assessments.			X	Not Implemented ———————☆——→ Well Implemented
		• 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		
	Timely Access to Data	• Provide timely access to data so that district leaders, principals, teachers, students, and parents can monitor and evaluate student knowledge and skills, plan for future educational programs, and adapt instruction to meet the needs of students.		X		Not Implemented ———————☆——→ Well Implemented
		• Give teachers and students access to college and career readiness assessments to customize/individualize high school courses of study.			X	

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 Next Steps Section

	Potential Policies and Practices to Address Gaps	Resources Needed	Whom to Involve
Next Steps	• Response to Intervention programs • Early Warning Systems Initiative • Formative assessments • College and work readiness assessments	• Student-level longitudinal database • Screening assessment tools • Targeted professional development (e.g., data analysis, implementation of intervention programs) • Staffing, time	• 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

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

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Alignment and Coherence	• Align curriculum and instruction 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.				
	• Implement high-quality standards within the curricula.				
	• Organize curriculum and instruction around student instructional needs and align with instruction in other content areas to support thematic and project-based learning, tiered instruction, etc.				Not Implemented ←————→ Well Implemented
	• Align curriculum and courses vertically to ensure that students possess necessary prerequisite content knowledge and cognitive skills.				
	• Organize curriculum and instruction to adapt easily to a variety of high school organizational structures.				
	• Integrate new standards with existing school curricula and instruction.				
Instructional Supports	• 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
	• Implement continuous progress monitoring/formative assessment and differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students.				

Self-Assessment

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1. Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction (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)	• Incorporate new modalities for learning and information sharing, including technology and universal design for learning in all content areas.					
	• Incorporate cognitive skills development, including note-taking, outlining, content summarizing and synthesis, study skills, and test-taking skills in all content areas.					
	• Address both academic and workplace literacy skills across all content areas.					Not Implemented ← → Well Implemented
	• Provide students with knowledge of a variety of career pathways.					
	• Provide 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 academies) to keep students on track for graduation.					
	• Offer opportunities and supports that enable all students to enroll in advanced coursework to promote college and career readiness.					

Next Steps

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

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.

Self-Assessment

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Screening and Progress Monitoring	• Encourage and support continuous progress monitoring through both formal and informal measures.				
	• Implement high-quality assessment systems to identify student needs, monitor student progress, and inform instruction.				Not Implemented ↕ Well Implemented
	• 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	• Embed formative, interim, and summative assessments in instruction.				
	• Include multiple assessment strategies, such as school-based portfolios or projects; interim or benchmark exams; and end-of-course exams, state or district standards-based assessments, and high-stakes competency or exit exams.				Not Implemented ↕ Well Implemented
	• Measure higher order learning and accumulated complex skills and accomplishments with an emphasis on college- and career-readiness.				
Timely Access to Data	• Provide timely access to data so that district leaders, principals, teachers, students, and parents can monitor and evaluate student knowledge and skills, plan for future educational programs, and adapt instruction to meet the needs of students.				Not Implemented ↕ Well Implemented
	• Give teachers and students access to college and career readiness assessments to customize/individualize high school courses of study.				
Evaluation and Accountability	• 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 initiatives.				Not Implemented ↕ Well Implemented
	• Use 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)	• Include both internal and external accountability provisions in an evaluation system, such as teacher effectiveness 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.				Not Implemented ↕ Well Implemented
	• Conduct periodic reviews to ensure that instructional and student support interventions are implemented with fidelity, have the intended impact on student achievement, and are modified if ineffective.				
	• Implement an audit system that ensures data quality.				
	• Use indicators and benchmarks to set goals and target resources aimed at improving student, staff, school, and district level outcomes.				

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.

Self-Assessment

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	• Ensure that all high school teachers are prepared with content knowledge and pedagogical skills through accredited teacher education programs, teacher certification and licensure requirements, and/or high-quality alternative pathways to meet the needs of all students.				
	• Promote knowledge of adolescent development, varied pedagogy for high school students, and the ability to motivate and work effectively and empathetically with students with diverse backgrounds and needs.				
	• Provide teachers with the necessary skills and tools to use data to make instructional decisions and adjustments.				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	• Promote effective classroom management skills.				
Ongoing Professional Development	• Provide ongoing professional development opportunities that are high-quality and based on standards for staff development and adult learning.				
	• Create and facilitate opportunities for teachers to work together to improve classroom practices and to connect instructional and support activities across disciplines and programs, such as Title I, special education, and services for English language learners.				
	• Ensure professional development opportunities are job-embedded at the school and classroom levels, are aligned to high school improvement efforts, and are offered throughout the school year.				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	• Develop teachers' classroom management and instructional leadership skills and make connections to school-wide student expectations.				
	• Provide opportunities for job-embedded professional development on instructional leadership skills, such as mentor teachers and content coaches.				
Retention and Compensation Policies	• Offer competitive compensation via transparent and fair evaluation systems that incorporate student growth measures as indicators of effectiveness.				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented

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.

Self-Assessment

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Supporting Programs	• Provide opportunities for formal and informal guidance programs, including peer and professional counseling and mentoring.				Not Implemented ⟷ Well Implemented
	• Establish early warning systems that include attendance, academic, and behavior monitoring to identify students at-risk of dropping out and provide appropriate interventions.				
	• Support wraparound and English language services that extend beyond the classroom.				
	• Promote health, physical education and co-curricular activities, such as service learning.				
Supporting Services	• Provide family-focused services and outreach that engage parents and family members in programs and services.				Not Implemented ⟷ Well Implemented
	• Support students as they transition into and out of high school.				
	• Provide opportunities for social and emotional learning, and supports to students.				
	• Foster a positive school climate, including safe schools and respectful environments (e.g., anti-bullying).				
	• Cultivate student voice and leadership in the classroom, school, co-curricular activities, and community.				
	• Respect and honor the strengths and resources of the student's family and community.				

Next Steps

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.

Self-Assessment

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Fostering Participation	• Engage the interests, needs, skills, and resources of multiple internal and external stakeholders (district and school staff, students, parents and family members, guardians, community organizations and members, business partners, social service agencies, institutions of higher education, etc.) in high school improvement efforts and initiatives.				Not Implemented ←→ Well Implemented
	• Foster collaborations with districts, high schools, midlevel and elementary schools, postsecondary educational institutions, the workforce, families, and communities to enhance teaching and learning opportunities.				
	• Ensure that all appropriate stakeholders are involved during critical planning and decisionmaking activities to foster buy-in for high school improvement efforts and initiatives.				
Promoting Collaboration	• Implement multiple communication strategies that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and support two-way communications to all internal and external stakeholders.				Not Implemented ←→ Well Implemented
	• Design opportunities for collaboration with considerations for various stakeholders (internal and external to the school) when planning high school improvement efforts and initiatives.				
	• Use technologies to support stakeholder engagement (e.g., e-mails, Web sites, automated phone calls).				
	• Acknowledge and draw on the strengths of various stakeholder groups when planning high school improvement strategies and initiatives.				

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

Next Steps

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.

Self-Assessment

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Management Structure	• Create a high school improvement leadership team to help guide and ensure alignment of all high school improvement initiatives.				Not Implemented → Well Implemented
	• Implement policies that align and codify the vision, mission and/or strategic plan for high school improvement.				
	• Promote distributed leadership by clarifying decisionmaking authority at all levels, and compensating and recognizing faculty and staff for their contributions to high school improvement efforts.				
	• Implement alternative leadership structures to address management, discipline, and other functions of running high schools traditionally performed by principals.				
Leadership Development	• Build capacity of distributed leaders to support required organizational changes for high school improvement.				Not Implemented → Well Implemented
	• Ensure school leaders possess adequate knowledge, time, and interpersonal skills to work with teachers as they define curricular and instructional goals and develop instructional strategies.				
	• Focus state, district and local policymakers and education agency staff efforts and school/community leaders to support comprehensive high school improvement centered on strengthening instruction.				

Next Steps

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

National High School Center at the American Institutes for Research

betterhighschools.org

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.

Self-Assessment

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Organizational Alternatives	• Support effective teaching and learning and personalization for high school improvement 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.				Not Implemented ← → Well Implemented
	• Support teacher organizational changes beyond traditional departmental structures, such as common planning periods, professional learning communities, and co-teaching.				
	• Implement strategies to address cultural change caused by shifts in roles and relationships that accompany high school improvement efforts.				
Instructional Alternatives	• Implement time and scheduling approaches that enhance and/or extend learning time to better meet the needs of students and staff, including block scheduling, year-round schooling, and double dosing in core academic courses.				Not Implemented ← → Well Implemented
	• 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, service learning, and work-based internships.				

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.

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	• Define priorities and allocate needed resources for sustainability over time.					Not Implemented ←→ Well Implemented
	• Implement new staffing patterns and adjust workloads to adequately support high school improvement efforts and initiatives.					
	• Provide appropriate time and necessary fiscal support for high school improvement efforts and initiatives to be implemented and take hold.					
Long-Term Strategies	• Grow both the physical and human capital within the system to implement and sustain high school reforms.					Not Implemented ←→ Well Implemented
	• Upgrade facilities, tools, and materials to keep pace with evolving college and career ready standards and technology.					
	• Ensure teacher and principal knowledge and skills continuously evolve to incorporate new high school improvement efforts and initiatives within their instructional leadership practices.					
	• Move effective high school improvement practices and initiatives to full implementation and scale-up.					

Next Steps

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