

DEFINING RIGOR IN HIGH SCHOOL

*Framework and
Assessment Tool*



NATIONAL
HIGH SCHOOL
ALLIANCE

WASHINGTON, DC

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The Vision and Mission of the National High School Alliance

The National High School Alliance is a partnership of over fifty leading organizations that share a **vision** for a nationwide commitment to fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all youth in our high schools and communities.

To advance this vision, the HS Alliance's **mission** is to engage its partners to work individually and collectively to inform policy, practice, and research, and to promote public awareness and engagement. The HS Alliance accomplishes this by providing a forum for professional discourse and collaborative effort to leverage its partners' resources, knowledge, and capacity.

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Defining Rigor in High Schools: Core Principles

What's rigor and why the fuss?

This short document provides a conceptual framework for understanding what is meant by rigor in the context of high school improvement efforts, in an effort to develop some common language for talking about it.

Rigor is often shorthand for:

An educational experience that leads to a common outcome – that *all* students are well prepared for post-secondary education, career and civic life.

Rigor is marked by steadfast focus on increasing student achievement for all students.

Following are important elements of the rigor agenda, which encompass a variety of tools and strategies for ensuring academic rigor:

- Minimum graduation requirements that prepare students for college
- High level content and instruction
- Wide range of supports for students to help them succeed
- Alignment of requirements with post-secondary education and work

There is no silver bullet—no one of these elements can be successful if implemented independently. States and districts must simultaneously employ a range of strategies that increase rigor and ensure that all students are well prepared for the future. In addition, strategies must be selected that consider existing state and district policies and progress. For instance, some states may already have minimum graduation requirements that prepare students for college, but need to improve supports for all students.

Why the focus on rigor?

Increasing rigor in high schools is at the fore of many high school improvement initiatives. In fact, the word “rigor” is used with striking frequency in education circles as a fundamental goal of reform. Appropriately rigorous curriculum and instruction, accessible to all students, is frequently at the core of successful efforts to raise standards and set high expectations for all students.

How is rigor defined?

While there are many definitions of rigor employed by a variety of organizations, the term “rigor” in the context of high school improvement can be used as shorthand for a set of ideas, principles and strategies that lead to a desired outcome—all students are well prepared for post-secondary education, career and civic life. These ideas, principles and strategies comprise a conceptual framework to guide reform. Rigor can be talked about in terms of specific course requirements and curricula, in terms of the quality of content and instruction, and in terms of strategies to support improved student achievement.

Can we agree on a common approach to increasing rigor?

On the prior page, we suggest a conceptual framework for talking about and working toward an appropriately rigorous high school experience. The National High School Alliance and one of its initiatives, the National Network of Constituent Organizations¹ have worked to agree on the common elements of a “rigor agenda” that would, from the perspective of increasing rigor, specify the desired goals of successful high school experiences, while allowing for considerable variance and customization in implementation. This framework encompasses, builds on and complements a large field of work in high school reform; it is intended to be used to move toward common language for advocating for policies that promote a rigorous educational experience for all students.

A rigor agenda requires commitment to a common outcome –all students are well prepared for post-secondary education, career and civic life.

Simply stated, the purpose of efforts to increase rigor in high school is to ensure that all students are well prepared for postsecondary education, career and civic life. This outcome should guide high school improvement efforts and has far reaching implications for most high schools. Too many students leave high school ill-prepared

¹ The National High School Alliance is a growing partnership of fifty leading organizations that share a vision for a nationwide commitment to fostering high academic achievement, closing the achievement gap, and promoting civic and personal growth among all youth in our high schools and communities. The National Network of Constituent Organizations, an initiative of the HS Alliance, is a network for learning and strategic collaboration among six national constituent organizations working to support high school redesign focused on the National Governors Association Honor States Program.

for college or career, at a time when a growing body of research points to the common requirements of both.

Rigor is marked by steadfast focus on increasing student achievement for all students.

Policies to increase rigor are driven by a desire to increase student achievement and raise expectations for all students. Rigor is not for the traditionally college-bound student alone; rather, all students should be provided with an education that qualifies them for college entry should they so choose. As a result, educators must employ a wide range of strategies to engage and support students.

An agenda to increase rigor establishes minimum graduation requirements that prepare students for college.

In many instances, it is possible to graduate from high school and fall far short of the requirements needed to matriculate in college. As a result, many states and education organizations like Achieve and ACT have proposed specific course requirements as essential to a meaningful high school education. There is general agreement that the academic content, regardless of how it is taught, of a high school experience should include at a minimum 4 years of English, and 3 years of mathematics, social studies and laboratory sciences, in addition to electives. Some analysts call for more stringent requirements as well as the addition of foreign language and other content areas.

An agenda to increase rigor provides high-level content and effective instruction.

Course title alone is not an indicator of quality. As a result, efforts to increase rigor also require careful examination of course content to ensure it is at an appropriately high level, and teaches students higher order thinking skills. In addition, standards, curricula and assessments must be well aligned. Such efforts to analyze course content are complex and time consuming. In addition, investment in teaching methods and support for teachers is an essential component of successful efforts to raise the bar.

An agenda to increase rigor includes supports to help all students succeed.

A single focus on increasing rigor must be accompanied by a wide array of supports to meet the needs of each student. This includes elements like expanded access to Advanced Placement, dual enrollment and other post-secondary exposure and acceleration strategies; improved guidance and counseling and other efforts to increase individualization and personalization; academic supports for struggling students and dropout prevention; substantial investment in professional development and teacher planning; and multiple pathways and options for students beginning in middle school and continuing through high school; to name a few.

An agenda to increase rigor aligns to post-secondary education and work.

In the new, knowledge economy that marks the beginning of the 21st century, high school must be conceived as part of a lifelong continuum. K-16 and P-20 initiatives are underway in many states to improve alignment and coherence among different parts of the educational system. For high schools, examining the relationship with higher education institutions and the requirements of the workplace are critical components of efforts to increase rigor.

What Rigor Isn't

- ▶ Graduation requirements that are less than what is required to matriculate in and succeed in post secondary education
- ▶ A college preparatory track for a small percentage of students
- ▶ Still having a “general track”
- ▶ A vocational track that does not contain a strong academic component
- ▶ A “one-size fits all” approach to teaching and supporting students, lack of multiple pathways and options
- ▶ Remedial support that doesn't accelerate students, and prepare them for a college preparatory curriculum
- ▶ More Carnegie units
- ▶ A change in course titles
- ▶ A high school graduation assessment that is not reflective of college entrance examinations or requirements

Assessing Efforts to Increase Rigor: How Do I Know It When I See It?

The following provides some questions and tactics for examining efforts to increase rigor, with an eye to identifying strengths and possible challenges. It is not intended as an exhaustive tool to assess every aspect of a high-quality educational experience, but rather to stimulate discussion about whether states and districts are pursuing policies and practices that are focused on increasing rigor for all students.

Rigor Framework and Assessment Tool

Outcome	Evidence/Observations	Next Steps
To prepare all students for post-secondary education, careers, and civic life.		
Elements of a Rigorous Academic Program		
I. Establishes minimum graduation requirements for all students that align with entry requirements for most colleges		
II. Provides high-level content and effective instruction		
III. Includes supports that provide access to the curriculum to all students		
IV. Aligns to post secondary education and work		

Strategies for a Rigorous Academic Program	Evidence/Observations	Next Steps
<p><i>A. Provide a college preparatory curriculum for all students</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state/district have clear and rigorous standards aligned with curricula and entrance requirements for post-secondary education and careers? ▪ Does the state/district ensure graduation requirements expect all students to complete a rigorous academic curriculum? 		
<p><i>B. Align and benchmark curricula to requirements for postsecondary education and work</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state/district work with leaders in higher education to ensure that high school standards meet college entrance requirements? ▪ Does the state/district work with leaders in higher education and the business community to ensure high school standards reflect the skills and knowledge students need to be successful in postsecondary education and the work place? 		
<p><i>C. Expand access to AP, IB, dual enrollment and other college level courses</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state/district have policies in place to encourage widespread enrollment in advanced placement, honors, and other rigorous courses? ▪ Does the state/district have a dual enrollment policy that allows high school students to earn college credit while in high school? 		

<p><i>D. Ensure course content focuses on teaching students higher level thinking skills</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state/district support schools in explicitly building students' capacity to critique their own work and learning process? ▪ Does the state/district support schools in teaching higher order skills to all students as opposed to solely developing memorization and basic skills? 		
<p><i>E. Align statewide assessments to requirements for post secondary education and work</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are high school graduation exams aligned with college entrance requirements and examinations? ▪ Does the state/district use multiple assessments that align with standards? ▪ Does the state/district encourage all students to take college entrance examinations or include college entrance examinations as a portion of the required high school graduation exam? 		
<p><i>F. Identify low performing schools and provide additional resources</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state/district identify failing schools and provide them with additional resources and support? ▪ Does the state/district support schools in restructuring or adopting comprehensive reform strategies? 		

<p><i>G. Identify at-risk students and provide them with remedial programs that include additional instructional time</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state/district provide accelerated learning opportunities to help all students meet or exceed standards? ▪ Does the state/district support schools in identifying at-risk students and providing them with additional resources and instructional time? ▪ Does the state/district require individual learning plans or additional counseling and guidance for at-risk students? 		
<p><i>H. Increase educator capacity to teach rigorous content</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state have teacher knowledge standards that reflect the content students need to be prepared for college and careers? ▪ Does the state/district have policies in place to attract, train, and retain teachers who are able to teach a rigorous curriculum? ▪ Does the state/district provide support to teachers in differentiating instruction and providing supports that meet the varied learning needs of multiple student populations? 		
<p><i>I. Provide learning environments that engage and motivate students, while supporting achievement</i></p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Does the state/district support the development of high schools that appeal to students' interests and provide high quality instruction? ▪ Does the state/district instill the expectation of college readiness in students as early as the middle grades to 		

<p>ensure that they begin to develop college and career aspirations, as well as to create an appropriate academic plan?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Does the state/district support classrooms in using project-based learning and other engaging, inquiry-based teaching methods that provide opportunities for students to master academic content, learn workforce skills, and develop personal strengths?▪ Does the state/district help schools to provide all students with individualized guidance, information, and resources on career pathways and opportunities for participating in workplace-based learning?		
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Partners of the National High School Alliance

National Research and Policy Organizations

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What Kids Can Do

Technical Assistance Providers

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Career Academy Support Network, UC Berkeley
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