

KNOW THY



All youth ready for
college, work & life.

NEIGHBOR'S CHILD

*REKINDLING COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY
FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENTⁱ*

By Karen Pittmanⁱⁱ, Co-Founder and President of the Forum for Youth Investment

Ready by 21® is a call to action to leaders who know that doing business the same way just isn't good enough anymore. In 2007, the Forum for Youth Investment launched the Ready by 21 National Partnership with a unique group of national organizations that represent state and local government, business, education, nonprofits and communities. The driving ideas that guide the Partnership, however, are not new. They reflect the long-term vision Karen Pittman, the Forum's co-founder, laid out more than a decade ago in this article, which still resonates with leaders who are passionate about changing conditions for children and youth.

TRANSCEND BUSINESS AS USUAL

Feathers may ruffle at proposals for social change with a bottom line. “Business” as business does it is not without weaknesses. But it is clear that what we are currently doing is not working. We need a different vantage point to forward the conversation – not government, not traditional service providers. But, before we start down another long path towards increased supports and improved outcomes, let's pause to ask – what does it really take to ensure that young people have the resources they need to learn, grow and connect? We have mentors, resource centers, service collaboratives, systems reform, state and national plans. What's missing? Six things. All doable. All overdue.

- 1. A clear and complete vision.** Problem-free isn't fully prepared. Even if young people have the wherewithal to avoid, limit or seek help with problems, this does not mean that they are fully prepared for adulthood. We need a vision that encompasses the full range of outcomes that we want for our young people and that they want for themselves. Clear plans and target populations are fine, but we have failed if categorization leaves adults and young people bereft of a shared positive vision for their future.
 - 2. A steady focus on a few key things.** Yes, everything influences everything else. But if we pick a few basic things and commit to do them well, we can build a solid base for expansion. America's Promise Alliance targets five fundamental resources – caring adults, a healthy start, safe and structured places, effective education for marketable skills, and opportunities to give back. These aren't the only five, but they are a solid list.
 - 3. A real commitment to map, deepen and coordinate new and existing resources.** We need both commitments to deepen and expand resources, and systems to figure out which resources are needed where. It is as crucial for existing nonprofits, schools and faith organizations to deepen and link the work they are doing with existing children, youth and families – making more deliberate efforts to address, collaborate and monitor progress on all five goals – as it is to double the number of children and youth served. And it is equally crucial that the new corporate commitment engines be connected to the existing faith-based, nonprofit and school-based passenger cars. Otherwise, a lot of kids will be left at the station.
 - 4. Specific, non-fudgeable, publicly shared measures of progress.** With all of the technology we have, we should be able to have accurate, user-friendly, cross-referenced reports on every child's progress and access to resources. To be useful, these measures need to be comparable across neighborhoods, cities and states. We need something in between individual program reports of numbers served and lives changed and city- or state-level indicators of problems and services.
 - 5. Publicly announced rewards for commitments and success.** The public and peers, in the end, are often the best judges of progress and the best incentives for accountability. Change is hard work. Everyone
-

engaged in commitment-making – young people, individual adults, community organizations, city-wide collaboratives, state and national organizations, businesses, associations and governments – needs to be encouraged to set goals and monitor progress. Someone needs to ensure that these are publicly celebrated and scrutinized.

- 6. A bottom-line commitment to work through – not around – families, neighbors, neighborhoods and communities.** Young people don't grow up in programs. While there are many institutions that can, and should, influence the supports and opportunities available for young people, the fact remains that kids grow up in the inner circles of families, peers and significant adults. Top-down solutions that ignore and skip over – rather than acknowledge, strengthen and partner with– these inner circles are doomed to fail. Remember top-down imposition happens from city to neighborhood, too.

BE ACCOUNTABLE BY NAME

These are not new ideas. Combined, however, they could make a difference.

The question is where to begin. How do we jumpstart this change? We need to identify something simple but powerful enough to push for change at every level – something that forces us to acknowledge that these numbers have names.

The Vietnam War Memorial is one of our nation's most simple and most powerful symbols because it conveys the most personal of messages – names – 58,000 of them. This memorial honors the dead. We need to cherish the living. We need to set concrete goals – like 2 million additional young people getting the resources they need. But that is not enough. We need to make it real. To be reached, a child has to be known – known by name, by spirit, by interests, by fears, by strengths, by weaknesses, by curiosities. Children have to be known by someone. And to be helped, they have to be known by someone who can listen and then make things happen.

The specific number isn't important. What is important is the nature of the commitment. Consider these differences:

Ask a city to commit to get more resources to 8,000 additional young people. No problem. This is nebulous and therefore can be fudged. Reporting these kinds of increases in service delivery numbers isn't hard.

Ask it to commit to identify 8,000 children and youth who are missing three or more of the five fundamental resources? Harder. How many have all five now? We usually don't have a clue. It depends on how you define the resources (e.g., effective education) and whether you have the capacity to count which resources kids currently have access to (currently we can't do this easily). Taking this commitment seriously pushes cities to define indicators for resources and to count how many children and youth are actually receiving them.

Ask it to commit to help an additional 8,000 get all five? Harder still. This means having indicators, regularly monitoring progress and, if they are going to look good, finding ways to generate improvements in resources available **and** connected to the 8,000 who need them.

Ask it to commit to helping a specific, identified list of 8,000 young people get all five? This is serious. It requires personalized service which means one of two things – significantly reduced caseloads for professionals (and corresponding increases in the numbers of professionals) or significantly increased use of community-based

organizations, networks and volunteers. And it requires ensuring that those organization and volunteers are connected to support systems – they can't deliver what they can't access.

If we want to really make a difference in children's lives, the recipe is simple. Ask cities and towns to make commitments to identify, name, link and track their share of young people. Ask governors, national organizations, corporations and associations to make concrete, focused commitments that increase the pool of resources, and increase the capacity of communities, to ensure that young people receive them. Add a foolproof, generic way to monitor commitments and progress. Stir in a dash of technical assistance and a dollop of sustained media attention, and *viola* – we may rekindle public will.

To meet the challenge – to make a difference not just in the aggregate but in the particular – cities, towns and national nonprofit and faith-based organizations will have to ask the neighborhood organizations and associations where children live to find ways to name them by name and to monitor their progress using agreed-upon goal categories and shared indicators. If we did just this, the impact would be incredible. No more case numbers. No more elusive promises. Real names, real champions, real commitments, real progress.

ⁱ First published as "Know Thy Neighbor's Child", *Youth Today*, 1997. All Rights Reserved.

ⁱⁱ At the time of the original 1997 article, Karen Pittman was Director of Programs for the International Youth Foundation and Co-Chair of the Communities of Promise Task Force for America's Promise.