

READY BY DESIGN

THE SCIENCE (AND ART)
OF YOUTH READINESS

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READINESS project

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The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan action tank dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are ready by 21 – ready for college, work and life. Ready by 21[®] was launched a decade ago, to translate research on youth development into tools to help diverse groups of leaders build strong partnerships that develop the whole child and engage the whole community. www.forumfyi.org

The Readiness Project is the Forum's renewed commitment to help build a national movement around readiness, by shining a stronger spotlight on the abilities and practices young people need in life and the common traps in systems and settings that contribute to growing gaps in young people's readiness. The Readiness Project reaches across cultures, systems and sectors in order to make readiness a right and within reach for all youth. www.sparkaction.org/readiness

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A NOTE FROM KAREN J. PITTMAN

I recently spent an hour talking about readiness with a Howard University student from Memphis, Tennessee. At the end of our time, he offered this summation: “Readiness is not a destination, it’s a journey.” He nailed it. The term “readiness” has two definitions: being willing to try and being prepared to succeed. The journey is about both.

As adults, we can work to address personal and institutional barriers that limit opportunities and cause young people to struggle—from substance abuse to disproportionate sentencing. We can work to increase option-expanding opportunities that help young people thrive—from making neighborhoods safer to ensuring access to high-quality education. These are points of departure or arrival where young people might linger or leave. But the trip really becomes a journey only when young people own it, when they have the sense of identity and agency needed to not just be present but to be proactive and seek out needed supports and opportunities.

Making progress in areas where we struggle or thrive (and we all do both in our lives) requires the confidence that comes from feeling prepared to handle what comes next. This confidence is built over time, with repeated opportunities to try and sometimes fail, and to grow as a result. Every young person deserves the right to develop these abilities to the point where they own them and can use them to advance themselves, their peers and their communities. Right now, too many young people in the United States are denied this right.

You know the proverb about giving a man a fish. Readiness is the pole, the technical fishing skill, the instinctual ability to read the river and the willingness to cast—and cast again. How can we not make this a priority for young people whose rivers have rocks and rapids that can sweep them away without notice?

With Stephanie Krauss at the helm, our team has spent the past three years researching readiness—across disciplines, systems, science and sectors. Our goal: to synthesize the science of readiness into easy and compelling starter materials and tools that young people, families and diverse community leaders can use to assess and align their current efforts toward making readiness a right for all young people.

Problem-free is not fully prepared

Readiness is clearly not a new idea at the Forum, just as it is not new in many youth-focused circles.

I coined the phrase, “problem-free is not fully prepared” 25 years ago to signal an “expectations gap” that was undergirding a number of seemingly progressive policy and programmatic proposals focused on disadvantaged youth. Embedded in these proposals was what I saw as a dangerous “fix then develop” fallacy. This argument holds that we must address problems facing young people who are vulnerable, involved in risky behaviors or experiencing adversity before they can take advantage of any opportunities focused on their growth. While it may be

intuitively satisfying, this approach is not supported by research. It is a misguided belief that has led to an over-emphasis on problem reduction as an acceptable goal for some subpopulations of young people, which, in turn, has often resulted in official programmatic practices that either don't match the developmental practices necessary for readiness or, in some cases, explicitly run counter to them.

A decade ago, Forum Co-founder Merita Irby and I created the Ready by 21® initiative to translate then-new research on youth development into frameworks and tools to help diverse leaders build strong partnerships that developed the whole child and engaged the whole community. We knew problem-free wasn't fully prepared. Our understanding of what "fully prepared" means is now light-years beyond what it was then. In research language: We've moved from discussions of broad concepts to operational constructs to actual variables. In plainer terms, we know so much more about what works, and are developing the real-world examples to translate this evidence into actionable tools and practice guides for all adults who work with or care about young people.

Readiness really does matter

Why is it so important to sharpen our language and update our arguments? Because it's clear that increasingly, readiness abilities matter to policymakers, program directors, advocates, thought leaders in other fields, practitioners and young people themselves:

- *Brain research* proves these abilities are malleable, even into late adolescence and adulthood, so long as settings and systems have explicit practices that support them and integrate them into their programs and services. This offers us an opportunity to rethink the costs of *not* intervening.
- *Field research* from different systems strongly suggests that young people won't be as successful as they could be in *any* life domain—academic, vocational, civic, social—if we don't pay adequate attention to these readiness abilities. This should give rise to new opportunities for cross-system standards, policies and collaboration.
- *Popular research* signals a growing concern among some of the end-users—namely businesses and higher education institutions—about the contributions these readiness abilities make to the more visible readiness gaps in achievement and skills that leaders are concerned about. This creates new opportunities for advocacy and action.
- *Youth research* affirms that the systems and settings designed to influence young people—not just education and afterschool, but also health, justice and others—can contain unintended readiness barriers. Some come from official system requirements, others from unchallenged norms and routines. Some of these barriers are known and being actively addressed, but others are less visible. For our reforms to have their intended impact, we must identify and address all barriers across the environments, systems and relationships that influence young people's lives. Our goal is to equip leaders, advocates and decisionmakers to do that.

There is a science to readiness

As I peek (just peek) around the corner to retirement, I am heartened that there are now multiple strands of research that further substantiate this work over the last 25 years. In particular, I am delighted the Forum is kicking off 2016 with two complementary contributions to our fields' overall capacity to promote readiness by design.

This paper, *The Science (and Art) of Youth Readiness*, is the culmination of a broad, cross-systems, cross-fields synthesis of the science of readiness, which was generously funded by the Ford Foundation. We summarized the research in what we hope is accessible language, offering a powerful set of ideas accompanied by a set of reproducible resources. We are infusing these into our work to facilitate cross-system and youth-focused policy and practice discussions everywhere youth spend their time. We hope you will find these useful. The key ideas and the tools that operationalize them are intentionally designed for general use across fields. We will make them—together with real-world stories, perspectives and interactive resources—available on

The Readiness Project platform (sparkaction.org/readiness), powered by the Forum's journalism and advocacy project, SparkAction.



possible but measurable as part of continuous improvement efforts. I hope everyone who reads this paper will take the time to review these tools, because although they were developed with and for out-of-school time youth programs, they have relevance for all fields. They are available at <https://www.selpractices.org/>.



On Language

Readiness by Design

Intentionally designing youth services and supports to integrate the science of readiness into the daily experiences of young people.

The *Preparing Youth to Thrive* series prepared by the Forum's Weikart Center, with funding and leadership from the Susan Crown Exchange, is the culmination of intensive work with a learning community of eight mature, but diverse, youth organizations. The papers and assessment guides borne out of this partnership represent the epitome of how to promote readiness by design. They are inspiring examples of what can be produced when researchers and practitioners collaborate to document the outcomes and practices most relevant for a field and design observation measures and improvement guides to meet practitioners' needs.

This work demonstrates that skill growth is not only



These two strands of work—one a broad scan of the science of readiness, the other a focused refinement of the art of readiness design for practitioners—are downpayments on the Forum’s renewed commitment to study and promote readiness.

You will note as you read these two works that the out-of-school-time definitions of readiness abilities and practices in the *Preparing Youth to Thrive* SEL field guide are consistent with, but not identical to, the universal definitions offered in this paper. This is as it should be. No one system, organization or program will embrace all of these goals or equally implement all practices described in these papers.

We must get to a point, however, where every system, organization and program is permitted—and in fact incentivized—to promote readiness as defined by the science described in this paper. We can start by ensuring that environments where young people spend their time do no harm to the development of young people’s identities, spirits and sense of place and importance in the world. To achieve this first step, leaders, policymakers, practitioners and youth must be able to name what is needed and what gets in the way of their readiness and well-being, including less visible barriers and norms, and know what steps are needed to address them. Decisionmakers may need to adjust official requirements, ultimately going beyond barrier-reduction into intentionally promoting readiness and empowering young people.

Ready by 21® was and is the vision that undergirds all of the Forum’s work. We are confident that now, thanks to The Readiness Project and the Weikart Center’s Preparing Youth to Thrive initiative, we know enough about what it means, why it matters, and what should and can be changed to ensure that every young person is ready for his or her journey, throughout every stage of life.

It is time for bolder language and a bolder call to action: **Together, we must ensure that readiness is a right for every young person.**

A GUIDE TO THE SCIENCE (AND ART) OF YOUTH READINESS

Every young person deserves the right to be ready for life's opportunities and challenges at every age and stage.

In the United States, there is a growing sense of urgency and attention to the issues of equity and youth well-being. As a nation, we devote significant expertise and resources to addressing disparities and closing gaps among groups of young people, yet our progress has been slow, in no small part because our best efforts remain deeply fragmented. As a result, too many young people transition from adolescence to adulthood without the abilities, skillsets and mindsets they need to manage life's opportunities and challenges. Persistent inequities demand that we do more.

The Forum for Youth Investment has made a renewed commitment to ensuring that readiness is a right for every young person, regardless of background, ability, circumstance or experiences. What will make this vision a reality? We now have more than two decades' worth of research to help us act with precision. There is a science to readiness.

The Readiness Project is designed to make this science clear, accessible and actionable. It is a multi-year, multi-phase initiative that begins with comprehensive research to define readiness and the conditions and contexts that influence whether a young person is ready. It then moves to translate those findings into concrete tools and lessons that can be used by leaders, practitioners, policymakers, advocates and anyone else working to improve the lives of young people.

This paper presents the findings of our three-year research effort to locate and synthesize the science of readiness. It is divided into two main sections: The first describes the overall science of readiness, the second dives more deeply into four core components of this science, offering examples of how organizations and communities can and are putting them to use.

The science of readiness

This paper provides our synthesis of the existing research—including new findings in brain science as well as trends in social emotional learning, 21st century skills, employability skills and childhood well-being—into a systems-neutral compendium. This science of readiness has four core components:

- **Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets.** There are 10 universal abilities every person needs, regardless of age, background or circumstance, which every system and setting should support. We use these abilities every day, no matter who we are or what situations we are in. The abilities are supported by commonly used skillsets and mindsets (habits, attitudes and beliefs). Skillsets *prepare and equip* us to do something, while mindsets help us become *willing* to do something.

- **Readiness Practice.** There are four categories and characteristics of developmental practice that are essential to support young people in developing the Readiness Abilities. These are developmental environments, relationships, experiences and the ways in which young people use space and time. While intentionally system- and setting-neutral, the characteristics within these categories of Readiness Practice map to existing standards of practice for every major youth system (e.g., child welfare or education). Readiness Practice happens when adults put specific developmental practices in place, which build young people's connections and competence.
- **Readiness Traps.** There are four common cultural and policy "traps": detrimental yet often-unintended conditions in systems or settings where young people spend time. Traps arise when a system or setting's official practices—whether defined by rules and regulations or expectations and norms—focus on an easy-to-monitor metric (e.g., time or completion) that does not guarantee growth or competence. To transform practice and support readiness for all, we must understand and mitigate these four traps: allowing age to be a proxy for stage, completion a proxy for competence, time a proxy for progress and access a proxy for quality.
- **Readiness Gaps.** Readiness Traps fuel four Readiness Gaps, which are deep and persistent disparities among populations of young people and between what young people have and what they need in life, work, and civic and community engagement. The four prevailing gaps are in achievement, expectations, opportunities and skills.

Putting the science to work: the "art" of readiness

The second section of the paper provides resources for diving more deeply into these four components of readiness. We provide early examples of how this science is being put into action by partnering organizations and communities. In the Readiness Resources section, which begins on page 52, you will find more detail on what informed the science, including what we read, which sources we studied and compared, and our overall methodology.

Future papers and tools will focus more on the art of readiness—the implementation of the science into everyday interactions with young people, whether at home, in neighborhoods, in classrooms or youth programs. We will spotlight efforts on the ground, and promote new ways to help practitioners, leaders and youth make readiness a right. We also intend to produce future versions of this paper, reflecting the still-growing evidence base and practical expertise of our partners and allies.

We believe we are at a critical time in history that demands and enables those who work with young people to more effectively align efforts, measure progress and implement holistic approaches that account for the complex ecosystems in which young people develop. The Readiness Project's science, stories and tools are designed to make this possible and to get us much closer to making our vision a reality for all young people.

A CONCEPT COMPANION

FOR THE SCIENCE (AND ART) OF YOUTH READINESS

Keep this page on-hand as you read *The Science (and Art) of Youth Readiness*. It provides an at-a-glance guide to the concepts and visuals used throughout the paper.

Readiness Abilities

We use these 10 abilities every day, no matter who we are or what situation we are in.



I can get and stay healthy physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.



I can solve problems and make decisions about the intellectual, social, moral and emotional issues and problems I face.



I can relate to others and the world by forming, managing and sustaining my relationships.



I can use insights to grow and develop in each stage of life.



I can work and stay focused in each stage of life.



I can think and create in ways that help me navigate and experience life.



I can persist through struggles and maintain hope no matter my challenges.



I can engage with people and places by being present and engaging in meaningful, real and honest ways.



I can apply learning in the real world to meet life demands.



I can feel and express emotion appropriately and as a way to connect with others.

Readiness Skillsets & Mindsets

We use these skillsets and mindsets, in various combinations, to express the readiness abilities.

SKILLSETS

- Application
- Resource & Information Processing
- Coping
- Communication
- Organization & Planning
- Problem Solving & Decision-Making
- Reflection & Self-Awareness
- Self-Regulation
- Basic Life Management
- Thinking & Analysis
- Self-Care
- Relationship Management

MINDSETS

- Fairness
- Open Mindedness
- Future Orientation
- Humility
- Pragmatism
- Agility
- Drive
- Adaptability
- Curiosity
- Compassion
- Courage
- Empathy
- Growth Orientation
- Optimism
- Persistence
- Purposefulness

Readiness Practice

A young person grows up in environments, relationships and experiences.

When these are developmentally appropriate, they provide young people with the supports and services they need to build connections and competence. These supports, plus adequate space and time, enable young people to learn, develop and strengthen the 10 readiness abilities.



ENVIRONMENTS



RELATIONSHIPS



EXPERIENCES



SPACE AND TIME

Developmental Practices that Build Connections and Competence and Get Youth Ready

PRACTICES THAT BUILD CONNECTIONS

- Focus on the young person
- Provide safety
- Be a coach
- Cultivate community
- Be relational
- Be engaging
- Encourage teamwork
- Show care and concern
- Give the young person agency
- Support personal reflection
- Be socially and culturally responsive

PRACTICES THAT BUILD COMPETENCE

- Model what you want
- Facilitate personal mastery of skillsets & mindsets
- Provide resources
- Provide positive challenges
- Be strengths-based
- Be a skillful planner
- Empower the young person
- Make real world connections
- Provide structure
- Be a personal trainer

Threats to Youth Readiness

Readiness Traps

These are four common cultural and policy patterns or phenomena. They pull the focus away from the young person, placing it on an easier-to-measure system proxy. Traps are longstanding, entrenched and cross-cultural.



Access as proxy for quality



Age as proxy for stage



Completion as proxy for competence



Time as proxy for progress

Readiness Gaps

These are four common gaps between populations and individuals. They show up and grow because of differences in opportunities, supports and personal abilities.



Achievement gap



Expectations gap



Opportunity gap



Skills gap

Beginning on page 52, we have Readiness Resources, which take a deep dive into each of these core areas, as well as reproducibles, which you can use as needed. Please be sure to give proper credit when using and distributing.

INTRODUCTION

THE CASE FOR READINESS

Life is messy and hard to predict. Each day we go in and out of settings and situations, some comfortable and familiar, some new or unexpected. We move among environments and relationships. Although we rarely stop to think much about it, our decisions and behaviors are guided by a specific set of knowledge, skills, habits, attitudes and beliefs. Ultimately, how we navigate these situations—from the mundane to the demanding—influences not just our days but our future, and helps set the course of our lives.

Too many adolescents and young adults navigate life without the abilities and supports they need to be successful. Many of these same young people confront especially challenging or adverse circumstances in their lives: poverty, inadequate treatment for physical, mental or behavioral health conditions, violence and other threats to well-being. Today, more than 5.6 million young people in the United States are disconnected from school and the workforce. Many more have a high school or postsecondary credential yet still lack the competence to get by.ⁱ Only four in 10 young adults are “doing well,” meaning they are in college or working, emotionally and physically healthy, and engaged in civic or community life.ⁱⁱ As the Forum for Youth Investment has long noted, problem-free is not the same as being fully preparedⁱⁱⁱ and having certifications or credentials is not the same as being sufficiently competent.

The past decade has brought considerable attention to youth well-being and the troubling expansion of gaps among groups of young people that result from disparities including income, health and social status. These gaps are further exacerbated by cultural and workforce conditions: rapid changes and technology advances have ushered in an era where knowledge and skills can become outdated within five years.^{iv} These gaps have been shown to have lifelong developmental, health and economic implications.

In response, many of our brightest minds and most powerful institutions devote significant resources toward increasing access and opportunity for every child and young person. We have made considerable progress—for example, in increasing high school graduation rates and narrowing achievement gaps for many of our most vulnerable students, including young men and women of color.^v

Despite these gains and the rising popularity of collective impact^{vi} and whole-child approaches, there remains deep fragmentation among efforts. As a result, there are still too many “traps” that derail young people, especially those who are underserved and underrepresented.

What if we could change this? What if we could ensure every young person entered adolescence and adulthood ready for life’s challenges and opportunities?



The Forum for Youth Investment believes that every young person has a right to be ready for life’s opportunities and challenges, at every age and stage.

We believe this is possible. What it means to be ready and what it takes to make readiness a right for every young person in America—regardless of background, ability, circumstance or experiences—are not mysteries. We have more than two decades’ worth of research to help us define, with precision, what it will take. In the past several years, there have been significant efforts to synthesize this research and influence policy and practice. There is a science to readiness.

The Readiness Project is the Forum’s renewed commitment to making readiness a right by making the science of readiness clear, accessible and actionable by all who work with and care for young people.

With this goal, our team conducted a multi-year research project¹ to:

- Identify and define universal **Readiness Abilities and their associated Skillsets and Mindsets**, which every person needs, regardless of age, background or circumstance and which every system and setting should support.
- Identify categories and characteristics of **Readiness Practice**—developmental practices and supports that are essential for young people to develop, strengthen and demonstrate the Readiness Abilities.
- Identify common **Readiness Traps**—serious and often unintended conditions in youth-serving systems and settings that affect some young people disproportionately, narrowing or cutting off their paths forward.
- Synthesize common **Readiness Gaps** spurred by these traps. These are the deep and persistent disparities between populations of young people, and between what a young person has and what he needs for life, work, personal well-being and civic and community engagement.



Readiness in Action

Organizations and community partnerships are in the early stages of putting our research to use, affirming that the work is valuable to leaders, practitioners, funders, families and young people themselves. For more, see the Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

The results of our research offer a galvanizing way to think about one of the most persistent and vexing challenges we face as a nation—the preparedness and well-being of our children. These findings offer the potential to transform, by assessing, amplifying and aligning the many existing efforts already in place. We are at a critical time in history that demands and enables anyone who works with and cares for young people to do so more effectively and in a more connected way.

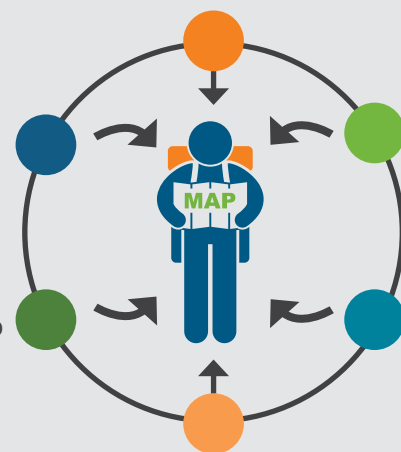
¹ This is explained in more detail in Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

This paper describes everything we have learned about the science of readiness. It gives you an overview of our findings, our rationale and approach, and jumpstarts thinking around how this science can be operationalized to drive essential changes in research, policy and practice.

Future papers will delve more deeply into “the art of readiness”—the implementation of these findings into everyday interactions with young people, whether at home, in neighborhoods, in classrooms or in youth programs. We will spotlight efforts on the ground, and emerging tools to help practitioners, leaders and youth make readiness a right.

Young People at the Center

The Readiness Project is designed with young people at the center. Our research can be applied to any environment, by both adults and young people themselves. Imagine a young person with a backpack—inside the backpack is everything he or she needs to get through the day. This is a useful way of thinking about the readiness research: In order to be willing and prepared to take on life’s challenges and opportunities, young people must be able to reach into their packs and get what they need (the abilities). Adults must help young people fill their backpacks, and help them learn how to make use of what’s in them (using proven developmental practice).



THE SCIENCE OF READINESS

Over the past three years we have been researching readiness and the conditions and contexts that influence whether a young person will be ready. We reviewed more than 300 reports, studies, journal articles and books—ranging from neuroscience to systems thinking to future forecasts of the economy and workforce—and analyzed and crosswalked more than 60 of the most credible standards and frameworks from each major youth system.² We examined childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, within the context of developmental and learning science, making note of key milestones and transitions. We explored what happens in systems and settings where youth spend time, unpacking the range of experiences—from struggles to successes. The result is an evidence-based and systems-neutral science of readiness and a case for why it matters. There is a robust and growing body of research that teaches us about youth readiness. This includes areas such as brain science, social emotional learning, 21st century skills, employability skills and childhood well-being.

We especially focused on readiness among adolescents and young adults—twens, teens and young people transitioning into adulthood. We have selected this population because we can connect it with the considerable research and work on early childhood that is already underway.

A Note on Adolescence and Young Adulthood

The concept of adolescence is relatively new. It was first recognized as a distinct developmental stage, in the United States, in 1904. It signaled a brief period during the teenage years. It has since evolved and expanded. Today, adolescence lasts for roughly 15 years.

We consider adolescence as a life stage starting with the onset of puberty—which can start as early as nine or 10 years old—and ending when a young person is socially and economically self-sufficient, which is at or around age 26. This stands in stark contrast with many system views on the legal age of adulthood and yet it is consistent with neuroscientific evidence. This understanding has significant implications for how we work with young people, as well as how we structure youth systems, settings and policies around transition. “Developmentally appropriate” means something far different today than several generations ago.

“Today adolescence begins much earlier, it ends much later, and it is far more important in determining health, success, and happiness in adulthood than it has ever been.”

Laurence Steinberg, *The Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*

² For more, see Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

What is readiness?

We define readiness as the dynamic combination of being prepared and willing to take advantage of life's opportunities while managing life's challenges. Readiness is also about being equipped for times of transition and transformation. Throughout our lives, we all face situations and circumstances that are unplanned and uncertain. Serious challenges may threaten to stall or push us off track. Even positive events—like earning a scholarship to a private high school or a chance to perform in public—can be stressful. That is because these situations require responses to new settings, expectations or challenges for which we may be or feel unprepared. We are all, generally speaking, more willing to do things that we know we can do.

Readiness enables us to navigate situations and events without being derailed. It empowers us to seize opportunities and strive through times of challenge and change.

A young person who is “ready” is able and willing to keep going and get better in the face of challenge or adversity. He can find and access the supports he needs: ask for help, identify a mentor, ask questions, make a plan and/or adapt behaviors. Readiness is the mobilizing force that enables him to strive, to move past struggles and toward thriving. Readiness is a prerequisite for self-sufficiency and well-being.

Readiness matters

In our culture, there is a pervasive tendency to see *struggling* and *thriving* as opposite ends of a continuum, when in fact they exist simultaneously across a range of indicators that apply to every one of us in our lives. We may struggle with a physical ailment or a trauma even while we are thriving in other areas of our lives, such as our personal relationships. Each aspect of life influences the others and it is possible to struggle in some areas, thrive in others and be in between in still others.

Our struggling-to-thriving status in each area of life is influenced—both positively and negatively—by what is happening around us. Inequity in access to opportunities in the United States plays a significant (and increasingly well-documented) role. However, a young person's status is also influenced by his or her willingness and ability to engage. **Striving** is another way to think about readiness. Readiness is the ability and willingness to strive, or to move forward



On Language

We define **readiness** as the dynamic combination of being *prepared* and *willing* to take advantage of life's opportunities while managing life's challenges.

Why we use the term “readiness”

We acknowledge that we are not the first to use this term, but over the course of our research we have confirmed that it is accessible, neutral and galvanizing. Perhaps most importantly, it makes sense to most young people and their families. “Readiness” is powerful and practical.

within the context of one's current conditions. Some young people need to strive far more than others in order to reduce struggles and increase thriving. Yet we know that when certain inequities or barriers are present, striving alone is not enough to reach self-sufficiency. We must work to help young people to strive while concurrently addressing the shortcomings of the systems and settings that influence their lives.

Why is striving so critical to include in the broader concept of readiness?

Describing struggling and thriving as static or fixed states ("I am bad at math" or "he has a problem with alcohol" or "she is a natural athlete") erodes a person or group's sense of agency, removing their ownership over being able to grow, change and develop. With the right supports, everyone's readiness can be strengthened and increased. This is certainly the case for young people whose brains and identities are actively changing and developing.^{vii}

In addition, grossly categorizing young people as struggling or thriving reinforces a dangerous "fix then develop" fallacy. This fallacy forces us into thinking we must address problems facing young people who are vulnerable, involved in risky behaviors or experiencing adversity *before* they can take advantage of opportunities for growth or enjoyment. Recent discoveries in brain science tell us this is neither necessary nor healthy. Too often, this belief leads to an over-emphasis on problem reduction as an acceptable goal for certain groups of young people.

Consider an all-too-common and profoundly unjust scenario in our country: We allow a young person with limited reading and math skills to believe she is ready for college or work by awarding her a diploma. It is equally unjust, however, to inform young people of the gaps they bring into school or work without equipping them to close them. Young people growing up in households or communities where they experience poverty, trauma, high rates of incarceration and disconnection are disproportionately more likely to experience "readiness traps" without the full range of supports they need to be ready. At the same time, they are more likely to receive messages, implicit or explicit, that they are unprepared. For these youth in particular, defining readiness as a realistic goal and mapping what it will take to get there is especially important. It is not enough to say that some young people need risk prevention and others need enrichment. Readiness must be our goal for every young person.

The science of readiness gets us closer to this goal by offering a shared understanding of the universal Readiness Abilities and associated Skillsets and Mindsets every young person needs, and the fundamental categories and characteristics of Readiness Practice that adults, systems and settings must put in place to support this development.

What it means to be ready

Readiness Abilities, Skillsets & Mindsets

Nearly every youth system or setting operates with a version of “readiness” criteria and goals: ready for school, college, career or civic life. Ready for adulthood. Ready for algebra or chemistry. Increasingly, we see readiness criteria include social, emotional and interpersonal skills in addition to content- and topic-specific competencies.

We have consolidated all of these criteria into a universal list of **Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets**.

These are the 10 abilities we use every day, no matter who we are or what situations we are in. The abilities are put in motion by commonly used skillsets and mindsets (clusters of habits, attitudes and beliefs). Skillsets *prepare* and *equip* us to do something, while mindsets help us become *willing* to do something.

These abilities, skillsets and mindsets, and the sense of agency they provide young people, are at the core of what it means to be ready. They do not replace specialized knowledge or expertise—building a rocket, for example, requires physics and chemistry. Instead, these abilities, skillsets and mindsets work in combination as the essential foundation for everything we do, from the basics of day-to-day living to highly specialized careers or situations.



On Language

It is important to consider the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets together as a set. Just as we have systems that make our physical bodies function—the brain, lungs and blood cells are needed for respiration, for example—our intellectual, social and emotional selves need this combination of abilities, skillsets and mindsets to function. Thus, the shorthand “Readiness Abilities,” which we use sparingly, should be taken to include skillsets and mindsets.



We need the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets in every stage of life. This applies to every person, regardless of background or circumstances. We put these abilities into action at every age and in every situation.

Readiness Abilities

There are 10 broad and dynamic abilities we use every day. These abilities allow us to respond to life. They activate and change based on whatever is going on. Each ability has both specific and coordinated roles.



I can get and stay healthy physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.



I can work and stay focused in each stage of life.



I can relate to others and the world by forming, managing and sustaining my relationships.



I can use insights to grow and develop in each stage of life.



I can solve problems and make decisions about the intellectual, social, moral and emotional issues and problems I face.



I can apply learning in the real world to meet life demands.



I can engage with people and places by being present and engaging in meaningful, real and honest ways.



I can feel and express emotion appropriately and as a way to connect with others.



I can think and create in ways that help me navigate and experience life.



I can persist through struggles and maintain hope no matter my challenges.

Skillsets and Mindsets

These are the skillsets and mindsets we use to express the Readiness Abilities. Skillsets prepare us to do something and mindsets—made up of habits, attitudes and beliefs—help us become willing to do something.

Skillsets	Mindsets
Application – being able to apply what is learned and practice it in real life.	Adaptability – being flexible in your thinking and behavior, depending on what is needed.
Basic life management – being able to meet basic life demands and practical needs.	Agility – being able to change your mood and actions depending on what is needed, where you are and who you are with.
Communication – being able to communicate what to say in an appropriate and effective way.	Compassion – being moved by the struggles, situations and pain of others.
Coping – being able to make it through and bounce back from hard times.	Courage – being willing to take on challenges, even when you are scared or confused.
Organization and planning – being able to organize and plan life, projects, tasks and schedules.	Curiosity – being an eager learner with many questions.
Problem solving and decisionmaking – being able to solve problems and make informed decisions.	Empathy – being understanding and connected to the feelings and experiences of others.
Reflection and self-awareness – being able to think about life and honestly evaluate where you are, what you need or want and what should be done.	Fairness – being sensitive to the difference between right and wrong, and believing everyone deserves a fair chance.
Relationship management – being able to form, grow, manage and keep relationships.	Future orientation – being focused on what is ahead and using that to motivate you in the present.
Resource and information processing – being able to gather, keep track of and manage information and resources.	Drive – being motivated and focused. Enjoying getting things done and accomplishing goals.
Self-care – being able to meet physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs, as long as there are the right supports and access.	Growth orientation – believing you can get better with practice and hard work.
Self-regulation – being able to manage emotions, thoughts and behaviors so they are appropriate for who you are with, where you are and what you are doing.	Humility – being thoughtful and honest about your talents and achievements, shortcomings and mistakes. Having a healthy perspective and engaging with others even when the focus is not on you.
Thinking and analysis – being able to think and reason critically and creatively about issues and produce thoughtful responses.	Open-mindedness – being open to perspectives and experiences that are different from your own.
	Optimism – being comforted and hopeful by the positive parts of a situation.
	Persistence – being focused and doing whatever it takes to accomplish a goal or task.
	Pragmatism – being honest, practical and objective when considering life, problems and needs.
	Purposefulness – being committed to accomplishing something and being someone whose accomplishments, however modest, improve the world.

Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets work in combination, like body systems. In every situation we express multiple abilities at once, engaging various combinations of skillsets and mindsets. The situation and our own needs determine which skillsets and mindsets we use and at what levels. As with body systems, we do only as well as our abilities are working. If one ability doesn't work properly the others are affected. Settings and situations place different demands on our abilities. When we are developmentally on-track, the use and rotation of these skillsets and mindsets can be almost automatic, like breathing.

There are three key characteristics of the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets:

- **They can be learned.** Our research—especially our study of brain science and human development—indicates the Readiness Abilities are malleable. Anyone can learn and develop these abilities in childhood and adolescence, so long as they have the right supports and opportunities. Once learned, the abilities must be continually practiced and strengthened.
- **They can be measured.** There are empirical, practical and observational ways to see if someone is learning, developing and demonstrating the skillsets and mindsets. Researchers are building new measures for many of the skillsets and mindsets.³ Some examples of validated measures and assessment tools can be found in Child Trend's [*Flourishing Children: Defining and Testing Indicators of Positive Development*](#), the Forum's [*From Soft Skills to Hard Measures*](#), KnowledgeWorks' [*Compendium of Social and Emotional Competency Measures*](#) and the American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) [*Developmental Screening Tools*](#). In 2014 and 2015, the White House convened researchers and funders to discuss “how to measure hard-to-measure skills.” RAND produced two separate reports from those convenings, the first called [*Measuring Hard-to-Measure Student Competencies: A Research and Development Plan*](#) and the second called, [*The Feasibility of Developing a Repository of Assessments of Hard-to-Measure Competencies*](#). For more on measuring readiness, see Readiness Resources, which begin on page 52.⁴
- **They are dynamic.** The expression of the abilities, skillsets and mindsets changes throughout our lives, as a result of our life circumstances, developmental stage and environments. For instance, a young child and adult both need to be able to *feel and express emotion* but it looks different for each. In addition, physical and mental differences—autism, for example, or a physical limitation—require different skillsets and mindsets to correspond to the specific needs and circumstances of the young person.

³ A couple of the the mindsets have been getting lots of attention. This seems to happen when a single mindset is championed and studied by a well-known researcher, especially when that researcher goes on to publish a bestseller. This includes Carol Dweck's work on “growth mindsets,” Angela Duckworth's work on “grit,” and Martin Seligman's work on “optimism.”

⁴ Two other resources begin to tackle issues of measurement, especially in how they relate to professional practice: The Wallace Foundation and University of Chicago Consortium on School Research paper on foundations for young adult success, as well as the Susan Crown Exchange and David P. Weikart Center's field guide to promising practices for social and emotional learning.

When the abilities, skillsets and mindsets are underdeveloped, young people are less likely to be able to avoid, manage or extricate themselves from struggles. They are also less likely to be able to find and respond to opportunities. Systems and settings must see a young person's development of these abilities as paramount—in addition to system-specific priorities such as reducing recidivism or getting students to graduate—and understand they have a clear responsibility to help cultivate those abilities. Readiness and the chance to thrive requires not only these personal abilities, skillsets and mindsets, but also the right supports .



Readiness in Action

These universal abilities are at play for every person in every situation. They are at the core of existing frameworks and standards. In this way, practitioners, leaders and young people can use these to map supports across any system or setting, and connect efforts across sectors. They can be useful to track and monitor how a young person is doing, and how prepared he or she is for events such as graduation or starting college. They can be built into a range of experiences, from recreation to counseling services to classroom projects. Young people can use them to identify their needs.

A Note on Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Scientists are making game-changing discoveries about how the adolescent brain works, which has clear implications for the science of readiness and efforts to support young people in becoming ready. The Readiness Abilities are grounded in this neuroscience. We synthesized dozens of research studies, analyses and books devoted to this emerging field. The following discoveries helped form the foundation of our work:

The adolescent brain is more “plastic” than we thought, and for longer than we thought. The brain is constantly developing and changing during our younger years. In early childhood (birth to 5) and adolescence (ages 9 to 26) our brain development spikes. These are our brain’s major periods of change and growth. In *How the Brain Learns*, David Sousa describes these times as “windows of opportunity”—periods when the brain is especially sensitive and responsive to its environment. Pediatricians and medical researchers consider these to be critical periods for physical development.

This plasticity helps young people learn and strengthen important readiness abilities. The more plastic the brain is, the more it can change. The adolescent brain can change more than the adult brain, adapting and taking on different forms. The science supports how important high-quality youth programming and developmental opportunities are for young people. Plasticity is our finest foundation for learning and development, paving permanent learning pathways in our brains. The adolescent brain is at once vulnerable, versatile and powerful.

The intense emotions adolescents experience are a good thing. They help the brain develop. In adolescence, the brain—housed in an especially emotional young person—is constantly encoding experiences. This unparalleled sensitivity to the outside world makes it imperative that young people be in developmentally appropriate and supportive environments, relationships and experiences.

In adulthood, our brains become less plastic and more efficient. This heightened period of plasticity ends sometime in our early twenties, or whenever our brain physically matures. By this point, our brain has “cleaned house” by letting go of whatever we don’t use and strengthening the knowledge and abilities we use most often. In *Brainstorm*, Daniel Siegel explains it this way: “adolescence can be seen as a transformative period in which individuals go from being open to everything (in childhood) to becoming expert at a few things (in adulthood). We’ve seen that one aspect of this remodeling is pruning, or letting go of the connections in the brain that are not now needed. Pruning in general can lead to important changes in how we function as teens—and sometimes it can unmask potential problems.”

Trauma affects the developing brain. The brain is shaped by our environments, relationships and experiences, especially those that cause high emotions and stress. Our study of the brain included revisiting all we know about trauma and the developing brain, and all that has been recently discovered. This includes research on trauma and trauma-informed care and the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) key principles of a trauma-informed approach. There is evidence that young people have a naturally elevated stress response—as a self-protective technique—that the brain activates on threats to personal safety and survival. This response happens far more quickly for young people than adults. When young people’s already-elevated stress responses are further amplified or sustained for long periods, the consequences can be devastating. Some young people experience persistent traumatic stress as they transition into adulthood. Young people who are homeless, aging-out of foster care, facing special physical or mental health needs, re-entering society from the justice system and living in unstable homes are particularly vulnerable. Trauma-informed care offers proven ways to help young people deal with and heal from trauma or persistent toxic stress. Two key strategies are self-management techniques and mindfulness. When those strategies are combined with safe developmental environments and relationships with people who are educated on trauma, a young person can heal from unhealthy conflict, stress and unpredictability.

*For more on adolescent brain science as well as a full list of citations, see Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

What it takes to ensure all young people are ready

Readiness Practice

Young people's readiness and well-being are shaped by their relationships, experiences and environments. When these supports are developmentally appropriate, they equip a young person with the raw material needed to build critical connections and competence. This is not magic. There is a science (and art) to cultivating readiness, just as there is a science to readiness itself. This science builds on more than a generation of discoveries on child and adolescent development, positive youth development, coaching and mentoring models, developmental relationships, high-quality youth programs and effective teaching and learning. It integrates all features of positive youth development as originally described by the National Research Council in 2003 in *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* as well as the decades of work by Forum for Youth Investment President and CEO Karen Pittman, and Weikart Center Executive Director Dr. Charles Smith.⁵ Viewed in concert, we see just what makes relationships, experiences and environments effective in supporting young people and helping them prepare for life, challenges and opportunities.

We have identified four foundational categories and related characteristics of **Readiness Practice**, which includes a set of specific developmental practices. Developmental practices help young people build connections and competence, which supports the development and demonstration of the abilities, skillsets and mindsets.

Readiness Practice includes the full range of supports young people need in any system or setting at any age or stage. Like the Abilities, it is system- and setting-neutral. Ideally, a young person experiences these supports at home, in the community, at school and in out-of-school services and programs. This must also be true for young people who have been removed from their families and homes—including those who are hospitalized, in juvenile justice settings, residential treatment facilities, shelters or group homes. To be most effective, these practices need to be experienced in an ongoing way, over time.

Readiness Practice maps to and aligns with existing standards of practice in every major youth-serving program or setting. This includes the [David P. Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Intervention \(YPQI\)](#) and [Social Emotional Learning practice standards](#).

⁵ For more information on our practice identification process, see Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

Four categories of Readiness Practice



Developmental Environments⁶

Developmental environments are welcoming, safe and structured. These are positive places where young people want to spend time, know what to expect and know what is expected of them.



Developmental Relationships⁷

Developmental relationships are authentic, positive and productive. These relationships are caring, motivating, equipping and empowering.



Developmental Experiences⁸

Developmental experiences keep young people challenged and engaged. These experiences connect with young people based on who they are, where they are, what they need and what they want.



Space and Time to Develop Skillsets and Mindsets⁹

Systems and settings support readiness by providing space and time for young people to learn, develop and demonstrate skillsets and mindsets. This includes being able to observe and explore, practice and learn from mistakes, apply and connect, reflect and continuously improve.

At a glance, Readiness Practice may seem obvious, including a no-brainer list of the broad attributes we all want for our children and ourselves. Too often, however, these practices are espoused but not actually in place where we assume they should be. We have identified the most common characteristics, all observable and measurable, within each category of readiness practice. Adults and young people can use these to assess their situations, identifying areas of strength and need. These are presented in-depth in the Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

⁶Information for each category of practice comes from specific literature reviews and expert interviews. Information integrates findings from the Forum's past projects and papers, especially those directed by Karen Pittman, Merita Irby and Nicole Yohalem, and by Dr. Charles Smith and colleagues at the Weikart Center.

⁷This category of practice aligns most closely with Search Institute's work on developmental relationships as well as the work from the Weikart Center on professional competencies that support high-quality youth programs.

⁸This category of practice aligns most closely to The Wallace Foundation's and University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*, specifically the descriptions of developmental experiences. This category also builds from the promising practices described in *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (2015).

⁹This category of practice aligns most closely to The Wallace Foundation's and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*.

Developmental practices that build connections and competence

Developmental practices are the dynamic supports young people need, in different ways and from different people, throughout their lives. Adults can learn these practices, and develop strategies for putting them in place, whenever they engage with young people.

What Adults can do to Build Connections	What Adults can do to Build Competence
<p>Be a Coach – Motivate young people, celebrating their growth and success and encouraging them to persist during hard times.</p> <p>Be Engaging – Choose activities and conversation topics that interest young people and keep their attention.</p> <p>Be Relational – Interact with young people with intention and presence. Be an active listener and respond to their needs in healthy and positive ways.</p> <p>Be Socially and Culturally Responsive – Respect young people’s identities, cultures and beliefs. Help them examine and construct their personal identities.</p> <p>Cultivate Community – Help young people feel they belong. Give them meaningful ways to contribute and participate.</p> <p>Encourage Teamwork – Create opportunities for young people to work in teams. Support teams as they navigate personal dynamics and challenges.</p> <p>Focus on the Young Person – Prioritize and value young people’s needs and interests.</p> <p>Give the Young Person Agency – Give young people voice and let them be decisionmakers. Help them take on developmentally appropriate roles and responsibilities.</p> <p>Provide Safety – Keep young people safe and free from violence. Whenever and however you can, reduce risk and prevent harm.</p> <p>Show Care and Concern – Express warmth and closeness to young people. Be empathetic and compassionate. Show them you are paying attention.</p> <p>Support Personal Reflection – Provide opportunities for young people to reflect and share their thoughts. Be available to listen, process, guide and share your own experiences.</p>	<p>Be a Skillful Planner – Plan activities and experiences that support young people’s growth and development. Design ways for young people to develop and demonstrate important skillsets and mindsets.</p> <p>Be a Personal Trainer – Choose and facilitate experiences that build young people’s abilities. Modify or come up with new experiences as young people progress, or their circumstances change.</p> <p>Be Strengths-Based – Recognize, draw out and build upon young people’s strengths. Create opportunities for young people to express and showcase their talents and skills.</p> <p>Empower the Young Person – Nurture young people’s sense of self and independence. Equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to take on challenges and own their behavior and actions.</p> <p>Facilitate Personal Mastery of Skillsets and Mindsets – Provide the space and time young people need to observe, develop and demonstrate skillsets and mindsets.</p> <p>Make Real World Connections – Show young people how activities and experiences connect to the real world. Create ways for young people to safely test skillsets and mindsets in real ways.</p> <p>Model What You Want – Be a positive example for young people by modeling what you expect from them.</p> <p>Provide Positive Challenges – Push young people to keep growing by offering opportunities to get out of their comfort zone, work hard and try something new.</p> <p>Provide Resources – Give young people access to information, tools and supports they need. Work with others to support young people in ways you cannot.</p> <p>Provide Structure – Establish clear, consistent boundaries and a sense of predictability. Monitor young people and those around them, ensuring positivity, safety and support.</p>

We consider a system or setting **readiness-rich** when a young person is able to seamlessly move between environments, relationships, experiences and spaces that engage all of the developmental practices. With ongoing exposure to these supports, young people eventually develop sufficient mastery of and ownership over the abilities, skillsets and mindsets. This agency activates striving, moving the young person toward self-sufficiency and well-being.

Making the invisible visible in systems and settings

Every youth system (e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, education) and setting (e.g., school, residential group home or classroom) has an official set of practices and unofficial but generally accepted or encouraged practices. In some cases, these are grounded in what we know works for young people. In other cases, practices emerge from a mixture of trial, error, routine and instinct on the part of well-meaning leaders and practitioners. The practices show up in hiring and programming decisions, policies and processes, norms and expectations, and organizational culture.

Within systems and settings, leaders and practitioners must understand how the official ways of doing business compare to the developmental. Specifically, they must assess whether official policies, processes or practices promote or prohibit the developmental practices.¹⁰

Some leaders and practitioners, particularly those in youth development, will find that most of their official programming implicitly if not explicitly acknowledges the value of developmental practices. In other cases—far too often, according to our research—the official policies or processes hinder or even run counter to the developmental practices. This is often unintentional, resulting from responses to crises, established routines, trends in our understanding of childhood and human development (or public safety, for example), or approaches that have stood unchallenged over time. Staff and administrators may be too busy to examine the practices, or actively discouraged from questioning them.

Consider a juvenile detention facility that works with girls who have typically been exposed to trauma, including physical or sexual abuse. The official code of conduct prohibits staff



Readiness in Action

The Readiness Project identifies observable and measurable characteristics of readiness-richness within four categories of Readiness Practice: environments, relationships, experiences, and space and time. These characteristics can be used to assess the strength of any system or setting. For leaders, practitioners and parents, these characteristics offer a basic architecture and design for the places and people young people need to grow and develop.

¹⁰ This concept of making the invisible visible and comparing official practices with developmental practices has been developed by Karen Pittman, CEO of the Forum and Co-director of The Readiness Project.

from physically touching the girls. This rule is in place to minimize further trauma; in reality, however, it creates a situation where staff are forced to respond to situations in a way that can be destructive. If a fight breaks out, for example, staff are encouraged to use non-physical interventions—verbal commands, pepper spray or cold water—to break it up without violating the “no touching” rule. We know from studies that relationships are the active ingredient that triggers youth engagement. The no touching policy, while well-intended, weakens connections between the youth and staff. Most staff recognize that these methods are far from ideal, but feel unable to respond in a more productive way.

Cases like this contribute to young people becoming less ready—that is, less prepared and willing over time. In the justice field, the clearest evidence to the ineffectiveness of this approach is the significant difference in recidivism rates among adolescents in the juvenile system, especially between those involved in community-based alternative programs, as compared with those in detention facilities or in the adult system—places where few developmental practices and supports are in place.

Not all examples are as stark as these. Often, the disconnect between the official and developmental is far more subtle. A more nuanced illustration also arises in the justice system: In a juvenile detention center, group home or other institutional setting, behavior management often makes use of a “point” or “level” system where compliance with rules earns points. The more points or higher the level, the more privileges or rewards. However, because this process is built around rule compliance, it fails to acknowledge and reward positive behaviors critical to social, emotional and cognitive development, such as teamwork, empathy and problem solving.

In this case, as in many others, official practices don't prohibit developmental practices but are silent on how, when and why to integrate the developmental. This leaves settings room for interpretation on how practices should be implemented within the policy and contributes to unevenness in the quality and consistency of execution. The result: Outcomes remain worse than we want them to be. High school graduation rates increase, but graduates still struggle



On Language

Official Practices

The required or established policies, processes and practices necessary—or assumed necessary—for a system or setting to achieve its outcomes and purposes.

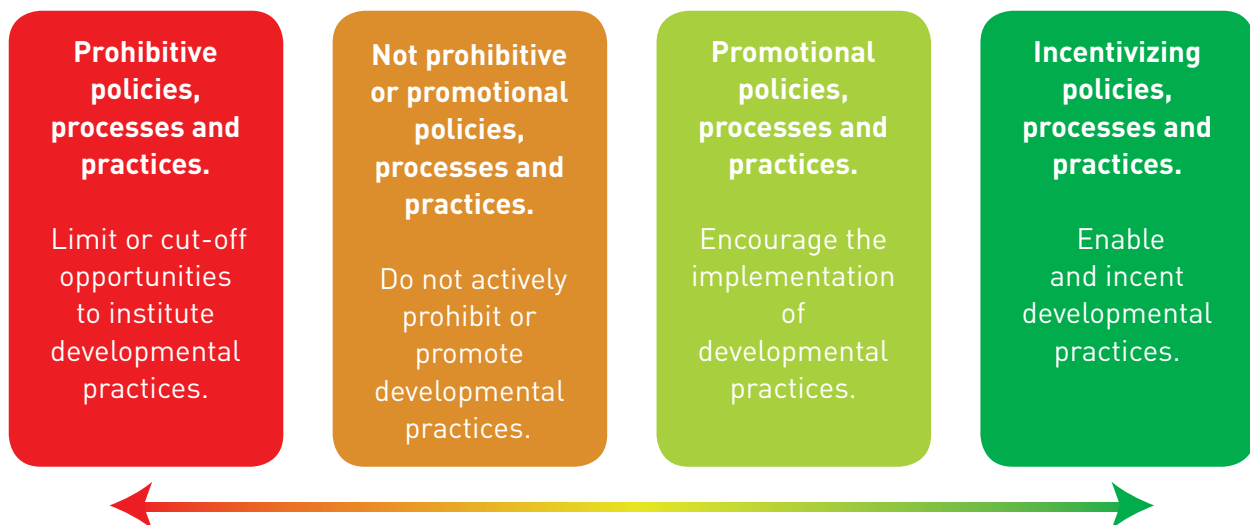
Developmental Practices

Informal or optional practices happening in a system or setting that support young people's growth and development, which are critical for readiness. Readiness Practice is grounded in the developmental. We aim for the developmental becoming the official.

in college or work. Youth aging-out of foster care are offered life skills programming, but find they lack crucial skills required for living independently. Children have access to an afterschool program, but their problem behaviors persist.

The four categories of Readiness Practice, with their accompanying developmental practices, are a way to assess official and standard approaches through a readiness lens. From here, disconnects can be identified or a case can be made for changing what is already known to be counterproductive.

An assessment across a spectrum scale, as shown here,¹¹ provides a starting point for figuring out the readiness-richness of your system or setting practice.¹²




Unpacking official practices against this type of spectrum *makes the invisible visible* in a system or setting. It illuminates where developmental practices are already official and where they may be either discouraged or not allowed. From here, leaders and practitioners have the information they need to decide on practical changes that can optimize the presence of developmental practices and remove barriers. This applies to all aspects of an organization, both organizational viability—for example, human resources or financial management—and programming, such as curriculum and assessment choices.

By going through this assessment process, they bring “the magic” behind especially effective people and approaches into the open, naming it, formalizing it and giving it precision. In

¹¹ This spectrum was adapted from a similar tool in the Forum for Youth Investment’s *Collective Impact for Policymakers: Working Together for Children and Youth*.

¹² There are tools, such as the Weikart Center’s Youth Program Quality Intervention, that support the high-quality implementation and continuous improvement of these practices over time.



whatever system or setting, this can help bring about high-quality hiring, evaluating and programming. It can also lift up specific actions to move a youth readiness agenda forward.

One example among many: In 1999, a team of researchers at Virginia Commonwealth University created an afterschool program for middle school students with special needs, who were exhibiting behavioral problems. They began by developing relationships with the students, then creating increasingly more organized and formal ways for them to share their frustrations, practice expressing their emotions, and identify ways to contribute and be recognized among their peers in school. The program was a success. Participants' behavior disruptions declined significantly, along with school disciplinary actions and suspensions.^{viii}

The program, however, was not picked up by the school system once the university's grant funding ran out. The program used the developmental practices as its foundation – but there was no official process to name and assess the practices that were leading to its results. The program was not introduced as a pilot for providing staff with opportunities to incorporate developmental practices into their work. There was no explicit charge to document how these successful practices could be aligned with the official requirements for interventions at the school. So, as is too often the case, the lessons from an effective program were lost when the program closed.

When we make developmental practices an integral part of the official practices, we exponentially increase adults' opportunities to do the right thing for young people most in need of our support. These young people are:

- More likely to be in systems that have official practices that run counter to developmental practices (e.g., juvenile justice).
- More likely to be with staff who are not trained in youth development, making them less likely to use developmental practices, even if not explicitly prohibited.
- Less likely to be in specific programs that explicitly encourage developmental practices (e.g., self-directed teams in gifted and talented programs) or with staff who are comfortable taking risks to innovate practice.
- Less likely to believe they should expect adults and programs in their lives to demonstrate these practices or have family members or champions who advocate for these practices.

The youth perspective: How “readiness-rich” is your life?

Young people must be empowered and equipped to identify and demand the supports they need to be ready for their lives.

This is not the same thing as requiring young people to be responsible for their own growth and development. Too often by default— or by flawed design within systems and settings—we ask young people to do the impossible. That is, to name the supports or connections they may not even realize they lack, and then to go find them on their own. We suggest flipping this. By naming the abilities, skillsets and mindsets life requires, and the developmental practices that cultivate these abilities, we give young people a roadmap to know what they’re getting and what they’re missing. This mapping process can be done by reviewing this science with an adult or independently. Assessing current systems or settings against developmental supports can be a transformational process for young people, especially those who are underserved and underrepresented. It gives them practical insight into what resources and supports they must connect to. In order for this mapping process to work, young people need someone or some place that can help them fill gaps, by making connections between the supports they need and those people and places who can offer them.

Developmental Supports Young People Need

Places where they are

- Safe and secure
- Clear on routines, roles and responsibilities
- Known and welcome

People who

- Empower and equip
- Coach and motivate
- Love and care

Opportunities that

- Connect with and explore their interests
- Challenge and engage
- Allow for observation and exploration
- Allow for practicing, failing and learning from mistakes
- Encourage making connections with and applying what is learned
- Encourage reflection and continuous improvement

Putting the characteristics of Readiness Practice into place in a system or setting—including having adults using the developmental practices—helps a young person “fill his backpack” with the abilities, skillsets and mindsets he needs and to learn how to use them.

Over the course of this project we talked to more than 100 individuals, ages 17 and older, from various backgrounds, to see how ready they consider themselves for life and adulthood. We asked if and where they had experienced developmental supports in childhood and adolescence. All adults who considered themselves “ready” had experienced these supports throughout their lives. Notably, it did not matter how many places and people it took to map to all of the practices. This suggests that one young person could grow up in a readiness-rich family and school, receiving all the supports she needs. Another young person could grow up in a dysfunctional home and attend a poor-performing school, but find those supports elsewhere—like at an afterschool program or through a faith community—and end up just as ready for life.¹³



On Language

Our research is designed to help leaders and others connect high-quality yet fragmented efforts by providing shared maps that allow leaders to leverage commonalities across programs, systems and communities.

¹³ These conversations, surveys and interviews were part of a summer project, called the Bootstraps Storybank. As a part of that project, a self-assessment was created and distributed via social media and personal request. Participants were invited to assess themselves against the abilities, skillsets and mindsets. They were then asked about their experience with the developmental practices at each life stage. Participants were also invited to submit their life stories—through writing or recording—into our storybank.

What gets in the way of readiness

Readiness Traps

There are many reasons young people enter times of transition or transformation without the abilities and supports they need. Many young people grow up in ecosystems that are far from readiness-rich.

We found four common Readiness Traps, which are serious and often unintended conditions in youth systems and settings that impede readiness. They are in our rules, regulations and expectations. They are entrenched in culture and policy. They have persisted over many years and are deeply ingrained in much of our work with young people.

To fundamentally change practice and support readiness for every young person, we must understand and mitigate these traps:



Readiness in Action

The Readiness Project identifies four Readiness Traps that prevent or narrow opportunities for putting the Readiness Abilities and Readiness Practice into place. These traps show up in policy, processes, norms, expectations and cultures. Policymakers, system leaders and practitioners can scan for these traps, putting strategies in place to manage or mitigate them.



Access as Proxy for Quality

When young people's place of residence determines their access to high-quality schooling, services and programs. Many systems track and report on admissions and enrollment information or the number of people they serve, sometimes giving it more attention than the quality of programming.

Examples:

- » **Resources** – local systems and settings have resources, but that does not mean they are sufficient, stable, sustainable or used in the best ways.
- » **Talent** – local systems and settings have staff, but that does not mean staff are sufficient, skilled or working in the most effective and supportive ways.



Age as Proxy for Stage

When young people are assigned to a program, group or class based on age, rather than stage of learning, development or behavior. Many system policies decide when a young person starts or stops in a system or setting, because of age. There are few policy exceptions available to children and youth whose age and developmental stage do not match.

Examples:

- » **Social promotion** – using age as the deciding factor for placing or passing a young person into a setting, such as academic grade.
- » **Aging-out** – denying young people services because they have reached the set age of adulthood, as defined by a system or setting.



Completion as Proxy for Competence

When young people are allowed to move on to the next stage, grade, system or setting because they have finished—even if they are not ready. Or, when young people are ready to move on but are not allowed because of certain policies or requirements. Many systems track and report on completion requirements—successful exits, graduations, number of young people who have aged-out—without also tracking and reporting on their proficiency in critical competencies.

Examples:

- » **Completing school** – a diploma means a young person has met one school's graduation requirements. It does not guarantee readiness for college or a job.
- » **Completing treatment** – finishing treatment for addictions or mental health struggles does not guarantee that a young person is or will remain sober, stable or healthy.



Time as Proxy for Progress

When young people's time in a system or setting triggers when they move ahead, or when time is used as a way to measure a young person's growth and development. Many system policies use time (e.g., minutes, hours, days, months) as a way to determine where young people are placed or when they are finished.

Examples:

- » **Seat-time** – when a young person earns academic credit based on time spent in class.
- » **Doing time** – when a young person is held in a juvenile justice facility after a court hearing or judicial decision, or is issued a time-based sentence.

All young people confront these traps in one form or another. However, young men and women of color, those who live in or near poverty, and young people involved in multiple public systems (e.g., those who are involved in both child welfare and juvenile justice) are disproportionately affected by these traps—and are especially vulnerable to being derailed by them.

These traps contribute to persistent and growing readiness gaps, which can be classified in two categories: gaps among groups of young people and gaps between what young people have and what they need. These gaps are one of the greatest threats to a young person's readiness and well-being. Together, traps and gaps perpetuate inequity.

Readiness Gaps

There are four common Readiness Gaps, fueled by the traps that threaten a young person's readiness:



Achievement Gap

Differences in academic standing between young people, which are often connected to race, class, ability or gender.



Expectations Gap

Differences between what young people and their support system expect will happen from investing time and resources into a system, and what actually transpires. The differences in what society expects from certain groups of young people.



Opportunity Gap

Differences in the quality and quantity of opportunities and supports available to young people, often because of their families or where they live.



Skills Gap


Differences between what young people can do and the skillsets and mindsets they need to carry out a role or responsibility.



Readiness in Action

The Readiness Project identifies four Readiness Gaps that keep young people in inequitable circumstances. Community and system leaders can use these four gaps to get a pulse on where a group of young people or a young person is, understanding the barriers getting in the way of readiness.

There is significant and growing attention to these traps and gaps, primarily by leaders in business, education, youth development and government. This focus on the needs and disparities of young people has given rise to efforts that range from opening high-quality school-based health clinics and early childhood education centers, to extending foster care supports to age 21 or reversing "zero tolerance" school discipline policies. Equity campaigns and



national corps (e.g., AmeriCorps and Teach For America) are striving to close achievement and opportunity gaps. Groups of employers are launching initiatives to understand and address skills gaps. States are actively engaged, too. New Hampshire led the way for most of New England to do away with “seat-time” in favor of more student-centered learning approaches. Several states have raised the age of criminal responsibility above age 16 to limit the number of adolescents who become trapped in the adult criminal justice system.

We have tracked the many initiatives working to reduce these traps and gaps and synthesized what is known about their impact. All of these are worthwhile and thoughtful efforts, and many are effective. Yet they are typically limited to a single system or youth population. As a result, while these efforts are highly promising because they address and attempt to correct underlying issues, they are not enough. Partial success is all that can be expected because these efforts do not correct or address silos and fragmentation between the spaces and places where young people spend time. System-specific efforts to reduce traps and gaps are necessary, but they cannot make readiness a right on their own.¹⁴

¹⁴ For more information, see Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

The readiness ecosystem

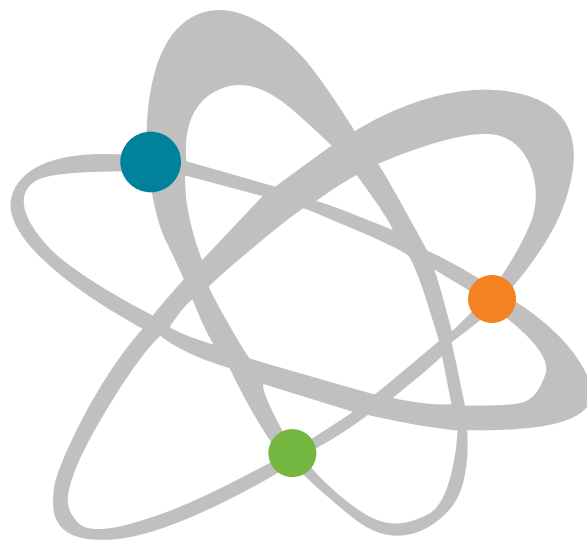
The science of readiness calls for a third way: To work hard to reduce gaps and traps while providing young people with the abilities and supports they need to get by, no matter what challenges and opportunities they face. This approach is focused, generative and systematic. It provides practitioners and policymakers with a chance to address deep and persistent inequities in permanent and holistic ways. It also equips a young person with the abilities and supports he or she needs to limit the impact of traps that may come in the future.



The science of readiness requires we take a holistic, ecosystem view.

This is by design. Young people grow and develop within a complex human ecosystem of settings, systems, situations and communities. This ecosystem is shaped—in ways that are not always obvious or visible—by policies, regulations, cultures, norms and expectations about what people do and how they behave. These, in turn, are influenced by external social and economic forces that can either reduce or exacerbate traps and gaps.

No matter what internal and external forces influence a young person's life, the science of readiness provides maps and trailmarkers to identify what young people need and when. Together, the four components of the science—the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets, Readiness Practice, the Traps and Gaps—prepare us to take a holistic and youth-centered approach to making readiness a right for every young person.



BEHIND THE SCIENCE

READINESS IN CONTEXT

To research readiness, we went much deeper than just reviewing the brain science described in the previous section. We looked at how every major youth system is working to promote readiness. We also examined the best thinking on learning, human development and ecology, historic influences and the behavior of networks and systems. These influences are described below. Additional information is provided in the Readiness Resources section, which begins on page 52.

Readiness efforts within and for youth systems and settings

Every major youth system has at least one authoritative set of metrics, markers or milestones used to describe what it considers makes a young person ready. These are typically designed to address inequity by focusing on the reduction of risks or problems, or on indicators of achievement and success. Over time, systems have matched metrics with various practices and programs. Often these are referred to as promising or best practices, some having earned the title of evidence-based practices.






We reviewed the many metrics, milestones and standards from every major youth system¹⁵ to ensure the fullness and accuracy of our research and its alignment with credible efforts. We crosswalked many of these frameworks and measures. We selected 60 of the most frequently used and well-known and compared them to find what was universal. We took this universal list of readiness characteristics, and refined it against everything we had learned from research and experts. Several national nonprofits—like CASEL, Child Trends, Partnership for 21st Century Learning, Jobs for the Future and Search Institute—and research centers—like University of Chicago’s Consortium on School Research and Chapin Hall—especially strengthened, guided and made sense of our research.

From this process, a system-neutral and youth-focused research base emerged, which we hope is usable by all. The chart on the next page presents an at-a-glance snapshot of some of the sources we used categorized by major youth system.

Technology and the changing worlds of learning and work

Today’s young people are transitioning to adulthood in the midst of an unpredictable economy and a workforce where roles and requirements are constantly in flux.^{ix} Learning is changing, too. In the digital age and era of smart technologies, young people are increasingly reliant on their devices to connect, learn, earn and live.^x For many young people, technology offers a potential bridge out of inadequate schooling environments and a chance to drive their own learning. Nonetheless, a digital divide persists. This makes it more likely that the young people who could most benefit from access to new learning technologies—youth in underresourced communities or those with learning limitations—are still the least likely to have the access and supports to take advantage of these tools. This is the promise and possible peril of digital learning tools. The very things that could begin to reduce inequities are just as likely to exacerbate them.

¹⁵ See Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52, for a full listing of the more than 60 system and sector sources we collected, compared and curated.

Youth System Efforts that Promote Readiness ¹⁶					
					
	Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice	Faith, Family & Civics	Education & Youth Development	Health & Prevention	Workforce Development
PRIORITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management • Transition and independence • Well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic engagement • Morality and virtues • Service • Strength of character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21st century skills, • College and career readiness • Deeper learning • Social emotional competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk management and protection • Transition and independence • Wellness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career readiness • Employability
PARTIAL LIST OF PROGRAMS & PRACTICES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset building • Positive youth justice • Restorative justice • Transition planning • Trauma-informed care • Youth advisories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic education • Mentorship • Religious education • Spiritual practice • Volunteerism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advising and counseling • Blended learning • Character education • Experiential and project-based learning • Developmental experiences and relationships • Peer supports • Positive youth development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to healthcare and medications • Drop-in health centers • Physical fitness • Therapeutic services • Wellness visits • Transition planning • Trauma-informed care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apprenticeships • Job shadowing • Career pathways • Internships and externships • Stackable credentials • Work-based learning
PARTIAL LIST OF SYSTEMS, NETWORKS & ORGANIZATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Center for Youth Justice • Chapin Hall at University of Chicago • Child Trends • Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative • National Research Council • UNICEF • U.S. Administration for Children, Youth and Families • U.S. Agency for International Development • U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention • Youth Transition Funders Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AmeriCorps • Brookings Institution • Center for Character and Citizenship • Civic Enterprises • John Templeton Foundation • Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues • National Citizen Service • Step Up To Serve • VIA Institute on Character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieve • ASCD, Whole Child Initiative • CASEL • Child Trends • Consortium on School Research at University of Chicago • Hewlett Foundation • Lumina Foundation • Partnership for 21st Century Skills • Opportunity Youth Network • Susan Crown Exchange • U.S. Department of Education • Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100 Million Healthier Lives • American Academy of Pediatrics • Got Transitions • National Alliance to Advance Adolescent Health • Search Institute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joyce Foundation • Korn Ferry/Lominger • National Network of Business and Industry Associations • Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development • Polaris • U.S. Department of Education – Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education • U.S. Department of Labor
FRAMEWORKS: METRICS, MILESTONES & MARKERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harm Reduction • Opportunity Youth Logic Model • Positive Indicators of Child Well-being • Well-being Frameworks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character strengths and virtues • Character and opportunity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21st Century Skills • AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes • Common Core State Standards • Cross Disciplinary Proficiencies • Degree Qualifications Profile • Habits of Mind • P21 Framework • Whole Child Tenets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40 Developmental Assets • Child Trends DataBank Indicators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting Credentials Framework • Common Employability Skills • Employability Skills Framework • Lominger and Polaris Competencies • SCANS Workplace Essential Skills

¹⁶ For full listing of the sources behind our work, see Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.



How does The Readiness Project fit?

The Readiness Project is grounded in the belief that all young people deserve to be ready for their lives, no matter who they are, where they live, what their circumstances are or what systems they touch.

As we talked through our ideas and findings with researchers, policymakers, practitioners, parents and young people, we were struck by the strong interest in a galvanizing and universal list.

We designed our research and materials to align with and connect to the existing frameworks and approaches, offering a central, unifying starting point for working with young people. This is not another framework. **Our vantage point is the young person rather than the system or setting.**

Other Key Influences

Several cultural trends and emerging data developments informed the readiness research. These are briefly described on the next few pages and explained in greater detail in the Readiness Resources, which begins on page 52.

This is where readiness comes in. As external factors assert their push and pull, we can support young people—and those who work with and care about them—to understand and develop the abilities needed in life, no matter how the landscape changes.

The rise of social and emotional learning

It is hard to overstate the importance of the growing field of social and emotional learning (SEL). Although SEL has been named, practiced and studied for decades—especially in youth development and out-of-school settings—only recently have we had significant research to document its importance and effectiveness. A 2015 study found many practitioners who are new to SEL consider it the “missing piece” of their work, while those who have long worked with it often say it is the most important and active ingredient of their practice.^{xi}

SEL, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the process and practices that support a young person’s development of the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.¹⁷

In 2016, the Susan Crown Exchange partnered with the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality—a Forum affiliate—in the release of an actionable evidence-based field guide to SEL practice. The Social and Emotional Learning Challenge was a partnership between expert practitioners (youth workers, social workers, teachers) delivering exemplary programs in eight unique communities, a team of researchers and a national funder. It was designed to: (1) identify promising practices for building SEL skills with vulnerable adolescents and (2) develop a method for taking these practices to scale in thousands of out-of-school time settings. The promising practices are called standards for SEL practice and the method is called the SEL Strengths Builder.

The findings are published in a field guide, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning*, a technical report, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Methodology and Findings from the SEL Challenge*, and a website, SELpractices.org. The SEL practices that were the focus of the Challenge were organized around adolescent skill growth in six areas: emotion management, empathy, teamwork, responsibility, initiative and problem solving. The field guide presents 32 standards and 76 practice indicators in the six areas of SEL practice and four additional curriculum features. Each practice indicator is accompanied by multiple real-world examples. Case studies are also presented for each of the eight exemplary programs.

The growing body of evidence being developed by the SEL field makes it clear that there are concrete and observable developmental practices that youth systems and settings can put in place, which facilitate a young person’s demonstration of readiness abilities.

These are integrated into the categories and characteristics of Readiness Practice.

¹⁷ CASEL focuses on five areas of social emotional competence: self-management, self-awareness, responsible decisionmaking, relationship skills and social awareness.

Shifts from child welfare to well-being

In the past decade, there has been mounting interest among policymakers and practitioners in turning general interest in child and youth well-being into intentional investments and implementation. In particular, those who work in child and youth protection and prevention have begun to shift their primary focus away from risk management (reduction of struggling) and toward quality of life (promotion of thriving). This has led to the development of international and domestic well-being frameworks and initiatives. In the United States, our public child welfare, health and prevention, and juvenile justice systems have started discussions and initiatives that make child and youth well-being a primary goal.^{xii}

Differences between Child Welfare and Child Well-being ^{xiii}	
Child welfare focuses on	Child well-being focuses on
Meeting basic needs	Building assets
Reducing risks	Expanding opportunities
Developing basic skills	Cultivating key capacities
Survival	Happiness and quality of life
Personal contribution	Meaning and purpose

Readiness is about being able to mobilize oneself, with appropriate supports, to reach well-being. If well-being is the goal then readiness is the road to getting there.

Growing a better-prepared talent pipeline

Employers are demanding readiness. When business leaders are asked what skills they want in their employees—and subsequently, what skills many employees lack—they name social and emotional competencies, or “soft skills.” Child Trends partnered with the U.S. Agency for International Development and FHI 360 to identify which soft skills predict a young person’s success in the workforce. After reviewing nearly 400 sources and speaking to experts around the world, the Child Trends team determined that higher-order thinking skills, communication, positive self-concept, self-control and social skills are the soft skills that matter most for employability.

Their findings are supported by two other leading frameworks, one by the National Network of Business and Industry Associations (National Network) and the other by RTI International for the U.S. Department of Labor.

The National Network created the *Common Employability Skills Framework* with input from employers who represent high-growth industries.^{xiv} Its four competency categories are personal skills, people skills, applied skills and workplace skills.

RTI International contracted with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education to create the *Employability Skills Framework*, which includes nine key skills, organized into these three categories:^{xv} applied knowledge, effective relationships and workplace skills.

Systems thinking for social change

We were deeply influenced by systems science or systems thinking, which is the understanding of the interdependent structures of dynamic systems and how elements influence each other within a larger system.^{xvi} Systems thinking offers a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, and for seeing patterns of change rather than static "snapshots."^{xvii} Systems thinking has been referred to as the "discipline of seeing wholes." Approaching readiness from this perspective helps us identify points we can effectively leverage to spur desired outcomes.

Human ecology approach to development

Our research is also informed by an older body of work, popularized by Urie Bronfenbrenner in *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Bronfenbrenner proposed a human ecology approach to development. His theory suggests that a young person's development depends on his relationships. There are immediate relationships, like family and friends, as well as distant and indirect ones. Young people affect and are affected by these relationships in different ways, depending on the nature of connection.^{xviii}

WHAT'S NEXT

THE ART OF GETTING YOUTH READY BY DESIGN

Readiness happens, by design

We believe the first step of making readiness a right, is to understand and clarify—in accessible, actionable and youth-centered language—what it means to be ready, and what it will take to ensure that young people are supported wherever they spend time. This science of readiness offers that and represents the full range of systems and sectors where youth may be.

The most pressing question from stakeholders is how to put this science into action to improve outcomes for young people. Or, put another way, what does it look like to make readiness a right for every young person?

We hope adults take our research findings and use them to:

- Explicitly acknowledge the abilities youth need and the practices that nurture them, with the goal of *building them in* rather than *adding them on* to official practice.
- Systematically document the traps and gaps that combine to undermine young people's readiness.
- Design opportunities to address the traps and gaps in the most powerful way by ensuring that any interventions proposed have these abilities and practices at their core.

There is an art to the application of this science into our work and the “messy” world of real lives. We must approach readiness holistically, carefully keeping young people at the center, and design for readiness using a youth-centered approach that takes into account the full ecosystem in which young people develop. In concrete terms, that means we must focus on the four primary components of the readiness research—the Abilities, Practices, Traps and Gaps— as a whole. To do otherwise is insufficient and will not bring about lasting change, as our current social conditions demonstrate.



We must focus on the four primary components of the readiness research—the Abilities, Practices, Traps and Gaps—as a whole.

Many of us come into the readiness arena through a single entry point—as an advocate tackling a specific trap, a teacher focused on an ability or two, a practitioner focused on narrowing a gap. Some of us are responsible for designing broadly; we set policies that impact several systems or groups, or we run strategies that affect multiple areas in a community. Designing for readiness requires that system and community leaders see and address the whole ecosystem. All of us, including practitioners, families and young people, will benefit from understanding how we are affected by the ecosystem, even if on a daily basis we are more likely to be concerned about navigating a trap or honing an ability.

How readiness happens by design

By working with the full complexity of this ecosystem, we optimize each young person's chance of readiness, now and as he or she grows. We can enable a young person to—at once—minimize gaps, avoid culture and policy traps, maximize time at places and with people who are most supportive, and find spaces to practice and master the skillsets and mindsets that really matter.

As we finalized our research, we started working with organizations, coalitions, collective impact efforts and funder affinity groups to infuse this into their work. An overview of how these thought partners and early adopters have started to design for readiness is included in the Readiness Resources section, which begins on page 52.

This section outline ways that young people and adults can make use of the readiness research.

Acting on the science

When young people get themselves ready by design

The Readiness Abilities and Readiness Practice provide young people with clear guidance for what they need for life. Written in a way to be accessible and actionable for most young people, we think there is a “grab and go” feature to use these resources quickly figure out what they have and what they need.



Getting honest about personal readiness gaps

Young people need to know where they stand against their peers. If possible, young people should know if there are personal readiness gaps that could keep them from thriving. Caring adults can guide a young person through a series of activities or conversations to identify whether or not they struggle or risk struggling from achievement, expectations, opportunity or skills gaps. This can have important implications on what skillsets and mindsets are made high priority for development.

Talking about and assessing readiness abilities

Young people can use the readiness abilities to assess where they are in their natural state—that is, when they are free from unusual stress. They can also use the abilities to gauge where they are thriving, striving or struggling. Working with caring adults, close peers or through personal reflection, a young person can identify which abilities are under- or overused and in what settings or situations. From there, the young person can look for the skillsets and mindsets that support the appropriate use of that ability. For instance, a young person who struggles to *work and stay focused* might identify the need for improving organization and planning skills.

Take the Lessons Home

Five Ways to Start Using the Science of Readiness

As you move your readiness work forward, it must survive changes in leadership, funding and fads. Here are five steps to help you institutionalize readiness as a regular way of doing business:

1. **Talk about readiness and increase awareness.** Build public understanding and will. Make sure young people, their families, frontline workers and leaders all know how important readiness is, what readiness requires and how it could change a young person's chances in life. Create buzz and increase demand.
2. **Engage young people and the community.** The readiness research was designed with young people and their families in mind. It simplifies and synthesizes so much science, writing and system-specific efforts. This was done so young people, their families and the community could understand and use it. Involve young people and their families to plan for readiness, and to make the case that it matters. They are your most important consumers and can be your most important champions.
3. **Use data.** They say if you cannot measure it, it does not matter. Make readiness matter by collecting and reporting regularly on the impact of this science. How are child and youth outcomes changing? What is happening in practice? Where do you see improvements? Use data to inform, improve and seek investment into the work.
4. **Change the policies and resources you can.** Work with others to make sure policies, regulations and resources explicitly promote or incentivize youth readiness. This may require legislative change or changes to organizational policies and process. It could mean working with funders to make readiness a priority funding area. Readiness work cannot be institutionalized unless it can be implemented and sustained. Policies and resources must create a supportive regulatory environment.
5. **Improve systems and conditions.** Readiness needs to be a priority at every level—from daily interactions with young people, to system infrastructure and leadership. Improve conditions by looking for permanent public policy and systems change. Identify and push for federal and state changes that can ease readiness work, by promoting or incentivizing it.

The Forum is designing strategy guides and tools to help you undertake these calls to action.

Young people, particularly those who are in underresourced environments, can use the assessment of readiness abilities as a way to evaluate the systems and settings where they spend time. Do these environments provide opportunities for young people to learn, develop and demonstrate the skillsets and mindsets? If not, are there ways to demand more and better aligned opportunities. And, if that is not possible, can the identification of gaps and weaknesses help the young person and his family be more specific in the supports and services they ask for?

Abilities assessments could become a routine way for young people to check in with themselves, and with those with whom they are in developmental relationships. Like going to the doctor for a check-up, young people would have a way to regularly check and monitor their readiness.

Mapping to developmental supports

Developmental supports point young people toward the places, people and opportunities they need. Young people can use this list of supports to connect to readiness-rich environments, relationships and experiences. In this way, the supports act as a critical checklist for moving forward. Young people should routinely check to see if all of their developmental support needs are being met. If they are, then they can actively engage those people, places and opportunities to assess and improve readiness. This is especially important for young people who are underrepresented or live in underresourced communities. If common systems and settings—like school or family—cannot provide the developmental supports, it is imperative for young people to tap into a broader ecosystem of support. There is a huge need for mentors, advocates and caring adults during this process. Young people may not know how to find, demand or connect to developmental supports that are not readily available. This is where strong and connected adults can be of most assistance.

When adults design for readiness

Our research on readiness provides information and instructions for parents, practitioners, providers and other caring adults. We have written our findings in such a way to be picked up and put to immediate use. Putting the developmental practices into action, and partnering with young people to strengthen their readiness abilities, should result in improved relationships and outcomes for the young person.

“In Ohio’s efforts, we are careful to articulate that young people involved in youth-led programming need the guidance and assistance of adults as they learn how to effectively create community change. We found the Science of Readiness to be invaluable as we situated youth-led programming in contemporary research.”

***- Holly Raffle,
Associate Professor,
representing the Ohio Department of
Mental Health and Addiction Services***

Building connections and competence

Adults may find the list of developmental practices to be the most practical part of this research. It can easily be used as a self-assessment. Once there is a young person or a particular situation in mind, the adult can scan the list and try to figure out if there are more or better ways to offer support. Adults can use this list as a conversation piece, inviting young people into dialogue about what they need and want. Adults can also use this list as a strategy and planning tool, working with colleagues or talking with parents about how to best support a young person during times of specific challenge or opportunity. Out of these assessments and conversations, an adult can connect to resources and trainings, seeking his or her own improvement and personal development.

Tossing out the “fix then develop” fallacy

Adults must meet young people wherever they are. This means adults need to put far more attention on how young people manage challenges and respond to opportunities, rather than *if* they are managing challenges and responding to opportunities. Coming alongside young people to provide support and help strengthen their Readiness Abilities will empower them for the rest of their lives. It is time to check any tendency we have to focus on either fixing or achieving, and increase our focus on what happens in between. This kind of mindset shift is potentially transformative.

Assessing readiness abilities

The Readiness Abilities are lifelong. Young people learn so much through modeling, and readiness is no exception. Adults can assess their own abilities, in both a natural state and also within particular settings and situations. If adults can be open and honest with young people about how they are working on specific abilities, skillsets or mindsets, or where they are over- or underusing an ability, then they not only show young people how this science works in adulthood, but demonstrate its immediate relevance. Adults will benefit from monitoring and tuning up their abilities.

“As a nation, we have recognized the importance of teaching our children the ABC’s and 123’s. We know it doesn’t just happen in a vacuum. We have created systems to support academic skills from early childhood through postsecondary. But academics are only one part of the skillsets needed for our young people to be successful in an increasingly complex society. I am heartened that the conversation is turning to include not just ABC’s and 123’s but also readiness abilities across developmental areas of social emotional well-being, civic engagement, and health, for example. Research and science backs the importance of these abilities, and it is our responsibility as a field to urgently elevate the conversation, level of intentional practices, and aligned policy around readiness.”

***- Allison Williams,
Senior Vice President,
Wyman Center***

When systems and settings design for readiness

Youth systems and settings, whether informal or formal, have an incredible chance to put all the science of readiness into play. Engaging at multiple levels, a system or setting can work on its policies, programming structures, practices and people. It can align each level of activity with the science. Doing this could limit the number of times a young person needs to look for support outside his everyday systems of care. Designing for readiness would enable systems and settings to reduce traps, promote or incentivize developmental practices and focus programming on strengthening young people's abilities.

Making the invisible visible

As soon as a youth system or setting decides it wants to design for readiness, leadership should assess official practices (policies, processes, practices) against developmental. From here, the system or setting can make visible the importance and presence of the developmental practices. This can be done by assessing major official practices against the spectrum on page 29, or even more broadly by assessing against the characteristics of developmental environments, relationships and experiences.

Identifying readiness traps and deciding how entrenched they are

The next step is seeing how present the four Readiness Traps are. This can be done informally or formally. Informally, key stakeholders can work to identify and unpack each trap. Formally, staff or volunteers can systematically review policies, processes and practices flagging the presence of traps. Once a list is generated, stakeholders can determine how entrenched and dangerous each trap is. Consider the full system implications during this process. Identify all of the potential intended or unintended consequences that could arise by working to reduce or eliminate each trap.

"The readiness abilities take the seemingly intangible skills young people need to be ready and turn them into easy to understand, attainable abilities. As we continue to define what it means to be 'ready' in Greater East St. Louis, we look forward to aligning The Readiness Project research to help us focus on what really matters to our young people. As we work to develop shared measurement from cradle-to-career throughout Greater East St. Louis, considering the readiness traps created in existing systems will help us to avoid continuing to define the success of youth by age, time, completion and access and start defining the success of youth by stage, progress, competence and quality."

- Hannah Allee,
Community Engagement Coordinator,
East Side Aligned

Optimizing the environments, relationships and experiences offered to young people

Once system or setting leaders have a clear sense of how official practices align with developmental, and understand how their work is being affected by readiness traps, it is time to develop specific and reasonable strategies for improving the readiness-richness of environments, relationships and experiences for young people. This could be in the form of an action plan done through a single system or setting, or in coordination with others.

Reaching for youth program quality

The science of readiness brings language and prioritization for the abilities and supports young people need. It does not offer prescriptive programming or specific recommendations on how to do continuous improvement, high-quality programming, human resource management, measurement or evaluation. We recommend that the adoption of this science be done in concert with a process or product, like the Weikart Center's Youth Program Quality Intervention, which allows for a deeper dive into ongoing program quality and improvement. For human resource management, leaders may find competency frameworks, such as those put out by Korn Ferry, to be useful.

Envisioning a Day When Readiness Is a Right

Since this project started, our team has been transformed and invigorated by the work. Not only as professionals, but as parents. All three of us are mothers, one of us a grandmother. Raising kids feels increasingly risky and unpredictable these days. As we think about our children and grandchildren, we want some assurance they will be okay. Frankly, we hope for far more than okay. We want them to thrive and enjoy prolonged periods of good fortune and well-being.

We are convinced the science (and art) of youth readiness offers the right set of trailmarkers and maps to all young people, including our own. It even has applications in our own lives. We find ourselves increasingly checking in against the abilities and feeling convicted if we are not putting the developmental practices in place. We are more indignant when we encounter flagrant readiness traps, seeing them more clearly for the threats they are. We maintain some hope when we hear about gross and growing disparities between young people because what once seemed so intractable now has a bit more light shining through. We hope you will help us make readiness a reality for all of our children; that you will consider the power and possibilities of this science and let it transform or restore how you do business. Our world is changing more quickly than ever. We cannot keep our children waiting.

READINESS RESOURCES

The following pages provide a “deeper dive” into the four components of the science of readiness. These resources are designed to equip practitioners, leaders, policymakers, researchers—and indeed anyone with a desire to go deeper into the science and how it can be applied—with further elaboration into our rationale, sources and examples of how the research can be used. We invite you to interact with and interrogate each of these components and share your feedback or stories of how you might use this in your work and personal lives.

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A DEEP DIVE INTO THE ABILITIES, SKILLSETS AND MINDSETS

Each young person is different. Strengths, struggles and circumstances influence what skillsets and mindsets they need to use, how often and how much. Even so, the Readiness Abilities are the same for everyone. Unless these abilities are developed properly, we cannot be expected to navigate life, manage risks and respond to opportunities.

The next few pages include an alphabetical listing of and more information on each ability.



We take and use what we learn. This ability lets us take our knowledge, skills, habits, attitudes and beliefs and use them to help navigate everyday settings, situations and problems.

- Application
- Decisionmaking
- Problem solving

- Adaptability
- Curiosity
- Pragmatism

- *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times*, Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel
- *Education for Work and Life: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century*, National Research Council
- *How We Learn: The Surprising Truth About When, Where, and Why it Happens*, Benedict Carey



ABILITY 2 - Engage with People and Places

I can engage with people and places by being present and engaging in meaningful, real and honest ways.

We must actively engage with our surroundings and people. This ability enables us to authentically participate in conversations, activities and community.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Communication
- Relationship management
- Resource and information processing

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Humility
- Open-mindedness
- Purpose

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*, ed. Joseph A. Durlak, et al.
- *Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships*, Daniel Goleman
- *The Village Effect: Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters*, Susan Pinker



ABILITY 3 - Feel and Express Emotion

I can feel and express emotion appropriately and as a way to connect with others.

We are relational beings. This ability is key to how we form and nurture relationships. It enables us to identify and share our thoughts and feelings.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Communication
- Relationship management
- Self-regulation

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Compassion
- Empathy
- Open-mindedness

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, Brene Brown
- *Emotional Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships*, Daniel Goleman
- *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*, ed. Joseph A. Durlak, et al.



ABILITY 4 - Get and Stay Healthy

I can get and stay healthy, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

Throughout life, tremendous demands are placed on our health and well-being. This ability enables us to stay healthy and find peace with who we are and whatever is going on.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Life management
- Organization and planning
- Self-care

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Drive
- Future orientation
- Growth orientation

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, ed. Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman
- *Overwhelmed: How to Work, Love, and Play When No One has the Time*, Brigid Schulte
- *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, Charles Duhigg



ABILITY 5 - Persist through Struggles and Maintain Hope

I can persist through struggles and maintain hope, no matter my challenges.

We all face struggles, some small and others earthshaking. This ability allows us to build resilience to weather difficulties, learn lessons and maintain healthy perspective throughout.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Coping
- Reflection and self-awareness
- Self-care

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Courage
- Future orientation
- Optimism

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*, Malcolm Gladwell
- *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who you Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, Brene Brown
- *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, William Bridges



ABILITY 6 - Relate to Others and the World

I can relate to others and the world by forming, managing and sustaining my relationships.

We are relational beings. This ability is key to forming and sustaining relationships. It enables us to form connections and bonds. It helps us strengthen and sustain different kinds of relationships over time.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Communication
- Self-regulation
- Relationship management

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Agility
- Fairness
- Open-mindedness

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*, ed. Joseph A. Durlak, et al.¹⁸
- *Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships*, Daniel Goleman
- *The Road to Character*, David Brooks



ABILITY 7 - Solve Problems and Make Decisions

I can solve problems and make decisions about the intellectual, social, moral and emotional issues and problems I face.

Each day brings problems to be solved and decisions to be made. Some are simple, others complex and game-changing. This ability enables us to be intentional and skilled in taking on and resolving these challenges.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Problem solving and decisionmaking
- Resource and information processing
- Thinking and analysis

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Curiosity
- Pragmatism
- Persistence

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *Decisive*, Chip and Dan Heath
- *Mindgym: Achieve More by Thinking Differently*, Sebastian Bailey and Octavius Black
- *Strategic Thinking and the New Science: Planning in the Midst of Chaos, Complexity and Change*, T. Irene Sanders

¹⁸ This is the first research and practice text completely dedicated to social and emotional learning. It is recent (2015) and will be a seminal text.



ABILITY 8 - Think and Create

I can think and create in ways that help me navigate and experience life.

We have insights to contribute and new ways to approach the world. This ability enables us to be creative and thoughtful in our relationships, work and engagement with the world.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Resource and information processing
- Thinking and analysis
- Organization and planning

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Open-mindedness
- Future orientation
- Curiosity

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All*, Tom Kelley and David Kelley
- *Creative Intelligence: Harnessing the Power to Create, Connect and Inspire*, Bruce Nussbaum
- *Creativity: the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



ABILITY 9 - Use Insights to Grow and Develop

I can use insights to grow and develop in each stage of life.

We make mistakes and experience setbacks. We accomplish goals and experience joys. This ability enables us to learn from all of those experiences.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Reflection and self-awareness
- Coping
- Thinking and analysis

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Growth orientation
- Optimism
- Humility

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do*, Amy Morin
- *Building Resilience in Children and Teens*, Kenneth R. Ginsburg
- *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead*, Brene Brown



ABILITY 10 - Work and Stay Focused

I can work and stay focused in each area of life.

We are learners, workers, family members, neighbors and more. With so many responsibilities, this ability enables us to focus and get things done, in each area of life.

Commonly used skillsets to express this ability

- Coping
- Organization and planning
- Self-regulation

Commonly used mindsets to express this ability

- Drive
- Persistence
- Growth orientation

Three books that help unpack this ability

- *Better than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives*, Gretchen Rubin
- *Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- *The Sweet Spot: How to Find your Groove at Home and Work*, Christine Carter

Measuring the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets

Our research is predicated on the fundamental belief that the abilities are malleable and measureable. That is, they can be taught, assessed and improved over time. Young people—together with those who work with and care about them—must be equipped to drive efforts to strengthen their Readiness Abilities.

There are three ways to assess and measure a young person's proficiency of the skillsets and mindsets: observationally, practically or empirically. We have found efforts underway in all three areas.

Observational measures

Adults who spend a lot of time with young people—especially adults who are professionally trained in youth-related fields—tend to have a sense of when a young person is using a skillset or mindset appropriately, within a particular context or demand. Observational assessment and measurement is something that youth-serving professionals and other caring adults can use right away and at no cost. As a young person engages independently or in group settings, the adult can look for instances when the skillsets and mindsets are on display, or when they should be but are not observed. Youth workers and early childhood workers have been using observational assessment and measurement to track these skillsets and mindsets for years. Take a look at a progress report sent to a parent from an early childhood education center, or a logic model from a high-quality youth program, and see where these skillsets and mindsets are intentionally cultivated, monitored and reported on.

Practical measures

In the absence of strong empirical measures, many youth-serving professionals have developed trustworthy measures of young people's development and demonstration of various skillsets and mindsets. For instance, in a transitional living program for homeless or foster care youth, case workers might have tools and checklists they created that measure whether a young person is sufficiently skilled in life management or self-care. A clinical social worker who works with children with severe behavioral difficulties might have pretty reliable instruments to gauge how

"The idea of understanding and educating the 'whole student' has been around for decades. Sadly, though, only tiny pockets of specialty programs have actually done anything about meeting the real readiness preparation needs of our children. With great hope and excitement, Pairin has worked to align our social emotional measurements, lessons and curriculum integration tools with the timely research of The Readiness Project. The insights this research provides does a great deal to move the focus of education beyond merely 'what' is taught to reconnect educators with 'why' they got into teaching in the first place. Which is, of course, to prepare the students we touch to choose their future, instead of it being chosen for them."

- Michael Simpson,
Co-Founder and CEO,
Pairin

compassionate, empathetic or optimistic her clients are in various settings or situations. Practical measures may not be empirically validated, but they work. Practical wisdom is a powerful asset in readiness work.

Empirical measures

There are an increasing number of validated measures and assessment tools that align to various skillsets and mindsets. These measures are mostly found in the social sciences—particularly from developmental psychologists and social workers—and increasingly are being used in education settings. A few compendiums of measures have been published, including *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, KnowledgeWorks' [*Compendium of Social and Emotional Competency Measures*](#) and the [*American Academy of Pediatrics' \(AAP\) Developmental Screening Tools*](#). In 2014 and 2015 the White House convened researchers and funders to discuss “how to measure hard-to-measure skills.” RAND produced two reports from those convenings, the first called [*Measuring Hard-to-Measure Student Competencies: A Research and Development Plan*](#) and the second called, [*The Feasibility of Developing a Repository of Assessments of Hard-to-Measure Competencies*](#).

A DEEP DIVE INTO READINESS PRACTICE

A young person grows up in environments, relationships and experiences. When these are developmentally appropriate, they provide young people with the supports to build critical connections and competence. These supports lead to the space and time to learn, develop and strengthen the Readiness Abilities. In this section, we consider Readiness Practice from three perspectives: (1) the system and setting perspective, (2) the adult perspective and (3) the young person's perspective.

Categories and characteristics of Readiness Practice from a systems and settings perspective



Developmental Environments¹⁹

Developmental environments are welcoming, safe and structured. These are positive places where young people want to spend time, know what to expect and know what is expected of them.

A system or setting offers young people a developmental environment if it is:

- **Community-oriented.** Young people feel they belong and can contribute. They believe their involvement in the environment means something. They feel wanted and know they bring value.
- **Relational.** Young people know their feelings, opinions and ideas are sought out, listened to and valued. When young people are in the environment they feel cared for and known.
- **Resourced.** Young people have access to information and tools they need. These resources can be direct (e.g., food, computers or school supplies) or indirect (e.g., funded programs or high-quality staff).
- **Safe and structured.** Young people feel physically and mentally safe, healthy and supported. They are protected from all forms of violence. Unsafe and risky behaviors are reduced as much as possible. There are clear, consistent and known rules and expectations. Young people can predict what will happen and know what is expected from them.
- **Socially and culturally responsive.** Young people are expected to respect, reflect, serve, examine and co-construct their identities, cultures and beliefs as well as those around them. These environments are reflective of the people in them.
- **Strengths-based.** Young people's strengths—or assets—are engaged and their resilience is being continuously strengthened. Young people are present in these environments, they feel empowered and able to be their own decisionmakers. The physical environment and culture help young people to focus on the future and their goals.
- **Youth-centered.** Young people sense their needs and experiences are the focal point. Young people have agency and ownership of the space. Policies, processes and practices prioritize young people's needs and interests.



Developmental Relationships²⁰

Developmental relationships are authentic, positive and productive. These relationships are caring, motivating, equipping and empowering.

A system or setting offers young people developmental relationships if there are people who:

- **Assess and encourage continuous growth.** Young people are connected to people who assess them on what they know and can do. These individuals carry out meaningful and measurable assessments that show a young person what his proficiencies are, providing precise and actionable feedback on how to keep growing and developing.
- **Coach and care.** Young people are connected to people who are able to make profound heart connections, providing critical support and motivation during periods of struggle. These individuals are responsive to young people's needs, offering them security, responsiveness and closeness.
- **Empower and equip.** Young people are connected to people who nurture and promote their autonomy and sense of self. These individuals build up a young person's drive, strengths, skills and sense of purpose,²¹ providing experiences where young people are responsible, feel challenged and have a sense of ownership.
- **Skillfully plan and execute.** Young people are connected to people who effectively design and carry out ways for them to develop and demonstrate the skillsets and mindsets. These individuals make sure young people have lots of ways to acquire knowledge, build skills and form healthy habits, beliefs and attitudes.



Developmental Experiences²²

Developmental experiences keep young people challenged and engaged. These experiences connect with young people based on who they are, where they are, what they need and what they want.

A system or setting offers young people developmental experiences if there are opportunities that:

- **Are age and stage appropriate.** Young people engage in opportunities that account for their chronological age, as well as their physical, intellectual, social and emotional development. Experiences connect to a young person's interests and needs.
- **Build skills and mastery.** Young people engage in opportunities that provide critical space and time to learn, practice, develop and demonstrate the skillsets and mindsets.

²⁰ This category of practice aligns most closely to Search Institute's work on developmental relationships as well as the work from the Weikart Center on professional competencies that support high-quality youth programs.

²¹ This idea is found in Daniel Pink's *Drive* (2010).

²² This category of practice aligns to the Wallace Foundation's and University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's *Foundations for Young Adult Success, Developmental Framework*, specifically the descriptions of developmental experiences. These practices also build from the promising practices described in *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (2015).

- **Challenge and engage.** Young people engage in opportunities that promote growth and improvement. Young people feel driven and have opportunities to find flow.²³
- **Connect to real life.** Young people have opportunities to see how experiences translate into the real world. When experiences mimic or safely take place in the real world they get rich practice opportunities, which improve their confidence and competence.
- **Encourage agency and choice.** Young people have opportunities to choose and control their involvement and connect to their interests. They can safely explore what they enjoy, while working on strengths and areas of growth.
- **Promote group work.** Young people have opportunities to engage with peers, assume leadership roles and participate in meaningful group activities. In group settings, young people feel they have a voice as well as experiential opportunities where they can contribute.



Space and Time to Develop Skillsets and Mindsets²⁴

Systems and settings support readiness by providing space and time for young people to learn, develop and demonstrate skillsets and mindsets. This includes being able to observe and explore, practice and learn from mistakes, apply and connect, reflect and continuously improve.

A system or setting offers space and time for young people to develop skillsets and mindsets by providing them with this developmental cycle:

- **Observe and explore.** Young people observe skillsets and mindsets in action, exploring what they look like, why they matter, and what it means for them. Through this young people safely view the parts or steps of the skillset or mindset before attempting them. People model expectations and showcase what the young person should be able to know and do.
- **Practice and demonstrate.** Once a young person has observed and explored, he is able to start practicing and performing. This practice is intentional and ongoing. Eventually, a young person begins to demonstrate the skillset and mindset and can receive feedback and guidance for getting better. This builds confidence and competence.
- **Apply and connect.** Once a young person can demonstrate a skillset or mindset with a sufficient level of proficiency, it is time to practice it in the real world. By making real life connections, young people begin to transfer their learning into everyday settings and situations.
- **Reflect and continuously improve.** Once a young person is routinely applying a skillset or mindset in the real world, she enters a process of reflection and continuous improvement. This process is facilitated via her developmental relationships.

²³ For more on this, we recommend *Drive* (2010) by Daniel Pink or *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

²⁴ This category of practice aligns to to the *Foundations for Young Adult Success, Developmental Framework* created by the Wallace Foundation and the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE READINESS TRAPS AND GAPS

Why are so few young people ready?

Our vision is of a nation—and a world—where every young person enters each stage of life ready to take advantage of opportunities and mitigate risks. Our current reality is far from this. So what gets in the way?

We identified four Readiness Traps: serious and often unintended cultural and policy conditions that get in the way of young people's readiness. These traps affect some young people disproportionately, narrowing or cutting off their pathways forward. They pull the focus away from the young person and place it on a system proxy, which is typically more concrete and easier to track and measure. These traps seem to be longstanding, entrenched and cross-cultural.

Four Readiness Traps²⁵



Access as Proxy for Quality

When young people's place of residence determines their access to high-quality schooling, services and programs. Many systems track and report on admissions and enrollment information or the number of people they serve, sometimes giving those more attention than the quality of programming.

Examples:

- » **Resources** – local systems and settings have resources, but that does not mean the resources are sufficient, stable, sustainable or used in the best ways.
- » **Talent** – local systems and settings have staff, but that does not mean staff are sufficient, skilled or working in the most effective and supportive ways.



Age as Proxy for Stage

When young people are assigned to a program, group or class based on age, rather than on stage of learning, development or behavior. Many system policies decide when a young person starts or stops in a system or program, because of his or her age. There are few policy exceptions available to children and youth whose age and developmental stage do not match.

Examples:

- » **Social promotion** – using age as the deciding factor for placing or passing a young person into a setting, such as academic grade.
- » **Aging-out** – denying young people services because they have reached the set age of adulthood, as defined by a system or setting.

²⁵ The Readiness Traps have been alphabetized to signal the equal importance and threat of each.



Completion as Proxy for Competence

When young people are allowed to move on to the next stage, grade, system or setting because they have finished—even if they are not ready. Or, when young people are ready to move on, but are not allowed because of certain policies or requirements. Many systems track and report on completion requirements—successful exits, graduations, number of young people who have aged-out—without also tracking and reporting on their proficiency in critical competencies.

Examples:

- » **Completing school** – a diploma means a young person has met one school's graduation requirements. It does not guarantee readiness for college or a job.
- » **Completing treatment** – finishing treatment for addictions or mental health struggles does not guarantee that a young person is or will remain sober, stable or healthy.



Time as Proxy for Progress

When young people's time in a system or setting triggers when they move ahead, or when time is used as a way to measure a young person's growth and development. Many system policies use time (for example, minutes, hours, days, months) as a way to determine where a young person is placed, or when they are finished.

Examples:

- » **Seat-time** – when a young person earns academic credit based on time spent in class.
- » **Doing time** – when a young person is held in a juvenile justice facility after a court hearing or judicial decision, or is issued a time-based sentence.

Readiness Traps stymie a young person's chance of having the abilities and supports he or she needs. They also fuel Readiness Gaps, such as achievement or opportunity gaps. Traps pull the adults who work with young people away from what really matters, under the guise of an equally acceptable—often more measurable and trackable—route to readiness. Access, age completion, and time stand in for quality, life stage, competence and progress, making it hard to see how far off-road these take young people until gaps emerge.

Traps are tricky to address because they are rooted in culture and policy, two areas notoriously resistant to change. Many traps have been around for a long time. We may not need to or be able to completely eradicate these traps. However, if we can figure out where they are and how they affect adults and young people, then we are in a better position to plan ways around them, or in some situations to remove them completely.

Ways Youth Systems are Addressing Readiness Traps			
Child Welfare	Education	Juvenile Justice	Mental Health
Extended Services for Youth Aging-Out of Foster Care Since 2010, 18- to 21-year-olds who age-out of foster care can continue receiving certain services and support.	Seat-Time Waivers and Performance-Based Graduation 39 states now offer exemptions to seat-time and time-based graduation requirements.	"Raise the Age" Campaign Advocates are trying to stop the practice of trying young people under age 18 as adults.	SAMHSA Focus on Transitions and Wellness The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration now prioritizes prevention, access, use of effective services and the promotion of health and well-being.
Child Well-Being Frameworks Child welfare leaders have issued a call for a system shift from child protection to child well-being.	Competency-Based Education Increasingly, schools allow students to move forward based on demonstrated competencies, rather than on time spent in class.	Funders' Blueprint for Juvenile Justice Reform Universal principles for juvenile justice reform provide actionable strategies for any state or setting.	
	Statewide Transfer and Articulation Some states now allow students to transfer between public higher education institutions without financial or credit penalty.	Reauthorization of JJDPA If reauthorized, the U.S. Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act will require the use of more evidence-based strategies and make it harder to try a juvenile as an adult.	
		Peace Courts These innovative alternatives to traditional juvenile courts apply a less punitive, more restorative youth justice model.	

Four Readiness Gaps²⁶

These differences between peer groups show up and grow because of differences in outside opportunities and supports, and personal abilities. Readiness Gaps are symptoms of young people experiencing Readiness Traps and harmful or punitive practices, and having underdeveloped Readiness Abilities.



Achievement Gap

Differences in academic standing between young people, which are often connected to race, class, ability or gender.



Expectations Gap

Differences between what young people and their support system expects will happen from investing time and resources into a system, and what actually transpires. The differences in what society expects from certain groups of young people.



Opportunity Gap

Differences in the quality and quantity of opportunities and supports available to young people, often because of their families or where they live.



Skills Gap

Differences between what young people can do and the skillsets and mindsets they need to carry out a role or responsibility.

²⁶ The Readiness Gaps have been alphabetized to signal the equal importance and threat of each.

Reports and Books that Unpack the Readiness Gaps			
Achievement Gap	Expectations Gap	Opportunity Gap	Skills Gap
<i>Achievement Gaps: How Black and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Statistical Analysis</i>	<i>Closing the Expectations Gap: 2014 Annual Report on the Alignment of State K-12 Policies and Practice with the Demands of College and Careers</i>	<i>Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected</i>	<i>America's Skills Challenge: Millennials and the Future</i>
<i>Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Statistical Analysis</i>	<i>Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses</i>	<i>National Equity Atlas</i>	<i>Beyond the Skills Gap: Making Education Work for Students, Employers, and Communities</i>
<i>Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap</i>	<i>Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates</i>	<i>2014 Opportunity Index</i>	<i>Boiling point? The Skills Gap in U.S. manufacturing</i>
<i>The 2015 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well are American Students Learning?</i>	<i>Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools</i>	<i>One Nation, Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All</i>	<i>Time for the US to Reskill? What the Survey of Adults Skills Says</i>
<i>The Educational Experience of Young Men of Color: A Review of Research, Pathways and Progress</i>		<i>Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis</i>	
<i>The Schott 50 State Report on Education and Black Males</i>		<i>America's Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness</i>	
		<i>Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men</i>	
		<i>2014 KidsCount Data Book: Trends in Child Well-Being</i>	

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

READINESS IN ACTION

A sampling of how organizations, initiatives and change efforts are beginning to use the science of readiness

Collective impact initiatives

East Side Aligned is a citiwide collective impact effort in East St. Louis, Illinois, which is managed by the United Way of Greater St. Louis. East Side Aligned envisions a day when all children and youth within the Greater East St. Louis community are supported—physically, intellectually, emotionally—and ready by 21 for success in school, work and life.

East Side Aligned has aligned its strategic roadmap—a comprehensive set of strategies to improve outcomes for local young people—to the science of readiness and is incrementally adopting core research components, such as the Readiness Abilities. Specifically, East Side Aligned has:

- Established youth readiness as an overall goal of the collective impact initiative.
- Launched a “Readiness and Well-Being” committee to ensure a primary focus on youth readiness and well-being. Among other roles, this committee, which is made up of representatives from local early learning, education, healthcare, social service providers and community members, is tasked with creating strategies for children and youth to develop and strengthen the abilities, skillsets and mindsets.
- Cultivated stakeholder buy-in that the readiness research is a promising pathway to reach the initiative goals.
- Developed a plan to use this research and forthcoming tools to guide ongoing strategy, assess progress and support systems change.

Statewide coalitions

Colorado 9to25 is a statewide, action-oriented group of young people and adults in Colorado who are working in partnership to align efforts and achieve positive outcomes for all youth, ages 9 to 25, so they can reach their full potential.

Colorado 9to25 is actively reviewing the readiness research to determine official ways to align with and adopt it into their existing frameworks and efforts. Specifically, Colorado 9to25 has:

- Been trained by The Readiness Project team on the readiness research.
- Established an exploratory committee dedicated to reviewing the research.
- Started using the research as a way to translate and deepen the guiding principles of positive youth development (PYD), by cross-walking PYD principles against the developmental practices, and engaging longtime PYD advocates in dialogue about how the readiness research deepens and improves PYD practice.
- Started to assess how the *Readiness Traps* present themselves in Colorado.

Funders

The Youth Transition Funders Group is a national network of funders that work together to support the well-being and economic success of vulnerable young people ages 14 to 25. YTFG seeks to ensure that all young people have lifelong family, personal and community connections and the opportunities and tools to succeed throughout adulthood.

The Youth Transition Funders Group relied on The Readiness Project team and used the readiness research extensively for its new well-being framework, *Investing to Improve the Well-Being of Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults: Recommendations for Policy and Practice*, released in November 2015. Specifically, the Youth Transition Funders Group:

- Invited The Readiness Project team to serve as content experts during the initial research phase of the well-being framework.
- Invited The Readiness Project Co-director Stephanie Krauss to participate on the Economic Well-Being sub-committee.
- Used The Readiness Project's theory of change and ecosystem approach to support the design of the overall framework.
- Included the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets in the framework's *drill down of conditions and capacities*.
- Included the developmental practices in the framework's *drill down of conditions and capacities*.
- Discussed how Readiness Traps and Gaps get in the way of child and youth well-being. These discussions influenced some of the framework's *recommendations to improve the well-being of vulnerable youth and young adults*.
- Agreed that the science of youth readiness and the well-being framework serve as companion resources.

Education and economic mobility organizations

Jobs for the Future's Students at the Center initiative synthesizes and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered approaches to learning that lead to deeper learning outcomes. Students at the Center aims to strengthen the ability of practitioners and policymakers to engage every student in acquiring the skills, knowledge and expertise needed for success in college, career and civic life.

As such, Students at the Center considers young people's readiness for college, careers and civic life a key goal of its work and sees the cross-promotion and alignment of its efforts with the readiness research as a strategic imperative. As a result, Students at the Center has:

- Served as an early advisor on key aspects of the readiness research.
- Embedded The Readiness Project Co-director Stephanie Krauss as a senior fellow, to integrate and adapt her expertise on readiness into the Center's activities.

In the coming months, Students at the Center will work with The Readiness Project team to determine strategies for cross-promotion and ongoing collaboration.

Youth social entrepreneurs

Think of Us is a social enterprise designed and run by young people who have experience in the foster care system. It aims to produce technology that empowers youth to take control of their developmental process and gain necessary skills to succeed in adulthood. A vital part of the technology is increasing youth's access to social capital and the amount of supportive adults involved in their lives. As part of the process Think of Us is integrating the Readiness Abilities into tools, such as coaching sessions, interactive videos and resource development, that will support youth throughout their transition to adulthood.

In addition, the Readiness Abilities are guiding resource development for adults. In a youth and adult partnership, it is vital that adults understand the Readiness Abilities and the various systems that prevent their opportunities from being fully developed, in order to enhance both the youth and adults lives.

Youth development organizations

The Wyman Center is a national youth development organization, based in St. Louis, that works to empower teens from economically disadvantaged circumstances to lead successful lives and build strong communities.

Wyman Center has a historical commitment to and track record of promoting young people's readiness and well-being. The Wyman team sees the readiness research as an important and usable translation of key positive youth development principles, as well as the best and most recent advances in adolescent brain science and human development. As a result, Wyman will:

- Use the science of readiness to guide practice and strengthen programming.
- Leverage the research to communicate with young people, their families and practitioners about the gaps and traps that impede young peoples' readiness.
- Advocate for high-quality developmental practices and supports that encourage young people to thrive.

Youth justice organizations

The National Council for Juvenile and Family Court Judges is one of the oldest judicial membership organizations in the United States, providing resources, knowledge and training to juvenile and family court judges.

NCJFCJ sees the value in the science of readiness and its alignment to other areas of strategic focus, including trauma-informed care and positive youth development. Together with The Readiness Project team, NCFCJ has decided to:

- Consider ways to train pilot judicial sites on the readiness research.
- Design snapshot tools and resources on the research for judges.
- Integrate the research into existing or new membership trainings.

Youth prevention specialists

The Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services has committed to including the readiness research as a part of training and support for the state's youth prevention specialists. To carry out that commitment, the department has:

- Convened leadership to review and get widespread buy-in and agreement with the research.
- Had The Readiness Project team present, at multiple convenings, on the research
- Had The Readiness Project Co-director Stephanie Krauss offer a series of trainings on the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets, and developmental practices during a convening of youth prevention specialists.
- Started to plan for ways to officially adopt and integrate the research.

Employer groups

The National Network of Business and Industry Associations links and leverages the work of organizations that share the common challenge of finding an educated and skilled workforce, competent to fill open jobs. The National Network works to align learning with employment opportunities and life success. Membership includes leaders from manufacturing, retail, healthcare, energy, construction, hospitality, transportation, business and information technology.

The National Network is examining the readiness research as a critical companion to its *Common Employability Skills* framework. Specifically, National Network leadership believes it is necessary to:

- Support young people in learning and developing the employability skills earlier in life.
- Align workforce development and youth development efforts and standards.
- Codify the fragmented conversations happening in education, workforce development and other youth fields about employability and workplace skills.

In the coming months, National Network leadership will be working with The Readiness Project team to determine strategies for collaboration.



Companies

Pairin is a company committed to tracking and developing the essential skills students need for college and career readiness, and seeing those skills incorporated into everyday curricula.

Pairin has served as an early partner of The Readiness Project and is committed to alignment between the social emotional skills tracked in its Pairin Readiness Management System™ and the Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets. So far, Pairin has:

- Served as an ongoing thought partner throughout each phase of research.
- Sought to align the essential skills with the Readiness Skillsets and Mindsets.
- Used the readiness research and project team to support the development of coaching and teacher training tools.
- Committed to exploring how the Readiness Management System™ can be used as a measuring and tracking method for the research.

MORE ON THE SCIENCE OF READINESS

Today's young people are transitioning into adulthood in an unpredictable economy that is still reeling from the Great Recession of 2007-2009. The workforce is rapidly changing—with jobs being outsourced, automated or removed, and new jobs increasingly requiring technology skills and training. Although having a postsecondary degree is more and more important for employment, the potential payoff of that credential is decreasing. With workforce roles and requirements in flux,^{xx} there is a gap between what colleges offer and employers want,^{xx} and a recent proliferation of credentials is reducing the quality of many certificates and degrees.^{xxi}

Learning is changing, too. In the digital age and era of smart technologies, young people are increasingly reliant on their devices to connect, learn, earn and live.^{xxii xxiii} For many young people, technology offers a potential bridge out of inadequate schools, and a chance to drive their own learning. Yet the “digital divide” persists, making it more likely that the very young people who could most benefit from access to new learning technologies—those in poor-performing schools or unmet learning needs—are still the least likely to have the access and support to take advantage of these tools.

KnowledgeWorks—an advisor on this project—recently released its fourth annual “Future of Learning Forecast,” called *The Future of Learning: Education in the Era of Partners in Code*. In this report, KnowledgeWork’s strategic foresight team imagines what learning will look like over the next decade. They suggest that our dependencies have grown so much on our digital technologies and devices that we are emerging into an era of co-evolving with technologies—what they call being partners in code. KnowledgeWorks suggests that this era will be defined by the following five societal shifts:^{xxiv}

- **Optimized selves.** Technological tools will enhance our understanding of self, including how we grow and develop.
- **Labor relations 2.0.** As more jobs and professional functions become automated, we will be forced to redefine what workforce contributions are uniquely human and what technology partnerships look like.
- **Alternate economies.** New transactional models are emerging, such as the artisanal and maker economies (i.e., Etsy, Uber, Swap Meets). These new exchange and value creation models are projected to grow over the next 10 years. Young people will grow up with more and more chances to move within and between economies.
- **Smart transactional models.** Full local control of schools and other institutions will become increasingly feasible as financial authority, leadership permissions and resources shift from hierarchical structures to communities, networks and local agents.
- **Shifting landscapes.** Social and economic forces will create turbulent times for young people. Instability may trigger new social and economic experiments and survival strategies. Individuals will have more chances to personally contribute to social and environmental issues, such as climate change.

All of this translates to a considerable shift in what it means to transition to adulthood. Where previous generations saw roughly three pathways forward—college, vocational preparation or (especially for women) marriage—today’s young people, regardless of background, circumstance (or gender) have more pathways into adulthood than ever before. In sociology, this is called the *de-standardization of the life course*.^{xxv}

Arguably, the pathway to adulthood has always been more complicated than our prevailing cultural depictions would suggest. The “ideal” path of high school graduation, four years of college and a stable career trajectory leading to a supported retirement has never been a reality for all. Today, it is more elusive than ever. Most young people face less certainty about accessing, completing and paying for postsecondary credentials, and about the value of these degrees in the workforce.

This is where readiness comes in. As external factors assert their push and pull, we can support young people—and those who work with and care about them—to understand and develop the abilities they will need in life to mitigate risks and increase the likelihood they will thrive.

Our research is deeply informed by recent developments in neuroscience, social science and culture.

Recent advances in adolescent brain science

Scientists are making game-changing discoveries about how the adolescent brain works, which has clear implications for the science of readiness and efforts to support young people in becoming ready. The Readiness Abilities are grounded in this neuroscience: We synthesized dozens of research studies, analyses and books devoted to this emerging field. The following discoveries, in particular, helped form the foundation of our work:

The adolescent brain is more “plastic” than we thought, and for longer than we thought

The brain is constantly developing and changing during our younger years. In early childhood (birth to 5) and adolescence (ages 9 to 26) our brain development spikes. These are our brains’ major periods of change and growth. In *How the Brain Learns*, David Sousa describes these times as “windows of opportunity”—periods when the brain is especially sensitive and responsive to its environment. Pediatricians and medical researchers consider these to be critical periods for development.

This plasticity helps young people learn and strengthen important readiness abilities

The more plastic the brain is, the more it can change. The adolescent brain can change more than the adult brain, adapting and taking on different forms. The science supports how important high-quality youth programming and developmental opportunities are for young people. Plasticity is our finest foundation for learning and development, paving permanent learning pathways in our brains. The adolescent brain is at once vulnerable, versatile and powerful.

The intense emotions adolescents experience are a good thing

They help the brain develop. In adolescence, the brain—housed in an especially emotional young person—is constantly encoding experiences. This unparalleled sensitivity to the outside world makes it imperative that young people be in developmentally appropriate and supportive environments, relationships and experiences.

In adulthood our brains become more plastic and less efficient

Although this plasticity is present throughout our lifespans, adolescence is an especially fertile time for brain development. As our brain physically matures, usually sometime in our early 20s, it “cleans house” by letting go of whatever we don’t use and strengthening the knowledge and abilities we use most often. In *Brainstorm*, Daniel Siegel explains it this way: “Adolescence can be seen as a transformative period in which individuals go from being open to everything (in childhood) to becoming expert at a few things (in adulthood). We’ve seen that one aspect of this remodeling is pruning, or letting go of the connections in the brain that are not now needed. Pruning in general can lead to important changes in how we function as teens—and sometimes it can unmask potential problems.”

Trauma affects the developing brain

The brain is shaped by our environments, relationships and experiences, especially those that cause high emotions and stress. No analysis would be complete without the inclusion of data on what we know about trauma and the developing brain—including research on trauma and trauma-informed care and the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s key principles of a trauma-informed approach. There is evidence that young people have a naturally elevated stress response. As a self-protective technique, the brain activates on threats of personal safety and survival more quickly for young people than adults. When young people’s already-elevated stress responses are further amplified or sustained for long periods, the consequences can be devastating. Some young people experience persistent traumatic stress as they transition into adulthood. Those especially at risk are young people who are homeless, aging-out of foster care, facing special physical or mental health needs, re-entering society from the justice system as well as those whose home lives are fractured or unstable. For young people dealing with trauma or persistent toxic stress, there are proven approaches to support self-management and healing. When these approaches are combined with safe developmental environments and relationships with people who understand the impact of trauma and who can recognize its symptoms and respond appropriately, a young person can develop resilience and protection from unhealthy conflict, stress and unpredictability.

The rise of social and emotional learning

It is hard to overstate the importance of the growing field of social and emotional learning (SEL). Although SEL has been named, practiced and studied for decades—especially in youth development and out-of-school settings—only recently have we had significant research to document its importance and effectiveness. A 2015 study finds that many practitioners who are new to SEL consider it the “missing piece” of their work, while those who have long worked with it often say it is the most important and active ingredient of their practice.^{xxvi}

SEL, as defined by CASEL, is the process and practices that support a young person's development of the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions.²⁷

The power of SEL is best described by longtime educator and academic Linda Darling-Hammond in her foreword to the *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*:

"All young people—and particularly those who live in stressful contexts—need to be able to recognize and address their feelings, so that fear, hurt, and anxiety do not overwhelm them; to recognize and respect the feelings of others; to learn problem-solving and conflict resolution skills; to have the opportunity to contribute directly to the welfare of others; to understand that problems and challenges are part of the process of learning and living, so that they can persist in the face of difficulties; and to become 'growth oriented' in their approach to life."

Darling-Hammond goes on to discuss SEL practice in this way:

"To do this, [young people] need to feel cared about and cared for, and to experience culturally responsive, engaging, and empowering learning opportunities in contexts that provide supportive relationships and contributions."^{xxvii}

Our colleagues at the Center for School Reform (CCSR) at the University of Chicago partnered with the Wallace Foundation to dig into how these kinds of developmental practices work. The 2015 publication, *Foundations for Young Adults Success: A Developmental Framework*, examines what young people need to develop critical social and emotional competence.²⁸ According to CCSR, developmental experiences and developmental relationships are central.

- Developmental experiences are opportunities for action and reflection that help young people build self-regulation, knowledge and skills, mindsets and values, and develop an integrated identity as well as competencies. These experiences are "maximized" in the context of social interactions.
- Developmental relationships are strong, supportive and sustained relationships with caring adults who encourage young people to reflect on their experiences and help them interpret those experiences in ways that expand their sense of themselves and their horizons.

In 2016, the Susan Crown Exchange partnered with the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality—a Forum affiliate—in the release of an actionable evidence-based field guide to SEL practice. The Social and Emotional Learning Challenge was a partnership between expert practitioners (youth workers, social workers, teachers) delivering exemplary programs in eight unique communities, a team of researchers and a national funder. It was designed to: (1) identify promising practices for building SEL skills with vulnerable adolescents and (2) develop a method

²⁷ CASEL focuses on five areas of social emotional competence: self-management, self-awareness, responsible decisionmaking, relationship skills and social awareness.

²⁸ The four components are: self-regulation, knowledge and skills, mindsets and values.

for taking these practices to scale in thousands of out-of-school time settings. The promising practices are called standards for SEL practice and the method is called the SEL Strengths Builder.

The findings are published in a field guide, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Promising Practices for Social & Emotional Learning*, a technical report, *Preparing Youth to Thrive: Methodology and Findings from the SEL challenge*, and a website, SELpractices.org. The SEL practices that were the focus of the Challenge were organized around adolescent skill growth in six areas: emotion management, empathy, teamwork, responsibility, initiative and problem solving. The field guide presents 32 standards and 76 practice indicators in the six areas of SEL practice and four additional curriculum features. Each practice indicator is accompanied by multiple real-world examples. Case studies are also presented for each of the eight exemplary programs.

The growing body of evidence being developed by the SEL field makes it clear that there are concrete and observable developmental practices that youth systems and settings can put in place that will facilitate a young person's development and demonstration of critical life abilities. These are integrated into the categories of Readiness Practice.

The shift from child welfare to well-being

In the past decade, there has been mounting interest among policymakers and practitioners in promoting child and youth well-being. In particular, those who work in child and youth protection and prevention have begun to shift their primary focus away from risk management (reduction of struggling) and toward quality of life (promotion of thriving). This had led to the development of international and domestic well-being frameworks and initiatives. In the United States, our public child welfare, health and prevention, and juvenile justice systems have each committed to child and youth well-being as a primary goal.^{xxviii}

According to the St. Louis Child Well-Being Symposium steering committee, child and youth well-being means that:

- Young people can grow and develop as they should for their age.
- Young people have all they need to be successful in adulthood.
- Young people can enjoy childhood and adolescence.^{xxix}

UNICEF has determined that a country or community has achieved child and youth well-being when their young people are healthy, safe, materially secure, educated, socialized, loved, valued and included in their families and societies.^{xxx}

The concept of “well-becoming,” a term used by international child well-being researcher Asher Ben-Arieh, is gaining more colloquial use. It means being able to get ready to grow and to develop in and enjoy the next stage(s) of life.

This pronounced commitment to child and youth well-being has led leaders and practitioners to see their goals shift beyond risk management and problem reduction to helping young people strive and thrive.

Differences between Child Welfare and Child Well-being^{xxxii}

Child welfare focuses on	Child well-being focuses on
Meeting basic needs	Building assets
Reducing risks	Expanding opportunities
Developing basic skills	Cultivating key capacities
Survival	Happiness and quality of life
Personal contribution	Meaning and purpose



Readiness is a crucial prerequisite of well-being. Take for instance, the common framework for well-being proposed by the Youth Transition Funders Group (YTFG) in [*Investing to Improve the Well-Being of Vulnerable Youth and Young Adults: Recommendations for Policy and Practice*](#).^{xxxiii}

We worked closely with YTFG on the development of this framework, and see this paper as a companion to the framework. In order for young people to experience any one of the well-being domains (see figure on left) they must possess certain enabling abilities and supports. This is because young people will experience times and situations where they struggle, and others where they thrive. To achieve well-being, young people must be

able to move on from their struggles and maximize times of thriving.

Readiness is about being able to mobilize oneself, with appropriate supports, to reach these well-being domains. If well-being is the goal then readiness is the road to getting there.

The call for a better prepared workforce

In 2014, the Lumina Foundation commissioned Gallup to poll business leaders to see how prepared they believed recent college graduates were for the workforce. More than one-third of those polled believed recent college graduates lacked critical business competencies. Gallup also polled chief academic officers at colleges and universities. In complete contrast, Gallup found 96 percent of those surveyed believed their graduates left college well-prepared for employment.^{xxxiii}

When business leaders are asked what skills they want in their employees—and subsequently, what skills many employees lack—they name social and emotional competencies, or “soft skills.” Child Trends—another advisor to The Readiness Project—has partnered with the United States Agency for International Development and FHI 360 to identify which soft skills most predictably lead to a young person’s success in the workforce. After reviewing nearly 400 sources and speaking to experts around the world, the Child Trends team determined that higher-order thinking skills, communication, positive self-concept, self-control and social skills are the soft skills that matter most for employability.

According to Child Trends, when young people have and use these five soft skills, they are:^{xxxiv}

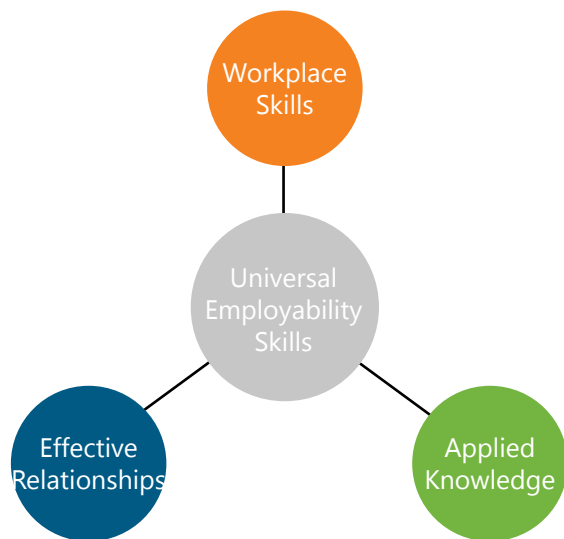
- More likely to get hired because they are effective at finding work and interviewing.
- More productive on the job.
- More likely to be promoted or get a raise.
- Higher wage-earners than their less-skilled peers.

Their findings are supported by two leading national employability frameworks, one by the National Network of Business and Industry Associations (National Network) and the other by RTI International for the U.S. Department of Labor.



The National Network, created by the ACT Foundation and Business Roundtable, worked under the direction of former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor, Emily DeRocco, and issued a blueprint of the knowledge, skills and abilities needed in today’s workforce and economy. This blueprint—known as the *Common Employability Skills Framework*—was designed with input from representatives of the highest growth industries in the United States.^{xxxv} The framework is made up of the following four competency categories:^{xxxvi}

- Personal skills (e.g., adaptability and integrity)
- People skills (e.g., teamwork and communication)
- Applied skills (e.g., reading and math)
- Workplace skills (e.g., problem solving and decisionmaking)



Around the same time the *Common Employability Skills Framework* came out, a research team at RTI International contracted with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education to create the *Employability Skills Framework*, which includes universal skills needed at every level and sector of employment. This framework includes nine key skills, organized into three broad categories:^{xxxvii}

- Applied knowledge (integration of academic knowledge and technical skills)
- Effective relationships (interpersonal skills and personal qualities to connect and relate)
- Workplace skills (analytical and organizational skills)

As we move more deeply into the 21st century, these transferable skills, named by Child Trends, the National Network and RTI International, will likely become more important. By 2020 the technical skills we use on the job will expire after five years. These “soft” employability skills will be what carries young people during a time of rapid change.^{xxxviii}

The use of systems thinking for social change

Our research is informed by the discipline of systems science or systems thinking, which is the understanding of the interdependent structures of dynamic systems and how elements influence each other within a larger system.^{xxxix} It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static “snapshots.”^{xl} For example, in human bodies many organs and processes are interdependent and influence each other: the central nervous system, heart, lungs, kidneys and so forth. In nature, we think of ecosystems in which the elements—water, air, animals, plants—and their associated processes are interconnected. Young people grow up in ecosystems: environments that are influenced by people, places, actions, space and time.

Peter Senge, senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management and founder of the Society for Organizational Learning, defines systems thinking as the “discipline of seeing wholes.” Approaching readiness from this systems perspective helps us identify points we can effectively leverage to spur desired outcomes.

The iceberg metaphor, a concept from systems thinking, offers one simple yet powerful way to understand our research. In our case, the iceberg’s tip represents the system or individual events that we can observe—a young person acting out in class or rejecting a foster care parent,

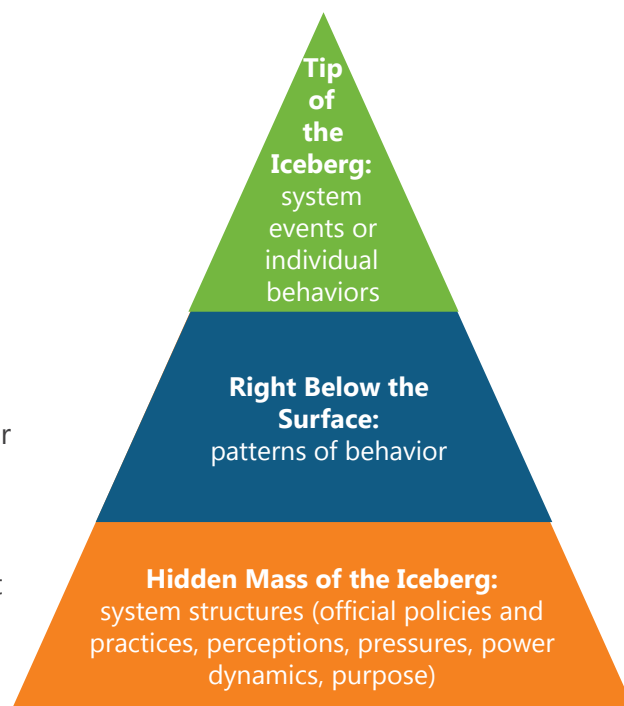
a youth council meeting with few attendees, or a summer camp's funding being cut. If we only deal with what can be seen, and fail to go beneath the surface, we end up with *reactive* management and culture.

The largest share of the iceberg is below the surface. For systems thinkers, this represents patterns of behavior that help us get to the underlying causes. Perhaps the young person who is acting out only does so in math class. The teen in foster care always rejects male foster parents because she has a history of sexual abuse. When system and setting leaders spend time identifying and correcting patterns of behaviors, this is called *responsive* management and culture.

The hidden mass of the iceberg represents *system structure*, which includes system pressures, policies, power dynamics, purpose and official practices. System structure drive what people perceive as their roles and responsibilities, as well as the official system practices. When system and setting leaders spend their time addressing systems structure, we call this a *generative* management and culture. Systems thinkers believe this is the place for the strongest opportunity to change behavior.

The readiness research is designed to help adults and young people in any system communicate and assess with precision these often invisible areas below the tip of the iceberg.

The bathtub analogy another helpful illustration. This one represents the dynamic influence of multiple forces and conditions on a system. If the bath water is the "stock," you control the amount of stock by adjusting the "inflow" (in this case, plugging the drain and turning on the faucet) and the "outflow" (by unplugging the drain). This assumes that there is water available in the first place.^{xli} If you need water quickly, you turn the faucet to maximize water pressure. You adjust the hot and cold water until you reach a desired temperature.^{xlii} Young people's Readiness Abilities operate in just such a stock-and-flow system: There are inflow supports and behaviors that "fill" the ability "tub." There are outflow activities that may temporarily drain stamina or willingness, or temporarily tax specific skillsets or mindsets.



Here is how this analogy applies to the Readiness Abilities, using "I can get and stay healthy" as an example:

Stock-and-Flow System for "Getting and Staying Healthy"			
Inflow	"Ability" stock	Outflow	Feedback loop
Personal behaviors and outside supports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating nutritious food • Exercising regularly • Connecting spiritually • Being motivated by others • Having the resources to engage in healthy activities 	Personal health	Expending personal health: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily activities • Illness • Workplace stress • Running a marathon 	To be able to get and stay healthy (our stock-and-flow readiness ability system), a young person must have enough inflow (healthy behaviors and supports) to be prepared to deal with the necessary outflow.

A human ecology approach to development

Our research is also informed by an older body of work, popularized by Urie Bronfenbrenner in *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Bronfenbrenner proposed a human ecology approach to development. His theory suggests that a young person's development depends on his relationships. There are immediate relationships, like family and friends, as well as distant and indirect ones. Young people affect and are affected by these relationships in different ways, depending on the nature of connection.^{xliii}

METHODOLOGY

Readiness is conceptual and we wanted to make it concrete. We narrowed down what we meant by asking ourselves: Ready for what? By when? According to who? We decided to focus primarily on readiness for adolescence and adulthood, because much work has been done on what readiness and "whole child" development looks like in early childhood. We looked for the internal and external supports that are most imperative for getting through common adolescent and adult situations and settings. Life is unpredictable, and there are shared aspects of these formative years. With these abilities and supports identified, we explored what practice and policy conditions promote or prohibit them.

The following pages describe our approach to the research and the sources behind it.

We cast a wide net.

To understand what gets a young person ready for adolescence and adulthood, we needed to settle on an age- and stage-spectrum. Our developmental continuum starts in the middle of childhood and goes up and through early adulthood.

Within each of these life stages, we studied developmental and learning science, exploring the work happening in systems where youth spend time, and making note of expected personal milestones and markers. We flagged what young people need to be ready for each stage—in school, at home, in relationships, and later on in work and independent living. We also studied the flow and changes within the developmental continuum. Adolescence is starting earlier and lasting longer. Adulthood is becoming segmented by early and later years. These developmental changes affect when a young person is expected to know and do certain things.²⁹

We collected, compared and curated.

To start, we looked for what each major youth system and setting expects from young people during different developmental stages. We crosswalked many metrics, markers and milestones. We found most systems and sectors, like those listed in the puzzle piece graphic on page 40, have authoritative lists or standards that define success or readiness-to-transition. We chose roughly 60 of the most credible and well-known and laid them side-by-side. We then zeroed in on what was universal. We took this list of shared readiness characteristics and refined them with what we had learned from science and expert interviews. Several national nonprofits—like CASEL, Child Trends, Partnership for 21st Century Learning and Search Institute—and research centers—like University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research and Chapin Hall—strengthened, guided and made sense of our research.

We repeated this process with a practice and policy lens. This helped us figure out what adults can do to nurture and promote youth readiness.

²⁹ Here are some books that helped us better understand adolescence and adulthood: *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (2014), *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research and Public Policy* (2005), *On Your Own Without a New: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations* (2005), and *Adolescence and Adulthood: Transitions and Transformations* (2012).

We got feedback from leaders and young people.

Once we synthesized our findings, we spoke with experts and leadership groups, many of whom had authored or trained on our chosen source lists, books and research studies. We worked with them to make sure our research was not replacing any frameworks—rather, that our research could be used to align with and make sense of all of the important efforts and information on this topic. Our vantage point would be the young person rather than the system. We made sure our research was being described in ways that made sense to young people and their families. During the research process, we interviewed and spoke with hundreds of adolescents and adults.

We made findings simple and attractive, then took them on the road.

Our research needed to be accessible, actionable and aligned. We wanted young people and adults to have information that was simple, attractive and easy to understand. We wanted to educate on and equip them with what readiness for adolescence and adulthood requires. We decided to communicate our research in a systems-neutral way, as there are young people trying to get ready in every system. Although it is presented in a neutral way, the research can easily map back to specific systems, frameworks and standards. We did this to ensure practitioners (e.g., case workers, healthcare workers, teachers) can make connections between our work and their requirements.

We integrated all major youth system efforts already focused on readiness.

Every major youth system has at least one authoritative set of metrics, markers or milestones used to describe what makes a young person ready. These lists typically describe the reduction of risks or problems, or indicators of achievement and success that are narrow in scope, limited to aspects of a young person's behavior within a particular system or point in time. For instance, juvenile justice focuses on indicators of crime reduction, schools focus on academic achievement, and so forth.

Over time, systems have matched metrics to practices and programs. These are often called promising or best practices. Some have earned the title of evidence-based practice.

The Readiness Project reviewed the metrics, milestones and standards from every major youth system to ensure alignment with our research. We crosswalked many metrics, markers and milestones. We selected 60 of the most credible and well-known and compared them to what was universal. We took this list of shared readiness characteristics, and refined them using what we learned from science and expert interviews. Several national nonprofits—like [CASEL](#), [Partnership for 21st Century Learning](#), [Child Trends](#) and [Search Institute](#)—and research centers—like University of Chicago's [Consortium on School Research](#) and [Chapin Hall](#)—strengthened, guided and made sense of our research.

SOURCES BEHIND THE SCIENCE (AND ART) OF YOUTH READINESS

Source Authors	Reviewed & Consulted Sources
Association of American Colleges and Universities	Liberal Education and America's Promise Essential Learning Outcomes
Achieve	Cross Disciplinary Proficiencies, American Diploma Project Benchmarks
ACT	National Career Readiness Certificate
ACT	College and Career Readiness Standards
Association for Career and Technical Education	What is "Career Ready"
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Whole Child Initiative	Whole Child Tenets
American Academy of Pediatrics	Bright Futures Pediatric Health Standards
Arizona Department of Education	Arizona's New Workplace Skills
Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel	21st Century Skills
Benjamin Bloom	Academic and Affective Taxonomies of Learning
CareerOneStop	Competency Model Clearinghouse
CASEL	Social Emotional Competencies
CASEL	Safe and Sound Guide
Center for Disease Control and Prevention	Adolescent and school health standards
Center for the Study of Social Policy	YouthThrive Protective and Promotive Factors for Healthy Development and Well-being
The Council of Chief State School Officers	Common Core State Standards - Math
Character Counts	Model Standards for Academic, Social, Emotional and Character Development
Character Education Partnership	Character Education Quality Standards
Child Trends DataBank	DataBank positive development indicators
Council of Chief State School Officers	Common Core State Standards - English
Cisco, Intel and Microsoft	Transforming Education: Assessing and Teaching 21st Century Skills
Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick	Dispositions
Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick	Habits of Mind
Children, Youth, and Families at Risk Program	Core Competencies for The Common Measures Adoption Project
Common Measures	Core Knowledge Curriculum
E.D. Hirsch, Jr.	Six Core Elements of Health Care Transition
Got Transitions	Deeper Learning Competencies
Hewlett Foundation	

Source Authors	Reviewed & Consulted Sources
Jim Casey Foundation	Youth Opportunities Initiative – Site-level Logic Model
Lominger International	FYI: For Your Improvement Competencies
Lumina Foundation	Degree Qualifications Profile
Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson	Character Strengths and Virtues
Multi-National Project	Multi-National Project for Monitoring and Measuring Children's Well-being
National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium	Career Ready Standards
National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium	Career Clusters Framework
National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium	Common Career Technical Core Standards
National Association of Special Education Teachers	National Standards and Quality Indicators for Secondary Education & Transition
National Core Indicators	Individual Outcomes
National Council for the Social Studies	National Standards for Social Studies
National Council for the Social Studies	C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards
National Network of Business and Industry Associations	Employability Skills Framework
National Research Council	Next Generation Science Standards
National Research Council	Positive Child and Youth Development Framework
National Institute for Literacy and Center for Library Studies	Equipped for the Future Content Standards
Association for Career and Technical Education	21st Century Skills for Workplace Success
Norman Webb	Depth-of-Knowledge Scheme
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development	DeSeCO Competencies
Partnership for 21st Century Skills	21st Century Skills
Partnership for 21st Century Skills	P21 Framework
Polaris	Core Competencies
Public Profit	Strategies to Promote Non-Cognitive Skills

Source Authors	Reviewed & Consulted Sources
Scottish Government, Scotland	Wellbeing Indicators
Search Institute	Developing Relationships Framework
Search Institute	Search Institute 40 Developmental Assets
Skills USA	Employability Skills Blueprint
StriveTogether	Social and Emotional Competencies
The Forum for Youth Investment	Skills areas featured in From Soft Skills to Hard Data
The Young Foundation	Framework of Outcomes for Young People
UNICEF	Positive Indicators of Child Well-being
University of Chicago Consortium on School Research	A Framework for Developing Young Adult Success in the 21st Century
U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services	Citizenship Foundation Skills and Knowledge Clusters
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	Well-being Framework; Administration on Children, Youth and Families
U.S. Department of Labor	SCANS Workplace Essential Skills
U.S. Department of Labor	Industry Competency Models
U.S. Department of Labor	Employability Skills Framework
VIA Institute on Character	The VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues
Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality	Youth Program Quality Assessment
Youth Transition Funders Group	Framework for Well-being for Older Youth in Foster Care

BOOKS THAT INFLUENCED THE SCIENCE (AND ART) OF YOUTH READINESS

We read and reviewed the following books when developing the science of readiness.

Readiness Abilities	
Title	Authors or Editors
13 Things Mentally Strong People Don't Do	Amy Morin
21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times	Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel
Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance	Atul Gawande
Better than Before: Mastering the Habits of Our Everyday Lives	Gretchen Rubin
Building Resilience in Children and Teens	Kenneth R. Ginsburg
Building Vocabulary for College	R. Kent Smith
Character Strengths and Virtues	Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman
Collaboration	Morten T. Hansen
Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All	Tom Kelley and David Kelley
Creative Intelligence: Harnessing the Power to Create, Connect and Inspire	Bruce Nussbaum
Creativity: the Psychology of Discovery and Invention	Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead	Brene Brown
David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants	Malcolm Gladwell
Decisive	Chip Heath and Dan Heath
Dispositions: Reframing Teaching and Learning	Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick
Drive	Daniel Pink
Emotional Intelligence	Daniel Goleman
Flourish: a Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being	Martin E.P. Seligman
Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience	Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
For Your Improvement: A Guide for Development and Coaching	Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger
Fostering Grit: How Do I Prepare my Students for the Real World?	Thomas R. Hoerr
General Science Activities with Real-life Applications	Pam Walker and Elaine Wood

Title	Authors or Editors
Getting Things Done	David Allen
Great by Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos and Luck—Why some Thrive Despite them All	Jim Collins
Hands-on Physics Activities	James Cunningham and Norman Herr
Hands-on Chemistry Activities with Real-life Applications	James Cunningham and Norman Herr
How Children Succeed	Paul Tough
Integrity: the Courage to Meet the Demands of Reality	Henry Cloud
Leadership and the Art of Struggle: How Great Leaders Grow through Challenge and Adversity	Steven Snyder
Leadership on the Line	Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky
Learned Optimism	Martin E.P. Seligman
Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind: 16 Essential Characteristics for Success	Arthur L. Costa and Bena Kallick
Made to Stick	Chip Heath and Dan Heath
Math Projects with Real-life Applications	Judith Muschla and Gary and Muschla
Measuring Hard-to-Measure Student Competencies	Brian M. Stecher and Laura S. Hamilton
Mindgym: Achieve More by Thinking Differently	Sebastian Bailey and Octavius Black
Mindset: the New Psychology of Success	Carol S. Dweck
Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation	Daniel J. Siegel
Outliers	Malcolm Gladwell
Overwhelmed: How to Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time	Brigid Schulte
Practice Perfect	Doug Lemov, Erica Woolway and Katie Yezzi
Project Management	Peter Hobbs
Ready for Anything	David Allen
Seeking Serenity: The 10 New Rules for Health and Happiness in the Age of Anxiety	Amanda Enayati
Social Intelligence: The Revolutionary New Science of Human Relationships	Daniel Goleman
Strategic Thinking and the New Science	T. Irene Sanders
StrengthsFinder 2.0	Tom Rath

Title	Authors or Editors
Sway: the Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior	Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman
Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion	Gregory Boyle
Teaching Kids to Think: Raising Confident, Independent and Thoughtful Children in an Age of Instant Gratification	Darlene Sweetland and Ron Stolberg
Teaching Your Children Responsibility	Linda and Richard Eyre
Teaching Your Children Values	Linda and Richard Eyre
Tell to Win	Peter Guber
The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People	Stephen R. Covey
The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are	Brene Brown
The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything	Ken Robinson
The Happiness Project	Gretchen Rubin
The Marshmallow Test: Mastering Self-Control	Walter Mischel
The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload	Daniel J. Levitin
The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business	Charles Duhigg
The Road to Character	David Brooks
The Tipping Point	Malcolm Gladwell
The Village Effect: Why Face-to-Face Contact Matters	Susan Pinker
Thinking Fast and Slow	Daniel Kahneman
Thinking: the New Science of Decision-Making, Problem-Solving and Prediction	John Brockman
Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder	Arianna Huffington
To Sell is Human	Daniel Pink
Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes	William Bridges
Wellbeing: the Five Essential Elements	Tom Rath and Jim Harter
Writing: A Guide for College and Beyond	Lester Faigley
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance	Robert M. Pirsig

Developmental Practice	
Titles	Authors or Editors
A Chance to Make History: What Works and What Doesn't in Providing an Excellent Education for All	Wendy Kopp
Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers	Rebecca E. Wolfe et al.
Blueprint for Tomorrow: Redesigning Schools for Student-Centered Learning	Prakash Nair
Building Civic Capacity: the Politics of Reforming Urban Schools	Clarence N. Stone et al.
Community Programs to Promote Youth Development	National Research Council and Institute of Medicine
College (Un)Bound: the Future of Higher Education and what it Means for Students	Jeffrey J. Selingo
Customized Schooling: Beyond Whole-School Reform	Frederick M. Hess and Bruno V. Manno
Change Leadership: A Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools	Tony Wagner and Robert Kegan
Child Welfare and Child Well-Being: New Perspectives from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being	Mary Bruce Webb, et al.
Educational Entrepreneurship: Realities, Challenges, Possibilities	Frederick M. Hess
From the Ivory Tower to the Schoolhouse: How Scholarship Becomes Common Knowledge in Education	Jack Schneider
Getting it Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools	Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas
Going to Scale with New School Designs: Reinventing High School	Joseph P. McDonal, Emily J. Klein and Med Riordan
Leap of Reason: Managing to Outcomes in an Era of Scarcity	Mario Morino
Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development	Urie Bronfenbrenner
Measuring What Matters: Competency-based Learning Models in Higher Education	Richard A. Voorhees
Megacommunities: How Leaders of Government, Business and Non-Profits can Tackle Today's Global Challenges Together	Mark Gerencser, et al.

Titles	Authors or Editors
New Directions for Youth Development: Defining and Measuring Quality in Youth Programs and Classrooms	Nicole Yohalem, Robert C. Granger and Karen J. Pittman
Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom	Lisa Delpitt
Parentology: Everything You Wanted to Know about the Science of Raising Children but Were Too Exhausted to Ask	Dalton Conley
Pivotal Moments: How Educators Can Put All Students on the Path to College	Robert Espinoza
Raising the Grade: How High School Reform Can Save Our Youth and Our Nation	Bob Wise
Ready, Willing and Able: A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success	Mandy Savitz-Romer and Suzanne M. Bouffard
Schooling in the Workplace: How Six of the World's Best Vocational Education Systems Prepare Young People for Jobs and Life	Nancy Hoffman
Spotlight on Student Engagement, Motivation and Achievement	Caroline T. Chauncey and Nancy Walser
Switch	Chip Heath and Dan Heath
The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design	Urie Bronfenbrenner
The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of Learning Organizations	Peter Senge
The Last Word: The Best Commentary and Controversy in American Education	Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
The Power to Transform: Leadership that Brings Learning and Schooling to Life	Stephanie Pace Marshall
The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform: Can We Change Course Before It's Too Late?	Seymour B. Sarason
The Smartest Kids in the World	Amanda Ripley
The Triple Focus	Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge
The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Proven Strategies to Nurture your Child's Developing Mind	Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform	David Tyack and Larry Cuban
Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research	Ian Gough and J. Allister McGregor

Titles	Authors or Editors
Whatever It Takes	Paul Tough
What Works in Education Reform: Putting Young People at the Center	Joel Tolman, Patrice Ford and Merita Irby
Youth Development: Issues, Challenges and Directions	Public/Private Ventures
Youth, Education and the Role of Society: Rethinking Learning in the High School Years	Robert Halpern

Readiness Traps and Gaps

Titles	Authors or Editors
Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses	Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa
A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League	Ron Suskind
Almost Home: Helping Kids Move from Homelessness to Hope	Kevin Ryan and Tina Kelley
Amazing Grace: the Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation	Jonathan Kozol
American Youth Violence	Franklin E. Zimring
Aspiring Adults Adrift: Tentative Transitions of College Graduates	Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa
Boys into Men: Raising Our African American Teenage Sons	Nancy Boyd-Franklin, A.J. Franklin
Coming of Age in America: The Transition to Adulthood in the Twenty-First Century	Mary C. Waters, et al.
City Kids, City Schools: More Reports from the Front Row	William Ayers, Gloria Adson-Billings, Gregory Michie, and Pedro A. Noguera
First in the Family: Advice About College from First-Generation Students	Kathleen Cushman
Instructor's and Counselor's Guide for Career Choices	Mindy Bingham
Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America	John McWhorter
New Directions for Youth Development: Preparing Youth for the Crossing	Sam Piha and Georgia Hall
No Place but Here: A Teacher's Vocation in a Rural Community	Garret Keizer

Titles	Authors or Editors
On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research and Public Policy	Richard A. Settersten Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Ruben G. Rumbaut
On Your Own Without a Net: the Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations	D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan and Gretchen R. Ruth
One Nation, Underprivileged	Mark Rank
Ordinary Resurrections: Children in the Years of Hope	Jonathan Kozol
Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis	Robert D. Putnam
Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men	Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer and Paul Offner
Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools	Jonathan Kozol
System Kids: Adolescent Mothers and the Politics of Regulation	Lauren J. Silver
The Last Dropout: Stop the Epidemic	Bill Milliken
The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates	Wes Moore
The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Dream and Fulfill a Dream	Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt
The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them	E.D. Hirsch, Jr.
The Shame of the Nation: the Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America	Jonathan Kozol
The Teaching Gap	James W. Stigler and James Hiebert
There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing up in the Other America	Alex Kotlowitz
Youth Crisis: Growing up in the High-Risk Society	M.A. Bortner and Linda M. Williams
Youth in Prison	Nanette J. Davis

Readiness in Context	
Titles	Authors or Editors
Adolescence and Adulthood: Transitions and Transformations	Leo B. Hendry and Marion Kemp
Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence	Laurence Steinberg
All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood	Jennifer Senior

Titles	Authors or Editors
A Mind at a Time	Mel Levine
Brainstorm: the Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain	Daniel J. Siegel
Child Well-Being: Understanding Children's Lives	Colette McAuley and Wendy Rose
Developmental Psychology	Amanda Ludlow and Roberto Gutierrez
From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development	National Research Council and Institute of Medicine
How the Brain Learns	David A. Sousa
How We Learn: The Surprising Truth About When, Where and Why it Happens	Michael C. Nagel
In the Middle: The Adolescent Brain, Behaviour and Learning	Benedict Carey
Mind, Brain, and Education: Neuroscience Implications for the Classroom	David A. Sousa
No Drama Discipline: The Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind	Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children	Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman
Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood	William Pollack
Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls	Mary Pipher
The Emotional Life of Your Brain: How Its Unique Patterns Affect the Way You Think, Feel and Live—And How You Can Change Them	Richard J. Davidson and Sharon Begley
The Nurture Effect: How the Science of Human Behavior can Improve Our Lives & Our World	Anthony Biglan
The Secret Language of the Mind	David Cohen
The Social Animal: the Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement	David Brooks
The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving	Lisa Miller
The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist's Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults	Frances E. Jensen and Amy Ellis Nutt

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REPRODUCIBLES

The following resources are designed to stand alone and support the information you have read in the paper. Feel free to reproduce and distribute these. Be sure to use proper attribution and citation.

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READINESS ABILITIES

There are ten broad and dynamic abilities we use every day. These abilities allow us to respond to life. They activate and adjust based on whatever is going on. Each ability has both specific and coordinated roles.



I CAN THINK & CREATE
in ways that help me navigate and experience life.



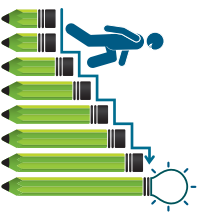
I CAN FEEL & EXPRESS EMOTION
appropriately and as a way to connect with others.



I CAN GET & STAY HEALTHY
physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.



I CAN APPLY LEARNING
in the real world and to meet life demands.



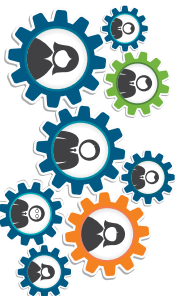
I CAN USE INSIGHTS TO GROW & DEVELOP
in each stage of life.



I CAN WORK & STAY FOCUSED
in each area of life.



I CAN RELATE TO OTHERS & THE WORLD
by forming, managing and sustaining my relationships.



I CAN ENGAGE WITH PEOPLE & PLACES
by being present and engaging in meaningful, real and honest ways.



I CAN PERSIST THROUGH STRUGGLES & MAINTAIN HOPE
no matter my challenges.



I CAN SOLVE PROBLEMS & MAKE DECISIONS
about the intellectual, social, moral and emotional issues and problems I face.

SKILLSETS & MINDSETS

These are the skillsets and mindsets we use most often to express the Readiness Abilities. Skillsets prepare us to do something and Mindsets—made up of habits, attitudes and beliefs—help us become willing to do something.

SKILLSETS

APPLICATION – being able to apply what is learned and practice it in real life.

RESOURCE AND INFORMATION PROCESSING – being able to gather, keep track of and manage information and resources.

COPING – being able to make it through and bounce back from hard times.

COMMUNICATION – being able to say what you need or want to in an appropriate and effective way.

ORGANIZATION AND PLANNING – being able to organize and plan life, projects, tasks and schedules.

PROBLEM SOLVING AND DECISIONMAKING – being able to solve problems and make informed decisions.

REFLECTION AND SELF-AWARENESS – being able to think about life and honestly evaluate where you are, what you need or want and what should be done.

SELF-REGULATION – being able to manage emotions, thoughts and behaviors so they are appropriate for who you are with, where you are and what you are doing.

BASIC LIFE MANAGEMENT – being able to meet foundational life demands and practical needs.

THINKING AND ANALYSIS – being able to think and reason critically and creatively about issues and produce thoughtful responses.

SELF-CARE – being able to meet physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs, as long as there are the right supports and access.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT – being able to form, grow, manage and keep relationships.

MINDSETS

FAIRNESS – being sensitive to the difference between right and wrong, and believing everyone deserves a fair chance.

OPEN-MINDEDNESS – being open to perspectives and experiences that are different from your own.

FUTURE ORIENTATION – being focused on what is ahead or possible and using that to motivate you in the present.

HUMILITY – being thoughtful and honest about your talents and achievements, shortcomings and mistakes. Having a healthy perspective and engaging with others even when the focus is not on you.

PRAGMATISM – being honest, practical and objective when considering life, problems and needs.

AGILITY – being able to change your mood and actions depending on what is needed, where you are and who you are with.

DRIVE – being motivated and focused. Enjoying getting things done and accomplishing goals.

ADAPTABILITY – being flexible in your thinking and behavior, depending on what is needed.

CURIOSITY – being an eager learner with many questions.

COMPASSION – being moved by the struggles, situations and pain of others.

COURAGE – being willing to take on challenges, even when scared or confused.

EMPATHY – being understanding and connected to the feelings and experiences of others.

GROWTH ORIENTATION – believing you can get better with practice and hard work.

OPTIMISM – being comforted and hopeful by the positive parts of a situation.

PERSISTENCE – being focused and doing whatever it takes to accomplish a goal or task.

PURPOSEFULNESS – being committed to accomplishing something and being someone.

READINESS PRACTICE

A young person grows up in environments, relationships and experiences. When these are developmentally appropriate, they provide young people with the supports and services they need to build connections and competence and get ready. These plus adequate space and time enable young people to learn, develop and strengthen their Readiness Abilities.



ENVIRONMENTS

DEVELOPMENTAL ENVIRONMENTS

Developmental environments are welcoming, safe and structured. These are positive places where young people want to spend time, know what to expect and know what is expected of them.



RELATIONSHIPS

DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

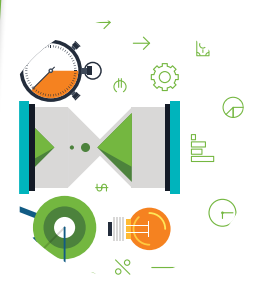
Developmental relationships are authentic, positive and productive. These relationships are caring, motivating, equipping and empowering.



EXPERIENCES

DEVELOPMENTAL EXPERIENCES

Developmental experiences keep young people challenged and engaged. These experiences connect with young people based on who they are, where they are, what they need and what they want.



SPACE AND TIME

SPACE AND TIME TO DEVELOP ABILITIES

Systems and settings support readiness by providing space and time for young people to learn, develop and demonstrate the readiness abilities. This includes being able to observe and explore, practice and learn from mistakes, apply and connect, reflect and continuously improve.

DEVELOPMENTAL PRACTICES THAT BUILD CONNECTIONS & COMPETENCE

Adults can put specific practices in place to build a young person's connections and competence. Connections and competence form the bedrock for learning and strengthening the Readiness Abilities.

HOW TO BUILD CONNECTIONS

FOCUS ON THE YOUNG PERSON – Prioritize and value young people's needs and interests.

PROVIDE SAFETY – Keep young people safe and free from violence. Whenever and however you can, reduce risk and prevent harm.

BE A COACH – Motivate young people, celebrating their growth and success and encouraging them to persist during hard times.

CULTIVATE COMMUNITY – Help young people feel they belong. Give them meaningful ways to contribute and participate.

BE RELATIONAL – Interact with young people with intention and presence. Be an active listener and respond to their needs in healthy and positive ways.

BE ENGAGING – Choose activities and conversation topics that interest young people and keep their attention.

ENCOURAGE TEAMWORK – Create opportunities for young people to work in teams. Support teams as they navigate personal dynamics and challenges.

SHOW CARE AND CONCERN – Express warmth and closeness to young people. Be empathetic and compassionate. Show them you are paying attention.

GIVE THE YOUNG PERSON AGENCY – Give young people voice and let them be decisionmakers. Help them take on developmentally appropriate roles and responsibilities.

SUPPORT PERSONAL REFLECTION – Provide opportunities for young people to reflect and share their thoughts. Be available to listen, process, guide and share your own experiences.

BE SOCIALLY AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE – Respect young people's identities, cultures and beliefs. Help them examine and construct their personal identities.

HOW TO BUILD COMPETENCE

MODEL WHAT YOU WANT – Be a positive example for young people by modeling what you expect from them.

FACILITATE PERSONAL MASTERY OF SKILLSETS AND MINDSETS – Provide the space and time young people need to observe, develop and demonstrate skillsets and mindsets.

PROVIDE RESOURCES – Give young people access to the information, tools and supports they need. Work with others to support young people in ways you cannot.

PROVIDE POSITIVE CHALLENGES – Push young people to keep growing by offering opportunities to get out of their comfort zone, work hard and try something new.

BE STRENGTHS-BASED – Recognize, draw out and build upon young people's strengths. Create opportunities for young people to express and showcase their talents and skills.

BE A SKILLFUL PLANNER – Plan activities and experiences that support young people's growth and development. Design ways for young people to develop and demonstrate important skillsets and mindsets.

EMPOWER THE YOUNG PERSON – Nurture young people's sense of self and independence. Equip them with the knowledge and skills needed to take on challenges and own their behavior and actions.

MAKE REAL WORLD CONNECTIONS – Show young people how activities and experiences connect to the real world. Create ways for young people to safely test skillsets and mindsets in real ways.

PROVIDE STRUCTURE – Establish clear, consistent boundaries and a sense of predictability. Monitor young people and those around them, ensuring positivity, safety and support.

BE A PERSONAL TRAINER – Choose and facilitate experiences that build young people's abilities. Modify or come up with new experiences as young people progress or their circumstances change.

DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORTS *for young people*

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Young people need places where they are

- » Safe and secure
- » Clear on routines, roles and responsibilities
- » Known and welcome

2

Young people need people who

- » Empower and equip
- » Love and care
- » Coach and motivate

3

Young people need opportunities that

- » Connect with and explore their interests
- » Challenge and engage
- » Provide space and time to watch and explore
- » Provide space and time to practice and learn from mistakes
- » Provide space and time to apply and connect to what is learned
- » Provide space and time to try, mess up and keep getting better

READINESS TRAPS

Readiness Traps are cultural and policy patterns or phenomena that get in the way of young people's readiness. They pull the focus away from the young person and place it on a system proxy, which is typically more concrete and easier to monitor and measure. These traps are longstanding, entrenched and cross-cultural.



ACCESS AS PROXY FOR QUALITY

When young people's place of residence determines their access to high-quality, services and supports. Many systems track and report on admissions and enrollment information or the number of people they serve, sometimes giving those more attention than the quality of programming.

Examples:

- » **Resources** – local systems and settings have resources, but that does not mean the resources are sufficient, stable, sustainable or used in the best ways.
- » **Talent** – local systems and settings have staff, but that does not mean staff are sufficient, skilled or working in the most effective and supportive ways.

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AGE AS PROXY FOR STAGE

When young people are assigned to a program, group or class based on age, rather than on stage of learning, development or behavior. Many policies decide when young people start or stop in a system or setting, because of their age. There are few exceptions available to children and youth whose age and developmental stage do not match.

Examples:

- » **Social promotion** – using age as the deciding factor for placing or passing a young person into a setting, such as academic grade.
- » **Aging-out** – denying young people services because they have reached the set age of adulthood, as defined by a system or setting.



COMPLETION AS PROXY FOR COMPETENCE

When young people are allowed to move on to the next stage, grade, system or setting because they have finished—even if they are not ready. Or, when young people are ready to move on but are not allowed because of certain policies or requirements. Many systems track and report on completion requirements—successful exits, graduations, number of young people who have aged-out—without also tracking and reporting on their proficiency in critical competencies.

Examples:

- » **Completing school** – a diploma means a young person has met one school's graduation requirements. It does not guarantee readiness for college or a job.
- » **Completing treatment** – finishing treatment for addictions or mental health struggles does not guarantee that a young person is or will remain sober, stable or healthy.

TIME AS PROXY FOR PROGRESS

When young people's time in a system or setting triggers when they move ahead, or when time is used as a way to measure a young person's growth and development. Many system policies use time (for example, minutes, hours, days, months) as a way to determine where young people are placed, or when they are finished.

Examples:

- » **Seat-time** – when a young person earns academic credit based on time spent in class.
- » **Doing time** – when a young person is held in a juvenile justice facility after a court hearing or judicial decision, or is issued a time-based sentence.

READINESS GAPS

These gaps between populations and individuals show up and grow because of differences in opportunities, supports and personal abilities. Readiness Gaps are symptoms of young people experiencing system and policy traps, harmful practices, and having underdeveloped skillsets and mindsets.



ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Differences in academic standing between young people, often connected to race, class or gender.



EXPECTATIONS GAP

Differences between what young people and their support systems expect will happen from investing time and resources into a system, and what actually happens. The differences in what society expects from certain groups of young people.



OPPORTUNITY GAP

Differences in the quality and quantity of opportunities and supports available to young people, often because of their families or where they live.



SKILLS GAP

Differences between what young people can do and what they need to be able to do to carry out a role or responsibility.



**the
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