To be successful in the 21st century requires skills that an earlier generation never imagined. Fundamental changes in the economy, jobs, and businesses have reshaped industry and the nature of work. Today, employees engage with a technology-driven, diverse, and quickly changing global economy that requires new and different skills. Literacy demands have changed along with these changes in society and technology.

Technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, and the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies. Twenty-first century readers and writers need to be able to:

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology;
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts; and
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

Because students build 21st century literacies essential for their future through access to technology and to instruction and practice in these literacies, the National Council of Teachers of English supports efforts by Congress to increase the federal investment in programs that address 21st century literacy teachers and learners. As Congress reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (NCLB) and considers a comprehensive literary policy and other legislation affecting our nation’s schools, attention needs to be paid to research on 21st century literacies. This document describes important research-based approaches and recommendations for policymakers in order to prepare students to become informed citizens, prepared workers, and life-long learners in the 21st century.

**Research-based Practices**

*Aligning literacy efforts in preschool and early grades with middle and high school assures a continuum of instruction and learning.*

Interventions with low-income preschoolers offer the highest potential returns in terms of later school success because achievement gaps between low-income and more affluent children begin well before kindergarten and increase with each school year. With appropriate instruction, including new technologies, children three to five years of age can develop understandings about the appearance of print, the connection between marks and language, the ways different kinds of writing shape the form and meaning of texts, and the ways readers and writers see and understand one another.

Once students enter middle and high school they must develop the ability to read and comprehend complex texts and multimedia texts, to write to diverse audiences in varied ways, and to use a variety of media forms to make meaning. Just when students need support to reach these higher literacy levels, most schools stop providing literacy instruction. Accordingly, secondary teachers need to explicitly address the specific and specialized literacy demands of each discipline. Creating a comprehensive literacy program across academic levels and providing professional development across content areas would support continuity and high-quality literacy instruction in all content areas.

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Twenty-first century students need to gather information from multiple sources, evaluate their reliability, and apply their findings effectively.

Most students like to use the Web, but often lack skills necessary to find information or to use that information effectively. Teachers need to provide explicit instruction on strategies such as formulating a research question, evaluating information, evaluating the search process, and assimilating information. Therefore, professional development about information literacy is crucial.

Twenty-first century technologies can engage students in learning.

Research shows that computer technology and other multi-channel digital technologies can reduce the isolation of school work from real-world contexts. Students’ natural interest in the use of various media outside of school can be tapped to engage them in reading and writing in school. Accordingly, professional development is needed in order to effectively incorporate technologies in pedagogy and curriculum.

Twenty-first century assessment will be different because of technology.

Research shows that newer forms of assessments, such as portfolio and performance-based assessment, can motivate student learning. Portfolio-based assessment fosters reflection which, in turn, enhances student awareness of and engagement in learning. Performance-based assessment reveals how students can apply their knowledge in real world settings.

**Recommendations for Policymakers**

Teachers need both intellectual and material support for effective 21st century literacy instruction. Accordingly, federal and state legislators need to support schools in providing continuing opportunities for professional development as well as up-to-date technologies for use in literacy classrooms.

- Create and fund a comprehensive early childhood through grade 12 literacy program.
- Provide funding for professional development to help teachers incorporate literacy learning in all content areas.
- Make performance-based assessments of 21st century literacies a priority. Teachers should contribute to the choice of appropriate assessments and have access to assessment data in a timely fashion so they can use it to shape instruction.
- Ensure that schools are equipped with a 21st century technology infrastructure and 21st century technology tools.

For more than ninety-five years, the National Council of Teachers of English has been devoted to improving the teaching and learning of English and the language arts at all levels of education. We value your efforts to enact policies that support this goal. If you have questions or need further assistance, please contact Stacey Novelli, NCTE Legislative Associate, at snovelli@ncte.org.

**Endnotes**