

A Conversation with Merita Irby Transcript
April 28, 2021

Ian Faigley ([00:01](#)):

Good afternoon everyone, and welcome to today's spring Thought Leader round table. Today is the second 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 to a senior fellow role to find more time. With the national search for our next CEO underway, 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. And those are strengthening practices and programs, improving and aligning policies and planning and partnering for impact. Over the next month, Karen will sit down with the forum's three program executives to discuss 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.

Ian Faigley ([01:05](#)):

Two weeks ago, Karen sat down with Kim Robinson, head of the Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, and today will feature Merita Irby, the forum's co-founder and executive vice president as well as the managing partner of Big Picture Approach Training & Consulting, the forum's most visible effort devoted to planning and partnering for impact. We will be accepting questions and comments via the chat feature on today's session, which is available at the bottom of your screen. Today's session is being recorded. Next week, it will be sent to everyone who registered and also posted to the forum website along with any additional resources that are mentioned. So it's now my pleasure to turn it over to Karen.

Karen Pittman ([01:45](#)):

Thank you, Ian. And this is a great opportunity for us, for those of you who are on the call. And I think equally important as we're making these transitions for us to just have this recorded for history. So as Ian said, and Ian you can go ahead and start to change the slides, as Ian said, the forum really has, since its inception, really focused on three broad strategies. These ideas of improving and aligning policies, planning and partnering for impact and strengthening programs and practices. And depending on who you are, you may know the forum more for one of those things and the other. So we thought we would really dig in to all of these one at a time and make sure people know what's going on behind them, what the history was and where we're going.

Karen Pittman ([02:34](#)):

So as we zoom into planning and partnering for impact, you can go to the next slide, Ian, this is straight from the website. We really have from the beginning, been trying to do four things, really sharpen and promote key ideas about youth development, about what you success looks like and about how we can really hold leaders to have shared accountability for their progress. Really focusing on building the capacity of change. Oriented leaders should do this work starting by thinking differently. And we call them boundary spanners, and that's great. And then we really zoom in to say, "If you're really boundary spanners, and you're trying to do change, what do we know about change management, what do we know about managing change, especially when you're trying to influence change and things that you don't exactly control?" We do this locally and we've done this nationally. We go back and forth in terms of which one we lead with over time, but these really have been the strategies behind the work as we put the forum together.

Karen Pittman ([03:37](#)):

But what's important to know is that these strategies in their inception really predate the co-founding of The Forum for Youth Investment, and go way back to when Merita actually joined me at The Center for Youth Development and policy research. And I had had the pleasure of serving with [Milbrey McLaughlin 00:03:57] on the Carnegie Commission on Adolescent Development, where a matter of time came out and was looking for a senior researcher. And Milbrey said, "Without a doubt, you have to talk to Merita." So thinking that Milbrey is brilliant, I talked to Merita. And Merita joined us at The Center for Youth Development in 1994. She may correct me. She usually corrects my dates.

Karen Pittman (04:22):

But, we really had this whirlwind experience. She joined in '94. Several months later, we had an opportunity to go start this president's crime prevention council in the White House. She came along with me to get that started. That didn't last very long. We then took our ideas internationally into The International Youth Foundation. Did that for a while. Had an opportunity with America's Promise to bring those lessons about how we do policy and practice and partnership work, brought that back into the U.S. through what was originally called IYFUS. And then as that work really grew to the point that we needed a new organization for it, we created the forum. All of that happened in about the span of four and a half years.

Karen Pittman (05:08):

So as I turn to Merita, I have to turn with, first, enormous gratitude that she hung in there through the first five years through that many transitions. Second, that she's still with us as the co-founder of the forum. But I want to just start by saying, Merita, clearly you didn't sign up to get five jobs in four years when you came to join me at The Center for Youth Development, what was it that attracted you to this work in the beginning?

Merita Irby (05:33):

Thank you, Karen. And it's going to be fun to have this conversation today since I got to interview you a couple of months ago as you were just making this transition. So, delighted to be here, delighted to have folks joining us for afternoon tea. And I've been thinking about this as we, is it's a little bit of this trip down memory lane is happening at this time that we've just been through this incredible momentous year, where there's been a lot of time for reflection, and there's a lot of time to think about how the roots of the work really are all carried forward into the work that we're doing today.

Merita Irby (06:07):

So as we zoom back on what made it attractive in the first place, [inaudible 00:06:12] that question and why hang in? Before I worked with you, there was a time, pre Karen, where I was an eighth grade teacher. I was a youth worker. I actually had an after-school program called the Culture Club that met in the local library East Palo Alto, which is also where I taught at eighth grade. I was a researcher on the work with Milbrey and Shirley Brice Heath at Stanford that was on urban sanctuaries. And it really was starting with the same questions I think that we've been seeing in this past year, is the with the urban sanctuaries work, what we were really interested in exploring was we get a sense of just how important schools are in the lives of young people. Family is critically important and we've been seeing that more than ... It's been even more visible in this past year.

Merita Irby (07:06):

But also community organizations. Community-based organizations that work with young people, what did those look like? This was 30 years ago, when we started this work, sorry. And it was like, what really makes them tick? And so I actually got to hang out for five years in youth organizations and Chicago and Cabrini-Green and Logan Square, greater Humboldt Park and Fort Worth and the Bay Area, a little bit in Pittsburgh as well. And we were just trying to figure out both what made them work for young people, but also what needed to be happening in the community around them to help those organizations be strong and what role they played in just helping young people navigate the realities that they found themselves in. That was my grounding and my roots in this work, always interested in that combination of what happens inside of schools, but what was happening in community based organizations and how did that really connect them with families?

Merita Irby (08:07):

So, coming to work with you, I didn't know it. I don't know if you remember this. It was February 22nd of 1994. And my first day on the job, you said, "We have this proposal due to Carnegie by Friday, can you write it?" I didn't know that was actually a proposal to pay for my job. It turned out that it was actually a proposal to pay for this work on school community partnerships that we did with Michelle Cahill. It was really looking at the range of kinds of school community partnerships that were in play at that time and why they were central to making this kind of work happen. So that [inaudible 00:08:40] that was perfect. That was a perfect drop-in in terms of the work.

Merita Irby (08:44):

And the other big project, again, I think about this in both this cross system work we do and then also the deep dive, it's just really understanding community organizations well, is this work that we called The Monograph. It was with Chapin Hall. It was I think 115 youth serving organizations across the country that you had pulled together all this information and you needed a typology. And you said, "Tell me how these things all hang together." And I remember this much like the proposal for the school committee partnerships work, I remember this as my second all-nighter when I was working for you, where I thought I'd have to have this done by tomorrow morning. And I spread out all these organizations, and I made this giant matrix. And then what brought it into the next day and laid it out in the giant conference table and was like, "I think this is how these things hang together. This is what they're about. This is what they do. This is what they have in common." And you said, "Okay, cool."

Merita Irby (09:38):

And then we wrote through that, it was the people, places, possibilities. But I will say, but that is where I came up with one of the piece of advice that I give to almost all new staff members as they come on board, sometime in your first two to three months, make a matrix for Karen and she will love it. Show us multiple dimensions in the work and then we'll see what we can do with it. Those were the hooks when I first started.

Karen Pittman (10:06):

Those were absolutely the hooks. And those were the two very ambitious projects that you cut your teeth on at the forum, and I'll flag them. I think you were truly, or at the center, I think you were at the center maybe five months before we made the transition. So it was really pretty quick but significant work. And I think that, just as you said Merita, in some ways we've really come full circle back around to these questions with much more sophistication, with much more understanding of how learning happens, with a whole lot more data and a lot more willingness and understanding on the part of schools to think about these partnerships in more strategic ways. But we're right back again at these questions of how do you make these organizations more visible, how really do they hang together as an informal system, as increasingly formal systems that support middle people, how are they not just optional, but really a critical part of young people's learning experience and what is the best way for them to work with schools in this complimentary way?

Karen Pittman (11:06):

So we know we're right back in that. I know that's really what the readiness project is all about, but let's take a little bit of time before we jump all the way up to the current, and just go back to that whirlwind set of experiences that we had together. And I will flag, we have these experiences. The person who joined us on this journey at the White House was Thaddeus Ferber. And he'll be the next person that we interview in a couple of weeks. And he has stayed with us. So there's something about this journey that we started with Merita and then Thaddeus joined the caravan early on that has really allowed us to stay with these things and play with them and move them over decades now.

Karen Pittman (11:49):

So, you have these experiences of going from policy, from practice work to policy work, to partnership building work, all in the short period of time, domestic and international. What was the common theme, what was the takeaway that by the time we landed to create The Forum for Youth Investment, where were we in terms of the key ideas that we were trying to get across, what's the through story that we brought with us?

Merita Irby ([12:16](#)):

We used to talk a lot about the power of public ideas. And Bob Greg's work on that, it's just, what does it take to actually really work an idea and then find the opportunity to move it at different points in time? And I think it's interesting in that is that always in that work, there was the ideas that we were starting with. The ideas of how learning happens, how learning and development happens. Youth development as the capture phrase for that, but taking everything we know about how young people learn and develop and having that be the center and the starting point for the work. But then what does that mean as you're working across the crime prevention council that was across all the departments at the federal level that had anything to do with young people, the work at the International Youth Foundation and the work that grew out of that around youth and the committee impact and youth action work that was with the ...

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

We had an international learning group on youth and community development that was getting a range of players across organizations in the U.S. and also internationally, the international learning group that we ran there, to really explore what it means to have young people not just supported by these organizations, but also really take action to transform their neighborhoods and communities, what does that look like and how do you support that kind of agency? All of those ideas, you had to back up and see them in a big picture of what a young person's life is like, and what does it take to really keep that whole picture in focus while you're doing that work?

Merita Irby ([13:51](#)):

I think one of the key things that runs through is this idea that we often talk about thinking differently in the early days of some of the Ready by 21 work. And maybe, and if you pop this one up, we talked about thinking differently so that together we could act differently. We've unpacked that one just a little bit more. We talk more now about how to think and talk differently about these ideas and how you see what it takes to really see and hear differently in terms of who you're engaging with and understanding and unpacking the data. And then what it takes to really act and react differently as we're doing that.

Merita Irby ([14:25](#)):

And then the punchline we say is, and then being able to do it together. But I think the reason I just wanted to pop this back up here, and folks have seen this in other conversations that we've had and what it takes to really coordinate and connect across that, but I think there's a togetherness at each step along the way there. That if you think about the work that we did, whether it's with the president's crime prevention council, the international learning group approaches. Sometimes it's a council in structure, sometimes it's a learning group, but it really is about thinking together and being able to shape those ideas together based on the different places that we sit coming into those conversations, different areas of expertise, the local wisdom. That is really critical to those conversations, and really sharpening those ideas together and then figuring out how you move those ideas into action and into impact.

Merita Irby ([15:16](#)):

So, there is a togetherness in all of this work. If you were looking back over everything on that wild rollercoaster ride that we had before the forum, I think part of the landing of that rollercoaster was to shape some of the work. We had a [inaudible 00:15:36] if we build it, they will come response. We tried things with the funders groups and key leaders and in government and other things. There was a through story to them moving around of how to really start with the power of these ideas and take them into action. And that's really what led to the creation of the forum, is how can we do this with key partners, what's it like to set that table ourselves?

Karen Pittman ([16:04](#)):

Yeah. I think that's absolutely right. Emphasize a couple of things that you said quickly because they really do explain in some ways the intentional but also opportunistic way that we move through these things. You mentioned this idea of community youth development. And we came in this space with the rich ideas about youth development that were coming in from some of the Commonwealth countries like Great Britain and Ireland and Australia and South Africa, where there really was this idea that youth development was about

helping young people be socially ready to step in to their adult roles. It wasn't about schooling. It wasn't about remediation. It really was about helping young people explore and build confidence that they really could be active contributors to their community. And it had an implicit equity piece to it that it was especially important for us to do this with young people who were marginalized.

Karen Pittman ([17:03](#)):

So we were bringing those ideas into the U.S. We went internationally and brought those ideas back with us into the U.S., and they took more in these two spaces. And you mentioned both. One was really in helping people move from prevention and remediation into really thinking about how to make sure young people were prepared and were really ready to be full participants. So that phrase, problem three isn't fully prepared, that I'm known for, really came through that focus on how we got folks in child welfare and juvenile justice, and second chance programs to really not just see that their job was to help young people, to fix young people, and get them back up to point zero, but to actually get them fully prepared, fully ready, fully engaged.

Karen Pittman ([17:51](#)):

The second thing was exactly as you said, this idea that there was an intersection between youth development and community development. That was very intentional. So if we go back in, and I think one of the things that I will do now that I have more time, as Ian has said, is to really go back and read the things that we wrote 20 and 30 years ago. Because we had such a focus on this question of how young people ... We even had this thing we call the double arrow, youth supporting communities and communities supporting youth. How does it go together, how is really this yang yang? And it's so critical to young people's development and definition of identity and agency that we really focus on that.

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

But as we were doing that power of ideas and moving to set up the Forum for Youth Investment and putting a board together that was really a board that had some of these national folks as well as local folks who were coming from some of the communities we were working around this idea of youth action and use agency, there was a phrase that both of us remember that the board said to us. And they said, "This is great. You've got these ideas moving. You've got the plate spinning. We love the work that you're doing, but it's now time to get focused, get grounded and get results." And so while I may be the person who's known for the bumper sticker phrases, and getting these ideas pushed down into a couple of words that people can remember them, that charge from the board is really the charge that you took on and said, "All right, how do we get this work focused and grounded, how do we get it down so that we are meeting leaders where they are and giving them ways to really move these ideas to accelerate progress?" So, what was that shift, what made it happen, how did you make it happen, what did that look like in the early years of the forum as we were getting grounded and getting focused to get results?

Merita Irby ([19:43](#)):

I remember the phrase, I remember the meeting. Peter Edelman is the one who actually said it to us, and said that these ideas were all great, but they've got to really land with people in places who are trying to get real things to happen and be informed by them and how does that happen? It really began over probably the next decade of different kinds of place-based learning groups, projects that really focused in on ... That really were working with the innovators in places, that were doing this work. And again, having them inform the ideas as much as us being able to share them. It was looking at their work and trying to crystallize it.

Merita Irby ([20:32](#)):

You mentioned the double arrows. I think another image that comes to mind as I think about the early days was the cube. We had this cube that we used in the Greater Resources for Afterschool Programming Project, right, so this was again going in on the community program space, really actually at the time when a lot of the 21st century schools funding was coming in, and there was a concern. Again, echoes of the past in today of, "There's a lot of money that's about to come into communities. How does it lift up the work that's already happening and not somehow pave over it?" And so there was actually some funding that we got from one of the program officers, The Monte Foundation, to look at what are communities already doing in this space, how do we make sure that there are greater resources for after-school programming, but they're also really

understanding what these emerging networks look like, but the concept, this was more at the center, but what the concept of intermediaries look like, what is the need to have provider networks, how do you build a infrastructure in this space? And with some of the early roots for some of the quality work that came later.

Merita Irby (21:40):

But to do this, this is what the journey with you has been like. I know you alliterate, we all know you alliterate. But we also draw a lot of pictures. And this cube idea was really the beginning of this big picture thinking, what does it look like if you were trying to look at the life of a young person, which parents really look at the whole life of a young person. But if you're looking at the community level, how do you understand the whole experience from the time that children are little until they're big? So that was zero to 21. We went to 21 to get it into the next decade a little bit. What does that look like across morning until night across all the waking hours and across the range of outcomes of the problem [inaudible 00:22:21] that fully prepared.

Merita Irby (22:22):

We also said, "Academics are important, but they're not enough so how do you think about the academic and the vocational and the physical and emotional health and the social and civic engagement, what are all those things look like?" If you took the age and the time of day and the outcomes, then you could start to see that it was a patchwork built in terms of how you feel [inaudible 00:22:44] in communities. That starting conversation of, "If we're really looking at all the young people in our community, are they getting what they need?" How that gets built in, it looks very different for different young people for different neighborhoods. And it was really that conversation that came out of that that led into our of big picture Ready by 21 work.

Karen Pittman (23:07):

Yes. So you mentioned Ready by 21, and we didn't always have that. We've had taglines along the way. When we started the forum, I think our tagline was helping organizations that invest in youth invest in change. And then we moved along to moving ideas to impact when our board told us to get grounded and get focusing at results. And then this idea that we had to actually talk to people about not just youth development, but give them an end point of ready by 21, ready for college, ready for work, ready for life. As you did this work in communities, why was it important have that kind of a new focal point to continue to galvanize partnerships and galvanize planning?

Merita Irby (23:54):

I think the other similar idea in the forum was the idea that it was a forum and this idea of allied youth fields are across these fields. And we've talked about this a little bit in the call, just all the different places and spaces where young people spend their time. And how are you helping people look at all of those places and spaces, and in the lives of young people. And the Ready by 21 work really started with this idea of, and we talked about it on our last conversation together, how are you not just helping individual young people beat the odds, but how are you changing the odds for all of the children and youth in your community, what does that look like to change the odds for all the children youth in this country? And to do that, how do you really understand the landscape of the current community that you have, communities perfectly designed to get the results you're currently saying? So how do you understand the landscape a family, school, community supports, and then what are we going to do about it as leaders?

Merita Irby (24:54):

And so the Ready by 21 work was really going through that theory of change of how do you really help leaders work together more effectively in order to change that landscape and change the response and be able to ultimately change the odds for children and youth. So, we started working with leaders. And when we think about leaders, with leaders broadly defined in all levels of the work and starting off in all places.

Merita Irby (25:19):

And in our first Ready by 21 learning group, we had everything from a school superintendent in a rural community in California to the governor's office, children's cabinet with the state of Maryland, to an intermediary in Columbus, Indiana. Just a real range of leaders and what they came together around, where

we're trying to take this big picture approach, we're trying to move these ideas, we're trying to see what it would take in our community or our state to make sure that all young people are ready by 21. We move further along the age continuum now, but what does it take to really do that and with the power that we carry, what can we do to be able to move that in our communities? I think one of the key things about the Ready by 21 work and ideas all along the way is that it's those boundary spanners that you mentioned can be found in many places, and they often change jobs over time as well. So, how do you support them in the work they're doing if they're the kind of leaders that can really galvanize others to work together?

Karen Pittman (26:23):

Yeah, I think that's a really important point. And you're reminding me of a lot of history and the fact that that first Ready by 21 learning really was a diverse group of boundary spanners who were sitting in rural school districts and United Way and sitting inside a government, sitting inside of youth development intermediaries. They really were leveraging from wherever they were sitting, this idea of building this broader partnership table and having that table really stick together with this broader vision. As you described it, it can't just be about one outcome. It can't just be about one age group. And it really can't just be about one system we're setting. You've got to establish a set of shared goals, and we have to really figure out some way, which we didn't have then.

Karen Pittman (27:08):

Looking at and pulling back and doing this. We used to talk about zooming in and zooming out. Zooming out to say, "Really, how well is this community doing?" And I remember some of the power of these very simple tools. We were just asking people to use a coloring book, really. It was pretty much that simple. And color in these matrices, red, yellow, green, do you think you're doing better for little kids or good kids, do you think you're doing better in the academic space versus the social space versus the health space? And folks were finding this group exercise of comparing where they thought things were in their community quite valuable. And so I think the early idea, and you can talk a little bit more about this, that in order for these ideas to get sticky, we had to find simple creative ways for people to play with them.

Karen Pittman (27:57):

And so the tools, when we talked to Kim a couple of weeks ago, Kim Robinson from the Weikart Center, the other of the three executive vice presidents, the Weikart Center now has these incredibly sophisticated evaluated evidence-based continuous quality improvement tools. You have really been finding tools to help people play with ideas. You don't need a validated tool to assess the quality of their program. They are really just trying to find ways to literally get on the same page with their ideas. So, Ready by 21 was one of those things that we had to put out there just as a simple idea, you can't stop at 18. Because so many of the policies just stopped at 18. And while you were working with some of these groups, we had to find a way to push them. But, anything else about the simple tools that you put together early on, and I know we'll get into some more sophisticated ones, that really help people get around a table and play to see how their thinking was influencing their decision making.

Merita Irby (29:04):

Yeah. I'm thinking about that because it did ... There were simple conversation starters in a way and ways that people brought their own, in some ways, their perception data of what was happening in their communities as a starting point for those conversations, and we'd help them do that. It did get into more detailed, how do you do outcomes focused strategic planning and community wide processes that really focus on community engagement. It's where it evolved to. But I think about that zoom out and zoom in that you were talking about, and we would do these. And we've mapped how well do you think your young people are doing, where do you think the resources and attention are going. Sometimes there would be actual surveys and things behind it. Sometimes it was the end [inaudible 00:29:43] build the picture.

Merita Irby (29:45):

But it would just take the age group by those different outcome areas and have people map it out and then we'd have this classic moment. Maybe it's just how strategic planning happened or used to happen. It's classic moment where folks would say, "Okay, now we've looked at this whole picture and we've scanned everything.

We've looked at our data.[inaudible 00:30:03] And what now what we need to do is pick something," right, we see the red lights going off here and over here, we're not doing well in some of these areas. So, we just need to pick one or maybe even maybe pick three, right, we're just going to zoom in and pick something.

Merita Irby (30:18):

And then we'd hear time and again from folks like, "We did that." And then something else came up on the radar screen. Maybe it was childhood obesity, maybe it was something that was happening around grade level reading that [inaudible 00:30:32]. Something else came up because we were all looking over here. And then we have to go do the whole scan again. And so our encouragement to folks in terms of the Big Picture Approach was as you're picking some ... If you're saying you have to pick three, let at least one of those things be zooming out and having some way to keep the overall radar screen and focus so that as things change ... And they change rapidly. We've all been through this past year, but you think about the [inaudible 00:31:00] level things just change over time. The idea is to be able to see the change as it's happening and be able to, with all the relationships you've built, respond to that changing reality for the young people in your community and have them involved in bringing about that change as well.

Merita Irby (31:19):

So, I think that's the kind of thing that in some ways we still use. It's a simple thought and we can use it in different levels of complexity. But those dashboards for youth that were the starting tool became really core to the strategic planning work of how do you keep a big picture and focus while you're actually still zooming in on some parts to really get some traction and make a difference.

Karen Pittman (31:47):

So it was we move forward into the present, and definitely if folks have questions about history, we'll get to the current in just a minute. But I think for the record, since I'm the person who was helping us get the record straight, it's important to know whether these ideas have been around for a long time, and that the strategies for getting people to think about these ideas have been around for a long time. Because we really are coming back full circle into a space in which we've got more science and more evidence and more willingness to play with these ideas that we're back in the idea promotion space. And then pushing again forward to say, "Okay, as people are only getting these ideas, how do we basically help them bring them into key places of influence so they can get to impact?" And your tools have moved along the way.

Karen Pittman (32:34):

So let's fast forward up from the early Ready 21 working group or learning group, which I know brought that diverse set of folks together and it gave us an opportunity to see how people in different settings in different systems were using these ideas and moving them. That led us come back to say, "Okay, we think we have enough of these intermediaries, these out of school time youth development intermediaries, that it's time to really push these ideas about quality up to the city level." And so we started quality counts. And with quality counts, came the partnership with [inaudible 00:33:12] of Educational Research Foundation, which then became the Weikart Center.

Karen Pittman (33:15):

So those of you who joined us last time, that commitment to really come in and help communities think not just about how to build these program networks, but how to move the idea of quality is a key part of what a community needs to be committed to. So yes, we need quantity, but we also need quality. And that's what was happening in that space. But as we saw that happen, this bigger space became the Ready by 21 national partnership as communities were ready to put children's cabinets, coordinating bodies, and were ready to set these tables for this cross sector, cross system planning.

Karen Pittman (33:53):

You saw enough similarities in what people were doing and enough similarities in who was sitting at the table, even though different people may be convening the table, different groups might be convening the table that it felt like it was time to go have conversations with some of the national organizations and get them to figure out

with us how to take this to scale. So take us forward quickly into the Ready by 21 national partnership and how that intersected, that work intersected with collective impact [crosstalk 00:34:22] came along in that same time.

Merita Irby (34:24):

Yeah, it did. And the Ready by 21 ideas going through all these initiatives, we had the Ready by 21, as you mentioned, quality counts and then Ready by 21 Southeast challenge, which we put together with a combination of really idea and membership partners. United Way, ASA school administrators association at that time, corporate voices for working families. We tried to think through those national partners that we're connecting with people locally that were the people that were most often asked to be around these tables. We're hearing the same thing then that we're hearing now, it is the how do you get things organized in your own space to be able to bring it to the table and connect with other partners to be able to make these connections happen, and have definitely been hearing from places this year that that's some of the same kinds of challenges.

Merita Irby (35:16):

The work there really did focus a lot on how do you get the relationships more structured for being able to manage change over time. One of those key components of the planning and partnership work that you talked about at the top of the hour, how do you work with the range of leaders, but how do you actually structure and think about the planning and work that they can do together? It ended up, while we had been working on this for a while, it coincided with and we ended up riding the collective impact wave in terms of that, and looking. And a lot of the collective impact started with a cradle to career, but a K-12 focused. And so many places, again, it was as this wave is coming through, how are we really helping to support the range of places, spaces, systems, settings in a community to be a part of that conversation to be seen in that conversation?

Merita Irby (36:15):

And really supported many places coming to more different ways. They called it a youth master planning approach. I see Maggie on the call here from New Orleans and the work that they just did this last year there around this how do you get the range of players in the community to the table and overall game plan. Although I'd say there in New Orleans what you all have done had more of a ... It's much of a master youth engagement process with young people helping to lead the work. As a youth master planning process, it's a both end. But bringing this up through the collective impact space, I think that the lessons that we've learned along the way, what we'd hear from places, it's it's much about building the relationships and the ways of working together as it is the structure.

Merita Irby (37:00):

And so some of the lessons learned is sometimes the structures could become too top heavy and become more about their operation themselves and to guard against that. But at the same time, realizing that having somebody like having the backbone to help make these efforts move forward is also critically important. So the leaders of the effort are not just sitting around a kitchen table at 10 o'clock at night, trying to figure out how all the pieces fit together.

Merita Irby (37:24):

So it was really trying to think about how to be more nimble over time, I think is what these things that a lot of the places that have had these partnerships, the shift has been a little bit from just the longer range planning, and certainly in this last year, is how the relationships that we've built by being around the same tables, being in the same rooms, being on the same screens, helped us to respond to the fact that our communities change, the lives of our young people change. And if we're here, it's not about five-year plan. It's about how are we responding and improving and learning with each other as things emerge and evolve and change.

Karen Pittman (38:09):

So that message that I think jarred a lot of us from that first FSG article about collective impact, which was basically the message of, we went out to look for partnerships to see if they had an impact and we couldn't find

very many. So we see a lot of plans sitting on shelves, but we don't really see a lot of partnerships that have been able to push these ideas through to really implement at scale to get to impact. And I think that lesson is one that you really brought in to say, how do we do that, how do we not just-

Merita Irby ([38:40](#)):

What are the nuts and bolts [crosstalk 00:38:42]. We do these institutes for years with the United Way about the nuts and bolts of collective impact, how do you really train to that? It takes big picture thinking, but there are specific skills that you can develop and support along the way. And so really did those trainings around that. I think the other piece around it, it's back to changing the odds, it's what we used to talk about as the denominator problem. That if you just go in and you say ... We often would have this experience with some of the opportunity of coalitions. If we're going in and just adding up, as well as others, we're adding up everything, all the young people that we get to in terms of who our providers are reaching right now, invariably you would be 15 to 20% of the actual numbers in that community that were the target population.

Merita Irby ([39:33](#)):

And that really flipped the conversation for folks. If your numerator is just who you're reaching already, you're not at all getting to the challenge of all the young people that are facing these challenges in our community. So how do you flip that? The lessons from that work carry forward. And again, they're things that we're seeing today. People are trying to say not just who do we already get to, but who in our communities have disconnected, how do we re-engage, what can we do to learn together about how to do that work more effectively?

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

So we've got about 20 minutes left and I want to bring us up into the recent present and talk a little bit about where this work is going next. But one thing began to happen, and we saw it begin to happen about five years ago, but then we had an opportunity to really step into it on both sides. And that was this idea of moving, whether you call it social emotional learning, or 21st century skills or life skills, the fact that our K-12 partners really started to lean in to this conversation and not just think of SEL as another set of skills that young people need to build that we need to have a curriculum for, and how do we squeeze another curricula again to the work that's already going on.

Karen Pittman ([40:50](#)):

But this broader idea of how skills and competencies really integrate and build as we got a deeper understanding of how learning happens, not just to little kids, but in young people and adolescents. That work that then went to the ... we have the seed commission. We now have the SOLD Alliance, the science of learning and development. And the fact that the forum got invited to be at those tables and the fact that we had a critical organizations and foundations like the Wallace Foundation and like the Bechtel Junior Foundation really bringing together partners like Altria. Bringing partners together who were in this space to really have this conversation about how do we leverage this interest and not just saying, "We're going to broaden the list of outcomes for young people," but we're actually going to come back and take a look at this idea that what you see young people being able to do is really, as you said before, very much determined by how you create the environment and the experiences and the relationships.

Karen Pittman ([41:57](#)):

So as we saw that pendulum swing back, we've heard, when we talked to Kim about how SEL came in and really allowed us to both demonstrate the power of improving program quality, but also really sharpen the lenses that we use to say, is this are these programs doing everything that we can for young people. But we also really got this real big glimpse into what it meant to really partner with schools. And again, we had had our social services partners at the table. We had had our community development partners at the table.

Karen Pittman ([42:30](#)):

But if we're going to be honest, we really never had at the national or the local level, very few times was this work really being led and envisioned by our school partners. So something got in the water about five years ago

that really came back to that idea of school, community partnerships, but really school community partnerships to do what we would say is now creating this and understanding this ecosystem in which learning and development happens. And so here we are now with this thing that we're calling the readiness projects, which really came out of the fact that we had an opportunity to sit with K-12 people, to sit with youth development people, who were being, "Yes, we want to be more intentional. We think we've always been doing it. We've been measuring program quality, but now we're going to go the extra mile to really explain to you what it is that we do and what it is that we do differently to get to these outcomes."

Karen Pittman (43:24):

So we have this thing called readiness projects that we're doing now with the National Urban League and we're doing with our partners at AIR, the American Institute for Research. And you're managing it. And I'm stepping out of the way and the whole thing is yours. And it's a big thing-

Merita Irby (43:41):

It's a team leader.

Karen Pittman (43:43):

It's bigger. You and the team, and I'm happy to be a part of the team.

Merita Irby (43:46):

And I am, and you're still a part of the team.

Karen Pittman (43:49):

And our colleagues in the forum are a part of the team. And the team has colleagues from all kinds of partners, but still, it's back at that space of we have a chance to reset the ideas. We have a chance to really get people to think differently, not just because we know the science of how learning happens in the brain but we understand this idea of ecosystem. So where are you going, Merita? Yes. Arthur says-

Merita Irby (44:12):

No pressure. Thank you, Arthur. [crosstalk 00:44:15] what is this opportunity? And this is what I was reflecting on. I said, starting off as an eighth grade teacher and a youth worker and thinking about all these, doing good teaching and good youth work, these are the same things, how do we think about it? Starting with that whole focus on school community partnerships, I think you're right. I think it's the same ideas. More research to underpin it. It's the same ideas, but there is a connection and openness to the audience for those ideas that we have not really seen in this way before these last few years. And I think it is that idea, being able to have people think, learning is social and emotional, what does that look like?

Merita Irby (44:59):

And our dear friends in the Science of Learning Development Alliance, I remember the very first meeting I went to and having a little conflict up in the hallway and at the break talking about, if I said to you that there was a group of people in your community that had already been starting with everything we know about how young people learn and develop as the starting point for their work, and have been saying that environments matter and saying that learning happens through relationships and that had been starting, and that this was their starting point. Not that it's something new to them, but it's really their starting point in how learning happens. Wouldn't you want them at the table with you at the community level, at the national level, talking about what they've learned about how to make engaging learning environments, what would that look like?

Merita Irby (45:50):

And just what's exciting about the conversation is everybody is there. Having them still see each other as folks with expertise and lived experience on how to make this happen I think it's the conversation and the challenge. And the mutual understanding and respect, I think, as we come into this space together is that at the same time, people have been challenging more and more. The systems as they currently exist were just created in a

way that was not for all to succeed The systems, whether it's education or juvenile justice, child welfare, the young people that have been pushed out or pulled into systems and systematized in that way in the same time period, the conversations have been, it's not just about systems reform. We have to completely re-imagine what this looks like.

Merita Irby ([46:47](#)):

So coming into the present day, what it means to have equitable ecosystems for young people, what it means for the range of players to be thinking about this differently. This is the space and the time that we're in and it's just been completely ramped up by what this last year has been. We can talk more about the readiness projects in the space that we're creating for that work to happen, but I think that the ideas, while they're in some ways the roots of the ideas, it's also getting much more explicit. We used to talk about all young people being ready for college work and life. What does it mean for each and every young person to get the supports they need to be ready, to get supports they need to engage in the different places that they spend their time. It's just a different conversation than when we ... It's a more explicit conversation about what has been put in place in our country and in our communities that really have the racism built in. And it is really saying, how do we tackle this, unpack them, re-imagined and put things back together in a different way?

Karen Pittman ([47:54](#)):

So I'm going to pick up on that word explicit. And Ian, I'm going to ask, if you can, go to that slide that has those wonderful red doors to the school. And we can start there for a minute as we get toward the end. But this opportunity to be explicit is so important because what we've seen over the past several years is the fact that the language is getting into the vision statements. So we're getting it there. We're getting equity, we're getting whole child, we're getting whole community, we're getting community partners. We're getting things written in. Let's go back to the ... Or I guess it must've just self-defined itself.

Karen Pittman ([48:36](#)):

But, one of the things that we've been talking about and is reeling down to be explicit about talking about all learning, how it happens in all settings with all adults. And so when those school doors closed, that disruption that happened with school gave us a huge opportunity that obviously no one wanted, and we certainly hadn't anticipated. And that was to actually say, "Well, yes, the school door is closed but if we're now going to try to figure out where learning can happen when those school doors close, we need to really understand what those settings are inside the building." And maybe if it works, Ian, we'll go to the little picture behind. And those settings inside of a school are more than classrooms. It's the library, it's the cafeteria, it's the sports field, it's the hallways, it's the playgrounds, it's all of those things.

Karen Pittman ([49:31](#)):

You can keep going, Ian. It's not going to cooperate with us. So you can go on there. So the word that you said about explicit, we really have been with the readiness project that I want you to just sort of talk us through where you're going next with this. We really have had this opportunity to grab the disruption and grab the fact that the systems that we refer to as after school or out of school or summer have really been able to step up and demonstrate the power that they have to be these flexible delivery systems for learning and development, who were much more nimble in their ability to step in.

Karen Pittman ([50:07](#)):

And we create some of those settings where learning happens and recreate it through the lens of relationships, which is how they often come into work with young people because they broke this involuntarily. So this idea of, yes, we all want to build back better, and we all want to make sure our schools are built back and we all say we're not going back to normal, but what does it mean to actually take full advantage of the opportunities that we have to build forward together? So, take the last couple of minutes, Merita, to talk through in whatever way you want, where we are in activating these goals and strategies that over the past six to eight months have galvanized under this Build Forward Together umbrella.

Merita Irby ([50:49](#)):

Sure. And I think being able to speak to that, it's work that's happening that we're hearing both at the local level and in the national conversations. And I've been looking more recently at how to be able to support the, as the national turns to focus on state with the funds that are coming into communities now, but just looking at this ... This came out of the conversations that we've been doing as a part of the readiness projects over the last six months with national and local leaders saying, "What are we grappling with right now, what are the real issues that we're facing?" And we know we need to build schools back better in re-imagined and different ways and take lessons learned from the past year and also really accelerate the supports that we have for bringing people. Now we need to strengthen and leverage those community partners.

Merita Irby ([51:34](#)):

Increasingly, adolescents are getting a short shrift in all of this and so how are we making sure that they are centered in the work and in the thinking about what that work should be, the conversations as well as the action. And then how are we really innovating using summers and to really innovate towards long-term change? I'm going to speak to that one for just a moment because we've had, at the national level, this group that started really just coming into more of a learning and development ecosystem space, many of the readiness projects co-strategists, and some others that came together around this idea of even this summer, how are we leveraging this summer as a springboard to thinking about the following year differently? And how are we seeing each other more in the national partnership space as well as how are we supporting this work that's happening locally?

Merita Irby ([52:29](#)):

So we were seeing this happen at multiple levels, I think in terms of the work. And what is both exciting, daunting, it's energizing, but also, I'm not going to say it's exhausting, it's just all consuming, is that we're all figuring it out together. And for me, it feels like the early days of the Ready by 21 word. We're trying to think about and sharpen what those ideas to actually help people think about real time, how are they doing things differently in terms of their work, how are we flipping, whether we can or not, the language around learning loss or the lost year to what were the assets that were developed during this year, what have we learned that we can carry forward into this phase, how are we really seeing the young people that have not been showing up for the opportunities that have been put out there, who's connecting with them and how are we understanding what that picture looks like?

Merita Irby ([53:25](#)):

And in this conversation, it is so much more than you and me, and even the powerful team that we have at the forum. It really is the work that we're doing with our partners and their partners to try to create this collective learning space. And we have to learn very quickly because these really are extraordinary times that we're in. And we have to have that learning bubble up from the local work to really inform state and national where we should be focused in these efforts.

Merita Irby ([53:58](#)):

So, on the readiness projects, this is ... I know Katherine put the thing in the link, and many of you are here because you're connected to this work already, so I won't go into a great detail. But I think success for that work is really, as we're hearing from folks across the country, at national level and at the local level, it's the how do we use this opportunity to not just go all out and then hit to some cliff three years out in terms of funding and intention and know-how, how are we actually really building the way of doing business and the infrastructure nationally, state and local for realizing the potential of our young people and our communities, what does it take to do that? If there were ever an opportunity with the softening of the walls between K-12, afterschool, out-of-school time, summer learning, workforce development, community service, et cetera, even the different funding streams that are coming in, if there's a different way of doing business, this is the time to really figure that out.

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

Absolutely. So as we come to the end, and I know there's so many things that you can talk about in this space, we just we'll pause. And for those folks who don't know about the Readiness Projects and Build Forward Together, please go start taking a look. Because we're really on the cusp I think of being able to not just work

with these ideas, but really identify, as Merita said, what is the really specific tools and ways that we help people move these ideas to impact, how do we really get them to think and talk differently, see and hear differently, act and react differently in their own spaces so that when they come together to partner, they are partnering with the kind of understanding of respect needed to make these partnerships stick and not just be partnering around a project or partnering around transactional things like who shares buses and who shares space, but really have these strategic partnerships that will allow us to have young people have healthy equitable ecosystems for learning and development. How do we get to the idea of learning center, learner centered?

Karen Pittman ([56:16](#)):

There are so many partners in this space now with us. You can also see the list of those broad list of partners on the website as well. But Merita, you've talked about the success as really helping us get from [inaudible 00:56:30] leveraged this disruption so that three years from now, it doesn't go away. And I think that really is the perfect way to think about it. I wanted to end by just emphasizing that in that chart that you just had up, it said leverage summers, not just leverage summer. And I think the work that you and the partners have been doing to really walk the balance, and I see some of the folks on the screen or on the participant list like Arthur Pearson from Outward Bound and Thompson Island, to walk this balance between guests, we have to do things differently this summer. We have a huge opportunity to get this things right.

Karen Pittman ([57:11](#)):

But if we just see this as a temporary, we have to do it this summer because of COVID, and then we go back to the way it was before, we will lose a huge opportunity. And we certainly will lose a huge opportunity if we don't keep going forward and focus on adolescents. And that was one of the things in your theme. I'm going to hand it back to Ian, but on that last piece of adolescence, while I think with the Readiness Projects and Build Forward Together, we've focused on how we get that learning and development ecosystem moving forward. The forum really has, back to its roots, this commitment to working with employment and child welfare and juvenile justice, and this huge commitment to making sure that young people themselves are active, active parts of the solution.

Karen Pittman ([58:02](#)):

And so when we come back next week and I think Ian just dropped it in the chat, or the next time, Ian will tell you the date, we'll have Thad join us. And Thaddeus is really, as we divided up the labor as this thing got bigger, is really the one who has been leading our work around opportunity youth as well as led the historic work at the policy level around creating children's cabinets. So, Ian, I'm going to hand it back to you for the last word. Merita, we could stay on the screen for another hour, but I'll probably just see you for coffee. So thank you for doing this with me, and Ian, back to you.

Ian Faigley ([58:34](#)):

So thank you very much for the excellent conversation today. Definitely stay in touch with us. Here's information about our website as well as our social media handles. As Karen mentioned, we have part three of the conversations scheduled for next week with Thaddeus Ferber, executive vice president and head of the unit, focused on policy and strategic storytelling. And then on May 19th to 20th, we hope you will all be able to join us for the eighth annual Ready by 21 national meeting, which will be held virtually. So please join us and thank you all and have a wonderful afternoon. Thank you very much to Merita and Karen