

Defining Goals for Youth



NATIONAL CONFERENCE
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A New Approach Helps Minnesota Legislators Identify Policy Priorities for Young People

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Ensuring that young people are prepared for college, work and life involves many areas of state government. Policies affecting youth include school curriculum requirements, after-school learning opportunities, child welfare programs and substance abuse prevention services.

The National Conference of State Legislatures and the Forum for Youth Investment help states create a tailored, comprehensive approach to address the various systems and policies that affect children's lives. The forum developed Ready by 21™, a framework to help leaders think differently about how to prepare young people for success. Ready by 21™ is a wide-based planning approach that encompasses a range of youth policy. A national partnership of organizations, including NCSL, is dedicated to providing technical assistance to leaders who want to use their current resources more effectively to meet the needs of young people. NCSL highlighted this approach at its Youth Policy Institutes for legislators and other state policymakers.

Minnesota legislators established the Legislative Caucus on Children and Youth, using the Ready by 21™ framework and tools to determine the policy priorities to improve the odds for youth. This brief outlines:

- How Ready by 21™ served as a catalyst in the development of the Minnesota Legislative Caucus on Children and Youth,
- Lessons learned from the process, and
- Resources NCSL can provide to states that are considering a comprehensive approach to youth policy.

Youth Policy Institute:

A New Way of Doing Business

In 2008, a delegation from Minnesota attended the Youth Policy Institute in Louisville, Ky., along with six other state teams. NCSL co-sponsored the meeting with the Forum for Youth Investment and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges as part of a project to help states strengthen youth policies and programs. The institute focused on various policies for states to consider implementing to prepare youth for college, work and life. Speakers discussed strategies to set state goals, align policies and coordinate services across several state agencies to achieve those goals. State teams identified actions to strengthen their own policies and initiatives.

The Minnesota team consisted of legislators, juvenile court judges and members of the Department of Education. During the meeting, the Minnesota team discussed the need for clearly stated goals for children and youth and better coordination of youth services. In its state action plan, the team set out to create a children's caucus to provide an opportunity for legislators to discuss the state's priorities for children and youth. The team determined that it was also important to map state fiscal resources dedicated to providing services to youth.¹

Applying the Framework at Home: Creating the Minnesota Legislative Caucus on Children and Youth

The Minnesota state team invited all members of the legislature to attend the caucus' inaugural retreat in January 2009; 16 legislators from both chambers attended. The retreat included a session dedicated to educating represen-

tatives from the executive branch, community organizations, business leaders and other key stakeholders about the Ready by 21™ framework and how it could be applied in Minnesota.

During the same retreat, NCSL, the Forum for Youth Investment and the University of Minnesota facilitated discussion among legislators about the purpose and structure of the caucus. Members agreed that the caucus’ main goal was to identify priority policy areas that affect youth. This included conducting an analysis of the state budget to determine how much is spent on youth programs and services. The purpose of the Minnesota Legislative Children and Youth Caucus was defined as: “to influence and shape public dialogue among policy makers; seek to encourage cross-sector and cross-agency solutions that address the critical challenges facing our young people today, and; strive to better coordinate and align state resources to meet the total needs of children and support their growth into successful adults.”

Using the Ready by 21™ Tools

The caucus used the Ready by 21™ framework and assessment tools² to guide discussions about strengths, weaknesses and potential barriers facing youth. The group used the “developmental dashboard” assessment tool, a matrix

of five age groups (birth to young adulthood) and five outcome areas: learning, working, thriving, connecting and leading (Figure 1).

Participants also used the “10 Action Areas to Sustain Long Term Change” assessment to determine the groups perception of its capacity in four leadership areas — setting big goals, building broader partnerships, implementing bold strategies and using better data to measure progress. With Ready by 21™ tools, participants discussed whether children were reaching specified developmental milestones and if the state was accomplishing its desired goals of helping each young person succeed across all age groups.

Senator Mee Moua, co-chair of the Children and Youth Caucus, emphasized that Ready by 21™ provided legislators with a new way of looking at state policy that transcended partisan divides and helped them focus on results and reconsider how to use existing resources to achieve positive results for children and youth. Senator Moua stated, “The Ready by 21™ frame and the [developmental] dashboard is very instructional for a group like the caucus. It forces us to evaluate where we are and it also sends a very strong message about what happens to everything else when you focus all your resources in one area.”³

Figure 1. Example of a Ready by 21™ Developmental Dashboard

		Pre-K (0–5)	School-Age (6–10)	Middle School (11–14)	High School (15–18)	Young Adults (19–21+)
Ready for College	Learning	Needs Improvement	Getting By	Needs Improvement	Needs Improvement	Getting By
	Working	Succeeding	Succeeding	Needs Improvement	Getting By	Getting By
	Thriving	Needs Improvement	Getting By	Getting By	Succeeding	Succeeding
Ready for Life	Connecting	Getting By	Getting By	Succeeding	Getting By	Needs Improvement
	Leading	Getting By	Succeeding	Getting By	Needs Improvement	Getting By

Reaching Goals with Ready by 21™ Supports

NCSL and the Forum for Youth Investment offered further technical assistance and resources beyond the retreat to support the caucus.

OBJECTIVE AND BIPARTISAN SUPPORT. The caucus was created as a bipartisan, bicameral group with the intent of fostering an open dialogue among legislators on children and youth policy that cut across party and chamber politics. Ready by 21™ and its partner organizations provided an outside perspective and national experience on youth policy that supported the bipartisan goals of the caucus.⁴

STAFF TRAINING AND RESOURCES. Staff support for the caucus was a priority. With help from the University of Minnesota, the caucus was able to secure funding from local foundations to pay the staff person's salary and provide additional resources to convene meetings with the caucus. The Forum for Youth Investment trained this staff member on the Ready by 21™ framework and tools to guide the discussions and plans for the caucus.⁵

BEST PRACTICE MODELS TO MAP RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH. The Minnesota team wanted to know how much state funding was dedicated to children and youth services. NCSL and the Forum for Youth Investment provided fiscal mapping templates from other states and offered guidance on how to replicate the models. Using this information, caucus co-chair Senator Mee Moua and Representative Debra Hilstorm helped pass legislation (SF0561/HF0702) to require the Minnesota Management and Budget Office to complete an analysis of funds spent on children under the age of 21 across various state agencies.

Lessons Learned with Ready by 21™

Frame and Tools

Minnesota legislators took the first step toward a comprehensive policy approach to youth issues by creating a children's caucus and implementing a fiscal mapping pilot

project. The legislators learned some key lessons in the process.

- Creating a bipartisan, bicameral group provided a neutral forum for legislators to have an open dialogue about setting goals for children and youth.
- Allowing interested members to discuss and agree on the operations and leadership of the body helped create a sense of ownership and transparency among the group.
- Collaborating with external, neutral organizations such as NCSL and the Forum for Youth Investment helped facilitate open conversations in the caucus.

The caucus continues to call on technical assistance from Ready by 21™ partner organizations as it attempts to find cross-sector solutions to the challenges facing children, while effectively using state resources.

How Other States Can Use Ready by 21™ in a Legislative Caucus

The Minnesota Children's Caucus provides a unique example for how legislators can discuss ways to improve the well-being of children and youth. Ready by 21™ tools and resources offer legislators a framework to evaluate and prioritize policies and determine strategies that will prepare young people for college, work and life.

NCSL Can Help States that Are Interested in Using the Ready by 21™ Approach by Providing:

- Assessment tools such as the developmental dashboard;
- Research on best practices and policy options;
- Technical assistance and leadership development;
- Facilitation of stakeholder meetings involving state departments, local nonprofits, business leaders, universities and foundations; and
- Connections to Ready by 21™ partner organizations.

For more information about the Ready by 21™ framework and tools, see www.readyby21.org.

References

- Finzel, Rochelle, and Qiana Torres Flores. *Resource Mapping: Tennessee Case Study of Spending for Children and Youth*. Denver: NCSL, 2011; <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?TabId=22383>.
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- Pittman, Karen, and Nalini Ravindranath. *Tracking Child & Youth Well-being*. Washington, D.C.: Forum for Youth Investment, Sept. 13, 2010; http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org/files/Tracking_Child_Youth_Well_Being_Final.pdf.

Notes

1. Representative Joseph Mullery, Minnesota Legislature, "Legislative Caucus on Children and Youth," Presentation at the NCSL Legislative Youth Advisory Group meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures. Denver, Colo.: NCSL, June 14, 2010.
2. Ready by 21™ is an approach to outcomes-based planning created by the Forum for Youth Investment to provide leaders the tools and guidance they need to use their resources in the best way possible to make positive changes for young people. The approach emphasizes big goals, broad partnerships, better data and bold strategies.
3. Mee Moua, former Senator, Minnesota Legislature, interview with Elizabeth Gaines, Forum for Youth Investment, Saint Paul, Minn., Jan. 16, 2009.
4. Mee Moua, former Senator, Minnesota Legislature, interview with author, Feb. 22, 2011.
5. Dale Blyth, University of Minnesota, interview with author, Jan. 14, 2011.

The National Conference of State Legislatures' Youth Policy Project provides legislators with the latest research on positive youth development, offering tools and support to improve results for youth. For more information, contact youthproject@ncsl.org or (303) 364-7700.



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