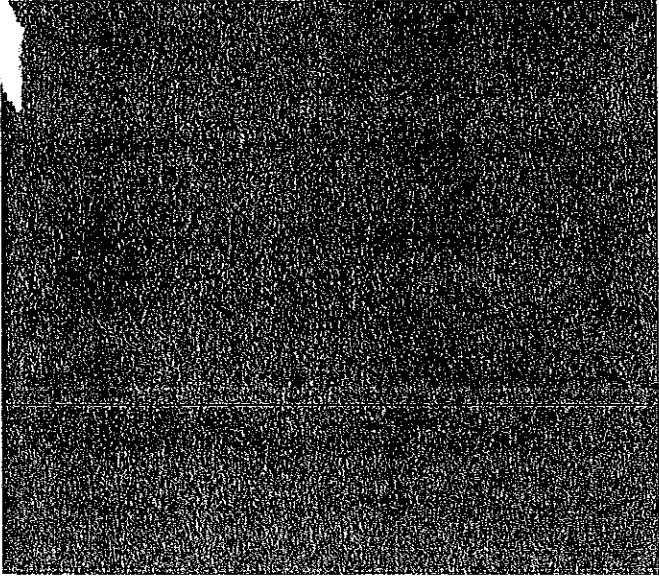


The Power of Rigor

IMPROVING
INSTRUCTIONAL
RIGOR AT THE
SECONDARY
LEVEL

ERIC J. JONES





Instructional rigor begins with raising student expectations with an explicit goal of developing college-ready high school graduates. At the secondary level in the Lawrence Public Schools, we are beginning the transition from a norm-referenced grading system, where students are graded against each other on a bell curve, to a standards-based system, where all students are expected to meet content and performance standards before moving forward. To make this transition, instructional practices will need to change. It is important to note that we are not asking teachers to work harder: because in our current urban environment, teachers already work incredibly hard to meet their students' needs. But in a traditional structure, it is often the case that the teachers work harder than the students. Shifting to a standards-based environment forces students to be active participants in their own learning and teachers can shift to more of a coaching role in the classroom.

Currently, there is an incredible opportunity to make these changes across our six high schools. Change begins at the secondary level with classroom structures. In every class, regardless of the content, teachers will need to be explicit regarding learning outcomes. Students must know what is to be learned and how they will be assessed. Instructionally, we will need to shift away from students knowing what activity they will complete that day towards students knowing what they are expected to learn that day. This is a vital towards improving instructional rigor. A lesson in which all students complete the instructional activity may be far less rigorous—and less successful—than a lesson where the instructor is assessing whether or not

students have met learning objectives that day. Formative assessment strategies—short assessment tools used throughout the course of a given instructional unit—allow teachers to adjust instruction based upon student learning or to address student misconceptions. This lends itself to far greater rigor than those classrooms where students are tested or quizzed only at the end of the week or unit.

Rigorous instruction at the secondary level requires that students read critically and write with a purpose. When walking through classrooms in any content area, you will see currently that students are simply not reading enough. There are read-alouds in some classrooms, but we need to implement strategies to explicitly teach students to read critically. This means teaching and learning differentiated reading strategies for fiction versus non-fiction and learning to use a textbook critically. Students must learn to look at information from alternate perspectives than their own, connect ideas and make sense of new content for themselves. Learning to write effectively must also become an integral part of instructional practices. Students must have daily opportunities to write effectively across contents and genres.

Rigorous secondary classrooms are environments where teachers check for understanding daily. Did students learn what they were expected to learn that day? Are all students ready to move on? If not, they must determine which students needs more support and what type of support they need. There does not need to be a formal graded daily assessment, but rigorous classrooms are environments where students are expected to show if they have learned a new piece of information. Hence, building in time to assess student learning is a crucial component of building a rigorous instructional environment.

At the secondary level in Lawrence, we have a long way to go to improve the level of instructional rigor. There is no question as to whether or not we should make these instructional changes. The reality is we must make these instructional changes to ensure our students can be successful in college and in the twenty-first century economy. The good news is that we have faculties who have the knowledge and the desire to make these instructional changes for students. By working together, we will shift instructional practices to develop more rigorous learning environments towards ensuring all our students are college-ready at graduation.



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Leading in a Small High School

by MICHAEL FIATO

“In the Humanities and Leadership Development (HLD) High School, leadership is the driving force behind the school’s culture and climate. Leadership takes on many roles and shapes and is systematically embedded into the fabric of the school day.”

Embedded Leadership in the Curriculum

HLD teachers work collaboratively to construct and plan interdisciplinary lessons that embed the theme of leadership into the curriculum. For example, during this election year, two history classrooms in conjunction with the video production class, held a presidential debate. Students were divided into Sen. Obama and Sen. McCain camps in the AP (Advanced Placement) U.S. Government class. Four students were chosen to play the roles of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates. They studied the relevant issues and their classmates worked together to prepare the candidates to respond to questions that were developed from the AP U.S. History class. The HLD Video Production class taped and edited the event and then broadcast it during the Advisory period. All HLD students voted for the candidates based on the substance of their responses, how much the students responses paralleled the position of the candidates, their delivery and their presentation skills.

This event not only exposed all HLD students to the key issues facing our nation today, it afforded students a chance to learn while doing. This authentic performance task was designed to build critical thinking, research and communication skills, while connecting the current issues of today within the Massachusetts History Frameworks and the district’s Essential Learning Outcomes. This integration of ideas is a major focal point of our mission as a school, to teach leadership through involvement and action on a local, national, and global level. HLD students’ involvement in the political process is a great example of that leadership.

Freshmen Seminar

All incoming ninth-graders take a class called Freshmen Seminar. This full-year course is focused on helping students successfully make the transition from middle school to ninth grade. Curricular topics emphasize developing students’ self-awareness, high school readiness and leadership style. Mr. Nicholas Beauchamp, HLD Freshmen Seminar teacher, developed the curriculum and is amazed at the impact this class has had on the overall students development and growth.

“Students come to high school having not been exposed to the rigors of secondary education, and in a short time this class has become an essential element of an HLD education,” said Beauchamp. “Leadership Seminar helps students to develop skills that they will need to be successful in high school and in higher education.”

The seminar teaches students to think critically, read for understanding, develop their communication and decision making skills, conduct effective research and practice positive study habits. This is all done through an interactive, hands-on approach that will lead to a capstone project. The capstone project will be a community service project that students have researched and planned out starting in their Freshman Seminar class and will act on in their final year of high school. The ultimate goal of this project and all of our initiatives in HLD is to help students be involved in their community, to be successful academically and socially in high school, and to be truly prepared to succeed in college by the time they graduate.



Principal Fiato with students and teachers from the HLD High School

Distributive Leadership

Teachers in HLD assume many leadership responsibilities in the school. All HLD teachers are organized into groups around the Seven Essential Elements of School Transformation—the driving force behind our comprehensive education plan. Teacher leaders are divided into teams to promote clear, focused and targeted action plans to improve teaching and learning. All of our staff members, including teachers, paraprofessionals and safety officers, are structured and divided into teams based on the principles of the Seven Essential Elements. This researched-based system helps our school focus on the areas that the HLD High School must address to initiate and sustain improved student achievement efforts and shape the school's comprehensive education plan.

HLD teachers, students, central office staff, representatives from institutions of higher education, community members and parents make up our design team. Our design team sets the agenda for our long range vision and planning. Design team members meet quarterly to review progress and make recommendations for programmatic changes that are aligned with the theme of HLD with the goal to improve teaching and learning.

Team members rotate responsibilities on a weekly basis to enable every teacher to assume leadership roles during the course of the year. The teams set their own agendas in collaboration with the principal and assistant principal. Since the teams meet daily, sufficient time is available to create meaningful opportunities to look at student work, engage in text-based discussions and professional learning opportunities, meet with parents and students in need of extra support, and collaborate to plan interdisciplinary lessons and instruction together. Mr. Brian Bates, ninth grade English teacher, has been a team leader for two years and feels that common planning time has a positive effect on building leadership capacity in the staff.

"When teachers are given opportunities to take on leadership roles in the school, it increases our sense of ownership and accountability."



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