



# I'm 21 Now ... and Accountable

## A Case for Coherence in 21st Century School Transformation

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Few topics generate more excitement — or more diverse opinions at polar ends of the educational spectrum — than that of 21st century skill development. Proponents herald it as the transformational and necessary step to ensuring that American students are once again academically globally competitive. Critics fear yet another pendulum swing — an educational experiment in which the positive steps toward accountability and academic rigor are replaced with “fuzzy” pedagogy and vague standards — ultimately leaving students farther behind their international peers when all is said and done. Despite the arguments, both pro and con, there is no disputing that American education is in crisis.

Bob Wise, Executive Director of the Alliance for Excellent Education, in his book *Raising the Grade: How High School Reform Can Save Our Youth and Our Nation*, indicates that today, only 70% of all American high school students graduate in the expected four years; the figures are even bleaker for students in poverty and students of color. If these historically low graduation rates continue on the same trajectory, our national graduation rate will continue to decline as the country's growing number of poor and minority students are left behind. These are sobering statistics for a nation once at the top of its game educationally and now faced with the realization that its students do not fare well when compared to their international counterparts. A subsequent March 2009 All4Ed Policy Brief entitled *Short Sighted: How America's Lack of Attention to International Education Studies Impedes Improvement* provides clear evidence of the extent of the problems we face. In the early 1960s, the United States had the highest high school completion rates among the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member nations. By 2005, the United States had slipped to eighteenth out of twenty-three member nations. From 1995 to 2005, America's college graduation rate had slipped from second to fifteenth among member nations.

Increasingly, the gap is widening between what colleges require and what graduating high school seniors are realistically able to do. According to NAEP results in 2005, only 23 percent of seniors were considered proficient in mathematics, 35 percent in reading, and in 2007, only 24 percent of high school seniors were proficient in writing. With the “proficiency standard” now widely accepted as the benchmark for college readiness, these statistics are cause for genuine national concern. A preponderance of college professors across the country now say high school does not prepare students for college and indicate that most of their students require some form of remediation after admission. This poses a serious equity and access consideration for Pell Grant recipients who must show progress in credit-bearing courses toward a baccalaureate degree for continued funding.



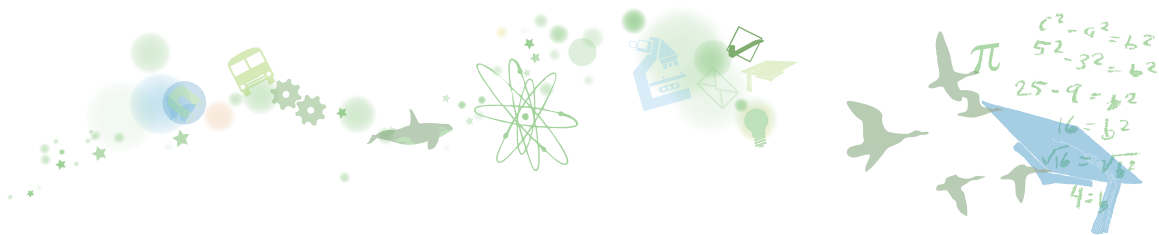
One need only compare the way a typical teenager listens, communicates, and engages others to the way instruction is delivered in most secondary classrooms in America to see that there is a fundamental disconnect between expectation and reality. This is especially troubling in light of the “Seven Survival Skills for the 21st Century” identified by Harvard researcher Tony Wagner in his new book, *The Global Achievement Gap*. The skill list is an outgrowth of Wagner’s conversations with corporate CEOs and their descriptions of the skills and competencies they seek in new employees, contrasted with his observations of teaching and learning in prominent high schools across the country. What he found with alarming regularity in these schools was a marked incongruity between the way students are being taught and corporate America’s expectations of graduates. Because these students live in a dramatically different time than did their parents, the world will no longer beat a path to their door. Instead, fueled by drive and determination, they must seize the moment in a post-graduate world that requires sophisticated levels of collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Wagner’s experiences prompted a call for transformational change in the way students are being taught and assessed in this country and, finding “remarkable consistency” in the skills and competencies corporate leaders sought, Wagner outlined the following as critical for 21st century learning:

- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Collaboration Across Networks and Leading by Influence
- Agility and Adaptability
- Initiative and Entrepreneurialism
- Effective Oral and Written Communication
- Accessing and Analyzing Information
- Curiosity and Imagination

So what is the solution to poor academic performance among high school students, many of whom drop out or graduate unprepared for the workforce or college? In addition to Tony Wagner’s Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a number of other groups are working tirelessly to define and bring about 21st century learning in our nation’s schools. Two notable examples include:

- The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, whose leadership and work with membership organizations has produced a comprehensive vision for 21st century skills and learning. The Partnership’s *21st Century Student Outcomes* includes a focus on Core Subjects and 21st Century Themes, Learning and Innovation Skills, Information, Media and Technology Skills, and Life and Career Skills. For more information on this organization’s valuable work: [www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org)
- The Metiri Group was commissioned by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory to produce *enGauge 21st Century Skills: Literacy in the Digital Age*. This effort helps define the 21st century skills American students will need to remain globally competitive. The report defines 21st century skills in terms of Digital Age Literacy, Inventive Thinking, Effective Communication, and High Productivity. For more information: <http://www.metiri.com/features.html>

In light of this extensive body of work, it is clear that major changes to assessment and instruction must occur and that a fundamental philosophical shift is necessary to ensure that America’s students are both college and career ready. How do we make that happen?



1. We start by elevating the quality of teaching and learning — aligning both with 21st century skills and competencies. This begins with a concentrated effort to move beyond what critics have labeled the “test-prep mentality” found in many school systems: a negative outgrowth of the unchecked overreliance on summative data which, while useful in gauging the success of overall program implementation, should never be used to determine the course of day-to-day instruction in the classroom. Twenty-first century schools must feature a comprehensive and balanced assessment program with formative and summative assessment measures used effectively to inform instruction and professional development in the right contexts, as suggested by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.
2. The instructional programs in schools must be based on world-class academic standards, provide relevant and engaging curriculum based on current and confirmed research and best practices, and ensure instructional delivery in state-of-the-art learning environments. This includes incorporating the cutting-edge hardware and software that these students demand and that they use nonstop outside the classroom.
3. In today's world, application and relevance are as important as rigorous academics. In creating effective 21st century learning environments, school leaders must have a clear understanding of what students will need beyond graduation — realistic college and workforce expectations — and be able to translate those requirements into meaningful and substantive learning activities that mirror the types of life experiences students will be exposed to beyond high school graduation. These same K–12 educators — along with their counterparts in higher education — must also transform themselves as a part of the journey. “Digital immigrants” teaching “digital natives” is no longer an acceptable instructional paradigm. Students enrolled in 21st century schools must be taught by teachers with 21st century skills and competencies, and beyond high school, students have every right to expect that the universities they attend must also have the same degree of digital proficiency.
4. There must be instructional “safety nets” for students who have fallen behind their grade-level peers and extended-day and -year options for students whose lifestyles or circumstances are not aligned with the traditional school day. For many of these students, credit-recovery programs are essential, but credit-recovery programs in high schools are increasingly under the microscope, with students placed into materials just long enough to get past an “instructional hurdle” or “end-of-course test.” It is essential that these programs be designed to build deep understanding of the critical skills and concepts students will need for success in college and/or the 21st century workforce.
5. We must find meaningful ways for students to once again feel connected to their school communities. Far too many students feel alienated, having no significant adult ties either personally or educationally. The transformational change 21st century schools must make includes a focus on the relationship building called for by the Alliance for Excellent Education in what they describe as the new 3 R's — Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships.

Clearly, there is no magic bullet. Student success requires a strong commitment from the students themselves, their parents, educators, and the community as a whole. The instructional programs and materials developed must be of sufficient quality and depth to ensure mastery of critical academic content, and educators must ensure that these programs are implemented with fidelity. The goal of every American should be to provide each child with a world-class education. To do less would ignore one of our most basic civic and moral responsibilities.



## References

Wagner, Tony. 2008. *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need — and What We Can Do About It*. New York: Basic Books.

Wise, Bob. 2008. *Raising the Grade: How High School Reform Can Save Our Youth and Our Nation*. New York: Jossey-Bass.

## About CompassLearning

CompassLearning creates curriculum and assessment solutions that motivate today's students to engage, think & learn. K–12 schools use our Odyssey system to personalize instruction, improve test scores, and increase graduation rates. Odyssey influences student success because it is based on current and confirmed research on the way 21st century students acquire knowledge. Teachers and administrators benefit from our custom implementations, excellent customer support, and professional in-person or online coaching, mentoring, and modeling.



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