



Community Toolbox

Advocating for rigor in our high schools

COMMUNITY TOOLBOX:

Advocating for rigor in our high schools

This toolbox is designed for community organizers, parent leaders and other advocates in order to raise awareness and drive for change in their community high schools.

In this toolbox you'll find:

- A collection of relevant articles and resources to share with your community
- Newsletter copy to send out to your subscribers
- Social assets for your network (on Facebook, Twitter, Thread, Instagram, etc).
- A short presentation deck for in-person or online meetings, which you're encouraged to copy and adapt for your community.

We hope these tools will equip you to build understanding and public will for transforming the high schools in your community into vibrant centers of relevant learning that support each and every student to fulfill their potential.

Many of these tools are designed to be customized to your community needs. Look for the **red ink** to find places to customize. But don't stop there, please do whatever it needs to suit your purpose!

Focus on Rigor

What's rigor? Rigor is a fundamental part of a great education but it's often misunderstood and sometimes set aside in favor of focusing on equity, another fundamental part of a great education. In truth, rigor and equity go hand-in-hand. Educational practices that lead to rigorous learning always build on a foundation of equity and vice versa. (Check out our community tool box on equity, too!)

The following resources explore the definition of rigor, offer spotlights on educators who are innovating new ways to encourage rigorous learning, and feature examples of best practices, high school models and courses that are known for their rigor. One word of warning with these examples: no single approach or class or school model is

guaranteed to be rigorous. They may *aspire* to be but each needs to be well implemented and part of a whole school approach that elevates underlying principles of equity, accountability, systems thinking, and professional excellence. For a deeper look at an excellent school quality framework, check out Springpoint Schools' [Indicators of School Quality](#).

Resources about rigor

From the [Transforming High School](#)

- [Explaining academic rigor – and why you want it for your child](#) – Article
- [Understanding the power of project-based learning](#) – Article
- [Does your child's high school offer internships?](#) – Article
- [How mastery-based learning helps every student succeed](#) – Article
- [The power of student exhibitions](#) – Article
- [Giving students voice and choice](#) – Video
- [What is early college high school](#) – Video
- [A brilliant way to teach advanced English](#) – Video
- [A school culture makeover: Salem Charter Academy](#) – Podcast

Additional GreatSchools resources:

- [How high school pathway programs can make dreams come true](#) – Article
- [Cracking the code on STEM success for Black and brown students](#) – Article
- [What is International Baccalaureate?](#) – Article
- [Why are advanced courses so important?](#) – Article
- [Forget college prep. Start college now.](#) – Podcast

Additional resources from National Parents Union

- [Connecting with school administrators and elected officials](#) – Article
- [How to reach local press and media](#) – Article
- [Parent toolkits](#) – Tool
- [Join National Parents Union](#) – Tool

Recommended resources from other organizations:

- [Project Lead the Way](#) – Article
- [Next Generation Science Standards](#) – Article
- [What is Project Based Learning](#) – Article
- [The Early College High School Model](#) – Article

Newsletter on Rigor:

Subject line: Are [\[your community\]](#) schools really rigorous?

Headline: The most important – and most misunderstood – idea in education

We want to make our schools better. Right now, too many of our kids don't graduate high school ready for life, college, or work – and that's *if* they graduate at all. What we need are ways for our sons and daughters to embrace their future after high school – not be resigned to it or even worse, afraid of it. We want them to find joy and fulfillment in life because they have been empowered and ennobled in high school. And we know that for this to happen we must ensure that they're in a supportive environment that delivers a great education.

Most educators will tell you that a great education is a rigorous education. But are our teens getting the rigor – and the opportunities for rigor – that they're entitled to? Let's start with a common understanding of what a rigorous education really means. It isn't hours of homework every night, and it doesn't mean sticking a kid in a math or English class with material way over his head.

So [what is rigor](#)?

Rigor means that kids are given challenging work along with the time and support they need to think deeply about it, build on what they've learned, and make new connections. Rigor means helping students make the learning their own – and it results in kids feeling motivated to learn even more.

When you're conversation with schools in our community, here are some questions to ask:

- Does the school create [learning experiences that challenge kids to think deeply](#) about the material and explore what they're learning instead of learning primarily by rote memorization?

- Does it challenge all students to take [advanced classes](#), based on their interests?
- Does the school take the time to [find out what kids are interested in](#) learning about?
- Does it offer students the opportunity to demonstrate their academic chops with [projects and hands-on learning](#) as well as papers and exams?
- Does the school give kids the chance to [learn at their own pace](#) until they've mastered the material?
- Does it give them the chance to learn why academics count, through [internships](#) that incorporate what they're taught in school?

There are many ways to give our kids a strong rigorous education, including:

- Training all teachers to teach with rigor.
- Ensuring all students have access to [advanced classes](#) such as AP classes, dual-enrollment classes, IB classes, and honors classes (no gatekeeping based on stereotypical assumptions).
- Providing support for all students in advanced classes.
- Offering [project-based learning](#) to help students apply what they learn beyond textbooks.
- [Giving students voice and choice](#) to design their own learning.
- Students get to taste the value of learning outside traditional classrooms through internships, [senior capstone projects](#), and CTE programs.

To advocate for this type of education in our high schools here in _____, we will have to start planning how to do it now. All of these changes won't happen tomorrow. Some of them will take time. So I hope you understand that we're working to benefit the younger kids here as well as the ones already in high school.

How do we start? **[Add methods/actions relevant for each particular community.]** So let's work and move our schools forward to benefit our kids.

Social thread (for Twitter, Thread, etc)

Sick and tired of our kids leaving high school unprepared for college, career, and life? Is there anything to do about it? We think there is ...

...Our high schools need more rigor. That doesn't mean homework piled higher or more tests. It means schools challenge students with lessons that...

...make them really think, problem-solve, and master the material. This can include hands-on projects, exhibitions, and internships where they have to put their learning to use...'

...like the [California teen](#) who is learning to link her math studies with becoming an accountant, or..

..the students in a [North Carolina high school](#) who learned physics by designing their own roller-coaster.

...Now that's REAL rigor that helps kids learn! How come more schools don't try this stuff? [\[Add call to action, link to resource\]](#)

Facebook/Instagram post (with or without links)

We want all our kids to get a [rigorous education](#). But what does that really mean? It means kids being both challenged AND supported as they learn to think deeply, make connections, and learn to love learning. Ask your school if teachers are trained to teach with rigor.

Vocational ed used to just be about repairing cars, cooking in restaurants, or the like. But teens can now learn job skills and get top-notch academics too. Want to learn more about [pathways programs](#)? Or explore whether your community needs an [early college high school](#)? [\[Add call to action.\]](#)

Rigor in Our Community presentation

This [16-slide customizable presentation](#) is available for you to copy and customize with your imagery, ideas and data about your community. It includes a definition of rigor, an explanation of why it's so important and 3 inspiring case studies that allow your community to see what rigor looks like in real high school classrooms across the country.

With support from our core partners, National Parents Union and Highlander Institute, we were able to create this community tool to help you advocate for better high schools in your communities. For more information about transformative practices, visit <https://transforminghighschool.org>.