

Karen ([00:12](#)):

As we await the release of season two of the Changing the Odds Remix podcast, I'm excited to be able to share two bonus episodes over the next two weeks. These episodes add broader context to our conversations about how we can change the odds for children and youth across learning and development ecosystems. While our podcast series focuses mostly on youth and young adults, the work to engage communities effectively begins much earlier.

In this episode, I'm joined by Ralph Smith, managing director of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Ralph and I have known each other for at least four decades. We are mutually in awe of our persistence at trying to find ways to change the odds for young people in this country, especially those in the most dire and difficult circumstances. Ralph and I have recently reengaged in conversation as the campaign has embarked on a Learning Happens Everywhere initiative. In our conversation, we'll discuss not only the ways parents and community have deeply engaged as partners in early literacy, we'll explore the notion of authentic demand for the type of change we hope to see that engages adults everywhere in support of learning.

You've made an incredible contribution over the years to helping to change the odds for children and youth, but in this last version, you have zoomed in on early childhood and this idea of reading readiness and getting young people really reading on grade level, and the importance of early literacy, so give us a few sentences about the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, why you started it, and really how it's grown up as this really sort of grassroots local movement, and then we'll go on to understand why now you're pushing ahead to talk about a Learning Happens Everywhere initiative. So, why this campaign?

Ralph Smith ([01:55](#)):

I had come to the conclusion that traditional philanthropy, as I am proud to have practiced it at the Casey Foundation, had reached the end of the line in terms of what it was doing, and I could not see any value to be gained from yet another demonstration project, that we had enough information, we had enough evidence to know some things that we should stop doing, and to try to actually take the risk and make a difference. And so in developing a plan for going forward, I thought that we should invest in a number of campaigns, and the one that interested me most was Half in Ten, the campaign to actually take on what is the moral issue of our time, and that is generational poverty.

When I realized if you really care about generational poverty that we had to build a coalition of folks, for most of whom poverty was not their number one issue, but we had to build a coalition of people who would take on poverty simply because it was getting in the way of something they wanted to do. And what seemed to me one of the best ways to do that was to look at people who really cared about young children, who had a commitment to young children doing better, and especially those folks who were concerned about early school success, and I was convinced that they were the low-hanging fruit because we're not going to achieve early school success unless we actually took on the drivers of poverty, because poverty is the major super-spreader of the challenges our young children face, and if you're going to take on poverty and you're going to take on early school success, you've got to find a meaningful metric, one that is not only meaningful, but one that is easy to communicate, and around which you can get people to rally.

And there's a deep consensus that children ought to learn to read, and beneath that consensus is an understanding that we've got to teach children to read. And the evidence that we have of the connection between reading and later school success and high school graduation and the path out of poverty not only was strong, but it met the standard of common sense. And so we could build a coalition

around third grade reading, and as people gravitated to saying that that was important to do, we would end up having them join the army that it will take to disrupt generational poverty.

Karen ([05:10](#)):

I really appreciate your taking the time to tell that full story. I knew it, but it's good to have it refreshed and put out for our listeners. The other thing about the strategy is that specific word, "Campaign." There are many people who have tackled anything, grade-level reading, et cetera, by coming in and saying, "We have to get the system to do this better." You didn't do that, you didn't focus your energy on, "We have to get schools to teach reading better." The army that you're talking about mobilizing is an army of parents and community adults who actually see kids and can contribute to this. Ralph, I think you use the term "Authentic demand" to mean community demand that doesn't disappear when the foundation dollars are gone. Can you tell us a bit more about this?

Ralph Smith ([05:58](#)):

So this notion for us is really at the core of the campaign, not to focus on supply, but to focus on demand, not to focus on the big policymakers, but really to ask folks in the community to work with us and walk with us toward a goal that they could understand, that they could embrace, and that they could own. And that's why one of the things about the campaign about which I'm most proud is we had not recruited any communities since 2014, not because we made a choice, because we didn't have the capacity to recruit.

The campaign has more than doubled the number of communities since then, because people are looking and hearing from what's happening next door, in the community next door, in the county next door, and they're joining the campaign. They're saying "We want to join. We want to join," because they're seeing something happening. That has moved us to try to keep the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading as a very close to the ground effort, with a number of initiatives that are not competing with each other, that are not competed for a few pilot programs, but have the oxygen and the local momentum to continue to struggle and to strive for something that has meaning to them and to their communities.

Karen ([07:51](#)):

This idea of authentic demand, linked to a clear vision of what success could look like, not just for all young people, but as you said, for black children, was linked to an idea of ownership, and so I want to put a word in there, which is when we think about demand, we're demanding of someone. Who was the target? How did we get from demand to ownership? How did you get this to not just be, "We are demanding this of our schools," so we're in advocacy mode, but "We're demanding this of ourselves and our community," so we're in innovation and building mode?

Ralph Smith ([08:28](#)):

I think that's a good question. Let me just put it in a context that demand is not just about advocacy, it's really this... Kind of more of the economic supply and demand, do we have a market for what we're selling? So much of advocacy and so much of philanthropy is about affecting the supply without ensuring that it is what the end user wants, needs, understands, could use. And so this notion of ownership cannot be separated from sense of efficacy, and cannot be separated from working on agency, that we need to have a narrative, a different narrative, and to spend the time creating a different narrative around low-income parents.

We have not taken the time to do what we say we should do, and that's start where parents are and ask, what is it that we could do to ensure that parents have bold goals for their own children, not that they adopt our goals, but they have bold goals for their own children? And which means that our role could be ensuring that parents have the exposure and the range of experiences that will allow them to develop and embrace bold goals. That's different from substituting our goals for theirs. And we don't take the step and say, "What is it that we could do to help?" We know where these kids belong and we're pushing forward and not investing the time, not having the patience to have their parents own those goals. We're out here working real hard, being real conscientious, caring a lot, but caring a lot for and about other people's kids, because we don't have enough confidence or patience that they really, given the opportunity, will do better by their kids than we do.

But at the root of much of what we do wrong is that we give lip service to parents, insufficient attention to demand, we step over agency, we don't allow opportunities for efficacy, and so we leave parents with judgment and blame, and a narrative which disempowers them, and then we pretend somehow we're going to be able to do this. If we don't succeed, which we won't, then we can come back and blame the parents all over again. And how we turn that upside-down really is the work of the campaign to say, we've got to have the patience, the time, the inclination, the motivation, the will and the skill to enable parents to envision bold goals for their kids, to support them in achieving those goals, and to be with them when they celebrate progress and success.

Karen ([11:56](#)):

I want you to just give us a very concrete example of how you have been engaging and supporting parents and broad members of the community, and your campaign is incredible, because you've got the folks who are the head of the coin-operated laundromats, you've got barber shops, you've got adults in the community who are not educators per se being engaged and supporting parents in this idea that they really can be pivotal players in their young people's education success, starting with this key goal of making sure that they are capable and engaged readers. How did you get there, and why is that so important?

Ralph Smith ([12:40](#)):

What we know about brain development today tells us that school arrives with too little, too late. We now know enough to reject the notion that we ought to leave numeracy and literacy to school, that we have got to figure out, especially for young kids, how we essentially start that teaching and learning function from the time they're born, and even before, which means that we have got to figure out how to move the resources to enable parents, families, and other adults in the community to be actively engaged in the lives of children, to acquire the skills, and to have the opportunity and to get the supports they need to succeed in that, which takes away from school this omnipotence around teaching and learning, and shares it, and say "This is a shared responsibility." And what we have all over the country, in virtually every community, is an intuitive understanding on the part of a lot of us that adults who are not teachers, and who may not be formally mentors, tutors, or coaches, have a responsibility in this teaching and learning enterprise for our kids.

And so these programs, which are laundromats and barber shops, and museums and libraries, and mom and pop stores, represent this sort of intuitive understanding that there's more to do, that this is a shared responsibility, and what we're trying to do by shining a light on those efforts, by... Is to create a series of high-five moments to affirm this intuition, and to wonder with these folks whether we can build collectively the capacity to realize the aspiration that is not always said out loud.

Karen ([15:11](#)):

So the campaign has decided to be a catalyst for an even broader effort, Learning Happens Everywhere. We'll learn more about this later, but tell us a little bit about how this connects?

Ralph Smith ([15:21](#)):

So, Learning Happens Everywhere affirms both the intuition, the aspiration, and the work that's going on, and invite the folks who are already doing the work to aspire to do it even better, and to see it as legitimate work, not work that is in conflict with schools, or not work that is rebelling against school, but work that acknowledges that when it comes to teaching and learning, that is one of the many important roles of schools, it is a role which is too important to be ascribed solely to school. It is work in which we all must share, and we must find ways in our lives to be part of that, and it means rethinking the role of adults, all adults in the lives of children. And that is, for us, one of the most exciting and potentially transformational outcomes from the pandemic.

Karen ([16:34](#)):

I want to recap what you said, and then ask you a question. This deeply-held thinking that learning happens only in schools, and caring happens only in families and communities, is something that you want to disrupt, and that in fact the pandemic demonstrated for us the falsity of that sort of bifurcated idea that we send kids into this thing to learn, and then the community and the families just do care. You've really sort of pushed both of those together in a very important way.

Having done that, I want to ask you if you think, with the Learning Happens Everywhere campaign, that we can take that energy and that commitment, and not only use it to reinforce the importance of all adults and all settings, and all of these diverse learning approaches that are happening, in informal learning in libraries, museums, that we can not only just do that for young children, but we can push that campaign all the way up to make sure that they are college and career-ready? Is there something special about the fact that we did it with young children that's going to make it more difficult to keep it going, or do we, as you start this campaign, do we have an opportunity to push this all the way through the developmental phases?

Ralph Smith ([17:56](#)):

My tentative answer is yes, I think so, but I don't know for sure. I think we can start. I think we feel that about very young kids, but when we get to adolescents, [inaudible 00:18:12]... Adolescents [inaudible 00:18:14] angles and attitudes, we kind of lose the exuberance, and we've got to figure out how we hold onto it through adolescence. And I think we need to see the folks who are in roles, who are mentors and coaches and tutors, and most of all, the folks who are educators, whether for young kids or in the K-12, where they see their role as not only teaching and learning for the kid, but they see their role as being in partnership with the parents, and that re-casting and redefinition of the role, and accepting and embracing this revised and refreshed role, I think will be important to the future.

They have chosen a profession which we are now defining and redefining, not as a one-on-one connection with a kid, but really... Hopefully you can do as any adult, but now a one-on-one connection with the kid and those adults that come attached to that kid. And I suspect that there are a lot of people who are in the formal roles as educators, tutors, mentors, and coaches for whom that will come as a surprise, and not a fully pleasant one, and may only be partially embraced. And if I'm correct on that, then the expansion, the upward extension of what we're seeing glimmers of in the early years and early grades may still prove as much of a challenge as it is today.

Karen ([20:14](#)):

Well, Ralph, you have challenged me to think about this. I'm going to remain optimistic that we can slowly move the success that you've had in generating this authentic demand through the age group. We won't jump immediately to teenagers, but the fact that you didn't stop at the school doors in kindergarten, but you took it through third grade, means very intentionally that you're already modeling the fact that this broader set of adults has a shared responsibility, even when young people are enrolled in school.

And as we build that muscle, and as we build that confidence that they really do have this responsibility, primarily because they have the relationships and they have more relevance than a lot of the folks who are in the schools sometimes, because they have those relationships and those opportunities to connect with the young people and their families in more authentic ways, I think we can build on that idea that they're not just teachers in young people's lives, but there are coaches, there are librarians, there are mentors, there are neighbors. There are people who are in their lives who have experiences and connections with them in multiple contexts.

That if we can broaden the definition of teaching and learning to be about these broader life skills and goals, and not just about academic content, from which a lot of people shy away and go, "Well, I'm not trained to do that," I think we can slowly do it. So I really look forward to continuing to partner with you as you develop this Learning Happens Everywhere campaign, and help you move it up the age range, and really appreciate the time that you've taken to spend with us today.

Ralph Smith ([21:58](#)):

Well, Karen, I am so grateful to you for the opportunity, and look forward to having a chance to continue the conversation. And with you leading this overall effort, I have increased confidence that we're in good hands, and that your optimism will fuel something quite, quite wonderful.

Karen ([22:25](#)):

Ralph and I have each taken different paths to our focus on changing the odds, but what undergirds all of our work is the importance of people, places, and possibilities in ensuring positive outcomes for young people across all developmental phases. Next week, we'll be joined in another bonus episode by our Changing the Odds Remix executive producer, Katherine Plog-Martinez. We'll explore how authentic demand and community engagement translate for older youth, and we'll talk more about what's coming in season two.

Speaker 3 ([22:56](#)):

Visit [changingtheoddsremix.com](http://changingtheoddsremix.com) to learn more about the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and hear more from Ralph Smith.