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In this chapter, we’ll address three key aspects of increasing rigor in your school. First, we’ll look at the definition of rigor. There are as many viewpoints of rigor as there are sources, but we will explain the facets of our definition.

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.

Barbara Blackburn, *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word* (2008)

Next, we will provide professional development suggestions for researching the topic of rigor, as well as giving you a list of recommended resources for further study. Finally, we will turn our attention to the change process. For each of these, there are a variety of tools for your use.
Tools in Chapter Two: Rigor, Research, and the Change Model

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Rigor

Probably the major concern we hear from leaders is “What exactly is rigor? How do I know if our classrooms are rigorous?” In *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word*, Barbara defined rigor as “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” (Blackburn, 2008).

We want to focus on the total environment you create in your school. Our three-part view of rigor is not limited to the curriculum students are expected to learn. It is more than a specific lesson or instructional strategy. It is deeper than what a student says or does in response to a lesson. True rigor is the result of weaving together all elements of schooling to raise students to higher levels of learning.

This three-part approach assures that rigor doesn’t consist of just adding curriculum requirements or raising grading standards. Integral to our model is providing every student with high levels of support so that they can thrive and be successful in their classrooms.

Expecting Students to Learn at High Levels

We’ve learned that rigor begins by creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels. Having high expectations starts with the decision that every student possesses the potential to be his or her best, no matter what.

Almost everyone we talk with says, “We have high expectations for our students.” Sometimes that is evidenced by the behaviors in the school; at other times actions don’t match the words. When you visit classrooms and work with your teachers, there are some ways you can assess the level of rigor.

As you work with teachers to design lessons that incorporate more rigorous opportunities for learning, you will want to consider the questions that are embedded in the instruction. Higher-level questioning is an integral part of a rigorous classroom. Look for open-ended questions, ones that are at the higher levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy (analysis, synthesis).
It is also important to look at how teachers respond to student questions. When we visit schools it is not uncommon for teachers who ask higher-level questions to accept low level responses from students. In rigorous classrooms teachers push students to respond at high levels. They ask extending questions. If a student does not know the answer, the teacher continues to probe and guide the student to an appropriate answer, rather than moving on to the next student.

Supporting Students to Learn at High Levels

High expectations are important, but the most rigorous schools assure that each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, the second part of our definition. It is essential that teachers design lessons that move students to more challenging work while simultaneously providing ongoing scaffolding to support students learning as they reach those higher levels.

Providing additional scaffolding throughout lessons is one of the most important ways to support students. This can occur in a variety of ways, but it requires that teachers ask themselves during every step of their lesson, “What extra support might my students need?”

Provide Scaffolding in Lessons

<table>
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<th>Examples of Scaffolding Strategies</th>
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<tr>
<td>♦ Guiding Questions</td>
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<td>♦ Chunking Information</td>
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<td>♦ Color-Coding Steps in a Project</td>
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<tr>
<td>♦ Writing Standards as Questions for Students to Answer</td>
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<td>♦ Using Visuals and Graphic Organizers such as a Math Graphic Organizer for Word Problems</td>
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<td>♦ Providing Tools such as Interactive Reading Guides, Guide-o-Ramas</td>
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Ensuring Students Demonstrate Learning at High Levels

The third component of a rigorous classroom provides each student with opportunities to demonstrate learning at high levels. We often hear that, “If teachers provide more challenging lessons that include extra support, then learning will happen.” We’ve learned that if we want students to show us they understand what they learned at a high level, we also need to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate they have truly mastered that learning. One way to accomplish that is through increased student engagement.

Student engagement is a critical aspect of rigor. In too many classrooms, most of the instruction consists of the teacher-centered large group instruction, perhaps in an interactive lecture or discussion format. The general practice during these lessons is for the teacher to ask a question and then call on a student to respond. While this provides an opportunity for one student to demonstrate his or her understanding, the remaining students don’t do so. Another option would be for the teacher to allow all students to
respond either through pair-share, thumbs up or down, writing an answer on small whiteboards and sharing their response, or responding on a handheld computer that tallies responses. Such activities hold each student accountable for demonstrating their understanding.

**Indicators of High-Levels of Student Engagement**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Negative Indicators</th>
<th>Positive Indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>♦ One student responds</td>
<td>♦ All students respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦ Two or three students discuss content</td>
<td>♦ All students discuss content in small groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦ Students are asked if they understand, with a simple yes or no and no probing</td>
<td>♦ All students write a response in a journal or exit slip</td>
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When you talk with your teachers about their instructional practices, you can also ask them about engagement and how they design lessons to promote positive student engagement and high-levels of student accountability for demonstrating their learning.

**Tool 3 – Rubric Reflections**

On the following pages, you’ll find Tool 3A-Rubric for Gauging Progress Towards Rigor that describes the varying components of rigor. It was originally introduced in *Rigor is NOT a Four-Letter Word* to be used as a general tool and a starting point for discussions about rigor. Depending on your situation, you may want to start the process described below with your administrative team, school leadership or improvement teams, or all faculty and staff.

**What if...**

“Should I begin using the rubric with everyone, or should I start with my leadership team? Is there a best way?”

Good question. There is no one best strategy. You will want to consider your school, the faculty, and where you are on your journey to becoming more rigorous. We believe it is always important to build a cadre of leaders who can advocate for your vision. Therefore, you might want to start with your leadership team, or an informal group of teacher leaders. They will offer you advice about how you might use the rubric with the larger group.
### Tool 3A  Rubric for Gauging Progress Toward Rigor

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<th>Starting at the Base</th>
<th>Making Progress Up the Mountain</th>
<th>Reaching New Heights</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Expectations for Learning</strong></td>
<td>I am working to understand what it means to say that each student can learn, will learn, and I will help them do so.</td>
<td>I believe that each student can learn, will learn, and I will help them do so. I sometimes act on those beliefs or I act on those beliefs with some students.</td>
<td>I consistently act on my unwavering belief that each student can learn, will learn, and I will help them do so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support and Scaffolding</strong></td>
<td>I sometimes provide support and scaffolding. This support is usually general and built into the regular lesson. At times, I provide optional extra help.</td>
<td>I sometimes provide the appropriate support and scaffolding students need to ensure their success. This support is customized for each student at times. At times, I provide optional extra help.</td>
<td>I regularly provide the support and scaffolding each student needs to ensure their success. This support is customized for each student and supports my belief that students are not allowed to not learn. It is appropriate and encourages independence. If extra help is needed, it is required, and is offered when the student can attend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demonstration of Learning</strong></td>
<td>Occasionally, some students demonstrate understanding of content in a way that is appropriately challenging. More often than not, students prefer basic assignments or questions. Students are generally given one opportunity to show they have mastered content.</td>
<td>Sometimes, students are given the opportunity to show they understand content in a way that is appropriately challenging. Students are beginning to see the value of more challenging assessments. At times, I provide alternative assessments and will allow students to redo work.</td>
<td>Each student regularly demonstrates their understanding of content in ways that are appropriately challenging. In other words, students do not take the easy way out in terms of showing me they learned. I provide alternative ways for students to do this and allow those students who need it extra time or a second opportunity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Student Engagement</strong></td>
<td>There are limited opportunities for students to be engaged in learning beyond listening and taking notes. Most of my instruction is directed toward the whole class. At times, I provide the opportunity for students to work with another student to apply their learning.</td>
<td>Some students are actively engaged in learning. There is a mix of whole group and small group/partner activities, and some activities are interactive. I facilitate some activities, and some ownership is shifted to students. However, the focus is still on me.</td>
<td>All students are actively engaged in learning. Each is participating in every aspect of the lesson by making connections, contributing to the discussion (whether small group, partner, or whole group), and responding to learning. The majority of the activities are interactive, and whole group activities are limited. I am the facilitator, and the focus for learning is on the students.</td>
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(continued)
There are two options for using the rubric. You might begin by introducing the definition of rigor, as well as the full rubric. Next, discuss the criteria descriptions. Finally, using Tool 3B-Rubric Template for Gauging Progress Towards Rigor, ask all participants to rank each area and list examples to support their decision. You may want to give them an extended time, such as a week, to reflect and more fully complete this activity. Finally, discuss their perspectives to agree on where your school is on the road toward rigor.

The second option is to distribute the rubric without any discussion. Once participants have completed their rubrics and reflections, then discuss what they discovered. For more information on similar processes, see Chapter Four: Ownership and Shared Vision.

What if…

“How important are the examples on the rubric template?”

Examples are useful because they help us begin to assess your current progress. What is critically important is to make sure that there is clear evidence for the examples you cite. You will want to avoid talking in generalities and try to get really specific in what you see. For example, a teacher might believe that they hold high expectations for learning but cannot cite a specific verbal or nonverbal behavior that conveys that message to students. The more precise the example, the more useful it will be for your continued planning.