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Q&A: Ken Kay
President, Partnership for 21st Century Skills
ASBJ Editors

For our September 2007 “What is Ready?” cover package, the editors of *ASBJ* interviewed educators, scholars, and researchers about the topic of student readiness for the 21st century.

Ken Kay is president of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, an organization dedicated to promoting a new vision of what students need to be successful in a globally competitive economy.

Editor: What is “ready”? What specific skills should students have when they leave high school to enter higher education or the workforce?

Kay: There’s probably a question you have to answer; ready for what? Most of us have looked at this and said, ready for work, life, citizenship. In our work, it’s gratifying that we don’t think there are splits between those outcomes.

There is cynicism among educators that people are looking for a skill set divergent from creating good citizens. We found the same attributes one needs in 21st century job in for-profits are similar to what nonprofits and civic leaders are looking for. Self direction, critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration are not just the domain of 21st century workers, but also citizens and people. Ready for what? It turns out that ready for work, life, and citizenship are compatible.

Another thing to say about “what is ready” is we have been concerned that, in asking different constituents, those notions don’t align. K-12 and community college and higher ed seem to be having different conversations. For colleges, what does it mean for a student to be college ready? There’s a divergence between that and being workforce ready.

One of the things I’ve picked up is that the K-12 community has been more interested and open to looking in the cross-cutting skills for the workforce than the higher ed community. It bodes well that K-12 agrees on the attributes on the global economy. Higher ed has not been introspective enough on those qualities. Workforce surveys have shown employers are unhappy with graduates of four-year institutions, and it’s because higher ed hasn’t been intentional about creating these outcomes.

My hope over time is that higher ed is willing to be as introspective and open to the changes in the 21st century, so we won’t have the chasm between work ready and college ready. It could be identical or close to one another. You can’t say that being a critical thinker, problem solver, and communicator won’t make you ready for college. One conversation needs to be getting higher ed in better alignment.

Editor: How well are K-12 schools preparing students for tomorrow’s workforce challenges?

Kay: Not very well, but I don’t think we’ve been trained on the right outcomes. We’re still using the 19th century model of education. Some people look at it and say the schools are ineffective. I

don't think we have the right model and we haven't had a conversation about the changes and what kind of model we need.

We still have subject matter mastery. If you mastered the content in schools, we believed you could master the content in your chosen field. The rate of growth of information doesn't look like it did in the 1950s and '60s. The amount of technical information in the world is doubling every 24 months. In a world like that, you can't expect anyone to master the content they need.

Students need to master skills that help them synthesize and problem-solve the content. They need the ability to work with information you've never seen before. We still have a model that says, "Did you memorize the reading assignment from last night?" That's not going to take us where we need to go in the 21st century.

The other shift, according to the Secretary of Labor, is that kids 18 to 38 will have at least 10 jobs. In a world where you will have more jobs and careers, when a piece of your job is computerized or off-shored, the skill set you need to negotiate that is one that says, "How do I redefine the product value as circumstances change?"

The coin of the realm is problem-solving, finding new propositions for a person, product, or company to deliver value to society in a constantly changing and evolving set of circumstances. Every student needs it because that is their ticket up the economic ladder. If you can't problem solve and think critically, you cannot do what we thought education could do, which is to help them work their way up the economic ladder.

Editor: What do you think of educators' current focus on the basics – mastery of reading, writing and math skills?

Kay: It's no longer good enough to read, write and do basic math. You need to think, problem solve, communicate, be globally aware. We [at the 21st Century Skills Partnership] don't beat up on the current system. We encourage a dialogue between education and business.

We are so happy with how our work is received. It's viewed as a constructive, positive measure, allowing people to think through the shifts that have occurred and what do our kids need to know to respond to them. Will we embrace change or fight it? We have given state and local boards a concrete set of directions to move in. That's a solid construct that many have responded to favorably.

The reason we are having a disconnect right now in education is that those in the education field continue to talk about content and employers are thinking about critical thinking and problem solving. Kids are stuck in the middle, not knowing what the relationship was between those two strategies.

School boards are supposed to be looking down the road and anticipating the future needs of kids. We give them the framework to use as a tool to see if they're preparing our kids. School boards have been open to this conversation. They realize they do need a starting point for that discussion. The Framework is a starting point. Boards can say, "We aren't concerned about this aspect or that aspect." But at least we can give them a comprehensive list.

We have been trying to partner with districts and states who want to go through the thoughtful analysis that is required to see if the goals of the system are aligned with the outcomes of what we want for kids in the 21st century.

We need to align the content work with the outcomes. You don't have to get rid of math, science, or English, but change the focus. Kids are there to memorize content. They are there to learn how to think, problem solve, communicate. That shift will allow us to keep core subjects, but we're there to teach these new outcomes. The kids are the ones caught in the gulf between memorizations on one hand and the need for the skills on the other hand. We need to be more purposeful in our intention.

Editor: How do you see your work fitting in with the requirements of No Child Left Behind?

Kay: Our work and NCLB are compatible. When we started the conversation about NCLB, we asked, "How do you identify underperforming kids and schools?" It turns out that we should have understood that when the conversation started, we would pick up our preexisting metrics and use them.

For the purpose of identifying underperforming schools and districts, you can use old metrics and find out if they are underperforming. Some districts that have been flagged are dramatically underperforming, and can use old metrics. The business community loves metrics, but it wouldn't occur to them that the metrics aren't right for the long run. Before, companies had one metric -- profitability. You'll go out of business now if you use only that measure. You'll only measure if you are making money, not customer satisfaction. You have to have a balance of metrics. Money and satisfaction.

Today, 98 percent of metrics are subject mastery. Today you need another metric to measure outcomes. Just looking in a rearview mirror and taking snapshots of old metrics won't get us where we need to be. One other way to look it: It's not the accountability we should complain about; it's the fact that any institution, company, or school district, should view the metrics as something they should shape.

We wanted to educate what the future of metrics and NCLB should become. What would happen if we actually had a set of metrics that measures problem solving, global awareness, self-directed learning. We don't need to view NCLB and 21st century skills at odds with each other. It's healthier to see them as the future of NCLB, seeing our work as the metrics to aspire to.

A lot of people in education look at metrics and accountability and say, "It will be in place forever." Right now, we have uni-dimensional metrics for a 19th century education system. Twenty-first century metrics are the ones that really matter.

Editor: Is 13 years of public school, using the current 180-day, 6.5 hour instructional formula a realistic time limit to ensure readiness? If not, what can school do differently?

Kay: I don't view length of time or day as a metric. We counsel people to separate outcomes and strategies. Before you take on length of day and year, what does every kid need to look like: problem solver, collaborator, communicator, globally aware, critical thinker. You need the design specs. The outcomes are like design specs.

Then you have a discussion about the shape of the building and the length of the school day. You could have a school meet from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and have them trained in 1950s objectives. I have the same conversations with the virtual schools people. You could have virtual skills with drill-and-kill math strategies. The question is, "Will you have 21st century outcomes?" It won't happen just because it's virtual.

We have been working to get people focused on whether they outcomes right. Then we talk about what the strategies are to get there.

We have a long view of how long it will take to make these changes. Take the business community staying involved over the long haul. We try to distinguish between the skill outcomes and the educational strategies that create that environment. When I hear professional development, you can have 1950s drill and kill and teach them to do those strategies better. If you decide to make kids critical thinkers, teachers need to be taught all new pedagogy that supports 21st century kids. That's the purpose of getting a state or local school board to articulate outcomes.

Once you've agreed on the outcomes, it redefines so many things -- professional development, assessment, technology strategies and support, after school, high school redesign. North Carolina saw our work less as a new program than as a way to inform all their other programs. It creates a construct to refocus purpose and get them aligned.

Editor: How do you make these program replicable and not just isolated pockets of success?

Kay: When we started five and half years ago, we started with early adopting districts that contacted us about our framework. At some point, our board, which consists of business and education leaders, said, "Look, this is great to have early adopters, but we want state partners. We want to have a state-level vision, all working on alignment and implementation of the skills in their states. There are best practices around, but they're not being implemented in a holistic way."

In West Virginia, we're really trying to help school leaders implement skills strategies in their districts. We are helping creating a mosaic of what it looks like when it's all put together called Route 21, which is coming out in November. What does 21st century curriculum, professional development, and assessment look like? We are not only giving fragments of best practices, but also other essays of our vision of what it might look like.

If you take Route 21 to North Carolina or Wisconsin, how do we support every part of our state? How do we help all the pieces pursue 21st century skills?

Editor: What is the role of the local school board in all of this?

Kay: When I started this work 5 years ago, our board asked, "Who is the audience for this project?" The perfect audience is a lay member of a school board. That is who we should drive our work toward. At the end of the day, we need to give a starting point to a school board member who is there to set future direction for their district, give them comprehensive tools and a potential model they can use. In Madison, Conn., the board is using 21st century skills as a critical piece of the five-year plan for the district, and they found our work helpful as a template for their own strategic discussions.

School boards are really entrusted with the future of education. They tend to look down the road and see if they are anticipating the right kinds of things. Our 21st century framework is compatible with the missions of school boards.

Editor: What do you see in the future for K-12 public education?

Kay: The other thing that has driven our best work is that we have a notion of where the political consensus around the future of education lies. Where you can put together consensus is around what our kids need. I don't get a lot of resistance when I say, "Kids need to communicate, critical think, problem solve, and be global thinkers." The business people say, "You've got the right skills."

One thing school boards can help do is put the political consensus around the right proposition, which is whether or not our kids should have these attributes to succeed in life, citizenship, work. We can get them to agree around these skill outcomes. Education leaders will come up to me and say, "Isn't this about project-based learning?" I'll say, "No."

I can't get up and say that a critical thinker/problem solver consensus evaporates when you say project-based learning is a strategy to get there. I'm such a supporter of decentralized education, because we don't know the best way to get there, and we continue to get good models of getting that done.

School boards should focus on getting our community, parents, and business leaders all pulling in the same way for outcomes for kids. We can help in lots of different ways to get them there. We will have lots of new strategies for teaching and assessing those skills in 20 years that don't exist today. We won't have a food fight over where we want to go.

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