

Defining what matters

A common lexicon to
support learning

Summary

- There are numerous frameworks, classifications, and lexicons across the education and youth development sectors to describe the competencies students need to succeed in school and in life.
- Whether they are described as 21st century skills, global competencies, or transferable skills, each framework offers value; but the lack of a consistent language and clear definitions across policies and programs creates significant challenges for educators.
- A specific competency language can help to define big, complex, and sometimes nebulous areas like collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, or well-being. These areas are often named as essential for long-term success, but less often defined specifically and concretely in teachable and learnable competency terms.
- Articulating/defining specific competencies and conditions across all areas of learning and child and youth development will:
 - support a common, coherent organizational frame for curriculum, policy, strategy, planning, teaching, and assessment, both locally, in schools and boards, and centrally, within and across government ministries;
 - help make complex areas of learning more concrete;
 - help students articulate their own learning;
 - help the system report to parents and the public;
 - support more effective communication and greater alignment across different parts of the education system – from early childhood to post-secondary education; and
 - build capacity for more meaningful links across the different sectors of youth development through which students move, learn, and transition.

com•pe•ten•cy (n.):

An ability to meet complex demands by drawing on combined skills, knowledge, processes, behaviours, and habits of mind.

lex•i•con (n.):

The vocabulary of a person, language, or branch of knowledge.

Broadening the focus in education

Worldwide, policy-makers are exploring essential areas of learning beyond the traditional focus on literacy, numeracy, and academic content knowledge.

These areas are framed in a variety of ways (e.g. 21st century skills, global competencies, soft or transferable skills); or within areas such as innovation, health, or well-being (e.g. Learning Metrics Task Force, 2013; Ontario, 2015 & 2016; Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2015; UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2015). Each “frame” offers a perspective on learning and development, and each provides its own “language of learning” that educators, students, policy makers, and the wider community use to understand and communicate about student learning.

Multiple frameworks, multiple challenges

In Ontario, as in many systems, educators are faced with a multiplicity of overlapping policies, initiatives, and strategies that focus on similar or related areas of youth development and learning – each with its own conceptual framework and working language or lexicon.

Because each framework “speaks its own language,” it can create layered and sometimes competing demands on schools, and may limit opportunities for communication, collaboration, and coherence across initiatives (e.g. People for Education, 2017; Pinto, Pollack, & Winton, 2015).

All of the policy frameworks and their associated skill or competency classifications are potentially viable ways to address the complexity of student success. However, the lack of coherence among them creates an implementation quagmire for classroom teachers, principals, and school board leaders (e.g. People for Education, 2017).



What difference does a common language make?

People for Education engaged experts from across Canada to examine four essential learning domains (creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health), and identify specific, teachable competencies within each domain, along with the conditions necessary to support them.

Since 2015, educators from across Ontario have been field-testing the use of these competencies in their classrooms and schools.

A number of themes are emerging from this work.

Making complex areas of learning concrete:

Having a set of specific, descriptive competencies helps educators define the complex and sometimes nebulous concepts of creativity, social-emotional learning, citizenship, and health. This, in turn, enables educators to “anchor” their work in these areas.



Supporting classroom planning:

The language of the competencies provides educators with clarity as they plan specific actions in their classrooms.

By identifying the specific competencies they want to work with, teachers are able to approach curriculum content in ways that allow students to practice and express those competencies. It also provides a concrete focus through which changes to classroom conditions can be planned, documented, and analyzed.

Supporting communication and collaboration:

Educators can use the specific language of the competencies to communicate with each other about areas such as creativity or social-emotional learning in the same way that they discuss skills or learning in mathematics or reading.

The clear, concrete competencies serve as an entry point into discussions of pedagogy and learning theory. It enables teachers working with different age groups and in different learning contexts to engage with one another in meaningful and specific collaborative dialogue.

Enabling students to articulate their learning:

A specific competency language allows students to identify and understand key competencies, and apply them in a variety of different contexts. Teachers find that having a specific language helps students to deepen their insights into their own learning.

Facilitating reporting to parents and the public:

When communicating with the public about the broad purpose of education, the education sector often talks about developing skills in citizenship, creativity, collaboration, etc. However, these big ideas are rarely broken down into specific competencies that may help parents and the broader public understand more concretely how the education system is building these kinds of knowledge and skills in our students.

A common language can facilitate communication and understanding. For example, using specific competencies on report cards could help parents understand how their children are progressing in the vital areas currently categorized as “Learning Skills and Work Habits.”



Competencies in the curriculum

Currently, the domains of health, citizenship, creativity, and social-emotional learning are widely represented in policy and curriculum. However, they are not specifically defined or practically supported with specific examples. They are often only partially integrated, and there is a lack of consistency across policy and curriculum documents (People for Education, 2015).



The K-12, post-secondary, and employment sectors are all concerned with similar areas of learning, including critical thinking, persistence, well-being, problem-solving, collaboration, resilience, and innovation.

A specific, common lexicon of competencies within the K-12 system can facilitate communication across these sectors about the essential competencies young people need to succeed; and about how we can ensure smoother transitions from one level of education to another, and from education to the labour market.

Ontario's strategies, policies and frameworks

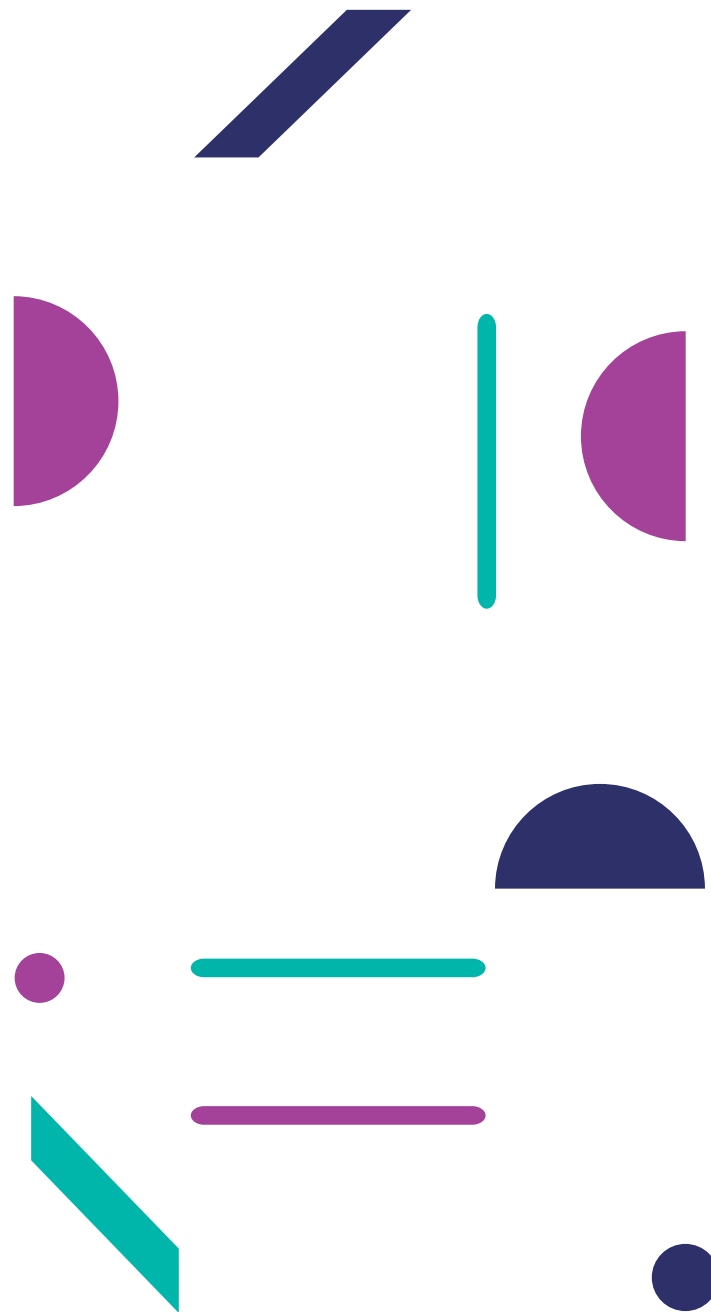
- **21st Century Competencies** focuses on six areas: critical thinking and problem solving; innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship; learning to learn/self-aware and self-directed learning; communication; collaboration; and global citizenship (Ontario, 2015).
- **Foundations for a Healthy School** includes supports for students' cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development (Ontario, 2014b).
- **Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools** defines well-being in relation to physical and mental health, a positive sense of self and belonging, and skills to make positive choices (Ontario, 2014a).
- **Creating Pathways to Success** identifies four broad areas of learning for career and life planning: knowing yourself, exploring opportunities, making decisions, and making transitions (Ontario, 2013).
- **Stepping Stones** defines youth development in four areas: cognitive, social, emotional, physical (Ontario, 2012).

From our field trial teachers...

"For me, the domains and competencies provide a way in which we can talk about learning and not just achievement. When we only look at the expectations in the curriculum, we tend to only talk about achievement. A student can do that or they can't. We don't really think about growth. We don't think about the conditions for learning that we are responsible for creating, either as a teacher or an administrator in a building."

"I sensed that [the teachers on the team] felt that creativity was sort of this nebulous concept and [they thought,] "What does it look like in areas other than art?"...It was interesting to hear how their thinking had evolved; that actually it's not just this nebulous thing – it lives in so many different places and spaces, and [the specific competencies] helped them name and unpack what it looked like and make connections to the curriculum."

"If I don't know what I'm looking for, I can't notice it. I can't name it. I can't respond to it. I can't plan next steps... I think [the competencies] help us unpack what meaningful learning looks like and sounds like, and then we have the autonomy and creativity to act – that's the art and science of teaching."



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This work is supported by:



R. HOWARD WEBSTER
FOUNDATION

McConnell

The Murray R. O'Neil
Charitable Foundation

