

# FOCUS

*A Newsletter for Selected School Board Members in Washington State*

## Defining Rigor

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From the editor:

### Rigor: What Does It Mean To You?

*Rigor* is another one of those words we use all the time in education. But what exactly does it mean? Recently, a couple of board members challenged me to come up with a definition.

It's easier to start with what rigor is *not*, at least when we're talking about learning. My dictionary uses words like "severity, rigidity, hardship" which, in education, might look like endless repetition, or long hours of filling out worksheets. Rigorous learning is *not* a measure of the quantity of material covered or the number of times it's covered.

Rigor isn't increased graduation requirements, either, although they may be needed to prepare more students to enter college. Adding more courses, important as that may be, won't necessarily increase rigorous learning in our classrooms.

#### *Think about chocolate*

So what *is* rigor? Think about chocolate for a moment. (Have I made your day?) You can read a dictionary definition of chocolate, but to really know what it is, you have to taste it. To really understand rigorous learning, you have to experience it. (And now we all must stop thinking about chocolate, please.)

Fortunately, all of us have experienced rigorous learning at some point in our lives, at school, at home, at work.

Here's one of my examples. I was fresh out of college, newly (and ignorantly) employed as a magazine editor. Computer publishing didn't exist yet, so I took an evening class in layout and design at a local university. It involved a lot of reading, hands-on work—setting type (actually!) and preparing layouts—and problem solving.

It also involved a lot of math, which has never come easy for me. By the end of an evening, I'd feel like my brain (not my head) hurt from being stretched, but I'd also feel so satisfied, so accomplished. I'd go home, both exhausted and invigorated.

Clearly the content was relevant to me, and that always helps. But when I think of rigorous learning, I think of "sinking my teeth" into in-depth work, which is what that class instructor (whom I can't remember at all) made happen for me.

#### *Think about your own experiences*

So to define rigor, begin by jotting down a personal learning experience that you feel was rigorous. Then ask yourself:

- What did it look, feel, sound like?
- What was I doing?
- What did others do (if anything) to create that experience for me?

Now take a minute to read the examples from board members Deborah Turner (Coupeville), Gary Noble (Edmonds), and Elaine Lynch (Bellingham). Each situation is different, but do you hear some themes? See some common threads?

#### ◀ An Afternoon of Frog Anatomy ▶

I attended Bingham Academy, a missionary school in Ethiopia, up through the seventh grade, and I would use the word "rigorous" to describe most of my learning there. The teachers had high expectations for us, and we absorbed, on many levels, what they presented to us. Learning at Bingham was as much emotional and physical as it was intellectual.

One afternoon in my sixth grade year, a science teacher went through a frog

dissection with me and a friend. It was one of the most exciting afternoons of my life, and I will never forget frog anatomy...ever.

Rigor is, I think, an experience. It stretches your mind, engages your body and soul. At Bingham, every time I thought my mind was full, I found I could make room for something else. Rigor makes you want to get up in the morning and learn something new.

*Deborah Turner*  
*Coupeville School Board*

#### ◀ A Challenging Work Project ▶

Not too long ago, my employer (Boeing) put me in charge of developing some new software. I'm an electrical engineer, not a software developer, so in essence I had a project that I didn't know how to do. We knew where we were supposed to go, but the rigorous part was figuring out the path to get there. That's what makes things fun.

During this process, I've talked to about a zillion people. This wasn't something that could happen in a self-contained way; I had to go out and ask lots of questions. Our small team did a lot of research, and one step was deciding what we didn't want to do. Eventually, we chose a methodology.

Basically, I think rigor involves both challenge and frustration. It's important to manage the frustration so it doesn't overwhelm you. But in most cases, the more challenging the learning, the more satisfying it is when you succeed.

*Gary Noble*  
*Edmonds School Board*

## Defining Rigor, *continued*

### ◀ Those First School Board Years ▶

My first two years on the school board, I had rigorous learning experiences on a daily basis! Even though I'd been involved in PTAs for years, being on the board was different, and it was a steep learning curve. I did a lot of reading and independent research and worked on asking well thought-out questions. This was self-motivated, self-directed learning that came from my personal commitment to do the very best I could for kids.

Just because I'm now in my ninth year on the board doesn't mean I don't have this kind of experience anymore, of course. I'm thinking of a science curriculum policy that our board is looking at right now. To come to my final decision, I still have to go through the stages of inquiry, discovery, and self-questioning that are all part of rigorous learning.

*Elaine Lynch  
Bellingham School Board*

### *Think about common threads*

Now that you've read examples of other people's rigorous learning experiences and thought of a few of your own, what common threads or themes do you see?

Several things jump out at me. In every case, the learning is:

- Active, either through conversation or hands-on or minds-on activity. There's questioning and discovery going on.
- Deep rather than broad; project-based. The learners are digging into a topic or project.
- Engaging. Either on his or her own or with the help of a teacher, each learner has made a real

connection with the material to be learned. In every case, there's a sense that the learning was "hard but satisfying."

Perhaps you will see other similarities. In any case, I've decided not to come up with a neat definition of rigor. Instead, I invite you to take a few minutes to think about your own rigorous learning experiences. And I'd love to hear your example and your definition.

### What Boards Can Do To Support Rigor

It's not a school board's job to evaluate classroom teaching to ensure "rigor" is happening there, and it's probably not useful to mandate it by policy. So how do you support rigorous teaching and learning in your district classrooms?

- Believe that all kids—no matter their backgrounds or past performance—can not only *handle* rigor in the classroom, but *deserve* it.
- Allow teachers as many opportunities as possible to learn how to incorporate rigor into their teaching. Obviously, these opportunities should be rigorous themselves (active, deep, engaging)—for example, teachers getting together to look at student work and at their own practice.
- Support project-based learning in and out of the classroom. This might involve requesting waivers, being creative about transportation, or changing a policy.

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