

## A Rigorous Curriculum

We are in an era of much uncertainty as the No Child Left Behind initiative slowly morphs into something different in the years ahead. We are pretty certain that some of NCLB will remain while other parts of it will either disappear entirely or change dramatically. Elements likely to remain are the use of standards, some kind of high stakes test system, and other processes designed to ensure that office holders and agencies can assess and report school accountability. Portions that may disappear will likely be the current definition of *adequate yearly progress*, state testing as we know it now, and the almost total concentration on certain subject area proficiencies. There is speculation that Common Core Standards will be used, national tests will replace states tests, **all** aspects of the curriculum will again become important, and techniques used to measure progress will become more sophisticated than AYP.

Should these suppositions prove true, how do we begin to make the adjustments in our schools and districts? One way to do that is to redefine academic rigor by moving away from so much focus on specifically tested indicators in the realm of math, language arts and science, and to move toward what it means to be a fully competent high school graduate ready to meet the challenges of post secondary education and the real world of work and adulthood. Before NCLB, most educators accepted those challenges and worked toward meeting them in their programs and teaching activities. The problem before NCLB was that too often the schools weren't doing that kind of thing systematically. Curriculum tended to be a product of textbooks, and teachers worked as individuals in their classrooms without establishing and working within a unified strategy.

Unfortunately, the idea of academic rigor in the NCLB era was ensuring that students did well on state-generated high stakes tests, a concept and practice that those who really understand the value of education could not support. Future success in post-secondary education and the real world of work and adulthood involves much more than accurately filling in bubbles on multiple choice tests, whether those tests are created and administered locally or in an organization that contracts with a state to create them.

An article in *Educational Leadership* November 2001, *Teaching What Matters Most: Standards and Strategies for Raising Student Achievement*, (Volume 59, Number 3, Pages 56-61) by Strong, Silver, and Perini, indicates that educators can align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with both standards and students in mind so that standards serve teaching and learning – instead of the other way around. Even though it's been about ten years since this article was written, it is every bit as relevant today. The authors go on to say that, "Rigor is the goal of helping students develop the capacity to understand content that is complex, ambiguous, provocative, and personally or emotionally challenging." They point out that rigor is meant to improve students' abilities to understand complex concepts, but sometimes is

misunderstood to mean students should work with difficult concepts. Sometimes even the most difficult of topics is not also a rigorous lesson. When teachers take time to analyze their current lessons for rigor they can find where it is already present and where it might be added. Students learn to manage difficult content and work with difficult ideas. They are presented with content created from interconnected parts or that is comprised of multiple meanings. Lessons might include sorting through a dilemma or struggling with an emotionally challenging problem. It is a matter of being concerned with the quality, or depth, of the content more than the quantity, or breadth. The authors of this article posed four questions to determine whether or not our academic programs are rigorous:

- Are the activities inquiry or project based, requiring students to form their own answers?
- Do students use the results of their answers to explore ways they can make a difference in the world around them?
- Do lessons contain elements from different disciplines, encouraging students to make connections with previous knowledge?
- Are students asked to examine their own emotions concerning dilemmas or to take a position on a controversial topic?

More recently Tony Wagner (*The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—and What We Can Do About It*, Basic Books, 2008) was even more specific in what academic rigor needs to be in the 21st Century, based on interviews with leaders in business, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, and education. What those people said is sometimes common knowledge, but in a few cases they suggest ideas and practices that are not often thoroughly considered among educators today. Here they are in a nutshell:

1. Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
2. Collaboration and Leadership
3. Agility and Adaptability
4. Initiative and Entrepreneurialism
5. Effective Oral and Written Communication
6. Accessing and Analyzing Information
7. Curiosity and Imagination

Educators are usually well acquainted with some of those categories, even if they've had to be minimized in the NCLB era. Most teachers understand the importance of critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and leadership, accessing and analyzing information, and even curiosity and imagination. They may be a little less conversant with agility and adaptability, and even initiative and entrepreneurialism, but they strongly indicate an understanding of *effective oral and written communication*. However, there is evidence they don't understand the depth that this particular objective implies in the context of application in post-secondary education, the workplace, or in day-to-day activities as members of a community or society in general.

In the next E-hint *effective oral and written communication* will be discussed at greater length, and what should be done by teachers to align their thinking with those who must hire and work with persons who complete a public school education.