RECENT HIGH SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS—including those advocated by *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution* (NASSP, 1996) and *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform* (NASSP, 2004)—strongly recommend that schools model democratic principles and give students, teachers, parents, and community members a significant role in school governance and the decision-making process. Specific recommendations include the creation of site-based decision-making councils, student leadership forums, and student-initiated seminars on substantive issues that are directly related to school improvement. The message is clear: giving students a voice in determining the quality of their education is central to school reform.

Unfortunately, over the years, many educators have given little more than lip service to the idea that students can be partners in their schools and the reform process. Student leaders, such as members of student government and class officers, have been relegated to planning dances and pep rallies, discussing the quality of cafeteria offerings, and organizing fundraising events. Although these activities have some intrinsic value, students need to be more fully involved in authentic aspects of school leadership. Educators must begin to invest in their students and empower them to be participants in a shared, collective endeavor: their education. Only then will educators be truly able to model participatory democracy in their schools and help prepare students for life as informed, engaged citizens.
Engaging Student Leaders

The teachers, staff members, and administrators of Millburn (NJ) High School have invested in students by giving them greater control over issues that directly affect the quality of their education. Students in the student government association (SGA) and on the student liaison committee (SLC) have been engaged in many projects that made significant changes in Millburn’s curriculum, instructional program, and regulations governing student behavior. SLC is composed of a cross section of students selected by the guidance counselors to ensure that all grades and academic levels are represented. Students who are not in SGA or SLC may volunteer to join the SLC or any other ad hoc student group organized during the year to evaluate curriculum or policies.

During the past 10 years, students have collaborated with faculty members, parents, and administrators to recommend and implement changes in procedures for calculating class rank, combating plagiarism and cheating, weighting accelerated courses, implementing senior final examination exemptions, selecting new AP course offerings, providing internships, facilitating a smoother transition from middle level to high school, developing writing policies, adding new elective courses to the curriculum, and establishing senior research projects. The process by which these have been accomplished is very straightforward and simple. Every year, student groups select a problem to research and study, conduct full investigations, recommend changes, and propose their ideas to the faculty. The process culminates with the students presenting all findings to the board of education and the public for approval.

The First Study

Perhaps the best example of the value of this process was the first endeavor of our SGA 10 years ago. Many people in our school and community felt that the numeric class-ranking...
system penalized many students in the college admissions process, particularly with the most competitive colleges and universities. The problem was exacerbated when a given class had a large number of national merit finalists and very talented students. Students with very high GPAs were ranked in the second and third deciles of the graduating class.

To address this problem, students in the SGA undertook a yearlong study of more than 70 comparable high schools and 100 colleges and universities to determine whether eliminating numeric class rank would be beneficial to seniors in the college admissions process. The students established the criteria for their study and developed two surveys: one for high schools and one for colleges and universities. The high school survey measured each school’s opinion and use of class rank. The college survey asked admission officers about the relative importance of class rank in the admissions process and sought their input to generate a list of acceptable alternatives to class rank.

The students received a high yield on their surveys. They tabulated and analyzed the data, drew conclusions about the findings, and constructed a final report. In March, representatives of the SGA presented their findings to the community and the board of education. During the summer, the board of education formally adopted the recommendations and incorporated them into board policy. Since that initial study, the SGA and recently the SLC continue to study important issues in the school and make recommendations for the betterment of our program. Other high schools in the area have used the results of this study as the foundation for their investigations of class rank.

**Getting Started**

Over the years, we have worked diligently to refine the process by which students get involved and conduct their research and have tried to include more students. We have found that there is no perfect template for each group of students to follow because of the nature of the issues being studied and the varying composition of the groups. However, there are several overarching factors to keep in mind:

**Core beliefs.** For any student-generated change to be successful, all participants involved in the process must share some key beliefs. Administrators, faculty members, students, central office personnel, members of the board of education, and members of the community must believe in the ideals of shared decision making, continuous improvement, student advocacy, and student voice in school governance. Without a general philosophical consensus among these groups, it is difficult to establish a vision, set goals, and determine specific objectives. In fact, the process can be easily compromised, which would render any permanent change impossible.

**Infrastructure and support.** Once there is a common understanding of the importance of student empowerment, a support system must be created to help provide direction, support, and encouragement for the students. This is particularly true for the initial study group. Although students must lead all aspects of the
change process, adults can offer advice, procure necessary resources (e.g., time and funding), help students focus on problems, teach problem-solving techniques, and otherwise provide assistance to maintain the momentum of the project. For an initial project, selecting the right faculty members to advise is essential. Experienced, respected teachers and counselors are the best resources for students.

**Student needs.** Every school, no matter how effective and well-run, has issues and problems that need to be addressed that the principal can easily identify. However, students must make the decision about what to study. What may be seen as a big problem for school leaders may not be a pressing issue for the students. It is, however, important to differentiate student wants from student needs. Students may want a shorter school day, less homework, and fewer research papers. They may need a longer school day and more academic rigor in their program.

To facilitate the analysis of school needs, all discussions should focus on teaching, learning, and the overall effectiveness of current programs and procedures. Remember, some needs may be long-term, such as a curriculum change that will require substantial study, funding, and marketing. Others may be short-term problems, such as changes in school rules and regulations that can be studied, changed, and implemented more rapidly. The real issue is priorities. There will be many issues to study. The question that must always be answered is, Which ones will affect the most students and improve the quality of education at your school? The use of student, faculty member, and parent surveys and focus groups can help students set priorities.

Finally, depending on the number of students involved, they may be able to take on both a short- and a long-term study. The short-term work will reach fruition quickly and serve as a strong motivator for the long-term work that is left to do. The most important factor in determining what projects to do is students’ opinions on the current state of affairs and how things can be improved.

**Study group and committee composition.** For maximum effectiveness, all groups should be drawn from a cross-section of the student body and the faculty. All school groups should be represented and include students from various academic levels and programs and reflect the ethnic and racial composition of the school. Fully inclusive groups are much more likely to determine important needs and successfully implement change. In addition, some thought must be given to the number of adults serving on the study group. For example, our SLC includes principals, supervisors, central office leaders, faculty members, and board of education members. Although this works for us, it may not work for others. For the greatest success, let the students help decide the composition of the group.

**Student leadership.** Once schools make the decision to empower students and include them in school governance, student leaders must be given the opportunity to lead all phases of the study. To do less will compromise the quality of the leadership experience for all involved. As in any informal group, student leaders will emerge on the basis of the composition of the group and on the issues under consideration. Sometimes elections are necessary. Regardless, students must guide all facets of the study: determining need, organizing the work, implementing the study, collecting and analyzing the data, discussing the results, presenting their findings, and conducting any necessary follow-up.

**The study.** Although every study will require different techniques for investigation, it is important that students follow a basic structure in their work. Sagor (2000) offers such a structure in his discussion of the action research process. He notes that the key steps include determining a focus,
clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results, and taking informed action. It is important to remember that the students should develop the process that best fits their objectives.

**The results.** In most cases, the results will be developed by students in various forms—a written report, a PowerPoint presentation, an executive summary, oral reports, and so on. The form of the final report and decisions about distribution should be largely determined by how and to whom the material will be presented.

**Presentation.** We have had great success in training students to use various media when presenting major studies to the student body, the faculty members, the board of education and superintendent, and community groups when appropriate. Obviously, the complexity, importance, and significance of the study will determine the form of presentation. It is a good idea to have different students present to different groups, so more students have a chance to be in the limelight.

**Recognition.** Although students will receive a great deal of support, encouragement, and praise throughout the entire study process, it is important to give students formal recognition when the study is complete and changes have been implemented. Such recognition can take many forms, such as handwritten notes from the principal, the superintendent of schools, board of education members, and elected officials. Students can also be recognized at faculty meetings, school board meetings, or community meetings. Articles may also be prepared for local newspapers. Most important, however, is the recognition that students receive from their peers. This can be done through assembly programs, the school newspaper, PA announcements, or special gatherings. Our guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators also include information about student contributions on their college recommendations each year. Whatever the method, the recognition must be student-centered and specific in nature. The principal should use comparable methods to recognize the adults who assisted the students during the study.

**The Principal’s Role**

Obviously, the role of the principal is a key variable in the success of any student initiative. Without the complete and unequivocal support of the principal, this process can become an arduous endeavor. The principal must believe in the ability of all students to successfully study important issues, resolve problems, and implement changes; help students understand the complex nature of leadership; provide whatever resources are necessary to support students’ efforts; aggressively support the results in public forums; and assist with the implementation of change. He or she must also provide the proper amount of encouragement and praise to sustain motivation and perseverance in student leaders.

Involving students in school governance gives them an opportunity to contribute to their school beyond the classroom as they explore their interests, refine their talents, gain a better understanding of themselves, and collaborate with their peers. Involved students also develop valuable social and leadership skills and gain a greater appreciation for the democratic process. Involving students in school governance gives them a sense of belonging and a voice, which in turn builds healthy relationships and powerful connections among students, teachers, administrators, central office leaders, and board of education members.

Truly effective schools are the product of diverse people investing their time and effort for the betterment of education for all students. For this to occur, leaders must develop and nurture leadership capacity in students. Great leadership cannot exist without an ardent belief in the goodness and dignity of people and the willingness to empower individuals with authority, independence, and choice.

**References**