

## Ready = Ready = Ready

By Karen Pittman, July 2006

The month of May produced yet another study showing that the skills young people need to be ready for life beyond high school may be the same whether they are headed to college or the work force.

ACT's new report, "Ready for college and Ready for Work: Same or Different?", finds that the reading and math skills needed to be ready for college-level courses without remediation are the same as those needed to succeed in work force training programs designed to teach job-specific skills. The conclusion: "We should be educating all high school students according to a common academic expectation, one that prepares them for both postsecondary education and the workforce. Only then ... will they be ready for life after high school."

This conclusion echoes that offered by such other reform-focused organizations as Achieve and the national High Schools That Work Initiative. It confirms the business community's entrance into the dialogue about what high schools should be doing to prepare young people for work.

Most importantly, it again opens the door for discussions about youth development. The youth development community, including the Forum for Youth Investment, has long argued that Ready for College = Ready for Work = Ready for Life. This is not news to us. It is the only logical conclusion to be drawn from the theory and the practice of youth development that has been summed up by the National Research Council (Community Programs to Promote Youth Development), Youth Development Strategies (Finding Out What Matters) and the Search Institute, among others.

The argument goes like this: 1) Young people need a core set of set of competencies or assets that include, but are not limited to, academic competence; 2) The more assets they have, the more likely they are to do well — in college, work and life — and the less likely they are to follow paths that put them in danger of doing really poorly; and 3) The more supports that young people have throughout their developmental years, the more likely they are to develop a rich base of assets. That's because early and sustained investments of time and resources matter.

It is terrific that education and business groups are documenting the overlap in the skills base that youth need to be ready for college and work. Rigorous studies, like the one by

ACT, strengthen the case for government, education and business leaders to come to the table to discuss school reform as a means toward the broader goal of “youth readiness.” There are two strong indications that the discussions, which may start with high school reform, will not end there.

First, business has embraced a definition of competence that goes beyond academic skills and that has brought various groups to that school reform table. Three years ago, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills kicked off an aggressive effort to create an agenda for school that acknowledged both the need for 20th century skills (reading, math) and content (e.g., history), and argued for an expanded list that speaks to broader skills (such as communications and initiative) and content (such as global awareness and financial literacy).

Recently, the partnership joined forces with Corporate Voices for Working Families, The Conference Board and the Society for Human Resource Management to conduct a comprehensive, cross-industry survey on the work readiness of “first job holders” that is based on this broad definition of universal skills. Corporate Voices has just created a Youth Transitions Work Group to create business-to-policy, business-to-community and business-to-business platforms about what it takes to ensure that teens and young adults complete the transition to adult roles.

Second, business is poised to embrace a broader definition of preparatory institutions that goes beyond schools. The “readiness” cat is out of the bag. As many as one-third of high school students don’t graduate on time and one-third of seniors don’t graduate ready for college or work. This means that action-oriented community leaders who want immediate solutions are starting to look beyond schools.

It is essential that youth development leaders secure seats at this table. We understand “ready.” We understand how being “ready for life” — with health, social, cultural and civic competencies — intertwines and often undergirds the readiness goals that get the headlines. We understand the roles that non-educational institutions — i.e., those that focus on development, employment, prevention and engagement — can play in developing readiness across the board and in accelerating the progress of those deemed the most unready. Most importantly, we understand and appreciate young people’s desire to be ready for all that comes next.

These discussions are forming in board rooms near you. Find them. Join them. Inform them. And bring young people with you. After all, this is about their lives.

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Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment