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## Issue Editors' Notes

AS THE DEBATE OVER education reform continues in the United States, we seem to have reached concurrence on a few basic points:

- American students are not performing well in comparison to many of their foreign counterparts.<sup>1</sup>
- American high schools in their present form are obsolete.<sup>2</sup>
- American schools are seeming less and less relevant to American students.
- The American public is keenly aware of the need to equip students with a set of skills beyond the basics in order for them to succeed in the new twenty-first century global economy.<sup>3</sup>

But there remain two important holes in our current thinking that need to be broadly addressed:

- We have not come to closure on the new skill set students need to succeed as twenty-first century citizens and workers.
- We have not been clear that we need a new broad alliance of schools and other community-based youth groups to work together to promote and implement this new learning agenda.

This volume invited by Gil Noam, editor-in-chief of *New Directions for Youth Development*, addresses these two gaps in our current consensus and in our view promotes forcefully a skills agenda that traditional education and newer youth development groups can jointly embrace to create a new momentum for education in our nation's communities.

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### *The rationale*

While much has been written about our current education landscape, a few facts bear repeating:

- The United States is falling behind on critical international comparisons of educational performance. On the 2003 Programme for International Student Assessment exam in mathematics, U.S. fifteen-year-old students ranked twenty-fourth out of twenty-nine countries that belong to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. The U.S. ranking in problem solving in practical, real-world situations, which goes beyond the mastery of mathematics techniques conventionally taught in U.S. schools, was tied with Spain, Portugal, and Italy and ahead of only Greece, Turkey, and Mexico. American students ranked well behind students in the highest-performing countries: Finland, Japan, and Korea.

- The proportion of the college-age population that earned degrees in science and engineering fields, which are indispensable to economic growth, were substantially larger in more than sixteen countries in Asia and Europe than in the United States in 2000, according to the National Science Board's 2004 *Science and Engineering Indicators Report*.<sup>4</sup>

- There are wide gaps between the skills that businesses value and the skills most graduates actually have. For example, 80 percent of employers in the fastest-growing industries assess writing as part of the hiring process, according to a 2004 report of the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges.<sup>5</sup> Yet more than 75 percent of twelfth graders are not proficient in writing, according to the 2002 National Assessment of Academic Progress.

In short, other nations are recognizing the critical value of the skills that matter in the twenty-first century while the United States has allowed itself to fall behind. We are in a global competition, in which many countries are off and running to excel in the new rele-

vant skill sets, while the United States is still using old models and old metrics.

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### *New directions toward twenty-first century learning*

This situation requires a national conversation on the skills children need to succeed in the twenty-first century and the venues where they can develop them—in school and out of school. We need a willingness to focus on those skills as the outcomes of learning and the best assets young people have in being successful workers and citizens.

The framework offered by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, America's leading advocacy organization focused on infusing twenty-first century skills into education, suggests that our current focus on core subjects mastery needs to be complemented by four other significant components:

- Thinking and learning skills (critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication, and collaboration skills)
- Information and communication technology literacy (the ability to accomplish thinking and learning skills through the use of technology)
- Life skills (leadership, ethics, personal productivity, self-directed learning)
- Twenty-first century content (global awareness and business fundamentals and economic literacy)

These are the skills and subjects that are not adequately focused on today in our educational system, but are the skills our national business and education leaders have identified as being central to the success of students as twenty-first century citizens and workers.

Citizen Schools, a leading national education initiative that helps improve student achievement by blending real-world learning and rigorous academics after school, is leading a movement to reimagine after-school education, where quality after-school programs become full partners with schools in learning. Afterschool offers the opportunity

of not only more time but also more actual hands-on experiences and more people involved in young people's lives. All of these resources, when well integrated with rigorous in-school academics and projects, can help students develop mastery in twenty-first century skills.

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### *The new conversation*

Twenty-first century learning frames an increasingly relevant and vital national conversation about what we are collectively trying to help young people achieve: the skills and attributes that will allow them to succeed in the new global economy. A focus on outcomes such as critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, and communications skills can create a new focus for students, parents, educators, and policy-makers on the specific outcomes we need young people to strive for and help them attain. This can lead to a broader conversation within each community about all of the individuals and groups that can play a role in helping young people attain twenty-first century skills.

Problem solving, creativity, leadership, and ethics are in the domain of every institution within a community that touches youth development, not just K–12 institutions. The skills conversation is a new opportunity for all of these groups to come together with traditional K–12 education and identify a comprehensive strategy to address the full panoply of twenty-first century skills in each community.

The chapters in this volume provide a broad scope of perspectives on the need, opportunity, application, and outcomes of twenty-first century learning and therefore provide a helpful backdrop for these new conversations. They make the case that the United States needs to redefine educational success, embrace twenty-first century skills, and offer perspectives on how some schools and programs can and are doing this.

To make the case for twenty-first century learning, Michael Dell and Karen Bruett in Chapter One and Allyson Knox in Chapter Two explain in principle and in practice why business in the modern economy demands twenty-first century skills. Michele Sacconaghi in Chapter Three reveals broad public support for a

“basics-plus” education that better integrates twenty-first century skills in learning and youth development. In Chapter Four, Blenda Wilson demonstrates how vital learning in school and in after-school programs is for closing the achievement gap in the United States. Frank Levy and Richard Murnane provide in Chapter Five an analysis of how the nation’s educational system can and must be changed in order to fit the nature and needs of the twenty-first century economy and citizenry.

To create an agenda for the research and practice of twenty-first century learning, Ken Kay and Margaret Honey outline in Chapter Six the framework for twenty-first century skills, along with their definition and measurement. In Chapter Seven, Eric Schwarz and David Stollow demonstrate the unique advantages of out-of-school time as a venue for the kinds of real-world experiences and civic engagement that enable young people to develop a broad, well-rounded package of skills.

In showing the wide-ranging application of twenty-first century skills, Bob Pearlman describes in Chapter Eight an innovative approach to project-based learning and twenty-first century skills outcomes in a model high school. In Chapter Nine, Marcia Capuano and Troy Knoderer explain how their pioneering professional development and assessment systems speak to learning in the digital age. David Driscoll paints a picture in Chapter Ten of how states need to and can refocus education systems toward learning for greater economic competitiveness. Cathann Kress in Chapter Eleven and John Box in Chapter Twelve show how their programs (respectively, National 4-H and Junior Achievement) have developed a long-standing tradition of and are innovatively pushing forward with twenty-first century learning in the after-school sector. In Chapter Thirteen, John Wilson discusses the importance and necessity that teachers give to twenty-first century skills and how they can be supported in incorporating those skills into the classroom. Finally, in Chapter Fourteen, Leidi Cabral, a high school student at Boston Latin School, draws from her experience as a young learner to describe the power of twenty-first century learning in helping make her a success now and in the future.

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## *Reimagine learning*

A wonderful group of people greatly aided all of us in putting together this volume of *New Directions for Youth Development*. We especially thank Mary Buckley and Maureen Cain from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills; Jason Cascarino, Adrian K. Haugabrook, and Katie Perry from Citizen Schools; and Erin Cooney and Gil Noam from Harvard University and the Program in Education, Afterschool and Resilience (PEAR).

We believe this volume of *New Directions for Youth Development* fills a void in our national education debate. As the chapter authors collectively argue, we need to reimagine the learning day—building partnerships that engage schools, after-school programs, businesses, and community-based organizations—and embrace both traditional academic basics as well as small-group and project-based learning that will give students a chance to master twenty-first century skills. By focusing on twenty-first century outcomes for our young people and the broad alliance that needs to work toward them, we can potentially take our national education debates in the new directions in which they urgently need to go.

## *Notes*

1. See the latest National Assessment for Educational Progress, Programme for International Student Assessment, and Trends in Mathematics and Science Study.
2. Gates, B. (2005, February 26). Remarks presented at the National Education Summit on High Schools, Washington, D.C.
3. Time Warner Foundation. (2003, June). *Twenty-first century literacy: A vital component in learning*. Survey conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates and Market Strategies. New York: Time Warner Foundation.
4. "Science and engineering indicators 2004." National Science Board, 2004. <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind04/pdfstart.htm>
5. National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges. (2004, September). *Writing: A ticket to work . . . or a ticket out: A survey of business leaders*. Report. New York: College Board.

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