

EDUCATION UPDATE

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Assignments That Measure Up

Before assignments go up on a bulletin board or in a portfolio, what makes them worth giving? Content and literacy standards provide a recipe for rigor that teachers can adapt to suit all tastes.

Assignments—tasks that integrate content knowledge, skills, and thinking strategies learned in a lesson or unit—are the artifacts of student understanding. And in a good way, teachers spend a lot of time analyzing student work on assignments, notes Keith Dysarz, a former teacher and current Education Trust director of K–12 practice. However, deciding what goes into an assignment can be a rushed and minor portion of planning. This can put assignments out of sync with the rigors of content and literacy standards, which sets off a cycle of low expectations and mediocre performances. Experts call the difference between what the standards require and what a teacher assigns the “assignment gap.”

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ASSIGNMENTS THAT MEASURE UP

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"Everyone has an assignment gap," says Don Marlett, a consultant with Learning-Focused, a K–12 professional development company based in North Carolina. One major study, conducted in 2009 by the South Carolina Department of Education, looked at 250,000 assignments in 326 public schools and found that as grade level advances, assignments fall further and further below standard. By the time a student gets to middle school, there's a 50 percent chance that an assignment given is not on grade level. More recently, a study by the Education Trust reported that only 38 percent of assignments are on grade level.

Too Many Cooks?

One of the toughest nuts to crack in addressing the assignment gap is creating consensus around what the standards require and what grade-level work looks like. That's one of the first things Barbara Blackburn notices when she's working with schools. "Every teacher has a different perspective on what's rigorous," says the author of *Rigor Is Not a Four-Letter Word*.

That may be a symptom of the shifting standards teachers have had to adjust to. In Hamilton County, Tennessee, chief academic officer Jill Levine notes that teachers in her district have gone through 3–4 sets of standards in the past 8–10 years. "That makes it really tricky."

Teachers need time to first unpack the expectations within the standard and then hold their assignments up to that light. Often this process is rushed, if

it happens at all. "You really need to be able to compare your assignments to a benchmark, and the best way to do this is to meet with other teachers, as a team," Blackburn advises. Without a benchmark and collaborative analysis, teachers are left guessing at rigor, she adds.

"When two teachers in the same content area, in the same building, don't have a common understanding of what a rigorous grade-level assignment looks like," says Dysarz, "that's where inequities begin."

Coming together to create shared understanding of the standards and a common definition of grade-level work is fundamental. Blackburn recommends using Webb's Depth of Knowledge scale to rank whether assignments ask students to simply recall and reproduce information, or move into extended thinking activities like analysis and synthesis. Dysarz reminds teachers to anchor discussions in example and exemplar assignments that reveal what meets the grade-level mark, what doesn't, and why.

"You could do a lot of work to create a common definition, but if you're not anchored in grade-level exemplars, all it does is ensure that you're all going down the wrong path, together," he says.

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Blackburn agrees that it can be easy to get hung up on the verb in the standards and unsuccessfully use that as the linchpin in assignments. "Students can 'create' get-well cards for a sick classmate, but that's no indication of rigor," she adds.

Five Ingredients of Effective Assignments

Based on their work in mostly Title I public schools, educators at Learning-Focused have identified five characteristics of effective assignments. These criteria provide a universal recipe to ensure assignments rise to standard and grade-level expectations. Marlett says effective assignments

1. Focus on grade-level standards.

"This is the number-one thing, but also the top thing that most teachers struggle with," Marlett admits. Closely read how grade-level standards are written, looking for the verbs and descriptors within the standard, and align the assignment to this criteria. If the first word in the standard is "compare," the artifact of the assignment should display two things.

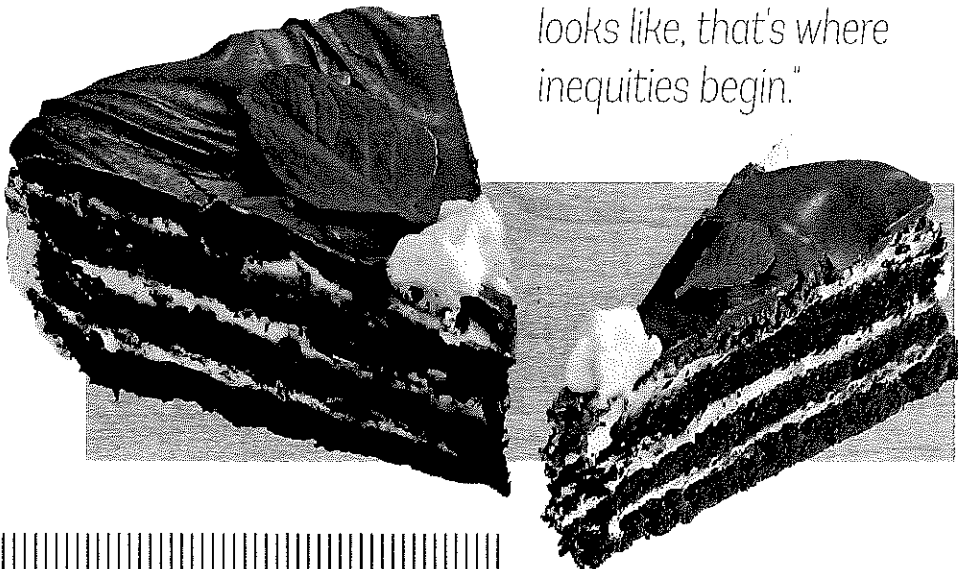
2. Align to the learning goals of the lesson. Exemplary schools write out standards in terms of "students will understand" and "students will be able to." Often teachers shoehorn activities into a lesson to fit a standard, instead of starting with a standard, unpacking it, and building an assignment that encompasses the learning goals of the standard.

3. Require higher-order thinking.

Do the assignments require students to apply, analyze, or reason? Students can put together an attractive PowerPoint presentation summarizing the plot of a novel, but take away the pretty slides and this is just a low-level, recall-focused activity.

4. Integrate writing. Apply writing standards across lessons with different content and literacy standards. To incorporate more writing, look at what kind of graphic organizers are used in the classroom. More complex organizers lead to more frequent and higher-quality writing.

5. Set clear expectations for student performance. Objective performance criteria are more important to the teacher-student relationship than anything else, notes Marlett. "Rubrics help get rid of, 'The teacher doesn't like me—she gave me an F.'" Focus criteria on content, thinking, and writing.



"Of all the strategies you use to raise achievement, aligning assessments and assignments to content and literacy standards is by far the most important," Marlett argues. But many teachers note that closing the assignment gap isn't just about raising the quality of assignments; it also means creating a viable route, for all students, to on-level work.

Catering to Mixed Abilities

In any given classroom, teachers encounter students with a wide range of abilities and background knowledge, which poses challenges in lesson and assignment planning. "If a teacher has a class where 50 percent of the kids are reading below grade level or otherwise not prepared for the content, teachers have to do a lot of work to prepare kids for the standards they should be teaching," notes Levine.

When students are so far behind, it can seem cruel to throw them into grade-level assignments. "As a teacher, I saw this problem firsthand," recalls Dysarz. "How do you meet everyone on their level, and move them up?"

"The higher the rigor, the higher the need for support," Blackburn asserts. Of the hundreds of scaffolding strategies, one that Blackburn particularly likes, for 4th grade and up, is "layering meaning." For example, say you're teaching 7th graders about volcanoes, but one-third of the class is reading on a 4th grade level. Start by finding an article on the same content, but at their level. (Websites like newsela.com and the Smithsonian's tweentribune.com are good sources for sorting content-focused reading by grade level. Or search online for ELL teacher "Larry Ferlazzo" and "leveled texts" for an extensive list of resources.)

Blackburn notes that teachers find more accessible texts all the time, but the "layering meaning" strategy is different because, "after students have read the easier article, you bring them back up to the grade-level article. By reading the easier article first, they've built background knowledge and vocabulary so that, with your guidance, they can read the grade-level article."

Background Knowledge on the Front Burner

Certain schoolwide practices can help students rise to more rigorous assignments. Toni Enloe, a former teacher also with

Learning-Focused, noted one successful strategy she encountered while working with Delaware schools to close the assignment gap. These schools created "acceleration periods"—time set aside for teachers to work with struggling students to preview upcoming content.

"Basically, they were building background knowledge," says Enloe. Acceleration periods took place during the 30 extra minutes these schools had built into lunch time, and the groups of kids elected for these support sessions were fluid. If surveys or pre-tests revealed that kids already had background knowledge on a topic, they weren't earmarked for acceleration.

Acceleration was a great confidence builder, remarks Enloe. With a chance to preview what's coming, students were prepared to step into grade-level work.

It makes sense that students will sometimes need to pause their learning, before they move ahead. The problem arises when they permanently stay on hold, never advancing to more challenging work. "The notion that we have to slow down to speed up is unique to American education," adds Dysarz. He argues that research and education systems outside the United States bear out that it doesn't work. "If you're trying to get kids caught up, then holding them back from accessing grade-level content actually does more harm than good."

Dysarz and others suggest that it's unnecessary to choose between catching kids up and giving them access to grade-level content. "We want to do both."

How Admins Set the Table

For a school to truly diagnose and address assignment gaps, leadership has to make teacher collaboration a high priority. For example, set aside ample blocks of coplaning time with teams of teachers across a school or district.

"Collegial discussions are critical," Enloe affirms, and not just across a grade level. Many standards are written in grade bands, covering grades 6–8, for instance. To plan for appropriate rigor, teachers need to know how that standard looks different in the grades above and below the one they're teaching, says Enloe. She supposes that one of the reasons the assignment gap increases with grade level is that rigor is not increasing across these bands.

ON THE WEB

The Education Trust recently released a tool to help teachers analyze sets of assignments for grade-level alignment or to identify ways to raise rigor during the assignment formation process. The "Literacy Assignment Analysis Guide" can be found at www.EdTrust.org/EquityInMotion.

In Levine's district, about one-fifth of teachers voluntarily come together by grade level and across the district to develop unit plans during the summer.

"That type of planning—in-depth curricular work—takes a lot of time," she adds. Levine notes that teachers are rarely given the time to do that type of work, and even more rarely are they getting paid for it. "For us, we have no budget to pay stipends for that work, so all of those teachers are there, for a week of their summer vacation, unpaid. It's good that they're here, but how do we reach every [teacher] when we're struggling financially?"

Dysarz echoes that for this work to take off, it can't include only a few teachers in isolation. He recommends instituting processes for distributed leadership and collaboration and establishing protocols for how teachers come together to look at student work. "If you approach this haphazardly, it can seem overwhelming. Whatever those processes are for how you look at student work, have a process for how you look at your colleagues' assignments, as well."

With Good Measure

Low-level assignments set off a cycle of low achievement that feeds into low expectations, less than challenging curriculum and courses, and poor test results, Marlett warns. Getting clear on what rigor looks like, at any grade level, and then making sure assignments measure up to these expectations is essential to propelling students academically.

"Kids can't do any better than the assignments they receive," Dysarz says. Closing the assignment gap sets students up to do their best work. ■

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