



PARTNERSHIP FOR 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

Ken Kay, President of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Testimony for the Republican National Committee Platform Committee *August 1, 2008*

I serve as president of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, the leading advocacy organization focused on infusing 21st century skills into education. We bring together the business community, education leaders and policymakers to define a powerful vision for 21st century education to ensure every child's success as citizens and workers.

The Partnership has 37 member companies and nine leadership states, including: Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, South Dakota, Wisconsin and West Virginia.

In an economy driven by imagination, creativity and innovation and a society facing complex business, political, scientific, technological, health and environmental challenges, the ingenuity, agility and skills of the American people are crucial to the United States' standing as an international leader.

I want to accentuate several key points about the steps America needs to take to ensure our graduates have these vital skills and are able to maintain the United States' status as an economic leader.

1. United States education reform needs to be led by a collaborative effort of the education, research and business communities.
2. The United States needs to focus education on the 21st century skills outcomes and attributes that are required for success in the 21st century.
3. Education support systems (standards, assessments and professional development) must be aligned to support 21st century outcomes.
4. The next administration and incoming governors need to align education, workforce development and economic development around 21st century skills.
5. The next administration needs to create new structures in the White House and key departments to support the development of a 21st century workforce.
6. The Congress needs to embed 21st century skills into re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)/No Child Left Behind.
7. The Congress should pass the Rockefeller-Snowe 21st Century Skills Incentive Fund Act.

There is no doubt that creating an aligned, 21st century education system that prepares students, workers and citizens to triumph in the global skills race is the central economic competitiveness issue for the next decade and administration.

To understand the current education climate, one must first look at the past decade of policy and reform initiatives. Since 2001, the nation has focused on this question in education: Can students achieve minimum competency standards under the No Child Left Behind law?

The question above is not enough in a global economy. We need to ask a second question: Is every young person ready for success in the new global economy?

This question recognizes the intrinsic relationship between education and economic competitiveness. It's the right question for our time and the answer should shape education and workforce development policies and practices going forward.

Recent research and landmark reports clearly indicate that a different set of skills – 21st century skills – power the wealth of nations. These skills, comprehensively articulated by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, will withstand the test of time, fluctuations in the economy and the marketplace, and dynamic employment demands.

The 21st century skills, or “cognitive skills,” measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) differentiated the economic leaders from the laggards among 50 countries from 1960 to 2000. According to Stanford researcher Eric Hanusek, “a highly skilled work force can raise economic growth by about two-thirds of a percentage point every year.” Worldwide, the average annual GDP growth rate for more than half a century is 2 to 3 percent, so this is a significant boost. Consequently “higher levels of cognitive skill appear to play a major role in explaining international differences in economic growth.”

It seems evident that thriving global economies succeed by producing innovative products and services that exist at the technology frontier and incorporate the most creative and advanced methods. The strategies employed by these countries are global in scope and thereby require a workforce with the skills to translate and drastically transform typical business models and offerings to international marketplaces.

Therefore, for America to thrive, U.S. K-12 school systems must graduate students capable of offering international perspectives and solutions and applying tangible skills like language proficiency along with less tangible skills like cultural sensitivity, openness to novel and diverse ideas, and the ability to adjust to changing landscapes.

Quite simply, the United States education system's mission is to prepare people for the jobs of the future.

To contribute, compete and prosper in the current global environment, young people must do more than master academic content and meet “seat time” requirements in school. They need 21st century skills that will increase their marketability and employability, such as:

- Thinking critically and making judgments about the barrage of information that comes their way every day on the Web, in the media, in homes, workplaces and everywhere else.
- Solving complex, multidisciplinary, open-ended problems that all workers, in every kind of workplace, encounter routinely.
- Collaborating with teams of people across cultural, geographic and language boundaries – a necessity in diverse and multinational workplaces.
- Making innovative and creative use of knowledge, information and opportunities with an entrepreneurial mindset.
- Taking charge of financial, health and civic responsibilities and making wise choices.
- Using technology competently to accomplish their work and manage their lives, and to learn, create, communicate and collaborate.

Twenty-first century skills have been and will continue to be the touchstone for U.S. competitiveness. While, the U.S. is still the most competitive nation overall in the world, a ranking to which our education system has contributed significantly, many warn that the future is decidedly uncertain.

The changing economic landscape appears to include flat markets and rising numbers of highly skilled and competent workers in other countries, while the numbers of these workers in the United States is declining. The United States is in the midst of a “perfect storm” of three powerful forces that threaten our competitiveness, according to the Education Testing Service:

- A wide disparity in literacy and numeracy skills compared to international competitors;
- Seismic changes in the economy, driven by technological innovation and globalization, resulting in profound restructuring of the workplace; and
- Sweeping demographic changes, resulting in an increasingly older and more diverse workforce

The common component of all economically viable and thriving economies is an investment in education. Historically, increased investments in education have powered productivity and boosted the national income. The difference today is that the solution to sustaining competitiveness and realizing these economic results hinges on 21st century skills.

It is clear that 21st century skills are critical for powering job growth in new and emerging U.S.-dominated industries and for sustaining the American way of life. Currently, the United States leads the world in several high-growth industries, including technology, media and telecommunications, and could dominate in emerging industries, such as advanced manufacturing, biotechnology, digital media, geospatial technology, nanotechnology, photonics and renewable energy.

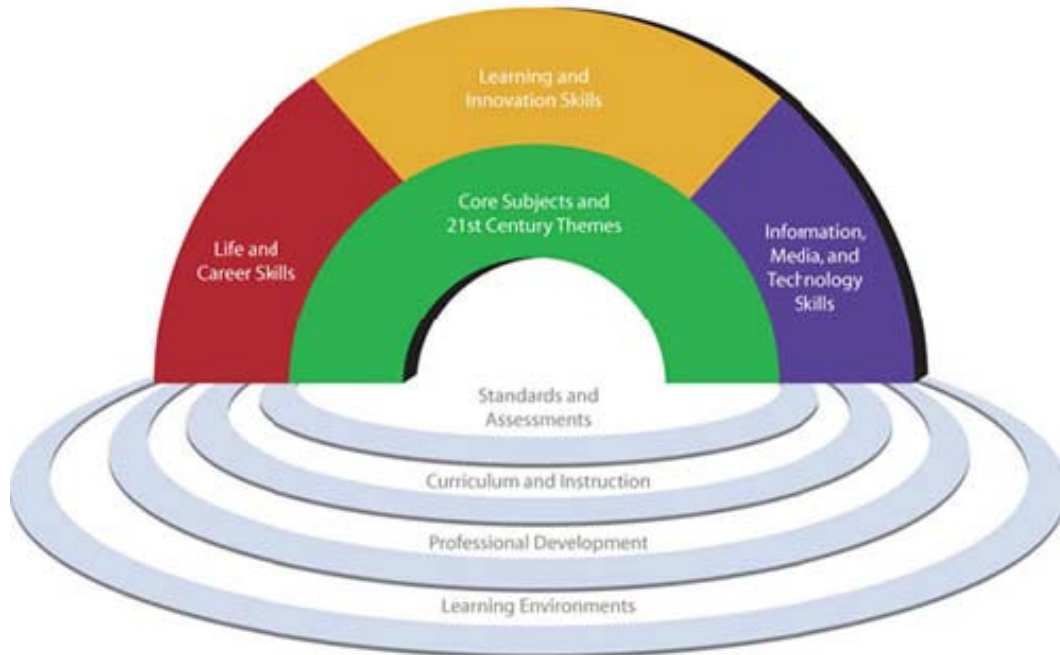
To become the preeminent country in these emerging fields, the U.S. needs to fuel creativity, innovation and adaptability as these skills represent the hallmarks of competitive, high-growth and emerging industries. Maintaining the United States’ edge and growing these industries depends on expanding the pool of American workers who can perform these new kinds of tasks.

Twenty-first century skills have become the common currency for employability. Among the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ projected fastest-growing jobs, high-wage, middle-wage and low-wage jobs all require 21st century skills.

Consequently, all Americans, not just an elite few, need 21st century skills to earn a living wage and prosper. It must be a shared vision of all sectors (education, public policy, business, etc.) to forge a 21st century education system.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills has developed a unified, collective vision/framework for 21st century learning and education support systems that can be used to prepare young people for a global economy. This vision is the result of a multi-year, comprehensive effort to create a shared understanding and common vision for education. This work included extensive research on 21st century skills, a National Forum on 21st Century Skills and outreach sessions with educators, employers, parents, community members and students.

Framework for 21st Century Learning



21st Century Student Outcomes

The framework describes the skills, knowledge and expertise students should master to succeed in work and life in the 21st century. Mastery of core subjects and 21st century themes is essential for students in the 21st century. Schools must move beyond a focus on basic competency in core subjects to promoting understanding of academic content at much higher levels by weaving 21st century interdisciplinary themes into the curriculum.

Core Subjects

- English, reading or language arts
- World languages
- Arts
- Mathematics
- Economics
- Science
- Geography
- History
- Government and civics

21st Century Themes

- Global awareness
- Financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy
- Civic literacy
- Health literacy

Learning and Innovation Skills

- Creativity and innovation skills
- Critical thinking and problem solving skills
- Communication and collaboration skills

Information, Media and Technology Skills

- Information literacy
- Media literacy
- ICT (information and communications technology) literacy

Life and Career Skills

- Flexibility and adaptability
- Initiative and self-direction
- Social and cross-cultural skills
- Productivity and accountability
- Leadership and responsibility

21st Century Education Support Systems

- 21st Century Standards and Assessments
- 21st Century Curriculum and Instruction
- 21st Century Professional Development
- 21st Century Learning Environments

For students, proficiency in 21st century skills – the skills, knowledge and expertise students must master to succeed in college, work and life – should be the outcome of a 21st century education. To be “educated” today requires mastery of core subjects, 21st century themes and 21st century skills.

To help students achieve proficiency in 21st century skills, teachers and administrators need education support systems that strengthen their instructional, leadership and management capacity. And both students and educators require learning environments that are conducive to results.

American voters overwhelmingly agree with this mission and believe that the nation’s schools can, and should, play a vital role in teaching 21st century skills. They are not alone as employers and postsecondary educators believe these skills are essential as well.

It is a crucial moment in the United States’ timeline. If the country can form a partnership committed to creating an education system that combines core subjects with innovation, creativity, communication and other essential 21st century skills, the U.S. will be able to maintain its preeminence as a global economic leader.

The membership of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills include: Adobe Systems, Inc., American Association of School Librarians, Apple, ASCD, AT&T, Atomic Learning, Blackboard, Inc., Cable in the Classroom, Cengage Learning, Cisco Systems, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Davis Publications, Dell, Inc., Discovery Education, Education Networks of America, Education Testing Service, EF Education, Ford Motor Company Fund, Giant Campus, Hewlett Packard, Intel Foundation, JA Worldwide, KnowledgeWorks Foundation, LEGO Group, Lenovo, Measured Progress, Microsoft Corporation, National Education Association, Oracle Education Foundation, Pearson, PolyVision, SAP, Sesame Workshop, Texas Instruments, THINKronize, Verizon, and Wireless Generation.