

## Letting Young People Lead Their Learning: A Conversation with Ron Berger

January 22, 2020

- Ian Faigley: [00:00:01](#) Good afternoon everyone and welcome to today's thought leader round table, a conversation on readiness. Today's session is part of a regular series of explorations of the key questions of what does it mean for all young people to be ready for life's demands at every stage, and what is it going to take to get there? Karen Pittman, CEO of the Forum For Youth Investment leads lively and candid conversations with some of the most influential boundary pushing leaders working to improve the lives of children and young people across the United States. Today's session features Ron Berger with EL Education. Today's session will explore the EL model, the character framework, and its 10 founding principles.
- Ian Faigley: [00:00:38](#) A little bit about our presenters today, Karen Pittman is president and CEO of The Forum For Youth Investment and a respected sociologist and leader in youth development. Prior to co-founding the forum in 1998, she launched adolescent pregnancy prevention initiatives at the Children's Defense Fund, started the Center For Youth Development and Policy Research, and served as senior vice president at the International Youth Foundation.
- Ian Faigley: [00:01:00](#) Ron Berger is chief academic officer for EL education, a nonprofit school improvement organization that partners with public schools and districts across America, leads professional learning, and creates open educational resources. Ron is the author of best-selling education books including *An Ethic of Excellence*, and *A Culture of Quality*. And he's coauthor of *Leaders of Their Own Learning*, *Transformational Literacy*, *Management in the Active Classroom*, and *Learning That Lasts*. Ron also teaches at Harvard Graduate School of Education where he did his graduate work. With Harvard colleague Steve Seidel, he founded the website *Models of Excellence*, the center for high quality student work, which houses the world's largest collection of beautiful student work.
- Ian Faigley: [00:01:44](#) There are only a handful of slides for today's session. We will be accepting questions and comments via the chat feature, which is available either at the top or the bottom of your screen. You

can also join the conversation on Twitter using the hashtag ready youth. Today's session is being recorded later this week. It will be sent to everyone who registered, and also posted to the forum website along with any additional resources that are mentioned throughout today's call. It's now my pleasure to turn it over to Karen.

Karen Pittman: [00:02:12](#) Thanks Ian, and welcome Ron. I'm so excited we were able to arrange to have some time to talk together. I have seen you in action up on the stage, and had a chance to talk to you a one on one as well. And I know that our listeners are going to be excited about learning more about EL Education. So let's start with your favorite quote, which you've told me is how you kick off most of your keynotes. And it certainly is without even knowing that. The quote that I pulled out when I looked at your work and listened to some of the videos, so why this quote, and why is that so fundamental to how you describe EL Education?

Ron Berger: [00:02:55](#) Thank you Karen. And let me just say it's an honor to be speaking an audience of people from schools and youth development who are doing great work. I come in with a lot of admiration for everybody that joins a discussion like this is someone who's committed to youth. I use this quote everywhere I speak because of course test scores in math and literacy matter. We need basic skills in math and literacy for every kid. But when our students are done with schools and done with the programs we're working with in their youth and they enter the world, test scores are no longer at all what matters. Really two things matter. The quality of the work that they do, and the quality of person that they are.

Ron Berger: [00:03:42](#) I can just tell you from a personal story, in addition to helping to run a nonprofit, a national nonprofit, I was a public school teacher myself in a small rural community where I still live, where I built my own home. And I taught there so long, almost 30 years that pretty much everyone in my town is my former student. And so, that means that the entire volunteer fire department are my former students, and the part-time police then is my former student, and my nurse is my former student, and my plumber is my former student. And so, my life is literally in the hands of my former students.

Ron Berger: [00:04:26](#) Just to give a specific example, when I was away building a playhouse for my grandchildren, my wife had an accident at my home. She's fine now, but it was a serious accident and all the first responders were my former students. And so, if you could imagine that someone you loved had an accident and first responders showed up at your home or your apartment and

every single one of those first responders was someone that had been a student of yours or in a program that you helped support how much it would matter that those people that entered your home would be people of character who do high quality work. That's all that would matter to you.

Ron Berger: [00:05:09](#) I didn't care what the third grade test scores were of the people who showed up to save my wife's life. What I cared about was that they were courageous, compassionate, and responsible people who did really great work. And they did. I mean, my wife was in the hands of people that I deeply trusted because they had the highest standards for their work. And so, it's easy for me to remember every single day that yes, math scores matter and literacy scores matter on tests, but in real life, so much more matters and it's really around the quality of who we are and the quality of what we do everywhere we go. It's a daily reminder to me because my life is in the hands of my students.

Karen Pittman: [00:05:55](#) That's an amazing story. I think that really... I've never heard a story that sort of drives home so well the importance of these two key things that you have up on the screen. And I think it's such a different way to describe what we want. What we want in our neighbors, what we want in our workforce, what we want as citizens. The idea of the quality of her character and the quality of her work pulls all this up to a higher level. Then the conversation that we often find ourselves in, or at least the conversation I often find myself in, which is more of a skills conversation. It's still in that space of, well, you know young people need reading, and writing, and computation skills, but they also need, and then we have our favorite list of social, and emotional skills that we want to sort of add to that portfolio.

Karen Pittman: [00:06:56](#) While I know that that rounding out of sort of academic with social emotional and cognitive skills is important, getting to the essence of why do you need all of those skills? You need them because that's what allows you to do high quality work, and that's what allows you to really act and perform and make decisions in a way that demonstrates character. I like lifting it up to that level. So, with that big goal of making sure that your schools are graduating young people who have character and are committed to high quality work, whether they're in elementary school or coming out of college, how do you do that? How do you then define student achievement if it's not by test scores?

Ron Berger: [00:07:42](#) That's terrific. And if we could have the next slide, the nonprofit that I work with, which is EL Education, we're about 25 years old, and we are trying to redefine the national conversation

about what does it mean when we say student achievement. So right now I would say there is a one dimensional view of what student achievement means. If you see a newspaper article or an article online about a high achieving school, we all know what high achieving means. It means they have good test scores, and in basic skills in math and literacy, that's all it means. And that's not what it actually means in real life to be a high achieving person.

Ron Berger:

[00:08:28](#)

And so, we're trying to use what we would call a three dimensional view of high achievement, and of student achievement. To say the first dimension is mastery of knowledge and skills. And that doesn't just mean good test scores. But of course test scores have to be good, but it also means having students who are great readers and writers and scientists and mathematicians and artists. It's students who do their work well, and have a deep understanding of the knowledge of the disciplines, but that's only a third of what we would say is the three dimensional view of achievement.

Ron Berger:

[00:09:06](#)

The next quality is character, and I would say, and I'm going to push here, social emotional skills are a really important part of character, but not all of character. We would say that character actually has three parts. There's what you could call performance character. Being organized and having grit and having organization and being reliable, and dependable, responsible. The kind of character that helps you get things done, and do well in your classes. That's super important character, but it's one part of character. The second part of character is moral and ethical character, compassion, and respect, and understanding, honesty, integrity. It's being a good human being, using your performance skills to do well. And then lastly, we would say there's civic character. If you have good character, are you putting your character to good use for justice and equity in the world? Are you helping people get better with your good character?

Ron Berger:

[00:10:06](#)

So, character is often not put at the center of what we talk about as the mission of schools. But I would say that schools have no choice about teaching character. Even if they say we can't teach character, that's the purview of families or of faith and churches or outside of school programs, we can't touch character. We would say that schools have no choice about teaching character because they're already teaching character all day long. The very experience of school infuse character in students. It makes them more respectful or less so, more responsible or less so, more compassionate or less so.

Ron Berger: [00:10:48](#) And so, whether we want to or not, schools and afterschool programs, out of school programs, all youth development organizations, we are all shaping the character of our kids. And we're either going to do it haphazardly and pretend we're not doing it or we're going to do it intentionally and meaningfully and do it well. In the end it's what parents most care about. Yes, parents care that their students and their kids get good grades, but parents care more that their students are good human beings. That they're honest and kind, and that they'll treat their family well.

Ron Berger: [00:11:23](#) So that's number two and we add a number three, which is craftsmanship, doing your work well. And no matter what your life choices, whether you're an engineer or an architect or a software designer or you're raising children in your home, it doesn't matter. The quality of what you do defines your legacy in work. And so, raising students to do beautiful work, to care about the quality of what they do has to be at the core part school. And that's different than doing well on tests. There's lots of students who do well on tests who don't put craftsmanship into their work. And so, we would say we need a three dimensional vision of what schools and programs can develop in students. And that's all three of these things, the academics, and character, and craftsmanship. So I'll pause there, but it's our big push to say, can we make student achievement mean something much more than just test scores?

Karen Pittman: [00:12:25](#) It's an important push. It's one that... And I'm sure you've got many graphics. I mean, just that three part definition of character is so important for us to push as well as the overall three parts. I was spending time last week with Camille Farrington from the Chicago Consortium, which has made one of my all time sort of frameworks. Their foundations for young adult success framework. And looking at that framework, and looking at how we often come into that, as you said, through this SEL skills door, which is important but not sufficient for getting young people where we want them to go. And in that frame, character was sort of substitute with values, and whether we call it character or we call it values, it's one of those words as you say that people shy away from that.

Karen Pittman: [00:13:23](#) So naming skills seems to be safer than talking about how you want... the larger way in which you want young people to actually use those skills, which is to demonstrate character in that moral and civic space, not just show that they have the skills from a performance perspective. And then also really bring that into the quality of their work. And so, when you look at the CCSR framework, the ultimate goal is for young people to not

just have a broad set of competencies, that mastery of knowledge and skills, but also have these things that add up to having a really strong and integrated sense of identity and a sense of agency. And I see a parallel between that longterm goal, and this emphasis that you're having on this multidimensional view of achievement. Does that make sense to you?

Ron Berger:

[00:14:13](#)

It absolutely does. Camille Farrington has been a friend and guide to us in our work of for a decade. Her work on identity has been really important to us. This sense that if kids can't develop an integrated identity where they're proud of themselves in school or in whatever program they're in, they'll never do well. They have to belong, and they have to feel like they can bring their best self, and their full self to the settings they're in. Her frameworks have helped shape a lot of our work directly with schools. I'm pushed, I like Karen that you used the word values because I'm going to give another push. Not just the word character, but we are afraid in this nation to talk about values because we worry about whose values are we talking about. It's okay to talk about skills. We talk about communication skills or self regulation skills, but let's just not talk about values because it's a little too politically tricky about whose values we are embracing.

Ron Berger:

[00:15:17](#)

I don't believe that. I believe that there is a narrative in this country that we have a terrible division of values, and that we can't have dialogue about values because people are split. Our country is either on this side or on that side, and I think there are issues that divide our country, but I actually think 95% of the values that we have for our kids are ones we share. When I speak to an audience, I'll put up a slide that just has names of values like respect, responsibility, courage, kindness, integrity, honesty, compassion. And I say, "Is there anyone in the audience from any background who does not wish their kids had these values and dispositions and habits in their lives?" Nobody says no to that. It doesn't matter what their faith, it doesn't matter what their race, it doesn't matter what their background or their income level. We all want our kids to be respectful, and responsible, and courageous, and kind, to have honesty.

Ron Berger:

[00:16:23](#)

If we all agree on that, we had better make sure that our schools and our youth development programs are taking that on directly because it is a shared value across our country. We want kids to grow up to be good people. Yes, there are issues in which we really disagree, and I'm often with audiences where I'll name those issues. Like when I'm speaking in certain States,

I'll say, "Look, I may vote differently than you. We may disagree on gun control. We may disagree on abortion." There are issues where we disagree, but you want your kids to grow up to be kind and compassionate, respectful, honest. I do too. We have common ground and we need our schools to make our kids to be more honest, more compassionate, more respectful rather than less so. And all of our youth programs. We have to take it on directly at the core of our programs. While we're teaching all those skills, we're also teaching kids to be good human beings. So, let me pause there, Karen. What does that push in you?

Karen Pittman: [00:17:27](#) Again, this is going to be one of those things where we continue to agree with each other. I think that's hugely important. I think the fact that we have tried to be so safe in this that we reduce everything down to a skill rather than talking about how those core social and emotional and cognitive skills help young people really develop in these more complex ways. And just your distinction between values and issues. We don't spend enough time talking about how skills bundle to create broader competencies, how those competencies actually allow you to actually act on your values. But those values have to come from someplace. Yes, they can be taught, but it's a much more complicated way of doing it, and it comes out of the range of ways you are in conversation, in relationship with people, the ways you are treated, and/or help to treat other people.

Karen Pittman: [00:18:31](#) As you said, it's modeled. It's not just taught. And so for me, that gets to the next question of, you talk about helping schools beyond a transformational journey. You don't just talk about helping schools build skills. What is this transformational journey that actually takes years? How do you do it, and how do you know that a school is really ready to start this process?

Ron Berger: [00:19:00](#) It's a great question. So, Karen EL Education used to be called Expeditionary Learning. We're a little over 25 years old. We were a new school design funded by a federal grant in 1992 that was looking for break the mold models of schooling. And our charge was to work with existing schools or to help districts open new schools that had a different model of education, a different mission that would be more effective. We had two parents in our formation. One was Harvard Graduate School of Education, and that's where we get our obsession with academic excellence and craftsmanship. And our other parent was an odd one, which was Outward Bound. The organization that's known for its wilderness work.

Ron Berger: [00:19:49](#) What some people understand about Outward Bound, but not everyone is that Outward Bound does not exist to teach

wilderness skills. It brings people in the wilderness to develop their character. So it brings adults and youth into the wilderness and often works with youth or adults that have had trauma, like returning veterans from wars or youth that have been in foster environments and difficult situations, brings them out into the wilderness in teams and gets them to work together to get to the top of the mountain or get down the river or get out onto the ocean. The wilderness and the teamwork is an environment in which they become better human beings, and more other oriented, and step up for each other, and build more courage and confidence in themselves to support the team.

Ron Berger: [00:20:43](#) So we thought, what if we could bring that teamwork into a school model where kids would not be just looking out for themselves, but they'd be looking out for all their classmates. So, our model of schooling is built around this sense of teamwork that comes from Outward Bound. School transformation for us starts with the faculty of the school, which would be the same in any youth development program working together to model what we hope kids will do.

Ron Berger: [00:21:12](#) So we feel like student culture is never ahead of the adult culture. We can't expect students to be courageous and respectful and responsible if the adults are not modeling that for them. So when we come into an existing school, a school that reaches out to us, the first thing we ask is, are you ready to change? Do you want to dive all in? And if the leader says that she is, we then talked to all the faculty, and we survey the faculty and do focus groups. And if they feel like we're not really ready to change our expectations that all kids can achieve and that we're going to respect and work with each other differently, then we say no because we know we can't lift people that aren't ready to dive in themselves.

Ron Berger: [00:21:54](#) But if the whole faculty is really ready to step up and the leader as well, we start with reshaping the culture of trust in the adults, in the staff of the school, or the organization so that they can model for students sort of a different way of being, of working together, of thinking of beyond yourselves. And then we start a multi year process. Our school transformation process often takes five years to take a school and bring it to a high performing place.

Ron Berger: [00:22:27](#) I will say it's easier if a district says, "We want to open a new school with you." Because if we are the consultants and opening a new school, then we're recruiting new faculty and building a new culture. It's easier than taking an existing one. So, most of our school startups that we help districts with are highly



successful. Our high schools, almost all of them send almost every single graduate to college, and they are specifically in low income communities. Many of our schools have had 100% of kids getting into college for a decade, so those schools are super successful.

Ron Berger: [00:23:06](#) We also step into schools... Last week I was in one of our schools in West Virginia that was one of the lowest performing schools in the state of West Virginia, and tremendous poverty and trauma in the school environment. We started with trying to rejuvenate the courage and compassion of the faculty for each other, the staff for each other to rebuild their confidence, and then started trying to build a culture of courage and compassion among students to try harder work, to take care of each other better. And that school is on its journey now, and we hope over the next few years it will just become a stronger and stronger place.

Ron Berger: [00:23:43](#) In the last year it went from one of the lowest performing schools of the state to making a tremendous leap forward. But we have a long way to go with it. So, it's not about looking at what are the deficits of kids? How do we lift each individual kid or adult? But thinking instead of the broad vision of can we do this as a community? Can we all lift each other? So, that was a lot of talk. I'm sorry. I'll pause there.

Karen Pittman: [00:24:12](#) No, that was great. And one question just to clarify, I think I know the answer, but I think it's important for listeners to hear it. When you say staff and you say faculty, are you talking about all of the adults in the building or just the classroom teachers and administrators? Who is staff?

Ron Berger: [00:24:33](#) That's a great push. Someone also posted in the chat box. Do you have suggestions for moving our organization's program skills into more common values? Having those conversations of values with the broadest group of your staff that you can is really important. So, I'm sure there'll be times when in a school or an afterschool program or a youth development program, you can't get all the staff there because not everyone is full time. People can't come to afterschool meetings or before the program meetings. They can't come to retreats always. But whenever it's possible to get the entire staff together, it makes a big difference for kids when every adult in the building is on the same page, uses the same language, uses the same framework of character habits.

Ron Berger: [00:25:32](#) So when I say staff, I mean the entire staff whenever possible. Certainly there are times when only your teaching faculty or the

people in your program who are doing the delivery of your program are have to be working together. But I would say we always try to begin with the full staff of a school, which includes people working in the cafeteria, and people driving the buses, and people that are the custodians, and people that are supporting everything. Getting us all together and think what's our hopes and dreams for our work together and our work with kids. Having that conversation about why are we doing this work? What do we hope our students will become? Not just what skills they'll have, but who are the kind of human beings we want to create through our program, through our school? With everyone in the building and getting common language and common vision around that really makes a difference.

Karen Pittman: [00:26:28](#)

Again, when I hear you, and I have heard you before, which is why I'm so excited about having this conversation. When I hear you say that and say it with such power and conviction I can't help but somewhere between sort of startled and frustrated at how rarely I actually hear that statement. In so many conversations that I've been in, including many of the conversations with the SEAD Commission, the Commission on Social Emotional and Academic Development, the focus was on teachers and helping teachers build skills. And the question was always where will they have the time to do this?

Karen Pittman: [00:27:10](#)

When you paused and said, we don't have to cram... First of all, we don't have to cram all of this into the classroom, so that it's legitimate for teachers to ask that question. But second, you have this bevy of adults who if we can shift them from being in reactive mode to being in proactive mode, and have them really understand that all of the experiences that young people have contribute to their character and development, you've really just exponentially expanded your workforce and exponentially expanded the amount of time that can be devoted to this. And as you said, time that's not detracting because we're not paying attention to some settings while paying too much attention to others.

Karen Pittman: [00:27:59](#)

That conversation doesn't stick the way I would hope it would stick. In particular with K-12 people. I think on the youth development side, because youth development organizations tend to start with relationship building and trust building there's more of a sense that every experience that the child has in that setting is important, and that you're having all of those adults come together. But can you reflect at all on why... Once is this something where schools wonder and push back at you about why do you want all those staff? What kind of response do you get when you say we need everybody in this space?

- Ron Berger: [00:28:44](#) Boy, it's a great question. I think the first thing people worry that it's just logistically impossible. We don't pay all our staff to be here that much. So how can we have shared experiences without having to change our budget for staff development because we only include teachers in our staff development not all of our staff. And that's where we push. We want all of your staff. We want everyone together. We might have to think of how to budget things differently, and get the kind of funding we need so that when we have a retreat, we have staff members that aren't just teaching faculty, and that when we have meetings to discuss important issues to build our vision for the school and our framework for what we want to do, we can bring in all the people that affect students' experience.
- Ron Berger: [00:29:32](#) When you're a student and you go into a high school, it's not just your classroom teachers who affect your experience. It's the bus ride you take there. It's who greets you at the door. It's the security officers in the building. It's the people in the cafeteria, it's the custodians in the hallway. They deeply affect your experience of the school. If they are all treating you with respect and kindness and high expectations, then you feel like I am a part of a world where the adults are all rowing together. Where they all have the same language and they all care about me and they all push me.
- Ron Berger: [00:30:03](#) So, to connect that for a moment, Sarah Hughes, one of the listeners here pushed back in a great way to say, yes, we have similar core values, but how are we going to make any growth unless we're going to have courageous and critical conversations about power, and bias, and racism, and poverty, and oppression. Absolutely. I just want to say to Sarah and everyone, I absolutely agree that those critical and courageous conversations have to happen on a regular basis, especially if we're working with places where kids are marginalized or come from tough situations. I would say those should happen with the broadest group of staff possible so that there's the biggest, the broadest understanding of how to act responsibly with our power and privilege in schools, how to be most equity focused and inclusive.
- Ron Berger: [00:30:56](#) So I'll just use a specific example so I'm not just sounding like I'm blathering here. The nearest city to where I live is the city of Springfield, Massachusetts. And we have a district, a secondary school there, Springfield Renaissance School that we helped to open a dozen years ago, 12 years ago. And it serves about 700 kids, most of them kids of color, most of them coming from homes of poverty, and it's one of our biggest successes. For 10 consecutive years, they've had every graduate get into college.

Not every student chooses to go to college, most do, but every student that's graduated has gotten into college. 98% of kids are graduating on time.

Ron Berger:

[00:31:36](#)

However, it's a school where really hard conversations about race, and LGBTQ+ issues, and class issues, and language issues, and immigration issues are always inflamed. They're always challenging, and we try to have regular, courageous conversations in small groups and across the school, including staff members beyond the teaching faculty. So that when a crisis happens, a crisis in the community, or a crisis in the school community, there's already the forum for those kinds of conversations to start grappling with how do we heal? How do we move forward? How do we respect people when this is happening? It's not waiting for a crisis to happen before we have those hard conversations, but having them all the time with the full staff so that we're ready to make sure every kid feels respected and looked out for. Otherwise, we couldn't be having those results of getting every kid to a good future. So, let me pause there.

Karen Pittman:

[00:32:39](#)

Yeah. Again, I think the questions in the chat, and I'll have Ian check the Twitter or questions or comments are reinforcing both, as you said, the challenge of doing this, but the power of making that commitment to really have all staff see that they are a part of this community, understand that they can make huge contributions to this community, and then really figure out how to engage them so that you're building those common grounds in terms of language and frameworks. And so, anything more, I'm sure that you can explain about how when challenged how folks have made adjustments to move from... Professional development is only for our classroom teachers to we have ways of engaging this whole community. I think that will help the school folks. It also is certainly a dilemma that we find when we try to develop partnerships between school and out of school partners where you have more part time staff, you've got differences of schedules and just the logistics. Not to even mention the extra cost of broadening the definition of who we involve gets in the way.

Karen Pittman:

[00:33:53](#)

To your later point about this not just being about polite conversations, but building those regular muscles to push on hard topics. Again, I see that when you talk about civic character we often define that in a very service learning, get kids out into the community contributing. And for me when you're talking about civic character, it is that ability to get young people comfortable in conversation with each other and with adults in these bold and courageous ways around hard topics, which then

allows them to go out into the community and act on those. So, extremely powerful examples of what this looks like. Give us one or two more concrete, what is it in this transformation process of three to five years, what does it take? What kind of things does schools and school leaders have to do, and how do they do it even with broader actors in the community as they're on this journey?

Ron Berger: [00:35:01](#) Great. Well, I'll move to the next slide. So, there are a number of books that we've created and I will say as a nonprofit, everything we create except our books we give away. We would like to be able to give even our books away, but they cost money to publish so we can't give them away. But all of the videos that go along with our books, all of the curriculum that goes along with the books, all of the frameworks that go along with our books are free and available online through our website because we are really trying to spread practices.

Ron Berger: [00:35:36](#) So, on the top left hand corner of that slide, the book Leaders of Their Own Learning is a set of practices that we try to help schools build in over the course of five years that puts students more in the driver's seat of their learning in the way that many youth development programs already do, but I think few schools actually do. Which is having students go to school with a vision of this is where I want to get to, and I kind of have a sense of how to be in charge of my pathway there. So that book Leaders of Their Own Learning has a set of eight connected practices that we suggest schools try out and that's the next slide, actually.

Ron Berger: [00:36:23](#) Those eight connected practices are ones that change assessment from being seen as a test that's done to kids for high stakes for the district or the state to the most important assessment that happens every day in a school building is the assessment that's going on inside student heads. It's them assessing, am I behaving well enough. Am I learning enough? Am I asking enough questions? Do I understand this stuff? Is this thing good enough to turn in? Is my writing good enough? Kids are constantly assessing, am I good enough? Is this good enough? And they're making a judgment about, okay, I'll turn this in at this point.

Ron Berger: [00:37:01](#) If we want to make students better learners and better human beings, we have to figure out how do we increase their ability to push themselves to higher levels, and to know, I know what I need to get to move to the next level. So, we would suggest that, for example, there'll be explicit learning targets in academic subjects and in character and in all skills of this is

where we hope you'll get to. And so, students can always be thinking, "Oh, that's the top of the mountain. All right, I can show evidence that I can do this, but I need to be able to do that and I need to be able to do that."

Ron Berger: [00:37:38](#) I can give you a quick example. I went to that school in Springfield, the Springfield Renaissance School because the governor of the state then Deval Patrick, the governor of Massachusetts was visiting the school. And the school asked me if I would come down to join him on his school visit. He was visiting the school because they'd had eight consecutive years or seven consecutive years of 100% college acceptance in a low income district school in an urban setting and he thought, this is a really amazing school. I have to go visit it. He did and I went along with him on his tour and this tour guys are two students.

Ron Berger: [00:38:14](#) And part way through the tour he said to one of them, "Tinisha let me ask you a question. All right, are you a good student?" And she said, "Well governor, that's a hard question because I'm really strong in some ways but not in others. Like for example, all of my character learning targets, I feel like I have really strong evidence that I am meeting. My academic learning targets I have strong evidence in some, but there's some learning targets I haven't reached yet and some learning targets I'm really struggling with." And the governor said, "I'm not sure what you mean by learning targets." And she said, "It's the expectations of what I'll be able to know and be able to do by the end of this year and the end of my time. So my learning targets in mathematics are around differentiating equations and graphing linear equations. My learning targets in history are around comparative essays."

Ron Berger: [00:39:09](#) And he said, "Oh, they're the lesson objectives. I know those. I used to be a teacher. And she said, "Sir, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but they're not the teacher's lesson objectives. They are my personal learning targets for the set of courses I'm taking that I know I have to show evidence of meeting and I can choose how I'm showing evidence. I can use essays, I can use tests, I can use projects, I can do presentations. I need to be able to show that I can do these things, that I have these skills and these character habits in order to show that I'm ready to move on."

Ron Berger: [00:39:46](#) And so this is, I own these, this is not a teacher's ownership. This is my ownership of these skills. And so, we are asking schools to rethink how they phrase and frame for students that this vision is led by them in ways. So for example, three of these circles are about structures where students have to present

their learning formally to their teachers, to their families, to their communities. Now we didn't invent any of these structures, but we've just spent the last 15 years working with schools to figure out how to help schools do them more powerfully.

Ron Berger: [00:40:25](#) So, for example, in all of our schools, pre K to 12th grade, every year students lead their own family conferences for their parents or whomever is in their home as their guardians. And so their families come in every year, multiple times per year, and they present evidence of here's how I'm doing in my subjects, here are my struggles, here are my strengths, here are my goals. Here's what I'm proud of. Here's how my character is progressing. Here's evidence of my character. No, they don't just do it in third grade. They do it in 11th grade and 12th grade, at years that which other schools don't even use conferences anymore. And it's entirely led by the student because we want her to take ownership of this is my education, these are my goals and I'm trying to show you that I've making progress toward reaching them.

Ron Berger: [00:41:20](#) Then the passage presentation often called presentations of learning in many other school networks is the similar process except they're doing it in front of a community panel where they are presenting to the community. This is evidence of my academic strengths and my character strengths and my high quality work. So you can sort of see who I am. So, a lot of this Karen is can we have students take much more ownership for, I'm in charge of showing the world that I'm learning important things and becoming a good person.

Karen Pittman: [00:41:55](#) Again, wonderfully powerful ways to flip words that are frequently used as as the governor's words and put them into the power of having students really own their own learning journeys. When you get this process fully going, and you've mentioned community panels, and the student led family conferences, does it naturally lead to any other blurring of the boundaries between school and communities? As young people are really thinking about what they want to do and how they want to demonstrate learning do they leave the building and go out into the community? Do they bring into the building work that they are doing in other settings to demonstrate their skills and competencies? How does this, if at all, as schools make this transformation, does it transform student in school relationships with community partners?

Ron Berger: [00:43:00](#) Well, one of the beautiful things about your audience, Karen, in this conversation is all the people that are crossing those

boundaries between just school and youth development beyond school. The more porous that boundary is, the better in my mind. And so, there's many ways in which that boundary is porous for us. When students do their student led conferences and their presentations of learning, they are very often sharing evidence from outside of school. If they're sharing evidence of their leadership skills, of their skills and character, or even of their academic work, it may be from within school, but it may be from the scouting program, from the afterschool program, from the church program that they're in. From any youth development program [inaudible 00:43:45], it may be from sports, from dance, from music that they're doing outside of school.

Ron Berger: [00:43:49](#) They are encouraged to use evidence from their entire life in the way that Camille Farrington so beautifully talks about building that integrated identity that the work they're doing in school and out of school, it's all contributing toward their development, and they should be able to share evidence from any part of their life in that.

Ron Berger: [00:44:09](#) The bigger way that we do a porousness in school and outside of school work and community power is that a book I wasn't speaking about, the book Learning That Lasts is our vision of instruction, and our vision of instruction is that the teacher is no longer the expert. The teacher is the facilitator of in her classroom, but the experts tend to be in the community. And so, whatever it is you're studying, you're reaching out beyond your walls of your school to bring in and bring out... Yeah, exactly, the Learning That Lasts book there is about how do you engage students and empower them with a much more deeper sense of instruction? And that takes bringing them out of the school building to interview people, to do research, to meet with people in their community who are doing the real work, and bringing those community people in to the school.

Ron Berger: [00:45:05](#) I'll just share a very particular example. We have a school in New London, Connecticut where many of the students are immigrants or refugees themselves. And so, they took on a study of immigration in America, which is a typical topic that students will study as an academic history topic, but they took it on with a very different lens, which is our entire city is filled with immigrants and refugees. We need to know them and tell their stories. So they went out into the community and worked with organizations that support immigrants and refugees. They worked with lawyers who supported immigrants and refugees and they met immigrants and refugees from all over the city, from different countries, different parts of the world, and



interviewed them to create a photo exhibit, and a book that celebrated their courage and their lives. Over the course of this project they became emotionally attached, and learned so much from all these people in their community that they built an exhibit that traveled around the state.

Ron Berger: [00:46:15](#) They ended up at the state house. They publish this book honoring the immigrants and refugees. All the proceeds from the book go to legal expenses for getting green cards for immigrants and refugees. So far, six people have already gotten green cards based on the legal expenses of the profits of the book that the students themselves wrote. So, our idea is the experts for what you're studying are all around the outside of your school and you can tap into them so that the teacher does not have to be the expert on everything. He or she just has to be the person who helps students make those connections to the amazing people in your community who can build that with you.

Karen Pittman: [00:46:58](#) Wonderful examples. I mean, I've got many thoughts at the moment, so I'm going to try to collect a couple. I'm going to turn to Ian to make sure we're covering all the questions that are coming in various ways. Anything we should take this pause to cover? I think we've talked... I'm looking at the questions. I think we've talked some about structuring the staff schedules and you have said it's doable but difficult.

Ron Berger: [00:47:25](#) Yes.

Karen Pittman: [00:47:28](#) Again, I think that's one of the key things that we're going to have to tackle, and and have concrete examples of both as we're broadening the idea of the adults in the school and connected to the school, and then also brought in the idea of pulling in adults from other organizations in the community who need to have this shared understanding of how to do this work. Your example, I think your commitment to getting all of the adults in the school, if we could have more schools even tackling that, the journey to then add in the adults who are working part time or on different schedules in community programs gets easier because they've already tackled some of these logistics that feel very hard when we just are working with schools who think they're doing professional development for classroom teachers, and are then trying to figure out how to juggle schedules, and roles with folks in the community who are often more part time and on different schedules. So I think that's one thing with the goal of sort of getting this to be organic.

- Karen Pittman: [00:48:38](#) Another question is whether students are included in exploring issues to help with collaborative mindset change. And it seems to me that a lot of what you just talked about in some of these past examples are really about changing the entire mindset of the schools, starting with the adults and then clearly with the students. But talk a little bit, and I know we're getting close on time. Talk a little bit for folks who are on the call listening with us who are already invested in using some of the more traditional curriculum or programs that are focused on growth mindset or skill building in various ways. How should they start to navigate thinking about moving into this more adult focused transformational model if they started in one of those more specific structured places focused on professional development or on bringing in specific programming for students.
- Ron Berger: [00:49:47](#) Great, Karen, a lot to cover here, and I'll try to hit some of the questions that came in on the chat. Maybe one way to hit a number of these questions is to talk about the book I'm working on now with my team is a book on a culture instruction we call crew, and when we use the word crew in EL, we're talking about a mindset, a culture of everyone in the building, adults and kids working together for a common mission to do good for others. We're also talking about a structure. So, in all of our schools, students get together every day in a circle to talk about how they're doing academically, how they're doing personally, and the challenges they have, and the strengths that they have. And it's basically a support group or a high accountability group for every kid pretty much every day.
- Ron Berger: [00:50:46](#) We do that pre-K to 12 so we actually have to structure secondary schools so they have what many people would call an advisory period every single day for a full period. And when someone asks what if you struggle in math, and how do you get to the top of the mountain? When I was a student in high school, kids that struggled in math were on their own, basically. They struggled in the back of the class and they might get extra help from the teacher, but it was none of my business if my classmates were struggling with quadratic equations. In contrast, our students sit together for 45 minutes or whatever every single day and they talk about how they're doing in each of their classes. And if kids are struggling in math, it's the teamwork idea of how do we help you if you're struggling with quadratic equation? It's like, how do we help you with getting the tutoring your need? We can work with you now. How do we... It's everybody's responsibility to make sure kids are doing well.

- Ron Berger: [00:51:44](#) Restorative justice was another one of those questions, and restorative justice is baked into the model. In fact, I was just finishing working on videos around our restorative justice practice, but restorative justice, often it happens, begins in those crew relationships where you're sitting in a circle and discussing the problems and issues that have come up and figuring out if kids have transgressed in some way. If they've made poor choices, what do we do? How do we bring them back? Get them out of their corner to a good place. And so, restorative justice is really built on relationships and we build those relationships explicitly every day in those crew meetings.
- Ron Berger: [00:52:24](#) Now, Karen, you asked about like how do you change adult culture? We have adult crew meetings. Adults circle up regularly to talk in a way that... I'll tell you my high school faculty when I was a kid never talked to each other like that. People just lived in their own departments and in their own worlds. In contrast, this fall I was in a large comprehensive high school that we work with in South Carolina that has over 2000 kids and every week the faculty gets together in crew meetings that are cross school. So there's a physical education teacher from ninth grade next to an English department chair next to a school custodian next to the school nurse next to a vice principal. Every week they get together in a circle and they talk about what are the issues they're seeing in students? What are the issues in their own lives? How are they doing? How are they supporting each other so that they can as adults what they're trying to help students model everyday in classes. So that they can be good crew leaders for their group of students.
- Ron Berger: [00:53:33](#) A lot of this is this like being honest about what we're struggling with and how we can support each other both as adults in the building and in students in [inaudible 00:53:43]. We tend to use the name crew for that, but you can call them advisories or support groups. Many youth development programs do the very same thing, circle up together to have honest and courageous conversations. And we just said we have to do it daily.
- Karen Pittman: [00:53:59](#) Again, once you get this going and people understand that it's not about counting the minutes that are being devoted to a specific content, but it's really about developing the quality of these relationships and conversations that unleashes this collective power. It is a transformation. And I think part of what's so exciting in listening to you, a couple of months ago we had Pam Cantor talking about the turnaround for children in the schools that they work with. It is a very different way to do it. It's a way that essentially says you have to change the whole thing. And it takes time, but we have to have our eyes on really

changing the entire culture from adults to young people. As you said, it's not for everybody. Folks have to be ready to do this.

Karen Pittman: [00:55:03](#) Two questions and I'll let you answer them together or in whatever way make sense. One is, you've talked about schools and doing this with schools, you haven't talked about districts. At what point are the things you're asking schools to do, do they butt into things that the district is challenging them that may go in the other direction? So, that's one question. And then the second question is, I know that you're a part of the BELE Network, the Building Equitable Learning Environments Network with other organizations and schools that are working towards this broader transformation process. And just if there's any reflections that you've had from working with other leaders that have this transformative vision of schools. So, I'll leave you with those two questions and then we'll turn it over to Ian.

Ron Berger: [00:55:58](#) Sure. Well, I want to acknowledge that in the chat box, Sarah put out just like this is hard. It's not working where I am, and it's super difficult and I just want to acknowledge this is incredibly humbling work. I'm sure Sarah that is true for your school. It's true in so many of the schools where we work and we don't always succeed in turning around a school culture, and there's a change in leadership either at the school level or district level sometimes so much of our hard work just evaporates. So I want to acknowledge this is forever humbling work. We learned a great deal from from the BELE work, Karen, because we focused exactly on this structure of crew as our BELE project and got lots of help from other organizations about ideally Crew as an engine of equity for every student.

Ron Berger: [00:56:49](#) But is it really working in that way? And we surveyed and worked with a lot of our schools and through student data and teacher data, but mostly to student data we found numbers of schools where subsets of students did not feel they belonged once we were not tracking. Often they were students who were not gender identified as male or female. Many more than we or the school leaders realized who felt really left out in school. So, it just opened our mind to a lot of being inclusive takes really reaching out to more and more people to find out, always being... entering this work with humility and really reaching out to find out who's feeling included and who is not. That applies to staff too. Who on the staff is feeling included and valued and whose voice is not?

Ron Berger: [00:57:42](#) I feel like if we can't walk the talk ourselves and feel like everyone in our organizations, everyone on our staffs has the ability to have a voice and feel valued and feel respected. We

can then with integrity say that's the way our organization is going to run for kids. That we're going to model that everybody is treated respectfully and gets their voice heard and that otherwise we can't really build an environment for young people unless we can model it ourselves. That shows that kind of equity and courage. So, we just have to be the models for it, which means hard conversations among our own staffs.

Karen Pittman:

[00:58:29](#)

Great words to end with. Again, Ron, I appreciate you reaching out to Sarah who's been commenting to say that it is incredibly hard and humbling work and it doesn't always work, but it is certainly worth trying. I mean, you left us with two more slides. One just reminding us and I'll let you sort of end on these last words of the importance of us having these big goals of making sure that young people are challenged and empowered and engaged, and then a slide on resources. But before we end with the slide on making sure people have resources, know how to go for resources, we'll certainly reinforce, there was a question earlier. Yes, this full thing is being recorded and there'll be a transcript of it as well because it was an incredibly rich conversation. Any last words around this last slide, Ron, before we turn it over to Ian?

Ron Berger:

[00:59:28](#)

Well, I would just say my last slide actually is just a link to our resources and I would say everything, other than our books of course, because we can't give them away. Everything we've created is free and open to the public to use to any educators or youth workers anywhere. Anyone who's doing youth development work, and we also have this collection that I'm so proud of, of beautiful work created by kids always in service of contribution to their communities. It's almost always community connected work, and so it's beautiful projects created by kids to contribute to their communities. We would love for you to, anyone on this call to submit work to the website itself. The curation team will look at it. We'd love to highlight work from your setting, your schools, your programs because we're just trying to share it in a freeway. Beautiful models of work with people that work with youth every anywhere in the world.

Karen Pittman:

[01:00:27](#)

Wonderful. Thanks so much Ron. Ron, I know that we've run out of time. We may come back again in a part two perhaps with another colleague and dig into several of the questions around how do you get this up at the district level, but this has been an incredibly rich conversation as you can see from the comments. So, Ron, thank you so much for your time and Ian last words.

Ian Faigley: [01:00:53](#) Well, thank you Karen and thank you very much Ron for your time this afternoon and very thoughtful remarks. Just want to let everyone know that we have our Ready By 21 ninth annual Ready By 21 national meeting coming up in Louisville, Kentucky, and that's scheduled from April 15th to the 17th. More information is available on our website [forumfyi.org](http://forumfyi.org), and just wanted to let everybody know that the early bird discount pricing is available through this Friday. So, if you want to save \$75 please go ahead and register today. So, thank you very much, Ron. Thank you very much, Karen, and have a wonderful afternoon.

Karen Pittman: [01:01:33](#) Thank you.

Ron Berger: [01:01:33](#) Thank you, Karen. Thank you, Ian.