

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

SHARPENING SKILLS FOR OUR CENTURY

By Valerie von Frank

Dianna Kennedy's 7th-grade language arts classroom looks very different than it did a few years ago. She replaced her rows of desks with round tables and her sets of books

with a classroom library that spans varied reading levels.

Kennedy's teaching also looks very different. Her students at Craig Middle School in the Metropolitan District of Lawrence Township, outside of Indianapolis, Ind., are learning through what educators there term "authentic, project-based instruction."

"I don't do whole class novels," she said. "I might have a student with a 2nd-grade reading level sitting next to a student who's post-high school. Now, I provide a variety of options for students and I teach the standard, not the novel. I have students read at their level or slightly above, and they show me they know the standard at whatever level is appropriate."

Kennedy and other teachers at Craig have spent years working to integrate 21st century skills into their instruc-

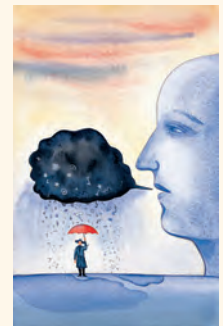
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Beyond memorization

21st century skills, according to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, include:

- Information and communication skills;
- Critical thinking and problem solving skills;
- Ability to collaborate and to be self-directed;
- Global awareness;
- Entrepreneurial skills; and
- Civic literacy.



Source: www.21stcenturyskills.org

tion and say they now are moving into the next phase: having students use those skills in relevant, real-world applications.

In a project last spring, Kennedy's students combined their learning in language arts, science, art, and Spanish to write, illustrate, and translate stories about preventing the spread of communicable diseases. They then shared their books with younger students.

To be successful in the workplace of the near future, some argue, students need a range of skills far different from the past (see box on p. 1). Knowledge is growing at such a rate that even the best minds no longer can keep up with memorizing content, but need to understand how to access, use, and communicate information. While there is not a uniform list of agreed-upon "21st century skills," the consensus is that the skills students will need to succeed in the future involve far more than being able to use technology — and more than the traditional content knowledge that has defined success in the past. Critical thinking skills, media literacy, communication, collaboration, global understanding, and creativity are on the list of goals for students to achieve.

An early start

Earlier this decade, Lawrence Township began a districtwide effort to teach for the 21st century. In 2001, the district conducted a technology audit to determine what skills students had and might need after graduation. Leaders studied research about digital age skills and identified competencies they wanted students to have:

- Basic literacy (language proficiency);
- Technological literacy (the use of computers, networks, new media);
- Visual literacy (an ability to decipher, interpret, and express ideas);
- Informational literacy (reviewing information and using it in various ways);
- Self-direction (learning to set goals and manage one's time);
- Higher-order thinking (analysis and drawing inferences).

Next, with a \$5 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, the district embarked on a plan to

NSDC'S BELIEF

Remarkable professional learning begins with ambitious goals for students.

change instruction through professional development around the competencies. The goal was to make every teacher responsible for students' digital age skill base.

Literacy coaches were hired for each building to work with staff, co-teaching, modeling, and leading book studies and other professional learning. The district provided a pool of substitute teachers available to take over classes for teams of teachers to meet for half- or full-day professional learning.

Kennedy was one of the literacy coaches. She said the coaches worked one-on-one with teachers, led learning sessions, and helped teachers discuss and develop strategies to focus on the 21st century skills: differentiating learning, enhancing students' self-direction, and creating authentic learning.

"We were looking at student work, talking about instruction," she said. "I wasn't all-knowing. I did a lot of reading. Through conversation, we came up with ideas, tossed them around, and tried them. Then we found what worked. It wasn't that I knew everything and handed out strategies to teachers, although I had a repertoire. Teachers, in conversation, would come up with great things to do."

Better student engagement

Wayne Naylor, now an assistant principal at Craig, was a classroom teacher at the time. Naylor said the shift in ideology was a challenge.

The key, he said, was he had to give up control. "Teachers want to know what the lesson is going to be," he said. "You don't know, because the kids are getting the control."

Naylor said his emphasis became student-directed learning. For example, he asked 6th graders in his science classes to complete a community service project. Rather than assigning them, Naylor left it up to the students to identify a problem in the community, figure out a solution, and execute the steps to accomplish the goal.

A couple of years ago, students said the pond in their neighborhood was neglected. They decided making it more attractive would help, so they planned a picnic table where visitors could sit. They cleaned up the trash and had a sign made asking people not to pollute. They planted trees. To get the

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necessary resources, they wrote to community sponsors and completed a successful grant proposal.

The change in approach has had “a huge impact” on student engagement and learning in the school, Naylor said. He gives the example of a 6th grader who had failing grades and was skipping class regularly. Except in Naylor’s class. When the students got the plans out for the picnic table, the boy “rose to the top.” He led the construction and figured out the math. “I saw this boy just get engaged and be the most capable kid,” Naylor said.

After the grant

Since the grant period is over, funding is not available for the full-time coaching positions or to upgrade technology, such as roving computer carts with laptops that now are failing. Naylor is the professional developer for Craig and now helps teacher teams in the building with professional learning around best practices. He meets with professional learning teams, individual teachers, and facilitates learning sessions. Teachers are part of two learning teams, one subject-area and one grade-level. The teams meet on a rotating schedule on Tuesdays and

Wednesdays, so each team meets approximately every other week. The school provides substitute teachers to cover classes while the teachers meet for one or two class periods. Naylor also arranges for half-day sessions when groups need additional time. The district has a bank of four to five substitutes available throughout the system for teachers to request released time.

Kennedy said teachers’ experiences in book studies and earlier conversations have laid the foundation for using their more limited collaborative time now.

“We now have started to develop professional learning communities in the truest form,” she said. “Teachers have a wealth of experience now to be able to make that happen.” And their focus for their collaboration is clear.

“At Craig, we have moved along the continuum,” Kennedy said, “with the emphasis on authentic learning. We’ve taken 21st century skills to the next level. Teachers all know what the 21st century skills are, and now they are working on how to make that learning authentic.” ♦

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