

Practical Leadership

*Improving the Schools of Today
Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Rigorous Schools and Classrooms

In a Nutshell

The discussion about rigor is not new. The release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) raised questions about the quality of American education. Adoption of No Child Left Behind (2001) and the recent Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) moved the debate to a new level. Schools became accountable for the achievement of every child, not just the most capable. Across the nation the 3 R's---Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships---are almost universally accepted as characteristics of effective schools. This brief describes a three-part definition of rigor that has been widely accepted by teachers and school leaders.

What is A Rigorous School?

While there are multiple definitions of rigor, one of the most widely accepted is the one developed by Barbara Blackburn (2008).

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.

This three-part approach captures the importance of high expectations complemented by equally high levels of support for student success.

Part 1 – Expecting Students to Learn at High Levels

Rigor begins by creating a school where each student is expected to learn at high levels. This begins with a belief that each student has the potential to be her or his best, no matter what. Almost every educator supports that idea but it is often not acted upon in individual schools and classrooms. There are some things you can do to assess the level of rigor in your school.

- Consider the questions that teachers ask. Do they incorporate higher-levels of Bloom's Taxonomy?
- Listen for teacher responses to student responses. Do they accept low-level responses or do they probe for higher-level thinking and more thoughtful responses?
- Do teachers ask extending questions to probe and guide the student to an appropriate response rather than moving to another student? Do they encourage students to explain their reasoning and think through their responses?

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Part II – Supporting Students to Learn at High Levels

The most rigorous schools are those where students are supported so that he or she can learn at high levels. As students move to more challenging work, teachers must simultaneously provide ongoing scaffolding to support students. Examples of scaffolding include the use of visual and graphic organizers, presenting guiding questions for each lesson, providing interactive reading guides or chunking information. These tools can help students deal with the complexity of a lesson. The most rigorous schools provide extra help and support both during and outside of the school day. Students are not left on their own to succeed.

Students are more motivated to learn when they value what they are doing and when they believe they have a chance for success. To build motivation students need to see the value or relevance in lessons. They need to believe they can be successful. When visiting classrooms do you see a variety of activities? Are lessons engaging? Do lessons provide students with some choice? Is encouragement provided to students? Does the lesson build on prior success? Are lessons challenging but within the students' ability to complete?

Part III – Ensuring Students Demonstrate Learning at High Levels

The third component of a rigorous school is classrooms where each student has multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning at high levels. Demonstrations of learning mean that instruction is not totally teacher-centered and assessment is not just paper and pencil tasks. Rather than ask a question and then call on a single student, a teacher might ask a question and allow everyone to respond using a pair-share, thumbs up or down, or responding on a handheld computer. Provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning by using various forms of media and different types of assessments.

Summary

Rigorous schools and classrooms are places where students are expected, and supported, to do high-level work. They see value in learning and teachers and other staff have an unwavering belief that all students can succeed.

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Resources

Online Resources

Myths About Rigor - This article describes four myths about rigor in the classroom.

http://ronwilliamson.com/uploads/4_Myths_about_Rigor.pdf

Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word Blog - <http://rigorineducation.blogspot.com/>

Adding Rigor (<http://ronwilliamson.com/uploads/AddingRigorSep09.pdf>) and **Sustaining a Vision of Rigor** (<http://ronwilliamson.com/uploads/SustainVisionMay10.pdf>) – These two articles from NASSP’s *Principal Leadership* discuss making schools and classrooms more rigorous.

Print Resources

Blackburn, B. (2012). *Rigor is Not a Four-Letter Word* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
ISBN: 978-1596672260

Williamson, R. & Blackburn, B. (2010). *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way*. New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN: 98-1596671454

Williamson, R. & Blackburn, B. (2011). *Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Leaders*. New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1596671768

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