OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® An Initiative of Public Impact®

Execute Rigor and Personalization

Execute rigorous lessons aligned with the curriculum, personalizing and differentiating instruction for highly engaging, high-growth learning.

"The stakes were getting higher, but the kids were accomplishing them. They saw the payoff and they were engaged, they were invested. I really couldn't be happier."—*Multi-Classroom Leader® Hadley Moore*

Rigor combined with personalization in instruction creates a positive and challenging learning experience. Great teachers focus on encouraging a growth mindset in their students, to see rigorous coursework as a path—not an obstacle—to success.

Executing rigorous, personalized lessons for mastery and growth includes these actions:

*** Ensure that all students have ambitious learning goals**

- o Set challenging, measurable goals, overall and with each student
- o Encourage students to work hard toward goals

*** Plan and teach lessons aligned with curriculum and student needs**

- o Assess students before lessons with diagnostics
- o Set sequential learning targets to and well beyond standards
- o Continue developing and editing engaging lesson plans that align both with curriculum/standards and what students know
- o Include in lesson plans: frequent checks for understanding, personalization/differentiation, re-teaching, and acceleration
- o Differentiate instruction for students at different learning levels
- o Include assignments that allow any student to advance by choice
- o Use activities that are relevant to students
- o Script out higher-order questions and correct answers
- o Incorporate digital instruction wisely

*** Engage students deeply in the learning process**

- o Incorporate student-centered teaching models, inquiry, and discussion
- o Deepen understanding via evidence and teamwork

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- o Encourage students to work hard toward goals

Great teachers say they must hold high expectations for all students and communicate the expectations and support students will receive to reach their ambitious learning goals.

"It's important that the **students know where they are and where they need to be**," Multi-Classroom Leader® (MCL™) Candace Butler says. "If not, it's just another number on a paper, and they don't understand what high growth is or what proficiency is or why they need to make this particular score. Having that conversation with the students is key."

For MCL™ Angela Porter, establishing expectations early in the school year helped her students set their sights on high growth.

"When we went into classes the first week of school, I introduced myself, **I let them know the expectation** that I had for them, I let them know where I see them going. I told them how it's not going to be easy to get there—you're going to have to work to get there."

When focusing on lower-performing students, MCL™ Hadley Moore found that introducing rigor leads to dramatic growth. When Moore began leading a teaching team at a school she had just joined, some teachers argued, "We know our kids—we know they can't do this."

"And my argument was, 'They can. Why don't we try?' It really comes down to asking students **critical thinking questions**. It comes down to asking them to make connections between the text and their lives, to challenge them to look at their world in different ways."

MCL™ Sean Carberry, who taught at a school focused on personalized learning, led his teaching team to set goals with student interests in mind. "Part of it is **building relationships with students**, finding out what interests them, what goals they have, and then inspiring them to meet that goal—it's something that they're going to, on their own, say, 'I want to find out more about.'"

MCL™ Lara Harris says her students get excited about their goals and progress because they know she and her team teachers support them. "They can tell you, 'OK, Ms. H., I'm reading on a level E, but I'm supposed to be reading on a level J by the end of the year.' Sometimes when I walk down the hallway, 'Ms. H., guess what level I'm reading on?' A lot of that comes from the teacher, when **teachers provide the right framing**: 'So this is what we're working towards this year. I don't want you to be nervous—I believe in you, you can make progress, you can make that goal. But here are the things that you need to work on. If you trust me, we can get you there.'"

Elementary teachers also often encourage their students to set class goals as well as individual goals.

MCL™ Bri Waddell says students understand that their lack of effort will prevent the class from reaching its collective growth goal, inspiring them to work harder for their friends and themselves.

Students in MCL™ Katherine Smith's school compare building-wide goals to their own, increasing their pride in their own work.

"I tell them our building goal is to increase our literacy achievement and how that relates to them. When we sit down for assessments to measure their reading, I always start by asking them, 'Do you think you've contributed to the building goal?' **They get really excited** when they know that's happened and they're part of a larger community," Smith says.

When teachers help students develop a growth mindset, students can be less afraid of high goals and more willing to push toward them. Scott Nolt, a high school blended-learning teacher, has changed how he teaches and grades to give students space to make mistakes and learn from them.

"You don't always have to be right, you don't always have to get it the first time—**if you miss something, you can go back and fix it**," Nolt says. "We're asking students to do harder things than have been asked of generations of students before. I think it's only natural that we support that and allow students through trial and error to really get better at this process."

∗ **Plan and teach lessons aligned with curriculum and student needs**

o Assess students before lessons with diagnostics
o Set sequential learning targets to and well beyond standards

"**Planning is so important**; it has to happen. With new teachers, they don't know how to find resources. We talk a lot about what questions are you going to ask your kids, how are you going to present this information, different ways of presenting the information. We find resources for the kids to really make sure that they have mastered the skill." —*MCL™ Jessica Smith*

When possible, teachers should gather information on their students' learning levels before the year begins. During the year, quick checks for understanding and mastery before each lesson can help teachers personalize instruction.

"**We adjust the class because of the diagnostic question.** There are two questions: the review question—the diagnostic—which is, do you already know our lesson for today? And if the kids do already know the lesson for today, then they have an alternate assignment. Sometimes they're doing something completely different; sometimes they are going straight to independent work, which is a little bit creative, and there is more application of that standard and they don't need the teacher's mini-lesson." — *MCL™ Ellen Rayburn*

"We have the do-now and exit tickets in place, which act as an assessment for that day's instruction. That is done on a daily basis so you're able to capture the level of the children's understanding from what you've taught. We use those exit tickets to be reflective on our practice as educators and reaching students, and if my students are not performing well on their exit ticket, tomorrow **I need to adjust my instruction to correct the misconception**." —*MCL™ Amber Hines*

- **Continue developing and editing engaging lesson plans that align both with curriculum/standards and what students know**

MCL™ Stephanie Roper created plans and assessments that went beyond the rigor needed. "When I created my assessments, they were very rigorous, always a step up from what I knew would be tested on at the end of the year. If the kids do something that's more difficult, then it's going to lead to success at the end of the year, because they're going to be like, 'Oh, this is a breeze, I can just do this.' When you **start with rigorous assessments**, you know where your end goal is."

- **Include in lesson plans: frequent checks for understanding, personalization/differentiation, re-teaching, and acceleration**

Along with do-now and exit tickets, teachers use aggressive monitoring to see on the spot where students are struggling or moving ahead, so they can personalize instruction in the moment, reteaching or accelerating the lesson as needed. (For more on this, watch: **Aggressive Daily Monitoring Enables In-the-Moment Adjusting.**)

Master Reach Teacher Jimmel Williams gives his students oral quizzes or uses dry-erase boards to see their thought process as they move through a lesson.

Scott Nolt says designing concept-driven, mastery-based instruction challenges students across all learning levels to read for ideas and develop deeper understanding for material. Nolt does so through allowing students to go more deeply into material that interests them.

"If you set your class up by content, some students aren't able to walk in here and spit it *all* back to you like it's a tape recorder. So, what this allows is if the class is centered around the big ideas and the big understandings and the analysis of it, they get that— because we have talked about dissent for two weeks, and students understand that idea, and they'll have examples to be able to apply."

- **Differentiate instruction for students at different learning levels**

Although the focus naturally tends to be on struggling students, teachers must differentiate to meet the needs of students at all levels, and small-group time can be key to doing this.

"With small-group time, you have to know what they're struggling in," Roper says. "If your whole lesson is

geared to your grade level, you're going to have kids that are above grade level and kids that are significantly below grade level. So that lesson is not going to meet the needs of all your kids."

For struggling students, great teachers find a balance between meeting students where they are while exposing them to grade-level material.

"[The curriculum] has high expectations, **it has challenging texts, and that tells kids that they are respected**, that they matter, that we believe that they can do this. When a 10th-grader is given a sixth-grade Lexile text about a puppy, they feel disengaged and disrespected, and they certainly don't grow. They certainly don't develop as a reader or as a person. So to give them *The Odyssey,* to give them *Romeo and Juliet, The Crucible, Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells them that they matter, they are capable, and they are worth investing time and energy in." —*MCL™ Hadley Moore*

Expanded-Impact Teacher™ Jeremy Kiesler starts each class period with personalized and differentiated instruction by giving students a different handout based on the previous day's exit ticket.

"Let's say I walk up to student B and they have a 70 or below—I pull [material to reteach missed concepts and skills] from the bottom of the stack, and the kids don't know any different. All they know is 'I got a piece of paper, and I think that is what everyone else is working on.'"

MCL™ teams also come prepared for students ready for advanced material. "If the kids already know the lesson for today, then they have an alternative assignment," MCL™ Candace Butler says. "Sometimes they're doing something completely different, sometimes they're going straight to independent work—which is a little bit creative, and there is more application of that standard."

Teaching team collaboration is key to reaching all students, with planning that ensures that advanced students need not get stuck working alone, online or on extra worksheets.

For more on personalization, see the **Adjust Instruction** study guide.

- **Include assignments that allow any student to advance by choice**

By taking a mastery-based approach and putting all his class materials online, Scott Nolt gives his students wide latitude in determining how deep to go and how fast to move.

"**Behind choice is empowerment**," Nolt says. "We're empowering students to take responsibility for their own learning, we're empowering them to take learning and make it valid and authentic to them and their needs."

o **Use activities that are relevant to students**

Teachers are increasingly focused on incorporating personally relevant materials and activities, and great teachers say this is vital to engage students.

Using more varied material than usual that allowed students to explore different perspectives and find some they could relate to paid off for Moore's classrooms, such as when her ninth-graders studied many forms of mythology.

"We've done a week on Greek mythology, a week on Norse mythology…a week on Aztec mythology, a week on African mythology, and then actually, our last week is on American superheroes. So again, the texts are engaging, they are rigorous, they're high-interest, and they don't pander to the kids," she says.

Nolt looks for texts that teach standards in ways that feel more meaningful to struggling students. "I know that **children will rise to the bar that you set** for them, and you shouldn't lower your expectations just because students might be behind."

o **Script out higher-order questions and correct answers**

Teaching team leaders emphasize the importance of planning questions and answers ahead of time, especially for new teachers. Some who take on more of the lesson planning for their teams supply questions ahead of time—but require their team teachers to come to team meetings having worked out the answers, to prepare for any stumbling blocks students may encounter.

o **Incorporate digital instruction wisely**

Digital instruction needs to be used with care, to enhance learning and data-gathering on student progress, rather than distracting students.

"I think a lot of people tend to think, or at least we did initially when we heard personalized learning, 'OK, kids are going to be on technology doing whatever the whole time.' And then we did some shadowing at schools that have been implementing the personalized-learning model for a couple of years, and we found that it's really **meeting them where they are and pushing them beyond that**," MCL™ Frank Zaremba says. His team teachers design some independent online lessons

that students can work through at their own pace, toward goals they have set. That creates time for the teacher to pull small groups for individualized mini-lessons based on student data.

Strong teachers use technology primarily to assess student knowledge formally and informally, to guide the next day's lessons.

∗ **Engage students deeply in the learning process**

o Incorporate student-centered teaching models, inquiry, and discussion
o Deepen understanding via evidence and teamwork

Scott Nolt uses online communication to deepen relationships with students and foster an open environment for analytical thinking.

"You can draw kids out a little bit more. Shy isn't really an excuse," Nolt says. Students can forget their fears about sharing in the classroom when online, "so they forget that they're giving their analytical thoughts."

MCL™ Laura Yates implements "productive struggle" in classrooms, such as having students debate how they reached different conclusions. Yates says this deeply engages students with the material through inquiry and discussion.

"From a teacher lens, it's really difficult because you're always wanting to jump in and save them, but that's not what's best for them, and we are realizing that," Yates says. "Having **our students engage in the discussions** has been a huge topic for us."

For Lori Treiber, team projects teach students the importance of teamwork and develops a deeper understanding of material. She created a detailed process for group work that holds students to high standards for collaboration. To learn more, watch: **Hold Students Accountable for Group Work**.

Note: Some quotes have been edited for clarity and length. Quotes come from interviews conducted with Opportunity Culture® educators over several years; titles for each educator here reflect the role the educator was in at the time of the interview.

Learn More: Watch the *Execute Rigor and Personalization* videos.

Discussion Questions

1. Which actions in this element of instructional excellence are **strengths** for you or your team?

2. Which actions in this element of instructional excellence are **weaknesses** for you or your team? Think about actions you never take, fail to take as often as needed, or do not take as well as needed to achieve strong learning growth consistently.

3. What one to three specific changes will you or your team make to **use your strengths more** often or more consistently and **improve weaknesses** in the coming months?

4. Make a brief **action plan** with specific goals, roles, and time by which you will make specific changes!

5. Did your changes produce **better learning results?** If so, keep them. If not, think again about what other changes to make!

For more elements of instructional leadership and excellence, visit the *Instructional Leadership and Excellence* **webpages**, which each have **video clips** of teacher-leaders who have achieved high-growth student learning; **discussion questions** for developing your team and yourself; **training links** for ongoing professional development; and other **developmental resources** including books, videos, articles, and tools

For more on an Opportunity Culture, visit **OpportunityCulture.org**.

We're happy to hear your feedback on this element; **contact us!**