

# The Principals' Role in Increasing Expectations for Rigorous Classroom Instruction

Barbara Blackburn  
Ronald Williamson

## *The Call for Rigor*

Several times each year there is another report documenting the need to increase the level of academic rigor, particularly in secondary schools. Despite the urgency, this focus is not new. When the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its landmark report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 it painted a clear picture: test scores were declining, lower standards resulted in American schools that were not competitive with schools from other countries, and students were leaving high school ill-prepared for the demands of the workforce. *"Our nation is at risk...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people."* Over 20 years later, many of the same criticisms continue to be leveled at the nation's schools.

### Issues

- Many high school graduates are unprepared for college;
- Too few high school graduates are getting needed skills and are taking remediation courses in college;
- College readiness translates into work readiness as well;
- Employers say that high school graduates are lacking basic skills;
- Students planning to join the workforce after graduation do not need a less rigorous curriculum---they also need higher order thinking skills;
- Students are not prepared for high school.

Sources: Achieve (2007); ACT (2007); American Diploma Project (n.d.); Cavanaugh (2004); Dyer (n.d.); National High School Alliance (2006); Williamson (2006).

The need is clear. We must increase the rigor of our classrooms in order to prepare our students for life after high school—whether some type of higher education or employment.

***A New Understanding of Rigor***

As we focus on increasing the level of rigor in our schools, it is important to first address the definition of rigor. If you ask teachers in your building to define rigor, you will likely hear a variety of responses. The same is true in the research on rigor.

Definitions of Rigor	
Quality of thinking, not quantity, and that can occur in any grade and at any subject.	Bogess (2007)
High expectations are important, and must include effort on the part of the learner.	Wasley, Hampel, and Clark (1997)
Deep immersion in a subject and should include real-world settings and working with an expert.	Washor and Mojkowski (2006)
“ ‘Rigor’ would be used to say something about how an experience or activity is carried out and to what degree. Specifically, a ‘rigorous’ experience would be one that involves depth and care as, for example, in a scientific experiment or literary analysis that is done thoughtfully, deeply with sufficient depth and attention to accuracy and detail.”	Beane (2001)
“Goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging (page 7).”	Strong, Silver, and Perrini (2001)
Rigor for the 21 <sup>st</sup> century includes a focus on skills for life: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and leadership, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination.	Wagner (2008)

Ultimately, rigor is more than just the content of the lesson or even the expectations of students. Too often, we simply raise expectations without providing appropriate support for students to succeed. We focus on increasing quantity

rather than quality of learning, which results in students perceiving rigor as punishment.

True rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels (Blackburn, 2008). Only by creating a culture of high expectations and providing support so students can truly succeed do you have a rigorous classroom.

***True rigor is creating an environment in which***

- each student is expected to learn at high levels,
- each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and
- each student demonstrates learning at high levels (Blackburn, 2008).

***Increase Expectations***

Any effort to increase rigor begins with expectations. There are schools where everyone is expected to learn at a high level and all students show growth and experience success. However, there are also many places where students, especially those who are not in placed in advanced classes, are not held to high expectations.

Barbara was at a school in Maryland, and had a conversation with Gabrielle, a student at the school. Barbara's favorite question of students is, "If you were in charge of the school, what would you change?" Gabrielle's answer was insightful. She said, "for people who don't understand as much...[they should] be in higher level classes to understand more [because] if they already don't know much, you don't want to teach them to not know much over and over." Isn't that reflective of how students view our levels of expectations in classes that are not labeled "higher level"? Make no mistake, there is a need to increase our expectations.

***Focus on Depth***

When it comes to rigor, less is more. If we expect students to learn at a high level, we must focus on depth of understanding, not breadth of coverage. Larry

Ainsworth recommends a focus on *Power Standards*, which are the standards and indicators essential for student success. Such standards incorporate three elements:

- Endurance--Will this standard or indicator provide students knowledge and skills that will endure throughout a student's academic career and professional life?
- Leverage--Will this standard provide knowledge and skills that will be of value in multiple disciplines?
- Readiness for the next level of learning--Will this standard provide students with essential knowledge and skills that are necessary for success in the next grade level? (Ainsworth, 2003, p. 13)

Instead of ignoring particular standards from your state curriculum, encourage your teachers to meet in groups to discuss prioritizing instruction based on these strategies.

### ***Evaluate Content***

It's also important to evaluate our expectations related to content. I've talked to many teachers who say, "as long as I get anything from my students, I'm happy." That attitude undercuts any attempts to increase rigor in your school. Part of respecting students is expecting high-quality work from each one, while considering where a student truly is on the learning continuum.

The first step this requires is to define high quality. Rubrics are an effective way for you to determine your expectations for quality. However, we've seen rubrics in which the level of "best" was pretty mediocre.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), home of the *High Schools That Work* program, offers detailed descriptions of proficiency levels tied to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test levels for students preparing to enter high school. One of the findings from research conducted by SREB is that many teachers expect advanced students to perform at the proficient level, and on-grade level students to perform at a basic level of competency. That's one level too low. As you review these samples, how do they compare with the expectations at your school?

### Sample Expectations from SREB

#### Example 1: Making Inferences and Predictions (English/Language Arts)

Basic	Proficient	Advanced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify an author's stated position.</li> <li>Make simple inferences about events and actions that have already occurred, characters' backgrounds and setting.</li> <li>Predict the next action in a sequence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use evidence from text to infer an author's unstated position.</li> <li>Identify cause and effect in fiction and nonfiction.</li> <li>Predict a character's behavior in a new situation, using details from the text.</li> <li>Formulate an appropriate question about causes or effects of actions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>With evidence from a nonfiction piece, predict an author's viewpoint on a related topic.</li> <li>Describe the influence of an author's background upon his/her work.</li> <li>Recognize allusions.</li> </ul>

Southern Regional Education Board, 2004.

#### Example 2: Gather, Organize, Display, and Interpret Data (Algebra I)

Basic	Proficient	Advanced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make and read single bar graphs, single line graphs, and pictographs.</li> <li>Read and interpret circle graphs.</li> <li>Find the mean, median, mode, and range of sets of data.</li> <li>Plot points on a coordinate grid.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Read and make line plots and stem-and-leaf plots.</li> <li>Collect and display data for given situations.</li> <li>Make, read, and interpret double bar, double line, and circle graphs.</li> <li>Determine when to use mean, median, mode, or range.</li> <li>Determine and explain situations of misleading statistics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formulate survey questions and collect data.</li> <li>Evaluate statistical claims in articles and advertising.</li> <li>Analyze different displays of the same data.</li> </ul>

Southern Regional Education Board, 2004.

#### Example 3: Describe Sound and Light in Terms of the Properties of Waves (Science)

Basic	Proficient	Advanced
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describe the electromagnetic spectrum.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relate the electromagnetic spectrum to practical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draw conclusions about natural phenomena based</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate the characteristics of sound and light waves.</li> <li>• Explain the effect of different media substances on wave transmission.</li> </ul>	<p>applications.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examine and relate characteristics of sound and light to wavelength, amplitude, and frequency.</li> <li>• Research why different energy forms require a medium.</li> </ul>	<p>on the electromagnetic spectrum.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research and summarize the effects of surfaces on light and sound reflection and absorption.</li> <li>• Research product designs that impact sound transmission.</li> </ul>
---	--	--

Southern Regional Education Board, 2004.

There are a variety of other sources for standards for all grade levels, including the National Center on Education and the Economy’s (NCEE) “New Standards” Performance Standards ([www.ncee.org](http://www.ncee.org)) and an online set of national content standards compiled by the Mid-Continent Regional Education Laboratory (<http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>). Choose the national standards that are most helpful for your school.

***Staff Development Activity: Curriculum Alignment/Adjustments***

Consider using the following process with your teachers to determine any adjustments that might be needed to the curriculum. Ideally, you can group your teachers by subject area and include teachers from a range of grade levels.

<p><b>Evaluating and Adjusting Curriculum</b></p>
<p><i>Providing Background Knowledge for the Discussion</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In subject-specific groups, ask teachers to use post-it notes to draft all the topics, concepts, or standards they believe are important. Color-code this by grade level or course (it’s easiest to use different colors of post-it notes).</li> <li>2. Next, ask teachers to compare the notes to actual state standards. What do teachers include that is not part of the standards? What is</li> </ol>

missing?

3. Find a set of national standards for comparison (see recommended resources for a starting point). Compare the state standards and the teachers' topic notes to the national standards. What is different? (see sample chart at end of article)

*Linking the Research Base*

1. Discuss the research findings with all teachers. You may want to pull the original research for more information.
2. Ask teachers to compare those findings to what they discovered in their own comparison.

*Taking the First Step*

1. Now, move back into subject-specific groups. Use Ainsworth's strategy to prioritize power standards from their lists.
2. Ask teachers to develop a draft outline of content for the year that is aligned with national standards.
3. Sketch out a pacing guide that will allow for **necessary** review, but incorporates instruction that is more rigorous.

*Implementation*

1. Begin incorporating the new instruction.
2. Ensure appropriate vertical alignment.
3. Meet to discuss what is working, and what needs to be changed.
4. Adjust as needed.

**Sample Reporting Chart**

Our Priority Topics	State Standards	National Standards

<b>Areas that need more focus:</b>		
<b>Areas that need less attention:</b>		
<b>Other needed adjustments:</b>		

***Conclusion***

In a rigorous learning environment, the role of the principal is to remove barriers to success. An effective principal must first understand the rationale for increased rigor, and be an advocate for needed changes. Next, he or she should lead the conversation, with a focus on higher expectations for learning, not punishment. Too often, efforts to increase rigor are focused around quantity, rather than quality, and the principal has the opportunity to guide that conversation. That is why the focus should be on increasing expectations through depth, rather than simply covering more material. You can support this by prompting conversations among teachers, paying attention to expectations during observations or walkthroughs, and encouraging teachers to consider their instructional practices together using the process provided within this article.

**References**

Achieve. (2007, December). *Aligning high school graduation requirements with the*



- real world*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc.
- ACT. (2007). *Rigor at risk: Reaffirming quality in the high school core curriculum*. Iowa City, IA: ACT.
- American Diploma Project. (2004). *Ready or not: Creating a high school diploma that counts*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc.
- Beane, J. (2001). *Rigor and relevance: Can we have our cake and eat it too?* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Middle School Association, Washington.
- Blackburn, B.R. (2008). *Rigor is NOT a four-letter word*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Bogess, J.A. (2007). The three Rs redefined for a flat world. *Techniques: Connecting Education & Careers*, 82, 62.
- Cavanagh, S. (2004). Bush plan calls for more rigor in vocational education. *Education Week*, 23, 30.
- Dyer, C. (n.d.). *Teaching for rigor and relevance*. [PowerPoint presentation]. Bernards Township Public Schools.
- National High School Alliance. (2006). *Increasing academic rigor in high schools: Stakeholder perspectives*. Washington, DC: Institute for Educational Leadership.
- Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). (2004). *Using rigor, relevance and relationships to improve student achievement: How some schools do it*. (2004 Outstanding Practices). Atlanta, GA: Author.
- Strong, R.W., Silver, H.F., & Perrini, M.J. (2001). *Teaching what matters most: Standards and strategies for raising student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Wagner, T. (2008). Rigor redefined. *Educational Leadership*. Retrieved November 3, 2008, from [http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/oct08/vol66/nm02/Rigor\\_Redefined.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/oct08/vol66/nm02/Rigor_Redefined.aspx)
- Washor, E., & Mojkowski, C. (2006/2007). What do you mean by rigor? *Educational Leadership*, 64, 84-87.
- Williamson, G.L. (2006). *Student readiness for postsecondary endeavors*. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. San

Francisco, CA.

• • •

Ron Williamson and Barbara Blackburn are the co-authors of *The Principalship from A to Z* from [Eye on Education](#). Barbara is Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Winthrop University in South Carolina and the author of *Rigor is Not a Four Letter Word* also from [Eye on Education](#). Ron is Professor of Leadership and Counseling at Eastern Michigan University. They work with schools and districts throughout the United States on school improvement projects.