

School Leadership Strategies for Classroom Rigor



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Today's students face a future that will require them to deal with complex social, economic, and environmental problems. America's schools must provide students with a rigorous and challenging academic experience that will prepare them for that future and help them develop the skills to be successful.

The challenge for leaders is to work with their teachers, students, and community to create schools that are rigorous and provide all students with the support necessary to be successful. It is not easy to confront long-standing norms about schools and schooling. We've worked with schools on increasing rigor for more than thirty years and have found three major obstacles to creating more rigorous schools and classrooms. They are:

- Lack of understanding of the purpose for increasing rigor
- A misunderstanding of the true meaning of rigor
- Resistance from teachers, students, parents, or stakeholders

Despite the obstacles, leaders are able to make a difference in their school—to improve rigor and positively impact student learning.

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A compass is a useful metaphor for understanding the way that leaders can positively impact rigor in their school. A compass provides direction and guidance. It can help you find your way when lost and can help you stay on track. Most importantly, a compass always remains on target. It continuously points towards “true” north. Our COMPASS provides the tools that leaders need for their journey to a more rigorous school (Williamson & Blackburn, 2010).



C—Creating a Positive and Supportive Culture

To make significant change in a school’s program, a principal must understand the school’s culture and identify strategies that can positively impact the culture.

When we talk about culture, we’re talking about the complex set of values, traditions, and patterns of behavior present in any school. A school’s culture reflects deeply held beliefs about students and schooling. It manifests itself in the way schools are organized; the way adults talk with students, families, and one another; the activities that are valued; and the beliefs about who can learn (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009).

Principals recognize the importance of culture and the activities and routines in their school that reinforce the current culture. They understand that these things can promote the school’s institutional values and core mission. Successful principals understand the power of these cultural symbols to communicate what is important. They also model the behaviors and practices that they expect others to use. It is important to use constructive language, support risk-taking, and build relationships. It’s classic leadership theory. What the leader pays attention to becomes important.

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“Name It, Claim It, and Explain It” is an effective activity you can use to increase the level of rigor in your school. As you and members of your leadership team visit classrooms, take pictures or videos of rigorous classroom practices. Then, at each faculty meeting, begin by projecting the picture or video and explain why it is an example of increased rigor. Next, ask the teacher whose classroom is featured to name the practice, claim it as theirs, and then explain what was happening in the classroom. It’s an excellent method for showcasing what you want to see occurring in the school, it reinforces the value of rigorous instruction, and it clearly indicates what you, as the leader, see as important.

O—Ownership and Shared Vision

When all critical stakeholders are engaged in school improvement, their collective commitment to proposed changes is greater (David, 2009; Hord, 2009). We also know that when teachers and others collaborate on instructional issues, their practice changes (Borko, 2004).

When we work with families, teachers, and other school personnel, we almost always find that they have very different ideas about rigor and how it manifests itself in schools. These different ideas about rigor indicate that all groups should be involved in any discussion about increasing rigor in your school.

An effective method for understanding where stakeholders are in their understandings is to begin by asking them to anonymously answer three simple questions:

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

Share all responses with the entire group and spend time discussing patterns you see in the data. Ask participants to share stories about a time they experienced a rigorous activity (personal or professional). The responses will provide a starting point for a discussion about rigor and what it looks like in the classroom, building a mutual understanding of rigor and how individuals experience it.

M—Managing Data

It's a given that leaders need to gather and use data to inform their decisions. An essential part of this is to gather data about student learning. But simply gathering data is not sufficient. While data should be used to determine the effectiveness of your school and inform you about opportunities for growth, the most powerful data relate to instructional practices, the real day-to-day work in classrooms (Williamson & Blackburn, 2010). Leaders have access to multiple data sources, much of it aggregated for the entire school. We've found that when principals work with their staff to look more closely at classroom instructional process data, it makes the data much more relevant and useful.

Instructional process data provide information about what's going on in classrooms. For example, you might look at the amount of time spent on particular content areas. Or you might see if student learning is greater when teachers implement professional development. You could also look for differences in achievement when teachers provide additional support for students, such as giving extra time for assignments and key assessments or adopting a revise-and-resubmit policy.

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We're fond of Student Shadow Studies as another way to gather data about your school. To conduct a shadow study, select students at random and then "shadow" them throughout the day. The process was originally developed by NASSP and allows an observer to chart the student experience every 5-7 minutes (Lounsbury & Johnston, 1988). When done with multiple students across multiple classrooms, shadow studies provide data about how students experience your school. You might discover that most of their days are characterized by direct instruction, or you might find some other pattern. Regardless, the process provides useful data that can inform a discussion about ways to improve rigor in your school.

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Another strategy is to look closely at certain features of instructional practices, such as levels of questioning. As you visit classrooms, look for the types of questions that are asked of students and record both the levels of the questions and of the student responses.

One school in Los Angeles used the seven instructional practices supported by the research and each month focused on one of the seven (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). The school improvement team conducted a monthly walkthrough to gather data about implementation. These data were then used by the faculty to talk further about improving instruction.

P—Professional Development

Appropriate professional development is also essential to improving rigor in your school. The principal sets the direction for a school's professional development agenda, and it is important that he or she model a commitment to continuous improvement and participate actively in professional development efforts.

Learning Forward (2011), formerly The National Staff Development Council, recommends that professional learning focus on improving the learning of all students by organizing adults into learning groups or communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school or district. The groups use disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, sustain improvement, and deepen educators' content knowledge and instructional capacity.

Professional learning should be thoughtful and should tie to larger school improvement goals. We find it useful to think systematically about professional learning, its objectives, and its relationship to your school's mission and the needs of students. Our PRESS Forward Model provides a format for just that sort of planning.

PRESS Forward Model for Planning Professional Development

Purpose	Why are we doing professional development on rigor?
Relationships and Connections	How does a focus on rigor relate to our mission, our goals, and the needs of our students? How does it connect with other initiatives in our school?
Expected Outcomes	If the professional development is effected, what changes will we see related to teachers' practice and student learning?
Steps to Take	What are the specific action steps we need to take to accomplish our goals? What is the timeline for each step?
Support Needed	What types of support do we need to accomplish each step? What material resources are necessary?
Forward	After a stage of implementation, take time to reflect, refine your plan, and move forward with next steps.

At Tucson High School (AZ), Principal Abel Morado organized his staff into small learning communities. Each group, either content-organized or interdisciplinary, selected a goal related to the school's mission and identified data they would collect about their progress. During monthly meetings the work groups reviewed their data, discussed their progress, and identified steps for continued progress. "At first they were reluctant," Principal Morado said, "We'd never done anything like this before. So we focused on developing the skills to work together. There's room for improvement, but it is going well. Teachers began to talk with one another about students and their learning."

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A—Advocacy

Leaders influence the priorities of their school (Schein, 2010), and it is important that school leaders are clear about their support for increased rigor. Advocacy is a way to assert the need for changes in your school. Perhaps more importantly, it is a way to build support for your vision of greater rigor and to secure resources to support your vision.

Since a school community has many diverse audiences, both internal and external, the advocacy role can vary. Leaders must work with teachers and other staff to assure a shared commitment to greater rigor. They must work with families and community to understand the importance of rigor and to cultivate their support. They must also work with district-level staff to make sure that their school has the flexibility and resources to support a vision of greater rigor.

A critical first step is to build a network with others who share your vision. But don't limit your contact with just those who share your point-of-view. Talk with those who hold other opinions. Monitor your environment. Get to know the "movers and shakers" in your community. Finally, identify your allies and your opponents, both in your school and beyond your school, so that you can build alliances in support of your vision.

Most principals engage in advocacy. They just don't think of it that way. To help you think more about your advocacy activities, we've included a survey you can use to self-assess your advocacy skills.

Self-Assess Your Advocacy Skills

	I already do this	I need to work on this
Speak from the heart when telling your story.		
Speak to the local impact and implications.		
Be factual and honest.		
Be clear, concise, and concrete.		
Develop sound bites, success stories, elevator talks, and one-page fact sheets.		
Frame the issue and tie it to a larger picture.		
Be cheerfully persistent.		
Know your audience and build your advocacy appropriately.		
Don't forget to follow up and say thank you.		

What are your current strengths that you can build upon? _____

What are your top three areas for improvement? _____

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Successful advocacy is far more than just having a passion for your vision of improved rigor. It requires developing a thoughtful and compelling message about the importance of rigor and then identifying strategies to share your vision and mobilize support.

S—Shared Accountability

A school leader's most important role is that of instructional leader. But the principal is not the only person responsible for a quality instructional program. Teachers and other staff are responsible for delivering instruction and positively impacting every student's learning.

No change is successful unless accountability is established. We have found that the most successful efforts to improve rigor occur in schools where teachers, families, and community, along with school leaders, are accountable for increasing rigor. Accountability is more than delivering mandates and forcing compliance. For school leaders, it involves energizing and motivating individuals as well as groups.

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In the section on culture, we discussed the importance of having a school culture where a high value is placed on improving students' educational experiences, where there is a collective commitment to improvement, and a parallel commitment to supporting people who take risks and make changes. Every student must be expected to learn and the staff must be committed to supporting students in their learning. Upholding these concepts is a clear indicator of a school community that embraces accountability for student learning.

School leaders model accountability by promoting innovation and nurturing professional learning. The following are four of the most important ways you can create a culture supportive of accountability:

- Provide time for collegial discussion and dialogue about improved instruction, including time to reflect on efforts to improve rigor.
- Stay current on educational trends and developments.
- Model quality instructional practices at meetings and during other interaction with staff.
- Attend and actively participate in professional development and other learning opportunities. (Williamson & Blackburn, 2011)

S—Structures

The day-to-day routines and structures of your school can impact the staff's ability to increase rigor. Structures, frequently rooted in past practices, may be major barriers to reform or they can be used to accelerate attainment of your vision for a more rigorous school. They include things like your school or district policies on homework and grading or your school's schedule.

In many schools the most significant structural barrier is the isolation of teachers from one another. Many schools have countered this problem by creating professional learning communities (PLC). While PLCs take many forms, they are most successful when they focus on student learning and provide time for teachers and administrators to work together to improve student learning at their school (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

A school's schedule is probably the most visible structure. Designing a schedule to provide collaborative time, to organize teachers into common instructional groups, and to provide students with opportunities to receive extra support is essential (Williamson, 2009).

Final Thoughts

Every study of effective schools identifies leadership as the central feature—leadership that recognizes the importance of developing a shared vision and working collaboratively with teachers and other staff, with parents and community, and with students to create a rich and vibrant academic program where every student can achieve success. Skillful leaders recognize the importance of advocating for their school and building connections with the community. They value data for the insights they provide about how to make their school even more effective. They embrace accountability for high levels of rigor and student achievement, and they understand the tools they can use to assure that their school is successful.

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Ronald Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn are the co-authors of *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way* and *Rigor in Your School: A Toolkit for Leaders*. Barbara is also the author of *Rigor is Not a Four-Letter Word* and *Rigor Made Easy*. All are available from Eye On Education (www.eyeoneducation.com).

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