

Curriculum Leadership Institute E-Hint

21st Century Learning Skills Partnership

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning Skills (P21) is an advocacy group that was developed in order to help students keep up with the changing world. Made up of policymakers and business and educational leaders, P21 has a goal for every child to be successful as a citizen, worker, and leader following completion of his/her secondary education. The main outcomes are found in core subjects, which are embedded with "21st century themes." These outcomes are complimented by skills in three areas: life and career, learning and innovation, and information, media, and technology. A framework of educational support systems neatly ties everything together.

Core subjects and themes. It is an expectation of P21 that students continue mastery of traditional core subjects, plus fine arts and foreign language. P21 stresses that education must include more than content, so students can learn to make informed choices. Within the core subjects, educators must incorporate the *21st century themes* of global awareness, and literacy in health, civics, finance, economics, business, and entrepreneurship. Current educational programs do not emphasize these themes; instead they focus on traditional content in language arts, math, science and social studies because these are the state-assessed subjects. However, some states are currently revising their standards to include 21st Century Skills; thus the themes could eventually appear on state assessments, too.

Skill areas. One of the criticisms of today's young adults in the workplace is their lack of crucial life and career skills. Note that "life and career" is one of the *skill areas* of P21. Skills taught in this area include leadership, responsibility, initiative, and self-direction – all of which can provide the groundwork for future growth of students in their professions. The second skill area, "learning and innovation," includes creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking and problem solving. These characteristics help students refine their skills in all areas. "Information, media, and technology" skills help students know how to access information and examine it for purpose and effectiveness, which will help them utilize rapid technological advancements.

Support Systems. While all of the 21st Century Skills are admirable, none of them would be realized without the proper support systems that are in place. Standards and assessments, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and learning environments are those supporting pieces. Careful planning is required in order for instruction to be engaging, differentiated, and learner centered, as well as tied to the curriculum. Effective educators and district leaders should be visionaries, implementing appropriate programs and training to encourage creativity and critical thinking as a part of student learning. Decision makers must have a broad consensus and a distinct plan of action, and must assure good communication with those carrying out the tasks. Development of an educational plan is not enough; there must be follow-through as well, to assure that all parts are adequately addressed and connected.

Recent reports have indicated that new national policymakers will be placing more accountability emphasis on student achievement of these 21st Century Learning Skills rather than the past administration's focus on the annual assessments of No Child Left Behind. Several states have already started incorporating these skills into their standards, thus getting a jump on this potential change of focus. To see details about the Partnership and a complete listing of states with their initiatives, go to www.21stcenturyskills.org. A redirection of an educational framework takes a long-term commitment. Integration of 21st Century Themes into core subjects, proper placement of support systems, and real world skill development are vital for our students' success as they move through the 21st century.