RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS

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Our Path to College and Career Readiness for Every Student

Rationale

The current Central Dauphin School District administrative team reviewed qualitative and quantitative data during the 2012-13 school year and identified several areas of weakness in our services to students. The main areas acknowledged as needing improvement included the methods of delivering instruction in the classrooms and the current state of the district curriculum. These shortcomings were not found to be the fault of the classroom teachers, but rather a system-wide effort to focus on test scores at the expense of a rigorous and relevant educational experience in every classroom.

Dr. Bill Daggett of the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) spoke to the professional staff of our district in March, 2013. In his address, he stated, “While our schools continue to provide a quality education to our students, the world in which they will live and work is changing and advancing at a faster rate than the improvements to our educational system.” Dr. Daggett urged us as professional educators to embrace a system-wide strategic approach to address student performance. He polled the audience and found that most of us agreed that we were not focused on what matters most, preparing students to be college and career ready, but rather on the deliverables of a system that not only focused on the next state test, but did so to the detriment of a high quality education. This cannot be our mission.

The leadership team of the Central Dauphin School District agreed with the survey results from March, 2013. We believe that we can no longer wait to do right by our students in preparing them for a challenging world and for life after school. We need to move beyond a focus on basic academics to a far greater emphasis on learner engagement and personal skill
development. We need to do so in a way that is relevant to the 21st Century, not the one in which we grew up, a century that ended more than 13 years ago. More importantly, we need to do this as a district, not as one teacher in a single classroom. It is our duty to provide a high quality education to every child in every classroom in every school in our district, regardless of where those children live. A zip code cannot be what determines educational outcomes.

The Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships (RRR) initiative in our district was born out of these beliefs. We are confident that to improve our district, we must do so school by school, teacher by teacher, leader by leader. Our goal is to transform learning, teaching, and leading in every Central Dauphin classroom and school through a focus on positive relationships and rigorous and relevant instruction.

Recall Dr. Daggett’s point last March: relevance makes rigor possible. Equally important is the concept of strong positive relationships. According to Ray McNulty, a senior fellow at the ICLE, when students feel connected, cared about, and supported in their schools, they can achieve their best academically and personally. He has said that the full power and potential of learning belongs to the person who is adaptive and can apply knowledge to new things. He calls it “living in Quad D.” From the training our teachers began to receive in the summer of 2013, we know that Quad D is all about adaptation, about competently applying skills and knowledge to make predictions, and about finding solutions and drawing conclusions about complex problems or unpredictable situations in the real world. Our initiative revolves around building rigor, relevance and relationships into the everyday conduct of our professional practice, for every employee of the district.
Timeline for Professional Development

Dr. Daggett described a framework for such a system-wide approach as the Rigor, Relevance and Relationships Framework. This framework will be the basis for opportunity for professional development in which we participate in the years moving forward. The professional development in which we will all engage, from the superintendent, to the principals, to the classroom teachers and other certified professionals, and the para-professional staff that supports them, will be designed to be sustainable and to build capacity in our staff.

You may have noticed that faculty meetings and department meetings are starting to look different. At every level, these meetings should now be periods reserved for professional development and training. The in-service days that we set aside will be about learning and understanding the four quadrants of the Rigor and Relevance Framework and how to re-design instruction at every level in order to focus far greater time in Quadrants C and D. We will create opportunities for teachers to work together with grade-level or content-similar colleagues to design lessons that go far beyond Quadrants A and B.

Our sessions held in the summer of 2013 were well-received by teachers. The survey results indicated strong positive support. One glaring misconception was that all of this was tied to the Common Core State Standards. In fact, our initiative is not about the Common Core, although it is our responsibility and duty under the PA School Code to implement the new PA Core Standards. However, one of our objectives in this initiative will be to realign our curriculum with the recently approved PA Core Standards and to implement the revisions as soon as possible.

WE Surveys constituted the next step of the initiative and were completed in September and October of 2013. The responses from students, teachers, staff, parents, and the community
provided the foundation for improvement plans for every building. Two glaring areas of concern from students and parents which played out across the district regardless of the school were the following: (1) There is a major discrepancy in how the students and teachers view their relationships; and (2) The work being asked of our students is not particularly challenging and it has little relevance to the real world.

In September and October of 2013, staff volunteered to be members of the school leadership teams at each building. These teams worked with leadership coaches from ICLE to review survey data for their schools and to begin to build school improvement plans based on the survey responses and school data. Having site-based leadership teams ensures that the plans for improvement are uniquely designed for each individual school. Bill Daggett suggested that every school has its own DNA. One size does not fit all and we have ensured individuality and specificity for each school community by employing this strategy. The members of the school team will benefit from training with leadership coaches and be better prepared to communicate the message and aspects of change to the building staff. This is one way in which we can build capacity and sustainability.

The next step in our initiative was to assess our curriculum, essentially the heart of everything we do in the classroom. Our consultants from Scholastic Achievement Partners (SAP) have reviewed our curriculum and have observed many teachers since we began our partnership in July. They have discovered areas of strength upon which we can capitalize. However, they have also uncovered serious concerns. In many areas, our use of the state standards is inconsistent and content areas lack coherence within units and from unit to unit. Our use of high level questions is minimal. In the secondary schools, differentiation is limited. Many maps, sequences, timelines, and units are constructed skill-by-skill or standard-by-standard instead of by a broader
more integrated approach across standards. In this single area of concern lies the answer to the question of how we can meet all of the standards while simultaneously introducing rigor and relevance into our everyday practice. We can do so by integrating multiple standards into single lessons. Finally, our assessments seldom go beyond Quadrant A, putting our students at a distinct disadvantage for the newly upgraded PSSAs and Keystones.

The good news is uplifting and encouraging. The SAP observers found that many teachers are collaborating and diving into the new standards. They saw strong positive evidence of common assessments and common rubrics included in the curriculum maps. The inclusion of non-fiction is a strong focus across grades and subjects. Writing appears to be valued by most teachers and is evident in the maps and timelines, and vocabulary is featured as an important component in the maps. More importantly, they have affirmed the passion, commitment and hard work of teachers in the classroom and on the curriculum-writing teams.

The in-service held on October 14, 2013, was to have been the next step in introducing teachers to the Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Framework, continuing to enhance the lessons we currently teach. Again, we reviewed the survey results with a critical eye. The district administrative team found the results to be disappointing. However, our dissatisfaction with the direction in which we appeared to be headed, and widespread dissatisfaction by those who completed the surveys, helped us to reverse our course. Many of you found the training to be repetitive and some questioned our use of outside consultants to instruct our teachers. We needed to use outside consultants because we were all learning the new paradigm. With a Department of Curriculum and Instruction that contained two people and one secretary, none of whom were experts in the Framework, it would have been impossible to deliver the in-service sessions on the scale of 900 staff. Yet the survey contained such venomous responses, we felt we
had to take a different approach and to speed up the timeline of building capacity. The surveys indicated that we had missed the mark with respect to relevance. We found that to be unacceptable. And yes, we listened.

The result of that change in direction is what you will be participating in on March 7. We invited a group of our own teachers and specialists to join us for intensive training in developing and delivering Quadrant D lessons to small groups of their colleagues. For example, a fifth grade teacher will deliver a lesson to other fifth grade teachers. An Algebra teacher will deliver a Quad D lesson to other Algebra teachers. Nurses and counselors will meet with their colleagues to engage in ways to improve their relationships with the rest of the school staff as well as with the students.

Let me take a minute to recognize the amazing efforts of this group of 115 teachers and specialists. It may be difficult to get on board with fundamental systemic change. It may take us out of our comfort zones to sit in an in-service and be exposed to new and challenging instructional ideas. Let me assure you, there is nothing more intimidating and stressful than to be the teacher on the front lines of presenting new ideas to a staff, given the uncertainty of what one will face in a room of 20 colleagues on March 7. Yet this diverse group of teachers, counselors, media specialists, nurses, therapists, and others came together to be trained extensively by the SAP coaches who were originally expected to be your trainers at the in-service. This group accepted the challenge, put aside their fears, and embraced the Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Framework. They have created Quad D lessons to present to you on March 7th, knowing that, as a group, the professional staff can be among the most discerning and critical audiences anywhere. Please accept these professionals as trailblazers in our district and as
leaders among you who are willing to assist in sharing this vision of change and what they have learned with you.

Another concern raised was that there was little time to collaborate during the October 14th in-service. On March 7th, the second half of the day will be collaboration with grade-level or content area colleagues. In the first half of the day, you will see a Quadrant D lesson in your specific area and you will learn how to critique it and develop one of your own. Classroom teachers must bring a lesson or a unit that they plan to teach before the end of the year. Specialists will bring resources on which to build stronger relationships within the school community. The professional staff should bring their laptops or personal devices to use to complete the requirements of the second half of the day. The training sessions will be located in CD High School or CD East High School, both of which have wireless access throughout the building. This was another concern raised in October and we have addressed it by limiting the training locations to those that have functional wireless service throughout the building.

The professional staff will be offered follow-up options after the training in which the products they developed on March 7 will be reviewed by school teams or administrators. All members of the professional staff will choose an option to be accountable for sharing the lesson they taught and their reflections about the experience. Some may choose to use the lesson they have developed for formal observations before the school year ends. Others may choose to demonstrate their lessons at a faculty or department meeting. Others might choose the option to videotape their lessons or to complete a lesson reflection worksheet. Regardless of the option you choose, you must design that lesson in the second half of the day on March 7th and submit it to your building principal by March 10, 2014.
We have read the minutes from department and grade level meetings regarding this initiative and our perceived inability to communicate its scope with the staff. I encourage you to talk to your building principal to discuss the enormous contribution of your individual building leadership teams. As for the district administration’s failure to effectively communicate the specifics of the initiative, I take responsibility for that. We have been so absorbed in setting up a foundation for the leadership teams at every level and in every building that we have failed to detail the scope of the initiative to the staff. The purpose of this report is to provide you with the information you need moving forward. I welcome your input, questions and comments. Please direct those to me at cjohnson@cdschools.org.

We have also created a leadership team for the district as a whole. This includes teachers, other certified professionals, parents, principals, a community member, and various directors from the central administration including the departments of Curriculum and Instruction, Special Education, Pupil Services, Human Resources, Finance, Dr. Miller, and me. This team is working on a vision and mission statement for the district as a whole. The work of this committee will form the basis of our strategic plan moving forward.

**Dispelling a Few Myths about Rigor**

1. *A lot of homework is a sign of rigor.* False. Rigor is about a focus on depth, not coverage.

2. *Rigor means doing more.* False. Doing more often means doing more Quad A activities and frequent repetitions of things students have already learned. This narrow approach does not define a rigorous classroom.

3. *Rigor is not for everyone.* False. Lowering standards and lessening rigor does not ensure success for all. Students live up to (or down to) our expectations, whether they are
advanced or students with special needs. Rigor is different for different learners. This is why we differentiate in a rigorous classroom.

4. *Providing support means lessening rigor.* False. Rigor is about supporting students so that they can learn at high levels.

5. *Resources and rigor are the same.* False. The right resources can help raise rigor in the classroom but raising the level of rigor is NOT dependent on the resources you have. For example, a true-false test from the text book is not rigorous because students simply have to guess the answer. Yet adding one more step can increase the rigor. Asking students to re-write all false answers into true statements requires them to demonstrate a deeper understanding and increases the rigor of the test.

These ideas are the work of best-selling author Barbara Blackburn from her book *Rigor is Not a Four-Letter Word.* It is an excellent resource.

*What’s Next?*

You may be wondering what happens after March 7th. What is the next step in the professional development process? We intend to use feedback from that in-service to drive future learning opportunities. We will tailor upcoming training sessions to meet the needs of the staff in areas in which they have concerns. However, we are certain that you will receive ongoing support from the SAP consultants who will be in your buildings and classrooms to help you become proficient in writing lessons designed to engage all 21st Century learners. Further, we will provide new opportunities for you to work with your colleagues to collaborate in designing and evaluating lessons of the highest quality. We will also assemble teams to work with SAP curriculum specialists to address the weaknesses in our curriculum
and our maps. Finally, we will continue to develop our cadre of trained teachers by inviting another 100 of you to be the leaders in the next district-wide in-service training.

We envision this process unfolding over the next three years. I can assure you that nothing of any quality is created overnight. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Our change process and the learning curve associated with it must be deliberate. That is what will help make it effective and lasting.

**Summation**

This is the most comprehensive professional development initiative that our district has ever undertaken. A few things make it distinctive and different from all the rest. First, it is here to stay and it is something we all really must embrace. Think about it. Can you really say, as a professional, that you would rather teach like a 20th Century teacher than improve your practice and make it relevant to the learners you teach today? Is that professional or ethical? It is neither.

Second, the central administration is listening to the feedback of the professional staff, both positive and negative. Not only are we listening, but we have demonstrated repeatedly that, based on your feedback, we are willing to take action to re-align or re-tool the professional development opportunities that we are offering regarding Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. This is not a typical feature of past professional development scenarios.

Finally, when has our district ever undertaken any professional development initiative that included the participation of the staff, the parents, and the community as key players in the leadership structure and guidance of vision, goals, and the strategic plan? The entire model of our initiative has emanated from within the district. We are supported by experienced consultants who work for national leaders in educational reform. Together, we have formed
a partnership that will result in our students receiving the highest quality education, not based on the luck of the draw and the hope of getting a few great teachers each year. Our students will be the beneficiaries of a system-wide educational structure that supports the professional practice of great teachers and engaging learning experiences in every single classroom in this district. You are a part of that. Regardless of who we are, each and every one of us has the potential to improve. It is a certainty that if we are not improving each day, then we are stagnating and falling behind. We owe our students and the community our best. We are all in this together and this initiative is in place to support every educator.

I thank you for your willingness to learn, to grow, and to change. I understand that this is not easy work, but I promise you there is no work more valuable in education. We are attempting to meet the needs of every child in our district, to make each and every one of them college and career ready. Our platform of choice is the Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Framework, because we believe it most closely matches our goals and our beliefs in what school can be and what school can do for all students.

Respectfully,

Dr. Carol Johnson
Superintendent

Attachment:  *Rigor/Relevance Framework*
RIGOR/RELEVANCE FRAMEWORK

Assimilation

Application

Knowledge Taxonomy

Evaluation
Synthesis
Analysis
Application
Comprehension
Knowledge/Awareness

Application Model

Application to real-world unpredictable situations
Application to real-world predictable situations
Apply across disciplines
Apply in discipline

Knowledge in one discipline