Getting Rigor Right: 
Academic Challenge without the Backlash of Failure

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What’s so hard about rigor?
School leaders across the SREB region are interested in the rigor, or academic challenge, of instruction and assessment in the classroom. Yet rigor poses a challenge in itself as being difficult to define and measure—exactly what needs to occur to increase rigor to improve student achievement.

Proficiency levels are imprecise measures of rigor
Results of high-stakes tests provide little help in understanding current levels of rigor experienced by students. Proficiency levels based on these assessments are not created equally. As Peterson and Hess (Education Next, Summer 2005) aptly state, “Johnny can’t read ... in South Carolina. But if his folks move to Texas, he’ll be reading up a storm. What’s going on?” Some states, they conclude, are more generous than others in determining whether students are proficient.

State proficiency levels mapped to NAEP proficiency scales underscore the need to look beyond state test results as an indicator of rigor in the classroom. Odds are good that students that score proficient on their state test would score below the cut-point corresponding to the NAEP Proficient standard, and many fall below the cut-point corresponding to the NAEP Basic standard (NCES, June 2007).

Unintended Consequences
School leaders are correct in looking to rigor to improve learning and performance on state tests. What often occurs, though, is the unintended consequence of increasing failure when rigor is misconstrued as simply being harder content, an increased amount of homework, or a faster rate of instruction.

Increasing rigor is about increasing the complexity of thinking—from simple recall and conceptual understanding to more challenging cognitive processes such as applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating. Getting rigor right means simultaneously increasing academic challenge with increased support for both teachers and students to reduce the possibility of a backlash of failure.
**How do we get rigor right?**

School leaders are experiencing a renewed interest in using Bloom’s taxonomy of learning objectives for defining and measuring rigor in the classroom. Cognitive process levels are present in the work of Marzano (2007), Webb (2005), and Anderson and colleagues (2001).

**In the classroom**

In the classroom, a taxonomy is useful to analyze the alignment of the standard/instructional objective with what actually occurs during instruction and assessment of students. This type of alignment process provides more precision than traditional curriculum mapping processes which align content to the breadth of standards. The depth of the standard, its cognitive complexity, is analyzed and related instruction and assessments are aligned to more precisely meet the intent of the standard.

Teachers improve their instruction when they can meet regularly and work together to review what actually occurs with what needs to occur in classrooms to meet, and then exceed, standards. SREB has developed a Leadership Curriculum Module, *Assessing Academic Rigor to Improve Grade-level Proficiency and College Readiness*, to train school leaders in the practices of improving rigor in the classroom (see page 7).

**Across the school**

The alignment process is just one part of an overall effort to improve rigor across a school. Taxonomies are also helpful for school leaders to observe what is occurring in classrooms—the level of questioning by teachers, the depth of responses and type of engagement by students, and the quality and types of assessments to discern thinking skills.

Eight different practices have been identified by SREB that support a schoolwide effort to improve rigor — assessment in the classroom, collaboration, coursetaking or grouping patterns, curriculum coherence, expectations for student work, grading practices, instructional strategies, and student support. These practices are described in the pages that follow. The *SREB Rigor Rubric* is an additional tool for school leaders to measure and monitor progress in improvement — getting rigor right, and improving academic challenge without the backlash of failure.
What does support for increasing rigor look like in schools?

**Assessment in the Classroom**

Classroom assessments are rigorous if they provide specific information about student achievement of the learning and content in high standards.

**Alignment to Standards** All classroom assessments are strongly aligned to the cognitive complexity and topics of the grade-level state standards and, when appropriate, go beyond grade-level standards.

**Common Benchmark Assessments** Common assessments, which include high levels of cognitive complexity, are administered across all grades, subjects or courses and are regularly analyzed and revised by learning teams.

**Using Assessment Results** Teachers analyze tests results to diagnose student learning, improve assessments and instruction, and modify curriculum.

**Assessment Literacy** Teachers can select, develop and/or revise assessment items/tasks to measure higher levels of learning and appropriate assessment methods for each level of learning (i.e., paper/pencil, performance-based, portfolio, and presentations).

**Assessment Monitoring** The principal and/or professional learning team monitors and recommends revisions for classroom assessments in all grades, subjects and courses.

**Collaboration**

Collaboration within and outside of the school is important to build a common understanding and consistent application of practices that support rigor.

**Focusing Improvement** All faculty, department and grade-level meetings focus on the improvement of curriculum, instruction and assessments, include formal agendas, and support continuous collaboration throughout the year.

**Using an Organizing Framework** Learning teams or whole faculty study groups use an organizing framework (taxonomy) to produce a common way of thinking about and a common vocabulary for talking about academic rigor schoolwide.

**Analyzing Teachers’ Work** Teachers collaboratively analyze and revise assignments and assessments to increase the cognitive complexity and alignment to standards.

**Creating Challenging Learning Opportunities** Teachers collaborate across the school to create interdisciplinary opportunities that challenge students to perform at higher levels of learning and integrate learning from a variety of sources.

**Communicating with Home and the Community** Frequent communication and partnerships with home and community increase students’ opportunities to apply learning to real-world situations, and understand the relevance of the school’s curriculum to their needs and goals.
Coursetaking or Grouping Patterns
Examining students’ coursetaking patterns or identifying school practices for student grouping is important to understand the rigor of the curriculum that individual students experience.

Counseling and Advisement Guidance counselors and teachers use objective and subjective data to encourage student placement in college or career-preparatory classes that challenge students to their fullest potential.

Accelerating Readiness All students are required to be proficient in the coursework necessary for readiness for the next grade level, college, or the workplace, and the school provides the necessary support to accelerate learning for students who are behind.

Course Availability: High Schools and Middle Schools ONLY The school actively encourages all students to complete a concentration area and participate in all rigorous courses, including Advanced Placement (AP) courses and/or the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum.

Graduation Requirements: High Schools ONLY The rigor of classes required for graduation is aligned with the rigor of credit-bearing first year courses in the state’s colleges and universities.

Equitable Access: High Schools ONLY Data from master schedules or transcript analyses are reviewed and school practices changed to provide students equitable access to opportunities and, if needed, additional rigorous courses.

Curriculum Coherence The organization and sequencing of the curriculum is critical if students are to perform at higher levels of learning and understand the relevance of their education.

Curriculum Alignment The horizontally and vertically aligned curricula are periodically reviewed and realigned to optimize student performance, relevance and academic challenge.

Curriculum Quality Strategies are in place and actions are taken to ensure a “tight” alignment (correlation) between the written, taught and tested curricula in most courses/subjects.

Curriculum Relevance Based on data, a part of the standards-based school curriculum is reviewed/revised each year for relevance to student’s needs and goals with a long-term plan to review/revise the entire curriculum every 5-7 years.

Cognitive Complexity of Learning The standards-based objectives, assignments and assessments in most classes accelerate the learning to address the expectations for the next grade, college, or the workplace (increasing the level of cognitive complexity).

Curriculum Spiraling The curricula for all subjects introduce knowledge and skills at developmentally appropriate grade levels and increase the level of cognitive complexity of the knowledge and skills in subsequent years.
Expectations for Student Work
Expectations that teachers set for quality student work are important to communicate as students are challenged by increased rigor.

Explicit Expectations Expectations for performance are explicit in course syllabi, rubrics and assignment directions in most classes.

Examples of Student Work Teachers require students to analyze exemplary student and team/group work, prior to assessment on that material, to determine the qualities that make the work proficient.

Consensus on Proficiency The school’s professional staff (teachers and administrators) has reached consensus on what constitutes proficiency on grade-level standards, and there is little variation among teachers’ expectations, rubrics and grading practices.

Student Understanding of Quality Work Student evaluations of their own, peers’, and team/group work often match teacher and/or rubric definitions for quality.

High Expectations for All Students Schools provide the opportunity for all students to produce quality work with policies related to redoing work, re-teaching and grading.

Grading Practices
Grades assigned to student work are symbols of the teachers’ expectations for quality, beliefs about rigor, and understanding of proficiency evidenced in the classroom.

Grading & Reporting System The school has a grading and reporting system that identifies criteria for determining and reporting grades (academic and non-achievement factors and the weighting of those factors) including rubrics for performance-based work.

Alignment of Classroom Grades to External Assessments Most final grades are positively correlated to student performance on external assessments (state and national).

Common Grading Criteria Common grading criteria (of non-academic and academic factors) have been collaboratively established by teachers in all subject areas, grades and/or courses.

Communication about Grading Practices All teachers routinely inform students and parents about grading practices/weighting/point systems in course syllabi, lesson plans and assessments.

Reporting Academic Performance More than one summative grade is reported for each core subject, with one grade measuring mastery of standards exclusively. Other grades might include either a combination of non-academic and academic factors, or only non-academic factors.
**Instructional Strategies**
The instructional strategies that teachers use foster higher levels of learning in their students and increased rigor in their classrooms.

**Questioning Strategies** Teachers use an array of questioning techniques to prompt low, mid and higher level cognitive processing for all students.

**Instruction** Instructional strategies are based on research and selected to match the content and cognitive complexity in the standards and to raise the cognitive complexity of student learning.

**Instructional Leadership** The structure of the school day and organization of the school’s resources (time, money, personnel) supports higher levels of learning (i.e., experiential, interdisciplinary, digital or project-based learning) and encourages students to connect learning to real-world problems and situations.

**Academic Press** The school is driven by a quest for academic press as evidenced in its mission and school improvement plan’s focus on rigor, cognitive complexity and/or high but achievable academic goals.

**Professional Development** Teachers’ support for student learning is improved by the school’s professional development plan which has teacher teams learning, implementing and evaluating schoolwide strategies.

**Student Support**
Supporting students so that they can learn across all levels of cognitive complexity is an important component of increasing rigor in the school.

**Extra Help** A network of teacher support provides extra help before and after each school day and is required for some students to attend.

**System of Interventions** The primary support for students who are performing below basic proficiency on assignments and assessments is a well-organized, early warning and intervention system to accelerate learning.

**Credit Recovery** Additional credits are awarded students based on demonstration of achievement on standards.

**Student Progress** Students progress at different rates in the curriculum because of placement in double-blocked or accelerated courses, tutorial classes, and dual enrollment programs.

**Literacy Support** Support to reduce literacy barriers related to performing at higher levels of learning in their classroom is part of a schoolwide literacy initiative providing direction for the work of literacy coaches, teachers and students.
How can school leaders learn more about how to get rigor right?

Assessing Academic Rigor to Ensure Grade-Level Proficiency and College Readiness is a four-day SREB leadership training workshop. The goal for this module is: Facilitate school staff in a collaborative effort of academic press to measure and increase classroom rigor in instruction, assessments and objectives, in order to meet the demands of continued education and, ultimately, college or the workplace.

What school leaders can expect to learn

School leaders learn how to use tools and strategies to determine whether rigor exists in their classrooms (by evaluating the alignment among expected student learning, teaching, and assessing) and systemically in their schools (by using a rigor rubric and monitoring dashboard).

Module Design

Building an Understanding of Rigor  Participants begin to explore the definition of rigor. School teams work on the definition of rigor that they will present to their colleagues at their schools. Next, the trainer explains how and why the revised Bloom’s taxonomy will be used as a vehicle for evaluating rigor in this module. Finally, participants apply that knowledge by categorizing a variety of objectives, instructional activity, and assessment on the taxonomy.

Applying Our Understanding of Rigor  Participants look at objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment tasks in isolation and place them on the taxonomy table. Then, after a discussion on the importance of alignment, they do the same for all the elements in a single unit of study. Finally, they look at indicators of levels of rigor and plan how to assess rigor in their schools.

Homework  Participants extend the work to their school communities by informing them and educating them about the importance of academic press and raising the level of rigor.

Analyzing Rigor in Our Classrooms  Participants look at the data they have gathered and work in teams to map out the level of rigor in assessments, instruction, and standards and then check the alignment of rigor in these areas. Then, they discuss strategies for increasing rigor in objectives, instruction, and assessment at the classroom level.

Analyzing Rigor at a Schoolwide Level  By this point, participants should have a good idea of what rigor is, how to measure it, and strategies for increasing it. The focus of the discussion will shift to how to gather a schoolwide picture of rigor. Given a variety of samples and tools, including a survey, participants figure out how to gather and organize schoolwide data around rigor. The workshop ends with participants planning next steps for the systematic monitoring of academic press.