

Rigorous Schools and Classrooms

The discussion about rigor is not new. Ever since the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) the debate about the quality of American schools has continued. Adoption of *No Child Left Behind* (2001) raised the debate to a new level. For the first time schools were held 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 necessary characteristics of schools.

A Rigorous School

While there are multiple definitions of rigor, one of the most widely accepted is 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 the idea but it is often not acted upon in individual classrooms. There are some things that school leaders can do to assess the level of rigor.

- 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?
- Do teachers use extending questions to probe and guide the student to an appropriate response rather than moving to another student?

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 is there simultaneous 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. 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?



Resources

Selected print and online resources about this topic are available on page 2.

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. Rather than ask a question and then call on a single student, 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.

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.

Resources

Online Resources

Myths About Rigor - This article published in the *Charter Voice* describes four myths about rigor. http://eyeoneducation.com/bookstore/client/client_pages/pdfs/WilliamsonBlackburnCharterVoice.pdf

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

Adding Rigor and Sustaining a Vision of Rigor – These two articles from NASSP's *Principal Leadership* are available at http://www.ronwilliamson.com/RW_Web/Publications.html

Print Resources

Williamson, R. & Blackburn, B. (2010). *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. (www.eyeoneducation.com)

Williamson, R. & Blackburn, B. (2011). *Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Leaders*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education. (www.eyeoneducation.com)

E P I: Developing successful, long-lasting business and education partnerships with a positive impact on America's youth.

www.educationpartnerships.org

This brief prepared by Ronald Williamson, Eastern Michigan University, February 2012

The Fine Print

Education Partnerships, Inc., provides this article as a service to educators and does not assume any responsibility for the content of the article, or the positions taken by the authors or the Web sites or other authors whose works are included. This article reflects information currently available and is not the official position of Education Partnerships, Inc.

Disclaimer: All URLs listed in this site have been tested for accuracy, and contents of Web sites examined for quality, at the time of addition. Content accuracy and appropriateness, however, cannot be guaranteed over time as websites and their content changes constantly. The author takes no responsibility for difficulties that may result from the use of any website listed herein.

Permission: You may use or download content for research and educational purposes, or for your personal, noncommercial purposes, provided you keep unchanged all copyright and other notices with them. No other use of any content is permitted. You agree that you will make only lawful use of this article, and will only use articles in compliance with all federal, state and local laws and regulations. You agree that you will make no use of the research that violates anyone else's rights.

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org>