The Quest for Readiness: Thought Leaders Answer Questions from the Field

Talking readiness: (L to R) Karen Pittman, Sean Slade and John Gomperts.

Three leading thinkers in the field of youth and learning recently sat down for a long cup of coffee and a talk about a simple but critical question: What does it take to get young people ready for life? Hundreds of people tuned in via conference call as John Gomperts, president and CEO of *America's Promise Alliance*; Karen Pittman, CEO and co-founder of *the Forum for Youth Investment*; and Sean Slade, director of Whole Child Programs at *ASCD*, pondered that question and its spinoffs: How do we define readiness? Who's responsible for instilling it? How do we measure it?

Listeners Tweeted more questions than the three could answer. They promised to follow up. See the questions and answers below.

You can also listen to the one-hour conversation or read *a short blog* summarizing it.

Is the increasing focus on career readiness as a goal of education helping to change mindsets?

Pittman: It's a start. A focus on naming and defining the competencies that get a young person prepared for the personal and professional demands of adulthood does seem to earn universal stakeholder buy-in. However, changing mindsets requires more than initial buy-in. All of us have intimate and emotional connections that come to mind when we think about school – what it is, what it looks like, how it is structured. These constructs need to be challenged and patterned in ways that support a readiness orientation.

For example: The reengagement of the business community in defining education goals and designing innovative strategies is reversing the forced separation between academic and vocational education that started a century ago. Employers are clear that "career readiness" means more than academics. But changes in mindset have to be quickly reinforced by opportunities to change policy and practice.

Slade: Career readiness is one part of it, but just as important is a focus on citizenship readiness. A focus which only looks at college or career as the markers of success is one that still too narrowly defines the role and purpose of an effective educational system. Students should be college, career and citizenship ready.

Given schools can't do all but are well positioned to teach skills, especially for neediest, what should the trade-off be?

Slade: We often ask teachers to describe the child at 25: What skills, attributes and behaviors do they possess? Proficient in Language Arts, or confident, healthy, collaborative, team player, resilient, empathetic? We must be prepared to jettison some of the antiquated skills or content that continue to be taught as we enter what Daniel Pink has called the Conceptual Age. We cannot and should not be aiming to teach only content, but rather the skills for finding and sorting relevant content and moving that into knowledge. It is less a case of adding on extras and more a case for reevaluating what is needed.

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Pittman: While few would debate the statement that "schools can't do it all," there are many who would debate the statement that schools are "well-positioned to teach skills, especially for the neediest." Let's dodge that discussion by acknowledging the fact that schools are the primary institution charged with skill building. Schools partner with public and community agencies to share responsibility for providing basic services so that they can focus more time on skill-building. Those "trade-offs" make sense.

We need to encourage schools to avoid thinking about trading off some skills for others. The young people who are least likely to have access to basic services are also the least likely to be connected to family and community environments that provide opportunities for building and practicing the skills. They need to spend time in school and afterschool environments that take an integrated approach to building 21st century skills.

What are the benchmarks on the way to high school graduation we must monitor to make sure kids are on the track being ready?

Pittman: I like the benchmarks developed by Michele Gambone and colleagues (2002) based on an analysis of several longitudinal data sets that tracked students from their early teens into the mid-twenties. These researchers found that the data on how well students were doing clustered into three categories: productivity (academic and vocational preparation), connectedness (social and civic) and health (habits, relationships, and behaviors). These correspond to the broad categories of characteristics employers and colleges look for.

Another way to think about this is to build on the indicators used to flag students who are off track: attendance, behavior and grades. What would be the flip of these indicators, to confirm that students are on track? Engagement? Pro-social behavior? Achievements in afterschool activities?

Slade: We would say that the skills needed are the ones identified via the *Whole Child Tenets and their 50 Indicators* – ensuring that each child is healthy, safe, supported, engaged and challenged. While these indicators are directed at the school level, they provide guidance for what students need to be introduced to and develop. In addition, we recently released a series of *State Snapshots* for every state in the U.S. These give an indication of the type of measures that exist and that are needed to evaluate whether we are preparing students holistically.

Are there any instruments that measure resiliency and perseverance?

Pittman: There are many scales and instruments designed to measure many things in this broad social and emotional learning space. David Yeager, author of a paper called "Practical Measurement," explains the dilemma like this: "A comprehensive scan of the field located roughly 900 different potential survey measures. By and large, however, available measures failed the test of practicality."

The Forum's most-downloaded report, *From Soft Skills to Hard Data,* reviews 10 instruments that schools and out-of-school time programs use to assess social and emotional skills. For each tool, it provides sample items and crucial information about usability, cost, and evidence of reliability and validity.

StriveTogether released a compendium of measures last year that catalogues close to 100 scales under various categories, including emotional competence. Not all of these are suitable for use in practice; many were developed for research purposes.

Slade: I would recommend looking at the National School Climate Center's measures and also the Resilience and Youth Development Module developed by WestEd. Both focus on resilience and youth development, with the latter directly linked to this focus. Keep in mind, though, that for any instrument to be sustainable and effective in moving school culture, its processes and its day-to-day practices, that

instrument must be linked directly back to the school's mission, policies and school improvement process. It cannot be an add-on that stands or sits separate.

With all of the backlash and controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards, could communities and schools agree to common competencies?

Slade: While the Common Core (CCSS) has resulted in some debate and controversy, it does provide schools with a new start. The way that the standards are implemented and introduced in the school setting can be done with a focus on preparing students for college, career and citizenship. A focus on CCSS does not necessarily equal a focus on academics only. One does not necessarily exclude the other; CCSS can be introduced and implemented with a more holistic and whole child-centric lens. This is ASCD's stance on CCSS.

Pittman: Getting consensus would be difficult on a national level. Communities, however, have a pretty solid track record when it comes to getting their local education, business and other stakeholders to agree on common goals and indicators associated with the outcomes they want to see.

What's tougher to motivate and implement is agreement about how to prioritize, measure and develop these competencies. The challenge comes from gaps in research and measurement as much as from across-the-aisle differences in perspectives.

How can we make students more aware of the connections between in-classroom and out-of-classroom learning?

Pittman: The more explicit we are about naming the skills and competencies being learned (not just academic content) and the most effective ways to practice them, the more that students can become curators of their own learning experiences in school and out. The more that classes and out-of-school programs are explicit about not just the broad topic (drama, American history, boat building) but about the competency gains expected and the practice opportunities provided, the more that students can become evaluators of their experiences.

I mentioned the report cards used by some New Tech High schools. You'll see that the skills are clearly named. Students get feedback on their progress. The teachers link classroom practices to be used (e.g., team assignments, public presentations) to the skills. This approach could be carried over to use with community partners.

Slade: It is important that we make the links and connections explicit to students. If we believe that these links are crucial, then we also need to make sure that the reasoning behind these connections is relayed to students, families and communities. It is not enough to just provide avenues for out-of-classroom learning. It is critical that we articulate the why.

There seem to be lots of ways to describe these "attributes": grit, perseverance, integrity, communication, well-being, engagement, empathy, SEL, etc. How much difference is there between all of these as we start trying to get a common agenda?

Slade: Interesting question, as there is a discussion between many of these groups to do exactly what you are referring to: Develop a standard set of terms and models that fit and work with each other. In short they are all cousins in the same family – different enough but also similar enough. Stay tuned.

Pittman: Encourage communities to focus less on precise language and more on collecting relevant information on some key indicators reported regularly. Then communities can expand and negotiate language.

There is also a need to support a research and development agenda to more deeply understand the relationship between these SEL skills and academic achievement, or the achievement of readiness "markers" like successful matriculation into college, a job, etc.

Are we holding adults (educators, parents, etc.) accountable without giving them the tools and skills to help youth be ready?

Pittman: Yes, in many ways. Consider teachers, who have been trained and certified to do their jobs and who have been given playbooks to follow. If those playbooks don't include instructions on how to create learning experiences that build the full complement of skills, these professionals are in a double bind. They're held accountable to following the playbook they're given and, when they recognize the need to do more, they are left on their own to figure out what to do.

Slade: Yes, but the question remains, what should we be expecting of teachers and parents? It's easier to point fingers than to fix problems and that is a mindset that we need to move away from. Again: the child at 25 – what do they look like, act like? What skills and knowledge do they possess? We can't ignore this part of the discussion.

What infrastructure is in place for policymakers to coordinate and engage with the movement to get young people ready? How can it be improved?

Slade: Policy around encouraging and supporting a whole child approach to education is growing. Four states (Alaska, Illinois, Missouri and Rhode Island) have passed whole child resolutions, and just this month a whole child resolution was introduced at the federal level by U.S. Reps. Suzanne Bonamici (D-Ore.) and Rodney Davis (R-Ill.). H.Res.658 seeks to recognize the benefit of ensuring students are challenged, supported, healthy, safe and engaged; encourage parents, educators and community members to support a whole child approach to education for each student; and encourage the federal government to identify opportunities among federal agencies to coordinate the education, health, and social service sectors serving youth.

Pittman: Policy discussions and even policies that focus on components of a readiness agenda are growing but have not solidified in a way that policymakers would recognize as "a movement" to reckon with. But there are opportunities for policy makers to connect and contribute.

Federal legislation is in the works to support community schools, fund research on social and emotional learning, and provide waivers to public-private partnerships that want to align various federal grants to improve outcomes for disconnected youth. There is strong administrative language in place to guide child welfare agencies in the pursuit of safety, permanence and well-being for youth in foster care.

This is a crucial first step in getting federal lawmakers to develop policies and make decisions that more effectively promote students' long-term learning, development and success.