WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Celebrating its 10th anniversary, the Forum for Youth Investment today announced the national launch of the Ready by 21™ Challenge, aimed at helping state and local leaders change the odds for youth by changing the way they do business. Challenge co-chairs, former Congressman Dick Gephardt and former Governor Tom Ridge, applauded the initiative and pledged their commitment to engage private and corporate donors in building the Ready by 21 Challenge Fund. The launch event also honored Nashville youth activist, Eric Polk, 23, recipient of the first Ready by 21 Change Maker award.

The ultimate goal of the Ready by 21 Challenge is to ensure that all young people have the supports and opportunities they need to be Ready by 21 – ready for college, work and life. The five year goal is to have a critical mass of leaders in every state across the country who have learned to focus and prioritize differently so that they can set bigger goals, use bolder strategies, be better partners, and work together to ensure that their individual efforts add up rather than simply add on to current programs.

[View a video of AASA Executive Director Paul D. Houston at the national launch of the Ready by 21 Challenge.]

The Forum announced the launch of five interconnected strategies to meet these goals:

**Products.** The Forum unveiled its new Web site, announced a Ready by 21 Webinar series and announced that the Ready by 21 tools are being adapted for on-line use. By 2009, this on-line suite of affordable, customizable tools will include strategic planning and facilitation guides, data analysis tools, and resources and examples for moving on-the-ground work.

**Partners.** The Forum announced six major national partners committed to tackling the Ready by 21 Challenge, and their plans to enlist up to 20 national partners by 2009.

**Places.** The Forum announced recent matching grants to seven communities and five states that are currently taking on the Ready by 21 Challenge and announced plans to ensure that by 2011, 200 states and localities with leadership teams are taking on the challenge.

**People.** The Forum and its partners announced a set of leadership affinity groups and training opportunities including a series of Ready by 21 Institutes, the annual Children’s Cabinets and Councils Network Roundtable in July 2008, and the creation of the Youth Councils Learning Group. They announced their plans to ensure that by 2012, 2,000 leaders will be committed to moving the Ready by 21 Challenge within their own work.
Challenge Fund. The Forum announced the creation of a $21 million Ready by 21 Challenge Fund by 2013, built by public, private and corporate funders to provide support to people, places and partners ready to manage, make and measure change.

Karen Pittman and Merita Irby, co-founders of the Forum, announced the specifics of the Challenge at a press conference at the Ronald Reagan Building. They were joined by their signature partner, the United Way of America, and the top executives from the Forum’s national partner organizations: the American Association of School Administrators, America’s Promise Alliance, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the National Collaboration for Youth, and the National Conference of State Legislatures. Each organization pledged to encourage its members to take on the Challenge by working together in their states and communities. Other national organizations, corporations, government agencies and funders present at the launch were invited to join the movement.

“Trying isn’t good enough anymore,” said Governor Ridge. “If this country is going to be competitive in the 21st century, we have to invest in what works. The Ready by 21 Challenge helps state and local leaders put their own work in the context of the big picture of everything needed to change the overall array of community supports. The goal is that by age 21, young people are not just a bunch of ‘nots’ – not pregnant, not dropouts, not gang members – but are actually ready for college, work and life. The Ready by 21 tools and partnerships give leaders everything they need to take on the Challenge.”

“This Challenge is long overdue,” said Congressman Gephardt. “Incremental approaches don’t work. Improving young lives means changing old strategies. Increasing funding for one program while decreasing funding for another generates political wins but it fails children and youth. We need to challenge our leaders – public and private – to be accountable for the lives they touch directly or indirectly. These goals are ambitious, but doable, because of the groundwork that has already been laid.”

Ready by 21 Challenge grants were made in late January to seven communities and five states committed to improving the quality and reach of community learning opportunities for children and youth. Support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies is allowing each of these Ready by 21 Quality Counts sites to receive training and technical assistance and up to $100,000 each over two years in matching grants.

“The Ready by 21 Framework and the United Way Community Impact Model fit hand in glove”, said Brian Gallagher, president and CEO of United Way of America. “Ensuring that young people are ready for college, work and life are goals we must all support. Ready by 21 takes the very important step of inspiring our communities to think differently about solutions and to set bold goals.”

United Ways are already actively involved in two-thirds of the Ready by 21 Challenge sites and present in all. The sites provide a natural learning lab for United Way and the other National Partners to work together and to engage their members and affiliates. JC Penney is supporting United Way in its growing partnership with the Forum, including providing support to two additional Challenge sites.

“There is an urgent need to prepare our next generation of workers for the competitive challenges of the 21st century, and we cannot afford to approach this issue as business as usual,” said Donna Klein, president and founder of Corporate Voices for Working Families. “We support the collaborative effort embraced by the Ready for 21 Challenge. Our research indicates there are a high percentage of graduates that are not employable. Both the business and nonprofit communities need to change their behavior, align their goals and resources, and work together.”

Karen Pittman emphasized the need for corporate involvement in the work, noting that support from Philip Morris USA Youth Smoking Prevention has been key in moving the Ready by 21 work forward on the national level. “We know there are champions in all sectors and roles who are passionate in their support of children and youth and frustrated with our collective lack of progress,”
she said. “Our goal is to give them the frames and tools they need to bring precision to their passion. By working with organizations like the United Way and our other national partners, we are confident that we can reach our goals.”

ABOUT THE FORUM FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

The Forum for Youth Investment is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are Ready by 21™: ready for college, work and life. This goal requires that young people have the supports, opportunities and services needed in the first two decades of life so that they are on track and ready to learn, work, thrive, connect and contribute. The Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, technical assistance, training, network support and partnership opportunities needed to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement.

UNITED WAY OF AMERICA

United Way is a national network of nearly 1,300 local organizations that advance the common good, creating opportunities for a better life for all by focusing on the three key building blocks of education, income and health. United Way of America is the national organization dedicated to leading the United Way movement to create long lasting community change by addressing the underlying causes of the most significant issues. Common focus areas for local United Ways include helping children and youth achieve their potential, promoting financial stability and independence, and improving people’s health.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States. AASA members range from chief executive officers, superintendents and senior level school administrators to cabinet members, professors and aspiring school system leaders.

AMERICA’S PROMISE ALLIANCE

The America’s Promise Alliance is the nation’s largest multi-sector collaborative dedicated to the well-being of children and youth. With over 150 members, the Alliance leads the way in forging multi-sector partnerships, bringing together businesses, youth-serving organizations, elected officials, educators, faith groups, funders, and individuals of all ages.

CORPORATE VOICES FOR WORKING FAMILIES

Corporate Voices for Working Families (CVWF) is the leading national business membership organization representing the private sector voice in the dialogue on public policy issues related to working families. CVWF is a non-profit and nonpartisan organization that facilitates research and provides public and private policy solutions in three key areas: workforce readiness, including early childhood education, after school care and youth development, family economic stability, and flexibility in the workplace, including issues of the mature workforce.

NATIONAL COLLABORATION FOR YOUTH

The National Collaboration for Youth (NCY) is a coalition of more than forty of the nation’s leading youth-serving/youth development agencies. Its members collectively reach in excess of 40 million children and youth annually. NCY is a part of the National Human Services Assembly (NHSA), which is the nonprofit corporate entity for both organizations. NHSA is an association over 70 of the national’s leading national non-profits in the fields of health, human and community development and human services that are committed to helping individuals, families and communities thrive.
NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF STATE LEGISLATURES

NCSL is the leading bi-partisan organization supporting legislators and staff of the nation’s 50 states, its commonwealth and territories. NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. For more information about the Ready by 21™ Challenge, contact Thaddeus Ferber, Program Director at the Forum for Youth Investment at 202-207-3333 or thaddeus@forumfyi.org.