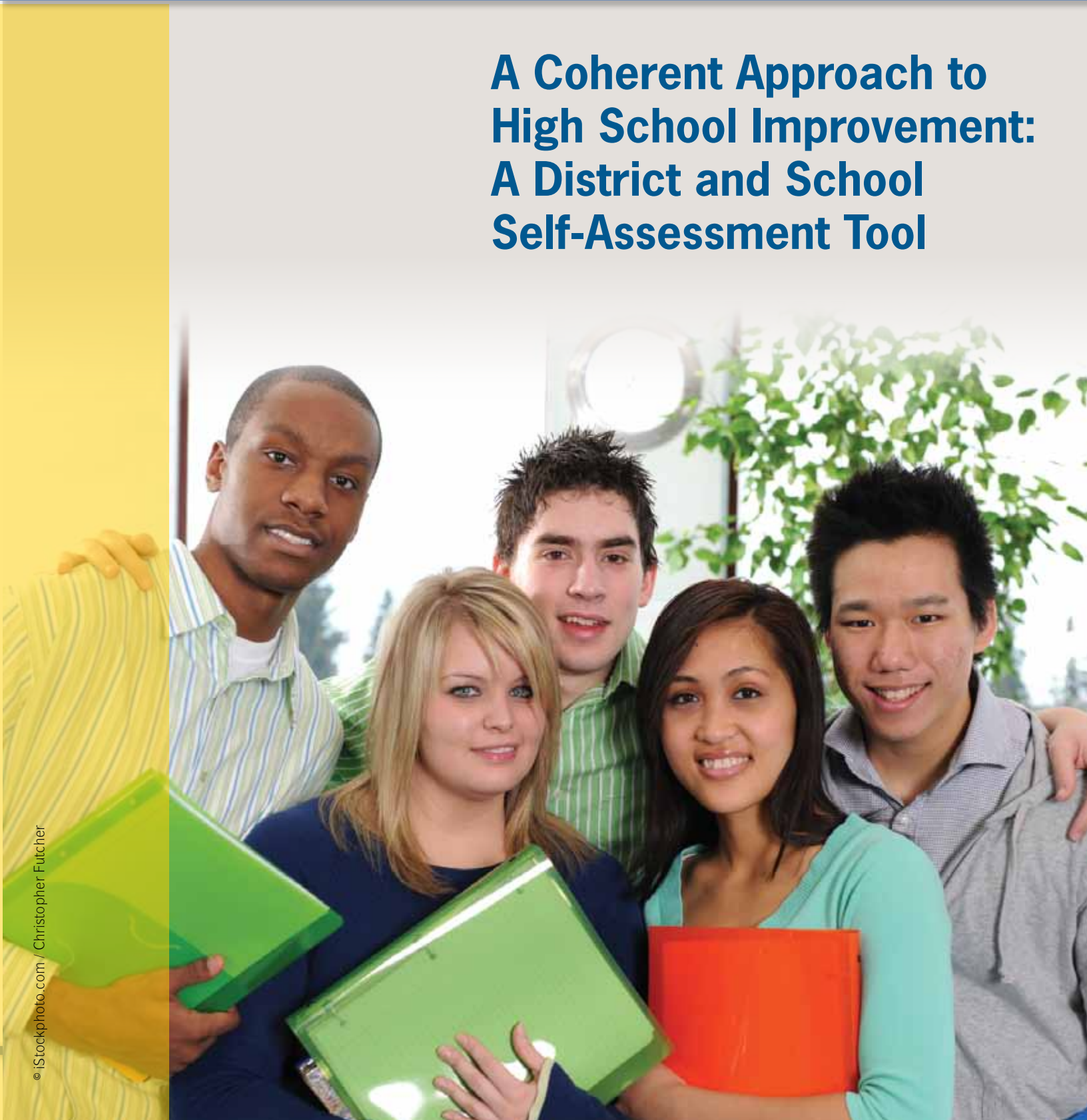


A Coherent Approach to High School Improvement: A District and School Self-Assessment Tool



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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, dual enrollment, freshman academies). However, research shows that systemic and sustainable improvement can be achieved only 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 District and School Self-Assessment Tool* to help districts and schools assess their current high school education policies and practices, identify areas of strengths and limitations, and implement coherent school reform initiatives.

The foundation for this self-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 Growth
- Stakeholder Engagement
- Organization and Structure
- Assessment and Accountability
- Student and Family Involvement
- Effective Leadership
- Sustainability

The U.S. Department of Education has identified six education reform priority areas in recent educational reform initiatives as well as discussions surrounding the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary School Act. Broadly, they are (1) College- and Career-Ready Students; (2) Great Teachers and Great Leaders; (3) Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners; (4) Effective Teaching and Learning for a Complete Education; (5) Successful, Safe, and Healthy Students; and (6) Fostering Innovation and Excellence. The eight elements of high school improvement contain many characteristics that address these six priority areas. This self-assessment can assist users in aligning their high school reform efforts with these priorities. Focusing reform efforts on both the six priority areas and the eight elements of high school improvement will help ensure that improvement plans coherently address accelerated learning for all students.

WHO SHOULD USE THE TOOL?

This self-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.

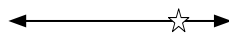
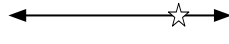
* This self-assessment tool is based on the National High School Center's *Eight Elements of High School Improvement: A Mapping Framework* by Joseph R. Harris, Ph.D., Phyllis L. Cohen, and Todd D. Flaherty, Ed.D.

HOW IS THE TOOL USED?

The tool 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 composed 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 complete, a school or district will be able to holistically evaluate its policies and practices in each *Area of Focus* and uncover strengths and gaps 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	Multiple Assessment Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment systems are implemented across all content areas to identify student needs, to monitor student progress, and to inform instruction. 			X	 Not Implemented ————— Well Implemented
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students with special needs and those at risk of failure are identified early and are matched with appropriate interventions. 		X		
	Data for Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timely and periodic access to data is provided to district leaders, principals, instructional staff, counselors, students, and families so that they 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
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relevant data are routinely used by school staff and students to make decisions about student progress toward college and career goals. 			X	

The second part of this process 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*. 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	<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

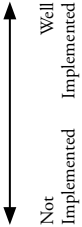
In completing this self-assessment process, a school or district will be able to focus strategic planning for improvement initiatives that are systemic and sustainable, and incorporate all of the eight elements of high school improvement in a comprehensive manner.

1. Rigorous Curriculum and Instruction

Ensure that all students have access to rigorous curricula and instruction designed to meet college and career readiness standards.

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Self-Assessment	Alignment and Coherence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum and instruction are aligned to district, state, and national standards that include college- and career-readiness. 				<div style="text-align: center;"> ↕ Not Implemented — Well Implemented ↕ </div>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum and core content courses are aligned vertically to ensure that students possess necessary prerequisite content knowledge for higher-level coursework. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum and core content courses are aligned horizontally to ensure similar courses include common standards. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum and instruction are adapted to high school organizational structures to address the needs of all students. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interdisciplinary approaches are established across all content areas to improve student engagement and achievement. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple research- and evidence-based instructional strategies are incorporated across all content areas for all students, including those with special instructional needs. 				
	Instructional Strategies and Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum and instruction are designed, modified and adjusted around student learning strengths and needs. 				<div style="text-align: center;"> ↕ Not Implemented — Well Implemented ↕ </div>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instruction is informed by student data across all content areas and is differentiated to meet the needs of all students. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic supports, extended learning opportunities, and content and credit recovery options are provided to keep students on track for graduation. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple approaches for teaching and learning are incorporated into instructional practices across all content areas. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Study skills are incorporated into instructional practices across all content areas. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families and students are engaged in academic decision making and planning processes. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instructional strategies and academic course offerings promote student curiosity, communication, interpersonal skills, creativity, and innovation. 				

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	
College- and Career-Readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic and workplace literacy skills are embedded across all content areas. Opportunities and academic supports are provided to enable all students to succeed in rigorous courses designed for college- and career-readiness. College- and career-readiness skills are integrated across all content areas. 				 <p>Not Implemented ← → Well Implemented</p>	

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

2. Assessment and Accountability

Implement coherent assessment and accountability systems that cover a broad range of formal and informal assessment policies and practices and that are consistent and coherent.

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment	
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence		
Multiple Assessment Strategies Data for Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment systems are implemented across all content areas to identify student needs, to monitor student progress, and to inform instruction. Students with special needs and those at risk of failure are identified early and are matched with appropriate interventions. Continuous progress monitoring for student mastery across all content areas is supported through formal and informal assessment measures. Formative assessments are embedded across all content areas and are aligned with standards and summative assessments. Multiple assessment strategies are implemented across all content areas. Higher order learning skills necessary for college and career readiness are measured. 				<div style="text-align: center;"> ↕ Not Implemented ↕ Well Implemented </div>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Timely and periodic access to data is provided to district leaders, principals, instructional staff, counselors, students, and families so that they can monitor and evaluate student knowledge and skills, plan for future educational programs, and adapt instruction to meet the needs of students. Relevant data are routinely used by school staff and students to make decisions about student progress toward college and career goals. Instructional staff members are provided opportunities to collaboratively analyze student work and other student-level data for instructional planning. Ongoing reviews are conducted to determine the impact of instructional and student support interventions and to modify them, if necessary. Information about students who transfer, drop out, or graduate from high school and information on students' post-high school outcomes is used to inform decisions about high school improvement strategies and initiatives. An early warning system is established to identify students who may be at-risk for dropping out of high school and to match students to appropriate interventions. 					<div style="text-align: center;"> ↕ Not Implemented ↕ Well Implemented </div>

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	
Data for Decision Making (continued)	Evaluation and Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Longitudinal data are analyzed to inform high school improvement strategies and initiatives. 				↕ Not Implemented
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indicators and benchmarks are used to set goals and target resources aimed at improving high school outcomes. 				↕ Well Implemented
Data for Decision Making (continued)	Evaluation and Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data systems are used to track collective and individual teacher and student data to inform high school improvement strategies and initiatives. 				↕ Not Implemented
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An instructional staff evaluation system is implemented that includes accountability provisions at the high school, district, and state levels. 				↕ Well Implemented

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

3. Teacher Effectiveness and Professional Growth

Implement teacher effectiveness and professional development systems that recognize a teacher's need for deep content and pedagogical knowledge and skills and include a broad set of recruitment, induction, professional growth, and retention policies and practices.

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Developing Effective Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All teachers continuously build their content knowledge and pedagogical and classroom management skills to meet the needs of all students. Teachers have developed the necessary skills and tools needed to analyze and interpret data to make instructional decisions and adjustments. 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitive compensation is offered to teachers via transparent and fair evaluation systems that incorporate student growth and achievement measures as indicators of effectiveness. Teachers' classroom management and instructional leadership skills are developed and connected to school-wide expectations. 				
Promoting Student-Centered Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of adolescent development, varied pedagogy for high school students, and strategies for motivating and working effectively and empathetically with all students is developed. Professional development opportunities are targeted and based on high-quality standards for staff development and adult learning. 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaboration is achieved among teachers and instructional staff members to meet student needs by connecting instructional and support activities across all content areas and categorical programs. Professional development opportunities are job-embedded at the school and classroom levels, aligned to high school improvement strategies and initiatives, and offered throughout the school year. 				

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

4. Student and Family Involvement

Engage families in providing all students with positive conditions for learning that address the whole child, including physical, social, and emotional needs.

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Student and Family Supports <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal and informal guidance programs for students are provided. Health, physical education, and extra-curricular activities are provided to enhance student wellness. Family-focused supports, wraparound services, and outreach that engage family members in programs and services are provided. Supports and opportunities for social and emotional learning are provided. Students are supported as they transition into and out of high school. 					Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
Student Engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities for student leadership in the classroom, school, and community are provided. A positive school climate is fostered, including school safety and a respectful environment. The strengths and resources of students' families and communities are respected and acknowledged. 					Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented

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

5. Stakeholder Engagement

Involve school and community stakeholders to leverage their interests, skills, and resources for—and create a sense of ownership of—high school improvement strategies and initiatives.

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Cultivating Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The interests, skills, and resources of multiple stakeholders within and outside the school are engaged in high school improvement strategies and initiatives. PK-20 collaboration is fostered to enhance opportunities for secondary and post-secondary teaching and learning. Partnerships with stakeholders are fostered to enhance teaching and learning opportunities. 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented	
Communication and Information-Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All appropriate stakeholders are involved during critical planning and decision-making activities to foster buy-in and ownership for high school improvement strategies and initiatives. Multiple communication strategies are implemented that are culturally and linguistically appropriate and support engaged communication and conversation with all stakeholders. High school improvement needs are communicated to policymakers and leaders at state and local levels. 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented	

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

6. Effective Leadership

High school improvement strategies and initiatives require high-quality instructional and organizational leadership that improves student achievement.

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Leadership Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A distributed leadership approach is implemented to support high school improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School leaders are equipped with instructional knowledge and skills to work with instructional staff to develop strategies which meet curricular and instructional goals. 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented
	Organizational Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All high school improvement strategies and initiatives are aligned and effectively guided by a high school improvement team. Policies are implemented that have a clear focus and that support the necessary changes to address the identified strengths and needs of all students. School leaders are equipped with knowledge of organizational change to support high school improvement strategies and initiatives. 				Not Implemented ↔ Well Implemented

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

7. Organization and Structure

Ensure that the school organizational and operational structures are designed and revised to support student needs.

Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
		Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Organizational Innovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of physical and operational structures that are aligned with high school improvement initiatives are utilized to support effective teaching, learning, and personalization. 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational structures to support collaboration among instructional teams are implemented. 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time management and scheduling approaches are implemented to enhance and/or extend learning time to better meet the needs of students. 				↕ Not Implemented Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovative organizational structures are implemented to distribute administrative responsibilities traditionally performed by the high school administrative team. 				
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School-wide structures are implemented that support effective classroom management skills across all content areas. 				
Instructional Innovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational structures to support instructional innovations are implemented to actively engage all students in the core curriculum. 				↕ Not Implemented Well Implemented
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational structures are implemented to increase opportunities to learn through nontraditional educational settings. 				

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

8. Sustainability

Identify and commit adequate resources for supporting continuous high school improvement strategies and initiatives.

Self-Assessment	Areas of Focus	Characteristics of Effectiveness	Evidence of Implementation			Overall Self-Assessment
			Little or No Evidence	Some Evidence	Substantial Evidence	
Resources		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High school improvement priorities are defined, and needed resources for sustainability over time are allocated. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriate time and necessary fiscal support are provided so that high school improvement strategies and initiatives can be implemented and take hold. 				↕
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources and human capital are secured to implement and sustain high school improvement strategies and initiatives. 				Not Implemented Well Implemented
Strategies		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilities and materials are continually assessed and upgraded to keep pace with evolving standards and technology. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staffing patterns are aligned to support high school improvement strategies and initiatives. 				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships with stakeholders are cultivated to support high school improvement strategies and initiatives. 				↕
Knowledge		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural changes that accompany high school improvement strategies and initiatives are promoted and supported. 				Not Implemented Well Implemented
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effective practices for high school improvement are identified, implemented, and sustained. 				↕
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers and principals continuously develop their knowledge and skills to incorporate high school improvement strategies and initiatives within their instructional leadership practices. 				Not Implemented Well Implemented

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