

## Learning Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – Reflecting Forward

*“What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all our children.”*

*Jean Piaget*

The future isn't what it used to be! That's the trouble with the future. Just when you think you have it figured out, something or someone comes along to change your thinking and suddenly the future looks different. Most school superintendents will agree that it's wise to look ahead; but, it's difficult to look further than one can see. For many of us, it's the uncertainty of not knowing what the future holds that makes forward thinking so troublesome. And, to make matters worse, most superintendents agree that if we don't change the direction of our schools, we're likely to end up where we are headed. It's enough to make a school leader nervous.

What do the months and years ahead hold for today's school superintendents? For the past year, approximately 30 M.A.S.S. members have been meeting regularly as a Global Studies 21<sup>st</sup> Century Committee (GS-21) and wrestling with this and other related questions. It would be nice to report that we have reached agreement on all our deliberations, but, honestly, that's not the case. We do agree, however, that the future will be different than the present, and we'd like to share some observations that might prove useful to other M.A.S.S. members.



School leadership articles, of late, have been replete with talk of students needing 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning skills. It's hard to avoid the notion that somehow at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century basic school skills suddenly became obsolete and were replaced with a new and different set of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills. It's akin to having gone to bed one night and waking up the next morning to find that all your household appliances had been replaced with newer more complicated ones. We don't believe in this concept of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills; thus, it might be helpful to define 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills and contrast them to earlier skills that students needed to be successful in our classrooms.

American schools are not the same as they were ten years ago; however, in general, they are not much different than they were last year. Support for this statement can be found in the ways schools are organized and classes conducted. The increasing use of technology to transmit, retrieve, and display information is now found everywhere from kindergartners with laptops to virtual on-line secondary classes that only meet in cyberspace. Of late, the use of computer generated data to help inform and, in some cases, drive decisions is more and more evident in district-wide policies, staffing decisions, and program changes.

Not surprisingly, the GS-21 superintendents involved believe that our schools will be considerably different ten years from now, but not all that different next year. In a similar manner, where our organization will be in a decade is certain to be different than today, but we doubt that anyone will notice a significant change next year. GS-21 acknowledges that our schools are changing, but it's difficult to identify where and when specific changes will occur. Unfortunately, the future doesn't arrive fully formed, and our group generally agrees that there is a transition, an evolution of sorts, underway that is reshaping our schoolhouses, our instructional habits, and our desired educational outcomes.

So, again we ask, what are “21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills?” Basically, they are an extension of the basic skills of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that promoted “educated” individuals as those who could read, write, and speak well, and calculate. These skills, narrowly defined as the 3 R's, focus on content and form

what should be considered the starting point for 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills. As a complement for these content based skills, 21st Century students should be able to demonstrate an ability to work well with others, to think critically and creatively, and to communicate effectively. To boil it down, the much heralded skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century include:

» critical thinking

» creativity



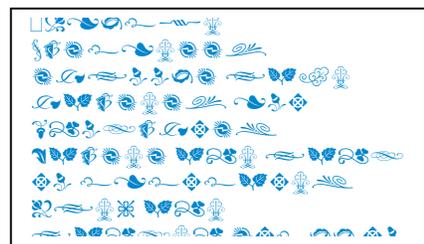
» collaboration

» communication

Not surprisingly, these skills, the 4 C's, will involve the use and mastery of newer technologies. Thus, today's superintendents must demand a continuing investment of time and money in those instructors who know how to harness technology for the betterment of their students. In short, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Skills are a melding of the 3 R's with today's 4 C's, all of which are heavily dependent on emerging technologies.

Additionally, developing the social and emotional competence of students will enhance their ability to collaborate and communicate in a personal way with their peers in the classroom or students on the other side of the world. Using rich academic content and connecting with others virtually or in person, students can develop new perspectives, a sense of empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity—all necessary skills in a global community that relies on technology but depends on human interactions and relationships.

Granted, one might argue that this is still a pretty nebulous explanation that calls for greater clarity. Our group won't disagree. We would, however, acknowledge that the skills of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are still evolving, and like the future itself does not arrive in final form. Thus, to aid and assist our students with the acquisition of these newer skills, the GS-21 superintendents are in agreement that school leaders, in particular, and school districts, in general, must embrace ambitious and aggressive programs of professional development for those who work most closely with our students. This training may take many forms, but it must include a thorough understanding of how each of the 4 C's will help students become well adjusted, civic-minded, and productive adults. Anything less will compromise our students' future.



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