

skills for a **KNOWLEDGE-BASED** *economy*

AS SCHOOLS PREPARE CHILDREN
TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN AND
BEYOND SCHOOL, THEY MUST
TEACH THE SPECIFIC SKILLS THAT
WILL HELP STUDENTS MEET THE
DEMANDS OF THE 21ST CENTURY.

As we enter the new millennium, student achievement continues to stagnate at less than impressive levels, and there is increasing concern about the capacity and will of our public schools to adequately prepare our children for successful lives in an increasingly complex society. Yet there can be no goal as important to the general well-being of our society as that of preparing our children for the 21st century.

Given this imperative, we would be well-served by strengthening our resolve to do all that is necessary to meet this goal. At a most fundamental level, this new determination must include acknowledgement by educators and public policy shapers that we must work hand-in-hand with parents, families and the larger community.

I speak as both an educator and a parent when I insist that the mission of our schools and our communities must be to ensure a quality education that prepares our children to be successful in and beyond school.

There is considerable evidence that in order to be successful in the future, our children need to have at their disposal some very

specific skills. In order to determine what these skills are, we have to be clear about what the 21st century world — which is the one in which our children will live and work — demands of them.

What does our community look like in the 21st century?

First, the 21st century community is characterized by a knowledge-based economy and (continuing) huge increases in the amount of new information confronting us daily. In our economy, employees' knowledge, experiences and attitudes are central to competitive success and growth.

There is a demand for college-educated or highly trained workers. In fact, most of the job growth is in the high-skill category. And because most people will make four to seven career changes in their lifetimes, people who are flexible, quick and independent learners will most assuredly have the edge.

Furthermore, in the 21st century people must deal with an ever-increasing amount of raw information. The amount of informa-

By Francisca Sánchez

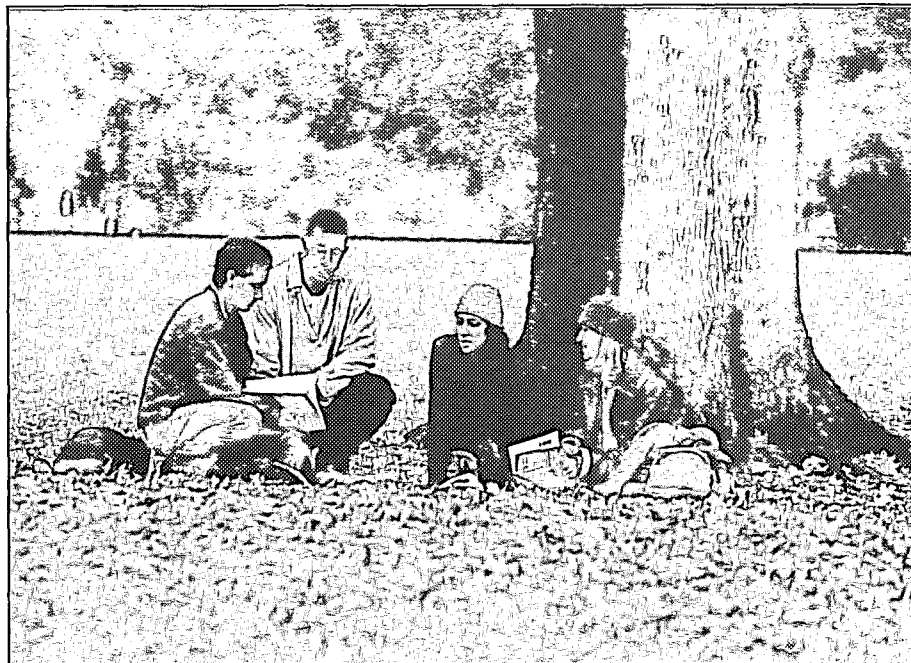
tion available to us is doubling every few years, and every day there are hundreds of new scientific articles appearing on the Internet. If our children are to succeed in this 21st century world, they must be both academically prepared and information literate; able to find, use, evaluate, create and transform information and knowledge.

Second, the 21st century community is characterized by a global economy. Businesses have to be able to play in the international marketplace where they compete against businesses from all over the world. It has become a truism that we can only be competitive if we can communicate with the buyers in their languages.

Asian and Hispanic populations continue to increase while white populations decrease. By the year 2010, half of our students will be nonwhite. In some of our local communities, we're already seeing that the minority population is rapidly becoming the numeric majority. These changes imply a future epitomized by an increasingly diverse society that requires its members to have high-level multilingual and multicultural skills.

Third, the 21st century community is characterized by a need for new technology, which has become an important source of jobs and which is fundamentally changing the character of people's work and home lives. Currently, there is a significant shortage of homegrown workers with the skills necessary to work in technology-based industries. In fact, high skilled workers are now primarily being drawn from Taiwan and the Indian subcontinent. Only those members of our society who are highly skilled in a wide range of technology areas will be able to compete for jobs at home as well as in the global marketplace.

Fourth, the 21st century community is characterized by increasing social inequalities and environmental concerns, and by a need for its citizens to have the skills to work and communicate effectively as part of a team, a community and a society. As the media increases in importance in our society, for example, the need to communicate effectively across languages and cultures also increases. At the same time, people must be able to work with others in and out of the workplace. And our American society demands active participation by all citizens in their government if our democracy is to be safeguarded.



The 21st century community is characterized by increasing social inequalities and environmental concerns, and by a need for its citizens to have the skills to communicate and work effectively as part of a team, a community and a society.

We also know that our environmental resources are not infinite and that we're depleting many of those resources at alarming rates. Furthermore, the division between the haves and the have-nots is growing ever wider. We've already seen the sort of social unrest that comes from this type of social inequality.

How should schools prepare children to succeed?

Our schools must help our children meet rigorous academic standards so that they are prepared academically for whatever the 21st century world throws at them. This means starting where kids are, and using their knowledge and experiences — including their linguistic and cultural knowledge and experiences — as a foundation for helping them move forward.

It also means that our academic programs must compel students to go beyond memorizing a hodgepodge of facts. Schools must help students become independent learners who think, take risks, apply their knowledge, reflect on their learning, and then figure out how to do it better next time around. Our schools must help our children create, find,

use and evaluate the overwhelming amounts of knowledge and information that are becoming available to us. This will be true for both the workplace and the community.

Moreover, our schools must help students develop into multilingual individuals who can speak, understand, read and write three or more languages with native-like skill and who are able to perform technical and professional level work in their second and third languages. Schools in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa are already doing this. In the 21st century marketplace, our children will have to compete against those students.

Our schools must also help our children develop into well-adjusted individuals who can thrive in a world that is increasingly characterized by difference, diversity and rapid change. Our children must be able to easily navigate this world of difference if they're to succeed.

In addition, our schools must help prepare our children to become capable users of technology. While all students must have substantial access to a wide variety of existing and emerging technology resources, we know that poor children and language and

ethnic minority students have less access to technology. Our strategic focus must be to provide immediate and continued access to these currently underserved groups.

Finally, if our children are to be prepared to succeed in this 21st century world and, in fact, to transform it into a good place in which to live and work, they must be both socially and environmentally responsible; they must be team players and civic-minded, contributing members of our communities and society. So, we must help our children

develop the communication, interaction and civic skills to live in a world that is high touch as well as high tech; a world that is characterized as much by interdependence as by diversity.

Our children need to learn to work well with others at every level: personal, social, environmental, economic and political. They need to be able to create safe, nonviolent living, learning and working environments. They need to act in socially and environmentally responsible ways, so that

their decisions promote a more just society and nurture healthy physical environments that preserve local habitats and biodiversity and minimize resource depletion. And our American tradition demands civic-minded citizens who are committed to actively participating in government and community to move our society closer to its ideals.

What can we do, now and in the future, to prepare students?

We can help ensure that our children are prepared academically and are information literate in a variety of ways. Among the resources available, technology stands out as particularly promising. Through online access to multilingually posted national, state and local standards, for example, parents from all language backgrounds can view the standards their child is expected to meet or exceed and take appropriate action. Parent/school video conferencing and parent online access to student information provide opportunities for parents to be better informed about their children's progress and about how and when to assist them.

Through online distance learning and online tutorial assistance, students can take courses that are not offered at their school or take additional classes in the evenings and on Saturdays if their weekday class schedule at school is full. Students can also get online help in different subject areas, prepare for tests, access multilingual and multicultural resources and accelerate their progress.

Educators and educational organizations can facilitate parent/teacher/student Internet access and provide Internet resources and training so that parents, educators and students themselves can use this information to become better informed and more productive.

Educators and policymakers must become passionate leaders in working with educators, parents and community partners to make sure we do today what our children will need tomorrow. For example, we need to commit to aggressively supporting our students' language skills by working with districts to establish dual immersion schools where English learners and native English speakers are taught in and learn two languages. This support includes providing training to teachers so they can develop their own language skills; helping districts recruit bilingual and multilingual teachers; finding extra money

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to support language programs; and purchasing, reviewing and recommending instructional materials in many languages.

By establishing multilingual and multicultural research and resource centers for classrooms, and by helping teachers learn how to establish global learning networks where our students work on common projects with other students across the world, we can play leadership roles in supporting the development of multilingual and multicultural capacities. As a bonus, programs of this type also dramatically accelerate and sustain students' academic progress.

Through innovative partnerships between schools, culturally diverse community organizations and business/industry, we can prepare students for the demands and enormous opportunities of the knowledge economy and the global village while creating a qualified, technologically sophisticated talent pool. Through linguistically and culturally responsive school-to-career programs, students from all walks of life can learn new careers in technology and work with mentors from technology-based businesses.

Through California's digital high school program, schools can receive funding to integrate technology schoolwide, including training teachers and parents, so that the entire school community builds its capacity to serve all students. Multicultural/multilingual resource centers can also maintain computer labs and help schools and districts establish and maintain site- and community-based technology labs and stations.

Teaching issues of social justice

Those of us in leadership roles also have the responsibility to help schools and communities plan culturally responsive service learning and community service projects, where students can learn about issues of social justice and ecological sustainability while they explore potential careers, develop powerful life skills, and make contributions to their communities. We can provide training to parents, educators and students to help them create safe, inclusive and respectful school and community environments. We can also support students in developing their interpersonal skills by sponsoring such

programs as intercultural communication and conflict resolution training.

Working hand-in-hand

In order to be successful in the 21st century, our children need to be academically prepared, information literate, multilingual, multicultural, technologically adept, integrated into their communities and society, and socially and environmentally responsible. As parents, educators and community members working together, we have the know-how and many of the resources to get this job done. Our commitment must be to work hand-in-hand over the long term to make this vision a reality for every child. ■

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