

TPS Headlines

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Academic Vigor

Moving through school website after school website, I am struck by the number that proudly state that their schools value “academic rigor.” Clicking on to the dictionary.com website, I find a definition of rigor that grounds my frustration in the way educators across the country gleefully toss around the word.

Consider the dictionary.com definition of rigor:

- *Strictness or severity, as in temperament, action, or judgment.*
- *A harsh or trying circumstance; hardship. See Synonyms at difficulty.*
- *A harsh or cruel act.*

Is that what we want for our children at The Philadelphia School? Do we want our children to experience academics as severe and harsh? Do we want our students to find the math curriculum cruel or the writing program a hardship? I think not. I suggest that educators rethink the language used to describe the work we do with our students, carefully choosing words that accurately shape the intent of excellence in education. And I suggest we begin by changing the word “rigor” to “vigor.”

At the start of the school year, I was delighted to have the faculty talk about using a new word to describe the engaging curriculum at TPS. “It’s really about academic vigor!”

Vigor means:

- *Physical or mental strength, energy, or force.*
- *The capacity for natural growth and survival, as of plants or animals.*
- *Strong feeling; enthusiasm or intensity. Legal effectiveness or validity.*

Let’s consider the possibilities of academic vigor. Isn’t it inspiring to have our students engaged as energetic learners every day? As I walk the halls, it’s easy to find children involved in intense studies of language and literacy. One quickly finds students who are thinking powerfully about math concepts or theme topics. Students apply their mental energy to problem solving as a group, whether out in the woods at Shelly Ridge or in the classroom. Growth, both mental and physical, is embraced and expected at TPS.

Perhaps I am being too picky here. Rigor and vigor are just simple nouns. But if a student used a word inappropriately, not taking into consideration its range of meaning, I would, as a dedicated teacher, work to help the child choose a better, more appropriate word.

For years, I have defined myself as a progressive educator – and because of that, I do not take lightly the importance of articulating clearly the rewards and challenges of creating learning environments that value the whole child. Academic rigor doesn’t begin to describe the exciting, rich, diverse learning community that is The Philadelphia School. Instead, academic vigor is a far better phrase to represent the work that we do at The Philadelphia School every day.