4 Myths About Rigor in the Classroom

By Ronald Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn
Authors of *Rigorous Schools & Classrooms: Leading the Way* and *The Principalship from A-Z*,
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For over 20 years, we've worked with teachers and principals on ways to improve their schools. Our efforts have centered on promoting the core concepts of rigor: creating schools where every student is known by adults, where students have a positive relationship with adults and other students, and where they are challenged to achieve at high levels. We've met thousands of committed teachers and principals who work incredibly hard to positively impact the learning of every student.

Concurrently and on a national level, the 3 R's—Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships—have become accepted as necessary characteristics of quality schools, with many states adopting the 3 R's Model as a requirement for school improvement efforts. And yet, there remain many misconceptions and myths regarding rigor itself. Here, we cite others' research as well as our own work to dispel those myths and to demonstrate how academic rigor can ultimately benefit every one of your students and staff members.

It's time to set the record straight on what rigor is and what it isn't.

Myth #1: Lots of Homework Is a Sign of Rigor

For many people, there is probably no more prevalent indicator of rigor than the amount of homework required of students (Jackson, 2009)[1]. Many teachers pride themselves on the amount of homework they assign.

The dilemma is that all homework is not equally useful. Some of it is just busy work, assigned by teachers because principals or parents expect it. Too often, "difficulty is equated to the amount of work done by students, rather than the complexity and challenge" (Williamson & Johnston, 1999, p. 10)[2].

One study (Wasserstein, 1995)[3] found that students described busy work as unimportant, and therefore, not satisfying. Contrary to what many adults believe, the study found that students viewed hard work as important. They enjoyed the challenge and enjoyment that came with accomplishing a difficult task.

Vatterott (2009)[4] found that homework is often built on the misconceived idea that doing more of something must mean more learning. The "more is better" idea permeates the discussion of rigor.

Dick Flanary of the National Association of Secondary School Principals described the impact by saying, "Too often, rigor becomes, 'Let's give more homework. Lessons must be 'rigorous' if they make kids suffer.' " (Hechinger, 2009, p. 3)[5].

"Doing more" often means doing more low-level activities, frequent repetitions of things already learned. Such narrow and rigid approaches to learning do not define a rigorous classroom.

Students learn in many different ways. Just as instruction must vary to meet the individual needs of students, so must homework. Rigorous and challenging learning experiences will vary with the student. The design of each experience will vary, as will the duration.

Myth #2: Rigor Means Doing More

Many parents and educators believe that a rigorous classroom is characterized by requiring students to do more than they currently do, that rigor is defined by the content of a lesson, the amount of reading, or the number of assignments.

Rigor is more than just content and cannot be measured by the amount of things students must do. Tony Wagner (2008a)[6] studied classrooms across America and found that many of them were characterized by low-level, rote activity. The focus was too often on covering material or preparation for the next test.

A few years ago, Ron Williamson and Howard Johnston conducted a study to find out how teachers and parents defined rigor. What they found was that the two groups held startlingly different definitions. Teachers said that rigor meant doing more work in general, while parents said that rigor meant doing less but more in-depth work.

The challenge for school leaders is how to reconcile these differences and work with teachers, parents, and the greater community to develop a shared vision for a rigorous school and to mobilize resources in support of improved rigor.

True rigor is expecting every student to learn and perform at high levels. This requires instruction that allows students to delve deeply into their learning, to engage in critical thinking and problem-solving activities, to be curious and imaginative, and to demonstrate agility and adaptability (Wagner, 2008a)[6].

Myth #3: Rigor is Not for Everyone

There is a belief that the only way to assure success for everyone is to lower standards and lessen rigor. Such beliefs often mask an underlying sense that some students are less capable and that their success will hold back those who are more capable.

There is growing recognition that all students must be provided an opportunity for a rigorous educational experience. The state of Michigan recently revised its requirements for a high school diploma. All students must now complete three and a half years of mathematics, including Algebra II and Geometry, as well as Biology and either Chemistry or Physics. The expectation is that schools will design networks of support to ensure that every student is successful.

Rigor, however, is more than a set of courses. It is anchored in the belief that every student can be successful given adequate time and sufficient support. Tony Wagner (2008b)[7] suggests that our society's success rests on a commitment to providing students with a set of skills that will allow them to become "productive citizens who contribute to solving some of the most pressing issues we face" (p. 21) and who thrive in a collaborative environment.

The National High School Alliance suggests that a "rigor agenda" must assure that every student, not just the traditionally college-bound student, is well prepared for post-secondary education, a career, and participation in civic life. Ultimately, the Alliance suggests, it is about improving achievement — for every student.

There is no evidence that says supporting the success of every student means lessening rigor or the quality of schools. Just the opposite; research demonstrates the benefits of a shared commitment to a more equitable and just society, one in which every student has the skills for life-long success.

Myth #4: Providing Support Means Lessening Rigor

A belief central to the American psyche is that of rugged individualism — do things on your own. Working in teams or with support is often seen as a sign of weakness.

But we've found that supporting students so that they can learn at high levels (Blackburn, 2008)[8] is central to the definition of rigor. As teachers design lessons moving students toward more challenging work, they must provide scaffolding to support them as they learn.

When Ron Williamson and Howard Johnston conducted their study, they asked teachers and parents about their experiences with rigor. Both groups repeatedly told stories of how successful they were on rigorous tasks when they were given a high level of support, a safety net. Often, people described tasks that were initially unsuccessful. Only after additional time or effort did they experience success. In fact, many people said that they would not have been successful without strong support.

The same is true for students. They are motivated to do well when they value what they are doing and when they believe that they have a chance of success. The most successful schools are those that build a culture of success, celebrate success, and build a success mentality.

What Rigor Is and Where to Go From Here

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.

We believe that real change – change that impacts every student – occurs at the classroom level. The power of every teacher, working alongside committed colleagues, can make a difference for students.

Our intent is not to offer another program or suggest another policy. It is to provide practical tools that every leader can use to positively impact his or her school. There is no silver bullet, no single program or directive that can increase rigor in your school.

But we *have* found that in classrooms where all students learn, regardless of gender, ethnicity, poverty level, or background, teachers and leaders care deeply about their students. They care enough to work with each and every one of them to assure that they rise to higher levels.

We have come to recognize that rigor is not just about what is taught or the classes that students take. It is all about expectations, instructional effectiveness, and assessment practices.

We suspect you find that you are already using some of the ideas, and we know that every school community is unique. We purposely included many different examples in our books, *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms*: *Leading the Way* and *Rigor is Not a Four-Letter Word*, and we encourage you to read and adapt the strategies you find to fit your own setting.

Rigor does not necessarily mean throwing away everything you are doing. Rigor in many cases means adjusting what you do to increase your expectations and the learning of your students. Rigor is ensuring that each student is provided the opportunity to grow in ways they cannot imagine. By taking the necessary steps, you as a principal can make a lasting and positive impact on students and on the teachers who work with them.

References

[1]Jackson, R. R. (2009). Never work harder than your students and other principles of great teaching. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

[2]Williamson, R., & Johnston, J. H. (1999). Challenging orthodoxy: An emerging agenda for middle level reform. Middle School Journal, 30(4), 10–17.

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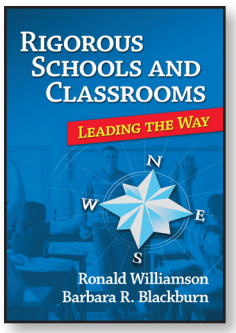
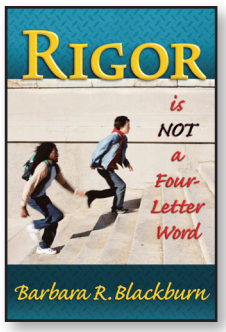
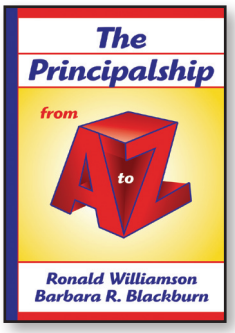
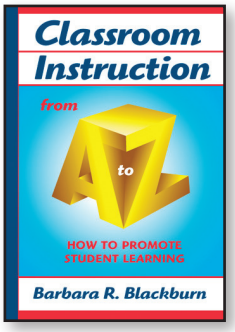
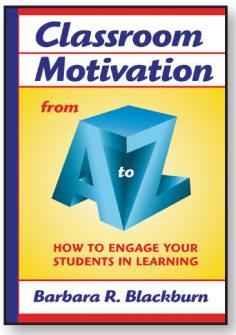
Books By Barbara Blackburn and Ronald Williamson











About Ronald Williamson

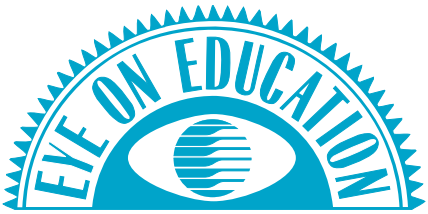
Ronald Williamson is a professor of leadership and counseling at Eastern Michigan University. Previously, he taught at the University of North Carolina. He was also a teacher, principal, and executive director of instruction in the Ann Arbor, Michigan Public Schools.

The author of more than 100 books, chapters, papers, and articles in every major professional journal serving middle and high school teachers and administrators, Ron works with schools throughout the country on issues concerning school improvement.

About Barbara Blackburn

Dr. Barbara Blackburn has taught early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school students and has served as an educational consultant for three publishing companies. She holds a master's degree in school administration and is certified as a school principal in North Carolina. She received her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. In 2006, she received the award for Outstanding Junior Professor at Winthrop University. She recently left her position at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to write and speak full time.

In addition to speaking at state and national conferences, she also regularly presents workshops for teachers and administrators in elementary, middle, and high schools.



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