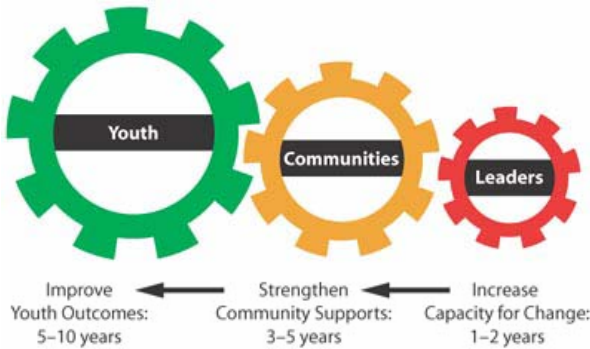




All youth ready for college, work & life.

# The Ready by 21™ Challenge:

## Changing the odds for children and youth by changing the way we do business.



Research suggests that it takes **five to ten years for changes in community supports to make a real difference in improved outcomes for youth**, such as decreased teen pregnancy or increased graduation rates. It is possible within a few years, however, to see significant changes in the capacity of those who are taking the lead in strengthening policies, programs and public demand. Those taking the lead can start from multiple places — whether they are collaborative groups (e.g., advocacy coalitions, community task forces, children’s cabinets), change initiatives (e.g., school redesign, youth master plan implementations), or individual champions (e.g., mayors, business leaders, educational leaders, advocates). As we see it, no matter where they sit, **moving the small gear makes a big difference.**

In most states and communities, the status of young people is poor enough that improving outcomes for young people cannot be accomplished through piecemeal, incremental approaches. Creating a seamless web of community supports requires sustained, coordinated planning and decision making. Progress simply can’t be made one program, age group or outcome at a time. Only **Big Tent Partnerships** that accept shared accountability for **Big Picture Goals** can drive the change strategies needed to achieve **Big Impact Results**.

**Ready by 21™** challenges states and local communities to change the odds for children and youth by changing the way they do business in order to increase the overall motivation and capacity for change. The Forum provides frameworks, coaching and tools to help change makers — from parents to program directors to policy makers — optimize resources and streamline strategies so that they can see increased the return on their investments.

Rigorous data analyses conducted by Michele Gambone and Jim Connell show that only **four out of ten** young people are doing well by the time they reach adulthood – working or attending college, in good health, and active in their communities. The research also shows that communities could change the odds if they consistently provided adolescents with the basic supports and opportunities they need.

### Changing the odds from 4 in 10 doing well...



### to 7 in 10 doing well



However, decades of fragmented policies, programs and advocacy have left policy makers, program planners, parents and the public confused about which issues are most pressing, which strategies most effective, which outcomes most important and which populations are most in need. Most importantly, “business as usual” has led to low expectations and piecemeal solutions. So *what’s the answer?* **Move the small gear.**

# The Big Picture Approach

**Young people don't grow up in programs, they grow up in communities.** They need early and sustained investments from when they are little to when they are big and when they wake up until they go to sleep, across a range of outcome areas from academics to health to social skills — investments that need to be made by families, schools, businesses, public officials, support systems and communities at large.

Without **shared actionable visions** of the outcomes desired for children and youth, the supports required from families, institutions and communities and the leadership required from all, individual efforts to focus can actually lead to fragmentation, frustration and failure.

Across the country, public and private leaders are heeding the Forum's call to take a Big Picture Approach to planning and decision making that provides an integrated way to see the forest and the trees. Whatever the task at hand — whether it is creating a comprehensive youth development agenda or revisiting the after-school supports offered by a single program or a community — leaders are coming to see the value of stepping back to:

- Take Aim** Set results-based goals that reflect the Big Picture of what is needed to ensure that every effort, no matter how small, is doing maximum good and minimal harm.
- Take Stock** Assess the current state of resources and need across programs, neighborhoods, populations, and/or issues in order to achieve improved returns on investments.
- Take Action** Make and sustain the changes needed by strengthening community demand, engaging youth and families, improving the quality and coordination of programs and systems, and shifting and aligning policies and resources.
- Make Progress** Implement basic but essential efforts to track progress against common goals and indicators, share reports with all stakeholders and assess the pace of change.

## Creating an Actionable Vision

Ensuring that all young people are Ready by 21 requires monitoring and supporting their development over time (from birth to adulthood) and across a range of outcome areas. For young people to be ready at 21, they have to be ready at 6, ready at 14 — ready for each new developmental stage. And they have to develop a broad set of skills.

Academic competence is critical, but not sufficient. Not only do young people need to be educated, they need to be healthy, connected, work-oriented, and ready to contribute.

There are a set of “Developmental Dashboards” starting with age group by outcome, that need to be created and monitored carefully for all children and youth and, in particular, for those at greatest risk of falling behind. Leaders need to know that children and youth are on track all along the way.

If assessments show that young people are in trouble in certain areas or where supports are lacking, actions need to be taken. But they should not be taken at the risk of other ongoing work to improve or maintain quality. Big Picture assessments are important, not only because they help identify the red cells, but because they map progress in all areas. It is important to pick a few things for all stakeholders to focus on (e.g., academic success for high school students, physical health of preschoolers, parent education and supports for families). But consider what happens if leaders throw away the rest of the picture. A few red cells may move to yellow. But without monitoring, in that same time period, yellows may shift to red and greens may shift to yellow. The net result: limited overall change. The challenge is to make overall improvements in the “Big Picture.” This is why it is important to focus on the forest and the trees.

