

21st Century Skills: Our Highest Educational Challenge

By David Flowers, superintendent, Hutchinson Public Schools, Hutchinson, KS

With the current Hutchinson Public Schools (USD 308) strategic plan nearing its expiration date, the district is in the process of redrafting a plan for the next five years. The task force responsible for revising the plan did an environmental scan—a review of literature, data and trends—that helped the district identify the challenges currently facing public education.

In this respect, it paralleled ASQ's educator priority survey, which seeks to identify the highest education priorities for the next president to address. ASQ has identified nine potential priorities. In our local strategic planning process, we identified 13 key challenges:

- **Great teachers**—Afford high-quality professional development, adequate compensation and appropriate conditions to attract and retain a great teacher for each child, and administrative and classified staff to support the efforts of great teachers.
- **Leading change is complex and difficult**—Plan for and support the change using the best we know from research on organizational change. Leadership capacity must be developed and maintained among principals and teachers to generate and sustain needed change.
- **Collaboration is key**—Improve teaching and learning. Teachers must be given time to collaborate with others to look at student work and plan ways to reach all students. Time for professional development, individual planning and collaborative work is a precious commodity.
- **Continuous improvement**—All of us need to understand the urgency and need for continuous improvement, not as an indictment of current or past practice, but as a way of doing business.
- **Needs of the whole child**—Ensure a continuing focus on skills and sensibilities gained from a well-rounded experience, including the arts. The focus of the current accountability model is on reading and math, which creates the potential the curriculum will be too narrow.
- **Diversity**—Meet diverse learner needs with differentiated support, programming and instruction.

- **The bar has been raised**—Support higher levels of performance. All students must be engaged in courses and curriculum that are rigorous and relevant. Higher percentages of students than ever need to be prepared for college and work. Skills needed for college and work are the same.
- **Measurable results**—Be accountable not only for those things that are easiest to measure or that are mandated, but also for developing ways of measuring all things we value for students to know and be able to do in preparation for their futures.
- **Safe, secure and adequate facilities**—Provide and maintain facilities that protect and enhance children and their learning.
- **Systemic change**—Possess and demonstrate the courage and foresight to envision fundamental change where necessary. The current system was not designed to produce the results needed in the new century.
- **Technology advances**—Provide the tools for students and staff to learn now and in the future, despite the fact that technological advances outpace resources.
- **Instructional clarity and focus**—Develop a shared understanding of quality instruction, in terms of relevance, rigor and relationships.
- **Partnerships**—Collaborate with all elements of the community (parents, businesses and nonprofit agencies) to develop support for a shared vision of the skills needed by all students in the new century, and of how school and community responses must change to address new needs. We can't do it alone.

Our work in identifying key challenges was heavily influenced by The Partnership for 21st Century Skills.¹ This is a national coalition joined by eight states, including our own state of Kansas. The partnership's vision statement, "The Framework for 21st Century Learning," details the need for students to acquire new awareness and new skills to be prepared to live and work in the 21st century. Examples of new literacy areas that must be integrated into traditional content areas are: global awareness; financial, economic and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; and health literacy. In addition, the framework identifies new skills in three broad categories: learning and innovation skills; information, media and technology skills; and life and career skills.

We were also influenced in our strategic planning work by Katy Haycock and the Education Trust,² an organization that has provided important data and insight to educators, governors and legislators. The Education Trust's data make it clear our

nation is falling behind other nations when it comes to basic skills and, more importantly, higher-order skills. We must go well beyond basic skills if we are to prepare subsequent generations for a rapidly evolving, global information age.

Finally, we were impacted by Daniel Pink’s thoughts in *A Whole New Mind*.³ Pink’s thesis is that we are already emerging from the information age and moving into what he terms the “conceptual age.”

This is an era during which “right-brain” sensibilities will become increasingly important as new skills and senses, including creativity, design and empathy, become as important or, in some cases, even more important than traditional logical, sequential and linguistic skills. All of these trends point to a radical rethinking of what we teach, how we teach and how we measure what we value all students to know and be able to perform.

We believe that if we mobilize the education system to focus on the new skills required for the 21st century, and if we seriously align the design of the system and the allocation of resources to achieve these skills for all students, then many of the other challenges identified in ASQ’s survey and in our own survey will be addressed.

Our new draft strategic plan identifies two visionary goals.

<p>1. Quality academic preparation in core courses</p>	<p>2. Quality preparation for life and work in the 21st century</p>
<p>USD 308 students graduate college ready/work ready by 2014, demonstrating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global awareness. • Financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy. • Civic literacy. • Health literacy. 	<p>USD 308 students graduate able to demonstrate:</p> <p><i>Learning and innovation skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity and innovation. • Expression, application and appreciation of creative arts. • Critical thinking and problem solving. • Communication and collaboration. <p><i>Information, media and technology skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information literacy. • Media literacy. • Information, communication and technology literacy. <p><i>Life and career skills</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility and adaptability. • Initiative and self-direction. • Social and cross-cultural skills. • Goal setting/career planning. • Productivity, accountability and work ethic. • Leadership and responsibility. • Healthy life choices.

If we are to achieve these results, we need bold vision. Two operational goals outline the means necessary to address the results we desire.

Quality staff	Quality support systems
USD 308 attracts, supports and retains a quality staff; each student has a great teacher every day in every class.	USD 308 creates and continuously monitors and improves systems and processes that produce excellent results.

To further mobilize the district, we have drafted focus areas that make it clear everyone has a role in creating a quality system aligned to our vision. The six focus areas are:

- **Fiscal resources:** Be great stewards of taxpayer dollars. Project, secure and manage the fiscal resources and assets of the school district ethically and effectively to support achievement of the strategic goals.
- **Facilities:** Great spaces support quality work. Provide clean and safe learning and working environments that support quality work by students and staff.
- **Nutrition services:** Food for thought. Provide quality nutrition services that provide and teach healthy choices.
- **Technology services:** The right tools for the job. Provide students and staff the technology tools necessary to do quality work.
- **Communications and community engagement:** Our district—a great story. Communicate effectively and transparently with internal and external stakeholders, and engage stakeholders to build trust and support.
- **Service:** Everyone’s job is quality work and excellent customer service.

We clearly understand this is an ambitious vision that will drive significant curriculum development. It will force us to integrate new content into existing courses, develop new coursework, create an assessment/accountability system that measures things we do not yet know how to measure and develop new instructional strategies.

This is the most important work we can do—to ensure the skills we teach and the work we have students do in schools will equip them to work and lead in the 21st century.

References

1. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, “Framework for 21st Century Learning,” www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120.

2. Katy Haycock, "Achievement in America: Gap-Closing Lessons From Schools and Districts on the Performance Frontier," presentation to Kansas/Missouri Superintendents Forum, Kansas City, MO, March 6, 2008, available in Education Trust archives at www2.edtrust.org/EdTrust/Product+Catalog/archives-Jan08-Mar08.htm.

3. D.H. Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, Berkley Publishing Group, 2005.

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