

# THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

## Creating Catalytic Partnerships to Change the Odds for Children and Youth

Karen Pittman  
President and CEO, the Forum for Youth Investment

Text and graphics of introductory speech given  
to inspire Ready by 21 community leaders.



August 2009

**Karen J. Pittman**

Co-Founder, President, & Chief Executive Officer, The Forum for Youth Investment

A sociologist and recognized leader in youth development, Karen started her career at the Urban Institute, conducting numerous studies on social services for children and families. Later, she worked six years at the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), launching its adolescent pregnancy prevention initiatives and helping to create its adolescent policy agenda. In 1990, she left CDF to become a Vice President at the Academy for Educational Development where she founded and directed the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research and its spin-off, the National Training Institute for Community Youth Work. In January 1995, Karen handed the Center's reins to Richard Murphy, former Commissioner for Youth Services in New York City, in order to accept a position within the Clinton Administration as Director of the unfortunately short-lived President's Crime Prevention Council, where she worked with 13 cabinet secretaries to create a coordinated prevention agenda. In the fall of 1995, Karen joined the executive team of the International Youth Foundation, charged with helping the organization strengthen its program content and develop an evaluation strategy. In 1998, she and Rick Little, head of IYF, took a six-month leave of absence to work with General Powell to create America's Promise. In 1999, she returned to IYF to lay the seeds for what has become the Forum.

A widely published author, Karen has written three books, dozens of articles on youth issues and is also a regular columnist for Youth Today and public speaker.

Karen has served on numerous boards and panels. Currently, she is vice-chair of the Board of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, vice chair of the National Collaboration for Youth, co-chair of the Next Generation Youth Work Coalition and she is a Trustee and Steering Committee member with the America's Promise Alliance. She has also served on the boards of the National Center for Children in Poverty, Educational Testing Service, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and the National Commission on the Senior Year of High School.

Karen is the 2002 recipient of the National Commission for African American Education Augustus F. Hawkins Service Award and the 2003 American Youth Policy Forum Decade of Service Award for Sustained Visionary Leadership in Advancing Youth Policy.

Karen was named one of the top 50 CEOs in nonprofits with power and influence. This 12th annual edition, published August 1, 2009, of *The NonProfit Times* list is the first time Karen has been recognized for her leadership in the youth development field.

Karen earned a Masters degree in Sociology from the University of Chicago and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from Oberlin College.

###

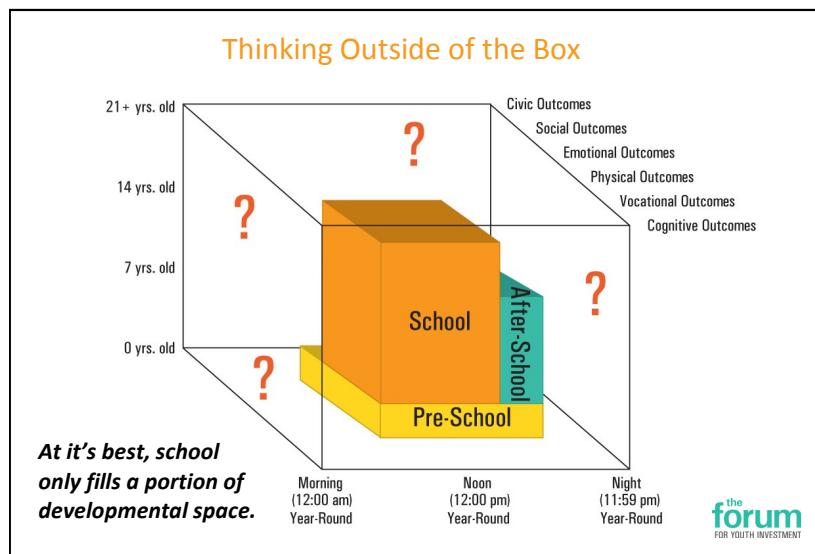
My goal today is to encourage you to think about the need for catalytic partnerships – partnerships that spark broader action and act as keepers of the vision and monitors of progress. I've been saying these three things for almost 20 years:

- Problem-free isn't fully prepared.
- Academic competence, while critical, is not sufficient.
- Schools are critical, but not sufficient.

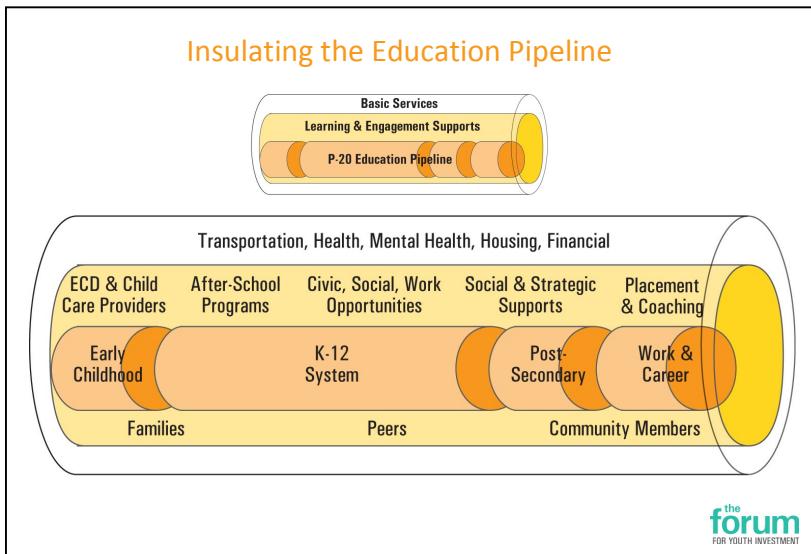
To ensure that young people are ready for college, work and life; leaders will have to create a catalytic partnership to ensure that all of the community's resources, not just the schools, have assumed shared responsibility for student success. Schools, no matter how good they are, cannot assume full responsibility for this goal.

- We need to make sure there are early and sustained investments in children and youth from before birth into their twenties. Our K-12 systems are responsible for only a portion of this developmental continuum.
- We need to make commitments to provide opportunities for learning and development year round, throughout young people's waking hours.
- We need to ensure that young people are competent not only academically, but physically, socially, vocationally, civically and, many would argue, spiritually. Schools do not assume this mandate, nor should they.

Schools fill only a small portion of developmental space. Annually, young people spend less than one-third of their waking hours in school. After-school programs, if viewed as taking place from 3-6 p.m. for elementary and middle school students, fill a bit more. If we believe that, other things being equal, young people do better when



more adults are intentional about providing more supports, more of the time, then we have to ask, "who fills the rest of the white space?" The good news is that many do – first and foremost families, but also nonprofit service providers, civic and faith-based organizations, health and social service organizations, businesses, libraries, parks and recreation departments, colleges and universities, early childhood educators and family care providers. The bad news is that most communities have very little idea of the overall levels of supports provided by these disparate leaders, or of the quality of what is being provided. The developmental space surrounding school is really a black box into which we put things and hope that they will be useful.



There are a number of very good reasons to focus on tightening the joints in the education pipeline (the links between Pre-K and elementary, between middle school and high school), and reduce the corrosion inside the pipe to increase the flow of students (e.g., increase the number of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who graduate in 4 years). There are even more reasons to resist stopping there. We don't just need to fix the leaks and increase the flow. We need to insulate the entire pipeline to ensure that young people come out of the other end "ready." The first layer of insulation should be a melded mix of the family and formal and informal organizations (including employers) who provide students with opportunities to apply their learning, pursue their interests and build social capital. The second layer of insulation ensures young people have access to quality basic services – health care, transportation, housing, financial, etc.

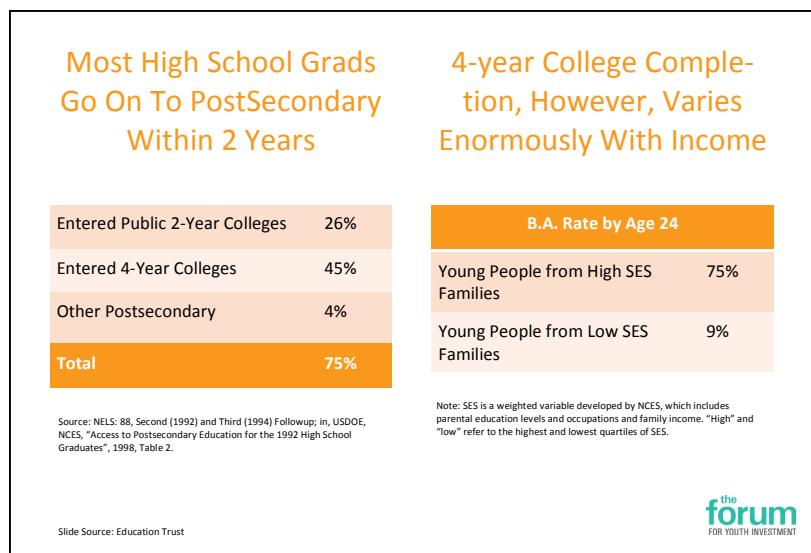
Again, these supports, services and opportunities need to be in place from birth through adulthood. Too often, the initial response to the question of what non-academic supports are in place for students is "after-school programs." These services are critical, but they are not enough, especially if they are only provided from 3-6 p.m. in the elementary and middle grades. Communities should know as much about the quality and availability of student supports provided by families and neighbors, community groups, businesses and public agencies as they do about those provided during the school day. And if we want to ensure that young people are not only ready for college, work and life, but make successful transitions, our curiosity and responsibility should not end when students leave high school either as graduates or dropouts.

## Message #1

**Too few students are ready for college, work or life.  
More high school diplomas are not the only answer.**

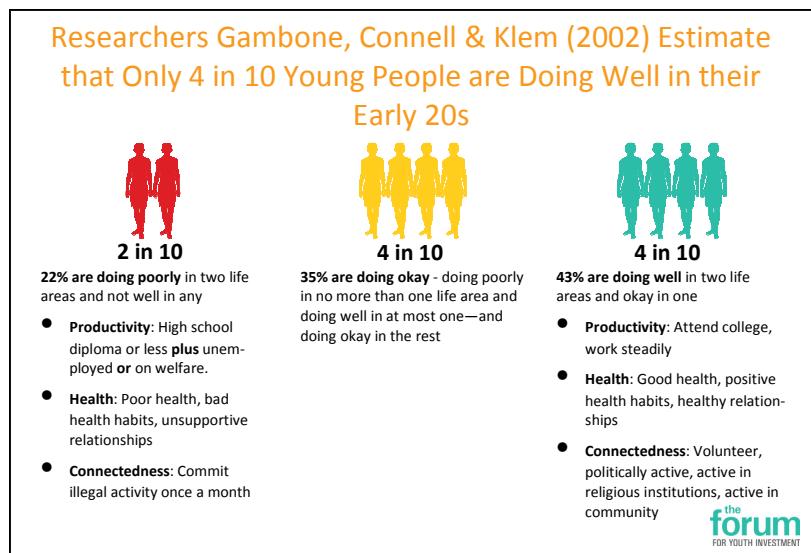
A 4-year college is not for every student, but every student needs and should be ready to succeed in some type of post-secondary education or training. A high school diploma is a requirement in this day and age. Ensuring that young people are successful in their next undertaking requires that we look beyond the diploma to ask more than whether they graduated from high school.

- **Entering college does not ensure completion.** According to the Education Trust, 75 percent of high school graduates enroll in some form of post-secondary education within two years of graduation. But far fewer complete their courses – only 42 percent of those who enter college graduate. And only 9 percent – less than 1 in 10 – low-income students complete a 4-year degree by age 24.
- **Work aspirations are greater than even basic work experience.** The *Gallup Student Poll* (2009) found that 85 percent of graduating seniors have good ideas about the kind of work they want to do, but 4 in 10 have never visited a workplace as a prospective employee. And 3 in 10 could not name 2 people that they have met to discuss work ideas.
- **Employers report that many high school graduates are unqualified for entry-level jobs.** There is increasing agreement on the skills young people need to function well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a 2007 survey by Corporate Voices for Working Families, approximately 400 employers rated skills such as teamwork, social responsibility and professionalism as high as oral communication and reading comprehension. 7 in 10 thought these skills were important for entry-level jobs available to high school graduates. They reported that 4 in 10 high school graduates were deficient in these skills.



It is absolutely critical that we address the dropout problem. High school graduation is only a predictor of future success. Ensuring success requires that we look not only for credentials, but for clear signs that young people are competent and connected.

In their 2002 study *Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development*, researchers Gambone, Connell and Klem analyzed large data sets that tracked young people from their early teens until their early 20s and created a profile of young people who were doing well. For young adults, success is defined as being productive, healthy and connected.



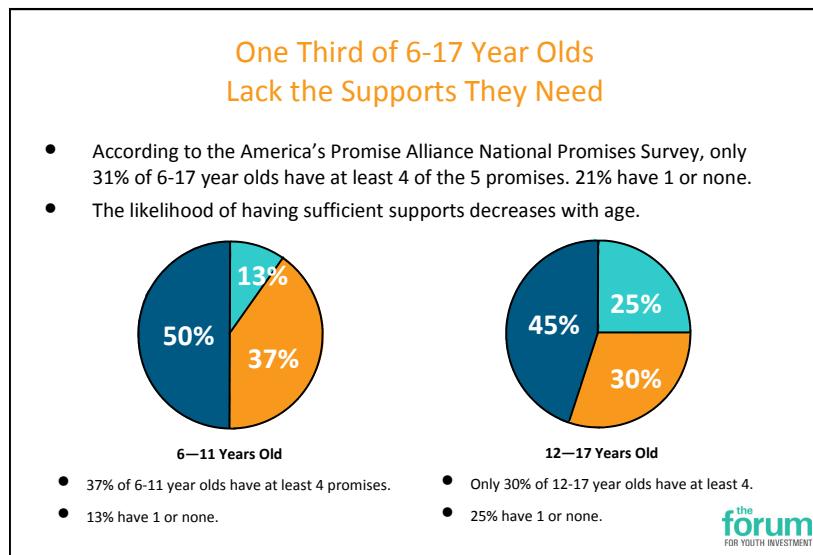
Only 4 in 10 young adults were doing well, according to this definition, and another 4 in 10 were doing okay. Two in 10 were in trouble – undereducated, unemployed or on welfare, in poor health or engaged in risky behaviors or relationships and disconnected from community to the point that they were committing illegal activities.

Rarely do groups believe that more than half of their young people are doing well – in fact, quite a few believe that even 4 in 10 is too high. It is difficult to understand why we are not more outraged at the fact that fewer than half of our young people are meeting a basic definition of success as young adults. Especially since we really do know what young people need to succeed.

## Message #2

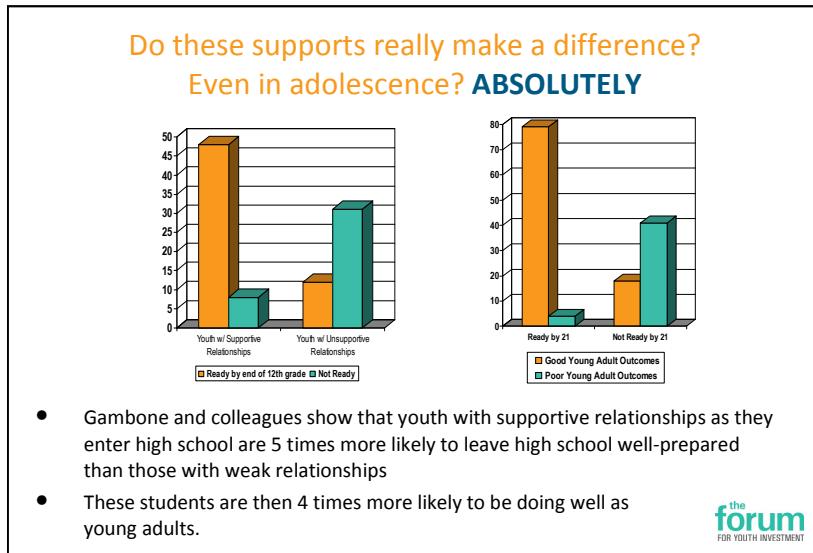
### Improved academic instruction is critical, but too few students are getting all of the supports they need.

The America's Promise Alliance, founded by General Colin Powell, has helped the country understand that young people need five basic supports – safe places, caring adults, effective education, a healthy start and opportunities to help others. This list is backed up by research conducted by the National Research Council on the characteristics of effective learning environments.



*Every Child, Every Promise: Turning Failure Into Action*, a national poll published by America's Promise in 2008, found that fewer than one-third of 6-17 year olds have at least 4 of the 5 promises; 21 percent have one or none. And, the likelihood of having all or almost all of these basic supports decreases with age.

Again, it's difficult to understand why we are not more outraged about the efficacy of our efforts when presented with data like this. Only 4 in 10 young adults are doing well and only 30 percent of 12-17 year olds have all of the supports they need.

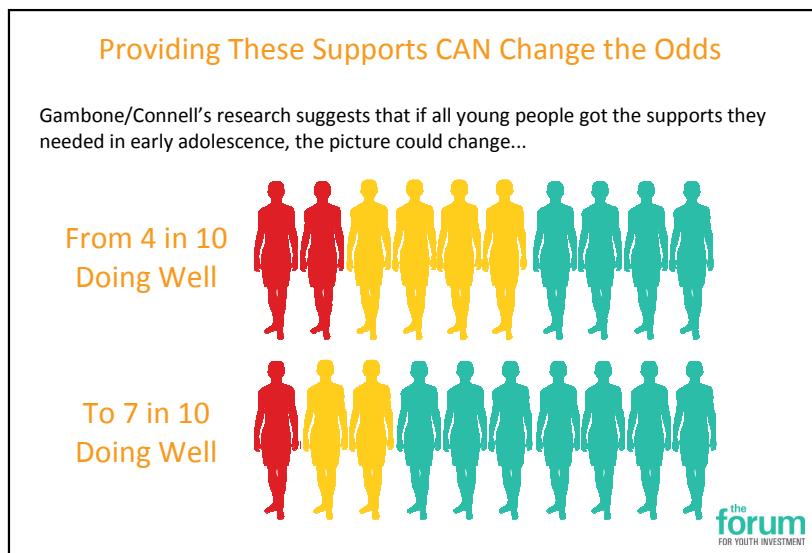


## Message #3

### We can change the odds if we change the way we do business.

Positive, meaningful relationships are one of the first things adults and young people say is critical to student success. Gambone and her colleagues demonstrated that young people who enter high school with strong relationships and have strong relationships with adults throughout their high school years are 5 times more likely to leave high school doing well than those who have no supportive relationships with adults. Doing well was more than graduating; these young people had good grades, and college or career plans.

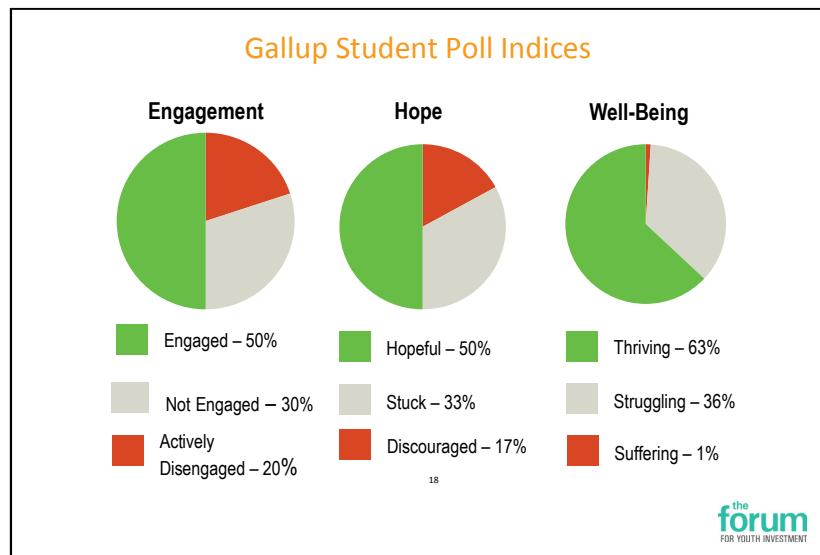
Teens who came out of high school doing well were then 4 times more likely to be doing well as young adults than those who weren't. Similar results were found when looking at the effects of other supports, such as challenging experiences and opportunities to contribute.



The researchers didn't stop there. They asked the question, if every young person coming into high school had the supports that those in the "doing well" category had, would the picture change? The answer was "yes." The 4 in 10 statistic would increase to 7 in 10 doing well. The number doing poorly would drop to 1 in 10. This research suggests that it's never too late to invest in young people and that it is possible to change the odds.

If all young people got the supports they needed in early adolescence, the picture could change from 4 in 10 doing well to 7 in 10 doing well. It's not perfect, but significant – this research only captures the difference made based on supports provided during early adolescence. It is possible that with increased investments during the first decade of a young person's life, we could get closer to 10 out of 10.

We can change the odds for young people, but this will only happen if we stop being satisfied with pilot programs and piecemeal interventions and begin to set bigger goals, build broader partnerships, and adopt bolder strategies that will net improvements at scale. Another important tool for passionate leaders is better data. Data that not only allows us to track youth outcomes and community supports, but allows us to ask hard questions and get better answers.



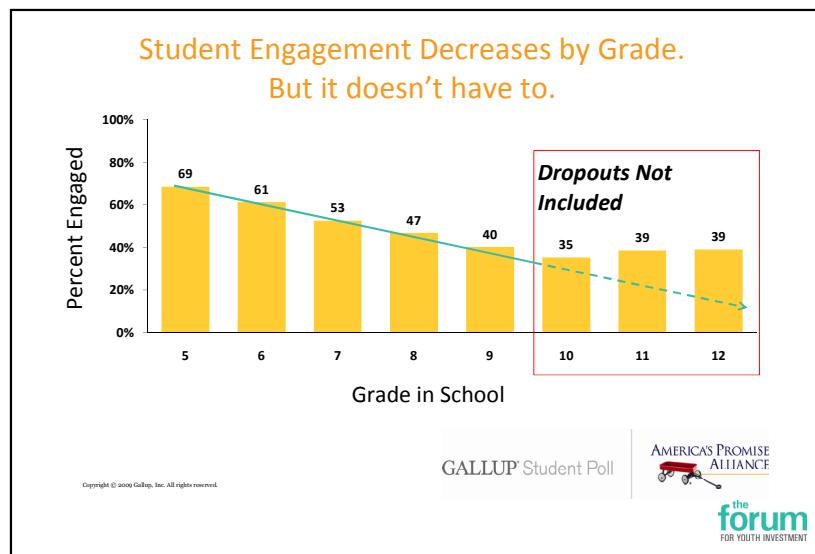
## Message #4: What gets measured, matters.

We have enormous amounts of data on what happens in school: data on student courses, attendance, performance and promotions. But we have very little data on how young people feel about their lives or what they participate in outside of school.

Research (*Gallup Student Poll*, 2009) shows, however, that young people who are hopeful, engaged in school, and thriving do better than those who are not:

- Hope predicts college GPA and retention over and above HS GPA and ACT/SAT scores.
- Engagement distinguishes between high-performing and low-performing schools.
- Well-being drives academic and vocational success.

But only half of 5<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> graders are hopeful and engaged in school, and only one-third are thriving. Only 1 in 4 students starts his or her day with the power of all three.



## Message #5

**School, business and community leaders can use these new types of “leading indicator” data to spark and track change.**

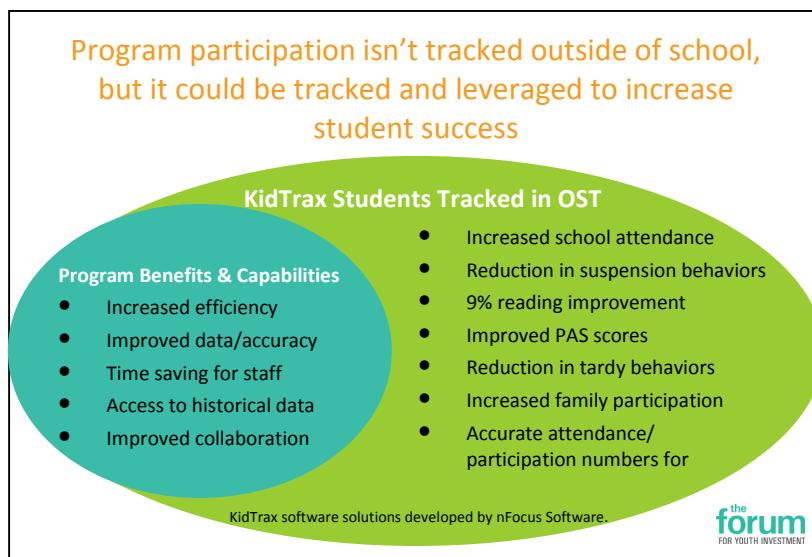
Students' sense of hope, engagement and well-being decline steadily with age – but they don't have to. If we measure these important indices, we can improve them. The solutions are relatively simple.

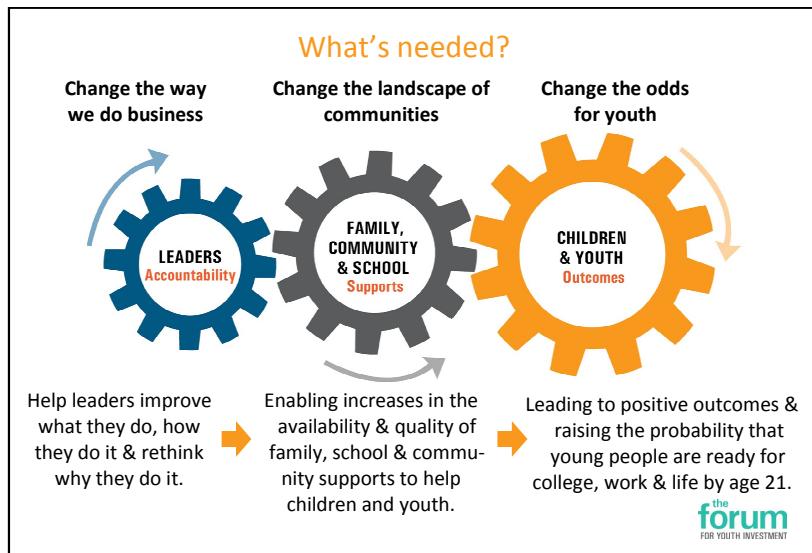
The Gallup survey is being made available to school districts and is administered twice a year. Communities receiving building-level data on these important indices could begin to make changes and track progress.

With extra effort, the survey could be linked to individual student files so that parents and teachers and others who work with you can engage students and watch for improvements.

Student participation in learning opportunities outside of school also declines steadily with age. The disengagement of students is not visible because we only track attendance in school.

In Louisville, school administrators recognized the importance of partnering with community organizations to increase student success. Working with the United Way and the Mayor's office, they created and helped more than 80 independent after-school program providers adopt a common data platform that tracked student participation and documented program activities. They considered these programs “adjunct classrooms” and gave after-school providers access to the academic records of the students in their programs. School and community providers then began working together to attain common goals such as improving 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading. As a result of this partnership, the programs got stronger, parent participation increased and the students improved across multiple fronts – attendance, behaviors, test scores.





Increased student participation – in school and out – produces increases in students' academic, social and emotional skills only when the activities are high quality. Whatever our opinions are about No Child Left Behind, most of us agree that it created common expectations for student achievement and systems for schools to be held accountable for progress. Communities need to broaden their definition of goals beyond academics, broaden their definition of learning environments beyond schools, strengthen their capacity to track student participation and student progress, and measure and improve the quality of the learning environments where young people spend their time. Quality is measurable and quality is malleable because teachers, coaches, after-school providers can quickly improve once they know what is needed.



Quality matters. A major analysis of Louisville's evaluation results of more than 80 programs found that young people in high-quality after-school programs showed significant academic, social and emotional gains; those in low-quality programs showed none. The low-quality programs may have helped young people avoid risky behaviors, but they did not prepare them for success.

## Message #6

### **Change begins with Leaders. Partnerships are key.**

Changing the way leaders think and act is the key to success. We can't insulate the education pipeline unless we coordinate all our efforts to ensure that they add up to what is needed. And we can't improve student success – and change the odds – unless we fix the pipeline.

Leaders, by definition, are individuals who take the initiative to move an idea through implementation. Leaders take on a recurring set of tasks as they do this work – they find volunteers, form partnerships and alliances, set goals, take stock of what exists, develop action plans and track progress.

In any community, on any given day, there are leaders who are making decisions about which priorities to set, which data to review, which providers to support, which funding sources to tap, which groups to work with. The Ready by 21 Approach meets leaders where they are. The goal is not to push the "restart" button, but to understand where you are, ask you questions about where you've been and help you go farther faster with strategic connections, tools and resources.

The Ready by 21 Partnership has brought together a unique group of national organizations that represent state and local government, business, education, community and nonprofit leaders – like United Way Worldwide, the American Association of School Administrators, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the National Collaboration for Youth – and organizations, like nFocus Software, Gallup and more, that specialize in developing the kinds of information, tools and technical assistance leaders need to make a difference.

I challenge you to show the country what it looks like when a community does this right – when you engage all stakeholders, set big goals, use bold strategies and drive change – collecting the kind of data that will not only show you where you've been but help you get where you want to be. We are convinced that rising to this challenge requires a cross-sector group of leaders. The Ready by 21 National Partnership agrees to be the keeper of the big vision – what President Obama has referred to as a "cradle to career" commitment – and takes responsibility for aligning the work, engaging the community, facilitating decision-making based on sound data and advocating for changes in policies and resource priorities.

The Ready by 21 Partnership is prepared to help if you are serious about wanting to publicly map your path and measure your progress as you work to meet your goals. Thanks to support from Philip Morris USA, an Altria Company, we have funding to work with up to 10 cities in the Southeast. We look forward to learning more about what you are doing and want to do to change the odds for youth.

## Resources

America's Promise Alliance (2008). A Report from America's Promise Alliance: Every Child Every Promise. Washington, DC: America's Promise Alliance.

Corporate Voices for Working Families (2008). Strengthening America's Economic Competitiveness: Public Policy Strategies to Improve Workforce Readiness. Washington, DC: Corporate Voices for Working Families.

Eccles, Jacquelynne and Gootman, Jennifer Appleton. (Eds.). (2002). Community Programs to Promote Youth Development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Gambone, M.A., Klem, A.M. & Connell, J.P. (2002). Finding Out What Matters for Youth: Testing Key Links in a Community Action Framework for Youth Development. Philadelphia: Youth Development Strategies, Inc., and Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

Haycock, Kati. (2009, July 10). College Access and Success Can We Do More? Education Commission of the States, Nashville, TN: Education Trust.

Larson, R.W., Hansen, D.M., & Moneta, G. (2006). Differing Profiles of Developmental Experiences Across Types of Organized Youth Activities. *Developmental Psychology* 42(5), 849-863.

Lopez, S.J. (2009). Gallup Student Poll National Report. Omaha, NE: Gallup, Inc.

The Forum for Youth Investment  
The Cady-Lee House  
7064 Eastern Ave, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20012  
202.207.3333  
[youth@forumfyi.org](mailto:youth@forumfyi.org)  
<http://forumfyi.org>

Ready by 21 and the Ready by 21 Logo are registered trademarks of the Forum for Youth Investment