

NAVIGATING POLICIES
AND CONDITIONS

Supporting Youth with Learning Differences in Learner-Centered Environments

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“We believe the best thing we can do is help students understand themselves, understand their needs, and **advocate** for those needs.”

Learner-centered site leader

Introduction

Among the 7.5 million students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 32% have diagnosed learning disabilities, affecting approximately 2.4 million K-12 students nationwide (NCES, 2024). When we include youth with learning differences (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, and executive function challenges) who do not receive services or meet diagnostic criteria, this number grows significantly. For these young people, federal IDEA funding and protections are critical for ensuring equitable access and support. However, these statistics mask a deeper problem: conventional one-size-fits-all educational systems leave many young people with differences, whether or not they have specific diagnoses, unserved or underserved. In many school settings, supports often appear as “add-ons” to existing systems rather than as fundamental redesigns of education to meet the diverse learning needs of youth. What these young people really need are education systems that are fundamentally inclusive and designed to cultivate every young person’s potential.

Learner-centered education offers a promising path forward by using a strengths-based lens that focuses on the abilities and potential of learners and communities rather than deficits. This approach emphasizes learners’ holistic development through unique learning journeys within supportive communities. Despite its promise, learner-centered education remains on the margins of mainstream practice. Moreover, limited research exists on what makes it effective for youth with learning differences or on the specific practices, structures, and policy conditions needed for scalable impact. Without sufficient evidence to guide decision-making, education stakeholders lack the insight required for system-wide transformation.

This brief investigates the effect of policies and conditions on learner-centered environments that serve youth with learning differences, identifying key themes that could enable more inclusive, learner-centered education systems. This was informed by a broader research study examining how learner-centered environments support youth with learning differences. The study was conducted across three learner-centered sites, where more than 45% of learners have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or Section 504 plans (504s). These three sites were selected based on their innovative learner-centered model designs and practices, geographic diversity, and significant enrollment of youth with learning differences.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of Education Reimagined’s Learning Differences Research Series, conducted with funding provided in part by Oak Foundation. While this brief has a policy focus, more details on the research context and methodology can be found in our Research Study Overview. For the complete series (available in 2026), visit [Learning Differences Research Series](#).

Case Study Overview

- Study Design:** Collaborative multi-case study
- Duration:** 8 months (2024–25 school year)
- Research Team:** 16 education leaders, practitioners, advocates, and researchers
- Data Collection:** Site visits, interviews, focus groups, observations, surveys, and documents
- Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis

Overview of Participating Sites: 2024–2025 Academic Year

Learning Environment	Location	Grades	Enrollment	Learning Supports
Avalon School Public charter school	St. Paul, MN (Urban)	6–12	275 learners	50% IEPs, 10% 504s
LaFayette Big Picture School Public school within district high school and part of the Big Picture Learning network	LaFayette, NY (Suburban/Rural)	9–12	50 learners	29% IEPs, 18% 504s
Norris School District Public school district	Mukwonago, WI (Rural)	K–12	63 learners	76% IEPs, 1% 504s

Site Profiles

Each of the three participating sites operate within distinct policy contexts that shape their ability to implement learner-centered practices. Our analysis revealed examples where policies and conditions have enabled a learner-centered approach to serving youth with learning differences, as well as examples where they have been inhibitive. The following domains emerged from which to examine these examples:

- **Governance structures** are oriented to create higher levels of autonomy, authority, and flexibility than are usually present in conventional structures.
- **Staffing structures** enable flexibility and empowerment, expanding how adults can be responsive to and support learners' individual needs.
- **Funding and resources** are utilized from a strengths-based approach to ensure learners' needs are being met.
- **State accountability and assessment measures** are met as required, while managing and mitigating the time-consuming compliance work and standardized testing preparation that can disrupt core learning approaches and supports.
- **Infrastructure** is leveraged where possible to increase the opportunities, support, and access for youth with learning differences.

Across these domains, we found both enabling and inhibiting factors at each site. This section highlights these by exploring how key policy opportunities and barriers affect the three learning environments in their work with youth who have learning differences.

Avalon School

Turning passions into projects and individual voices into a learning community powered by learners and educators

Avalon is a public charter school that is project-based and has a teacher-majority board, implements learner-governed policies through its Congress, while also serving many learners with intersecting identities and learning needs. Avalon leverages innovative staffing policies that employ credentialed paraprofessionals (“navigators”) and trauma-informed educators to naturally embed supports typically included in an IEP or 504 plan. The school operates under a philosophy of creative compliance, prioritizing learners’ needs while adapting formal plans and navigating federal regulations to serve rather than constrain learners.



Category

Policies and Conditions

Site Implications

Governance Structure

Independent district
status as a charter school

- Charter status provides increased autonomy and flexibility, enabling innovation.
- The increase in anti-charter sentiment in Minnesota creates ongoing political vulnerability and funding uncertainty.

Teacher-majority school
board and student
Congress

- The educator's voice, embedded through the teacher-majority school board, influences curriculum, budget, and hiring decisions.
- Learner voices embedded through the student Congress shape school policies.

Staffing Flexibility and Empowerment

Dual roles for educators
and credentialed
paraprofessionals

- Staff roles support collaborative IEP processes where goals are co-created with learners and systems are navigated to meet their needs.
- Staffing models facilitate authentic relationships between adults and learners.

Leadership and school
culture empower staff
decision-making

- The school culture enables rapid, responsive decision-making to adjust programming, space utilization, and support services without lengthy approval processes.

Funding and Resources

State charter school
funding model

- Charters receive less money than conventional public schools.
- Being intentional about a small student population creates challenges when funding is determined per pupil.

Federal IDEA funding

- IDEA provides vital funding to support learners with differences.
- Time-consuming compliance reporting requirements for IDEA can create misalignment with a learner-centered focus.

Accountability and Assessment

Autonomy in assessment decisions

- Charter assessment flexibility enables alternative approaches to measuring student progress (e.g., grade-level project rubrics and climate and culture surveys).

Infrastructure

Transportation policies

- Federal regulations restrict special education transportation through narrow IEP requirements, specific vehicle mandates, and limited usage parameters, resulting in underutilized resources and limited access to community-based learning opportunities.

Charter facilities regulations

- Charter regulations prevent building ownership, limiting long-term capital investment and resulting in facility constraints that limit enrollment growth and the school's capacity to serve more youth with learning differences.

LaFayette Big Picture School

Where relationships, relevance, and rigor guide every learner, one student at a time

LaFayette Big Picture School is a public school operating within a district high school as part of the Big Picture Learning network. The school serves learners, including many from the Onondaga Nation, through real-world internships with community mentors that develop self-advocacy skills. LaFayette succeeds by innovating within and around policy constraints, rather than because of supportive policies. The school’s leadership undertakes the complex task of policy compliance and creative interpretation, enabling educators to concentrate on learner-centered practices. The school-within-a-school model provides both opportunities (e.g., facilities, transportation, certified staff) and constraints (e.g., bureaucracy, limited autonomy) that the team navigates strategically to serve their students effectively.



Category	Policies and Conditions	Site Implications
Governance Structure	School-within-a- school	• A school-within-a-school provides access to essential district infrastructure (e.g., facilities and transportation). • The structure creates stability while maintaining an innovative approach. • Support from the school board and district superintendent is instrumental to sustainability.
Staffing Flexibility and Empowerment	Innovative staffing models Protective conditions driven by leadership	• The approach to staffing maximizes human resources within union constraints. • Paraprofessionals are licensed as special education aides. • Learners are exposed to professionals with diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise. • Staffing practices enable a focus on learners, rather than bureaucratic compliance.

Funding and Resources

Funding allocation

- Funding is managed by the district, resulting in a reduced allocation for LaFayette Big Picture School (e.g., an annual supply budget of \$8,000).
- The percentage of district special education funding received by LaFayette Big Picture School is not aligned with the percentage of learners with IEPs enrolled; funds received only cover staffing costs.

Creative funding strategies

- External partnerships (e.g., Morrisville State College, Access VR) and creative funding strategies (e.g., grants, donors, student enterprises) are leveraged, generating approximately \$3,500 annually.

Accountability and Assessment

State-level required Regents Exam (standardized testing)

- State requirements create significant challenges for learners with differences who would benefit from alternative evaluation approaches.
- It necessitates a pivot from a learner-centered approach to prepare for exams.
- Accountability reporting is absorbed by high-school metrics.

Infrastructure

Transportation policies

- Laborsome district transportation protocols require many steps for staff to transport learners or visit them at off-site internships.
- Advisors supplement with transportation to the off-site internship locations.

Affiliation with the Big Picture Learning network

- International Big Picture Learning Credential (IBPLC) provides a way for learners to document and demonstrate on- and off-site learning.
- Network staff provide coaching, and LaFayette teams have the opportunity to coach other schools within the network.

Norris School District

Shaping challenges into confidence that leads each learner to their next best place

Norris is a public school district that primarily serves high-mobility youth of middle- and high-school age who are in the justice or foster care system, along with learners placed out of district through the IEP process. The district uses trauma-informed, individualized approaches, often within a limited timeframe. Norris’s unique status as an independent school district enables significant policy flexibility, allowing leadership to creatively navigate regulations through waivers and strategic interpretation, while maintaining its mission of serving learners with differences. However, state accountability measures create ongoing barriers by failing to capture the true impact of their trauma-informed work with high mobility youth, forcing the school to continually write Continuous Improvement Plans despite clear evidence of success in social-emotional development. Ultimately, as multiple participants noted, “The successes of this program are despite the policies rather than because of them.”



Category	Policies and Conditions	Site Implications
Governance Structure	Independent school district	• The structure creates autonomy and flexibility. • Leadership creatively navigates regulatory requirements through waivers, board approvals, and strategic policy interpretation while maintaining its learner-centered mission.
Staffing Flexibility and Empowerment	Innovative staffing model Leadership shields direct-service staff from policy compliance and constraints	• Special education paraprofessionals are employed as “navigators” and coaches. • Learners are exposed to professionals with diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise. • Staff can focus on relationship-building and trauma-informed practices essential for their learner population.

Funding and Resources

Wisconsin education funding model

- The small size necessitates creative resource acquisition strategies.

Federal IDEA funding

- Special education enrollment (76% IEPs) results in IDEA funding as a significant and valuable funding source, including subsidizing about 40% of a special educator's salary.
- Significant staff time is necessary to complete IDEA procedural requirements and to align with additional accountability metrics.

Accountability and Assessment

Wisconsin state accountability system

- Conventional measures do not capture the true impact of Norris's work with its high-mobility population, resulting in time-consuming Continuous Improvement Plan requirements.
- Norris transforms accountability measures into "conversations of learning, evidence, feedback, and goal setting" rather than conventional forms of evaluation.

Infrastructure

Transportation policies

- Geographic and regulatory constraints limit transportation flexibility, requiring creative solutions.

Educational data systems

- Student information systems lack flexibility for competency-based and learner-centered approaches, requiring custom solutions.

Cross-Site Themes

Each of the three participating sites operates within distinct policy contexts that shape their ability to implement a learner-centered approach. Despite these varied contexts, five key themes emerged across all three sites:

1 | Leveraging State and Local Flexibility

Across all three sites, flexibility from conventional system constraints and compliance is critical to enabling learner-centered approaches and supporting learning differences. Each environment's governance structures provide critical autonomy for the site's vision and its implementation. In addition, each site's leader's ability to navigate statutory flexibility through waivers, exemptions, and policy interpretation also contributes to their success and unique approach. Each site reflected that many compliance structures designed to ensure equity for youth with learning differences inadvertently cause educators or school leaders to spend more time on paperwork than on prioritizing learners' needs. Flexibility to create new mechanisms that maintain necessary equity safeguards without distracting or disrupting the work of serving youth with learning differences is critical for successful implementation.

2 | Addressing Regulations with Creativity and Purpose

Successful learner-centered environments require bold leadership to navigate systems and structures, while enabling learner-centered values and implementation. Instead of focusing on compliance and constraints, leaders develop what one administrator called "a strategic mindset when reading legislation" to navigate federal and state requirements. In observations and conversations, evidence shows how these site leaders generate IEP and 504 documentation that meets compliance while capturing authentic learner growth. They also develop custom technology solutions to work around inflexible data systems and find creative ways to maximize limited infrastructure resources, like transportation. Leaders shield staff from bureaucratic burdens so they can focus on learners' needs. As one leader explained, "We'll see the list of requested accommodations, and they're just all things that we do anyway." Learner-centered approaches are already designed with many of the best practices for serving youth with learning differences because they center on the unique needs of every child. This demonstrates that bold leadership aligned with learner-centered values inherently leverages both opportunities and barriers as catalysts for centering learners.

3 | Accountability and Assessment

A barrier to all the learner-centered sites' ability to support youth with learning differences is that conventional state accountability measures don't capture the complete picture of their impact on learner outcomes. While some learner-centered sites show improvement on standardized test metrics, these metrics themselves fail to capture the holistic goals of learner-centered environments and are often structured in ways that disrupt how these learning environments are organized. Moreover, operating within these structures often results in time-consuming compliance work that does not accurately reflect actual learner growth. As such, resources must be shifted from core learning approaches and supports to standardized testing preparation.

4 | Building Values Through Aligned Professional Teams

The ability to hire educators aligned with learner-centered values and skills to support learning differences proves crucial, with sites asking, “Do you like your content more than kids? Or do you like kids more than your content?” Flexible staffing models serve learners through innovative certification solutions and role flexibility, such as getting staff certified across multiple CTE fields to address licensing requirements. Professional empowerment also extends to infrastructure decisions, with one educator noting, “I’ve had a lot of interesting ideas in my three years here. I don’t think I’ve ever been told ‘No,’ as long as it’s learner-centered.” This fosters collaborative cultures where staff retention is high, and educators can teach across certification areas to meet the diverse needs of learners. Across all three sites, flexible staffing models enhanced the sites’ abilities to provide support for learning differences, enabling transformative relationships with staff and learners that effectively met learners’ needs and elevated their educational experiences.

5 | Creating Policy Influence Through Community Advocacy

Significant victories begin with the inclusion of stakeholder voices and the building of community trust. Key components of learner-centered environments require that these sites build strong community partnerships. These sites develop relationships with businesses for internship transportation, community spaces for project showcases, and local organizations to supplement facility constraints. Trust in the sites is also reflected through organic referral networks, demonstrating that people recognize the value of these sites in uniquely serving learners who are not well-served by the current system. Community transformation happens through demonstrated outcomes, as sites move from initial resistance to recognition that “we’re actually pretty good at what we do.” When learners with learning differences succeed dramatically in community settings, they become living advocates for the learner-centered approach, challenging deficit-based assumptions in policy discussions. Families who experience transformation become community advocates, influencing local school boards and policy decisions through authentic partnerships that extend educational opportunities beyond conventional system boundaries.

These findings align with established patterns in education policy research that document how unclear policies, inadequate resources, and misaligned systems create barriers to implementing inclusive education, trauma-informed practices, and personalized learning (Hollings, 2021; Mullin et al., 2024; Pane et al., 2017). While direct evidence linking learner-centered environments to learner outcomes remains limited, the consistency of policy-practice relationships across educational innovations suggests that creating supportive conditions is essential for any practice designed to better serve diverse learner needs.

Recommendations

How to enable learner-centered sites to support youth with learning differences:

- **Increase awareness of existing state policy flexibilities:** Create resource guides and training to help learner-centered sites leverage available flexibilities.¹
- **Expand and codify flexibility:** Identify and codify enabling flexibilities already used by or identified as necessary by learner-centered environments to eliminate waiver requests and complex policy navigation.²
- **Transform accountability systems and assessments:** Advocate for accountability measures and alternative assessment approaches that capture authentic growth rather than relying solely on standardized testing that creates barriers for youth with learning differences.
- **Enable flexible staffing and professional empowerment:** Expand cross-certification teaching licensures, support alternative credentialing for paraprofessionals, and reduce bureaucratic barriers that prevent responsive decision-making.
- **Address funding models and resource constraints:** Establish learner-centered funding models and reduce compliance burdens that divert resources from direct services.
- **Build community-driven policy influence:** Support learner-centered environments in documenting outcomes and create networks where successful learners and transformed families become advocates.

¹ See [State-Level Policy and Conditions Landscape Analysis](#) for examples of existing state policy opportunities and implementation strategies.

² See [Seizing the Opportunity for State Education R&D](#) for state recommendations to create the infrastructure and conditions for state system-wide education research and development.

Conclusion

Policy contexts and conditions directly influence the ability of sites to support youth with learning differences. When the starting place is human-centered, solutions emerge despite policy and condition barriers and regardless of funding limitations, compliance requirements, and broader system constraints. These learning communities carry wisdom about maximizing their assets with results that lead to deeper relationships and comprehensive support for youth with learning differences. However, stakeholders must recognize their impact and continue to identify and expand the enabling policies and conditions that support them.



POLICYMAKERS AND ADVOCATES

can use evidence from this study to create enabling policies and conditions for learner-centered education as a solution for supporting diverse learning needs.



EDUCATION LEADERS

can use these findings for inspiration in order to navigate the policy barriers and maximize available flexibilities in their contexts.

Together, the cross-site themes and recommendations in this brief chart a course for developing more inclusive, learner-centered education systems that recognize and cultivate the unique potential of every child, especially those with learning differences.

To explore the complete research series (available in 2026), visit [Learning Differences Research Series](#).

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