



Berkshire Local Schools Community Member:

It has long been understood that the three Rs of education were Reading, 'Riting and "Rithmetic. However, as we get deeper into the 21st Century and realize that we are educating our children for a different world than we grew up in, and for a different time than we know, we must realize that there are a new three Rs in education. Rigor, Relevance and Relationships. Now more than ever, our children require access to a high level curriculum that encourages them to think and examine things in ways that they have not yet used. Our current system of public education was not designed to do this.

In the late 1890s, the Committee of Ten started to design our public school system to ease two competing philosophies about the purpose of public education. Those competing philosophies were; 1) that we should be preparing students to go to college, and 2) that we should be broadening the system to include more students. In order to satisfy both philosophies, a system was created to sort and select children. Some would be prepared to go on to college and others would be prepared to work in factories during the Industrial Revolution. Schools were designed like those factories, where content was sorted into small time based pieces and our children would travel along a proverbial conveyor belt from room to room picking up their pieces of education, each time base passed with a shrill bell. The design worked just like an assembly line. That was the education needed in the early 1900s, but it is not what is needed today. Today, the world looks very different than it did in the early 1900s, but what looks very much the same as it did in the early 1900s are our public schools. It is time for a shift.

In the industrial age, information and knowledge were often hard to come by. Today, information is at our fingertips. It is on our phones, our watches, and our tablets. As I write this, my computer is becoming obsolete. Now more than ever, we need to shift the way we instruct our students. They need to experience the world. Our children need to be able to apply what they learn to new and uncertain situations. We are not even sure what the employment opportunities will be for our children by the year 2030. What we do know, however, is that when knowledge is easily attained by all, our children's ability to use and apply that knowledge will be what separates them from the pack. It is imperative that we equip our children with the ability to create, to pick things apart and put them back together in different ways, to apply knowledge across disciplines and to search for new answers. We will only get there if we start to change from the old three Rs mentality to the new three Rs mentality. In the new three Rs mentality, we will expose all of our children to a high level curriculum where we reward thinking, creativity, perseverance, and teamwork.

Rigor. Most people will associate rigor with difficulty, and that is a mistake. Simply making things difficult will lead to frustration, disenfranchisement and discouragement. Instead we need to think of rigor in terms of challenging students thinking in new and different ways. We need to push our children toward a deeper understanding of fundamental ideas, and allow their curiosity to drive them to discover more. Rigor is not about how hard something is, but about what our students do with the material they learn. It is measured by a depth of understanding, not by how much we can push at them in a short period of time. When we encourage our children to question their assumptions and think deeply rather than simply memorize, then we are moving them toward rigor.

Relevance. The term relevance is defined as the condition of being connected with the matter at hand, or giving the matter at hand a practical and especially social applicability. We will never attain relevance with our children if we can't show them how it applies. Simply stating "these are the graduation requirements" is not enough to show relevance. Information is only relevant when it satisfies the needs of the learner.

We must show our children how the information they are learning is connected to them and to the world around them, and how they can apply it in everyday "real-life." Once our children make that connection, they will have found relevance.

Relationships. We will define relationships as the connection between the learner and the teacher. Our children need to know that their teachers (and all adults who they interact with) care about them beyond the boundaries of their current interactions. When our children know that we truly want what is in their best interest, and our very success lies only within their success, then we will have established the connection and the trust that will allow us to help them unlock their potential. No significant learning will take place without a significant relationship.

It is important to realize that in order to get the results that we need for our children, we must have all of the three Rs. We cannot have any in isolation. They are all interdependent. If we have relationships alone, our students will never make the connections to the material that they need to find utility, and they will not see the need to expand their thinking beyond the level of expectation that we set. By the same token, it will be impossible to show our students the relevance of any material if we have not established the relationship because they will not be able to trust the authenticity of our message. In addition, rigor alone, without the relevance and relationships will only lead to disenfranchisement. The powerful combination of challenging our students to think deeper and in different ways (rigor), along with showing them the connection to the matter at hand (relevance) because we are invested in their success (relationships) will produce the types of thinkers that we need to thrive in this brave new world.

John Stoddard  
Superintendent  
Berkshire Local School District