

Part I

The AIW Framework

Students are more engaged and learn more when teachers challenge them to think critically, to delve deeply into problems and big ideas, and to make connections between their schoolwork and personal or real-world concerns. Unfortunately, education in the United States faces persistent obstacles that often undermine emphasis on rigorous intellectual work. These include low expectations for students to master intellectual challenge, especially for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds; lack of student engagement in academic work; and testing and curriculum demands for extensive content coverage and mastery of basic skills, instead of in-depth understanding of subject matter and complex communication skills. These obstacles, exacerbated by disagreement on education goals and the nature of effective instruction, along with diverse, ever-changing reform efforts, often leave teachers, administrators, parents, students, and the public at large without a clear sense of the intellectual mission of schooling.

Since the 1980s, national commissions composed of leading figures in public office, the business community, higher education, private foundations, and K–12 education have tried to address these issues through state and national standards for curriculum and assessment. Improvement has been demonstrated for some students in some subjects or grade levels in some districts and states, but on a national scale the movement toward standards has not significantly alleviated the main problems.

Beyond the obstacles just mentioned, successful education reform faces other roadblocks:

- The more recent standards movement for more rigorous intellectual work through the Common Core is vulnerable to disjointed implementation, inadequate funding, and further politicizing discourse on reform.
- Key educational leaders in schools, districts, and state and federal agencies usually commit to only short-term rather than sustained effort on promising initiatives.
- Key institutional actors (districts, states, unions, text and test publishers, and teacher training institutions) that influence classroom practices often fail to coordinate their programs, confounding teachers.
- And finally, resources are often distributed inequitably due to disparities in the power of different socioeconomic groups and to education funding based on property taxes.

Unless these social-political roadblocks are addressed more comprehensively, the standards movement alone is unlikely to improve schooling on a large scale. The work described here did not aim to resolve these more systemic problems.

Instead, the framework for Authentic Intellectual Work presented in Chapter 1 and elaborated throughout this book offers a parsimonious set of criteria and standards for rigorous, meaningful intellectual work that can focus instruction on a common intellectual mission for schooling across all grades and subjects. Professional development aimed to implement the framework helps teachers advance student mastery of more challenging curriculum specified in national and state standards. Chapter 1 defines Authentic Intellectual Work through specific criteria and examples, and offers a rationale for emphasizing it as the central intellectual mission of schooling.