

Education researchers at Pearson teamed up with the Partnership for 21st Century Learning to conduct a review of the research literature on communication skills, including the importance of communication skills in education, employment, and life and how communication skills can be taught and assessed effectively. We found that communication skills are critical in all areas but that some students might not be developing the communication skills they need to succeed. What follows is a summary of significant findings and implications.

#### SUMMARY HIGHLIGHTS

- » Communication-skills training should be a central goal of education across all levels and disciplines.

#### KEY FINDINGS

- » Communication skills are linked with personal, academic, and career success.
- » Employers seek out candidates who are good communicators.
- » Evidence suggests that current communication-skills training is not adequately preparing students for success.
- » Research has revealed numerous effective practices for teaching and assessing communication skills.

#### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Help educators learn and implement effective teaching practices.
- » Bring together educators and employers to foster alignment between communication-skills training and business needs.

## Why Is Communication Important?

Communication skills are central to success in school, work, and life. The P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning includes communication as one of the four Cs, along with collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Research indicates that developing strong communication skills is important for a variety of reasons:

- Strong communication skills are associated with improved familial stability and interpersonal relationships.
- Students with stronger communication skills graduate high school and college at higher rates.
- Large majorities of business executives report that communication skills are central in growing their organizations and that they seek out employees with strong communication skills.
- Effective communication between doctors and patients is linked to improved health outcomes.

## What Communication Skills Do Learners Need?

Communication can be defined as a social process in which information is exchanged in order to convey meaning and achieve desired outcomes. Communication takes many forms, from reading the news to delivering a speech to conversing with a friend or colleague. Numerous theoretical frameworks of communication have been proposed. From those frameworks, we identify the following core communication skills:

- **Identifying desired outcomes:** determining desired results or consequences of the communication.
- **Crafting clear messages:** creating messages that clearly convey intended meaning, appropriately utilizing nonlinguistic cues such as body language and visual aids.
- **Modeling others' minds:** recognizing and accounting for others' knowledge, beliefs, dispositions, and emotions.

- **Adhering to conventions:** following the rules or norms of specific disciplines or communicative contexts.
- **Accounting for social and cultural differences:** identifying and accounting for variability in social and cultural norms.
- **Selecting appropriate channels:** utilizing the most appropriate communicative channel.
- **Active listening:** actively attending to communication, withholding judgment, and monitoring and clarifying understanding.
- **Deep reading:** critically analyzing text or speech, monitoring comprehension, drawing inferences, questioning, and reflecting.

## Is There a Skills Gap?

While communication skills are important in personal, professional, and academic settings, there is evidence that education could better foster students' communication skills. National surveys have shown that employers report difficulty in finding job candidates with adequate communication skills. In addition, the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that just over half of eighth- and twelfth-grade students performed at the lowest level of a standardized writing assessment. This aligns with anecdotal evidence from many educators who bemoan the inadequate communication skills of their incoming

students. It is apparent that at least some students are not developing the communication skills necessary for success.

## What Support Do Educators Need?

Teachers will require support in teaching communication skills. Teachers should be provided with professional-development opportunities to learn new teaching techniques and should be given incentive to engage in those opportunities. Smaller student-to-teacher ratios will also help teachers, as one of the biggest impediments to teaching communication is the inability to provide students with adequate practice and feedback in large classes. Along these lines, teachers' grading burdens can be reduced by peer review, which has been shown to improve learning of both peer reviewees and reviewers. If continued research in automated assessment technology produces valid assessment systems, funding for such technologies may also be beneficial. At the current stage, there are questions around the validity of automated assessment technologies, so their use in high-stakes assessment should be approached cautiously.

Policymakers can support partnerships between employers and educators to help students gain industry-oriented training and experience. This support can include creating bridges between educators and business leaders as well as providing funding for partnerships and programs that provide students with real-world communication experience.