

## The Urgency of Educational Equity Now: A Conversation with John King and Karen Pittman

May 29, 2020

### Interactive Transcript

Karen Niemi ([00:00](#)):

Thank you, everyone, for joining today's conversation. Every week, we try to bring you topics that are relevant and timely for the current moment. We're trying to stimulate and expand participation and conversations bringing leaders who can offer insights and guidance as we navigate issues of social and emotional learning that were relevant before COVID and even more apparent now. Before COVID hit, and certainly, before the events of this past week, we've been prioritizing research and practice around issues of equity in our learning environments and promoting healthy development because we believe that social and emotional learning can serve as a powerful lever for equity and excellence.

Karen Niemi ([00:49](#)):

The absolutely horrific tragic consequences of systemic racism are yet, again, on display from Minneapolis to Central Park and in the data demonstrating the outrageous inequities and the resilience of our communities. It's hard to articulate and even process the horror of it all, and personally, I'm struggling, really, to find the right words. I'm sure that I'm not alone in feeling heartbroken, and I'm also sure that I'm not alone in feeling the extraordinary sense of urgency to contribute and to help make things better.

Karen Niemi ([01:34](#)):

This perfect storm of inequity demonstrates that our nation will not stand united if its citizens don't feel equally valued, and the fact is, many, many, many people are not feeling valued. They don't feel seen. They don't feel heard pretty much across the nation. The question now is how do we ensure that everyone, every one of us understands equity as the bedrock of our individual and our collective aspirations? That is a question that social-emotional learning and many related efforts are striving to answer.

Karen Niemi ([02:19](#)):

I believe that things can change. Things can change. We, as a nation, have the knowledge, we have the capacity, we have the tools to create systems that can foster mutual respect and empathy and perspective taking, collaborative problem solving, and yes, agency and yes, self-expression and courage and love. When we talk about systems, we often act as if they are inanimate and separate from our own intentions.

Karen Niemi ([02:54](#)):

I just want to remind us all that our systems are who we are. We built them, and only we can rebuild them to reflect the world that we want to see, but do we have the will? The outcry across the country right now tells me that we do have the will. Now is the ideal moment to invest in the spaces and the places where our youth, where our children are engaged, where they learn and where they grow in school, in families, and in a range of out- of-school and community settings so that we can equip them with what they need to help create a more just and a more harmonious world.

Karen Niemi ([03:40](#)):

What could be more important at this time? I'm not sure I can think of anything. Today's discussion really could not be more timely, the urgency of equity. It is truly my honor to introduce you to two great thinkers, two great leaders, and two truly good people who've dedicated their careers to help better the lives and the opportunities for youth. Karen and John, please join me on the screen.

Karen Niemi ([04:14](#)):

Neither one of them really require much of an introduction. Let me start with Karen. Many of you know Karen Pittman as the founder and CEO and the president of The Forum For Youth Investment. The Forum For Youth Investment is a national action tank committed to changing the odds that all children and youth are ready for college, for work, and for life. In addition, Karen is associated with a bunch of really important things. She was a former commissioner of the SEA Commission, a principal partner for the SoLD Initiative, and the co-creator of The Readiness Projects with AIR and Urban League. She's also authored many articles and videos and books on positive development.

Karen Niemi ([05:09](#)):

Now, John King. John King is the president and the CEO of The Education Trust. While he currently is leading the national nonprofit that's used to identify and close opportunity and achievement gaps preschool through college, he previously served as the United States Secretary of Education for President Obama. While you may have known all of that, you might not have known that he began his career as a high school social studies teacher in Puerto Rico and in Boston as a middle school principal. I could go on and on about both of these exceptional leaders, but I do want to reserve the time for this important conversation. Without further delay, I'm going to go off camera and turn it over to Karen and John.

Speaker 1 ([05:58](#)):

It sounds like we're having a little bit of feedback. Let's see if that resolves. So sorry to delay the conversation. All right, let's go ahead and start and see how that goes.

Karen Pittman ([06:17](#)):

Great.

John King ([06:19](#)):

Great. Well, thank you-

Karen Pittman ([06:20](#)):

[crosstalk 00:06:20].

John King ([06:20](#)):

... and Karen, I'm excited to have this conversation. I'd love to dive right in by hearing your reflections on this moment and the equity implications of this COVID-19 moment and the current moment in the country.

Karen Pittman ([06:40](#)):

Well, first, I want to thank Karen Niemi for kicking us off by putting us in the immediate context of the horrific things that have been happening this week, which unfortunately, don't surprise us anymore, but they sadden us to a point that it's challenging to have these conversations and stay optimistic, but we will, at least for the next hour.

Karen Pittman ([07:12](#)):

I just rushed... The Readiness Projects is a new initiative that we've set up with the National Urban League and the American Institutes of Research, as Karen said, really coming out of the fact that all of us and many of us have been participating in this slow wave of acknowledgement that we have... that learning is social and emotional and that we have to, in our schools and in our youth organizations and in our communities, be much more cognizant of not just the need for young people to build the social-emotional skills and competencies that they need to thrive, but also the reality that the experiences that they are having have a social and emotional toll on them, especially in times like this.

Karen Pittman ([08:04](#)):

I would start by saying one of the things that we are probably doing right now at The Forum is posting a blog that the coordinating partners just wrote on summer period, learning period, loss period, and leadership to really try to pull those important words apart and not run them all together into jargon. Even as we posted that, it just occurred to me that we had to add a little preamble as we put the post up to really acknowledge the fact that our young people are learning and losing so much because of active racism in this country, that if we don't bring that reality and that conversation into our reopening plans, we're going to miss the boat.

Karen Pittman ([09:06](#)):

We can talk about academic learning loss, but we have to really acknowledge that young people, and especially young people of color, are absolutely aware of and learning incredible things about their communities, about their countries, about their police departments, about their neighbors, about what it takes as a country who stands up and who doesn't. If we come back and we start to talk about social and emotional skill building and academic growth, but we do it without the knowledge and [inaudible 00:09:46] without acknowledging the reality is that young people can't help but have seen, we're going to be so false in our commitment to education that I fear we will lose some young people who are already questioning whether coming back to school makes sense for them because of the... not just because of the time, but because of the extent of disconnection and disruption.

Karen Pittman ([10:13](#)):

On a more optimistic note, I'm encouraged by the fact that the conversations about the importance of relationships, the importance of trying to take time to at least temporarily have strike a balance between acknowledging and responding to the real deficits that have happened and have happened up unevenly because young people have not been in school, but to also acknowledge that when schools are running well, they are more than places for academic learning, they are communities, and that when schools shut down, that people's sense of community shut down, and a whole host of relationships and routines and realities, whether those are sports or clubs or things shut down, and all of those have to be rebuilt.

Karen Pittman ([11:08](#)):

I'm both optimistic that we're seeing those conversations happen, I'm deeply depressed, I don't know any other word to use, about the fact that we're coming back and that young people are now going to have to struggle through more months of essentially being afraid and carrying phones as protection so that you can document what may be happening to you. I also am optimistic because, as you know, John, I spent a lot of my time working with community organizations and youth organizations that have those relationships with young people and their families and did not go into a massive shutdown and are really working hard to not have summer be a dead space, but to have some of the... a place where young people really are continuing to learn while they are acknowledging the losses that they and their families have had in lots of ways.

Karen Pittman ([12:11](#)):

Good news, bad news, and just for me a hope that when we come back into this... I know we're going into a place where everyone is doing reopening plans, and I hope that we can figure out how to do those plans in a way that we're looking ahead toward a very different reality, a positive one in which we can really reimagine schools as owned by communities.

John King ([12:41](#)):

One of the things that your comments raised for me is that so often in the conversation about socioemotional learning that conversation focuses on what skills to pour into kids as opposed to a broader analysis of context in which kids are growing up and developing socially, emotionally, and academically. I think this is a moment that reminds us both around COVID-19 and around the issues of police violence and race that we are grappling with as a country that we've got to ask, "What are we doing at the system level to support kids? What is the climate that we're creating at the community level, at the school level, at the classroom level that either supports or undermines their socioemotional development?"

John King ([13:40](#)):

I think about when I was, and I'm thinking a lot this week about when I was secretary, I went to Saint Paul, Minnesota to the school where Philando Castile worked in the cafeteria. Philando was killed by police in an incident in Falcon Heights, Minnesota. He worked in the cafeteria in a Montessori School in Saint Paul, Minnesota. I went to convey my sadness about the loss of Philando's life, to convey the President and President Obama's sadness about the loss of Philando's life, and to try to mourn with the community and to heal with the community.

John King ([14:27](#)):

I've been thinking a lot this week about that visit. I remember going to the school and having a meeting with staff and parents, folks who'd worked with Philando Castile. Kids called him Mr. Phil. He was very popular with the kids. He was very engaged with them, and he thought about his job as being a part of this educational community. I was shocked in the conversation by a few things... A very diverse school... that for many of the white parents in the community-

John King ([15:02](#)):

Many of the white parents in the community may not necessarily thought a lot about the interactions between the police and people of color in the community. And there were a lot of folks who were surprised by what happened to Philando, but also surprised to learn that he'd been stopped by police I think upwards of 30 times, often for a trivial reasons, pretextual reasons. They were surprised to hear

from some of his African American colleagues about their experiences with the police. I remember one of the folks who worked at the school, a white woman, talked about how she'd never really interacted with police her entire life until she started dating the man who would become her husband, who was African American. And then she interacted with the police a lot because of how frequently he was stopped.

John King ([15:59](#)):

And we're talking about how race operates in a community that thought of itself as progressive. I think the Twin Cities would think of themselves as progressive and as a place that cares about equality, but there are these simmering tensions around race. And as we left the conversation, one of the parents stopped me and said, a white parent said, "I think for my kids, their experience of talking about race is that things were bad. Martin Luther King came and then everything was better." And his parents said, "That's wrong. That's not true. And the issues are more complex and they're more present. And I want school and our family to help my child understand that." And so, as I think about this moment and what social emotional learning requires to do it well, one has to integrate and center issues of racial equity and talk about how these issues effect the life in the community, life in the school.

John King ([17:11](#)):

We have to talk about racial disparities and discipline. We have to talk about racial disparities in our criminal justice system. We have to talk about the racial disparities in healthcare that we're seeing in the COVID-19 era, where you've got 30% of the folks in Chicago are African American, but 70% of the people dying from COVID-19 are African American. But like how we approach SEL has to be with a social justice brain. So I just so appreciate your broadening the vision for SEL in I think a really powerful way. When you think about what folks need to do to prepare for next school year or even community based organizations that are supporting young people over this summer, what kinds of questions should they be thinking about?

Karen Pittman ([18:01](#)):

That's a great question. And we have been thinking about it a lot. I want to pick up on what you've just said in the litany of disparities that we know exist across every life domain. And the fact that our schools are the central systems that we have charged with the commitment that young people can thrive. But our schools are not equipping young people to have the conversation that you just had. It shouldn't just be that the adults are the folks who are looking at these disparities. It should be that a critical part of our curriculum is equipping our young people to look at these disparities.

Karen Pittman ([18:58](#)):

So there's no secret here. David [inaudible 00:19:03] talks about robust equity and he's one of our AR partners. And he's very passionate about the fact that if every system defines equity as striving towards equal outcomes, just in the things that they're accountable for, we're never going to get there because when that young person comes into school or comes into a community organization, or it comes into a health clinic or shows up in the juvenile justice system, they've had experiences in all of these domains.

Karen Pittman ([19:36](#)):

And if they are young people of color, they have likely may in their families have experienced disparities and prejudice in all of these domains. And so it's not enough for us to just say we're going to figure out equitable ways to deliver academic content to you. And we're going to figure out ways to make sure

you're building the social emotional skills and competence skills that you need. We have to come back and define knowledge for being a citizen as knowledge of those disparities, and to find that not just for the kids of color, but for all kids, as that parent in St. Paul said. When you have things like facing history as ourselves as a curriculum that's introducing the idea of social justice, then social emotional competence takes on a different meaning. And I think that's the thing that we have to tackle head on.

Karen Pittman ([20:32](#)):

As we're dealing with COVID and now we're dealing with COVID in the reality of inequities that have been defined as digital, we're overlaying now these long standing inequities that are just associated with racism. We've got to figure out how to not blend together the importance of working on social emotional competency building, which is called SEL. The importance of helping people recognize and deal with trauma and adversity, which many of them have had. The importance of really bringing a social justice lens into our work and helping young people grapple with these ideas. And then the idea of really culturally responsive education. All of those have slightly different meanings. Sometimes we run them all together. If there was ever a time to get very clear about what each of those means and how we really shape not just how we teach, what we teach to young people, this is the time. When the system has been disrupted, it's also the time to go back to your story. It's also the time to acknowledge that half of the people in schools are not classroom teachers. They are the bus drivers, the janitors, the counselors, the cafeteria workers, and librarians, the building administrators, etcetera. And often those people are more likely to look like the kids. They are more likely to be from the kids' communities. They got more than likely to have relationships with those kids. And they have more time to not teach social and emotional skills, but actually help young people practice them and apply them in ways that are useful. And the word that we haven't said yet, they have relationships with our young people that are often the sticky reasons why they're coming to school, why they think they're being seen, why they think they're being known. And that applies to black and brown kids, but it applies to all kids.

Karen Pittman ([22:52](#)):

So another thing that I hope we can do as we're really coming back to not just rebuild better is to also rebuild broader, to really acknowledge all of the adults, including those adults in the building who are not charged just with academics. And that does not mean that teachers don't build relationships and teachers don't care, but it does mean that if we're going to take the power of what we know from the science of learning and development and argue that all experiences matter, then all adults matter, that every experience is an opportunity for learning something and demonstrating something and making some relationship. And so we need to use all of those. If there's ever a time for us to do that, and then recognize the assets that are in the community that young people are already connected to.

Karen Pittman ([23:40](#)):

And then I know one of the questions that came in was we also, as we're having this conversation about rebuilding better and coming back broader, we have to have specific conversations about teenagers. In the youth world, I think we're more sensitive to talking about adolescents versus little kids, etcetera. We've got systems. This is a childcare. This is early childhood development. These are programs for teenagers and for young adults. And if we have a K-12 conversation which we really don't zoom in on both the different ways in which our adolescents have experienced loss, in terms of routines and rituals in their lives that they were looking forward to and the different ways that they can contribute and the stickiness of the relationships that they had with people in the building and people in the community, we're also going to lose a lot of them. So I think that we've got an opportunity to just get rid of some language that keeps us operating at superficial levels. So again, in the blog that just got posted, I would

like us to stop talking about learning loss, not because academic learning loss isn't something we have to handle, but because we need to define learning more broadly and we need to recognize loss more broadly.

Karen Pittman ([25:12](#)):

And we need to not assume that those... You can't have learned an enormous amount and also lost an enormous amount. So we need to take care of that. Also, just the idea of school and out of school, we just need to stop it. We've got adults who move into the building. We've got adults who live out of the building. We need to take this down to what the science tells us, which is a setting level and understand how we really maximize opportunities for learning in every setting where people spend their time, including cafeterias, including libraries, including the community, including youth organizations, and absolutely including their academic classes. So I would just say, and then I'm going to turn it back to you because I want to hear what you're hearing and how Ed Trust is helping us not set this up as a competition between academics and SEL.

Karen Pittman ([26:04](#)):

We're making slow progress, chipping away at talking about integrating social and emotional and cognitive into academic. But I've been on enough of these calls and chats that what I'm hearing is we may be able to stave off the concern about academic learning loss for a while, but then including parents, I was going to say, how are they going to recoup the months in which they weren't learning? And it's that kind of language, they weren't learning, that gives me pause. Because if we don't acknowledge what they were learning, we don't treat young people with the respect that we need to, to reengage them in academics, in which they frankly may not have been engaged in before COVID. So those are some thoughts, but I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about whether you're seeing this tension and how you think we can help school leaders balance this.

John King ([26:57](#)):

Yeah. When I think about sort of what school is, what school is supposed to be. I think about school really as defined by the relationships between teachers and students and the work in which they're engaged. And I think we have to be attentive to both. We have to be attentive to the relationships. And I worry, as you said, about particularly adolescents who maybe had an already fragile relationship with school. I worry that we're going to lose some kids. You know, we made tremendous progress over the last decade in terms of graduation rates from high school. But I'm worried we may lose ground because there are kids who may not come back or kids who may come back and find the adjustment to school, particularly with all the challenges the fall will bring, difficult and they may leave.

John King ([27:47](#)):

And so we have to be laser focused on relationships. I think about what the Phoenix Union High School district in Arizona is doing what their every student, every day campaign, where they have connected adults in the school district. And to your point, not just teachers and counselors, but every adult who works in the school district, including central office, including the superintendent himself, everybody is connected to an advisory, a student advisory. Everybody has a set of students they're supposed to be in regular touch with. And the goal they have is to contact every student every day, just to check in on them, how are they doing? What do they need? If they need food, if they need a wifi hotspot, if they need support academically. And then all that information is rolled out to central office so that they can help get supports to kids.



John King ([28:40](#)):

So that kind of intentionality about making sure kids are staying connected to school now I think is critical. I worry a lot about our high school seniors who are in a moment of transition have lost all the rituals of the normal senior year transition from prom to graduation. And I'm worried some of those young people were planning to go to college won't, that we'll see an uptick in summer melt. I'm worried that some of those young people have spent the last few months taking care of younger siblings and haven't really had support in thinking about their own next steps. I worry that some of those young people have had to take on jobs because of the economic situation in their family. So we've got to be in touch with kids. We've got to be helping our seniors with postsecondary planning. We've got to help our juniors think about postsecondary planning. And then in terms of as we move into the fall, if we're going to be talking about hybrid class experiences, those early efforts to build relationships between teachers and students to lay the foundation for next school year I think are ever more critical. Then this brings us back to the question of the work in which-

John King ([30:03](#)):

... Critical. Then this brings us back to the question of the work in which we're engaged. The work has to be good, school has to be good and compelling. And I think sadly, what we've seen across districts is real wide variation in what school has looked like for kids over the last few months. From really smooth transitions to online learning, with engaging activities, where kids are doing science experiments and projects, and doing research and collaborating with peers to other places where they still don't have device, or at least not a device that every child in the house can use to get their work done. Kids don't have WIFI access. Kids particularly in some of our high needs districts have not gotten very much instruction at all and teachers haven't gotten very much support or professional development around how to provide distance learning instruction.

John King ([30:54](#)):

So we have a lot of work to do, I think, to make sure that the learning is good, that that content of the teaching is strong. The students are developing the skills that you need to do asynchronous work well. I mean, some of the challenge I think we're seeing is that kids weren't necessarily learning pre COVID about goal setting, time management, asking questions when they need help, integrating feedback into their work, all the routines of project based learning or more independent learning. If those weren't established beforehand, very hard to create those, cultivate those overnight, as we shift to distance learning. So I think there's work we need to do on the intentionality of the instructional learning experience, as well as the intentionality of the relationship development.

John King ([31:47](#)):

And we need to be thinking about how we make up for what kids aren't getting in terms of sports, arts, theater. So many of the things that happen that require community, that are much more challenging in a world of physical distancing. And some folks have tried to be creative about doing that in an online space, but we need a lot more of that because we have to keep kids connected and engaged and passionate about school. So we have I think, a tall order in planning for next school year. And I worry a lot that because of the financial uncertainty, states and districts think about the impact of the COVID-19 economic crisis, but there's a bit of paralysis around planning for next year and we can't afford that. We have to have very thoughtful planning on both the relationship building side and the instructional side.

Karen Pittman ([32:40](#)):



I couldn't agree more. So I'm going to do a both hands and that is everything that you've said and I think we also have to see this as an opportunity, whether it's through the mayor's office, or the mayor's office has a children's cabinet, whether there's a coordinating body or council, there's a public private partnership. Again, if we go to this idea that multiple systems have been disrupted, multiple systems are going to face budget shortfalls, multiple systems are making hard decisions about what they should cut. If we don't, as health communities, have solid shared science informed visions and definitions of what learning should be, of what thriving looks like and what good learning environments look like and where you could find them and where in particular young people who can vote with their feet have already found them.

Karen Pittman ([33:45](#)):

We don't do that. We're going to do harm in multiple areas. We've got some cities that are saying we can't do summer employment, youth employment this year, sorry, that's gone. We're closing the rec department, sorry that's gone. Those kind of decisions are not just happening because of COVID, right? We're in a space in which the excuse for decision making is we have to be virtual. But the underlying challenge is that we don't appropriately value and equip in terms of professional development resources, et cetera. We don't appropriately value all of those spaces where the cognitive development that you were just talking about happens.

Karen Pittman ([34:31](#)):

And I do want to come back to, when you talk about young people need to have problem solving skills and time management skills and teamwork skills. When we say social and emotional, we need to say social, emotional and cognitive. All of those skills are the skills that are built, practiced, and strengthened when you are challenged with appropriately rigorous, relevant content of any kind. And that happens in lots of places and for a lot of kids that has not been school.

Karen Pittman ([35:02](#)):

So we've been in calls with organizations that are saying, we actually have teenagers who are thriving because in that month or so, when the schools closed and the youth organizations hadn't closed and they opened up and said, "Come in here," young people actually were doing better. They were saying, "This is a much better place for us to be, this is a place where we have relationships. This is a place where we actually feel that we belong and are respected. This is a place where you're asking us what we need to know. Yeah, I'm building skills, but something else is happening here. And I'd actually rather finish my learning here."

Karen Pittman ([35:45](#)):

And so we have to look at things like that and figure out how we make those connections. So, as we're doing this with all of the discussions that you just said, I guess my question is, how can we send a message quickly and clearly that there are community partners, and by that I mean organizations, from childcare to youth organizations, to social justice organizations like the urban league, to faith organizations, museums, rec departments, libraries.

Karen Pittman ([36:20](#)):

There are organizations that have people that have time, that have buildings, that have budgets, and that have a commitment to learning and development who need to be at the table so that as we sit down and really try to figure out what is going to be a long haul of reopening slowly with pods and split

schedules and all kinds of things, and young people who may have to take two weeks off to quarantine. We're going to need such a different approach to the traditional show up and sit in your seat. That we need all those partners at the table together and we need young people at the table telling us where they learn best and how they would like to learn and families.

Karen Pittman ([37:08](#)):

So it's an opportunity. We have disrupted so many things. We're either going to have all of those siloed organizations and systems making independent decisions, which I don't think we have to think very far to figure out that those decisions made independently are going to disproportionately have an impact on black and brown and poor kids. And so we're going to be having a bigger conversation about inequity. So what can we do? Really, what can we do? What can our organizations do? What can we do with castle? What can we do to light a fire under, we need to be having these conversations together now more than ever. And I don't mean that in a vague have a parent meeting. I mean bring the institutions that represent community to the table with schools in a way that we've never done before.

John King ([38:00](#)):

Yeah. Well, I think in many ways, what we need is a collective impact strategy that brings everyone around the table with the question of how do we make sure that every young person is supported and has opportunity? And that may mean different things for different young people, right? So it may be that there are some young people this summer for whom we want to set up summer jobs that are virtual, that are going to be engaging for them. But there are other young people who may be, this is the summer they get a jump start on college coursework. I think about Northern Virginia Community College that's offering free summer online community college courses for all juniors and seniors in their region, right? And so this could be, for some kids, maybe they're taking a coding class or an animation class. And for other kids, maybe they're mentoring younger students. Maybe they're running a virtual summer camp experience for younger students. And for other students, maybe they are working on projects on for their city parks department.

John King ([39:13](#)):

So there could be a range of experiences, but I think we've got to have a mindset where nonprofits, the faith community, schools, elected officials, hospitals, all the institutional players are at the table thinking about how we support our young people. We need to couple that with strategies in schools that are about identifying students' strengths and their needs. I think about the work that, there's an organization called Building Assets, Reducing Risks, which was one of our Investing in Innovation grantees during the Obama administration.

John King ([39:58](#)):

Building Assets, Reducing Risks was started by a school counselor, Angie Jerabek, who saw that there was real variation in her school in who graduated and who was prepared for opportunity after high school graduation. And it was low income students and students of color and immigrant students who were less likely to graduate, less likely to have great postsecondary opportunities. And so she's asked her superintendent, can I have folks meet in teams, teachers and counselors, about our students.

John King ([40:34](#)):

And what the team would do is two things. We'd figure out what are students really good at? What are their assets? What do they love? What are they passionate about? What are they excited about? Where

are they succeeding? Where are they thriving? So that we can build on that, and where are they struggling? What supports do they need? And how do we make sure that every student has a connection to an adult who can help them and guide them? And what they showed in randomized controlled trials first at the school level, then at the district level, and now they're operating in districts all across the country, is that that kind of intentional work, to identify a student's strengths and needs, could change outcomes. Better grades, better graduation rates.

John King ([41:17](#)):

And their tagline, I'm not going to remember it exactly, but something like same students, same teachers, different results. Emphasizing that it's about how we organize ourselves that can help determine student outcomes. So we need that kind of work in schools, alongside the community level collective impact work. And then we need some political work. And by that I mean, we got to make sure everybody fills out the census. If communities of color, if low income communities, if immigrant communities don't fill out census, they will get less resources. They will have less ability to get access to opportunity. So we've got to make sure everyone fills out the census.

John King ([42:02](#)):

If Mrs. Obama was here, she would say, "We've got to make sure everybody votes." She has an initiative called When We All Vote, which is about trying to make sure that young people register to vote, that we engage young people and helping to get other young people to register to vote, their parents, their neighbors, their community members. But we need folks to participate in our democracy if we want a stronger, more resilient, more equitable future for our economy, we need to strengthen our democracy. So we've got to operate at all these different levels. At the community level, at the school level and at the level of meaningful political engagement.

Karen Pittman ([42:45](#)):

Yeah, absolutely true. But you said a couple of things that I think I want to emphasize. One is that in that space of young people can have diverse ways that they, especially when we're talking about teenagers and young adults, diverse ways that they can be using the summer and the fall to connect, to reconnect and to contribute. And one of the questions that came in was really how can we have young people explicitly involved in the recovering and rebuilding efforts? And we know because one of the things that the forum does is also to co-lead the Opportunity Youth Network. Young people who had already disconnected from school, but were still committed to learning and work and life. A lot of them were already organizing, to do exactly what you said, to get out the vote.

Karen Pittman ([43:38](#)):

They are the young people who are organizing in their communities. They are the young people who can be the COVID trackers. They are the young people who can step in as we're trying to rebuild staffing, we're going to have a huge staffing question. We've lost a lot of the folks in youth organizations, in childcare programs. We've got some realities that we have to layer back in. And our young people can be a part of those solutions, because we're not just rebuilding schools, but rebuilding community capacity overall. And they want to be a part of those solutions. So I think that that's an important one.

Karen Pittman ([44:21](#)):

I also think, you mentioned data and how do we assess both strengths and needs. This is a huge chance for us to think differently about data, to think definitely about assessment. We've got 10 or 15 minutes

left. What are your feelings about when, how, and what we should be assessing as young people come back to school? And that's assessing both in terms of outcomes, in terms of how well they are doing across domains, but also assessing in terms of how well we're doing as schools and community organizations and families, how to not just make the assessment about the young people, but we're also assessing...

Karen Pittman ([45:03](#)):

... how to not just make the assessment about the young people, but we're also assessing our shared capacity in the schools and communities, honestly, to actually support, in a differentiated way, people [inaudible 00:00:13].

John King ([45:12](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Well, I'd start with ... I'm not ready to let us off the hook for this school year yet. I think there's some tough questions we have to ask ourselves. How is it that, in the wealthiest country in the world, we still have kids and families who don't have Internet access? We have places where we used to ask, "Do you have a device in the house?" Not the right question, right? Question is, "Does every kid have a device they can use to do their work simultaneously?" We used to ask, "Is there Internet in this community? Is there bandwidth?" Well, now we know we have to ask a different question, which is, "Is this family able to access high-speed Internet such that they can use the distance learning resources?"

John King ([45:59](#)):

What it turns out is that we've got cable companies that say, "Oh, well, you've got an unpaid balance on your cable bill, so you don't get Internet. We have families that are mixed status families, undocumented families, where the cable company is asking for Social Security number and other personal information, and they're afraid to provide it in the current climate. We've got to find ways to make sure that school districts can pay directly for that Internet service or the city or the cable company. But we've got to find ways to get every child, every family access to the Internet.

John King ([46:34](#)):

So we have to ask hard questions at the district and community level about access, because, really, the Internet now is the schoolhouse door. If we're not providing Internet access, we are barring the schoolhouse door for young people. We've got to ask, "Are students able to participate in their educational experience?" It's great if we're doing Zoom classes, but if there are no kids in them, then it's not working. It's great if we're posting assignments and activities, but if kids aren't completing them, then it's not good enough.

John King ([47:07](#)):

So we've got to have an assessment of attendance, participation, project completion, engagement. If everyone's on the Zoom call, but the only one talking for 45 minutes is the teacher, that's not engagement. So we have to figure out, how do we measure? How do we assess whether or not we're using this time productively? With our high school seniors, we're already seeing a dip in FAFSA completion. If you don't complete the FAFSA, you don't have access to federal financial aid. You're very unlikely to successfully go on to college. So, in every high school, we should know who hasn't completed the FAFSA yet, and we've got to find them and make sure they do that.

John King ([47:54](#)):

So there are some things I think we have to think about for this moment. As we come back to school in the fall, we for sure need some diagnostic assessment to figure out where our kids ... What are the learning needs that we have to address? I particularly worry about students with disabilities, English learners, because we know districts have really struggled to provide distance learning support for those students.

John King ([48:21](#)):

But we need information on how kids are doing. We have to do it in a way that's not super stressful and that's very actionable for teachers and parents, but we need to know how kids are doing. We need to know how kids are doing from a socio-emotional wellbeing standpoint, and turns out, it helps a lot to ask people. We just finished doing some polling. We did polling of parents. We found very a high stress level amongst parents, but also real clarity about what people need.

John King ([48:52](#)):

People said, "I really wish I had direct contact with my child's teacher." 85% or more of parents wanted that. Less than half have received that. Many parents said they wanted tech support, navigating the technology and all the devices and platforms and so forth, but they weren't getting it from their school. Many parents wanted access to mental health supports and often weren't getting it.

John King ([49:20](#)):

So we have to ask parents and we have to ask kids, "How are you feeling? What do you need?" Kids will tell you, as you know, as you often point out. Kids have a lot to say about their experience, their experience of school, their experience in the community, and what they need.

Karen Pittman ([49:39](#)):

Yes.

John King ([49:41](#)):

So we ought to ask them. We ought to be in conversation with kids about their socio-emotional wellbeing as we come back to school, and our teachers. We have teachers who have young kids themselves, and they've been juggling teaching, staying connected with kids and their families, and homeschool for their own kids. That is a lot. That's a lot of stress on them. We have teachers who are teaching while taking care of sick loved ones. That's high stress. Teachers who have had real financial crises within their family. That's high stress. So we have to ask, "How's everybody doing, and what can we do to support those socio-emotional needs alongside these questions of the right academic interventions?"

Karen Pittman ([50:26](#)):

Yeah. All of those are hugely important questions to ask, and they make the analytic side of me want us to have a frame through which to ask those questions so that we don't ask some of them and discount the answers as soon as we ask the question.

John King ([50:45](#)):

That's right. That's right.

Karen Pittman ([50:47](#)):

One of the things that we have been playing with a lot in the past year since we've learned about it comes from Turnaround for Children, and Pam Cantor is a part of the SoLD Alliance. That's the Science of Learning and Development Alliance. [inaudible 00:06:04]'s a new member of that Alliance. But if you take this information about what we know about how learning happens, and, again, that was summarized with the C Commission, and we're just getting more and more information about the neuroscience behind learning.

Karen Pittman ([51:18](#)):

It really does boil down to every young person has the potential, if they're in an environment that supports it. If you're not, you're not going to show that potential. So we've got so many examples of it's not that I have to teach you social, emotional, and cognitive skills. It's that I have to create a setting in which you feel you have sufficient relationships, you feel safe and belonging, you feel that you're getting those appropriate supports about assessing your assets and needs so you're getting what you need. You've got some content that you're engaging with that is rigorous and relevant and is going to challenge you to use your skills to move forward. Then you've got people who are recognizing those skills for their value and helping build them.

Karen Pittman ([52:08](#)):

So it's not that we don't need that practice in that space, but one of the things I think we have an opportunity to do for every place that young people are spending their time is come in with that common picture of what an optimal learning setting looks like and then ask the questions to the young people and to the adults about, "How are you doing and building that setting?", because I may think I've created a great space where you have people belong, and some kids are not feeling safe. So that learning is not going to happen. I may be bringing in great content, but it doesn't feel as relevant to them. There are other ways that they would like to approach it.

Karen Pittman ([52:49](#)):

So I agree that we have to ask all these questions, but I think we have an opportunity to have everybody asking the questions and asking them with a recognition that if we're in the red in any of those spaces, if kids are not feeling relationships, if they're not feeling they belong, if they're not getting the individual supports that they need, if they're not interested in the content or finding it rigorous enough to challenge them, and they're not really getting explicit support in building their skills, their mindsets, their knowledge base, and testing and using them, all of those things have to be present.

Karen Pittman ([53:29](#)):

So my fear is we'll come back and we'll do it piecemeal. I'll ask you how you're doing in September, but then I won't ask you again for the rest of the year.

John King ([53:39](#)):

Right. [crosstalk 00:53:40].

Karen Pittman ([53:42](#)):

So it's how can we use this opportunity to really think differently about what learning and development mean and how they fit together so that we don't end up in these battles? I love the term transformative

learning that Rob Jagers at CASEL and other folks have used, because it basically says the point of learning anything is actually to help young people transform themselves, their peers, their families, their communities into a space of thriving, and they need those skills not to meet our academic requirements. They need those skills, they need that knowledge because they've got places to go and things to do.

Karen Pittman ([54:31](#)):

So how do we check in with them in a way that demonstrates that we're integrating these ideas together and that we're not having them compete with each other? I think we've got an opportunity to do that and do it in a way that we now acknowledge business won't be usual in the same basic ways, as you said. A lot of this is going to be virtual. A lot of it this is going to be in small pods. We're going to need young people showing up in different spaces. The evidence is lots of schools are going to come back with staggered schedules, but what happens when you leave the building? We no longer have a clear school, after school, school, out of school kind of a conversation. We need to really fast-forward into something that's much more integrated and much more youth- and community-centered to be able to get back to where we started, which is either this is a chance to really upend inequity, or we're going to go the other direction.

John King ([55:31](#)):

That's right. Well, I want to share one quick resource with folks, and I want to ask you a last question.

Karen Pittman ([55:36](#)):

Okay.

John King ([55:36](#)):

So the resources that we at Ed Trust are working on a paper on the relationship between racial equity and socioemotional learning, where we did a series of focus group conversations with parents and students of color around the country to get their perspective on socioemotional learning, what they see, what they want, what they need, how they think we should be thinking about these questions. So that paper will be out shortly, and folks can find it at [edtrust.org](http://edtrust.org) and sign up for our newsletter, where they'll get an early look at that paper.

John King ([56:11](#)):

So last question for you. I know we're out of time. I have a friend who has a podcast, DeRay Mckesson. He asks in that podcast a piece of advice that you've received that's been meaningful for you. I would say what is a piece of advice, Karen, that you've received over your incredible career in advocating for young people that you think it's important, a piece of advice that you've received that was meaningful for you that you think it's important for people to hear and think about now, in this moment?

Karen Pittman ([56:49](#)):

I think one of the things that I come back to a lot that I got from David Weikart, who started the High School Educational Research Foundation 60-plus years ago and sort of trained me in youth development before I knew what youth development was, is really to trust the learner. My entire career has been built on learning is what we are wired to do, and we have to figure out how not to get in the way of young people learning. How do we enable learning, but not assume that it's our responsibility to impart learning?



Karen Pittman ([57:37](#)):

As we come back together, the piece of advice that I will offer to all of us is respect the learner. Respect the learning environment. Respect our families. Take an asset approach into this. We are in times of incredible adversity, but, nonetheless, the human potential is there for learning, and we just need to be more creative in supporting it.

John King ([58:09](#)):

Great. Thank you. It's always such a pleasure to spend time with you.

Karen Pittman ([58:12](#)):

It's been wonderful talking with-