The Characteristics of a
Rigorous Classroom

Barbara R. Blackburn, Ph.D., and Ronald Williamson, Ed.D.

The call to increase rigor in schools increases daily. For more than 20 years, reports have described the lack of rigor in our schools. 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.

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

Issues

- Many high school graduates are unprepared for college.
- Too few high school graduates are getting needed skills and are taking remediation courses in college.
- College readiness translates into work readiness as well;
- Employers say that high school graduates are lacking basic skills;
- Students planning to join the workforce after graduation do not need a less rigorous curriculum—they also need higher order thinking skills;
- Students are not prepared for high school.

Sources: Achieve (2007); ACT (2007); American Diploma Project (n.d.); Cavanaugh (2004); Dyer (n.d.); National High School Alliance (2006); Williamson (2006).

More recently there is growing recognition of the need to prepare students for life following high school—whether some type of higher education or employment. A comprehensive look at American's classrooms (Wagner, 2008) found that even in some of the nation's "best" schools, students were inadequately challenged and were not expected to use critical thinking and problem solving skills.

A New Understanding of Rigor

The first step toward increasing the rigor in our schools is to build a common understanding of rigor. While there are many definitions of rigor, there is no agreement on what it means.

Our perspective is simple: True 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). Only when you create a culture of high expectations and provide support so students can truly demonstrate understanding do you have a rigorous classroom.

Launching a Conversation About Rigor

Begin the process by asking your teachers to answer three questions anonymously:
1. What is rigor?
2. What are teachers doing in a rigorous classroom?
3. What are students doing in a rigorous classroom?

Collate the responses and share them with everyone. This will help you and your teachers discuss your varied perspectives of rigor.

Then examine the characteristics of a rigorous classroom. What does rigor look like, according to your agreed upon definition? For each of the three components: increasing expectations, providing support, and demonstrating understanding, we've provided examples of a characteristic.

Increasing Expectations

The foundation of a rigorous classroom lies with high expectations for students. What does that look like in a classroom? We've identified three items principals should observe in a classroom of high expectations:
1. Through comments and actions, the teacher projects to students, "I believe you can."
2. The teacher has a positive affect, but does not allow excuses for a lack of effort.
3. There is adequate wait time from the teacher which conveys the message that, "I expect you to answer."

Definitions of Rigor

Quality of thinking, not quantity, can occur in any grade and at any subject.	Bogess (2007)
High expectations are important and must include effort on the part of the learner.	Wasley, Hampel and Clark (1997)
Deep immersion in a subject which should include real-world settings and working with an expert.	Washor and Mojkowski (2006)
"Rigor would be used to say something about how an experience or activity is carried out and to what degree. Specifically, a 'rigorous' experience would be one that involves depth and care as, for example, in a scientific experiment or literary analysis that is done thoughtfully, deeply with sufficient depth and attention to accuracy and detail."	Beane (2001)
"Goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging (page 7)."	Strong, Silver and Perrini (2001)
Rigor for the 21st century includes a focus on skills for life: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and leadership, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurialism, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analyzing information, and curiosity and imagination.	Wagner (2008)

Providing Support

Supporting students so that they can learn at high levels is central to our definition: *Each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels.* It is critical that teachers craft lessons that move students to more challenging work while simultaneously providing ongoing scaffolding to support students as they learn. To simply increase expectations without helping students move to those higher levels is inappropriate. There are three explicit activities you will see in a rigorous classroom with appropriate support.

1. Extra help is regularly provided to all students in a non-threatening way.
2. Opportunities for review and individualized support are built into the lesson.
3. Individual or small group tutoring is required for students who do not master material. Ideally this occurs during the regular school day.

Demonstrating Learning

Finally, classrooms with a culture of rigor provide opportunities for each student to demonstrate learning at high levels. In such a classroom you can observe:

1. When the teacher asks a question, all students are asked to respond through pair/share, interactive white boards, or some other form of response.
2. Students are given a variety of ways to demonstrate learning. This may include tests with a wide range of types of questions, or it may be that students are allowed to show their understanding through creative projects.
3. Students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding. This may occur through a "not yet" grading policy or through opportunities to rework missed questions of a test for partial credit.

Conclusion

In a rigorous learning environment, the role of the principal is to remove barriers to success. To increase rigor in your school, you may need to begin by developing a shared understanding of rigor so that all stakeholders have a common frame of reference. Then discuss the characteristics of a rigorous classroom and look for their presence when you visit classrooms in your school.

Authors

Dr. Barbara R. Blackburn is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Middle, Secondary and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. Dr. Ronald Williamson is Professor of Leadership and Counseling at Eastern Michigan University.

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