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Building Skills for the 21st Century

After a year of research and discussion, the Learning in a Digital Age Committee—a group of parents, teachers, and district administrators—gave a presentation to the District 109 Board of Education about the skills and characteristics today’s students will need to live and work in the 21st Century. The committee identified five major skill areas that will be critical for the students to thrive in the digital society:

- self-directed and independent learning;
- global and cultural awareness;
- problem-solving and critical thinking;
- information literacy; and
- effective communication skills.

On the committee’s recommendation, district administrators met with Ed Coughlin, senior vice president of the Metiri Group. Coughlin has spent more than 20 years providing consultations for professional development related to technology. The Metiri Group works to promote a technologically progressive educational environment through its resources and consulting services. One of the group’s publications, *enGauge® 21st Century Skills: Literacy in the Digital Age*, offered key insights that helped the committee articulate the skills students would need to face the future.

With Coughlin's guidance, District 109's administrators developed a three-year plan to address the committee's recommendations. Faculty and administrators will dedicate each year to one of the major skill areas. This year will focus on problem-solving and critical thinking. Next year will emphasize self-directed learning, and the following year will cultivate global and cultural awareness, along with information literacy. Assistant Superintendent Paula Owsiak notes, "Developing effective communication is already a priority at District 109, and will continue to be included as an element of everything we do." To promote an atmosphere of critical thinking, Coughlin suggested a resource created by three researchers affiliated with the Harvard Graduate School of Engineering, known as *The Thinking Classroom*. The book and website detail six dimensions of a "culture of thinking," and provide methods by which teachers can foster this in their classrooms.

Teachers Study Skills for the Future

Opening week of the school year included time dedicated toward familiarizing District 109 faculty with the district's collective aims and methods for the school year. Alan November, an educational consultant who has worked closely with the district in the past year, visited to deliver an address about education and technology. The staff then spent half a day on a "webquest" put together by the Metiri Group. The webquest's purpose was to familiarize teachers with the major skill areas the district is resolved to develop for the next three years. Teachers began at a website put together by the Metiri Group which provided a description of each skill area and links to a wealth of

information. Participants worked as a team, investigating one skill with a list of questions that the teachers would be able to answer at the close of the day.

This year, teachers will meet by grade every month to study one of *The Thinking Classroom*'s six dimensions of thinking. From peer discussion and examples of practices provided by *The Thinking Classroom*'s book and website, the teachers will develop practical methods to improve their students' acuity in critical thought. While this work will make great strides toward improving the students' educational experience, it is not filling an absence in what teachers have already been doing. Owsiak stresses: "Critical thinking is already present in our curricula, but our teachers will use these tools to elevate it to a new level."