

Relevance, Rigor and Relationships:

BILL DAGGETT'S THREE R'S FOR AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Willard “Bill” R. Daggett, EdD ’74, is telling several hundred principals from the School District of Philadelphia about Jack, his 6-year-old grandson in North Carolina who recruited his grandfather to play touch football.

In the huddle, the school improvement consultant couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Go out 20 feet and cut 25 degrees to the left,” Jack, his team’s quarterback, instructed one of his friends. Daggett realized his grandson had made a slight mistake — he should have told his friend to cut 90 degrees — but he was stunned that these first-graders were using percentiles: a sixth- or seventh-grade math concept.

“Where’d you learn that?” Daggett asked afterward. “From our first-grade teacher,” Jack replied. Intrigued, Daggett met Jack’s teacher, who told him that — after learning Jack and his friends loved football — she invited the local high school football coach to teach her students pass plays.





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A prime example, Daggett tells the principals, of his academic Rigor/Relevance Framework that has become a cornerstone of many school reform efforts throughout the country. And then there is the fact that Jack’s teacher knew enough about the boys’ interests that she realized a visit from a football coach would engage and focus their minds.

“Until you have a relationship with kids you can’t tell what’s relevant for them, and it is relevance that makes rigor possible,” says Daggett, winner of one of the College of Education’s prestigious Gallery of Success Awards in 2007.

Daggett has given a similar talk hundreds of times to educators and education stakeholders in all 50 states and abroad since founding the International Center for Leadership in Education in 1991 in Rexford, N.Y., near Albany. He has assisted and consulted in all 50 states and hundreds of school districts regarding their school improvement initiatives — many in response to the No Child Left Behind Act and its adequate yearly progress (AYP) provisions.

He currently has a staff of 38 full-time employees (half of whom consult) and more than a 100 independent contractors, teachers and educational administrators throughout the country who act as additional consultants in spreading Daggett’s school improvement gospel. Reaching across all demographics, his firm has worked with Louisiana’s 34 lowest performing high schools and the

worst performing high schools in Los Angeles, as well as affluent schools from Georgia to Hawaii.

“I love what I do,” says Daggett. “We see schools that are so dramatically outperforming where they were five or 10 years ago. Brockton High School in Brockton, Mass., has more than 4,000 students, more than 70 percent of whom are minorities. After working with them for three years they’ve become one of the highest performing high schools in the state.

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Daggett also has collaborated with the National Governors Association and advised educational systems in Canada, Argentina, Great Britain, Germany, Hungary, Russia, Japan and Saudi Arabia. The Successful Practices Network, a related nonprofit established by Daggett and his wife, Bonnie, received a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to enable 600 schools to share their best practices. The Gates Foundation is also funding a five-year effort in collaboration with the Council of Chief State School Officers to identify 75 of the highest performing high schools and analyze the best practices they are employing that would be most effective in the 600 Successful Practice Network schools.

Says Raymond J. McNulty, Daggett’s senior vice president who formerly was both a senior fellow with the Gates Foundation and Vermont’s education commissioner: “To improve public education, many funders such as the Gates Foundation are looking for great, replicable models of schools that appear to be beating the odds. For example, schools whose students are 90 percent minorities who are achieving at the 90th percentile.

“For years Bill has been finding these great schools and sharing his findings with others.”

Now in its 17th year, the International Center’s annual four-day Model Schools Conference draws more than 6,000 educators, and an annual three-day symposium for school districts draws 2,000 more. “We do no advertising and we have no natural constituency like national principals associations, yet we outdraw most major conferences in the country,” says Daggett. “People are voting with their feet because they love to see these successful schools.”

Daggett developed his Rigor/Relevance Framework over more than two decades during an educational career that included brief stints as both a high school business teacher and soccer coach and as an assistant professor at two different colleges. While earning his doctorate at Temple, he spent a year each as a teaching associate at Temple and Russell Sage College in Troy, N.Y.



He was attracted to Temple's doctoral program because of its emphasis on vocational education — not in the traditional sense of educating students for trades such as carpentry or plumbing but by bringing theory to practice in order to educate students for mid- and senior-level jobs. "It was a junior version of Harvard's MBA program," says Daggett, "a case study approach."

At Temple the seeds of his rigor and relevance concept were first planted. "In most universities you have silos, one called academic education and the other called professional schools, and they usually never may they meet," he says. "But the Temple program really integrated a lot of academics and case-study approaches to business."

Daggett was particularly influenced by two professors, William Sassaman, EdD (deceased), who chaired his doctoral committee, and Marvin Hershfeld, the chairman of the Vocational Technical Department and Distributive Education. "Marv was great on practice and Bill was really good at theory," recalls Daggett. "Trying to meet both of their needs while defending my dissertation forced me to think deeper and harder about how to bring practice and theory together."

After earning his doctorate in 1974, Daggett became an associate in business education for the New York State Education Department — the first of four state posts that over the next 17 years would include chief of the Bureau

of Business Education, chief of the Bureau of Occupational Education Department and finally director of the Division of Occupational Education Instruction.

His initial task: "For students, we needed to be able to answer a really simple question: 'Where will I ever use what I'm being taught today?' It sounds crazy, but a lot of teachers can't answer that question, other than saying you can use it on the test, which is not what the students are asking us. They're really asking, 'How does this relate to the world beyond school?'"

One conundrum facing the state: only 43 percent of high school seniors were passing the rigorous N.Y. State Regents Exam, a voluntary test that qualified the students for reduced tuition at any state university. About a quarter of the remaining 57 percent took the exam and failed, but Daggett says about 40 percent never even tried. State educators were debating whether all students should be forced to complete the kind of rigorous academic program that would enable them to pass the test, or should they be given what Daggett calls a "watered-down program and call it vocational or occupational education?"

He believed focusing on just academic rigor for the 43 percent high achievers and on just job skills for the other 57 percent were both doomed approaches. Instead, give both types of students rigorous, relevant education, and most will become life-long learners with the critical skills

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necessary to forge a career, not just be trained for a job that technology could rapidly transform.

The debate hit close to home for Daggett, who graduated 39th in his high school class of 43 seniors and never tried to earn a Regents diploma. “I never attempted it because I didn’t think school was really relevant,” he recalls. “All I wanted to do was play sports, which I had more time to do if I didn’t work very hard academically.”

But then he got his military draft lottery number: 4 — a guarantee that, as the Vietnam War was being waged, he would be drafted into the U.S. Army. “That was a lot of motivation,” he says candidly. “I didn’t want to go to Vietnam.” So he earned deferments by first earning associate and bachelor’s degrees — he graduated both times magna cum laude — and then by teaching.

With the N.Y. State Education Department, Daggett was responsible for both monitoring and technical assistance; when budget cuts forced the department to reduce its technical assistance services, Daggett took a six-month leave without pay to provide such services. “I knew within a month that I would never go back,” he says, “because I was booked for a year and could see that there was a huge demand for what I wanted to do: Provide technical assistance to

help teachers answer that basic question from students: ‘Where will I ever use what you’re teaching me today?’”

As for the No Child Left Behind Act, Daggett says, “It was a strong concept flawed in its implementation in that it cut off application of knowledge. Schools began to drop arts programs and career and technical education programs in order to double kids up in academics, and the test became the end line rather than the starting line of what we should be doing.”

Nonetheless, under President Obama, Daggett believes the NCLB concept will endure. “Originally No Child Left Behind was sponsored by Sen. Ted Kennedy,” he notes. “A lot of people forget it wasn’t as partisan as it ended up being.

“I think you’ll see a relaxation in how school districts and states can define how students are achieving basic academic skills, but I don’t see a backing off of the commitment to that goal.

“I also think the present economic downturn will lead to a major focus on workforce development-related programs and a much heavier emphasis on the integration of academics and career and technical education for kids.”

The NCLB concept strikes a particular chord with Daggett and his wife because two of their five children are disabled. At the age of 11 their son Paul was struck by a car and, after a coma of five months,

was left with severe speech and hearing loss. But today he is a college graduate with a good job, a wife and two young children. “I often say that the U.S. is the only country in the world in which that could have happened,” says Daggett.

Meanwhile their daughter Audrey, in her mid-30s, suffers from mental retardation, autism and epilepsy. “Daily life for Audrey is a struggle,” he says, “but since pre-school she’s been supported by the Wildwood Programs in the Albany area, a group we volunteer with that provides marvelous support and services for children and adults with severe disabilities.”

Daggett’s children have underscored his belief that the appropriate rigor and relevance for each child is different. “You should never presuppose, as in Paul’s case, that someone can’t be independent, but you also can’t be so naïve to think that every child, such as Audrey, can make it on his or her own.

“It has helped us understand, in a very personal sense, this need to make sure all kids are enabled to become all they are capable of being.”

RIGOR/RELEVANCE FRAMEWORK

KNOWLEDGE TAXONOMY

EVALUATION 6	Quadrant C / ASSIMILATION Students extend and refine their acquired knowledge to be able to use that knowledge automatically and routinely to analyze and solve problems and create solutions.	Quadrant D / ADAPTION Students have the competence to think in complex ways and to apply their knowledge and skills. Even when confronted with perplexing unknowns, students are able to use extensive knowledge and skill to create solutions and take action that further develops their skills and knowledge.			
SYNTHESIS 5					
ANALYSIS 4					
APPLICATION 3	Quadrant A / ACQUISITION Students gather and store bits of knowledge and information. Students are primarily expected to remember or understand this knowledge.	Quadrant B / APPLICATION Students use acquired knowledge to solve problems, design solutions and complete work. The highest level of application is to apply knowledge to new and unpredictable situations.			
COMPREHENSION 2					
KNOWLEDGE/AWARENESS 1					
	1 KNOWLEDGE IN ONE DISCIPLINE	2 APPLY IN DISCIPLINE	3 APPLY ACROSS DISCIPLINES	4 APPLY TO REAL-WORLD PREDICTABLE SITUATION	5 APPLY TO REAL-WORLD UNPREDICTABLE SITUATION

APPLICATION MODEL

Proven Improvement of International Center Client Schools

PASADENA (TEX.) INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

51,000 students

70% economically disadvantaged

74% Hispanic, 14% White, 8% African American, 4% Asian

43 different languages, 27% students limited English proficient

Texas Recognized School District 7 consecutive years

Each of the district's five high schools has its own ICLE consultant

Vicki Thomas, deputy superintendent:

"We've been partnering with Dr. Daggett for the last four years in an aggressive effort at systemically reforming pre-K through 12. In our high schools we have seen our failure rates dramatically decrease in our core subjects. Our attendance has improved, our discipline referrals have declined and so has the percentage of our students passing their advanced placement exams. In just one year the number of students taking AP exams went from about 300 students to 1,800.

"And our discipline referrals have declined. That's because, in addition to rigor and relevance, Dr. Daggett promotes working on relationships with students to make sure they have a significant support system on campus."

KENNESAW MOUNTAIN (GA.) HIGH SCHOOL

9-year-old suburban high school.

66% white, 18% African American, 8% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 3% other

Mimi Dyer, the school's academy director and an independent ICLE consultant:

"We started out with Bill Daggett's rigor and relevance framework as our mantra. You can't have rigor without relevance and you can't have either of those two without relationships. They are pieces of twine braided together. It's all about trying to put that relevance piece into the relationship. If you can't relate to the kids it doesn't matter how smart you are or the value of the information you have.

"And it's non-negotiable that students achieve high standards. It's cool to be smart here. Currently 56 percent of our students are enrolled in honors or advanced placement courses, and the pass rate on AP exams is 77 percent."