

Teaching for Rigor: Three Challenges for School Leaders

The Marzano Center Essentials for Achieving Rigor instructional model provides school leaders with resources, support, and the confidence they need to succeed.

A new model of instruction provides the “how” to teach for rigor.

The Marzano Center Essentials for Achieving Rigor model has been developed to meet challenges for school leaders implementing college and career readiness standards. The model:

- **Supports a focused shift in pedagogy**
Gives teachers a road map for planning units of instruction, grounds instruction in 13 essential strategies and a clear learning progression, facilitates feedback and collaboration, and provides real-time formative data that allows teachers to assess and adjust their practice.
- **Unifies school culture**
Unifies various programs and approaches around a common instructional model and a common language of instruction. Teachers across grades and departments, parents, community, and staff share a common language and common expectations for student learning aligned to rigorous standards.
- **Provides formative feedback**
Allows teachers to monitor student progress and make adjustments in their instruction before the end of a unit or year. Because the model helps teachers adjust their instruction in real time, it supplements RTI academic interventions for individual students by developing teachers and instructors across the school to commit to rigorous instruction for struggling or low-achievement students.



Introduction

Schools implementing new college and career readiness standards across the nation are facing serious challenges. While most districts are fairly far along in the process of aligning curriculum and textbooks to the standards, teachers and school leaders still report that they need targeted professional development in pedagogy, the focused training to help them teach lessons and units aimed at achieving rigor.

These reports are more than anecdotal. Indeed, multiple states have already shown troubling drops in student scores with assessments aligned to college and career readiness standards. Our analysis of more than 2 million data points at Learning Sciences International has revealed a significant finding: Less than 6% of observed classroom lessons are devoted to higher-order thinking skills and cognitively complex learning—analysis, hypothesis generation and testing, reasoning, decision-making—those skills that are the foundation of rigorous standards

such as Common Core, college and career readiness standards, and other aligned state standards.

What this indicates is that while teachers and students may be *visiting* the land of cognitive complexity, they are certainly not *living* there.

If school leaders expect teachers and students to succeed with new standards, it is imperative that principals and school administrators do all they can to help teachers make these critical pedagogical shifts. While researchers have been calling upon school leaders to become *instructional* leaders for some time, the shift to rigor makes instructional leadership not just an option but a requirement of successful schools.

As a school leader, what steps can you take? This brief paper identifies solutions to help you and your school overcome these major challenges and reach high levels of rigor for all students.



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Challenge #1: Providing Focused Professional Development

The most pressing challenge for school leaders is the need to find and implement focused professional development to support critical instructional shifts.

As teacher Emily Workman summarized the problem in her 2012 blog for Core Commons:

A number of initiatives have popped up, offering teachers opportunities for training and professional

development, but feedback from teachers and policy experts indicates that these resources are either not reaching enough teachers, are a one-size-fits-all approach, or are of questionable quality.

In a 2012 brief, Jane Cogshall similarly called for a “move toward professional learning so that more teachers in more schools have access to . . . professional learning that is

less fragmented and more coherent, more relevant, and better differentiated.” Cogshall also recommended a shift away from “sit and get” professional development toward professional learning embedded in the daily work of teachers.

We believe that professional learning aligned to rigorous college and career readiness standards will ideally feature a combination of the following components:

- Training in specific, research-based classroom strategies to move students toward attainment of higher-order thinking skills that address the requirement for both student autonomy and complex thinking
- Training in standards-based planning on measurement topics to show progression of knowledge across units and grade levels
- Reflection on lesson outcomes, with action plans for intervention and enrichment
- Integrated monitoring and feedback tools to help teachers transition their instructional practice toward cognitively complex tasks and the student-centered classroom
- Professional development “embedded in daily work” (Cogsall, 2012) and collaborative learning in a supportive, non-evaluative, growth-focused environment
- Parallel training for teacher coaches, who will continue to provide support and feedback long after formal training has been completed



Challenge #2: Unifying School Culture

Many school leaders may feel unprepared to support teachers in making these pedagogical shifts, but the transition is vital in maintaining a unified school culture. What do these shifts actually look like in the classroom? How can the leader ensure that necessary pedagogical shifts are made uniformly throughout the school? The successful school leader will ensure that *all* teachers and instructors throughout the school have access to the critical training around a model of instruction that will support students to meet expectations around new standards.

For this reason, a research-based model of instruction aligned to college and career readiness standards can help foster a collective sense that the school as a whole is moving together toward increased instructional rigor. We can define such a model of instruction as the *agreed-upon description and definition of effective teaching aligned to rigorous standards*. Such a model would serve the following purposes:

- Provide a common language of instruction across both grade levels and departments or disciplines
- Unify pedagogy across a wide range of instructional approaches for diverse learning populations
- Provide parents and community a clear understanding of the purpose and methods of the school’s instructional goals
- Alleviate anxiety about the number of initiatives teachers are expected to implement

Challenge #3: Avoiding the Dips and Gaps

As noted, preliminary assessments in New York, Kentucky, and Maryland, among other states, are showing sharp drops in student achievement with new assessments aligned to CCRS. An unpublished Annenberg analysis of 2013 New York state test scores, reported in *The New York Daily News*, was even more troubling, as it pointed to achievement gaps widening for special education, ELL, Black, and Latino students.

School leaders will want to meet this challenge head-on. Focused professional development around critical pedagogical shifts and a unified model of instruction will certainly help. But additionally, teachers

will need tools to allow them to identify struggling students and student subgroups early on in units so as to be able to adjust instructional strategies. To meet this challenge we recommend:

- Multiple measures of student growth to inform teachers of instructional gaps
- Formative feedback during units and the necessary monitoring data to facilitate instructional decision-making
- Specific research-based instructional strategies to help move struggling students toward attainment of cognitively complex skills

A New Standard of Professional Development

Teachers need instructional models and training to help them step into a new role as skilled facilitators, to guide students to take ownership of their own learning. School leaders need the resources to help teachers make this crucial transition. The Essentials for Achieving Rigor model has been designed specifically to assist teachers to develop a new pedagogy, the

crucial missing component that educators, analysts, and above all, teachers, have been calling for. Integrating 13 essential strategies into a comprehensive program of professional development, the model has received high praise from educators in schools and districts who are already beginning to meet these challenges.

Download a [FREE MONOGRAPH](#) by Robert J. Marzano and Michael D. Toth for the research and data foundations of the Essentials for Achieving Rigor model.

Contact us for more information at 1.877.411.7114, or visit our website at [MarzanoCenter.com](#).



What teachers are saying about Essentials professional development:

“[After this training] I will make adaptations when the desired result is not evident. I will go back and re-teach or allow the students to teach each other as a way to deepen their own knowledge. I will continue to be more aware of where every student is and what needs to be done to teach them all effectively.”

“The training provided good examples and deepened my understanding of creating complex tasks.”

“I am now ensuring that I am making changes to my lesson plans based on the monitored results I am seeing.”

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