



All youth ready for college, work & life.

TRANSCRIBED COMMENTS MADE BY FORMER CONGRESSMAN DICK GEPHARDT, READY BY 21 NATIONAL LAUNCH, FEBRUARY 27, 2008, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Thanks, Karen. I deeply admire your effort and your talent in this effort and everyone who has combined together to make this go forward.

About two and a half years ago, I attended a dinner which was the first movement of the Forum towards this Ready by 21 program. I was deeply impressed and wanted to be a part of it, and there were a number of reasons for this. The main reason that I wanted to be a part of it is because in my 28 years in the House of Representatives, I often worked on these issues because I cared so much about these issues.

I come from a different place than Karen did, but my personal story is not a lot different. I grew up in a poor family but had all the opportunities in the world, because of my public education and organizations like Boy Scouts and afterschool programs and so on and so forth...

What I became frustrated about in my congressional career was that we put together new ideas. We put big federal dollars behind those ideas, but I never felt like we were getting the results that we all wanted, the outcomes that we expected to get.

And so when I went to dinner and heard what was being talked about, I really got excited because I thought this was the chance to move in a new direction, not only with this organization but with so many important public and private organizations across the country.

Before I tell you why I was impressed, I want to step back and tell you why I think it's important that we think anew and act anew on these topics. There are two profound changes that have happened in this country in the last 50 or 60 years that we need to recognize so that we can think together about how we deal with these facts.

The number one fact is that in the last 50 years everyone went to work... when I grew up one parent was home to support a child's effort, make them do homework, get them to community organizations – be there as a support system for most children. The other fact is that in today's world in America 50% of America's children live in one-parent families. So you know from the beginning that that child will have 50 percent less time with an adult at home for the support that every child needs. Those are incontrovertible facts. We can talk forever about why these facts are there and whether they can change but the truth is, it is what it is. The question becomes how do we as a country—with all of the public and private institutions within it—really change, modernize ourselves and revolutionize what we do, so that we can deal with this situation for many children in this country so that every child gets the love, the care, the respect, the support they need to be ready by 21 and a productive citizen in our society.

What I heard at that dinner that excited me and continues to excite me are a number of touchstones that I think are critically important.

1) This effort is trying to deal with local communities and families. When I came to congress the Speaker of the House was Tip O'Neil. One of his favorite sayings was that all of politics was local. Throughout my career, I had to learn and re-learn that lesson. If you ever got too far away from community, you tended to get unelected. It's the same with children and all of what we're talking about. You have to stay focused on and connected on what is local, what is almost personal. It's got to be to the community, to the family. Whatever we do has to be implemented at that level. Nothing gets implemented well at the federal or even state level. The focus of this organization on what is local, what is community, what is family is exceedingly important.

2) But they've also accepted another touchstone which is almost in conflict with that. They want scale. We can't just succeed at the family level or the community level. It's not enough to be in the local level in St. Louis or Paduka, because it has to work everywhere and everywhere is different. So it makes it harder to bring these conflicting goals together. But, indeed, that is what we're trying to do.

3) The third touchstone that is exceedingly important to me is that they are trying to integrate the activities of these public and private organizations at the local level to get the outcomes that we need. Because of the old facts that existed 60 years ago, we work in silos, in separate efforts that were never pieced together or knitted together so that they can work together and reinforce each other so that we can get the results that we want.

4) And finally, and perhaps the most important touchstone that this organization is trying to deal with is that—for the first time that I've seen—someone is trying to assess the results that are being created in the local community, even in the family community by these hopefully integrated efforts. Someone said that if you can't count it, it doesn't exist. And I think that's absolutely true. In any human endeavor you have to have metrics to know if you're moving toward the goal.

Those four touchstones are vitally important and why I think this has a huge chance to succeed.

In a few months we are going to have a new administration in Washington, and a new president. There's a lot of hope about that and there should be. But to me, this effort succeeding may have more to do with whether we succeed in our county, invest in our youth and get everybody ready to learn and be a productive citizen. I look forward to having this effort help the new administration, the new governors elected, mayors, and new private organizations to succeed at what we're all trying to do.

Now it is my honor to present my co-conspirator in this effort. Tom Ridge and I came to Congress at about the same time. He's a Republican; I'm a Democrat. But most importantly we are great friends. I have enormous admiration for him.... Everything that he has done in his career has been done well...with excellence and great passion.