Ready by 21© Better Data Toolkit

What this is
Ready by 21© is a set of innovative strategies developed by the Forum for Youth Investment that helps communities and states improve the odds that all children and youth will be ready for college, work and life. The Forum organized those strategies and the related tolls under "the four B's": Broader Partnerships, Bigger Goals, Better Data and Bolder Action. The Better Data toolkit helps partners in a collective impact effort collect better data and use it to drive decisions. It guides them to collect complete data about youth outcomes, community supports and leadership actions; align and connect data for decision making across systems; and use the best information about what works to make strategies more effective.

How this Connects to Collective Impact
This toolkit enables partners to not only collect existing data, but to share data among themselves and create a permanent system of shared measurements in order to consistently track results and make adjustments based on those results.

How this tool is used
This tool guides partners through a process of identifying data needs, filling data gaps, and using data to influence real-time decision making. The process includes using existing data (from government agencies, for example) and creating new data through surveys and analyses. The tools include a Taking Stock Worksheet to assess what data is already at hand and where data collection needs to improve, and information about the Gallup Student Poll, which measures the hope, well-being and engagement of young people. The toolkit also includes readings and other resources.

Most of the tools in this kit are carried out as a group activity, at least initially, often with in-person facilitation by the Forum for Youth Investment. The tools and worksheets were created for partnerships working on child and youth issues, but they can be (and have been) used by partnerships focused on other populations or on specific community issues.

To find out more
See the [Better Data toolkit](#). Some of the tools require free registration in the Ready by 21 Leadership Network or are available only to partnerships working directly with the Forum.

Ready by 21® Better Data Toolkit

Ready by 21 Toolkits

The resources highlighted in this toolkit are available at www.readyby21.org/toolkits

Ready by 21 is meeting leaders where they are across the country to reach the goal of having all youth ready for college, work and life. Ready by 21 is a set of innovative strategies developed by national experts at the Forum for Youth Investment based on decades of experience and the knowledge to make a measurable difference in young people's lives.

Ready by 21 helps leaders to build broader partnerships, set bigger goals, collect and use better data, and take bolder actions. Within these four Building Blocks for Effective Change, the Forum has identified 14 standards that leaders consistently cite as important to improve youth outcomes. To help you learn more about the Building Blocks, their related standards and ways that you can apply them to your work, the Ready by 21 Partnership offers this toolkit series.

For more information about Ready by 21, please visit www.readyby21.org.To speak to someone about how Ready by 21 strategies can align with your efforts, contact ReadyLeader@ReadyBy21.org.

Ready by 21® Better Data Toolkit

For links and more information, please visit www.readyby21.org/toolkits/better-data-and-decisions

> "Simply having the data is not enough. How we will use the data will set our region apart."
> — *Polly Lusk-Page, Executive Director, Northern Kentucky Education Council*

America loves statistics and seems to have one about everything: from the number of people per square mile (87) to how much the average dog owner spends on the vet each year ($248) to the odds of catching a foul in the home ballpark of the Philadelphia Phillies (one in 1,233). So where are the data you need about kids in your community?

Probably all over the place, in different formats, with lots of gaps. State and local leaders routinely lament that while they have plenty of numbers about children and youth, they don't have a complete or coherent picture.

Armed with a comprehensive set of data about young people, leaders can make better decisions about services and supports. They can see what approaches are working. They can guide their community or state in setting priorities about what resources to provide, to whom, and where.

This toolkit helps you create a process for collecting and using data that:

- Cuts across systems and levels, from programs and organizations to networks and communities
- Measures leadership actions and their impact on services and supports for youth
- Covers all parts of youths' lives, across all ages
- Answers crucial questions about programs, such as demographics, performance and impact
- Is up-to-date and ongoing

To accomplish that, the Forum recommends following these standards for compiling and using better data:

- **Collect complete data about youth outcomes, community supports and leadership actions** to inform collective efforts and demonstrate the link to improved outcomes.
- **Align and connect data for decision making** horizontally (across systems) and vertically (from individual and neighborhood through community and state).
- **Use the best information about what works** to make strategies more effective.

Here's a quick self-assessment to help you get a sense of your community's or state's current capacity to use better data.

BETTER DATA	DOING THIS WELL	DOING OKAY	DON'T HAVE BUT NEEDED	NOT A PRIORITY NOW
Collect complete data about youth outcomes, community supports and leadership actions – Is data collected across a range of outcomes and a range of ages? Does it reflect what the community or state wants to promote as well as what it wants to prevent? Do you collect data on what supports are being offered and what actions leaders are taking? Are data gaps identified and addressed and agendas developed to improve data collection?				
Align and connect data for decision making – Can you provide data on goals across programs and systems? Are the various sources for data and information aligned and linked horizontally (across systems and settings) as well as vertically (individual to aggregate)?				
Use the best information about what works – Are improvements in everything, from programmatic supports to parental engagement, informed by the best of what is known about promising and proven practices? Is there a focus on continuous improvement?				

To learn more about better data in action, check out these resources:

"Better Data 101" Webinar Recording: This webinar offers an introduction to the Better Data standards and offers several examples. Broadcast on May 31, 2011, the session was led by Larry Pasti, field services director, and Kiley Bednar, program manager, at the Forum for Youth Investment.

Austin, Texas: Coordinating Data about Services to Drive Change: See how city leaders are using a state-of-the-art online tool to map and track youth programming, improve services and make them more accessible to families in need.

Standards Toolkits

These tools will help you examine your strengths and gaps for using better data.
Each set of tools is designed to help you fulfill a specific standard.

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Collect and Use Better Data:
Collect complete data about youth outcomes, community supports and leadership actions to inform collective efforts and demonstrate the link to improved outcomes.

If your community is like most, then you know a lot about young people as students: their attendance rates, grades, test scores and the rankings of their schools. But what do you know about the majority of their lives – the time when they are not in school? Probably not as much.

To make good decisions, however, leaders need complete data from all the settings and systems where young people spend their time. They need information about youths' physical and mental health, after-school activities, employment and family structure, and more. They need information about the extent and performance of existing services and supports.

Without this, you risk adding to supports that aren't needed or effective, and missing young people in need. Better data will help you use your resources more efficiently and effectively.

Here are resources that address common questions:

How do we figure out what data we need?

To see what data is available and what you need to find, ask your stakeholders to complete this **Taking Stock Worksheet.** It will help you assess what data is already at hand and where you should improve data collection.

Where do we get information about youth outcomes?

Gallup, a Ready by 21 National Partner, is breaking ground by directly surveying youth about important outcomes: their hopes, well-being and school engagement. Researchers have linked these factors to student performance and success. For example: Did you know that young people's scores on hope are better predictors of college success than their GPAs or SAT scores? But that only half are hopeful about their futures?

Find out more about the 2009 National results through the **Hope, Wellbeing and Engagement data sheets.**

Learn more about the free **Gallup Student Poll** for 5th-12th graders and how your community can be involved.

If you're looking to fill gaps in the outcome data that you collect, the **Child Trends DataBank** is invaluable. The DataBank is a one-stop source for the latest national trends and research on over 100 key indicators of child and youth well-being, and breaks down data to state and county levels.

Where do we get more information about the existing supports in our community?

Try landscape mapping. The **Program Landscape Mapping Packet** helps you figure out what services and supports are available for young people, and whether they are reaching those who need them the most.

How do we know the quality of those supports?

There are lots of program quality assessments out there. To help you make a decision that best meets your needs, the Forum for Youth Investment created **Measuring Youth Program Quality: A Guide to Assessment Tools, 2nd Edition.**

How do we use data to illustrate the actions taken by leaders?

Leaders and policymakers are inundated with spreadsheets and budgets, but they often don't have information on the story behind the numbers. **Adding It Up: A Guide for Mapping Public Resources for Children, Youth and Families** shows you how to present not just dollars and cents, but a fiscal picture that provides information about children, youth and communities.

See the **Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth's Resource Mapping of Services for Children** for how one state is getting a fuller picture of expenditures per child and reorganizing the state budget to reflect spending in the areas of safety, health, education, support and nurturance, and engagement.

Collect and Use Better Data:

Align and connect data for decision-making horizontally (across systems) and vertically (from individual and neighborhood through community and state).

It's time to share.

After all, a new pile of statistics will just give everyone information overload. To use this tremendous resource to its full advantage, you need a way to connect data sources and exchange information among stakeholders.

There are two ways to make these connections. The first is horizontally: sharing data across systems, such as education, juvenile justice, health, etc. The second is vertically: sharing data from the individual level to the program level, and up to the city/county level and the state level.

Both of these directions provide important information for decision makers – be it a policymaker who needs to know about the impact of certain policies beyond her specific system, or an afterschool provider who can better tailor his programming based on a student's performance in school.

Here are resources that address common questions:

How can we get started on aligning and sharing data?

To get a fuller picture of how data are shared and disseminated in your community, use the **Community Data Inventory Worksheet and Example**. This tool can help you assess how well your community is collecting, warehousing and disseminating data about youth outcomes; community, school and family supports; and leader efforts. The example shows how one community has used this worksheet to inform its plans for action.

nFocus (a Ready by 21 Technical Partner) provides solutions to some of these tricky data questions. Need to look at youth participation across a range of settings? Curious about program effectiveness over time? Want to link data from schools, afterschool programs and funding organizations? The **nFocus brochure** shows how this organization can help.

What places have done this well?

Precision Engineering: This Youth Today column by Forum for Youth Investment CEO Karen Pittman stresses the importance of having a full picture of data on children and youth. See the last paragraph on the first page for an example of ways that communities can link data from an individual level to a programmatic level to a city level.

Florida is designing and implementing data sharing between state agencies, and equipping providers with a tool that helps them better serve children, youth and families. This website and a related presentation tell how: **Florida's Children and Youth Cabinet Information Sharing System.**

As in many other states, New York's juvenile justice system is run by several agencies that each collect and report its own data. Until recently, this data had never been compiled or distributed to offer a comprehensive understanding of the system. **Developing and Sharing Juvenile Justice Data in New York State** describes an effort to empower state agencies to report data back to counties in a systematic way that can improve local planning.

Collect and Use Better Data:
Use the best information about what works to make strategies more effective.

You'll have no trouble finding strategies that call themselves "evidence-based" or "proven" to be effective. That's what leaders want – but how do you know what approaches really work and are a good fit for your community or state?

Leaders must stay up to date on effective methods for addressing youth issues. They also need to know what's working not just around the nation, but in their own backyard.

Don't worry: You don't have to spend your nights combing academic journals. Help is available to keep you abreast of the best information about effective practices, to help you understand different levels of quality assessment (such as evidence-based vs. research-based), and to guide you in conducting surveys and studies about efforts in your community or state.

Here are resources that address common questions:

How do we get started?

"Better Data: Using the Best Information About What Works" Webinar Recording: This webinar reviews theory, tools and examples about how leaders can bring the best information into their decision-making process. Broadcast on June 26, 2011, the session was led by Larry Pasti of the Forum for Youth Investment and Tom Devaney of the Forum's David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality.

What constitutes "evidence-based" practices?

Improving Effectiveness of Juvenile Justice Programs: This report clearly defines evidence-based, research-based, theory-based and pilot programs. (Page 49.) It also highlights how key characteristics of effective programming – such as the type of program, duration, quality and level of risk of participant – can be applied to local efforts that are not currently deemed evidence-based. (Page 29, section VI.)

How have leaders adopted evidence-based practices?

Leaders in communities chosen for Quality Counts– an initiative under Ready by 21 – improved the quality and reach of out-of-school time programs by promoting practices that work. Read about how in **Making Quality Count: Lessons Learned from the Ready by 21 Quality Counts Initiative.**

Where do we link research to specific outcomes?

Getting to Outcomes: 10 Steps for Achieving Results-Based Accountability offers a framework to plan, implement and evaluate effective programs that are accountable to decision makers and that achieve intended outcomes. Although developed for substance abuse prevention, these steps can be applied to other strategies. The framework provides a road map for leaders who want to continually assess program performance and collect outcome data for decision making.

The **New York State Office of Children and Family Services** created a one-stop resource on what works. This website provides links to several nationally recognized sites that have lists of evidence- or research-based programs for a wide range of outcome areas.