Teaching for Rigor: A Call for a Critical Instructional Shift

Why essential shifts in instruction are necessary for teachers and students to succeed with college and career readiness standards.

Schools Are Already Seeing Results

Educators receiving early training on the Essentials for Achieving Rigor are already reporting a noticeable improvement in classroom instruction. Put into practice, **it is "absolutely exciting" to see teaching with increased rigor**, says one Florida high school principal. "As we support more of our teachers moving in that direction, it's going to directly impact student achievement. Ultimately, we need to develop kids who, when they leave us, are critical thinkers and problem solvers."

Witnessing the Shift

Martin County High School Principal Al Fabrizio discusses the instructional shifts he observed when teachers were trained in the Marzano Center Essentials for Achieving Rigor model:

"Seeing [teacher] Laura scaffold her lessons and her rigorous approach to questioning was absolutely exciting. As we support more of our teachers moving in that direction, it's going to directly impact student achievement. Ultimately we need to develop kids who, when they leave us, are critical thinkers and problem solvers.

And what better way to work on that skill, in an age when the information is at their fingertips, than to have kids move through the process where they are using their inferencing skills, drawing conclusions, hypothesizing, and then proving what they do hypothesize? That's the direction we must move in every content area and grade level, to continue to build our teacher capacity and ultimately to provide our kids with the skills to be successful for a lifetime."

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The Research

Many states have seen drastic drops in student test scores after making the transition to new assessments based on more rigorous standards. For districts that haven't shifted their instructional practices to meet the challenges of today's increasingly demanding standards, this is troubling news.

The Learning Sciences International research team looked at more than 2 million data points in one of the largest available databases of classroom observations and found that teachers are facing some serious challenges. **Less than 6% of the lessons observed in the database were devoted to the highest level of cognitively complex tasks involving hypothesis generation and testing.**

Now, even the best teachers are working hard to make the critical shifts in their pedagogy that will help students succeed with standards.

The data have shed light on an urgent need. In response, we've developed the Marzano Center Essentials for Achieving Rigor, a model of instruction explicitly designed to give teachers a clear road map that makes the journey toward increased rigor more efficient and focused.

Less than 6% of observed lessons were devoted to the highest level of cognitively complex tasks involving hypothesis generation and testing. The data indicate that most teachers are placing a significant majority of their classroom emphasis (58%) on teaching new content.

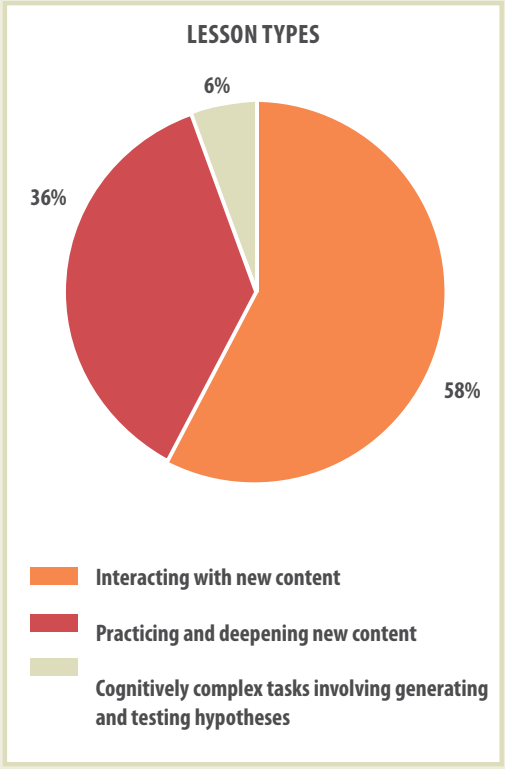


Figure 3: *Highest frequency strategies associated with lecture, practice, and review.*

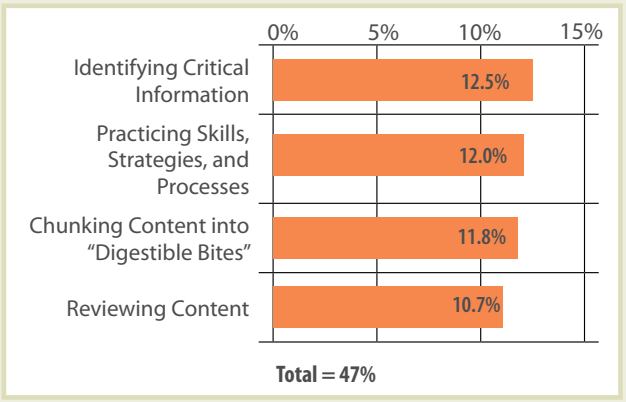
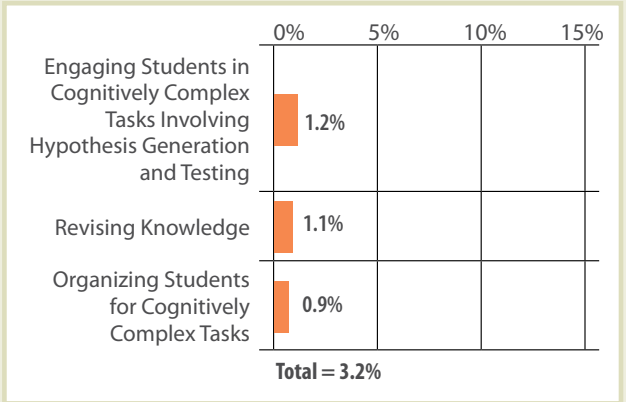


Figure 4: *Lowest frequency strategies, among the most critical for developing cognitively complex skills.*



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What Rigor Looks Like

Common Core State Standards and state versions of college and career readiness standards require more clarity in the progressions of learning being addressed in class. Teachers need to plan for not only what students should understand and be able to do by the end of the learning cycle, they need to scaffold their instruction from facts and details to robust generalizations and processes in order to reach these rigorous standards. As part of this clear progression of learning, students need more opportunities to apply their knowledge and make inferences based on what they are learning. The shift to rigorous standards also requires students to make and defend claims with sound evidence including grounds, backing, and qualifiers as part of utilizing the knowledge they acquire in class.

Throughout this progression of learning, scaffolded student autonomy should also be an area of focus. Students should frequently be asked to evaluate the validity and accuracy of their thinking and beliefs. At the conclusion of a learning cycle, students should be able to demonstrate the standard independent of help and describe how the details of the lesson built to support bigger ideas and processes.

A Non-Evaluative Model of Instruction

The Essentials provide a safe, evaluation-free zone for teachers to continue to grow as they practice and hone classroom strategies aligned to rigor. It gives them just the right guidance, support, coaching, and resources to make instructional changes that will help their students achieve.

Teachers love the Essentials because the model works with any evaluation system that a school currently has in place, but it doesn't evaluate. Rather, its chief objective is **to help educators focus on research-based, core classroom instructional strategies that build students' higher-order thinking skills,** such as analysis, reasoning, hypothesis generation and testing, and decision making.

Student-Centered Pedagogy

Rigorous instruction calls for educators to move away from traditional "sage on the stage" teaching methods. Instead, teachers will guide students toward accepting ownership of their own learning, empowering learners of all ages and abilities to solve complex, real-world problems whether they work individually or in collaborative groups.

The Essentials will **help teachers develop expertise in releasing autonomy to students, creating a student-centered pedagogy** in which the learner owns most of the responsibility for the learning—a key factor in raising achievement.

Narrow Achievement Gaps

Drops in student test scores can serve as a powerful call to action. The Essentials equip teachers with focused professional development—core classroom practices, planning and reflection tools, collaborative strategies, data analysis, and formative assessments—to move all students toward increased rigor.

As teachers perfect these skills, rigorous instruction essentially becomes embedded into their daily work. In turn, it becomes natural for them to **spend a larger portion of classroom time teaching cognitively complex skills** that engage and prepare students for the new assessments.

Download the 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."

"The training I received was priceless as far as my teaching career is concerned. I will be forever grateful as will my students this year and in the years to come."

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