Bringing Learner-Centered Ecosystems to Life:
10 Insights

In 2024, we announced our inaugural Learner-Centered Ecosystem Lab, an effort to support and study twelve diverse sites across the country—from the streets of Brooklyn to the mountains of Ojai—that are demonstrating or piloting ecosystemic approaches.

In our collaborations and site visits, together we are facing the challenges and opportunities of transforming public education. Although there is more work to do, we've begun to observe deeper insights, aligned with our Ecosystem Readiness Framework, about what's needed to bring learner-centered ecosystems to life.

education reimagined
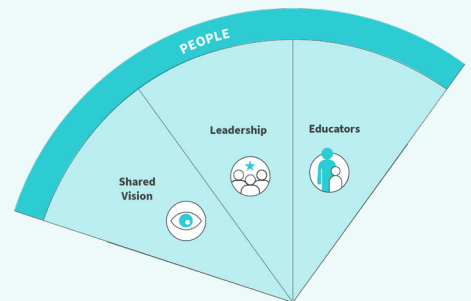
Learner-Centered Ecosystem Lab Partners

These ten conditions have emerged.

1. Vision | Must be Shared: In a fully realized learner-centered ecosystem, the entire community would have a common understanding of the purpose of public education—and the role different organizations can play in fulfilling that purpose. This is what you'll find in Newport, Rhode Island, where community makerspace FabNewport has spent the past ten years cultivating a collective commitment across the entire city.
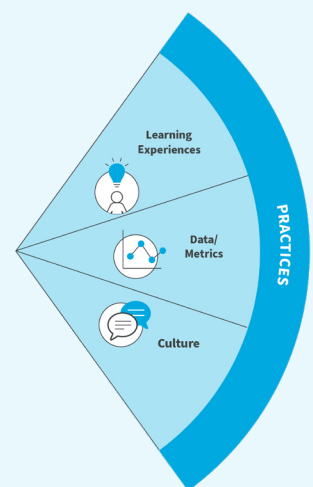
2. Leadership | Must be Distributed: Sustained and sustaining distributed leadership structures with strong relationships and interconnectedness form the basis of any healthy ecosystem. That's what's happening at Rock Tree Sky, a self-directed learning community in Ojai, California, that's extending its work throughout the city by forming a community steering committee and cultivating strong civic partnerships. Together they are launching the Ojai Learning Ecosystem.

3. Educators | Must be Mentors: As the Age of AI has transformed our relationship to information, educators have an opportunity to prioritize mentorship more than content delivery. This is what they've done in the Norris School District, a small district in rural Wisconsin that has transformed the functions and roles of its educators. In addition to conventional classroom teachers, they have "navigators" who are responsible for building cultures of belonging and helping learners explore their passions. They have "externship mentors," community members who have agreed to host one or more young learners to create experiential opportunities, support career pathway exploration, and foster the development of healthy adolescent identities.

4. Learning Experiences | Must be Meaning-Full: We've all known for some time now that a great learning experience is challenging, engaging, relevant, supportive, and experiential. Within a learner-centered ecosystem, this insight shapes every aspect of a young person's experiences. With the help of Spark NC, for example, seventeen school districts across the state have come together to establish "SparkLabs"—physical hubs that expose learners to seven different high-tech fields, and offer stackable mini-courses that can be combined for high school credit.

5. Metrics | Must be Holistic: All successful organizations must "measure what matters" so they can continually learn, grow, and evolve. A vital prerequisite for any learner-centered ecosystem is to identify and track a set of holistic outcomes. This is the approach of the NACA Inspired Schools Network (NISN), an organization that works with Indigenous communities to establish schools in New Mexico and throughout the country that will create strong leaders who are academically prepared,
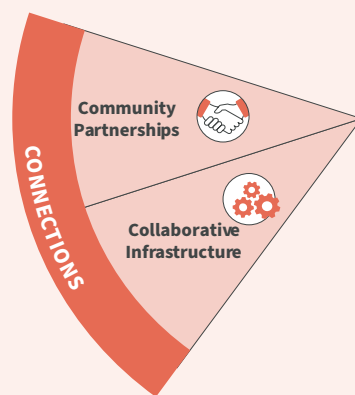
secure in their identities, healthy, and ultimately transforming their communities. To that end, NACA has implemented the Mission-driven Story Cycle (MDSC), a framework that ensures learning and decision-making remain aligned with a community's deeper mission and values.

6. Culture | Must be Inclusive: Reimagining how culture is created, developed, and sustained within an ecosystemic framework has been a primary goal of many of the leaders in the Ecosystem Lab. At The Lab School of Memphis, they're helping to build it via an explicitly stated understanding of how community partners can contribute to the Culture of the School in ways that match the values their community holds most dear. And at South Valley High in Ukiah, California, learners are leading Participatory Action Research (PAR) projects to examine the biggest barriers to community-wide wellness.

7. Community Partnerships | Must be Cultivated: Schools and districts can't do this alone. As we make clear in our 2023 report, "transitioning to a learning ecosystem is not just about improving outcomes for individual students, it is about strengthening the social fabric and advancing the civic renewal of communities by integrating young people as changemakers through an infrastructure that cultivates and nurtures partnerships." The emerging vision of Runway Green in Brooklyn stands as a remarkable example of this principle in action. Designed to occupy seven acres of a 1,300 acre National Park Service reserve, the staff at Runway are working to coalesce the myriad public-private partnerships—from SolarOne and the Billion Oyster Project to the Campaign Against Hunger and NYC Outward Bound—that are required to see an idea this big all the way through to reality.
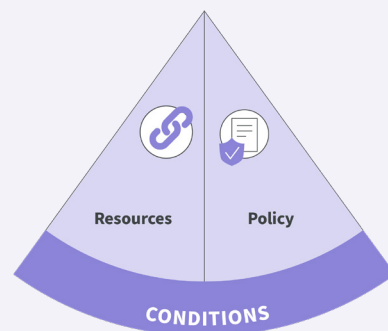
CONNECTIONS

Community Partnerships

Collaborative Infrastructure

8. Collaborative Infrastructure | Must be Created: It's vital that learner-centered ecosystems adopt learning management systems and collaboration platforms that can support community-connected learning at scale, and establish flexible systems for scheduling, transportation, and assessment. That's what's happening in Dallas, where Big Thought—a national leader in arts education, out-of-school programming, social emotional learning, youth justice, and learning systems— has revolutionized how young people navigate their learning journeys by combining digital badges with a Youth Journey Mapping tool.

9. Resources | Must be Repurposed: Learner-centered ecosystems have the potential to solve some of our biggest civic challenges when it comes to the optimal allocation of resources and assets. A good example of this is Liberty Public Schools (LPS), a historic public school district in Kansas City that is developing career-focused learning hubs across the community—and tapping into underutilized, district-owned land to create an environmental science-focused learning hub that will serve as a model for additional hubs and career pathways. Similarly, in Indianapolis, the Purdue Polytechnic (PPHS) network of high schools is offering the city's young people a range of "home-base" options—from large learning communities to microschools of just twenty students—from which they can explore different possible career pathways.

10. Policies | Must be Enabling: There is the question of policy—and the riddle of which sorts can best support the growth of learner-centered ecosystems. But one promising example comes from Ohio's capital city, where an evolving partnership, led by the PAST Foundation, between schools, businesses, policymakers, and civic allies has launched the Columbus EcosySTEM to demonstrate what a completely different approach to education would look like—and require. A big reason for that effort's early success is the policy landscape in Ohio, where a concerted effort to align K-12 education and workforce has opened the door to encouraging cross-sector collaboration and learner-centered approaches and created broader conditions to allow for more learner-centered approaches, programs, and partnerships to emerge.

Ten conditions. Ten priorities. And ten markers of a more modern, equitable system—a *learner-centered ecosystem*—that works for all young people, and protects the vital benefits of public education for generations to come.

The world's changing faster than ever before. It's time for education to catch up.

For more information about our work and upcoming events visit **www.education-reimagined.org.**