

Rising to the Challenge Part 1: The Readiness Projects Goals

April 15, 2020

Merita Irby ([00:01](#)):

Good afternoon or good morning. We are delighted to have you joining us for this first official Readiness Project event. I know we had hoped to many of us be together today in Louisville for the kickoff of the Ready by 21 National Meeting and I must say I'm just smiling as I look at the chat box and see how many of us are coming together now. It's always like a family reunion and I feel like we're doing a little bit of a family reunion here in a virtual space.

Merita Irby ([00:28](#)):

Many of you we were able to spend time with together back in November in Pittsburgh where we introduced the ideas of the Readiness Projects. It was just as we were beginning to get some funding to be able to do this work together. That was a lot of a volunteer and shareware kind of event with all of you that were involved, but we used that meeting to really gauge interest in working together and thinking about how do we leverage science findings from a lot of the recent consensus building efforts, the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, the Science of Learning and Development Alliance, the recent problems of adolescence report and others that are really having people think about how to change the narrative around where, when, how, and why and with whom we need to invest to ensure that each and every young person really realizes their potential to thrive.

Merita Irby ([01:18](#)):

How do we make sure that this happens and how do we work together? Themes from that meeting and subsequent discussions with many of you really reinforce this idea that we've posed there of what are some things that we can do together that really help to advance kind of stick-here narratives about how science and research on learning and development happen. How they can be used to really advance equity and thriving. How we really amplify the voices of youth and community leaders and ask how a more robust approach to equity and thriving can support and refine their agendas? How do we get a deeper understanding of the essential role of all adults in all settings, when, where and with whom learning happens and really prioritize efforts to recognize and act upon their perspectives. And then this is one that came up in that meeting. I'm going to add it as a fourth was how do we articulate the need to advance this idea of a thriving youth field? Kind of similar to what we have in early childhood, but something that really is working to align work within and across systems.

Merita Irby ([02:25](#)):

As we've talked with you and really been thinking about how to spark those kinds of connections and unleash energy, we've made these the project priorities for the Readiness Projects. We know that we're putting out some pretty bold statements and we don't think you'll be surprised if you know how the form is and how we like to do business. Here's what we're thinking about. How can we dramatically change the odds for children and youth if we commit to upend inequities, embrace science-informed strategies and work together to really accelerate progress. Changing the odds for all young people

rather than just helping individual young people beat the odds, that's long been our clarion call and the work that we've all done together with you over the years. How do you really align across this work and how do you do it in a way that really starts with young people at the center as a way to help people understand the need for that whole chunk, kind of whole community approach that really builds those bridges in the work and puts young people at the center, not systems at the center.

Merita Irby ([03:29](#)):

As we start this work together and really trying to support the work that you're doing, also probably no surprise, we had to reach out to some partners to be able to do it. Our coordinating partners in this work are the National Urban League and the American Institutes for Research and we have partners with us here this morning to help tee up the conversation that we hope to have with you today. In today's conversation, we will be doing this and in some short segments and so we're starting with our conversation with the Readiness Project partners moving into a focus on relationships and why they really matter. And then having a conversation about especially given these times, the conversations folks are having of what does summer look like in a year like this. And so we'll be having that conversation and then doing a wrap-up with a number of our partners that have been really having ear to the ground in the policy space and helping us think about what are some of the actions we need to be taking near-term and longer term to really make a difference.

Merita Irby ([04:25](#)):

I am going to ask my friends from the National Urban League and American Institutes for Research to join and I think Hal is going to be up first. Hal is the EVP for Education, Youth Development and Health for National Urban League. He's been leading a small but mighty team there that keeps their feet on the ground and their eyes on the bigger prizes. You were an active participant, Hal, on the SEAD Commission, co-chairing the Equity Working Group. You're actively now working as an advisor with the SoLD Alliance and you've had a long standing commitment to staff and support the table of equity and social justice organizations and work in partnership and all of those efforts. You have an extraordinarily full plate. I know the hours that you keep.

Merita Irby ([05:10](#)):

With everything else on your plate, why did you think it was important to add this partnership and be a part of this coordinating team for the Readiness Projects? How is this really helping you think about and accelerate the work that you think is most important right now?

Hal Smith ([05:25](#)):

Thanks Merita. I mean, I think it's fairly clear to everyone at the National Urban League and with all of our affiliates across the affiliate movement that what we are, are not just civil rights advocates, equity advocates, but we also deliver programs. And in the delivery of those programs, in our equity work, in the work that we do across other areas such as workforce development and health, we're very clear that we need to work comprehensively and the Readiness Project us is exactly that. It's the opportunity to tie together the science, what we know, what has been proven with some of the things that we know from our practice. And we're very clear that while not everything is going to be gold standard research, that there are things that we learned in our programs that most of the folks here on this call also recognize in their programs as things that work, things are impactful for our communities.

Hal Smith ([06:28](#)):

And we see this as an opportunity to blend our practice work, our policy work, our equity work all together with the real clear sense that we can do more to bring about a more robust equity by focusing on all three things simultaneously. And by inviting in conversations that focus on solutions and not just analysis. The analysis is very, very important, but we want to make sure that there are opportunities for young people that cut across funding lines, that cut across what might be a traditional sector after school versus workforce development for summer youth employment. These are all opportunities for the folks on this call and the folks who work in the sector to really think about our work in a different fashion, perhaps a fashion that allows us into the education conversation.

Hal Smith ([07:27](#)):

So for the National Urban League and many of you would imagine, education is not the same thing as school. So teaching and learning wherever it takes place is what we're focused on, including the adult learning, the people that work most closely with young people. The kinds of things we need to do to help prepare those workers. The kinds of things we need to do to support them in process, in addition to the things that we need to do with and alongside young people to build their agency, they're thriving. And that we alone are in this sector focused on these kinds of things that can work comprehensively and across these lines, mostly artificial lines in order to accomplish our work.

Hal Smith ([08:17](#)):

The last thing I'll say is we are all spending our time focused on the problems, right? The inequities that affect us now and that have been exacerbated exponentially during this time. However, we mustn't lose sight of the persistent inequities that have remained for decades, unremarked upon and seemingly unremarkable but devastating in that they have most clearly been understood as part of the normal that we seek to get back to. So there are certain pressure points that have emerged and become starkly clear during this time of the pandemic, but there are underlying things that we believe the Readiness Project can help us address that have been a part of the normal of the status quo that we'd like to upend, challenge and bring about additional quality, equity and thriving in our work.

Merita Irby ([09:13](#)):

And if there's ever a time to think about how to upend things now, it's bringing this into such stark relief that we are so glad to be in partnership together with you. I know you were talking about the kind of connections across all of your work in the visual that we have up on the screen right now in terms of that kind of broader ecosystem and really all the places that young people kind of need to navigate in their daily lives. But that piece I've heard you talk about so much is that it really does have to start with a focus on the young people and on the families and communities as the center of this work.

Merita Irby ([09:56](#)):

I'm wondering, as we bring David on, if David, you can talk to us also about how your work is sort of bridging across these different areas and why you think this is essential for the work there that you do at American Institutes for Research? I know that you have been connected for years to this work. I'm not going to call out how long and you've authored some incredible pieces that have really helped us all think differently about how to keep young people at the center. I also know that you're having some technical challenges today and so you're joining us via phone and we're going to see if we can hear you clearly and well. Right now, your colleague [Deborah 00:10:42] is ready to step in if we have a challenge but welcome David. And if you could speak to the other version of that four quadrants view that we had there just a moment ago.

David Osher ([10:55](#)):

I will be happy to. So I hope I'm being heard right now. I am really so excited to be with everybody and to work with the forum and with the National Urban League. I just echo the things that we've heard already and I do so in part because of the fact that, though I would have used different words at different times, my whole life career has been about robust thriving and robust equity and how that can openly contribute to transformative learning and [inaudible 00:11:27] I've actually worked alone but with my AIR colleagues and of course all four of those quadrants from... Let me just give you an example.

David Osher ([11:39](#)):

If we start on the left with education, I had the good fortune with a lot of people to lead national centers including national [inaudible 00:11:48] environments. In terms of if we go down to safety and those who are not necessarily made safe by how we treat them, that I lead centers and do research and work regarding young people who are both in the child welfare system and in the juvenile justice system. And if we go between safety and basic service, so in the green, I've lead centers and we are still doing lots of work in communities that relate to issues of children in youth mental health and transitions, opportunity youth and dealing with issues of trauma. That if I go up to, again, between green and we're now up to the yellow that I've had the really good fortune of working with families in the youth and justice organizations regarding the pipeline to prison. And a lot of this work comes together at AIR, is to put the [inaudible 00:12:53] programs.

David Osher ([12:53](#)):

And when I'm so thrilled to work with Deb and her colleagues because of the fact that they really are doing work in the out of school space that I used to work in and it's so important to me. And we're poised to synthesize [inaudible 00:13:10] of the SoLD learnings and other work so that it can be used in out of school time and also in all the other systems. And what I know is one of the persons who had the good fortune of synthesizing a lot of the work is whenever people apply work in their own context and practice, we learn new things and it has to be adapted. So that our job is not just putting things out but to help translate in ways that work for people and at the same time learn more from [inaudible 00:13:48] said the nature of the work [inaudible 00:13:52] by people and then SoLD is about whole young people being supported by whole adult who [inaudible 00:14:00] house that they are not necessarily in, as we know who are part of a world that we're interdependent with. So thank you for letting us participate with you.

Merita Irby ([14:11](#)):

Thank you David and I think I made out at the end. It started to get a little choppy to the end there but it's about whole children, whole people, whole communities and it really is at the center of this work.

David Osher ([14:20](#)):

You got it.

Merita Irby ([14:20](#)):

I'm going to ask Karen Pittman, Co-Founder of the Forum for Youth Investment to chime in and say why the forum continued work to get this group of folks together.

Karen Pittman ([14:36](#)):

Great. Thanks Merita and I will be brief. I think the folks on the phone that know the forum know our commitment to Readiness. We've been having the Ready by 21 National Meeting, which unfortunately we're not together at this year, and have talked about the importance of moving from completeness to readiness, moving from a quality to equity, moving from access to quality. I think the Readiness Projects and the wonderful work that we've been doing in partnership with Hal at the National Urban League and his team with David and Deb and their team through both the SEAD work and now the SoLD Alliance has really helped us understand that we have to actually take things further to talk about thriving, to talk about robust equity. And come back to really push on this definition of equity, not as a compartmentalized definition, but one that really cuts across all the domains in which young people and adults spend their time. And then to really double-down on what we mean by learning and development.

Karen Pittman ([15:43](#)):

So if we can go to that next slide. I want to play with those. When we were with the Commission, our focus was really to push in on this idea of where and when learning happens. And I think we were successful, thanks to a lot of you all on this call, at really getting that idea across that we have to think about all adults in all settings, that the sciences compelling us to have a fuller view of the contexts in which young people spend their time and the power of the relationships that they have with those adults in those contexts and with young adults and peers in those contexts. So we were really fortunate to sort of begin to broaden that conversation to talk about not just how learning happens, but where and when learning happens.

Karen Pittman ([16:26](#)):

But now as we move on to really sort of think about what we can do to upend inequity as a part of this Readiness Projects working with our coordinating partners, we're really pushing on this idea of learning and equity and thriving and how it connects. So let's take a second to just think about how they connect. We can go to the next slide.

Karen Pittman ([16:47](#)):

We've got this idea of not just learning but transformative learning. And I know a lot of the folks on the phone, Castle and others are really pushing us beyond how do we talk about making sure young people have social-emotional skills and competencies, to how do we make sure that they're using and understand the importance of having those skills and competencies as their way of actually enabling themselves to get towards thriving, to get towards an integrated identity. As Camille Farrington talks about, to get towards this full sense of agency. So as we're bringing in this concept and these ideas about learning and development, we want to make sure that we're pushing us towards a definition of learning that really is youth-centered and youth-empowered.

Karen Pittman ([17:30](#)):

The same is also true on that equity side. We often talked about educational equity or race equity or economic equity. All of those domains are critical for thriving. And so what we see is we have these enablers that need to be kicked in. When we help young people really become sort of full agents of their own learning, we're really helping them move their individual enablers towards being thriving youth. When we help really at the broad societal level, address these huge drivers of inequity across our systems, we're also clearing the path for young people to move towards thriving. Other things being equal. But the place where we have an opportunity to dig in because of the Science of Learning and

Development, the Science of Adolescence is to actually connect the two, the connect robust equity to transformative learning by making sure that the settings where young people spend their time are really vibrant, important, supportive, and we're going to go on to talk about that for the rest of the session.

Karen Pittman ([18:33](#)):

So we've been working with and had the fortune of working now with the SoLD Alliance and in particular with Turnaround for Children. And so this idea of what optimal learning looks like is so important. And those of you who've heard of any of us over the past year have heard about the Blue Wheel. And so we're going to go right into this idea of what does it take to optimize learning and development. And if we can get the Blue Wheel up on the slide, we see that the idea is that we have to start with positive developmental relationships. That's really where the game changer is. We start there, then we make sure that the environments are filled with safety and belonging and we check in with young people to make sure that they feel safe and their belonging because that's not always an assumption. We add in integrated supports, then we move on through to make sure that we're helping them develop these skills, critical skills, mindsets and habits through the insertion of rich and structural experiences of all kinds.

Karen Pittman ([19:35](#)):

And so, what's really been useful in the year plus since the SEAD Commission, is being a part of a context of folks who are really helping us understand that while focusing in on social and emotional learning and social and emotional skill building is critically important and is especially important to making sure that's integrated into academics of the schools, we have to double-down on this idea of starting with relationships. That these are the non-negotiables and that if the settings where young people spend their time aren't really sort of in the green or in the blue, in this case in all of these places, will have a challenge.