

The Ultimate Guide to 21st Century Skills in Secondary Schools

Introduction

21st Century Skills are among the most popular topics in education, especially in middle and high school classrooms.

But it can be difficult to teach these skills when you don't know where to begin.

In this guide, we'll answer the most common questions we've heard about 21st Century Skills from secondary teachers like you.

You'll also learn about a curriculum that thousands of middle and high school teachers use to teach 21st Century Skills in their classrooms.

Happy reading!

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PART ONE:

What Are 21st Century Skills

21st Century Skills are 12 abilities that today's students need to succeed in their future careers:

- 1. Critical thinking** involves logically assessing information to make informed decisions.
- 2. Creativity** empowers people to see concepts in a different light, leading to innovative thinking and problem-solving.
- 3. Collaboration** involves multiple people working together to achieve a common goal.
- 4. Communication** is the practice of conveying ideas by using a variety of methods.
- 5. Information literacy** gives your students the tools needed to distinguish fact from fiction.
- 6. Media literacy** helps students analyze media and understand potential issues that can arise when using digital tools.
- 7. Technology literacy** involves students understanding different applications and the best ways to use them.
- 8. Flexibility** is someone's ability to adapt to change and understand differences in views that impact decisions.
- 9. Leadership** involves someone's ability to influence and guide others toward a common goal.
- 10. Initiative**, sometimes called intrinsic motivation, relates to employees starting projects, creating plans, and executing strategies on their own.
- 11. Productivity** measures how well someone can prioritize, plan, and manage their work.
- 12. Social skills** refer to the skills needed to interact effectively with others, especially when working with a diverse group.

Understanding what each 21st century skill is, how it impacts your learners and why they are important is paramount for implementing them into your classroom.

PART TWO:

Why Are 21st Century Skills Important for Secondary Students?

21st Century Skills are essential for all employees in any industry.

So why do middle and high school students need to learn them?

Your students need these skills because many of today's employers expect candidates to have them prior to being hired.

In some cases, employers will help new hires hone these skills. But your students need this foundational knowledge to set themselves up for success immediately!

By mastering 21st Century Skills, your students will be better equipped to start and grow in their chosen career path.

You're probably thinking, "They can learn these skills later in high school or college. What's the big deal if we don't teach them until then?"

The biggest reason it's crucial to teach 21st Century Skills in secondary schools is the impact it can have on your students now.

In addition to helping prepare your students for their future careers, **21st Century Skills can help them be better learners.**

Wish your students worked better in small groups? Teaching collaboration and leadership skills can help.

Want to have more meaningful discussions in your classroom? Teaching critical thinking and communication can make a big difference.

Do your students struggle to effectively and appropriately use technology in and out of your class? Teaching information, media, and technology literacy skills can make a huge impact.

You'll not only see a difference in your classroom, but your students will carry these skills with them as they further their education.

PART THREE:

Biggest Mistakes to Avoid When Teaching 21st Century Skills

Top 2 Mistakes to Avoid When Teaching 21st Century Skills

Now that you know what 21st Century Skills are and why they're so important, you may be wondering how to teach them to your students.

But before you start, it's important to consider common mistakes other teachers have made when teaching 21st Century Skills.

The two most common mistakes when teaching these skills are:

1. Teaching the skills as separate entities
2. Forgetting about other career readiness skills

Mistake 1: Teaching the Skills as Separate Entities

The most common mistake teachers make when teaching 21st Century Skills is trying to teach each skill as its own topic.

It's natural to look at a list of 12 skills and plan out 12 units or lessons to align with each other.

But if you have a one-track mind when teaching these skills, your students will miss out on learning how the skills can build upon and reinforce each other!

To avoid this mistake, it's important to embrace and convey how each 21st Century skill relates to the others.

As you discuss each skill in your lessons, encourage your students to consider how they intertwine.

For example, having good critical thinking and communication skills can help improve someone's leadership skills!

Mistake 2: Forgetting About Other Career Readiness Skills

The second mistake when teaching 21st Century Skills is forgetting to incorporate other career readiness skills in your classes.

If you only focus on the 12 items listed, your students could be left with gaps in knowledge and skills they'll need down the road.

To avoid this mistake, add career readiness skills as extensions to your lessons on 21st Century Skills.

Some essential skills to hit on include:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Career exploration | 3. Public speaking |
| 2. Job seeking skills | 4. Customer service |

By teaching 21st Century Skills as part of a more well-rounded career readiness curriculum, your students will be more prepared for starting their careers.

PART FOUR:

How Do You Teach 21st Century Skills?

Now that you know how to avoid the most common mistakes with teaching 21st Century Skills, it's time to start teaching them!

In this section, you'll find tips and resources for teaching each 21st Century skill to middle and high school students:

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Critical thinking | 7. Technology literacy |
| 2. Creativity | 8. Flexibility |
| 3. Collaboration | 9. Leadership |
| 4. Communication | 10. Initiative |
| 5. Information literacy | 11. Productivity |
| 6. Media literacy | 12. Social skills |

1. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a skill many employers expect from new employees, which means there are many articles on improving critical thinking skills. However, these resources often focus on professionals rather than middle and high school students.

So how can you teach critical thinking in secondary classes?

Start your class by orienting them toward critical thinking with bell ringers. The **5 Best Bell Ringer Activities for High School** provide ample opportunity to engage students in a critical thinking mindset that will help them throughout the class period.

Then, consider how you can teach concepts like **decision-making** and **analysis** to reinforce learning and help them come to a more nuanced understanding of course material.

2. Creativity

The ability to think outside the box to find solutions will give your students a strong advantage in their careers. However, teaching your students how to be creative thinkers can be challenging.

That's why we recommend using problem-solving lessons to get your students thinking creatively!

After introducing problem-solving, consider other lessons that will help them develop creative thinking skills:

- **How to Think Outside the Box with Entrepreneurship Activities**
- **4 Tips to Better Engage Students When Using iCEV**
- **4 Best Strategies to Ensure Your Middle Schoolers Pay Attention**

3. Collaboration

When teaching collaboration skills in secondary classes, it's common to assign group projects and call it a day.

After all, if students are working together, they are learning collaboration skills, right? While group work can help reinforce collaboration and teamwork, it's important to start by addressing these skills in daily lessons.

To teach collaboration skills your students will remember, incorporate teamwork lessons and activities.

Once your students understand the importance of good collaboration skills, **assigning group work** will help to reinforce what you've discussed. To help, read this article on **using collaborative learning in your classroom**.

4. Communication

Effective communication requires your students to convey ideas quickly and concisely for others to understand.

This involves multiples facets of communication, including listening, verbal, written, and even social media.

Effective communication skills are necessary in any workplace and are expected by nearly every employer when considering new hires.

How can you teach communication skills? Get started here:

- **How to Teach Workplace Communication Skills**
- **What Is the Southwest Airlines Professional Communications Certification?**
- **What Is the Communication Skills for Business Certification?**

5. Information Literacy

Information literacy skills can help your students distinguish fact from fiction when looking at digital sources.

When teaching information literacy, we recommend a five-step approach:

1. Define information literacy
2. Show examples of trustworthy and untrustworthy information
3. Define what makes a source trustworthy
4. Encourage critical thinking
5. Introduce other 21st Century Skills

Following these steps will help your students hone their information literacy skills while reinforcing other 21st Century Skills you teach.

6. Media Literacy

Oftentimes, teachers incorporate media literacy as a small piece in their digital citizenship lessons. But media literacy is an important topic that deserves teaching time all to its own.

When covering media literacy, it's important to teach students how to evaluate sources and use discernment when using consuming content.

Social media and **cyberbullying** are closely related topics that many instructors also cover.

Regardless of how you teach media literacy, these **digital literacy skills teaching strategies** are a great place to start.

7. Technology Literacy

Technology literacy is often taught in a computer applications course focused on Microsoft Office or Google Applications.

If that's the case in your school, you won't need to spend as much time discussing this skill in your classroom.

However, if you're required to include technology literacy lessons, consider connecting with the computer teacher to tie your classes together.

Here are a few ideas you could start with:

- Have students create a presentation in computer class and present it in your class.
- Ask students to write an email in computer class to practice good communication skills.
- Use a word processing application to create a flyer about a 21st Century skill you're teaching.

8. Flexibility

Flexibility is someone's ability to adapt to change and understand differences in views that can impact decisions.

It involves letting go of control and adapting to decisions you may disagree with. That makes it one of the most difficult 21st Century Skills to teach to middle schoolers.

However, if you **approach flexibility in relation to other skills**, such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking, you may find it's easier to teach than you first thought.

To start, consider a conversation about how students balance their work between different classes. As students learn the flexibility involved in balancing their schedule, they'll learn a bit more about how to use this skill in everyday life.

9. Leadership

Leadership involves a person's ability to influence and guide others towards a common goal.

There are hundreds of articles dedicated to helping employers and professionals develop their leadership skills. But finding leadership resources relevant to middle and high school isn't easy.

When teaching leadership, it's essential to **dive into the qualities that make a good leader, including problem solving, teamwork, goal setting, and responsibility.**

Teaching professionalism in school will help you cover these qualities and prepare learners for future leadership opportunities.

10. Initiative

Many websites include tips and tricks for keeping employees motivated, but how can you teach these skills before your students even head for their first interview?

Some of our best tips for teaching initiative include:

1. Tie your lessons to the learning target
2. Incorporate group work
3. Let students work independently
4. Find ways to help students stay productive
5. Encourage students to discover connections

For more information on implementing these strategies, read the full article: [How to Teach Initiative in High School](#)

11. Productivity

To be productive, a person needs to hold themselves accountable and identify when an obstacle may prevent them from meeting that goal.

One of the most important topics to discuss as part of productivity is time management.

When teaching time management skills, it's best to tie it back to their current lives rather than looking ahead at the future.

After all, your students would likely benefit from improving their productivity skills right now!

One of the most popular resources to teach time management skills is [this article from Edutopia](#).

Use this as a starting point to discuss productivity in your classes and get students thinking about good time management.

Once you've discussed the basics, you can tie in with other skills by explaining how problem-solving and critical thinking also help people work productively!

12. Social Skills

Social skills are one of the most ambiguous pieces of teaching 21st Century Skills in secondary schools.

We find that the most important aspect of social skills is empathy and understanding others who may have different social or cultural backgrounds.

Teaching empathy to middle or high school students may difficult, but it's more straightforward when you teach it alongside other skills.

You can reinforce the importance of empathy and social skills by relating them back to communication and collaboration.

PART FIVE:

Teach 21st Century Skills with Digital Curriculum

At the end of the day, teaching 21st Century Skills takes a lot of time and effort -- especially if you use dozens of different lesson plans and activities.

If you have a well-established curriculum to start with, the resources we've shared can be excellent supplements.

But if you're looking for a more structured way to teach 21st Century Skills, consider checking out **iCEV**.

iCEV is a comprehensive curriculum provider with hundreds of lessons, activities, and assessments to teach career readiness and 21st Century Skills.

It's designed to make your life easier while helping your students succeed in your classroom and their future careers.

**To see if iCEV is right for you and your students,
click below to sign up for your no-obligation 30-day free trial:**

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