DOINGWHATWORKS

Video
FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Relevance Makes Rigor Possible

Willard R. Daggett, Ed.D. • March 2010

Topic: Helping Students Navigate the Path to College
Practice: Prepare Students Academically

Highlights

- Education consultant Willard R. Daggett explains the skills necessary for the 21st century, including the integration of subjects traditionally taught in isolation.
- Dr. Daggett gives examples of how making curricula more relevant can help schools increase the level of rigor. He shares a diagram that illustrates the relationship of rigor (higher-order thinking and reasoning skills) and relevance (the application of skills to real-life situations and problems).

About the Interviewee

Willard R. Daggett, Ed.D., CEO of the International Center for Leadership in Education, is recognized worldwide for his proven ability to move education systems toward more rigorous and relevant skills and knowledge for all students. He has assisted a number of states and hundreds of school districts with their school improvement initiatives, many in response to No Child Left Behind and its demanding Adequate Yearly Progress provisions. Dr. Daggett has also collaborated with education ministries in several countries and with the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,

the National Governors Association, and many other national organizations.

Before founding the International Center for Leadership in Education in 1991, Dr. Daggett was a teacher and administrator at the secondary and postsecondary levels and a director with the New York State Education Department, where he spearheaded restructuring initiatives to focus the state's education system on the skills and knowledge students need in a technological, information-based society.

Dr. Daggett is the creator of the Application Model and Rigor/Relevance Framework, a practical planning and instructional tool for determining the relevance of curriculum and assessment to real-world situations. Dr. Daggett's Rigor/Relevance Framework has become a cornerstone of many school reform efforts throughout the United States. He is the author of eight books about learning and education, 12 textbooks, and numerous research studies, reports, and journal articles. He also serves on a number of advisory boards.

Full Transcript

I am Bill Daggett. I am the chief executive officer of the International Center for Leadership in Education.

Young people today have to be ready for college and for career, and the reality of it is, the skills needed for both in the 21st century are higher and different than they were in 20th century. The reason being is you are going to have to compete against students from other nations who have a longer school day, longer school year. And we are going to need to take a long step back and recognize college-ready is essential in the 21st century.

To be college-ready really means to have the academic skills to be able to handle freshman-level work, which that means strong reading skills, strong writing skills, basic mathematics, ability to apply mathematics—essential. The high school curriculum of the 21st century, to prepare someone for college and/or careers, is going to have to be more rigorous then it's been in the past. We are going to have to ratchet up the math to a higher level, ratchet science up. And it's not going to be biology and chemistry and physics. It's going to be biochemistry. It's going to be biophysics. It's going to be the integration of math and science together. It is not going to be social studies taught in isolation from language arts. It's going to be almost like the old humanities approach, totally integrated, because in the real world we are trying to prepare these kids for, the world doesn't function in disciplines—it's totally integrated.

The academic high school experience of the future must have strong academics and teach students how to use that information in ways that we hardly can even conceive of today. The students are going to have to know what to do when they don't know what to do.

What is different today about preparing young people for college than it was a decade ago? If we look at this visual, on the left-hand side you have academic rigor; across the bottom you have application. Quadrant A is strong basic education with no application. That was the basics of the 20th century. You go up that chart, C

on top of it is taking those strong academics and moving them to an analysis, a synthesis, and an evaluation level. That's college prep of the 21st century, taking knowledge to a higher and higher level and being able to apply it in ways beyond just the one individual discipline or the one test.

Preparing a young person for college is essential, but also you have got to prepare them for a career. If we look at that A and C in terms of preparing young people with the academics, the reality of it is we have to teach them how to apply that. Going across the bottom of this chart is applying knowledge to real-world predictable and real-world unpredictable situations. The really successful school of the 21st century prepares students in the B and D quadrants, not just the academics of the A and C. It is rigor and relevance.

What we know today is that relevance makes rigor possible, and if you learn rigor without having a contextual understanding to it—relevance—you will probably forget it. Best example I can give you, I bet you if almost anyone was asked today to take a twelfth-grade test in a discipline they have never taught, they would probably fail it. But for all the teachers, they all passed it when they were in twelfth grade. Why could they do it back then but they can't today? Because if you don't use it, you lose it. Flip side of it is, learn how to use it, you retain it forever.

One of our biggest challenges in our schools are our students who come to ninth grade substantially behind academically. The question is, how do you get them the higher standards? You get them there not by giving them more of what they are already failing at. You get them there by bringing new applications, getting them engaged in the learning process. One specific example, stop offering all your electives in twelfth grade and move them to ninth grade. [If] a kid loves the arts, give them two and three periods of art in ninth grade, but drive academics into the arts. If they love athletics, let them take a course in football that is a classroom-based course, drilled around math and science. They will become engaged; they will become excited about school. Then move them on to the stronger academic skills all the way up through grade 12 where they would take their most rigorous academic experience. College is just a stepping stone, just like high school is a stepping stone, just like middle school is a stepping stone. The ultimate goal are the skills needed to be self-sufficient, independent in the 21st-century workplace.