



## **Strategies Leaders Can Use to Improve Rigor in Their Schools**

**Ronald Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn**

Concern about rigor is not new. Since the release of *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) the debate about the quality of America's schools has grown exponentially. This debate calls for dramatically different schools, schools that are much more responsive to student need, and provide a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for success in higher education and the workplace.

Adoption of No Child Left Behind in 2001 raised the debate to a new level. For the first time, schools would be held accountable for the achievement of every student, not just the most capable.

Throughout the nation the 3 R's---Rigor, Relevance and Relationships, are now accepted as necessary characteristics of schools. Many states have adopted the 3 R's model as a requirement for school improvement efforts.

### **The Need for Rigor in All Schools**

Greater rigor in schools has struck a chord with families of children in our schools. Those families are bombarded with information suggesting the knowledge and skills their children will need for success. Recent changes in the American economy have accelerated family interest in assuring that their children receive a rigorous curriculum.

Concern about rigor, however, is not limited to under-performing schools. Recently Tony Wagner, Co-Director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, questioned the academic rigor of even our "best schools (2008). He visited dozens of classrooms and observed students and teachers at work. He found that far too often students in honors and advanced placement (AP) classes were engaged in low level instructional activities where students were not expected to use higher-order thinking skills. Wagner found that, "of the hundreds of classes that I've observed in recent years, fewer than 1 in 20 were engaged in instruction designed to teach students to think instead of merely drilling for the test" (p. 24).

After talking with a group of the nation's top business leaders, from places like Apple, Unilever and the US Army, Wagner identified seven skills that every student must master in order to survive in the 21st century.

#### **Survival Skills for the 21st Century**

1. Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
2. Collaboration and Leadership
3. Agility and Adaptability
4. Initiative and Entrepreneurialism
5. Effective Oral and Written Communication
6. Accessing and Analyzing Information
7. Curiosity and Imagination

From: Wagner, T. (2008). *The Global Achievement Gap*. New York: Basic Books.

#### **Recent Discussion About Rigor**

In the last few years several reports addressing rigor have been released. The first, *Reading Between the Lines* (2006) from ACT concluded that most high school students are not prepared for college level reading. A second report was published the same year. *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Drop-Outs* (2006) reported on the experience of high school dropouts and surprised many by revealing that 88% of those who dropped out were not failing school, and that 70% of the dropouts believed they could have graduated.

So, what went wrong? Students reported that they were not expected to work hard (66%) and/or were not motivated (69%). They also reported that classes weren't interesting (47%). Perhaps most surprisingly, two-thirds of the students said they would have worked harder if more had been demanded from them.

#### **Findings from The Silent Epidemic**

- 47% of dropouts said classes weren't interesting
- 43% had missed too many days of school and couldn't catch up
- 69% were not motivated to work hard
- 66% would have worked harder if more had been demanded of them

Before discounting those beliefs, those same students shared clear views about how to improve their educational experience.

#### **Recommendations from Drop-Outs**

- 71% recommended making school interesting
- 55% said there should be help for students who have trouble learning
- 81% called for more “real-world” learning
- 75% wanted smaller classes with more individual instruction

The comments from these dropouts is similar to that reported in other recent studies. An ASCD Smart Brief described a study conducted in low-performing schools in Newark, NJ (Yeung, 2009) where it was found that allowing students to struggle with challenging math problems led to improved achievement and results on standardized tests. A “healthy amount of frustration” was described by the study as healthy and that this contributed to student satisfaction with having struggled and succeeded on the tasks.

Early in 2009, the Hechinger Institute released its report on academic rigor in schools. The report, a collection of articles by noted researchers, teachers and laypeople, identified advantages to rigorous learning but also noted “the ‘content vs. critical thinking’ debate is a false dichotomy” (p. 23). It suggests that these approaches are complementary, not exclusive.

The report suggests that rigor has become a “buzz word” with little meaning academically” (p. 1). The debate over rigor reflects America’s continuing “tension between the ideals of academic excellence and universal access to education” (p. 1).

Many suggest that a more rigorous education is the solution to our industrial malaise, the solution to an underprepared workforce, and a necessity for our future. Sadly, the report concluded that rigor has become a marketing tool promising all sorts of benefits from increasing self-esteem to assuring admission to preferred colleges.

The High School Alliance, a partnership of fifty organizations committed to high academic achievement, released a pair of reports examining rigor in American high schools (2006a; 2006b). They identified four core principles of a school with a rigorous program.

#### **Core Principles**

- Minimum graduation requirements that prepare students for college
- High level content and instruction
- Wide range of supports for students to help them succeed
- Alignment of requirements with post-secondary education and work

Most importantly, the Alliance said that having a rigorous course title was not sufficient. “Efforts to increase rigor also require careful examination of course content to ensure it is at an appropriately high level, and teaches students higher order thinking skills” (High School Alliance, 2006b, p. 3). Other efforts recommended by the Alliance include improved guidance and counseling, individualization and personalization; academic supports for struggling students and substantial investment in professional development and other teacher supports.

Two Million Minutes, a short but powerful documentary produced by a PBS station and available on YouTube and other sites ([www.2mminutes.com](http://www.2mminutes.com)) has caught the attention of many educators. It suggests that as a student completes 8th grade that student has about two million minutes until high school graduation---two million minutes that will affect the rest of their lives. It questions how students spend that time and what schools can do to assure every student completes high school with the knowledge, skills and dispositions for success.

### **Where to Begin**

So, how do you get started? Michael Fullan in his recent book *The Six Secrets of Change* (2008) suggested several ways that principals could work collaboratively with teachers and community to improve their schools.

1. Fullan suggested that leaders must first love their employees. They must value the work of their employees and recognize their important front-line role in improving the educational experience of students. Further leaders must work diligently to provide employees with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful with students. This includes time for peer interaction about core tasks and opportunity to continue to learn and develop their capacity as teachers.
2. Leaders must provide a way to connect their employees with one another around a shared purpose. Leaders must identify ways to intentionally create peer interaction. For example, principals might structure conversations about student work, around common assessments, or about ways to provide additional support for students.
3. Attract, recruit and retain talented people. Always make employment decisions based on the people with the greatest potential to positively impact students. Once they are hired, support the professional development of your teachers individually and collectively. Fullan suggests that a primary leadership role is to develop the capacity of every employee.
4. The fourth suggestion from Fullan is that schools must recognize learning as the primary work of schools. Activities that detract from this focus on student learning must be minimized. Additionally, a value must be placed on helping employees continue to learn and develop professionally so that they positively impact the learning of students.
5. Greater transparency in school operations is critical. That includes openness about results, positive or negative, and openness about practices that are connected with success. Principals must find ways to identify and share those practices that are successful so that they can be used by other teachers to impact student learning.
6. Finally, a focus must be placed on creating a culture of leaders, where many people are involved in working together to improve the school. Fullan suggests that the most successful

leaders are people who recognize the complexity of schools but lead with humility and an absolute belief in becoming more effective.

## Final Thoughts

We recognize the important role of principals and teachers in improving the rigor of schools and classrooms. We also recognize the complexity of the task and would like to hear from you about your successes as well as your challenges. Feel free to contact Ron at [rwmson214@aol.com](mailto:rwmson214@aol.com) or Barbara at [bcgroup@gmail.com](mailto:bcgroup@gmail.com). We look forward to hearing from you.

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October 2009

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