

4 STEPS

to increasing rigor in the classroom

If all of the components of instructional rigor are not in place, implementing the Common Core State Standards becomes just one more thing to do.

Concern about rigor is not new, but its importance has been raised with the advent of the Common Core State Standards. However, the CCSS are only the beginning on a journey to increasing rigor in your school. Equally important is the instructional rigor that supports the standards.

How does instructional rigor differ from the standards? Instructional rigor focuses on the how – what actually happens in the classroom when implementing the Common Core. Instructional 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).

Notice the aspects of instructional rigor: high expectations, support and student learning, all supported by the climate of the school and classroom. Without these

important components, the Common Core becomes just one more thing to do.

There are four steps principals can take to support a focus on increased rigor in the classroom and school.

Setting a vision

First, set a vision. Too often, rigor is just one more thing to do. It is important that you make it clear that rigor is embedded in everything teachers do.

How can you create that vision? One effective strategy is to create vision letters. Ask your teachers to imagine it is the end of the year. By that time, they will have discovered that their year was the best one in their teaching career. Students were engaged at high levels, they learned at increasing levels, and students took ownership of learning. Ask teachers to describe what happened. What did they do to make this happen? How did their students change in specific ways?

Also write your own letter, from a school perspective. What did you do? How did your teachers change? You can then have teachers share their letters in small groups, or meet with you to discuss their vision. It's important that you share yours also. As they share theirs, ask, "What can I do to support you?" You will be amazed at what you will learn, and how you can build a foundation for a shared vision from the letters.

Assess where you are

Next, assess your current status in regard to rigor. Are there rigorous practices that already exist in your classrooms? For example, do your teachers ask higher-order questions? That's a starting point, but it's important to pay attention to what happens next. How do the students respond? Far too

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often, we see teachers asking higher-level questions but accepting very low-level answers. This is not rigorous. Nor is answering for the student, another common practice.

Another way to assess your instruction is to look at your data. Generally, teachers and principals state they have high expectations for every student. But is that true? As you look at your data, especially with your subgroups, what do you see? Is there a difference between your minority groups?

We aren't saying that every student must be working at or above grade level to be held to high expectations. However, each student should show appropriate growth, and if your data do not indicate growth that tells you there may be a problem with expectations. What we expect from our students, we get. If we have lowered expectations students will prove us right; therefore we must hold each student to the expectation that they can and will achieve with our support.

Focus your efforts: PRESS Forward

Rather than looking at rigor as another new initiative, present the concept as a part of what you are currently doing. Professional development is an excellent way to help teachers focus on how they can incorporate increased rigor within their classrooms.

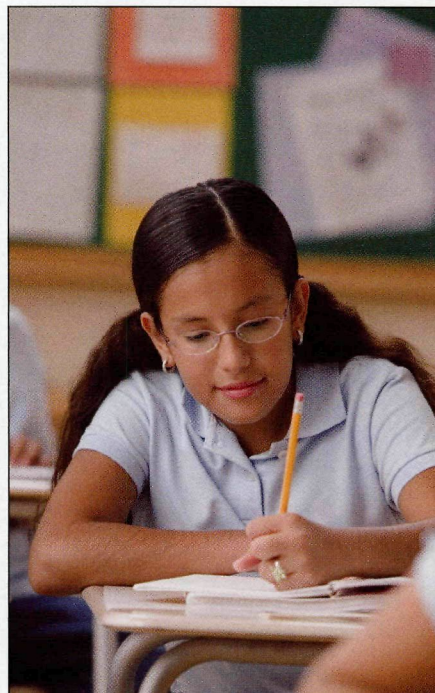
A clear model that can be used in planning is called PRESS Forward (Williamson & Blackburn, 2010). After considering the **purpose** of increasing rigor in the classroom, think about how it **relates** or is connected to what is already occurring in your building. Next, define **expected** outcomes, then add specific **steps** needed, and the **support** that is required for success.

For example, one emphasis in the Common Core State Standards is the use of non-fiction, informational text at higher levels of complexity. The purpose of the initiative is to implement that standard. It is connected to the literacy skills in science and social studies, and it also links to the content taught in those courses.

An expected outcome is the increased use of complex text in the content areas, and steps might include integrating primary source material, comparing textbook material to the primary sources, or comparing text from multiple sources.

Clearly, one area of support is providing the appropriate text materials teachers need to implement this standard. However, another aspect may be professional development on content literacy strategies to allow teachers to best support their students.

The final step of the model is moving **forward**. Once you have begun your imple-



mentation, it's important to take a forward focus. Reflect on what is and is not working, and make any necessary adjustments.

Finally, take a positive approach to implementing and sustaining a focus on increased instructional rigor. Adults are motivated by two factors: value and success. Once they see the value of the initiative, the next step is to help them feel successful. Any change can be threatening, especially because when a teacher tries something new in his or her classroom and it doesn't work, the teacher faces a very public failure. Therefore, it is important to consistently provide positive reinforcement throughout the process.

Finding examples in the classroom

An excellent strategy is to use "Name it, Claim it, and Explain it" (Williamson & Blackburn, 2010). When you are in classrooms, look for examples of teachers implementing increased rigor. Snap a photo or videotape part of the lesson. As you start

each faculty meeting, put your example on the screen. Explain that this is an excellent example of rigor that you saw while in a classroom.

Then say, "I'd like the teacher whose classroom I was in to stand up, name this, claim it as yours, and explain what you were doing." You may need to elaborate as to why you were impressed with the example, as some teachers just know it was a good lesson, but they may not be able to articulate the rationale.

As you do this throughout the year, teachers will see multiple examples of best practice. One tip, though. If you have teachers who are shy about sharing in a group, you may need to talk to them before you share it so they are not surprised.

Supporting student success

Ultimately, implementing the Common Core State Standards effectively requires an equal emphasis on instructional rigor. A blend of high expectations, appropriate support for students, and a clear demonstration of learning by students provides the support needed for student success. ■

References

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