Bigger Goals 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 goals under “the four B’s”: Broader Partnerships, Bigger Goals, Better Data and Bolder Action. The Bigger Goals toolkit helps leadership groups establish a “big picture,” action-oriented vision for a community or state. It guides them to create a balanced set of goals and indicators; define the supports that the community or state must provide to the population that they aim to help; create a big picture, goal-oriented action plan; and define common terms and communicate core messages.

How this Connects to Collective Impact

This toolkit is designed for a backbone organization to guide members of the partnership to:
- Develop a common agenda, via shared goals and indicators, and a plan to achieve those goals.
- Communicate more effectively with each other and their constituents by reaching mutual understanding of key terms that are commonly used by the various partners, and agreeing on the core messages of their effort.

The toolkit notes that establishing a common vision that conveys compelling goals is “a critical step towards aligning efforts” among community groups, “because common definitions and shared goals challenge leaders to work together more effectively to make a difference.”

How this tool is used

This tool guides leadership groups through a process of assessing local conditions and needs, and developing strategies to address those needs. The process includes using both new and existing data, as well as input from other stakeholders and the public. The tools include dashboards to help assess community conditions and a guide to selecting community indicators, along with 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 [Bigger Goals 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.
The resources highlighted in this toolkit are available at www.readyby21.org/toolkits

Ready by 21 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.

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“We must do more. We must strengthen our system, programs and services for all children and youth from every neighborhood in every corner of the Commonwealth.”

— Massachusetts Success for Life Statewide Action Summary, 2009

Toby Keith earned his fame in country music, but he sure showed great insight into leadership when he sang, “If you don’t know where you’re goin’, you might end up somewhere else.”

When leaders band together to improve supports for young people, they hold enormous collective power – to do what? What, exactly, do they want to achieve? Now is the time to establish a common, action-oriented vision: A vision that conveys compelling goals and indicators for all children and youth; a vision that gets everyone going in the same direction.

In many communities that have implemented Ready by 21, the challenge has been how to do that in the face of competing priorities, fragmented services, unstable funding and low expectations. Leaders have found answers by adhering to these four standards under Bigger Goals:

- **Establish a balanced set of goals and indicators for all children, youth and young adults** that includes preparation and problem-reduction in all areas of development.
- **Define supports that the full community must provide** and specify high-quality standards across all systems and settings where young people spend time.
- **Create a big picture, goal-oriented action plan** that establishes action strategies, stakeholder commitments and ongoing accountability mechanisms.
- **Define common terms and communicate core messages** to improve communications among joint efforts and to the general public.

Here’s a quick self-assessment of your community’s or state’s capacity to carry this out. Your answers will help you decide which areas to tackle first.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BIGGER GOALS</th>
<th>DOING THIS WELL</th>
<th>DOING OKAY</th>
<th>DON’T HAVE BUT NEEDED</th>
<th>NOT A PRIORITY NOW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Establish a balanced set of goals and indicators for all children, youth and young adults</strong> – that reflect what we know about how they develop and learn. Do the goals span all age groups (birth through at least 21)? Do they address key outcome areas (e.g., academic, health, social, civic) and the needs of special populations? Do they focus on reducing problems and promoting youth preparation and leadership?</td>
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<td><strong>Define supports that the full community must provide</strong> – to achieve the goals. Are there supports (e.g., relationships, safe environments, challenging experiences) that are widely seen as essential? Are all systems, settings and programs asked to speak to these community goals in their plans?</td>
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<td><strong>Create a big picture, goal-oriented action plan</strong> – Do you have an action plan that establishes strategies to reach your goals? That establishes stakeholder commitments? And ongoing accountability mechanisms?</td>
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<td><strong>Define common terms and communicate core messages</strong> – Are your goals for children and youth linked to core messages that the public and key stakeholders can understand? Do your goals drive planning and decision making? Are they used for reporting progress?</td>
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To learn more about setting bigger goals, check out these resources:

“Setting Bigger Goals 101” Webinar Recording: This webinar offers an introduction to the standards within Bigger Goals and provides examples. Broadcast on March 29, 2011, the webinar was led by Elizabeth Gaines, state and local policy director, and Kiley Bednar, program manager, at the Forum for Youth Investment.

Nashville, TN: Building a Big-Picture Action Plan: See how city leaders engaged their entire community to create a shared vision for their youth and a master plan to carry out that vision. Today that vision and plan provide the framework for delivering Nashville’s youth services and supports.

Massachusetts: Crafting Clear Goals for All Massachusetts Children and Youth: See how a statewide team created a shared set of desired outcomes for youth. These outcomes form the basis of an action plan for the state, focused on translating the vision into reality.
The resources highlighted in this toolkit are available at www.readyby21.org/toolkits

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Set Bigger Goals:
Establish a balanced set of goals and indicators for all children, youth and young adults that includes preparation and problem-reduction in all areas of development.

Conceiving goals and indicators is easy. The challenge is getting community leaders to agree on goals and indicators that cover all young people of all age groups, in all aspects of their lives – from education and health to interpersonal skills and job readiness.

Taking the comprehensive approach is difficult but crucial: Improving child and youth outcomes requires attending to young people’s overall development. That means:

- Setting goals across age groups.
- Setting goals across various types of outcomes.
- Ensuring that the goals and indicators are designed to prevent problems and promote assets.
- Tracking progress, especially among those most at risk of not meeting the goals.

Here are some resources that address common questions:

How can we communicate goals?
Try dashboards – two-dimensional visuals that are simple yet powerful. Leaders who have implemented Ready by 21 have found Dashboards for Youth to be especially effective for showing a community where it stands and where it needs to go on various measures of youth readiness.

How do we determine what goals are most important to our community?
Community meetings can be exhilarating, informative – and frustrating. We’ve all been to talkfests where everyone gets to be heard but no one leaves with a focus or plan.

There’s another way to find out what leaders think should be the goals for the community. Once again, a dashboard can help: The Forum for Youth Investment’s Outcomes Dashboard Facilitator’s Packet is designed to guide leaders through a process of thinking about and prioritizing their goals for young people. Just as importantly, it enables everyone to see how their goals fit into the bigger picture of the entire community.

Help me make the case for better indicators.
You don’t just want everyone nodding at the idea that better data is good. If you are going to call for more robust indicators that reflect the big picture of child and youth development, you need to prompt conversation about

- The quality of data in your community. It’s probably not as strong as many people assume.
- How to gather data that covers the full range of child and youth outcomes.

This review of data sources for tracking child and youth well-being makes the case and guides users to the kind of data they should look for.
How do we select indicators for our community?

Start by tapping two great sources:

- Yourself – that is, the indicators that your community already collects and those that leaders want to collect.
- Existing sets of indicators, developed by national experts, that reflect a broad set of goals for children and youth.

The Ready by 21 Indicator Guide recommends top indicators and steers facilitators through the process of reviewing and selecting indicators that fit your community’s needs. The guide was developed by the Forum for Youth Investment and Child Trends, both of which are Ready by 21 Partners.
Set Bigger Goals:

Define supports that the full community must provide and specify high-quality standards across all systems and settings where young people spend time.

While it’s true that “it takes a village to raise a child,” this is also true: The world is full of villages where many young people are not doing well.

Why? Because raising ready children and youth requires a steady stream of supports from the full community to ensure that young people are not only problem-free, but also fully prepared and fully engaged. To make this happen – to change the odds for all youth – community leaders and providers must dedicate themselves to:

- Work together – differently.
- Create an insulated pipeline of supports from cradle to career – one that wraps coordinated, high-quality services and supports around the traditional education pipeline.
- Focus on the whole child.

So after a community sets its goals and indicators, it must decide who’s responsible for helping to achieve which goals. And it must set up a system of accountability to measure progress.

To do that, communities need shared performance measures across systems and settings. This is a new approach: The development of cross-cutting performance standards links what we know about child and youth development with efforts to assess and improve program quality.

How do you do that? Start with a developmentally appropriate list of performance goals that will guide planning, communications and performance accountability.

Here are some resources that address common questions:

**How do I find information about the supports that young people need?**


The National Research Council – the nation’s leading independent reviewer of research – identified eight important supports that promote effective education and positive outcomes for young people. It compiled those in a List of Features of Developmental Settings. The document also provides examples of ways that programs can be categorized, from harmful to optimal.

The Research Council’s chart can help you drive home the benefits of high-quality supports across systems and settings in your community, and the risks that arise from harmful settings.

To see what supports correlate with success in both youth and adulthood, read the *America’s Promise Every Child, Every Promise Report*. The report is built around America’s Promise Alliance’s Five Promises – Caring Adults, Safe Places, A Healthy Start, Effective Education and Opportunities to Help Others – which are developmental resources that young people need. The report presents research that comprehensively measures the presence of those important supports in the lives of today’s youth, and correlates them with success in youth and young adulthood.

Surely there must be some commonsense, positive experiences and qualities that help young people become caring, responsible and successful adults. Search Institute went looking, and came up with its compendium of *40 Developmental Assets*, which have become a staple in the field of youth work. The assets are based on extensive research by Search Institute, a Ready by 21 Partner.
What basic elements are essential for high-quality youth programs?

There are countless ways to run a good youth program, but regardless of what that program offers – arts, sports, academic enrichment – they should all have certain core elements. High Scope Educational Research Foundation set out to show the characteristics of settings that best promote child and youth development. It came up with this Program Quality Pyramid.

Communities and programs can use the pyramid to ensure that their young people have supports that go beyond basic safety and needs, to offer opportunities for interaction and engagement as well.

We’re ready to talk about the range of youth supports in our community. Now what?

Someone needs to facilitate the discussion. The objective: Get the key leaders thinking broadly about the variety of settings and supports that youth now have access to, and about how the community’s goals for young people fit into the bigger picture. This will help everyone see how well their community is meeting the many needs of its young people.

To help, here’s a dashboard tool: the Supports Dashboard Facilitator’s Packet, which will help you guide leaders through this discussion with a series of tasks focused on your community.
**Set Bigger Goals:**

*Create a big picture, goal-oriented action plan that establishes action strategies, stakeholder commitments and ongoing accountability mechanisms.*

You’ve come a long way: Leaders in your community understand each other’s language, agree on goals for young people and have defined the supports that youth need to reach those goals. Now, what does everyone actually do?

Create a formal action plan, or improve the one you have, to outline a path for improving child and youth outcomes. We talked earlier, under “Define common terms and communicate core messages,” about the value of giving people “a framework for action.” Now is the time.

A well-done action plan is more than a blueprint for workers. Leaders use these plans as calls to action, generating community excitement and rallying key players – from youth and families to business and philanthropic leaders – around the cause.

The plan tells the community that:

- Community leaders have come together around a common cause – young people.
- They have a plan based on the best thinking and evidence available.
- Stakeholders will break out of silos to work across systems and sectors.
- The outcomes you achieve (e.g., healthy births, social skills, reading competence) will depend on the supports you provide (e.g., health services, supportive relationships, employment opportunities).
- People and organizations will have tasks and will be held accountable.

**Here are resources that address common questions:**

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**What are the key elements of a good action plan?**

We’re not going to tell you what to write in your plan; that’s for your leaders to decide. But we can show you the Ready by 21 guidelines for such plans, and guide you toward making sure your plan is goal-oriented and takes a big picture approach. The Forum for Youth Investment offers this one-page guide, *What Makes an Action Plan a Ready by 21 Action Plan?*

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**How should the planning process work?**

You might want to compare your planning process to an existing one. The Forum developed a worksheet- *What Makes an Action Planning Process a Ready by 21 Action Planning Process?* – so that you can compare your process to the Ready by 21 process. See where you match up and where you might improve.

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**What are some examples of good action plans?**

Here is one from a city and one from a state:

**Nashville Child and Youth Master Plan:** Developed in 2010 with assistance from the Ready by 21 National Partnership, this citywide plan is in line with the Ready by 21 Leadership Capacity Standards.

**Youth Ready by 21: A Five-Year Action Agenda for Maryland:** Developed with technical assistance from the Forum for Youth Investment, this plan provides an overview of the state’s process, outlines goals and the strategies to achieve them, and provides an example of how the state has tracked results and indicators.
Set Bigger Goals:
Define common terms and communicate core messages to improve communications among joint efforts and to the general public.

Ambitious leaders with big plans sometimes give people TMI: Too Much Information. Hand out a list of indicators about child and youth outcomes, or a list of goals to develop community supports for youth, and you risk creating communications overload. Everyone stalls because they’re overwhelmed and don’t know where to focus.

But see what happens when you give them a story or a framework for action. People see an outline for success and can envision their roles. You’ve exchanged your “to do” list for a powerful tool that can unite community efforts and drive community decisions.

To get there, you need to:

- Create a communications framework for both your internal plans and your public reports. This framework should help you clearly show how your outcome and performance goals link to the program and policy changes that need to be enacted.
- Adopt simple, consistent language to communicate with the public about the work that leaders are doing to improve outcomes for children and youth.

Here are some resources that address common questions:

**How do I get our organizations and leaders to use a common language?**

You’ll have a hard time bringing together stakeholders around common goals when everyone’s language is specific to their work. One person’s “prevention” is another person’s “engagement” and someone else’s “afterschool.” Then there’s “early childhood,” “pre-K,” “adolescence,” “young adulthood,” …

Try this overview as a tool for working toward common language. It should help everyone understand each other’s language and move toward some common terms. The tool provides sample language to spark conversations about what words and phrases reflect the work that everyone does, and where they can find common ground. You won’t necessarily get everyone using the same words all the time, but you’ll get them fluent in each other’s terms.

**Everyone is using different frameworks for their work with youth. How do we bring them together?**

Anyone looking for frameworks that outline the factors that prepare youth for healthy, productive futures will have no trouble finding several produced by esteemed national organizations: America’s Promise Alliance’s Five Promises, the National Research Council’s Features of Positive Developmental Settings, Search Institute’s Developmental Assets and the Forum for Youth Investment’s Outcome Areas. This abundance sometimes presents a dilemma: Various organizations in a community using different frameworks (these or their own), which impedes communications and creates silos of different approaches.

Use this parallel frameworks comparison chart: It demonstrates, on one page, how popular frameworks in the youth development field actually align.

With the chart, you can:

- Show the stakeholders in your community that the same principles undergird each of these frameworks and that there is lots of common ground among them.
- Discuss such issues as: Can we find a common language that reflects the broad set of readiness factors that we are all working toward? Can we make our efforts in each of these frameworks add up?
Here are three places that used frameworks and stories to communicate core messages:

Columbus, Ind.: This Council for Youth Development brochure is an example of how one community used Ready by 21 language to define common terms and communicate its vision to the public.

New Mexico: To see how to communicate about outcomes, see this Children’s Cabinet Report Card and Budget Report. Especially helpful are the Report Card sections about youth who are Healthy (p.11), Educated (p. 16), Safe (p.24), Supported (p.29) and Involved (p.33).

Massachusetts: The Success for Life Statewide Action Plan shows how one state linked its outcomes and indicators to a broader call for collaborative action.