

What Is 21st Century Education? Article 1 of 8 in Series

The year is 2056. A woman, young at heart, wakes up for a special day. This day has been long in the making. After an illustrious 30 year career, which encompassed nine comprehensive changes in occupation spanning 13 states and seven countries, retirement day has finally arrived. The woman, her family, and her closest colleagues meet for brunch and are joined by colleagues across the nation and around the world in a virtual retirement party to celebrate her special day. As she reflects back over her life, many people come to mind, but none are closer to her heart than is her lifelong inspiration...the person who helped her believe in herself and her abilities...the person who engaged her in life-long learning! A smile emerges on her face as she thinks back to age five, her first day of school, and her Kindergarten teacher, Ms. Smith, from 2013.

This story above is not unlike many stories which will be common a half century from now. As we look ahead to the future, more is uncertain than is known. However, a constant among the ever-changing world is that the education of our youth will continue to shape their lives and will determine the future of our nation. The challenge faced by schools today has never been greater. Today, American schools must align an instructional program that will prepare students for a global economy: an economy that continues to become increasingly competitive, digital, and elusive. A few factors which schools must acknowledge are:

1. Many jobs of 2020 do not yet exist and the majority of jobs thereafter do not yet exist.
2. Schools must train students to adapt to these unknown jobs and their unknown requisites.
3. The amount of new information technology doubles every two years.
4. China will soon be the number one English-speaking country in the world.
5. India currently has more “honors” students than America has in total students.
6. While a core of common knowledge is required of all students, process knowledge and skill knowledge is equally important for college and career success.

The skills required for success in the 21st Century include: critical and creative thinking skills; adaptability; skills of influence; oral, written, and digital communication skills; information literacy; ability to collaborate in multiple formats; entrepreneurship; citizenship and character; ability to analyze information; fluency in multiple languages; and diverse core technological competencies. The pace of change in our world today is unprecedented. To keep up, schools across our country must take a congruent pace of adaptability in order to prepare our students for college, career, and life in an unknown future. Without change, students *will* be left behind.

Albert Einstein is said to have defined insanity as, “Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” Clearly, we know the future for our students will be unlike anything we have experienced. That being the case, we cannot continue to prepare students in the same way we have for the last half decade if we expect them to be successful in the next. Twenty-first Century Education means doing things differently. It means preparing our students for *their* future!

As a baseline for this change, 46 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards which call for a focus on narrowed core content knowledge, an emersion of expansive technology skills, and vast skills in critical thinking and processing. Next week’s article will take a closer look at the Common Core. The last article in this series will bring the series together on that which matters most throughout this process. An interactive “anchor” slideshow presentation is available at wpsd.net. We look forward to partnering for progress with you in the Common Core Era!

Seeking a World Class Education,
Jerrod Wheeler, Ed. D., Superintendent of Schools