



# Professional Practices

For the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leader

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## About the Author



Marcia Baldanza, the author of *Professional Practices* and a Just ASK Senior Consultant, lives in Arlington, Virginia. Until recently she worked for the School District of Palm Beach County, Florida, where she was an Area Director for School Reform and Accountability; prior to that she was Director of Federal and State Programs.

## Making Rigor a Reality

I am an ardent believer in the idea that people perform at high levels when they understand the expectation or definition of “high level” that is being held for them and are supported as needed. I see this in my graduate class, my consulting, my conferencing, and even my 12-year old. Establishing a common definition or language system helps set the expectation and when done collaboratively, gets buy-in and understanding. Here are a few examples.

- I am teaching a graduate course on instructional leadership this semester. While there are several important areas of focus in the course outline, helping them understand the value of building common understandings of big (and sometimes little) constructs is critical to the quality of feedback they deliver, the professional development they plan, and how they evaluate teaching and learning. For each big component we study, coming to a common definition/understanding helps us move forward on the same page. After having spent two class session focused on equity and cultural responsiveness, our last couple of classes focused on rigorous instruction and assessment. To begin our study, students jotted their own definitions of rigorous instruction on one side of an index card and at the end of the class they revisited their definitions and made revisions. After our study of rigor, the revised definitions were remarkably similar. We now examine teaching and learning from the same definition of rigor.
- At a conference with a principal about the quantity and quality of her observations of teachers, she shared that at a recent principals’ meeting, she had heard that “frequent visits to classrooms keeps you informed of what’s going on.” The very next day, she put in place a schedule that had her moving from classroom to classroom with little attention to the teaching and learning that was or wasn’t occurring. Because of the rapid visits, she was unable to deliver quality feedback or even recall in which class she saw effective learning experiences. The teachers were concerned and wanted their principal to visit their rooms, talk to student about what they were learning, and give them feedback on their teaching. After a meeting with the principal to define “frequent visits” and come to agreement on what those should look like, she was able to engage in the practice of getting into classrooms to observe teaching and

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- learning in more meaningful ways that gave her the opportunity to provide growth-producing feedback.
- My 12-year old son’s definition of putting his clean clothes “away” was very different than mine. “Away” in his mind was anything from the clean clothes remaining in the laundry basket all week, since he was going to wear them again anyways to piling them on the closet floor to putting them all into one drawer (and then trying to shove it closed). After sitting with him and coming to a common understanding (which included elements of his definition and mine) of “putting your clean clothes away,” it’s done with minimal reminding.

I believe important ideas need to be discussed and agreed upon before taking action. While my son’s clothes not being “put away” the way his mother wants isn’t morally or life threatening (my two criteria for intervening), not providing rigorous instruction and assessment as a path to equity, is. This issue of *Professional Practices* embeds the **PSEL** standard that focuses on leadership of curriculum, instruction, and assessment as I make a case for rigorous instruction as a way to improve academic, emotional, and social outcomes. I offer ways to begin the conversation on rigor at your school and sustain your efforts. It starts with a common definition and expectations. To assist you in keeping rigor front and center, I include ways to have staff collaboratively produce and share rigor look-fors, ways to increase rigor, rigor exemplars, and even walk-through/learning walk recording documents. I summarize key points from four frameworks with multiple levels of rigor, one of which no doubt you will recognize from its use in your district and/or state.

## Making a Case for Rigor

**ALERT! Alarming statistics follow!** In a 2006 study titled **The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts**, almost 500 dropout student interviews and responses from focus groups revealed that 88% of these students were not failing and 70% felt that they could have graduated. Read that again. It is really bothersome, don’t you think? If these students weren’t failing and felt they could have graduated, what happened?

### Findings from the Report

- 47% of dropouts stated classes weren’t interesting
- 43% had excessive absences that prevented them from catching up
- 69% reported not being motivated to succeed
- 66% would have done better if more had been demanded of them

### Suggestions from the Dropouts

- 71% said make school more interesting
- 55% noted help is needed for students having problems
- 81% requested more world related learning
- 75% wanted smaller classes

Standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment that are intellectually challenging, cooperative, empowering, meaningful, and authentic would reduce these statistics dramatically and rapidly. I believe that every student PK-12 wakes up in the morning eager to get to school to learn, be with friends, participate in class discussions and activities. I believe in the resiliency of children to see each new day as a new beginning and new chance to get it right. Sometimes, we adults place barriers and bias in front of them that result in frustration, anger, disengagement, and hopelessness. Sometimes, we adults act on the research to provide rigorous opportunities for all of our students and support them all to demonstrate learning at high levels. There are plenty of schools and classrooms where this happens each day. I challenge you to make sure that every student in your building gets this each and every day. Barbara Blackburn, author of *Rigor is not a Four-Letter Word*, and several other books on rigor, shared five myths about rigor, and “they are indicative of the common misconceptions: that difficult, dry, academic, sink-or-swim learning is inherently rigorous.”

### Blackburn's 5 Myths about Rigor

Myth #1: Lots of Homework is a Sign of Rigor

Myth #2: Rigor Means Doing More

Myth #3: Rigor is Not for Everyone

Myth #4: Providing Support Means Lessening Rigor

Myth #5: Resources Equal Rigor

Blackburn further says that true rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he/she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels.

She advises that principals launch the conversation about rigor by asking teachers three questions:

- What is rigor?
- What are teachers doing in a rigorous classroom?
- What are students doing in a rigorous classroom?

I recommend that after they have written their responses (without names) to these three questions, collect those responses and share them with the group. This sharing of responses illustrates how varied the perspectives are on rigorous teaching and learning. You can then shape their responses into Blackburn's common definition.

It's important to recognize that teachers are working hard with what they know. But, when we know better, we do better. Reflect back on the statistics and suggestions from the high school dropouts. The moral crisis of that report is that we adults have authority over each of the statements made by these teens. Teachers have an obligation to provide instruction that is interesting and world related. Principals have an obligation to remove obstacles that prevent teachers from teaching and students from learning. Principals can provide smaller classes by creative scheduling and helping students needing it.

I further recommend that after you've unpacked each part of Blackburn's definition, make three T-charts and ask teachers to provide examples of what they would see and hear in a classroom where there were **high expectations** to learn at high levels, **support** that allowed learning at high levels, and **demonstrations** of learning at high levels. You can turn those examples into look-fors when observing in classrooms and providing feedback. Hopefully, the suggestions that follow will surface on those charts.

### When Observing for High Expectations, What Should You See?

- **Student efficacy:** Through actions and comments (written and verbal), the teachers projects to the students, "I believe you can."
- **Positive affect:** The teacher has a positive affect, but does not accept excuses for lack of effort and does not give up by moving to another student.
- **Wait Time:** The teacher provides adequate wait time (3-5 seconds) that conveys to the students, "I expect you to answer."
- **Randomized calling-on pattern.** The teacher does not repeatedly call on the first student to raise her hand or the same five students over and over.
- **Scaffolding:** If a student is unsure, the teacher doesn't give up and call on another student. Instead, the teacher scaffolds the student and presses him to the answer. "I expect you to answer and I will help you do so."



## When Observing for Providing Support, What Should You See?

It is critical that teachers design lessons that move students to more challenging work while providing on-going support to students as they learn. If we increase our expectations for learning at high levels and don't support, we're being reckless. When observing in classrooms, principals should be able to see:

- **Extra help:** All students receive extra help in a non-threatening manner.
- **Embedded review:** Opportunities for review and individualized support are built into the lesson.
- **Tutoring for mastery:** Individual or small group tutoring is required for students who do not master material. Ideally, this would be during the regular school day. The message is, "You can and will learn this material."

## When Observing for Demonstrating Learning, What Should You See?

- **Questioning techniques:** When the teacher asks a question, all students are asked to respond through **Think-Pair-Share** or other paired discussions, interactive white boards, response cards, etc. These checks for understanding are central to the idea of rigor in the classroom and the teacher knows that all students are learning, not just the one called on to respond. **Alert:** Teachers might ask an epic rigorous question and accept a non-rigorous response. This turns that epic question upside-down to a failure. Teachers cannot and should not let a student off the hook. They should scaffold to get an equally epic rigorous response.
- **Variety of assessments:** Students are given a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning. This could include tests with wide ranges of question types or that students are allowed to show their understanding through creative projects.
- **Multiple opportunities:** Students are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning. This can be through a "not yet" grading policy or opportunities to rework missed questions of a test. After all, isn't the expectation that the student learns the material as opposed to filing away a failing grade where the student doesn't ever learn the missed material, or worse, fails again with the same content that should have been corrected earlier. By allowing only one opportunity for students to show mastery, teachers are telling students that they weren't expected to learn it anyway.

## A Great Strategy for Keeping Rigor Front and Center

Engage staff in a rigorous, active, and fun exercise as they are implementing this new definition of rigor. In the week prior to a faculty meeting, invite teachers in groups of three or four to walk around the school during their planning time, before or after school. They should look for examples of rigorous products, teaching, and learning around the school. They should take a photo of their rigorous observation(s) and place it into a shared slideshow with a bit of text to describe the image. At the faculty meeting show the images and have staff do two things. First, determine the level of rigor displayed and then discuss ways to increase the rigor even more. This is an excellent opportunity to focus on one of the rigor frameworks such as:

- Daggett's Rigor and Relevance Framework
- Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK)
- Bloom's Taxonomy
- Hess' Cognitive Rigor Matrix

When I did this exercise with my doctoral students I prepared response cards for them to use as the image is being displayed and discussed. This allowed me to get a quick read on individual and group understanding and offer support and validation

There are many classroom walkthrough guides, checklists, forms that can help narrow the focus and target the desired areas for feedback. I strongly suggest that you create your own walkthrough tool by closely examining others, adjusting the language to fit your school and needs, and then teach the tool to teachers before using it.

## BIG Ideas That Need Common Language and Concept System



These are a handful of vocabulary words that should be commonly defined in the context of your situation in order for all students to be able to benefit. For any of these terms, concepts, or ideas you could ask five teachers offer a definition and you'd get five different responses. These differences can be complicating for students since they often share teachers who have different understandings and implementations of the same idea. So, work hard to get everyone on the same page, using the same words to mean the same things.

To get a student's perspective, I asked my 12-year old what makes a good lesson. Here are Enzo's words on the matter. "Good lessons are lessons that challenge you and make you think to help you learn." Good lessons are engaging and fun. They are cooperative and understand the need to be social beings. Good lessons empower students with meaningful work. Good lessons are authentic, student-centered and based on mastery.

I challenge school leaders everywhere to launch that conversation on rigor at your next faculty meeting, ensure that all students have good rigorous lessons daily by watching, listening, and asking questions and define a common language for your big ideas to help you support and manage implementation.

**What are you waiting for? Let's go!**



## Tools for Measuring Rigor Frameworks, Matrices, and Taxonomies

### Daggett's Rigor and Relevance Framework

The **Rigor and Relevance Framework** is well researched. It includes four quadrants built on Bloom's Taxonomy and an application model. Quadrant 4 tasks are definitely rigorous!

[www.leadered.com/pdf/Rigor\\_Relevance\\_Framework\\_2014.pdf](http://www.leadered.com/pdf/Rigor_Relevance_Framework_2014.pdf). For more information about the **Rigor and Relevance Framework**, go to *The Rigor/Relevance Framework: A Guide to Focusing Resources to Increase Student Performance*. [www.leadered.com/pdf/Rigor Relevance Framework White Paper 2016.pdf](http://www.leadered.com/pdf/Rigor_Relevance_Framework_White_Paper_2016.pdf).

### Bloom's Taxonomy

Both the original and updated versions are well-respected taxonomies that are embedded in most sets of state learning standards. Bloom's is based on the construct that learners must master lower levels of thinking about a topic before they move to the higher levels of thinking; that is, students must remember and comprehend before they can evaluate or create. Vanderbilt University has an informative page devoted to **Bloom's Taxonomy**.

<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy>

### Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK)

*Edutopia* provides a brief and clear explanation of **Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK)**. It includes content specific examples of each level. An important point is that students do not need to master lower levels before they do Level 4 tasks; that is, all students can do strategic and extended thinking. Level 4 tasks are definitely rigorous!

[www.edutopia.org/blog/webbs-depth-knowledge-increase-rigor-gerald-aungst](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/webbs-depth-knowledge-increase-rigor-gerald-aungst). There are multiple links embedded in the article.

### Hess' Cognitive Rigor Matrix

Karin Hess developed the **Cognitive Rigor Matrix** by applying **Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK)** and **Bloom's Taxonomy**.

[www.karin-hess.com/cognitivrigor-and-dok](http://www.karin-hess.com/cognitivrigor-and-dok) and

[www.corelearn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/dok-rigor-guide.pdf](http://www.corelearn.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/dok-rigor-guide.pdf)

<https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Teaching/Educator-Evaluation-System/How-to-Design-and-Select-Quality-Assessments/Webbs-DOK-Flip-Chart.pdf.aspx> is a presentation by Dr. Hess titled "A Guide for Using **Webb's Depth of Knowledge** with **Common Core State Standards**." It is really useful, even for states not using the **Common Core**. The levels are clearly explained and apply to any set of standards.

Paula Rutherford's *Instruction for All Students* (pages 231-238) addresses **Bloom's Taxonomy**, **Daggett's Rigor and Relevance Framework**, and **Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK)** in a section titled Building on Bloom's.



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