

21st Century Skills State Policy Initiatives: School Leaders' Views

Introduction

In April 2008, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education formed a Task Force on 21st Century Skills to assist the Board in considering how to infuse 21st century learning into the work of the state's public schools. Specifically, the Task Force was asked to develop a set of recommendations for the Board to address alignment in policies regarding standards, curriculum, assessments and accountability in a way that promotes deeper integration of 21st century skills. In November 2008, the 20-member Task Force issued its recommendations in a report entitled *School Reform in the New Millennium: Preparing All Children for 21st Century Success*. Most recently, the Board asked the Commissioner of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to work with his staff to develop an implementation plan.

The purpose of this issue brief is to aid the ESE in setting priorities for the implementation of the Task Force's recommendations. The issue brief outlines the Task Force recommendations and describes the extent to which public school superintendents, principals and charter school leaders across the state are in favor of implementing them.

Survey of public school administrators

During February and March 2010, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy surveyed public school superintendents, principals and charter school leaders across the state to better understand the skills and knowledge administrators believe are most important for their students to acquire. Principals were asked to indicate how widely 21st century skills¹ are being incorporated into core subject matter classes. Superintendents were asked to rate the importance of incorporating various 21st century skills into curricula and instruction. Both principals and superintendents were asked about their school/district priorities related to 21st century skills and their opinion about state policymaking on education issues. This issue brief focuses on administrators' responses to a series of questions about some of the initiatives recommended by the state's Task Force on 21st Century Skills. A total of 131 superintendents (44% of those invited to participate) and 193 principals (11% of those invited to participate) responded to these questions.

To what extent do public school administrators agree with the Task Force recommendations?

The Task Force created recommendations related to five broad levers for change. In the Rennie Center's online survey, administrators were asked to indicate the extent to which they believe the state should engage in particular initiatives that were recommended by the Task Force. Administrators rated each initiative using a 1 to 5 scale where a 1 means strongly disagree and a 5 means strongly agree. Administrators were not told that the initiatives they were rating were recommendations made by the state's Task Force.

As shown in Table 1, the initiatives that a majority of school and district leaders agree are worthy of state action are overhauling the state’s teacher training and professional development programs (69% agree), establishing a competitive grant program for establishing 21st Century Schools and Districts (64% agree), embedding complementary 21st century skills and content throughout the Commonwealth’s curriculum frameworks (63% agree), and requiring students to complete and present a locally-evaluated Senior Project prior to graduation (59% agree). Roughly half of administrators surveyed (48% to 53%) agree that the state should implement the other four initiatives.

Table 1: Percentage of administrators who agree that the state should engage in each initiative

	% of administrators who agree*
Lever 1: Educator Quality and Support	
Overhaul the state's teacher training and professional development programs to recruit and retain high achieving educators who have a background in and up-to-date knowledge of 21st century skills.	69%
Lever 2: Standards	
Raise the state's bar on rigor by embedding 21st century skills and content through the Commonwealth's curriculum frameworks in every subject.	63%
Lever 3: Assessment	
Become a national leader in assessment by integrating the measurement of 21st century skills throughout the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).	51%
Lever 4: Accountability	
Hold teachers and administrators accountable for incorporating 21st century skills into the curriculum and hold students accountable for learning them.	48%
Require all students to use technology to research, develop, complete and present a locally-evaluated Senior Project prior to graduation to demonstrate their mastery of 21st century skills.	59%
Lever 5: Demonstration Vehicles	
Establish a competitive grant program that would provide funding to districts interested in fully transforming themselves into 21st Century Districts with oversight and guidance from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.	64%
Expand the number of Expanded Learning Time Schools to 100 or more.	53%
Place a cadre of practicing professionals including artists, scientists and engineers in schools part-time to collaborate with classroom teachers on curricula and to develop alternative, pull-out seminars for students to complete hands-on science or art projects.	52%

* Percentage of administrators who gave a rating of 4 or 5 on the 5 point scale

Considerations for state policymakers

Establish a plan of action for moving forward with the four initiatives that a majority of principals and superintendents are in favor of implementing: overhauling the state's teacher training and professional development programs, establishing a competitive grant program for establishing 21st Century Schools and Districts, embedding complementary 21st century skills and content throughout the Commonwealth's curriculum frameworks,² and requiring students to complete and present a locally-evaluated Senior Project prior to graduation.

Engage principals and superintendents across the Commonwealth in the development of the action plan. Results of the Rennie Center survey suggest that administrators are in favor of the initiatives listed above. However the survey did not gauge administrators' level of support for specific strategies. For example, survey results suggest that 7 out of 10 administrators are in favor of revamping the state's teacher training and professional development programs, but we do not know the extent to which administrators are in favor of the specific strategies the Task Force proposed for doing so. Thus, it is important for principals and superintendents across the Commonwealth to be involved in the development of the action plans.

Investigate the reason why a substantial portion of principals and superintendents are not in favor of implementing some initiatives. The following initiatives were not supported by roughly half of survey respondents: increasing the number of Expanded Learning Time schools, establishing the "Creative Teaching Partners Initiative" that would place a cadre of practicing professionals including artists, scientists and engineers in schools part-time to collaborate with classroom teachers, integrating the measurement of 21st century skills throughout MCAS, and holding teachers and administrators accountable for incorporating 21st century skills into the curriculum and holding students accountable for learning them. It is important to explore the higher rate of resistance to these initiatives.

Stay tuned for full report on 21st century skills this fall

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy will release a full report of all survey findings in Fall 2010. The report will provide a picture of school and district priorities for student learning statewide including the skills and knowledge school administrators believe are most important for their students to acquire and their stance on important education policy issues. The report will also highlight school- and district-wide approaches to incorporating 21st century skills into teaching and learning as well as instructional practices.



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The Rennie Center's mission is to develop a public agenda that informs and promotes significant improvement of public education in Massachusetts. Our work is motivated by a vision of an education system that creates the opportunity to educate every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. Applying nonpartisan, independent research, journalism and civic engagement, the Rennie Center is creating a civil space to foster thoughtful public discourse to inform and shape effective policy. For more information, please visit www.renniecenter.org.

¹ The definition used in the survey is based on the Framework for 21st Century Learning, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=254&Itemid=120.

² It is important to note that at the time of the survey, Massachusetts had not yet adopted the Common Core Standards.