

## Rigor In Our Schools...Accelerate to Remediate

by  
Lillie G. Jessie

“Our goal for students is *not* for them to be  
doctors, scientists, businesspersons, teachers or lawyers...  
But rather doctors, scientists, businessmen, teachers or lawyers  
*Who will change the world!*”

Equity Commitments Statement Stults  
Elementary School in Richardson, Texas

I put my hat into the race for a seat representing the Occoquan District on the Prince William County School Board without knowing anything about the politics that came with it. For me it was a “Call to serve” and remains that today. I knew what I valued as an educator for thirty-five years in this county but I was not sure that it aligned with the people in this district. My mantra was always “Make the main thing the main thing... high levels of student learning!” During the campaign we conducted a survey and I was pleased to learn that we had a shared vision. The word that resonated was “Rigor.” My most recent article was “Data, Data Everywhere but *Not a Drop to Drink.*” I have found the word “Rigor” is also *everywhere* but there is “too much to drink,” because it has too many meanings to too many people. This article addresses the meaning of the word as defined by the educational experts and me. Addressed also is why its presence in the classroom is critical to our *economic success as a nation.*

Barbara Blackburn, author of *Rigor is Not a Four-letter Word* defines rigor this way: “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.” Others authors have similar definitions but the two phrases that permeate the literature are “depth versus surface level teaching” and “real world-authentic experiences.” Many of my professional colleagues and I have had the wonderful opportunity of seeing students who were not suppose to learn, not just learn but learn at high levels. Blackburn says, “rigor is for every student you teach. That includes your students who are at risk of failure, your students with special needs, and your student for who English is not their native language.” I would add students in middle class America. They too have an achievement gap. Their gap is between their *potential*, what they are capable of doing, and their performance, what they are *actually* doing.

The above gaps results when there is a lack of “Self-Efficacy” by students or the belief that they can be anything in life (Dr. Jeff Howard-Efficacy Institute). Dr. Howard’s motto is “Smart is not what you are...smart is what you become.” Dr. Carol Dweck’s years of research with students found confirmed that intelligence is not “fixed” but malleable (growth intelligence). She says that when a child says he can’t do something you respond by using the word “Yet.” You simply say “you can’t do it YET!” I like to call it being *Yetted*. Dr. Blackburn found what I observed and

read in student surveys for years. Students, themselves know that other students can achieve at higher levels given the opportunity. When asked "If you were in charge of the school what would you change, one student's response was: "For people who don't understand as much... [they should] be in higher level classes to understand more [because] if they already don't know much, you don't want to teach them to not know much over and over." In other words, accelerate if you want to remediate.

Now to the reason of "Why" we should be concern: The world is changing at a rapid pace. Other countries are out-performing us in the academic arena. Sometimes as Americans we make excuses because we are so use to being number one that we find it downright insulting to believe that other countries can outperform us. We just cannot make the paradigm shift. Take Shani Davis', the number one speed skater in the world, response when it was announced that he could wear his original suit since the newly designed one may have been the cause of his poor performance at the Sochi Olympics. He said, "It has to be the suit because it is *definitely* not me." The suits were changed but it did not enhance his or the team's performance. He later admitted it could have been *him* or the prior training. At the end of the day, other countries outperformed us. Academically, other countries are improving rapidly while we are standing still. Remember, the "World" is where our students will compete in the future, not simply Virginia.

According to Education Trust one of our national education gatekeepers, " No matter how you cut the data our students aren't doing well compared with their peers in other countries."

- In 20<sup>th</sup> century learning illiterates were those *who could not read*...In 21<sup>st</sup> century learning illiterates will be those *who have not learned how to learn* (R.DuFour, 2014 Learning Forward Conference).
- Of the 34 Organization of Economic-Cooperation and Development countries, U.S.A ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in reading, 20<sup>th</sup> in science and 27<sup>th</sup> in math.
- We dropped from the first in the world in percentage of high school graduates to 22<sup>nd</sup> of 27 advanced economies (DuFour)
- Only one in five of our youth meet the minimal standard necessary to enlist in the army.
- Finally, on average, each high school drop out costs taxpayers \$292,000 over his or her lifetime.

Reducing class size is a major issue for our school system. It is very important but it is equally important that we demonstrate that we can walk and chew gum at the same time and not lose our primary focus, high levels of student learning. Virginia's decision to drop out of the common core means that it, and it alone is now responsible for providing teachers with the tools needed to implement the rigorous curriculum needed for our students to acquire the career readiness skills needed to access the twenty first century labor force. In other countries, teaching is considered

a valued profession. Teachers are highly compensated and are *required* but also *provided* on-going training in an ever-evolving technological culture.

Rigor is about all of us becoming what I like to refer to as “Talent Whispers” for our children. We have to change how our students see a world that values thinking more than responding and filling in blanks. Instead of seeing school uniforms as the answer we must remind ourselves of what happened in Sochi where it was not the *suit or outer garment*. It is what we put *inside* the heads, hearts and minds of students and teachers in our schools. Talent Whisperers can be found everywhere. They are found in early hands on student apprenticeships with businesses, universities, hospitals and the professional community. They are found in classrooms where students are trained to be self-assessors and goal setters. They are found in schools where the end assessment is an actual house being built instead of a “How to build a house” fill in the blank test. Finally, we must close the Performance-Potential Gap by remembering Dr. Howard’s motto...”Smart is not what you are...smart is what you become.” We owe this to our children and this great country we call America.