

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A Collaborative Multi-Case Study of Learner-Centered Education and Learning Differences

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“My participation in this visit really stretched me professionally by requiring me to use a researcher’s lens. One of my professional goals is to be **more curious**, and this visit helped me take another step towards doing just that.”

Catayah Clark

PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER AND FOUNDING
COMMITTEE CHAIR OF PALMETTO PATHWAYS ACADEMY

Introduction

Approximately 15% of public school students (7.5 million learners) receive special education services (NCES, 2024). Despite this significant population, these students face significant challenges that extend from daily classroom experiences to long-term life outcomes. Research reveals that 70% of youth with specific learning disorders experience higher levels of anxiety symptoms compared to their undiagnosed peers (Nelson & Harwood, 2011). This occurs within education systems where youth already face widespread mental health challenges. For instance, academic-related stress affects the vast majority of students, with 66% reporting feeling stressed about poor grades and 37% reporting feeling very tense when studying (Pascoe et al., 2020).

These academic and emotional pressures contribute to stark inequities in long-term outcomes for youth with special needs. For example, young people with disabilities graduate from high school at only 67.1% compared to 84.6% for all students, earn college degrees at half the rate, and experience unemployment rates nearly twice as high (NCES, 2024; Houtenville & Bach, 2025; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Moreover, these disparities are often magnified for youth who face intersecting challenges, particularly those from low-income families, students of color, English language learners, and youth in rural or under-resourced communities (Artiles, 2013).

Although these gaps stem from multiple systemic factors across society, they also reflect a fundamental mismatch between how youth with learning differences learn best and how conventional education systems are designed. At its core, learner-centered education seeks to transform these systems to unleash the full potential of all children and adolescents, especially those furthest from opportunity. This approach cannot eliminate every societal barrier, but designing educational environments that intentionally build upon diverse learning strengths from the outset can substantially improve young people’s opportunities for success in their communities and beyond. Yet limited research has documented the effectiveness of the approach for youth with learning differences. Therefore, this study addresses that limitation by investigating the following inquiry: **How do learner-centered environments work with youth with learning differences?**

ABOUT THIS OVERVIEW

This overview is part of Education Reimagined’s Learning Differences Research Series, conducted with funding provided in part by Oak Foundation. While this overview focuses on information related to the research context, methodology, and participating sites, companion publications highlight other areas of the study in more depth, including policy implications and details on study findings. For the complete series (available in 2026), visit [Learning Differences Research Series](#).

Defining Learner-Centered Education

By “learner-centered education,” we mean an education approach that focuses on the holistic development of learners¹ within and as part of supportive communities and through unique learning journeys. Learner-centered education is grounded in five key elements:



Research suggests that these elements and the learner-centered approach support positive outcomes for learners, such as improved learning and engagement, stronger relationships and well-being, and better preparation for future success (Schonfeld-Karan, 2025). For more information, see the [Transformative Potential of Learner-Centered Education](#) report.

Defining Learner differences

In this research study, we utilized an inclusive definition of “learning differences” that includes

- **Specific learning disabilities** (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia);
- **Neurological processing challenges** (e.g., attention deficits, sensory processing, executive function challenges); and
- **Youth with or without formal diagnoses** who experience mismatches between how they learn best and how classrooms are typically designed.

The definition also recognizes that learning differences exist on a spectrum and acknowledges that many youth also experience challenges, even without formal identification through conventional diagnostic processes.

¹ Education Reimagined uses the term learner to refer to young people (ages 3–22) in learner-centered environments. Unlike “student,” which implies a passive role, “learner” encompasses the evolving ways that young people grow, explore, and understand the world around them.

Methodology

This study utilized a collaborative multiple-case study approach that involved engaging with a diverse community of practitioner-researchers through an intensive 8-month site-based inquiry. The methodology was designed to capture the lived experiences of learners, educators, and families through triangulated sources of evidence. The investigation was guided by one primary inquiry into how learner-centered environments work with youth with learning differences and four driving research questions:

- 1

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How are young people with learning differences identified and what resources are available to support them in the learning environments?
- 2

|

What implications do policies and conditions have on how the learning environments work with youth with learning differences?
- 3

|

What learner-centered practices are being utilized in the learning environments, and which ones are being employed to address learning differences?
- 4

|

What outcomes are being observed for youth with learning differences in the learning environments?

Multi-Case Study Approach

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

We selected a collaborative multiple-case study design for this research because case studies are designed to illustrate broader principles through specific, holistic instances involving real people in real situations, portraying “what it is like” to be in particular circumstances (Cohen et al., 2017). Moreover, studying three learning environments allowed us to compare the learner-centered approach across varied learning environments operating within distinct geographic locations, learner demographics, policy contexts, and governance structures (Yin, 2018).

In addition to the multi-case study, a literature review was conducted to examine the alignment between research on specific learning differences and learner-centered practices. This literature review, conducted in partnership with the [Institute for Self-Directed Learning](#), was used to validate and contextualize the study findings within the broader research base.

Our Collaborative Research Team

This study was intentionally collaborative, engaging Education Reimagined’s research team alongside seasoned practitioner-researchers. With more than two decades of experience on average, these professionals brought deep expertise in learner-centered approaches, especially in creating programs for learners who had not thrived in conventional settings. As a team, they represented a range of roles (e.g., special education specialists, teacher preparation leaders, and policy advocates), as well as diverse contexts (e.g., rural public schools, urban charters, microschools, youth development programs, and education policy organizations).

Although collaborative research can present challenges, such as differing levels of formal research experience and the potential for bias, it also adds great value. Much can be learned with and from practitioners who understand firsthand the nuance and complexity of learner-centered education (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). For the full list of co-researchers, see [Appendix A](#).

Data Collection Methods

Multiple complementary methods were used to capture the depth and complexity of the participating learner-centered environments. Each site participated in an online interview, completed a survey, and shared internal and external materials (e.g., guides on practices, vision statements, handbooks, and newsletters). In addition, every site hosted a two-day site visit for our team of co-researchers. During these visits, data was collected through direct observations; interviews and focus groups with administrators, educators, learners, alumni, families, and community partners; and reflective discussions with site leaders and educators. After these visits, the practitioner-researchers completed surveys to share their key observations and supporting data. For a full list of data collection methods, see [Appendix B](#).

To ensure methodological soundness in the data collection process, our team utilized comprehensive triangulation across five dimensions (Patton, 1990):

- Methodological (interviews, observations, document analysis)
- Participant (learners, families, educators, community partners)
- Researcher (16 collaborative co-researchers)
- Temporal (sustained 8-month engagement)
- Geographic (three distinct contexts)

Validation processes included regular debriefs and sense-making sessions during and after site visits. In addition, we systematically cross-checked observations among multiple co-researchers and conducted member checking with site participants on emerging findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the collaborative inquiry process, we also maintained rigorous documentation and organization of all data sources to ensure analytic integrity.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, we employed systematic thematic analysis to identify patterns and generate insights from the dataset. Our analysis began by exploring findings for each of our five driving research questions using an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge naturally from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following Education Reimagined's initial analysis, the co-researcher team revisited the findings through structured discussions and iterative refinement. The next phase of analysis involved additional synthesis to generate overarching themes that integrate all findings around two key dimensions: 1) the sites' systematic approaches to supporting youth with learning differences, and 2) the transformative impact these environments create for learners, families, and communities.

Collaborative Research Process: 8-Month Multi-Site Investigation



Study Limitations

While this research provides valuable insights into how learner-centered environments serve youth with learning differences, it is important to acknowledge the boundaries and constraints of our study design and methodology.

SCOPE CONSIDERATIONS

- The study examined three sites, limiting generalizability across different contexts and populations.
- Sites were pre-selected based on their identification as learner-centered environments from a limited network, potentially introducing selection bias.
- The 8-month timeframe provided a snapshot rather than longitudinal analysis of outcomes.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- The collaborative approach, while providing rich insider perspectives, may have introduced researcher bias.
- Learning partners had varying levels of experience with formal research methods.
- Data collection relied heavily on self-reported information from participants.

Despite these limitations, the depth and consistency of findings across diverse contexts, populations, and policy frameworks provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of learner-centered approaches in serving youth with learning differences.

Participating Sites

Three learner-centered environments were selected for this study to represent diverse geographic, demographic, and policy contexts, while also sharing a common commitment to support all learners through relationship-centered approaches. The following criteria were used in the selection process of the three sites. Each participating site

- Identifies as learner-centered and part of Education Reimagined’s national learner-centered network;
- Serves varying populations of young people, including at least 20% with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) and Section 504 plans (504s) as formal learning supports (see Appendix C for learner demographics); and
- Represents different community types (i.e., rural, urban, suburban).

The following table and site profiles provide an overview of each environment’s context, learner population, and its distinctive approach to supporting youth with learning differences through learner-centered practices.

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



“You could feel immediately that it wasn’t about the advisor’s agenda. It was totally about who you are and what you want to get out of this.”

Avalon School

Avalon School, which is located in urban St. Paul, Minnesota, is a public charter serving grades 6–12 with approximately 275 learners enrolled in the 2024–25 school year. The site’s 42 full-time professionals serve learners with diverse needs: 50% have IEPs, 10% have 504 plans, and additional children who exhibit behaviors consistent with learning differences but do not have formal diagnoses.

Founded in 2001 during Minnesota’s early charter school movement, Avalon’s leadership team seeks to contribute to research and development for experiential, project-based, relationship-centered education. From the start, Avalon placed learner agency and democratic participation at the center of its design. Learners helped write the “Avalon Constitution” in its first year, establishing the school’s enduring “teacher-powered, student-centered” culture of shared decision-making among educators and learners.

Avalon’s model combines teacher-led courses with learner-designed projects supported by community partners, with advisors connecting learning to state standards. Through multi-year advisory relationships, learners build deep, sustained connections with the same advisor throughout their time at the school.

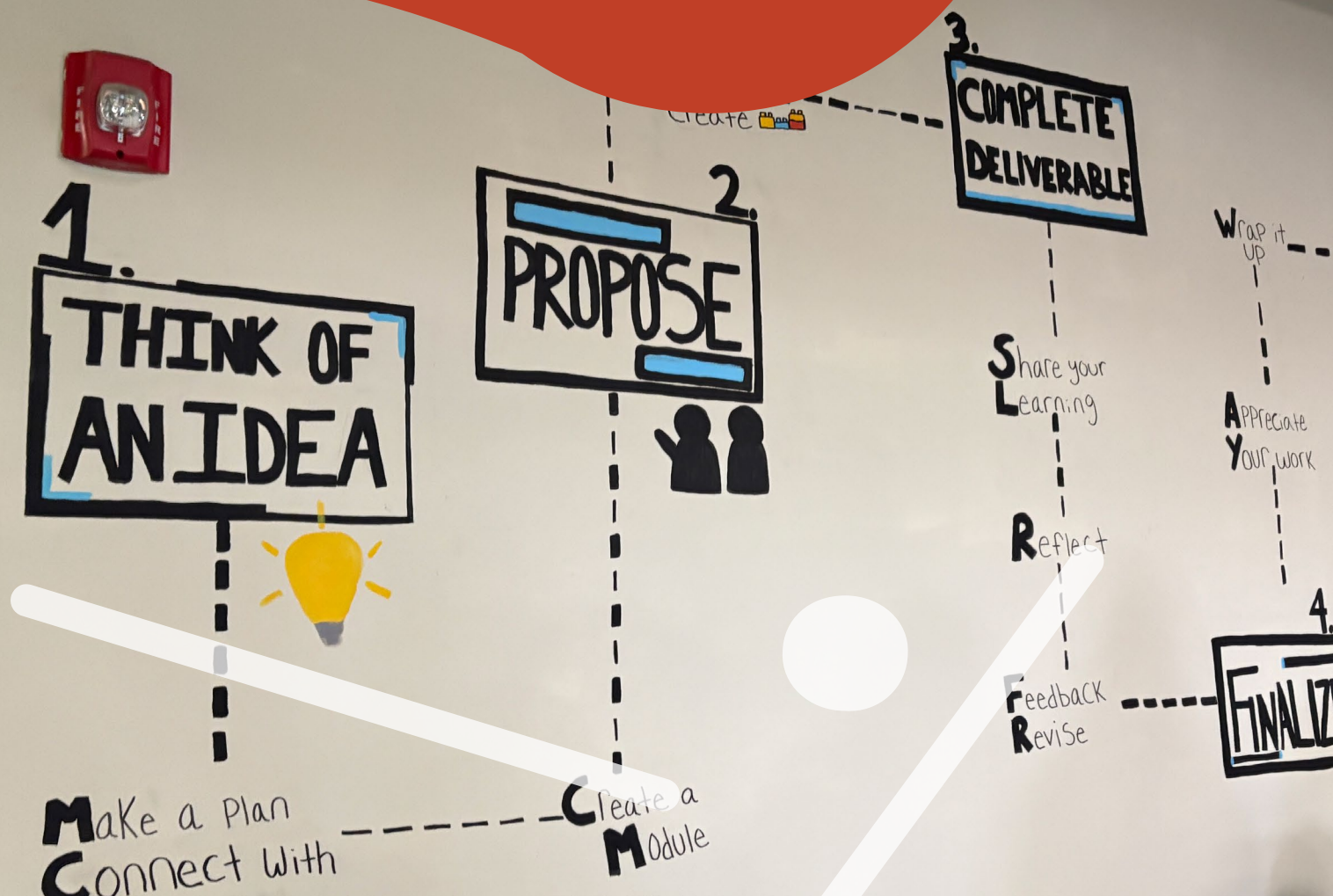
Support for learners with IEPs, 504s, and those experiencing housing instability is fully integrated into the advisory and learning structures through close collaboration between

Parent
AVALON SCHOOL

case managers and advisors. Staff receive training to support a wide range of learning differences, most commonly combinations of ADHD, anxiety, and depression, as well as executive function skills, general mental health, sensory issues, and autism. By embedding support throughout its inclusive, project-based model, Avalon minimizes stigma and promotes engaged citizenship, ensuring all learners access meaningful opportunities to grow academically, socially, and personally.

“We all normally can speak out and talk about what bothers us without the teachers shushing us and being like, ‘We can’t talk about that here.’”

Learner
AVALON SCHOOL





“You stick with the same teacher, the same advisor, and the same kids for four years. So, it definitely feels like a second family.”

Learner
**LAFAYETTE BIG PICTURE
HIGH SCHOOL**

LaFayette Big Picture High School

LaFayette Big Picture High School in New York’s LaFayette Central School District is a public school-within-school with 50 learners enrolled in the 2024–25 school year. Affiliated with the Big Picture Learning network, the school operates with 15 full-time staff members and a growing number of community partners to support its mission of educating “one learner at a time” through relationships, relevance, and rigor. Of the 50 learners served, 29% have IEPs, 18% have 504s, and 67% qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Established in 2008, LaFayette Big Picture was created in response to persistent inequities within the district. Its efforts have yielded remarkable results. Since the school opened, graduation rates for students with IEPs in the school district have increased from a baseline range of 50–70% to current rates of 95–100%.

LaFayette Big Picture’s learner-centered approach blends multi-year advisories, mentoring, and internships that develop self-knowledge, advocacy and life skills, and social capital in the local community. Staff prioritize professional development

to support learners with executive functioning challenges and attention deficits, which are the most common learning differences in its population. Internships anchor the model, pairing learners with mentors in fields such as culinary arts, welding, events management, and farming to develop life and academic skills with supports embedded as needed. Shaped by and in response to learner interests and needs, placements are offered both on and off campus in businesses throughout the local community. Graduates consistently highlight their internship experiences and mentors as transformative, with many discovering capabilities that extend far beyond what they previously believed possible.

“I love how the school is based around the student, not the student is based around the school.”

Learner
LAFAYETTE BIG PICTURE HIGH SCHOOL

Norris School District

Norris School District, located in rural Mukwonago, Wisconsin, is the state's smallest public district. Its campus is on 900 acres, serving 50–100 learners at any given time from across the state, with 63 enrolled learners in November 2024. The learner population reflects a wide range of life circumstances: 76% have IEPs, 1% have 504 plans, over half qualify for free or reduced lunch, and one-third are youth who are adjudicated or in foster care and who live at the co-located treatment center on campus, the Norris Residential Facility. This leads to a highly mobile population with an average learner stay of about 90 days.

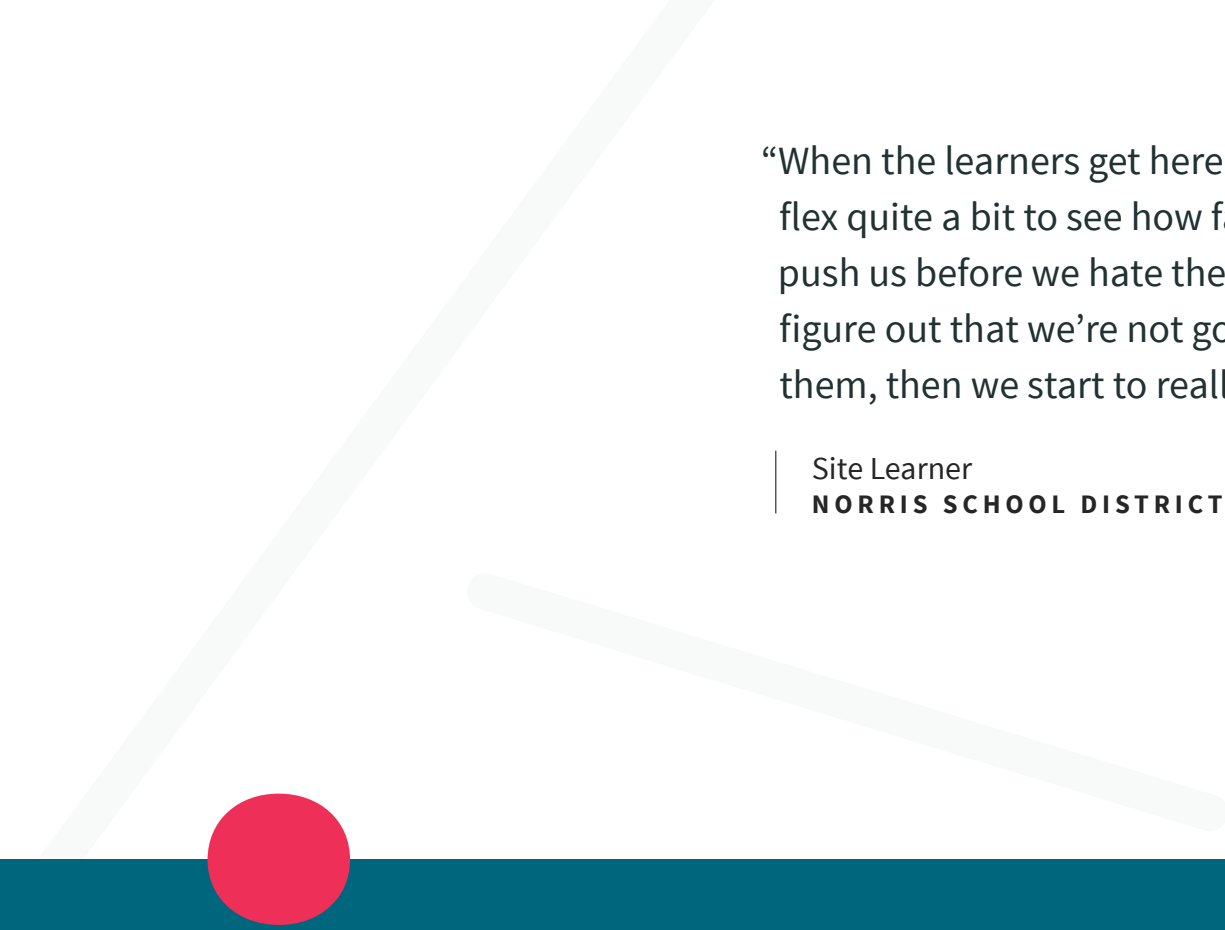
In 2015, Norris underwent a major programmatic redesign, shifting to a learner-centered model grounded in relationships and competency-based learning across four dimensions: academic, employability, citizenship, and wellness. Additionally, it prioritized behavioral health and community services, with emphasis on community, career, and life success. Since then, Norris has also opened the Norris Academy Virtual School and satellite programs for youth who transition outside Mukwonago and wish to continue their education with Norris.

Newly enrolled learners complete a 30- to 60-day orientation that includes creating an “urgency story,” which identifies highest need areas and aligns the right supports. In addition, a “learner profile” and an “engagement plan” are developed with learners to identify their strengths, interests, and needs, as well as life and learning goals. Norris’s staff creates opportunities to expose and deepen learner interests. Its team is composed of 26 full-time staff and approximately seven highly integrated part-time staff, the number of whom varies based on learner enrollment and active community partner engagement. These staff members are trained to support a wide range of learning differences, most commonly executive functioning challenges and attention deficits, as well as emotional and behavioral disorders and other health impairments linked to mental health and trauma. Norris takes an adaptive, iterative approach, constantly adjusting supports and practices to develop learners’ trust, self-understanding, and self-advocacy, and ability to envision their “next best place” in school, careers, and life.



“I dreaded going to school. I feared going to school, but when I started going here, I actually liked going to school. I actually loved going to school, and I started to love learning.”

Learner
**NORRIS SCHOOL
DISTRICT**



“When the learners get here, we find they flex quite a bit to see how far they can push us before we hate them. When they figure out that we’re not going to hate them, then we start to really see them.”

Site Learner
NORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT

Preview of Findings

Following Education Reimagined’s initial analysis, the co-researcher team reviewed the preliminary findings, collaboratively refining them. A preview of the findings is presented here, organized by the five driving research questions and highlighting how learner-centered environments support youth with learning differences across multiple dimensions. Forthcoming briefs will provide deeper analysis of these findings.

Model Design

| Supporting healing, sustained relationships, and positive conditions

The learner-centered environments in the study serve as places of healing and learning. Sustained relationships, personalized support, and a responsive mindset create conditions for growth, and also attract families and community referrals seeking out their learner-centered approach. (For more details on these approaches, see [When Accommodations Are the Norm, Not the Exception](#), and for more on parental experiences, see [Reimagining Support for Learning Differences](#).)

Outcomes

| *Developing personal wellness that positively impacts families and community*

Youth with learning differences experience outcomes ranging from personal wellness to community transformation in the learner-centered environments. As learners build trust and confidence, educators observe fewer behavioral incidents and signs of reduced stress, while learners discover new areas of interest. These shifts ripple outward, positively impacting families and community partners who work with these learners.

Policies and Conditions

| *Leveraging system conditions to broaden access*

Rather than viewing federal, state, and local policies as constraints, the learner-centered environments navigate them as a floor—not a ceiling—for innovation. While ensuring compliance, they expand opportunities through learner-centered practices such as flexible credentialing, competency-based recognition, creative staffing, and transportation solutions. These approaches demonstrate how system-wide policy and conditions can be leveraged to increase access for and responsiveness to learners.

Identification and Resources

| *Weaving accommodations into the culture and everyday learning*

In the learner-centered environments, differences are recognized as part of human diversity while attending to the distinct needs each learner requires to thrive. Accommodations and resources are woven into the environment, culture, and learning journeys through collaboration with each learner's network of support.

Practices

| *Fostering self-advocacy, social capital, and future pathways*

Learning is viewed as something that is personal, relational, and real in the studied sites. Learner-centered practices engender wellness, social capital, and exposure to various perspectives. In addition, relationships with families, communities, and other learners guide the development of skills like self-advocacy, executive functioning, and self-regulation that contribute in positive ways to each learner's life pathway.

The Research Series

This overview serves as the foundation for a comprehensive publication series that will explore these findings in greater depth, providing practitioners, policymakers, and advocates with actionable insights and evidence-based strategies.

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

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We extend deep gratitude to our collaborative research team:

SITE LEADERS & CO-RESEARCHERS

Carrie Bakken (Avalon School); Susan Hart (LaFayette Big Picture High School); Kristofer Koneazny (Norris School District); Johnna Noll (Norris School District); Tim Quealy (Avalon School)

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Appendices

Appendix A: Community of Co-Researchers

SITE LEADERS & CO-RESEARCHERS

Carrie Bakken, executive director, Avalon School
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Johnna Noll, executive director, Norris School District
Tim Quealy, program coordinator, Avalon School

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Liz Masters, director of family engagement, Lab School of Memphis
Lindsay Ogawa, senior director of field advancement, Education Reimagined
Khara Schonfeld-Karan, director of field research, Education Reimagined
Ayana Verdi, founder, Verdi EcoSchool
Lela Wesley, senior director, Big Thought Institute

Appendix B: Data Collection Methods

Methods for Data Collection	Data Sources
Online interviews	Video recordings, transcripts, and notes
Host site surveys	Survey responses
Host site resources	Online materials and internal documents and files provided by site leaders
On-site records	Transcripts of all presentations, interviews, focus groups, and discussions; research team notes, including observations and insights; photographs and audio recordings
Research team virtual meetings	Video recordings, transcripts, and notes

Appendix C: 2024–25 Learner Demographics Per Site

Demographic Category	AVALON SCHOOL	LAFAYETTE BIG PICTURE	NORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT
Total Enrollment	275 learners	50 learners	63 learners
Special Education			
IEPs	50%	29%	76%
504 Plans	10%	18%	1%
Race/Ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaskan Native	6.5%	40%	0%
Asian	3.2%	0%	0%
Black	5%	0%	21%
Hispanic/Latinx	11.3%	0%	10%
Multiracial	9%	5%	0%
White	64.2%	55%	69%
Other			
Free & Reduced Lunch	34%	67%	54%
English Language Learners	<3%	0%	2%