

What is a competency?

Global changes in the last twenty years and a better understanding of learning is impacting discussion about what is taught, how it is taught and how it is assessed. Many jurisdictions, worldwide, are moving towards the explicit embedding of competencies in curriculum. The need to address competencies is becoming an important aspect of educational change for the 21st century. There are many definitions used worldwide to define the term competency. Alberta Education defines a competency as an interrelated set of attitudes, skills and knowledge which are drawn upon and applied to a particular context for successful learning and living. A competency is developed over time and demonstrated to varying degrees, appropriate to the developmental age of learners and their learning needs.

The terms competency and skills are often used interchangeably. As a broader concept, competency is not limited to cognitive elements (involving the use of theory, concepts or tacit knowledge); it also encompasses functional aspects (involving technical skills) as well as interpersonal skills (e.g., social or organizational skills) and ethical values. A skill, on the other hand, “is the ability to perform tasks and solve problems”¹ and can be acquired in a matter of months while competencies are acquired over a number of years.

Why competencies?

Research on 21st century learners has shown that making competencies more central to their education is important (essential) for active participation in a global and knowledge-based society. The theme of competencies for the 21st century has opened up various discussions and debates as to what they are and how they should be defined. In essence, “the competencies that individuals need to meet their goals have become more complex, requiring more than the mastery of certain narrowly defined skills.”² Changes in technologies have also transformed the ways in which we live, learn and work. We have increased our use and reliance on specific devices including computers and other types of wireless devices connected to the Internet. Within a European context, a Framework for Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning was adopted in 2006 by the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament.³ The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) also discussed the global movement toward incorporating 21st century competencies into public education during their meeting in the fall of 2010. The Ministers acknowledged how the OECD and other high-level organizations have identified 21st century competencies including creativity, collaboration and digital competency as skills individuals will need in order to function in a knowledge-based economy.⁴

Albertans too have clearly indicated, through the community conversations within Inspiring Education, that learners today require competencies for critical thinking, creativity and problem solving, and others such as digital competencies that prepare them for a future that will largely be information and technology driven. Literacy and numeracy will continue to be foundational to learning whether in schools, the workplace or the community. To achieve this, Alberta Education will need to explicitly embed identified competencies into programs of study. Learners will need

to become cognizant of these competencies and then be given ample opportunity to apply them to a variety of contexts. Further, as the global society increases its expectations of what learners need to know and be able to do, there is an increased demand for explicit evidence that shows learners are attaining the competencies that prepare them for living, learning and working in this century.

What are the competencies being proposed by Alberta Education?

It is believed that the following seven competencies will provide Alberta students with the required set of interrelated sets of knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help them become **engaged thinkers**, **ethical citizens** with an **entrepreneurial spirit**. These competencies along with numeracy and literacy are:

- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Creativity and Innovation
- Social Responsibility and Cultural, Global and Environmental Awareness
- Communication
- Digital Literacy
- Lifelong Learning, Self-Direction and Personal Management
- Collaboration and Leadership.

The Competencies of 21st Century Learners⁵



Understanding the competencies

The need to make competencies more central to curriculum and ultimately to the education of the student has been the discussion point of many governments nationally and internationally, and of researchers and communities alike. The proposed draft competencies for learning in the 21st century are based upon a review of several national and international frameworks as well as what the Inspiring Education dialogue deemed as essential for Alberta students to achieve optimal success in their learning, living and work. The competencies proposed by Alberta Education:

- apply to all students, integrate across areas of learning and are articulated from Kindergarten to Grade 12
- promote democratic values, respect for others and sustainable development, and contribute to an equitable and innovative society
- serve as foundations to bring about educational, social and economic benefits in a democratic and pluralistic Alberta society reflecting First Nations, Métis and Inuit heritage, as well as Francophone and multicultural realities.

The Competencies of 21st Century Learners draft graphic conceptualizes the characteristics that will best address the specific needs and priorities of Albertans living, learning and working in the 21st century. Literacy and numeracy are foundational for lifelong learning and are primary and vital characteristics of a highly successful learner.⁶ Learners with strong literacy and numeracy skills acquire, create, connect and communicate meaning in a wide variety of contexts throughout their lives. Some of the proposed competencies, such as critical thinking and problem solving, although not new, will be acquired and applied in an ever-increasing knowledge-based society and within digital contexts. By integrating across areas of learning, the proposed competencies will be embedded systematically and systemically in all subject/discipline areas. If competencies are to be applied in real-life situations and enable learners to explore subject areas in authentic and meaningful ways and at a deeper level, it is essential that relevant contextual learning experiences are developed.⁷ The acquisition of these seven competencies—with the required set of interrelated sets of attitudes, skills and knowledge—that will enable Alberta students to become **engaged thinkers** and **ethical citizens** with an **entrepreneurial spirit**.

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving: Alberta students have well-developed critical thinking skills to review, analyze and assess information coming from a variety of sources and points of view, and are able to apply higher-level cognitive and critical thinking skills and perspectives required within a variety of contexts.

Creativity and Innovation: Alberta students recognize and engage in opportunities to be creative and innovative. They are curious and open to new and diverse ideas, and appreciate the creative works of others. They value aesthetic expression and demonstrate initiative, imagination, spontaneity and ingenuity when engaging in a range of creative processes.

Social Responsibility and Cultural, Global and Environmental Awareness: Alberta students are responsible citizens who contribute positively to the quality and sustainability of their environment, communities and society as a whole. They respect social, cultural, economic and environmental interconnectedness, and the rights and beliefs of others within local and global communities.

Communication: Alberta students seek to understand and interpret the thoughts, ideas and emotions of others and express their own, clearly and effectively, in appropriate ways, for different audiences and for a variety of purposes within local and global communities.

Digital Literacy: Alberta students make ethical and critical use of technology needed for a knowledge society, to communicate, to learn, to solve problems, to make decisions, and to create new knowledge in a variety of digital environments and media.

Lifelong Learning, Self-Direction and Personal Management: Alberta students understand that learning is for life, and for personal and professional growth. They are aware of their talents and their passions, and use them to motivate their learning and to manage their strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Collaboration and Leadership: Alberta students demonstrate leadership in their personal lives, at work and in their communities, building relationships, managing conflict and working in teams to achieve common goals.

In summary, competencies:

- transcend subject areas and are developed through learning approaches that include subject-/discipline-specific learning outcomes
- give students the capability to use attitudes, skills and knowledge as well as values for living, learning and working in a wide range of contexts: school, home, community, for lifelong learning, and most critically, support the dispositions to learn well now and to keep learning throughout their lives
- are demonstrated by performance; they require ACTION
- take into account rapid societal changes and place the learner at the centre.

The Ministerial Order No. 004/98 describes the goals and standards for the provision of basic education in Alberta including the Student Learning Outcomes. Once competencies have been finalized, through the current Ministry and the education community engagement process, they will provide direction for the revision of the Student Learning Outcomes.

Endnotes

1. Cedefop: European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (2008), *Terminology of European education and training policy: A selection of 100 key terms* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities), p. 164.
2. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2005), *The definition and selection of key competencies: Executive summary* (Paris, France: OECD), p. 4.
3. European Communities (2007), *Key competencies for lifelong learning: European reference framework* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities), p. 1.
4. Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (November 15, 2010), "Ministers of Education Mark International Education Week" (press release) (Toronto, ON: Council of Ministers of Education, Canada).
5. Alberta Education (2010), *Inspiring Action on Education: A Discussion Paper* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education), p. 9. <http://engage.education.alberta.ca/uploads/1006/20100621/inspiringact86934.pdf> (Accessed February 2011).
6. Alberta Education. (2010). *Literacy first: A plan for action*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education.
7. Jonnaert, P., Masciotra, D., Barrette, J., Morel, D., & Mane, Y. (2007). From competence in the curriculum to competence in action. Issue on Curriculum Change and Competency-based Approaches: A Worldwide Perspective. *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Comparative Education*, 37(2), pp. 187–203.