READY BY DESIGN

THE SCIENCE (AND ART) OF YOUTH READINESS

KEY IDEAS

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Every young person deserves the right to be ready to take advantage of life's opportunities and meet its challenges at every age and stage.

In the United States, too many young people move through adolescence and into adulthood without the abilities, skillsets and mindsets they need to manage life's opportunities and challenges. The numbers are stark: more than 5.6 million young people are disconnected from school and the workforce. Many more have earned a high school diploma or postsecondary credential yet still lack the competence to get by. Only four in 10 young adults are "doing well"—in school or working, emotionally and physically healthy, and engaged in civic or community life.[1]

The past decade has brought a growing sense of urgency and attention to the issues of readiness and equity. As a nation, we devote significant expertise and resources to addressing disparities in wealth, health and well-being and to closing gaps among groups of young people. We have made considerable progress. Yet even our best efforts remain deeply fragmented. Persistent inequities prove that we must do more.

> **"Problem-free is not the same as fully prepared."**
>
> Karen Pittman, 2001

The Forum for Youth Investment has renewed our commitment to making readiness a right for every young person, regardless of background, ability, circumstance or experiences. We believe we are at a critical time in history that both demands and enables those working with young people to more effectively *promote readiness* as a way to deepen and connect supports and measure progress across silos.

What will make this vision a reality? It is not a mystery. We have more than two decades' worth of research to help us act with precision. **There is a science to readiness.**

The Forum created **The Readiness Project** to make this science clear, accessible and actionable. It began with comprehensive research to define readiness and the conditions and contexts that influence whether a young person is or will be ready. We reviewed over 300 reports, studies, journal articles and books, ranging from neuroscience to systems thinking to future economic forecasts and workforce trends. We analyzed and crosswalked more than 60 of

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[1] Gambone, et. al. (2002). A Comparitive Analysis of Community Youth Development Strategies.

the most credible standards and frameworks from each major youth system. The result is a comprehensive and systems-neutral science of readiness and the case for why it matters.

Going forward, we will translate these findings into concrete tools and lessons that can be used by leaders, practitioners, policymakers, advocates and others working to improve the lives of young people.

The full paper, *The Science (and Art) of Youth Readiness*, presents the findings of our three-year research effort and offers a roadmap for how these findings can be integrated into and aligned with existing efforts to improve youth well-being. This key ideas document serves as a companion to the paper, introducing and summarizing our core concepts and research findings.

The Science of Readiness

Readiness is the dynamic combination of being prepared for and willing to take advantage of life's opportunities while managing its challenges. This is not a new term, nor are we are the first to use it, but our research confirms that it is accessible, neutral and galvanizing. Perhaps most importantly, it makes sense to young people and their families. *Readiness* is powerful and practical.

> **Readiness is the combination of being willing and prepared to take on life's challenges and opportunities.**
>
> The Readiness Project

The science of readiness calls for a holistic approach to youth development and learning. It takes into account the full human ecosystem in which a young person grows and develops—the relationships, environments and internal (mindsets and skillsets) and external (social and economic trends) forces that influence our daily lives. Designing for readiness requires that system and community leaders see and address the whole ecosystem. As our current social conditions demonstrate, to do otherwise will not bring about lasting change.

YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE CENTER

Imagine a young person with a **backpack**—inside 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 backpack, and teach them how to make use of what is inside (by using proven developmental practices). This is readiness.

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Our research identifies four interrelated components of readiness, which should be addressed together:

- Ten universal **Readiness Abilities** and their associated **Skillsets and Mindsets**. Every person needs these, regardless of age, background or circumstance. Every system and setting should support their development.
- Four categories of **Readiness Practice,** which include the essential characteristics of environments, relationships and experiences for young people to develop, strengthen and demonstrate these abilities, skillsets and mindsets.
- Four common **Readiness Traps,** serious and often unintended conditions in youth systems and settings that affect some young people disproportionately, narrowing their paths forward.
- Four common **Readiness Gaps** fueled by these traps. These are deep and persistent disparities between populations of young people.

Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets
What does it mean for young people to be ready?

The Readiness Project identifies ten universal abilities every person needs, regardless of age, background or circumstance and that every system and setting should support. These are the ten abilities we use every day, no matter who we are or what situations we are in.

The abilities are supported by the skillsets and mindsets—or, clusters of habits, attitudes and beliefs—that we use most often. The skillsets *prepare and equip* us to do something, while the mindsets help us become *willing* to do something.

The Readiness Abilities, Skillsets and Mindsets:

- can be learned and strengthened with the right supports and opportunities;
- can be measured using empirical, practical and observational methods; and
- are dynamic, changing depending on a young person's needs, life circumstances, developmental stage and environments.

Nearly every youth system or setting operates with a version of "readiness" criteria and goals. Some include social, emotional and interpersonal skills in addition to topic-specific skills. The Readiness Project synthesizes all of these into a universal list of abilities, skillsets and mindsets. This list represents what young people must have, regardless of ambition or circumstance. These, and the sense of agency they provide young people, are at the core of what it means to be ready.

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

What does it mean for systems, settings and adults to explicitly support youth readiness?

The Readiness Project considers four categories of Readiness Practice—developmental environments, relationships, experiences, and space and time—as essential for young people to develop, strengthen and demonstrate the Readiness Abilities. To define these areas of practice, we reviewed and compared more than a generation of discoveries on child and adolescent development, coaching and mentoring, developmental relationships, quality youth programs and effective teaching and learning.

Making the Invisible Visible

Readiness Practice supports a range of specific developmental practices adults can use to build a young person's connections and competence. These developmental practices can be put in place in any setting where youth spend time, regardless of the focus of the service or support. For each area of Readiness Practice, we have developed criteria of effectiveness, all of which are observable and measurable.

Every system and setting has its official practices and policies—as well as cultural norms—that determine how people behave and interact with young people. These official practices dictate the range of experiences and supports that are offered, and how young people are organized to experience them (individually or in groups, in structured or unstructured time blocks, etc.). Too often, the official practices fail to support the developmental practices; in many cases, they even run counter to what we know works.

It is our hope that system and setting leaders will use the four categories of Readiness Practice, as well as the specific developmental practices, to assess their official practice and align it with the developmental. Adults and young people can use the categories of Readiness Practice to identify areas of need or advocate for improvements.

READINESS-RICH SYSTEMS AND SETTINGS

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 components of Readiness Practice, thereby optimizing the development of the Readiness Abilities.

Too many young people grow up in environments that are not readiness-rich. The Readiness Project is designed to support immediate action to access needed supports as well as longer-term policy, practice and culture change.

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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.

Readiness Traps and Gaps
What gets in the way of readiness?

There are many reasons that young people transition from one life stage to the next without the readiness abilities and developmental supports they need. The Readiness Project identifies four common **Readiness Traps**, serious and often unintended conditions in youth systems and settings that affect some young people disproportionately, narrowing their paths forward.

The Readiness Traps are:

- **Access as proxy for quality** – when young people's place of residence determines their access to quality services and supports.
- **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.
- **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.
- **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.

Readiness traps arise when official practice—whether defined by rules and regulations, or by expectations and norms—fails to reflect what we know about effective Readiness Practice. To fundamentally change practice and support readiness for every young person, we must understand and mitigate these traps.

Traps lead to four common **Readiness Gaps**, which are 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.

The Readiness Gaps are:

- **Achievement gap** – differences in academic standing.
- **Expectations gap** – differences between what young people and their support systems expect and what happens; differences in what society expects from particular groups of young people.
- **Opportunity gap** – differences in the quality and quantity of opportunities available to young people.
- **Skills gap** – difference between what young people can do and what they need to be able to do.

In the past decade, leaders in business, education, youth development and government have begun to pay significant attention to these traps and gaps. This has resulted in interventions that are thoughtful and worthwhile, and many are effective—yet they continue to be insufficient to make readiness a right. This is largely because efforts tend to focus on a single system or youth population.

By working within the full complexity of a young person's ecosystem, we can optimize his or her chance of readiness, now and in the future. We can enable young people to—at once—minimize gaps, avoid traps, maximize time at places and with people who are using developmental practices, and find spaces to practice and master the skillsets, mindsets and abilities that really matter. **We can make readiness a right for all.**

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READY BY 21 — the READINESS project

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.

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.
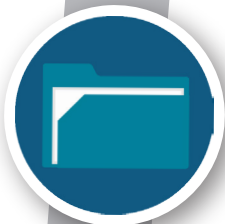
READINESS GAPS

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.