

What Next? Why Now? An Interview with Karen Pittman February 1, 2021

Ian Faigley ([00:00](#)):

Good afternoon, everyone, on this sunny, actually snowy Monday in Washington, D.C. Thank you for joining us for today's Thought Leader Roundtable: A Conversation on Readiness. Today is a 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? For the past several years, Karen Pittman, our co-founder, president and CEO here at the Forum has signaled that the day was coming when she would step out of organizational leadership and find more time. Today is the day that she shifts gears, stepping out of the president and CEO role and becoming a senior fellow here at the Forum.

Ian Faigley ([00:43](#)):

To mark this occasion, we've asked Karen to shift from interviewer to interviewee, and we've asked Merita Irby, co-founder of the Forum and Karen's colleagues for more than 25 years to lead the discussion as Karen reflects on the paths taken and what's up next. We will be accepting questions and comments via the chat feature on today's session which is available at the bottom of your screen. There may be a few slides but the general focus will be on the conversation today. So please listen in and send in your questions as they come up. Lastly, 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 on the call. It's now my pleasure to turn it over to Merita.

Merita Irby ([01:30](#)):

Thank you, Ian. We are absolutely delighted that you can join us today. Please use the chat and send us both questions and just say hi to each other. It already feels like a little bit of a family reunion. I'm seeing some former alumni there and some long-term partners and we're just so glad that you can join us today. We are going to do as promised, sort of a little reflection back and a thinking forward as Karen is making this shift. But before we dive in, I just want to ask Karen the number one question that I've heard posed to her over the past month, and it is basically this, are you really retiring?

Karen Pittman ([02:10](#)):

I wish there was a better word for it, but I am technically retiring as Ian said. I'm retiring as president and CEO of the Forum, I am not retiring from the field. So whether we call it retiring or rewiring as my friend Jane Quinn called it when she stepped aside, this really is not about leaving you all, but actually hopefully about being able to spend even more time thinking and writing and talking and listening to what you all are doing and trying to have more opportunities for actually sort of moving those ideas out. So this is not goodbye, so don't send me any presents. I'll leave it there.

Merita Irby ([02:55](#)):

Good. I know I was relieved when I heard that, so I just wanted to make sure that folks heard that upfront. So, as you think about the path forward, we thought we'd just take a little time and reflect on the path so far. I know we talked a lot at the Forum about moving ideas to impact and what it takes to really do that, but sometimes it also just takes some time for the ideas to kind of form, to gel, to become those kind of powerful, public ideas that really can change how people think. I'm just curious, as you're reflecting back, and just way back, think to kind of early experiences, folks that you connected with along the way, what was the spark for your imagination that kind of started you on this path to where we are today?

Karen Pittman ([03:44](#)):

Yeah, it's been a long path and you are challenging me to go back in time. But I'm going to go back 50 plus years, probably even more than that if I go back to high school, and say that even though I didn't fully know it at the time, what put me on this journey was a combination of three things. One, really, really getting a good education, not just from being in the D.C. public schools, which is where I grew up, but from being in the D.C. public schools, from being in the DC Youth Orchestra, which was my youth development organization, and from being an active member in a black church.

Karen Pittman (04:27):

Three very different settings for learning and development, but they were very compatible. I moved back and forth between them easily. Because of those, I actually had an opportunity that a lot of kids don't have to just go all over the city. I didn't go all over the country, but I went all over the city and I ended up going to school and being in an orchestra with rich kids, poor kids, black kids, white kids, kids of all ages, in the kind of learning environment that we talk about right now. I actually grew up in it. So that was the first thing. I really got a great, full education in the way we think about learning and development as I came through mainly middle school and high school.

Karen Pittman (05:14):

The second thing is, because of that, I went off to Oberlin College. I got on a Greyhound bus with my trunk and went off to Oberlin College in 1969. When I got there, what I found was that while people expected me to be smart and have potential, they were surprised that I was as well-prepared as I was to be in a relatively elite, private college because I was a poor, black kid from D.C. who went to the D.C. public schools. So they just didn't expect me to show up as well-rounded and well-prepared and frankly as well-spoken as I was. That was curious to me because I had no evidence until then that I was not like everybody else. So I had to process that. We could talk more about that later if you want.

Karen Pittman (06:05):

But the third thing that was that I got recruited to be a camp counselor at what was then the HighScope Educational Camp for Teenagers started by David Weikart and his wife. For those of you who know the Forum recognized Weikart as the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. Started by Dave and his wife who really were looking for an opportunity to bring their theories of active learning not just into preschool... For those of you who know preschool would know the Perry Preschools Project and the trajectory that that's had and the impact that that's had on us understanding the value of a quality, early childhood experience.

Karen Pittman (06:48):

They knew that the same thing could really transform the lives of adolescents, but they couldn't get that into the Ypsilanti public schools. So they actually bought a camp and set up a camp for teenagers and I actually just got recruited as somebody who wanted to be a teacher and spent my college summers basically learning to be an active learning coach for 70 or 80 young people, 12 to 18 ungraded, eight-week residential experience. These were kids who were rich kids from France and Germany whose parents wanted them to practice English to poor kids from Arkansas and the Mississippi Delta and kids all in between coming together to build a learning community.

Karen Pittman (07:32):

So by the time I got to the end of college, I knew I had to have had a huge commitment to learning and development, I knew I didn't fit in to go back to be a high school math teacher, which was where I thought I was going to be, and I basically then had to go chart a course to figure out where I took these ideas and move them forward. That's essentially been what I've been doing for the past 50 years.

Merita Irby (07:55):

So I've heard you say that you hop on the bus, you hadn't been to Oberlin before, you just kind of arrived on campus and had that experience. Years later, you started talking about that when you would talk about what it was like to not just help individual young people beat the odds, but what it took to really change the odds. I know that's one of those kind of bumper sticker phrases that you have, change in the odds, and there's a lot of

those over the years. There's been a problem-free isn't fully prepared, fully prepared isn't fully engaged, ensuring all young people are ready by 21, ready for college.... But don't laugh at me. Ready for college, work, and life.

Karen Pittman (08:31):

There's a lot of them.

Merita Irby (08:33):

There's a lot of bumper stickers. I'm curious, if you were to crystallize it, what is the essential idea that you've been working to move over the decades that you allude to?

Karen Pittman (08:49):

I think the essential ideas as I looked around for where they land really are embodied best in what we talk about as the positive youth development approach, which really is the sort of official, more official, more sort of global language around what David Weikart was talking about when he was talking about active learning, which is basically to understand the science of learning and development.

Karen Pittman (09:12):

We now have the brain scans and neuroscience and all those things to help us, but it basically is understanding that our job as adults, even as young adults, is to help young people build the skills and competencies and capacities that they need to have to make meaning of their experiences, any experiences, and then if we can, to really help put enriching experiences in front of them so that they can even make more meaning and build more capacity. That's our job, is to really sort of feed fuel into this natural learning engine which is what development is all about.

Karen Pittman (09:50):

I think what I learned and what we're trying to do is, how do we help adults understand that? How do we help systems get out of the way of doing that? When you think about the joy that's on young people's face... For those of you who go to the Ready by 21 National Meeting, you probably remember a couple of years ago I played the little video of my first grandson, there are now two of them, when he was just about two years old, when he was talking about, "I could do it all by myself," because he had learned how to climb in and out of his big boy bed. That joy and that self-learning and the things that we have to do to support that really should carry all the way through childhood and adolescence into young adulthood.

Karen Pittman (10:35):

That's what people are wired to do, and I think the lesson is, the more we sort of get out of the way and really trust that our job is to develop relationships and create experiences in all kinds of contexts in which learning happens so that young people are not moving towards a singular goal of graduating from high school or whatever, but they are moving towards youth success. And what we know youth success is it's a combination of having a full range of competencies, a strong sense of agency, and an integrated identity. And getting an integrated identity is a challenge. Certainly it's a challenge in this day and age, but it's always been a challenge for young people who are anything other than essentially white male.

Karen Pittman (11:20):

So we've got to really do that. And what we're learning over time is that doing that requires us to be much more cognizant of the power that all adults have in young people's lives and giving them the tools to really recognize and use that power responsibly and recognize and acknowledge the fact that the more they know and respecting each other, the easier it's going to be for young people to navigate through that space. Again, I was able to test that out and see it in person and see that transformation both in the counselors who were not a whole lot older than the young people, because they were my age. I mean, at that point they were 18 to 21-year-olds working with 12 to 17-year-olds.

Karen Pittman ([12:03](#)):

So it wasn't a big gap between the young people and the counseling staff. But the transformation that I saw consistently happen over an eight-week period for four summers convinced me that we know how to do this and it doesn't take a master's degree in teaching to do it, it really takes really creating the kind of knowledge about the power that you have when you're intentional about creating learning experiences. That's what we know. How you get that into policy, how you get that into practice, how you get systems to dismantle themselves to let that happen, that's what takes a lifetime to figure out.

Merita Irby ([12:39](#)):

I was about to say, that seems to be the lifelong question, because I first met you, we first started working together, it's been 27 years ago. I know you'd like me to keep counts. Been 27 years ago this month at this interface development and policy research. And it was really about taking that positive youth development idea and thinking about what it took to move it at all levels. Then I'll say our next few years was a bit of circuitous path between the Centre for Youth Development and the Forum for Youth Investment. Do you want to describe that a little? What were we trying to make happen during that time period and how did that kind of land us at starting the Forum?

Karen Pittman ([13:19](#)):

Yeah, I'll take it back one step and then go through it really quickly. The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research came into being... Rita is the exact bearer of the dates even when she wasn't there. But came into being in 2000, I think... No, I'm sorry. Not in 2000 but 1990, go back a whole decade.

Merita Irby ([13:42](#)):

I could find more dates.

Karen Pittman ([13:42](#)):

Came into being in 1990 basically because I had pushed these ideas as far as I could at the Children's Defense Fund. Now, I went to CDF in 1984, basically recruited by Marian Wright Edelman to head up their adolescent pregnancy prevention work because she had basically come to the conclusion one morning reading the news when she saw two statistics; one that half of the babies born to black women in general were born to single parents, and that for teenagers, it was almost 90%. And she thought, what is this about?

Karen Pittman ([14:25](#)):

The answer to this basically has to be more than contraception, so I need to find somebody who can figure out how to navigate these worlds of sort of public health. The answer is sex education and contraception and this bigger idea which in her head was hope. Like there's something going on here between having the actual technical capacity to prevent pregnancy and being motivated to do it. So she went off to look for somebody like me, she found me. I happened to be eight months pregnant at the time, but she was patient, and may had Timothy before I came to work.

Karen Pittman ([15:06](#)):

But what we were able to do there was really begin to bring the early kernels of this idea of capacity and motivation that we really have to not just be solving problems but making sure that young people are fully prepared. So problem-free isn't fully prepared really came out of the work at CDF to figure out how to start to have a language that said, "This is not just about telling young people to stop doing something, it's actually about giving them opportunities to figure out what they want to do and making sure that they are prepared to do it and that they've had a chance to practice and participate in that, that they see themselves as having agency."

Karen Pittman ([15:45](#)):

So those ideas really got to take hold at CDF, but the policy agenda was still a deficit-driven policy agenda at the time. So while at CDF, we were able to say, "Wouldn't it be nice if all of these separate policies about

dropout prevention, gang prevention, substance abuse prevention," you go all the way around what we used to call the donut, "that all of those prevention policies that cut across the different agencies and departments, wouldn't it be nice to knit those together and really put them into a broader framework that talks about not just prevention but development?" That was a nice idea and I got to write about it, but it was time to think about the policy.

Karen Pittman ([16:27](#)):

Marian Wright politely said, "Our policy makers are not ready for that. You go off and prove that we really can move policies that start with this idea of preparation and participation and then CDF will come along eventually." So that's what I did. That's where the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research came from; how do we take these ideas that we know make sense in research and begin to really infuse them into policy? So when the opportunity to actually do that knitting inside of the federal government came along, I was perfectly happy running the Center for Youth Development Policy Research with Michelle Cahill.

Karen Pittman ([17:05](#)):

I had hired Rita, probably she'll tell you how many months ago, not even years ago. She'd just been hired when the call came that said, "Okay, we got this idea of knitting together the programs across the federal agencies under some kind of an umbrella. We got that squeezed into the Crime Bill in 1994, which is why it ended up becoming the President's Crime Prevention Council. You drew the short straw, you have to come run it. You asked for it, you got it, you need to come run it?" So that's where we got our first taste at, could we really set that table? And we've got a proposal out now about a White House office for Children and Youth.

Karen Pittman ([17:46](#)):

We really did in 1994 set the table for the White House Office for Children and Youth, then called the President's Crime Prevention Council, that brought all of those agencies together around the table to say, "Some of you were about punishment, some of you were about prenatal care, you run the gamut, but you're all about really making sure young people are on a path towards success, how do we shape this into a philosophy that we can then use to knit these federal programs together?" We'll get some of our colleagues from the Forum on the calls in subsequent months, we're going to sort of keep this dialogue going for a little bit, to talk about how some of these ideas that got planted have pulled through.

Karen Pittman ([18:31](#)):

So we're coming back to talk about the White House Office. It took us 20 years to get something called the Performance Partnership Pilots pulled together, which really demonstrated that if you really gave local communities the incentive to knit these things together, they would actually pick up that, not with a huge amount of money, but just with the opportunity to take these things that they know are pieces of a puzzle and be able to put them together to say, "This is what we need to craft to get the outcomes." So, it's been a long journey to get to here, but we came out of the Crime Prevention Council and said, "Now what?"

Karen Pittman ([19:08](#)):

We had gotten these ideas of youth development seated, we had really gotten the ideas about youth development used to galvanize what we now talk about as afterschool and out of school and community programs, and so the next journey was just to say, "How do we get those ideas into other systems?" The Center for Youth Development and Policy Research stayed behind and we set up the Forum for Youth Investment to really continue to move these ideas out into what we have been referring to for a while as the allied youth fields. So, a long journey of trying to pick up these ideas and look for opportunities to plant them, sometimes more in a think tank research mode, sometimes more a policy space, certainly what the Weikart Center moving these ideas into practice, it's been a journey.

Merita Irby ([20:02](#)):

Yeah. So I want to stay with the Forum journey here in just a little bit, but it's interesting, I think, between the Center for Youth Development and the Forum for Youth Investment the number of different ways... I was in ride

along mode, but the number of different ways that you tried to move this idea of youth development, right? So we had it in the federal government coordinating across all the different departments.

Merita Irby ([20:21](#)):

That was a year, relatively short-lived at that point in time. Going to International Youth Foundation and really learning about the policies in other countries and how folks actually had youth policies that's just a fragmentation and bringing that back in, kind of the Presidents Summit and getting America's promise up and going, sort of a key leader that was a champion for the effort and working with that, supporting a funders group, the Development Funders Group and staffing that for a while.

Merita Irby ([20:55](#)):

Then at some point it just came to that maybe we should create the Forum. And I would say each of those things was somewhere along about a year of attempting and trying them. I remember I was there, but I'm just curious how you would say why did we land on the idea of the Forum? It was the Forum for Youth Investment, not youth development specifically. Why did we land on that idea? Then I'm going to add to that question, why did we land on it? Then what was it that you... as you navigated the next decade of twists and turns, how did you try to hold true to that idea with an increasingly varied organization?

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

Well, I mean, I'll answer the almost last question first, which is I think the thing that we say consistently is we stay youth-centered versus system-centered. As long as we keep young people in the middle of the picture... And we draw a lot of pictures. But as long as we keep young people in the middle of the picture, whether we're going into policy or practice, et cetera, and as long as we understand that in order to really support youth success and make sure people are thriving, we have to have an acknowledgement of the ecosystem.

Karen Pittman ([22:21](#)):

Now, we haven't always used the ecosystem language, it's coming back now with more precision as we're really understanding what we mean by ecosystems, but it has always been the idea that if we put young people at the middle and we fully understand what it takes to support development, academic, civic, social, emotional, physical, spiritual, all of those kinds of development, vocational, if we understand that that's the goal, then first of all, we have to really make sure that everybody who works with young people understands that.

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

Second, we really have to make sure that systems or even organizations which are set up to be accountable for particular things really understand that their first job is to do no harm, that by focusing on one thing, they can't focus so exclusively on that thing that they actually undermine overall development. So it's just been keeping that idea front and center and then really looking for opportunities to push those ideas wherever there seems to be a softened wall. Interestingly, when we started the Forum Youth Investment, the energy was in juvenile justice reform and child welfare reform and youth employment and alternative services.

Karen Pittman ([23:37](#)):

Those were the folks who were interested in saying, "These ideas seem to resonate with us, and most importantly, they resonate with the young people." When we actually have the courage as adults to talk to young people, not from a deficit model, but to talk about their assets, their aspirations, to try to figure out where they're going to ask them questions, as soon as we bring this sort of youth development assets approach in, it actually seems to make a difference. We got champions in those other systems. What was interesting was that we didn't get a lot of uptake with K-12 except around people who were running alternative schools.

Karen Pittman ([24:13](#)):

We got it around the edges, we got it around the margins, but we didn't get it in the core of K-12 in large part because they already thought they were doing learning and development and doing it their way. So when I think about why we set up the Forum for Youth Investment, and you definitely were not just there, you were a

co-founder of it, it was very intentionally because coming out of the President's Crime Prevention Council, we really saw opportunities to move these ideas into those other systems. We also saw opportunities to really begin to take them from ideas actually to implementation and impact which ended...

Karen Pittman ([24:55](#)):

If you start to tell the story, the Center for Youth Program Quality came along because of a very intentional opportunity to begin to say, "We can't just talk about your development and get people going, 'I think I do it.' How do they know what they're doing it?" They don't know if they do it if they don't have standards, they don't have ways to assess their practice, if they don't have ways to really improve their practice in a way that connects the dots between those. So some of those ideas got started and planted and we continued to do them along the way. But what's exciting now is that we've got K-12 folks.

Merita Irby ([25:27](#)):

I'm going to come back to that K-12 question just a second because I know our colleague Bethany Little over at the Council of the SoLD Alliance talks about the softening of the walls that's happening right now. But before we get there, I'm going to do two things. One, we're coming more into the present day, folks, so if there are questions that you want to drop into the chat or things that you're thinking about what's happening now that you want Karen to reflect on a little bit with us, please add those into the chat. As I'm just hearing you talk, Karen, I think about one of the other ways I've heard people describe you over the years, and that is-

Karen Pittman ([26:01](#)):

Only the positive ones.

Merita Irby ([26:03](#)):

Only the positives. It's sort of the definition of a social entrepreneur. The Forum as we started sort of had a core set of ideas that we were thinking about how to move, and as you just mentioned before the call, folks when they got the invite for this probably saw a lot of little logos across the bottom of the page. Can you offer any advice to folks who are trying to move their big idea about how you've navigated that over the years, starting this organization and with so... How have you kind of assessed and navigated the different opportunities and kind of twists along the way that led us to where we are now?

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

Sure. And it's a good thing to reflect on because there are a lot of caveats in this story. The first thing that I will say is that I really am an idea person. I have ended up starting and leading and leaving a lot of things along the way, but my measure of success was always whether the idea stuck, not whether I stuck around. So my intent was not to just sort of move myself professionally from one job to a bigger job, to a bigger job, but to really look for those opportunities to plant the ideas and stay as long as it looks like it made sense to have them.

Karen Pittman ([27:33](#)):

Because I learned early on you have a lot more opportunity to actually plant and move ideas and be nimble if you don't actually start your own organization, I really thought I was going to live out my entire career without starting an organization. So everything up until then was inside of somebody else's organization; inside of CDF, inside of the Academy for Educational Development, inside the White House, inside the International Youth Foundation. It really wasn't until this last time when the thing that we grew inside of the International Youth Foundation got to be half the size of that organization that we really needed to sort of pull it apart and find a way to do that.

Karen Pittman ([28:15](#)):

There's a story about how we even did that in collaboration with another organization that was sort of our first merger, was to merge with an organization called Community Impact, which would be then sort of absorbed and made into the Forum. But once we started an organization, that same entrepreneurial spirit was still there, of like, how do you keep the ideas moving? So I think in a lot of ways, one of the things that happened was people knew we were the idea people, we came to a lot of tables to bring these ideas in the same way that

we've talked about it. And when there was an opportunity to actually move those ideas towards impact, people either asked us to join or frankly asked us to take over things that they no longer could run.

Karen Pittman ([29:02](#)):

So if you look at that, you talked about the logos across the bottom, we started the Children's Cabinet Network with NGA and with NCSL, the National Conference of State Legislatures, and ran that for a while. Then as membership organizations, when that idea of waned, we kept that going and then made our local Children's Cabinet Network that we now run with the Education Redesign, education... Is that right?

Merita Irby ([29:34](#)):

Education Redesign Lab.

Karen Pittman ([29:36](#)):

Education Redesign Lab at Harvard and the Children's Funding Project, which was a spinoff from the Forum. SparkAction, for those who remember, was Connect for Kids. And when that organization sort of left things behind, we said, "Well, there's a whole lot of energy here around having a platform that's not just about one issue but it's really about the range of issues that we have to look at. Let's get that going. When Opportunity Nation... and the story goes on and on. So if you look at the logos across the bottom, they are all either connected to an idea, connected to an entity.

Karen Pittman ([30:10](#)):

The Readiness Projects is the last that I'm going to connect to, I expect, but it probably won't be the last for the Forum because I think the entrepreneurial spirit that started the Forum is going to stay on long after I leave. I think it's sort of ingrained into who the Forum is. So we aim for quality, we never aimed to become huge, but we do aim to be useful. And one of the ways that we can be useful is basically to take risks. They don't always pan out and they're not even always fun, but I think they're always important.

Merita Irby ([30:47](#)):

No, and they're also not always funded. I think that's another-

Karen Pittman ([30:51](#)):

[crosstalk 00:30:51] funded. Yes.

Merita Irby ([30:55](#)):

If we came back to the softening of the walls as you were saying, kind of around the conversations with our education partners, really starting a few years back with the National Commission on Social, Emotional, Academic Development where you were a commissioner, were both governing partners with the Science of Learning and Development Alliance, and in the early days of that, it was another one of those... Like many of these things were over the years, it was sort of a nights and weekends commitment and then the funding kind of followed a little bit for us to play the roles that we did.

Merita Irby ([31:27](#)):

But I'm wondering if you... as we kind of bring it up to present day and talk about things... And I just want to give a shout out and I see the note about the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, which is another one of those in continuing efforts and we've had the privilege of being able to connect and support some of that work over the years. But the kinds of things that are continuing in terms of those ideas and that one is in the federal government.

Merita Irby ([31:53](#)):

Just what you're seeing right now in terms of the difference in these last few years across, as we say, the allied youth fields, but of really having a conversation with our education partners in a different. What do you think that opportunity is now and how is this last year, how's 2020 really kind of even shaken that up even more?

Karen Pittman (32:15):

I mean, the opportunity to work with our K-12 partners is huge, and I think, at least in my lifetime, unprecedented. And I mean that, again, not that we couldn't always find willing individuals and even willing individual systems inside of K-12, but really having the whole conversation about public education, the whole conversation sort of being ready to have... to really sort of look at academics plus.

Karen Pittman (32:51):

So you even see it in the progression of the language from social, emotional learning, to social, emotional, and academic development, how do we integrate social, emotional learning into academic, to the science of learning and development, which just says, "Hey, everything that we know tells us learning is social and emotional, learning is about meaning making." Meaning making only happens when young people feel emotionally safe and socially connected to the people, peers, and adults that are in this space with them who are having these experiences. So we can't separate these things, we just can't separate them, and we can't predict where the most meaningful learning is going to happen, because learning isn't just about academics.

Karen Pittman (33:36):

Those messages were already being brought in to schools. Again, people playing the long game like Castle. We have absolutely benefited from the inroads, the very strategic inroads that the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning made into schools. But I would say we, and by we, I mean sort of the broader youth development community, has also had a hard time putting our hands up and saying, "We knew those lessons and we've actually scaled those lessons over here in these other spaces. Wouldn't you like to see what we've done?" And early on with the Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, we tried to sort of have these conversations between the systems.

Karen Pittman (34:26):

And the disparities between the systems were just so great and the focus on academics and formal learning versus sort of enrichment and all the ways that we've come to describe what happens in youth and community programs, it was very hard to get those conversations happening systemically. There was absolutely no doubt that you found individual teachers and youth workers who found common ground, that you found individual classes, that you found things in school that were operating using youth development principles, and also vice versa, that you found folks out in the afterschool space really trying to do academics in the same way that it was happening in schools.

Karen Pittman (35:06):

But what's happened over the past couple of years is the presence and the leading with understanding how learning happens has really created the common space for us to have these conversations. Then with COVID, literally, the walls fell down. I mean, all of a sudden, out of school time was all the time. As we said in the blog that we wrote in... When did it happen? In April. If school is really being the kind of school that I experienced, yes, it was rich and rigorous academic content, but it was also relationships with peers and adults, and really rich relationships within a diverse set of young peers and adults of all ages and abilities, et cetera.

Karen Pittman (36:03):

It was the comfort of routines, it was having extracurricular activities. I went back and looked at my yearbook just to make sure that I wasn't looking through rose-colored glasses, I found my high school yearbook and I counted. 95% of the young people who were in the yearbook had at least two extracurricular activities after their name. The expectation was, you may not be a genius, but you can participate in something and you're going to find thing that gives you a spark and you're going to do it, whether it's the Latin club or cheerleading or whatever. It really was an incredible experience and that's the kind of thing that we now have a deeper understanding that that's what young people need to have.

Karen Pittman (36:50):

And I think we have an unprecedented opportunity to really make that happen because school couldn't happen the way school normally happened. People suddenly were at home, youth organizations and community organizations were standing up, those people in schools, the bus drivers, the cafeteria workers, the social workers, the psychologists, got to step to the forefront, not just be there if kids got into trouble or just move them back and forth from a sort of a technical perspective in between classes, but they really got to stand up often as people who had deeper relationships with young people.

Karen Pittman (37:27):

So we know something happened to really sort of upset the applecart enough that people were moving at lightning speed to make stuff up, but a lot of good stuff was happening. And now our job as we're sort of going into summer and thinking we're going to have herd immunity and eventually the end is in sight, it's not just that we shouldn't go back to normal or we can't go back to normal because we've seen normal doesn't work for everybody, it really is even that we should build forward together, which is what we're talking about and we'll talk about that with you more later on when it's your turn to talk.

Karen Pittman (38:03):

It really is that we need to just rethink these words that we use. Those of you who know me know I've never been a fan of talking about afterschool time and out-of-school time, not because we don't tend to operate afterschool and summer, but because defining an entire important part of the learning ecosystem with the adjectives that just tell us where and when learning happens, but they don't really put front and center how and why and with whom learning happens, means that it's an uphill battle. I woke up to NPR and there was a piece this morning on school leaders saying, "Maybe we should just start school early and start school over the summer."

Karen Pittman (38:49):

Well, if you're a school leader and you can say, "Why don't we just start school in the summer?" That means that you don't understand that for many kids, summer has learning experiences that actually compliments school and that are important to have. So that's the kind of thing that we have to still work on, but the opportunity to do it is there in a way that it wasn't before and we can have that conversation and we can say those things. That's an opportunity that got started with SEL, and SEAD, and SoLD, and now really can be brought to the forefront just because of the opportunities that we've had because of COVID.

Karen Pittman (39:33):

So, yes, the walls are softened and I'm reading the quotes. I'm not quite sure this is when you do remodeling when the walls are softened, but I agree, this is the time to actually step in there and do it. And I would say, in that space... and then I'll give it back to you, Rita. It isn't just that schools need to not think that nothing happens in summer, it's that community organizations need to understand that what they do doesn't only happen in summer and afterschool, but we're going to have to come together to be a lot more articulate and a lot bolder in talking about how the things that we do really can be used to create a different picture of how learning and development can happen.

Karen Pittman (40:17):

So that when we use terms like expanded day and expanded year and expanded learning, the assumption behind it isn't just we're expanding what happens in the school building out. It really does mean we are letting the walls down and we're sort of mixing things up.

Merita Irby (40:36):

So, I know that one of the things that we've been talking about is just how you're going to have more time to do exactly what you just did and think about, how are we framing this? How are we think about things like summer? And how we even talk about it. And I really was curious to see if we get through the full hour without you saying. So I was listening to a story on NPR this morning. Since I will say it, I will let you all down on a little

secret. She does this often at dinner with her husband and he says, "Oh, yes, yes, yes. I'm sure you did," and then they skipped to the next topic.

Merita Irby ([41:05](#)):

But Karen is an avid listener in the mornings and I know this morning she was because I got the text message at 6:30 this morning about the story she was just speaking about, because it is so present and it is so pressing. So Karen, with that, there's some questions coming in in the chat. I've got a few more for you. But as we shift to now, could you just share with folks a little bit what you're thinking about... both why now and what now, as you're thinking about how to direct your energies in this next phase?

Karen Pittman ([41:38](#)):

Yeah. I basically figured when you're almost 70 years old, you really should get to do what you want. And what I want to do is to sort of crank the clock back, the Forum's tagline is moving ideas to impact, the thing that I think we have done well, and by we, I really mean we, and I'm very excited about making sure that you all have an opportunity to get to hear from Thaddeus Ferber and his team. And I just want to basically say right now Thaddeus is not nearly as old as I am, isn't as old as Rita, but Thad has been with us for how many years, Rita?

Merita Irby ([42:14](#)):

He was present at the creation. It was '98. Yeah.

Karen Pittman ([42:17](#)):

Yep. And was with us as an intern at the President's Crime Prevention Council in the White House. So we have people who have been doing this a long time and we're going to just sort of hear how they're going to keep all of those logos going across the top of the page moving or the bottom of the page as we're sort of taking these ideas out into impact. And one of the things that happens when you move ideas to impact is you do have to settle in on the ideas. You have to sort of test them, curate them, figure out which ones stick, figure out which ones have the best horsepower for moving things forward, and then move out into how you're going to really influence and impact.

Karen Pittman ([43:03](#)):

Once you do that, it's hard and sometimes a little bit scary to come all the way back over to the idea of space and go, "I wonder if we should just reframe, rethink, readjust our priorities about some of these ideas." I want to have the freedom to do that. I mean, you've heard this, we have been playing with these ideas for a long time, we've been curating these ideas for a long time. The staying power across all of the logos that you have at the bottom of the Forum page and across all of the logos that represent where I've been and where Rita's has been on the past 25 plus years with me is that we continued to take and curate the ideas.

Karen Pittman ([43:44](#)):

But right now, we have an opportunity to do that at such a rapid pace to bring in all of the science of learning and development, and make sure it's not just a science of learning and development as it applies to education, but it's the science of learning and development that applies to adolescents, that applies across all systems, that really is pushed and prodded to make sure that we're understanding the research and the science behind it in a way that really is important and appropriate for all young people, black and Brown young people, rural and urban young people. We have to do that, and it's a lot of work, and it also happens to be fun and it also happens to frankly be what I like to do the best.

Karen Pittman ([44:26](#)):

So it's not that I don't love being an entrepreneur, it's not that I don't love running an organization that by design is probably more complicated than it perhaps should need to be, but in order to do justice to the ideas, it just wasn't fair to pretend that I had time to do both. So I picked the fun one and I did that because, A, I'm really confident, one, that the executive team that we have will keep all of these balls moving and move them forward and move them forward together in ways that I probably couldn't imagine and necessarily didn't have the energy to do, but B, that this is what's going to actually keep me going for another 10 years.

Karen Pittman (45:13):

It's not running an organization, it's really having the time to think, "Okay, I heard that story, let me follow up and find out where those ideas are going, let me pick up the phone and call three people and find out what's going on and see what I can do to be helpful to make sure that those ideas are really getting grounded back in the rich history of what we have in education and youth development and the science of learning and development." So that's why I'm going to not slow down, but well, let's call it rewiring. I think it is kind of like rewiring the house.

Merita Irby (45:46):

And it is, yeah. We're going to get the house analogy in a minute. But it is unleashing more energy and it's one of the reasons why we're excited. And I'm going to say for the range of you who are on the call that have been a part of the work with the Readiness Projects and for those who haven't, I think Catherine's in the link, find out more about it, is that Karen is devoting a huge chunk of her time, sticking with us with Hal Smith of National Urban League, Deb Maroney and David Osher, American Institutes for Research, and the team here at the Forum and all of the core strategists in the Readiness Projects to really continue in this sharpening the ideas, work, and how do we sharpen and amplify those ideas, how do we get them beyond our usual circles, what is that going to take to be able to do that?

Merita Irby (46:27):

So those are all the kinds of things that are... as we have been dreaming a little bit together about her next phase on how to be able to stay connected with the work and have time to be able to do that as well. I was going to go to a couple of questions, Karen, but is there anything else you want say on that?

Karen Pittman (46:43):

I see two questions in the chat or two comments in the chat really.

Merita Irby (46:49):

One was around the... since we're talking about education, this idea of remodeling. Is it remodeling or is it really transforming? Can you speak to that? I know that's- [crosstalk 00:46:57]

Karen Pittman (46:57):

Yeah. [crosstalk 00:46:58] both of those. While I'm doing that, since I know Catherine... or Merita, you're both very swift, the quote that... which is not my quote, but the quote that we use to sort of kick off the community's context paper, if one of you could find that and we could even just sort of end by sharing the screen with that, that would be great. Hi, Della. Wonderful to see you, absolutely. I think we are not about just remodeling. This isn't just a new paint job that we need or even take a couple of walls down, we do need to restructure education. And Phyllis, to your point, absolutely.

Karen Pittman (47:38):

When I said the expanded day and expanded year, that was really referencing the fact that... and I've written about this for the past 10 years and it's now coming true, that because of the language that we have used to talk about afterschool and summer, it's easier for school folks, and I mean this with all respect to school folks, to think, "Oh, if it's just about more time, we can just expand into those spaces and bring stuff in." A, not recognizing that there are organizations and entities and things happening in those spaces that are not just complimentary to what happens during the school day.

Karen Pittman (48:26):

Some of them are directly compensatory to what happens during the school day because they're undoing damage that was done in, as Della says, a predominantly white, European-centric paradigm. So we know that. But the point is, we know that. What we have an opportunity to do I think it's going to take a little bit of sort of tough patients on our part to meet education folks where they are as these walls soften, but bring them forward. I mean, whether we think we're building a parallel system or a new system... And we're in

conversations with groups that are primarily K-12 groups that are talking about both. Do you create a parallel system because you have to dismantle them?

Karen Pittman ([49:16](#)):

The challenge that folks are asking is, how do you get to blank slate at scale? We can do blank slate around the edges with sort of boutique schools, et cetera, but how do we get to blank slate at scale? How do we even sort of look at terms like learning loss and say, "Not everybody lost learning." Some kids won't get learning if you had them in the building the whole time, some young people actually gained more. We can tell you the stories of what happened because they were actually put into a more supportive environment that met them where they are and move forward.

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

We know we have a whole lot of stories to tell that really can get to that blank slate. But a blank slate is really, really scary if you're a school district and you're accountable for a whole bunch of stuff, not just a whole bunch of money, but a whole bunch of stuff. And those are the conversations that I think we have to be in. Again, having more things to read, I will find this and drop it into the information that you get later on. But it wasn't NPR, but it was a newsletter that came from Education Reimagined yesterday that was quoting another piece that essentially said, "In order to really dismantle the system, you have to take the time to get to know the system so you know what you're taking apart."

Karen Pittman ([50:36](#)):

And I think that's what we have an opportunity to do here, to have people really get inside and dig into the education system. Much like in early years, we got inside and dug into the juvenile justice system, we have to get inside and dig into the system and it's going to be harder because they thought they were all about learning and development. They didn't think they were hurting kids. We have to get in there and figure out how to dismantle it in ways that we can put the new pieces back together. So, everybody on this call, absolutely hold me accountable, hold us accountable. This is our opportunity to actually make this stuff happen at scale.

Karen Pittman ([51:11](#)):

I don't exactly know what it's going to mean to do it, but by no means am I backing away from it. Part of being entrepreneurial is sort of knowing which language to use in which space while holding yourself absolutely accountable to the same high goals and seeing if you can move people along. I think that's what I did when I joined the SEAD Commission four years ago. People were, "That's a long shot. You're not going to get anything into that group." We did. The ideas are there, the goals are there, and I think we have more opportunity than ever to be able to move this forward. And then Phyllis, just to your point, remember, I'm not exiting. So I've got more time to figure out how to grab these words and challenge people to use them correctly.

Merita Irby ([51:58](#)):

I'm going to put one more question in there and a resource. And I think that Ian wants to do a couple of things to wrap this up. But I think it was Shelley Metzenbaum way back in the chat had a question of really about, isn't this the time at the federal level to do the kind of cross agency coordination? So there's both this opportunity as you're saying with education and then it feels like there's a different opportunity as well as we come into this new year, with the new administration, to really set priorities and kind of keep things going as well in terms of that.

Merita Irby ([52:32](#)):

As I tee up that question, Karen, it reminds me of the conversation we've just been having in the last couple of weeks of the need to kind of... Well, we've gone back and looked at the unfinished business reflections on... further reflections on a decade of promoting youth development. And that was 20 years ago that we did with Thaddeus... that you and I did with that way back a while ago, that really was laying out, what's a comprehensive agenda? If we're really trying to move this, now is the time.

Merita Irby ([53:01](#)):

I'm just curious, do you have closing thoughts on what it's really going to take... as you often will say, the power that we carry collectively, the folks that we have on call today, the others that we're connecting with across the field, what is really needed in the federal landscape at this time?

Karen Pittman ([53:19](#)):

Yeah. We're going to have to get it in there and push it, but I think the work that the Forum and others have been doing, we weren't even leading it, but sort of having to do it to really call for a lighthouse office, to call for an office of children and youth, to not just have it be an office that sort of hosts conferences, but really develops a cross agency agenda, that develops and elevates the strong point of view that the Interagency Working Group has put out there. I mean, it is a very strong, very clear commitment to a youth development approach. But we need education to be a strong partner in this with us, because we can't continue to think that what we do is we first fix kids and then we develop them, we fix them and then they can learn.

Karen Pittman ([54:09](#)):

We understand the dynamic between those. So continuing to have the separation of all these other agencies do wraparound services or enrichment things, but it's just the schools who do the important learning, we have to get in there and change that. So if we can do that from the beginning, really getting the science of learning and development and the science of adolescents... And I'm going to keep pushing on adolescents because that's really the place for us to best test out all these ideas and that's the place where 40 years ago, we learned that the deficit policies really sort of come into full bloom for adolescents and young adults.

Karen Pittman ([54:48](#)):

So I think we've got an opportunity to do it. We need to put those mechanisms in place, but we can't just end there. We have to hold them accountable for creating these agendas and we have to use all the existing mechanisms that we have, like the Interagency Working Group, like the fact that we already have the Performance Partnership Pilots in legislation, like the fact that we have strong State Children's Cabinet across about half the states. We have a lot of things that we can use, but we shouldn't settle for just a comprehensive listing of the federal programs that are sort of cross-referenced. We really got to figure out how to get to the heart of this, which is, how do you make sure what we know about child and youth development is at the heart of those programs so that we are not doing harm.

Merita Irby ([55:35](#)):

And how are we thinking about it in a way that is really speaking to different groups of young people and the needs of really each and every young person, this is what it's all about. So you're not going anywhere?

Karen Pittman ([55:48](#)):

Nope.

Merita Irby ([55:48](#)):

Still hanging with us?

Karen Pittman ([55:50](#)):

Yep.

Merita Irby ([55:51](#)):

You're going to keep these conversations going and keep the work going with the Readiness Projects as sort of creative director for our ideas, work with the Readiness Projects, where you're going to continue doing kind of changing the odds conversations and continuing to keep that kind of medium site going and other things so that folks can stay tuned for that. We're going to continue having the Making the Invisible Visible series that we had in November, December. We're going to be continuing with that kind of panel discussion and breakout groups afterwards for people to really dig in. Those are kicking off again later this month.

Merita Irby ([56:31](#)):

It is about ideas, but in terms of just real work that folks are doing, it's about how to bring those in and really embed them in a way that they make a difference. So we are so thrilled that you all joined us here today. I think Ian has some closing wrap up for us with what's happening next. But Karen, thank you. I can't wait for you to just even read all the messages in the chat today, they're heartwarming. But I will say it has been a wild, uproarious, passionate, committed, get it done ride with you over the years and I am thrilled that it's going to continue.

Karen Pittman ([57:18](#)):

Well, I'm here, and I look forward to doing even more, writing even more, and hearing from you all even more. So same email address, keep comments coming. Thank you so much.

Ian Faigley ([57:32](#)):

Well, thank you to you both. AS a 13 ish year veteran of the forum for youth investment, I learned a great deal just about your journeys and it was a real pleasure to be able to listen to this today and very much appreciate it as I'm sure the rest of the audience does as well. Wanted to let you know about a few upcoming events. Karen will be kicking off the new Changing the Odds interview series sponsored by the Readiness Projects. The first session will be February 12th on transformative potential of community-based learner-centered ecosystems that will feature Karen speaking with Kelly Young of Education Reimagined.

Ian Faigley ([58:16](#)):

And as both Karen and Merita have mentioned a few times, over the next several months, Karen will switch back into interviewer mode and host conversations with the Forum's executive team as they take the Forum forward into the next decade. So once again, thank you very much and have a wonderful afternoon, everyone.