

Adding Rigor

Rigor as it applies to education is not easily defined; school leaders must work deliberately to build consensus and a vision of rigorous classrooms among faculty members.

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A school leader's most visible role is the manager of the day-to-day operations of a school. A less visible but far more important role is that of an instructional leader who works with teachers and other staff members to ensure that every student has a high-quality, rigorous academic experience.

Ensuring that schools and classrooms are rigorous is complex work that requires paying attention to curricula, instructional effectiveness, expectations, and support strategies. The journey toward increasing rigor in your school begins with the purposeful engagement of teachers, parents, students, and staff members in a conversation about the school and how to strengthen its program.

There are many obstacles on the road to rigor, but the first is often the lack of consensus about what rigor is. Too often, a punishment-based view of rigor is present. As one principal shared with us, "When I first brought up the subject of rigor, several of my teachers were quick to respond that they were already rigorous teachers. They gave examples, such as a high failure rate in particular classes, the number of students who are 'weeded out' of honors classes, or the standard practice of issuing zeroes for incomplete work. That is a negative view of rigor and doesn't address how to help students be successful in a culture of high expectations."

A positive view of rigor takes another form: rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, is supported so that he or she can learn at high levels, and demonstrates learning at high levels.

Developing a Common Understanding

To build a strong foundation for rigorous education, leaders must work with their school communities to develop a shared understanding of rigor. There are four steps to developing a common vision.

STEP 1: GATHER STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

Find out how your various stakeholder groups define rigor. For example, before the faculty in Kennedy Middle School began a book study that was related to rigor, the principal asked each teacher to anonymously answer three questions:

- What is rigor?
- What are students doing in a rigorous classroom?
- What are teachers doing in a rigorous classroom?

She compiled the responses and shared them with the faculty, which helped jump-start a discussion of the characteristics of a rigorous classroom. There are various ways to collect perspectives from different groups of people. You might hold focus groups, use surveys, or do informal interviews with teachers, parents, and students. Simple guiding questions will facilitate the conversation. Examples of such questions include:

- How would you describe the rigor of this school's curriculum? What are examples of a rigorous classroom experience?
- What are your expectations for student learning? How do teachers provide extra help for struggling students?
- What suggestions do you have for strengthening our instruction to assure a more rigorous experience for students?

STEP 2: REVIEW RELEVANT RESEARCH

Work with the stakeholders in your school to review the research on rigorous practices. During this process, your faculty may find conflicting perceptions of rigor in the research, but the varying information will stimulate discussion. Several organizations—including the Southern Regional Education Board (www.sreb.org), ACT (www.act.org), and the American Diploma Project (www.achieve.org)—provide research reports on their Web sites.

STEP 3: LOOK AT DATA

Collect and evaluate data about your school. You may want to evaluate the curriculum that's currently in place by comparing it to outside benchmarks and analyzing test scores. Classroom walk-throughs and lesson plan comparisons may provide data on instructional practices in your school. Data on the assessments that are used to measure student learning can be gathered by comparing grades to standardized test scores and comparing levels of questioning. Assessing the school climate and any community involvement plans will help you evaluate the overall school environment or culture.

STEP 4: BUILD CONSENSUS

Using the information and data gathered in steps one through three, begin to have deliberate conversations to develop a clear definition of rigor and what rigor looks like. Although it is important for you to be clear about your vision for a rigorous school and classrooms, you must also be committed to work with the school community to develop a mutually agreed-upon vision for rigor.

The goal of these conversations is to develop consensus about rigor

in your school. It is essential that you engage everyone in the conversation. Seek to include every voice, particularly the missing voices of those who are often reluctant to speak out on issues. Welcome diverse ideas, give consideration to each one, and be sure to separate ideas from personalities.

Consensus does not mean that everyone has to agree wholeheartedly with a decision. It does, however, mean that everyone in the group can support the decision: they agree that they can live with it. Be clear that once the faculty has decided on an approach, everyone will be accountable for its implementation.

If at all possible, avoid voting on issues—voting creates an adversarial tone and produces winners and losers. Work to seek agreement. One tool we've found helpful to move a group toward consensus is the "Fist to Five" technique (Fletcher, 2002). When using Fist to Five, ask every participant to raise his or her hand and indicate a level of support, from a closed fist (no support) to all five fingers (it's a great idea). (See figure 1.) This technique can help a group seek common ground because it is an easy way to determine the opinion of each person. Many groups we've worked with continue the process until everyone holds up a minimum of three fingers.

Final Thoughts

Throughout this year, we'll be looking at rigor from a number of perspectives. We have identified several important tools that leaders can use to work with their school community to create a culture of rigor. They include creating a shared vision for a rigorous school; using data to understand the current reality of your school and to monitor your progress; providing



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focused, job-embedded professional development; advocating with your school community for a more rigorous school; embracing shared accountability; and organizing your school to provide the structures that support instructional improvement. Addressing each of these areas will enhance the sustainability of your efforts to increase the overall level of rigor in your school. **PL**

REFERENCE

- Fletcher, A. (2002). *FireStarter youth power curriculum: Participant guidebook*. Olympia, WA: Freechild Project.

Figure 1 **The “Fist to Five” Technique**

Hand raised	Level of support
Fist	No support: “I need to talk about the proposal more and I require changes to support it.”
1 finger	No support but won’t block: “I still need to discuss some issues and I will suggest changes that should be made.”
2 fingers	Minimal support: “I am moderately comfortable with the idea but would like to discuss some minor things.”
3 fingers	Neutral: “I’m not in total agreement with the idea, but I feel comfortable letting it pass without further discussion.”
4 fingers	Solid support: “I think it’s a good idea and will work for it.”
5 fingers	Strong support: “It’s a great idea, and I will be one of those working to implement it.”

Adapted from Adventure Associates (2009). Teamwork skills: Fist-to-five measuring support. Retrieved May 30, 2009, from www.adventureassoc.com/resources/newsletter/nltc-fist-to-five.html