

A Conversation with Kimberly Howard Robinson, Ph.D. Transcript
April 21, 2021

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

Okay, we will go ahead and get started as more people enter the conversation. Hello, everyone, welcome to today's Spring Thought Leader Roundtable. Today is the first installment of a three-part series exploring the strategic approaches of The Forum for Youth Investment's work. Karen Pittman, our Co-founder, recently transitioned out of organizational leadership and into a senior fellow role to find more time. We have a national search for our next CEO underway, and the forum's mission and vital work continues to help leaders think differently about what it takes to manage and sustain change so that they are more motivated to act differently and ultimately act together as a part of an allied youth serving field. Those who know the Forum know that three strategic approaches have guided our work since our founding 20 plus years ago. Strengthening practices and programs, improving and aligning policies, and planning and partnering for impact.

Ian Faigley ([00:00:55](#)):

Over the next month, Karen will be sitting down with the forum's three program executives, and will be discussing how the Forum is changing the odds for young people and explore the future of our work to advance equity, research, policy and practice across all the systems and settings that shape young people's lives. Today we'll feature Dr. Kimberly Howard Robinson, Executive Vice President of the Forum and managing director of our Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. The Weikart Center is the forum's most visible effort devoted to strengthening practices and programs. We will be accepting questions and comments via the chat feature on today's session, which is available at the bottom of your screen. We'll also be sharing resources and links throughout the conversation. Thanks very much to Kathrine Plog Martinez for serving in that role today. Today's session is being recorded, later this week, it will be sent to everyone who registered, and also posted to the forum's website, along with any links or resources that are mentioned. So it's now my pleasure to turn it over to Karen.

Karen Pittman ([00:01:53](#)):

Thank you, Ian. Welcome, Kim and welcome guests who are joining us. It really is a pleasure to get this conversation started, and I think in some ways, it's especially great to start it with Kim, who is the newest but not completely new member of the forum's executive team focusing on those three strategies. So for those of you who don't know, obviously you do know now that the Weikart Center is a part of the forum, and we'll talk a little bit about its history, but before we go to the Weikart Center in general, just why does the Forum have three strategies? It's a lot for a small organization to cover, and as an organization really committed to youth development and youth success, and an organization really committed to bringing what we know from research about youth development into policy and practice, it really was important as we moved from being a think tank that was really moving these ideas, towards an action tank, which is not just, let's talk about the ideas but let's help people implement them.

Karen Pittman ([00:03:01](#)):

That we really dug our roots in into what does this mean to help policy makers? What does it mean to help systems and practitioners? I mean, what does it need to help communities and states that are really trying to partner and plan differently to do this work? That's really where those three strategic approaches have come from and over time, where these three spaces have come, where we have these incredible leaders. So I'm really excited today to talk to Kim, Kim as you know is the Managing Director of the Weikart Center. The Weikart Center came directly out of work that we did now 15 plus years ago to really take advantage of the fact that there were a growing number of intermediaries and networks across the country that were bringing together community programs that promoted youth development.

Karen Pittman ([00:03:55](#)):

And asking questions about quality and asking questions about standards, both as a vehicle to obviously have more impact and get more funding, but also as a vehicle to make sure we really were taking the ideas that we all believed in and the approaches we believed and really optimizing the settings that we were creating for young people. So we were delighted to have an opportunity to bring our colleagues then at HighScope who were running youth programs at HighScope into something called quality counts. Where we were really testing out the idea that these newly formed networks could really bring people together and say, "Let's adopt common standards and let's see if we're really living up to these standards in our work in a completely voluntary way."

Karen Pittman ([00:04:39](#)):

We were able to test that out with quality counts in seven States and five cities, or either five States in seven cities, I forget which way it goes. And that really led to a very clear demonstration that there was a hunger for quality improvement done correctly, and led to the formal development of the Weikart Center named after Dave Weikart, who started the HighScope Educational Research Foundation. You all will see the history of this on the Forum site and on the Weikart site. But with that, we've just had a long history of pushing these ideas through, pushing these services through. And a couple of years ago, Charles Smith, who really was then at HighScope and came to be the founder and the first director of the Weikart center transitioned, and we had an opportunity to do a national search. Which was the Forums first national search, because it was so important to get this position filled correctly, to do a search and find the next person to take the Weikart Center into where we are now. And that person is Kim. So Kim, welcome.

Karen Pittman ([00:05:50](#)):

And I've explained to people why the Weikart Center is at the forum, but it would be great if you told us why you're at the Weikart Center. What made you respond to this search and how does this connect to what you were doing before and how does it connect to what you want to be doing?

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:06:08](#)):

Well, thanks for having me here today, Karen, it's always lovely to have a conversation with you, and excited to do so with all of our friends joining us from all around. So I am a developmental psychologist by training, and have been doing applied research throughout the course of my career. And so I knew who David Weikart was because as a developmental psychologist, the Perry Preschool Project and his role in really founding early childhood education as a movement in this country was definitely part of the things that I learned in school as someone doing child and family development work. But I didn't know about the history that goes to the camp that he founded and the focus on adolescents and the legacy of that work that the Weikart Center [[inaudible 00:07:09](#)] and brings forward today. And so it's been an interesting opportunity to connect things that I already knew about and cared about using continuous improvement as a very accessible tool to help people use data and evidence to improve.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:07:31](#)):

My whole reason for being in applied research in general is that I think data can be a powerful tool, but data for data's sake is not super helpful to anyone. And so I have worked in public school systems in New York City and Baltimore City, working on how the district used continuous improvement approaches to use data to improve its policies and practices, and also I've supported school leaders and teachers in using data to improve their practices as well. And then I used that same notion of continuous improvement and I worked at the W.K. Kellogg Foundation working with our grantees, the foundation's grantees around supporting their efforts using data and continuous improvement to know what you're setting out to do and are you making that difference?

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:08:24](#)):

And so when I learned about the Weikart Center's focus on continuous improvement, it was like this is speaking my language, this is the work that I'm about. And I think the Weikart Center's way of packaging an approach to continuous improvement so that it's not just an idea and wouldn't it be great if that's what really happens? But it is what really happens and it's been happening around the country and internationally for well

over a decade and it's really exciting work to be a part of, and it's always active and alive, continuously improving. So, the work never ends, and it's exciting.

Karen Pittman ([00:09:04](#)):

And your enthusiasm is obvious and we were explicitly excited to have someone both gravitate toward the work of the Weikart center, who would also have been sitting in that education space. And one of the phrases that we often use when we talk about the difference between trying to do continuous improvement in youth programs and youth organizations versus in schools, is highest stakes versus low stakes. And our ambitions are huge at the Forum as those of you who know us know and our intent which was Dave Weikert's intent ,was to really bring these approaches and bring these practices into all of the settings where young people spend their time. But both the youth development ideas as really relationship first driven ideas about creating experiences for young people and the openness to really assess and improve was easier to do, starting off in those out of school settings. Which don't have the kind of accountability structures that schools have.

Karen Pittman ([00:10:07](#)):

So when you think about continuous improvement and continuous quality improvement, and in particular, how we've been pulling it together and rolling it out at the Weikart Center and the Forum, talk a little bit more about exactly what you mean, since, as you said, it's an idea that most people have heard the words, but what exactly do we do to turn these words into practice and not just for individual practitioners, but for systems? What does it mean?

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:10:37](#)):

So like I said, continuous improvement is a general approach. Lots of folks talk about using continuous improvement. The Weikart Center's approach to continuous improvement is assess, plan, improve. And so you start with some sort of data an assessment, in our case it's an observational assessment of what's happening in a program between staff and young people. And then you plan, you use the data that you collected as part of that assessment to reflect on what you've learned in that process of gathering data and set goals for improvement. And then you engage in those improvement practices. And so in our model that involves a series of professional development opportunities, supportive coaching to help really provide opportunities for practice and skill building. But it really makes that cycle something that is practical and tangible.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:11:34](#)):

So the Weikart Center's approach, we call the youth program quality intervention which there was this beautiful randomized control trial which, telling my researcher because I think an RCT is beautiful but, that was conducted and finished, this was obviously way pre-dated my time here. What really tested if we do these continuous improvement practices, will we improve? And the answer was, yes, you will improve. If you do these practices, you will see improvement as a result. And so we have an evidence base that supports this and a process that makes it easy to say, "We want to improve so you can help us know how to improve. And all of that, the things that I just talked about, assess, plan, improve are really focused on the experiences of young people, what we call the point of service, which we use that phrase because we're really talking about all of the places where young people are spending their time and interacting with adults.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:12:35](#)):

So that point of service could be an after-school program, it could be a summer camp, it could be a faith-based program, or it could be a school. All of those things are points of service where young people are coming together and learning and growing. But in order for those point of service practices to take place we have to take into account the way that the people who work with young people are embedded in systems. And so we have a multilevel systems approach that really starts with, what are the policies at the organizational policy level, but also at the broader policy level that really set the stage for prioritizing high quality learning experiences for young people. And then how does that set a cascade into motion that then allows leaders to prioritize investing in their staff around the professional development skill building that they need to support young people. And to having those opportunities to take time to plan and reflect and engage in those improvement practices.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:13:40](#)):

And so I think one of the things that's so exciting about our approach to continuous improvement is that it really anchors accountability at the system level. It's not on the young person or on the staff who are working with young people to be accountable to a particular set of outcomes, if the system hasn't provided the supports and resources to create the conditions where any of them that is possible. And so I don't shy away from the word accountability, I used to have that word in my title in Baltimore city public schools. But often in K-12 school environments, accountability has such a punitive high stakes, if the test scores don't turn out the way that you hope that they will, there are significant consequence for teachers, for schools, for communities. And really our approach which is much lower stakes is really, if you want people to use data to improve, you have to make it not something that is going to threaten their livelihood.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:14:46](#)):

You have to create that safe space where people can be safe and supported to learn, which is what we know young people need and is also what staff need in order to improve. And so I just love the idea of accountability at the system level, because if we're not creating the conditions where staff can be successful, then that is where the accountability needs to be, not anywhere else. And as those conditions are created, then we can talk about what sort of progress we expect to see over time.

Karen Pittman ([00:15:18](#)):

I just want to reinforce how important what you just said is now and how exceptional it was 10 and 15 years ago when we started these conversations for us to push to that level. And before the Forum Youth Investment there was the center for youth development and policy research where Merita Irby co-founder of the Forum and I were, and there we developed something called the Advancing Youth Development curriculum, AYD, and the HighScope had the methods trainings that they were doing. And both of these were opportunities to really bring community youth workers in and give them this professional development. In both cases what we learned was that it didn't stick. And it's not that it didn't stick because people weren't excited about the training and they weren't excited about the support. It's when they got back into their programs, you didn't have that overarching structure that really gave them permission to try what they have learned, gave them permission even more important, to share, to talk about and share what they had learned and then be allowed to help the organization grow because they had been sent off to training.

Karen Pittman ([00:16:35](#)):

So the training would dissipate after people found that they weren't getting rewarded for it rather than growing, because the organization made that investment. So on both sides, we were looking for opportunities to say, "All right, we've got to push this up. It's not enough to set up training and professional development and certification programs for the staff if we're not really introducing these ideas at the system level." That's sort of commonplace now, but it really was a transformative moment, and it's really the reason we brought both Highscope and, at that point, the AED because we'd left the AED but the AYD curriculum together to say, "We've got to blend these things together and have this different model." The second thing that I would say, just to underscore the importance is continuous improvement often is described as a plan, do, study, improve approach.

Karen Pittman ([00:17:29](#)):

That's the classic way that you do continuous improvement. And it really is significant that when we sat down to say, "What's the Weikart model? What's the model that's going to work in this very flexible, non-structured environment called youth programs that we're bringing it in?" that we started with assess, plan improve. The assess had to go first, not sit down and do a plan about what you think you're going to do because if you're accountable for delivering some kind of content and then you do it, and then you study it to see if you've got the results that you wanted, and then you do improvement. We needed people to assess because we didn't know the setting that they were bringing it into. They had to do that themselves. And so it's not just that we started with assess we've also then had to say, "What are the questions that we want to ask that could be applicable in a camp, a sports program, an arts program, a prevention program where young people and adults are coming together?" We don't know what the content is.

Karen Pittman ([00:18:32](#)):

And we don't even that much know what the age group and age structure is. So what are those underlying conditions of quality that we're going to be looking for that are leading to these unique experiences? And again, as we go into dig into this a little deeper, the education world has gotten there now to say, "Oh, we've got to actually crank back and look at the learning environment." But it was a big deal then for us to start continuous quality improvement, not with the, what's the youth outcome we're trying to get? And therefore what's the content we're trying to provide, and therefore, how do we plan to deliver that content? But to actually assess the environment. So what are the components of continuous quality improvement approach as done by Weikart? How flexible are they? Just dig in a little bit more into what exactly it is that we've done, because this is a pretty impressive thing that has now been scaled up. And it's even more impressive that it's been scaled up voluntarily across the country.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:19:38](#)):

Well, I think I'm going to take this opportunity to point to a very exciting big reveal, Katherine just posted the link in the chat. The Weikart Center is actually, this very day, launching our new website. So if you've followed our work for any length of time you might've noticed that our website was in need of some updating and refreshing. And we have officially joined the Forum's website as we are a part of the Forum and so our new online home is at forumfyi.org/weikartcenter. And we're really proud of how everything is laid out and explained in a way that walk step by step through what the pieces are, why they were designed to fit together and how they can be leveraged to support program quality improvement efforts. So the start of it is really the sort of assessment piece and as you described, that opportunity to get a bearing of where you need to begin knowing that this could be used flexibly in all kinds of different settings.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:20:49](#)):

And so we have a number of different program, quality assessments. I think our website calls them flavors, PQA flavors, there's the youth PQA, Youth Program Quality Assessment, is where this work really started. And then it was adapted to the school age to support school age programs, sort of scaled down to be appropriate for programs serving slightly younger children, a couple of years ago we launched in 2019, a new social and emotional learning program, quality assessment that gets into a little bit more explicit practices to support social and emotional learning. But they're all... All of the flavors of the PQA are all built around these fundamental ideas that young people need to feel safe and supported in order to learn and to lead.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:21:41](#)):

And so what we call the pyramid of program quality, which you'll see as soon as you click on that website, has the base of the pyramid is safe space, a safe environment for young people to feel just the emotional, psychological, physical safety, to be able to enter in to a learning experience. And then from there we can meet their developmental needs and create a supportive environment that will provide opportunities for age appropriate learning. Then opportunities for an interactive environment where young people have opportunities to interact with one another and with supportive adults and build those sort of empathy and teamwork skills in relationship with other people. And then the top of the pyramid is engaging environment, that's really about young people being actively engaged in their own learning, having agency, having voice, having choice in their own learning.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:22:39](#)):

And we know in so many after school programs or community-based programs of all kinds, it's those opportunities for young people to really explore and pursue their own interests, that they really learn a lot about who they are, what they are about, how they want to be as people in the world. And so that is all of our program quality assessments are really about identifying the practices that staff engage in to support creating a learning environment that has those characteristics. And so then from there, there's a set of supports related to planning. We do a lot of workshops, David Weikart was pioneering in this active participatory approach to learning. He really believed that young people, even as young as pre-school, should be agents in their own learning. And that it's not about instruction being given to, or delivered upon children but that kids should be active in their own learning.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:23:43](#)):

And so we think that in general, things that are good for young people are also good for adults, and we try to make learning experiences that are very active and participatory so that people will come to the workshops and learn about the skills that we're talking about, really have that experience of what it feels like to be actively engaged in the learning. And so we do that with planning with data, taking something that oftentimes people are like, "Do I really want to go to a workshop called planning with data?" But you would be surprised, there's beach balls involved. It's really great. And there's opportunities to really think about being engaged in that learning process. And then our improvement workshops, you mentioned the history of the youth work methods workshops, we have these very targeted professional development opportunities that focus on explicit practices that you can attend a workshop and walk away with some new tangible strategies that you could put to work the next day or later that day in your work with young people.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:24:48](#)):

But the idea that it's not just the going to the professional development, but it's having the opportunity to practice. And so we also really emphasize the role of leaders and managers as coaches who are able to help people to reflect on their own practice. So often we all know this, you learn something and you try to put it in practice, but having a chance to reflect on "Here's what I thought I did, but how did that actually work out?" It really helps to solidify that learning. And so we started with a set of 10 youth work methods workshops that really describe the practices that helped to create a safe, supportive, interactive, and engaging learning environment for young people. And as part of our SEL work, we've added another set of 10 because we all have practices and strategies to really support youth work that are more focused explicitly on social, emotional learning.

Karen Pittman ([00:25:49](#)):

So I'm going to ask Ian to throw the quest graphic up because I think probably lots of folks on the call know the pyramid, and we'll put that up as well. And the pyramid, obviously if you didn't hear it in that, for those who don't know it, it's very consistent with Maslow's needs hierarchy, with any way that we come at this we have to take care of those basic needs, emotional and physical safety, and then move up into that idea of real engagement. But one of the things that has been really useful over the past couple of years and makes me both most proud and excited of the early investments we made and taking Dave Weikart's realization of active learning and taking it to scale through the Weikart center, and getting it ready for this very moment, is this commitment, as Kim has said, a couple of times to recognize that even if your big goal is to improve youth outcomes. Whether it's high school graduation, it's academic confidence, it's employment, whatever it is, the reality is how learning happens is young people go into an environment.

Karen Pittman ([00:27:09](#)):

The quality of that environment determines their level of engagement, the level of that engagement and the quality of what is being offered in the experiences really helps them develop these skills and beliefs that we talk about. And then if they really get those, we used to talk about getting them into their abilities backpack, so they can take them with them, then they will take them wherever they go and they will be more successful in whatever it is that they're doing. But that idea, which you can see gets called quest, is one that has long undergirded this whole approach to assess, plan, improve. Because we want you to assess the quality of what you're creating before you make a plan to improve it. Don't just make a plan to improve it based on, "We need kids to have these outcomes, so we're going to assume we've got the right kind of context and we're just going to pour more content in."

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

It really was pushing it from the other direction. And what's been so exciting about watching [inaudible 00:28:06] or watching K-12 education catch up with youth development, sorry for the K-12 folks on the call, but really that's what's happened. Watching K-12 education kept up with youth development, not because it didn't intuitively understand this, but because the accountability structure was so focused on the outcomes, is that in things like the National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic development, which just did a big report and wrapped up a couple of years ago. In now the science of learning and development, this is now being reinforced in really, really powerful ways that are now driving the education folks to go, "Oh, we have to

pay a lot more attention to the context in which learning is happening before we can expect that young people are having experiences that are going to get the kind of outcomes that we want."

Karen Pittman ([00:28:57](#)):

So I'm going to hand it back to you, Kim, but I just wanted to make sure we got that up there because it's so important to what we're doing. It's so important to why we have both the start with a pyramid in terms of the standards and getting people to really own and embrace. That's what good looks like. That's what quality looks like before the assessment. And that's the other thing that's been so important. It's not just that we sort of walk in with an assessment tool. It's an assessment against standards that people have actually embraced, which is what's made this so successful. So we've got this sort of underlying theory of how learning happens and basically how good practice happens in a setting. What's changed? When we put this thing together, we put it together as a pretty tight package. And frankly, we put it together as a tight package because we were working with a bunch of programs that didn't have a lot of options. Didn't have a huge amount of capacity in terms of collecting data, et cetera, doing training.

Karen Pittman ([00:30:02](#)):

So we were looking for the most efficient way to package it together, but fast forward 10 or 15 years, and the world has changed and it had changed even before COVID. So how has this packaging working now?

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:30:15](#)):

So one of the things that we really are trying to emphasize in our work now, and this I think was amplified and emphasized even more in the last year is how flexible these tools really are and can be. Continuous quality improvement is by definition, a flexible approach that you take to... can leverage to systematize how you go about learning and growing and improving. And the YPQ was sort of originally packaged as a way to say, if you want to just be all in on this improvement journey, we've got a way to make that easy for you. And that's still very much the case. We hope that working with Weikart Center really does help to make that easy for organizations to really embed these practices and processes in the way that they do business. But we also know that there's... as we've collected different pieces of it, being able to leverage the different pieces and parts in different ways is really important.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:31:17](#)):

So as we launched our social and emotional learning focus resources a couple of years ago, and I think we'll talk more about the history of that in a few minutes, but we've been finding that there's really an opportunity to mix and match, right? The sorts of skills that support positive youth development, also support social and emotional learning, and the sorts of skills, the adult practices that support young people's social and emotional development are the sorts of practices that support positive youth development outcomes. And so the particular program, quality assessment doesn't matter so much the particular workshops, there's ways to leverage this and make it work. And over the course of the last year, we worked with organizations around the country and internationally that were basically breaking the thing apart and saying, "We need to do this differently." Programs are operating differently, young people have different needs, our staff have different needs. And so how can we take these pieces and leverage them to be what we need? And that's exactly what we try to do.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:32:29](#)):

We always emphasize this is always about meeting people where they are and helping them get to where they need to be. And so we think of our tools and resources and supports as a variety of assets that can be leveraged to help people in organizations improve their work to serve young people. And this quest framework, I think is so helpful that sort of comes back to say, you have to start with the elements of quality and the things that are described in the PQA may not be the only things that you have to think about as a program leader in terms of quality, but they should certainly be on the radar in terms of the staff practices that set the stage for young people to really be engaged in the experience so that they can learn.

Karen Pittman ([00:33:20](#)):

Great. You mentioned SEL and sort of SEL and youth development and how they fit together, and I want to sort of dig into that for a few minutes as you've said, one thing just to the truth in advertising, when SEL started to become the conversation and schools were talking about SEL, and how do we do SEL, the first response apparently from the youth development basis, we've always been doing SEL. Which was absolutely true, we have. I mean, if you're not leading with content, but you're leading with relationships, which comes from the fact that these are voluntary programs, these are programs that we want young people to want to come to because they're interested in the content, they're interested in being with their peers, they're interested in having new experiences. The whole idea of these organizations is that, sure they are serving a purpose if they're working with younger kids and families need childcare, but it's not just that. These are opportunities for active learning. These are opportunities for what we're beginning to call flexible learning, not just formal learning where I have to go here because I have to learn algebra, or I have to learn this.

Karen Pittman ([00:34:32](#)):

I'm coming here because I want to be able to have more opportunities to shape these flexible learning experiences. So knowing that we have that, the idea of, if you look at any of the youth organizations and you look at how they describe themselves, right? You see a lot of SEL language baked into 100 year old youth organization, right? We want young people to be strong, smart, and bold. We want them to have character. All have that social, emotional and cognitive ideas, those skills and mindsets are things that we were already working on. So in that sense, it was true that, of course, we've always had those as a priority more than formal transfer of content that's going to be graded or certified. Although some organizations do that, and that's a part of it. But when we really got pushed, and this was really when Weikart had an opportunity to step in and say again, in the same way that 15 years ago, we said, you buy the approach, but are you really doing it as well as you could?

Karen Pittman ([00:35:39](#)):

We had to step back and go, "Yeah, we know we're all committed to social, emotional and cognitive development, but are our practices doing everything we can to optimize our experiences?" And so Weikart had an opportunity to work with a SCE, Susan Crown Exchange to sort of ask that question. And what did we learn from that incredible opportunity?

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:36:02](#)):

So the work with the Susan Chronic Exchange was called the SEL challenge, started around 2013 and was really focused on highlighting the practices that exemplary programs would rate us very high quality programs on a PQA that they were engaging in to support social and emotional learning for their young people. And so we recruited, I believe there are eight programs that were from different places around the country working with adolescents. And it was really an opportunity to just learn from them, learn from expert practitioners. What are you doing to really to support young people and in the fullness of the fact that learning is social and emotional? And one of the things that we learned in our thinking about what are the social and emotional competencies that although the relational focus of our framework and certainly the sense of creating a safe space, creating a sense of belonging for young people in youth programs has always been there, that there was still a little bit more of a preference of cognitive development and a little bit more on social, but really a dearth in emotional development.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:37:26](#)):

And so, we had opportunities around skill building and, opportunities to practice certain building skills and learning things, opportunities for teamwork and collaboration. But what we found was that there was a gap around what we came to call emotion management, emotion coaching around empathy, and really thinking about the emotional aspects of learning and really supporting young people to navigate those aspects of their learning, was really critical as well. And so what we learned from those exemplary programs that we worked with as part of the SEL challenge, was that there were additional practices that they were engaging in that really helped to support their young people to develop social and emotional competencies that may or may not have come about without that level of intentionality.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:38:26](#)):

And so I like to think of the Weikart center's role in that work was really... The practitioners are already doing the things that are supporting young people. And we came alongside and said, "Can we understand how we can describe those practices and how we can amplify those practices so that other people who aren't doing them, but would like to improve, can learn how to do that as well?" And so the preparing youth to thrive booklet which is available on our website, I think the link will be in the chat. Really what we call the thrive guide is very... breaks it down in a really practical ways. What are some of the practices that organizations need that staff should engage in to really support young people in their social, emotional, and cognitive learning? That fullness of all of those things. And related to that, we realized that we had to update the... Since we learned about these new practices, that we needed to add new items to a PQA. And so out of that work, the culmination of it was what we now call the SEL PQA, the social emotional learning program quality assessment.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:39:48](#)):

And it really highlights both the emotional, the social and the cognitive aspects of learning. And I really think it's the emotional aspects that are the newest that are sort of like, "Okay, we're going to talk about emotions. We're going to label emotions." The idea of reframing conflict was always in the youth PQA, but one of the things that we saw about that was that if a conflict didn't occur, then you didn't have a chance to reframe it. And it sort of positioned emotional experiences as something that had to have some negative balance in order to need to be addressed. And so emotion coaching is really more about, there are opportunities to support emotions, whether they be positive or negative, whether they manifest in conflict or in other ways. And that, that is part of youth work as well.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:40:45](#)):

And so playing that role of amplifying the practices of these exemplary programs and helping to break down the steps for other people to build those skills as well. One of the things we found in that process was we started to break down, here's how to support young people in managing their emotions, for example. And I mean, lots of adults struggle with managing emotions if we didn't think that was the case before this year, I think this year has been a struggle in managing emotions. And so we realized that in order to prepare adults to support young people, that we have to prepare them to be reflective about their own emotional, social, and cognitive skills and assumptions and mindsets. Because that is really going to shape how they interact with young people.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:41:40](#)):

And so in our new youth work methods around social and emotional learning, each of the strands, whether it's social, emotional, or cognitive, begins with a foundations and self-awareness which I think in the initial year that... well, it was launched in the fall of 2019 and I think initially folks were like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. We want to just get to the youth work." And this year, I think it has been, "Oh, some of the space for staff to be able to process their own emotional experiences as they prepare to support young people or their social experiences or their assumptions around cognitive development." All of those things. I think it's made a lot more sense in a year where a lot of things don't makes sense. But we've needed to support people in new ways.

Karen Pittman ([00:42:31](#)):

Good. Well, I want to make sure we have time to talk about the new ways you're supporting people, but before we move on to that, and I know Katherine's doing an incredible job of dropping things into the chat as fast as you can say them. But the two volumes of the thrive work are both very different, but both worth looking at, the methodological one is important because it really does explain the methodology behind it and it does give you the data. And just one of the things I want us to make sure we understand that was so important for us to do on our own terms with youth organizations, was to demonstrate that when you see these kinds of intentional high-quality experiences put in place, young people who come into these programs we divided them into three, and the bottom third in terms of their own social, emotional skills actually caught up with the other kids in the program.

Karen Pittman ([00:43:32](#)):

Now, I don't know of a study in school that shows that much growth. But the potential power have being in these flexible environments that really start with safety and belonging and give kids a chance to come up through this is really important. So the research is there that shows that. The other thing, when you go to the

first volume that's so important, is the fact that the ticket to admission for these eight high quality organizations was literally their ability to be able to deconstruct what they did. It wasn't that we went in and tested them and said, "Okay, we have found the organizations that are in the top 5%." They happened to be in that top 5% when we did the assessment, but how they got selected was that they had to say, "These are the skills and competencies we are trying to help young people build. We named them. We talk about them with our young people, and these are the experiences that they experienced throughout the arc of our program that we think contribute to those.

Karen Pittman ([00:44:35](#)):

And that there's a certain amount of logic about why we do what we do, when we do it." So these were incredibly intentional programs, and I just want to underscore that word intentionality. And that's another thing that comes along with the flexibility of being able to design youth programs. You can actually customize to better meet the characters who could be adults, the setting, and the young people to optimize those experiences. So having said all that, let's jump into the present as we're getting to the last quarter of this conversation. It has been an incredible year, it's amazing that half of your time with us has been in COVID. But what is it that the Weikart center has been able to do to support programs as we've gone through this year?

Karen Pittman ([00:45:24](#)):

And how do you see that helping us be more intentional about how we broaden, how we get this continuous quality improvement work out both to a broader swath of programs in the community space, but also take advantage of the walls that are softening and get this into a school environment? Where do we go next and what have you been doing that's been helpful?

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:45:47](#)):

So like many organizations a year ago, we were scrambling to figure out how we support so much of what we historically have done is traveled to have these really great learning experiences in rooms full of people. And so this fundamental assumption, and I think we had thought you can't really do that if you're not in a room with people, you're not going to have the same magic if you're not able to be in the same space together. And so we hadn't tried really to be able to do that virtually, and we had to figure out how to do that.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:46:29](#)):

And so over the course of the last year, we've adapted all of the sort of components of the youth program quality intervention and our approach to continuous improvement to be able to be delivered in a virtual setting. So my team is full of Zoom wizards who are just amazing at creating these really rich learning experiences and replicating that sense of active, participatory learning in a virtual environment. But we're finding that this is a new asset that has value and that will continue to do. So I think, hopefully in the coming year, we'll be able to go back to having some things happening in person as I know we all miss that, but we also, sometimes the ability to be able to gather with people around the country without having to travel and without having to figure out how to support all of the costs that are associated with that really makes it possible that this can reach more people and be even more supportive.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:47:39](#)):

And so we're going to continue to offer our materials in these wider variety of formats going forward. We're also really mindful of how we can support learning communities in the networks that we serve. We have done a lot of the just communities of practice, whether that's focused on bringing people with coaching roles together, to think about how they can improve their practice as coaches and supporting leaders and supporting staff. Or whether that's bringing folks together to think about building their skills around emotion centered practices. We actually have a learning series that's launching in a couple of weeks, the registration is still open and the link is in the chat around our emotional centered practices series. And so we're trying to identify ways that we can again, meet people where they are and leverage all of these powerful tools in unique and better ways.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:48:44](#)):

And one of the definite things we have spent a lot of time thinking this past year as we're navigating, not only working from home and being able to support programs that are not operating in the same sorts of ways. But also really being very intentional and purposeful about thinking about our role in dismantling racism and structural oppression in the United States and beyond. And thinking about how our tools are reaching out in so many places and how we can play a stronger role in supporting organizations to really use our continuous improvement tools as a lever to further their equity and justice work. And so we have some new workshops around equity and belonging that really helps leaders to think about the elements of their organizational culture, how they support staff, how they think about their organizational policies and practices. That really in youth development, we know young people having a sense of belonging is really critical.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:49:59](#)):

But I think we need to dig deeper and unpack that depending on the cultural context and background and who the young people are and who the staff are and what the setting is that they're coming together in, the likelihood that all young people will experience that sense of belonging is not the same for everyone. And I think that the opportunity for the Weikart center to really lean into the forum's mission about changing the odds, in order to change the odds for young people, we have to know what the odds are. Which means we have to have better data about who's being served in programs that are using the YPQI. We have to have better data about who are the staff in programs that are using the YPQI. And so our fantastic director of research, Dr. Krista Collins, has been revising our approach to how we gather this information so that it isn't look around the room and judge for yourself the demographics that you see before you.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:50:58](#)):

Which is not an appropriate way to try to collect that information, but to collect that in a systematic way, as we think about setting up the systems for gathering PQA data, so that we can start to, in a more robust way, really dis-aggregate and understand for whom our programs high quality. And who are the staff who are best positioned to offer high quality experiences for young people. And what are the ways in which the practices that we've always described can be used to further equity and justice, and what are ways that the practices that we've always described help you to avoid the things that you should see if your goal is to try to further equity and justice. And so we have been grappling with those and are grateful to our partners in the field who are also grappling and pushing us as well, to be able to take a stronger stand in that space. And that is really the area that we are going to be moving in the year to come even more strongly.

Karen Pittman ([00:52:10](#)):

And it has been an intentional journey and I want to flag that for folks. One, it was very much a commitment that the organization that the Forum made three or four years ago to say, "We have to be able to do this." As many organizations where, we've all been on this journey to be much more intentional about what we're doing when we're talking about equity. So we're not just at the Forum talking about what does it take to really fulfill this commitment and not just have aligned youth fields, but really create these equitable learner center, community based ecosystems where the dynamic relationships are there. The equity word is so critical for all the reasons that Kim just said and the lift that Kim and Krista and the team are doing to really go from basically an agnostic system in which programs or programs and data was data, and the quality was quality.

Karen Pittman ([00:53:06](#)):

Based on these broad principles of your development, to one in which we really are honest about saying, "We're not sure you can be a high quality program in which you get, an all. Like, all of your kids are feel belonging, and all of your kids are engaged if we don't know more about you and your kids and your setting." So we can't just come in with the quality tool and assume that we can understand this as a quality context. We are actually got to ask more questions. That was really, really an important thing to do and it required a bunch of shifts, it required some capacity building investments to be able to do that. And it's a journey that we're on. In the couple minutes that we have left, and I think there was a question about how to get to methods, but I think it's being answered on the chat.

Karen Pittman ([00:53:53](#)):

So I want to sort of pull in a couple of minutes on where and how the whole Weikart team is embracing, as you said, this bigger change in yards conversation, which has been the journey that I've been on since I met Dave Weikart back in 1969. But also the jury that the organization is on and where we are in this idea of embedding the incredible lessons that you have in this broader conversation on ecosystem. So there are two things to talk about quickly, first the Forum and Weikart have been steady contributors to a book series about out of school time, and Kim and Tom [inaudible 00:54:39] are now the editors of the latest volume of this book series, which is called It Takes An Ecosystem. So take a minute to tell us about that book series, and then we can post the whole series so folks can go back and read the other chapters that we've written along way.

Karen Pittman ([00:54:53](#)):

And then I'm going to ask you for a minute about why this design principle work is so important. But It Takes An Ecosystem, why does it take an ecosystem and why did it take a book?

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:55:03](#)):

So the It Takes An Ecosystem book about understanding the people, places and possibilities that support learning and development, will be coming out this fall so stay tuned later in the year. It will be the sixth book in the current issues and out of school time series by information aid publishing and Karen and her writing the foreword for this book reflected on the fact that she has contributed to many of the books in this series. Which has been such a resource for the out-of-school-time field, really grappling with very important topics. One of them, I actually have it right next to me because I always have one of these books right next to me. Around social and emotional learning and out of school time has a chapter that highlights some of the Weikart centers work in social and emotional learning and the lessons learned from the SEL challenge that we were just talking about. But this book on ecosystems is really thinking about how this idea of the allied youth feels, how people who... The adults and systems that serve young people wherever they are, that it's not a system, there's all kinds of systems. And that what we really need is an ecosystem that really brings people together.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([00:56:21](#)):

That leverages the science of learning and development, understanding how kids learn, how young people need to be supported, to learn and to thrive in their development. And how creating and structuring, learning ecosystems that really take into account that it doesn't matter which system or which setting you're in. That young people still need the same sets of things that, that can really set the stage for re-imagining how we organize supports for our children and families. And how we can really create a more equitable communities, equitable systems and better support changing the odds that we're seeking to do. So we're very excited in the throws of the finalizing the chapters but we'll be excited to launch that into the world later this year.

Karen Pittman ([00:57:16](#)):

Wonderful. And I know that we won't do justice to the second topic so I'll ask Katherine to drop the blog into the chat. But we will also, probably in the next couple of weeks I hope, be releasing as a part of the soul's Alliance, which the Forum is one of the organizations and the science of learning and development alliance from one of the governing partners, be releasing two volumes of playbooks on design principles. The blue wheel, as we love to call it, really is the thing that parallels in some ways the pyramid and basically says, if you're going to optimize learning environments, it starts with relationships, these developmental relationships, you have to make sure, you really do have to check in to make sure every young person feels safe and belonging. You've got to really put in rich instructional practices and knowledge focus it can't just be come here because you want to hang out.

Karen Pittman ([00:58:11](#)):

Then we've got to really make sure that we're providing those integrated supports as needed and then finally we do have to name those skillsets and mindsets that we want people to grow in and make sure that we're providing time to practice. All of that's in there, all of us have to do all of those. The big deal is we say, these are non-negotiables. If you're in the red on any of them, you're not doing justice for kids, and we have to find ways to measure them. So there's an alignment that we're having between the ways that we've been talking about program quality and the ways that we're now in a broader space, talking about contexts where learning and development are happening and how we measure it.

Karen Pittman ([00:58:49](#)):

So these two design principle books that are going to be coming out one for the K-12 space, one for community programs and Weikart center team was a part of helping to make sure those community programs are happening, those examples were being pulled together. We can pick that theme up when we go into the next conversation, which will be with Merita Irby, who's the Forums co-founder and also the head of the managing partner for the big picture approach consulting and training. But I'm going to give Ian a minute back in case he wants to tell us anything about the next series. And before I leave, thank Kim for an incredible conversation. So Ian next things that you want people to know and the last minute.

Ian Faigley ([00:59:36](#)):

Thank you so much to Karen and Kim for your time today. As Karen just mentioned, the next of these three part series will be on April 28th with Merita Irby, covering the planning and partnering for impact work. And then May six we'll have Thaddeus Ferber on improving and aligning policies. And if you haven't signed up yet, we strongly encourage you to join us next month in the virtual world. May 19th and 20th, we'll be holding our ninth annual ready by 21 national meeting. And we very much hope to see all of you there. All right. Thank you very much. Have a good afternoon.

Kimberly Howard Robinson ([01:00:14](#)):

Thank you.

Karen Pittman ([01:00:15](#)):

Thank you.