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Is there a Right Kind of Instructional Rigor?

We often hear that effective instructional practices have a greater impact on learning than anything else; possibly greater than the influence of socio-economic status, language proficiency, home-life, or ethnicity. In fact, rigor, and its closely related cousin, relevance, have come to define effective instruction. We see teachers working incredibly hard, however, in an attempt to implement rigor, but often not getting the results they are working toward. Teachers and other staff become discouraged when proficiency scores fall short of expectations. Why, despite ample effort on the part of teachers and students, do we continue to see students struggling to master standards? And why do some teachers and principals become discouraged when questioned about levels of rigor within their classroom and school? A common retort is, “just look at how hard we are working.”

Rigor in teaching sounds like a lot of work, both for teachers and students. It sounds like a heavy lift towards an end goal of proficiency relative to standards. What is rigor, and why impose it on teachers and students? Can’t learning just be fun?

Some teachers will express confusion when encouraged to introduce rigor into their classroom. They recall how hard they work to plan and prepare lessons. In fact, not only do their students break a sweat daily working to meet assignment deadlines, parents frequently break a sweat helping their students, especially on Sunday night while helping with a poster board project due on Monday morning. But all that sweating has little to do with quality learning. It’s often about filling in boxes in the gradebook. It’s about completing homework, finishing assignments on time, and turning in projects. It can be hard work for sure, and it can be rigorous in some sense, but it’s not what most educators have in mind when they talk about rigorous core instruction.

Key components of developing rigorous core instruction include ensuring that teachers are thoroughly educated in learning outcomes in the grade and subject areas they teach, and teachers having access to quality materials including curriculum, layered heavily with professional development and clear frequent feedback. The addition of pacing guides, common assessments and reporting practices, along with support for knowing how to conduct a grade level PLC, and time for teacher collaboration should not be overlooked.

One venue in which a lack of rigorous core curriculum will quickly become apparent will be in a child study team or similar meeting. Sometimes a CST becomes a panic button that someone pushes hoping for a shortcut to tier 2 interventions. It might be useful, however, to take a close look at what core instruction in the classroom looks like before moving on to tier 2 interventions.

It's important for teachers and principals to agree within their building what rigorous core instruction looks like. A quick search of the internet might help, but it's not uncommon to find elaborate sounding definitions of rigor, followed by uninspiring examples. If nothing else, rigorous core instruction ought to excite curiosity and inspire persistence towards a learning goal. At best, that learning goal will be firmly rooted in an important and crucial learning standard.

The wide range of student ability levels and student behavior encountered in the classroom add to a tendency for teachers to spend too much time on sweat-heavy, but less challenging, intellectually-light tasks. With the right tools, teachers can spend time engaging students in rigorous tasks that meet the needs of students and ensure learning. Every teacher has the best of intentions when they do the work of planning and instructing students, but the day-in and day-out pressures to manage the hundreds of decisions that need to be made on a daily basis throughout the school year take their toll. Districts support teachers most effectively when they take some of these decisions off of teachers' plates. Instead of wondering when to teach X, Y, or Z, a thoughtful pacing guide allows teachers to plan more efficiently. Instead of spending precious time browsing Teachers-Pay-Teachers or Pinterest for the latest and greatest printable or packet, teachers should feel confidence in relying on quality curriculum and approved supplemental materials. And instead of feeling isolated and confused, time for collaboration with peers both in the same building and throughout the district can provide invaluable support and guidance.

When teachers have the opportunity to teach in the areas they are most qualified and trained, less time is wasted sorting through the myriad of unfamiliar yet extremely important details associated with getting comfortable in new subjects, grade levels, or programs.

Article Submitted by:

Gina Behrens - Literacy/Math Interventionist and Instructional Coach, Seth Woodard Elementary School
West Valley School District, Spokane Valley, WA gina.behrens@wvsd.org

Mike Lollar - Principal, Seth Woodard Elementary School

West Valley School District, Spokane Valley, WA mike.lollar@wvsd.org



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