

Rigor, Relevance and Relationships

These “three R’s” are referred to with increasing frequency among educators and policy makers. From the perspective of the Oregon Small Schools Initiative, the three R’s apply to students and adults alike, and underscore essential components of high achieving and equitable small schools: challenging academics, authentic learning experiences, and a personalized approach to teaching and learning.

Rigor, relevance and relationships must be approached together, rather than as independent goals. We believe that building relationships is the key foundation, upon which teachers can develop relevant learning opportunities for students. With strong relationships and relevant curriculum that connects with students’ interests and lives, students are more likely to embrace rigorous and challenging learning opportunities.

The Initiative’s expanded interpretation and application of the three R’s is summarized as follows:

Rigor: Students acquire knowledge and skills central to core disciplines or content areas, and methods of inquiry, higher order thinking skills, and habits of mind, that are applied to unique and complex situations both within the classroom and beyond the classroom walls.

Truly rigorous learning involves deep immersion in a subject over time. It is reflective and intimate, causing students to take some type of action or position, to develop their own questions, and to realize the difficulty of doing something well. In order to provide rigorous learning opportunities, teachers must also challenge themselves and one another to develop lessons and assessments that meet the level of rigor our students need.

Relevance: Activities, learnings and content applied in real world settings that serve a real need or solve a real problem, and/or that connect with an individual student’s personal or career interests, passion or goals.

Relevant learning helps students make connections with subject matter, with adults, and with the world beyond the classroom. Students in relevant learning situations learn how the world operates, they observe adults doing focused, difficult work, and they become more aware of their own skills, abilities, and potential. They also become more likely to enter a field of study or a profession that matches and builds upon their strengths and interests.

Relationships: Positive, sustained adult relationships, allowing the adult to 1) mentor the student and introduce him/her to the adult environment or networks, and/or 2) know the student’s strengths, interests and goals in order to use these to inform instructional strategies or activities provided.

The relationships within a school define the culture of that school. Positive, collegial relationships must be developed and nurtured among and between teachers, administrators, and the school community. When students become part of that collegial environment, they find the safety and support they need to explore new learning, think critically, question and challenge ideas, and push themselves to higher levels of achievement, understanding, and success.