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| RIGOR IS FOR EVERYONE | http://www.seenmagazine.us/Portals/0/images/icons-sm/icon_10.jpg |
| Barbara Blackburn Ph.D. |

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| The foundation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is a focus on rigor. Developed in the midst of perceptions about lowered expectations for our students, the Standards provided a well defined set of expectations for each grade level in the areas of English/Language Arts, Literacy and Math.  The standards set rigorous benchmarks, but the impact on student learning will depend on the implementation of the standards. Authentic rigor includes high expectations for students, increased support for students, and increased demonstration of learning by students. As defined — Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word: |  |

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.

We cannot assume that simply adopting the standards is enough to provide a rigorous classroom environment. Rigor includes what you teach, but it is also how you teach and how students show you they have learned the content. The Common Core State Standards are an excellent starting point, but there are instructional aspects to consider.

**High Expectations**

We have always known that our expectations of students are critical. Students live up to or down to what we expect. Our expectations, however, can be clouded by a variety of factors. When I was a teacher, I heard about one of my students before I ever met him. Several teachers came by my room to “warn” me about him — his disrespect, his poor grades and his lack of motivation. Unfortunately, I built preconceived notions of an apathetic student, and lowered my expectations. And he responded by continuing his behaviors. At midterm, I realized that I had made a mistake and changed my attitude. I believed he could be successful, and with my support, he was. It’s easy to see bad behavior, disrespect, and a history of poor grades and assume a student has no chance. But it is our choice — and our responsibility — to hold students to high expectations. The CCSS help us with this, but we still have to believe students will succeed, and help them accomplish that success.

**Support**

How can we support students? First, by showing students they can be successful. Providing open-ended assignments for which there are no wrong answers. You can also chunk information into smaller bits so students can achieve at smaller levels. With these two strategies, students begin to feel successful in the classroom, and they are willing to try something new.

You can also re-frame the standards into questions. This activates the inquisitive nature of students. Rather than telling students what they will be doing, students are considering what they are to learn. This is an excellent way to shift the ownership to students, and allows you to facilitate their learning through additional questioning.

Another strong method of support is to model learning for students. This might include showing students an example of a completed project or extended response so they can see what they are to accomplish. Often, students do not complete an assignment effectively because they do not know what to do. Or you may model your thinking for students. Actually talk them through what you would do. For example, “As I start reading this selection, I look at the title to see if it gives me any hints to the topic. When I find a vocabulary word I don’t know, I keep reading to see if the rest of the sentence tells me what it means. Or, I try to break the word down into parts to see if that helps. This word in your article is bifocal. I know bi means two, and the rest of the sentence is about glasses. So maybe it means glasses with two lenses.” Modeling is a critical support feature for student learning.

**Demonstration of Learning**

The CCSS will be accompanied by matching high-level assessments. The immediate emphasis appears to be on summative assessments, but we cannot forget the critical role of formative assessments. These ongoing assessments will help you see the progress students are making. Formative assessments help you see on a daily basis, or even within a lesson so you can adjust your instruction immediately. Formative assessments include questioning, entrance and exit slips, giving students time to reflect before they share an answer, or using large poster sheets with key points so students can add information.

The last one in particular supports the CCSS. A key aspect of the standards is to cite evidence from the text to support a point. If you ask students to write something they learned from the text, you can then have small groups write the evidence from the text that supports the key point. Remember, one of our best instructional strategies is to assess students’ work regularly in a manner that provides feedback so you and they can adjust what they are doing.

**Environment**

All of these aspects lead to the creation of an environment that supports learning. That environment is one of high standards and expectations, one in which students are supported to be successful, and one where students regularly show they understand the concepts of learning. There is also a focus on progress, as well as achievement. We all teach students who may never make the honor roll. But we can also have a progress roll, which recognizes each student who has made strides in learning.

Another aspect of the environment is the positive language that is used. Rather than using comments like, “I can’t believe you asked that question again!” A teacher says, “Thanks for asking that again. I needed to clarify that for everyone.” Students are not allowed to use the word can’t. They may not want to do something or they may need extra help, but giving up in advance is not acceptable.

**Conclusion**

Finally, the new CCSS are an excellent way to create immediate, rigorous expectations for students. However, the standards are just plans and outlines of practice. Real change, lasting change, the change that makes the most impact for students happens at the classroom level. The true power of helping students learn at higher levels happens at the classroom level. The new Common Core is the foundation for rigor, but instruction is the way for students to be successful in rigorous learning. Remember, Rigor is ensuring that each student you teach is provided the opportunity to grow in ways they could never imagine!

Barbara Blackburn Ph.D. is a nationally recognized expert in the areas of instructional rigor, student motivation, and student engagement. For more information about her speaking and writing, visit [www.barbarablackburnonline.com.](http://www.barbarablackburnonline.com/).