

SEEDS OF POSSIBILITY

Connecting Policy to Practice
Across Learning Ecosystems

Sarah Bishop-Root and Emily Liebtag, Ed.D., in partnership with Remake Learning

Introduction

Across the country, communities are charting new paths in education. Whether to address rural economic decline, urban educational inequities, or Indigenous cultural preservation, these communities see a need for education systems that better support their young people. Their local challenges and assets are becoming powerful catalysts for transforming education, which manifests in more interconnected, human-centered approaches to education.

Learning ecosystems are taking shape. In a learning ecosystem, local businesses, community centers, schools, community colleges, and parks are all recognized as vibrant spaces for learning, while educators, mentors, content experts, and families guide and support young people's learning. Community assets work together cohesively to serve children and families, breaking down silos or barriers to collaboration whenever possible. From rural collaboratives to urban innovation hubs to state-wide networks, these communities demonstrate that ecosystems are not just theoretical; they are an emerging, tangible reality.

[Education Reimagined](#) and [Remake Learning](#) share a commitment to advancing the emergence of these learning ecosystems, believing they offer a pathway to educational equity and possibility. In service of this shared commitment, the organizations came together to study eight diverse communities demonstrating how learning ecosystems are being brought to life and to uplift the policy levers and conditions that are making this work possible and sustainable. This exploration yielded new insights into how other communities might both leverage existing policy conditions and create their own to advance their local learning ecosystem vision.

IN THIS BRIEF, YOU'LL FIND:

- Profiles of the eight learning ecosystems studied, with highlights of enabling policies and conditions.
- Cross-cutting policy themes to fuel others' ecosystem development, along with guiding reflection questions for leaders to leverage in their own context.

DEFINITIONS OF LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS

In their efforts to inspire and spread more ecosystemic approaches to education across the country and world, Education Reimagined and Remake Learning have crafted aligned yet distinct terminology and definitions for the idea. This investigation sits at the intersection of their visions for education transformation.

- Education Reimagined utilizes the term **“learner-centered ecosystems”** and has distinguished it as “an adaptive, networked structure that offers a transformed way of organizing, supporting, and credentialing learning that focuses on nurturing the development of whole human beings within caring communities.” [More here.](#)
- Remake Learning leverages the term **“learning ecosystem”** and has defined it as “the complex web of people, places, and forces that shape learning experiences.” [More here.](#)

For the purposes of this brief, we will use the term “learning ecosystem.”

Profiles

Eight communities. Eight unique contexts. One unifying commitment to transforming how we “do” education in service of human flourishing.

The eight communities highlighted in this brief span a range of geographies, learner populations, and contexts. These profiles were developed through a combination of interviews, site visits, and policy analysis.

They demonstrate how learning ecosystems can emerge when communities engage in deep listening to understand what young people and families truly need, then mobilize their assets, people, places, community wisdom, and structures to better support their children’s learning and development. While they represent varying stages of systems transformation, they are each breaking down traditional silos between formal and informal learning, expanding the definition of who counts as an educator and creating seamless pathways for learners to access opportunities across multiple settings.

FUTURE FEATURES

In May 2024, at [The Forge Futures Summit](#), convened by Remake Learning and The School Superintendents Association (AASA), more than 200 forward-thinking educators, community leaders, and innovators came together to discuss a future of education for human flourishing, one where learning ecosystems can thrive. From these generative conversations, four key features emerged, characterizing the group’s collective priorities for what future learning systems would include:

- **Learner Agency:** Empowering learners through opportunities tailored to their passions and interests, and providing voice and choice to utilize project-based methods and competency-focused pathways for personalized and lifelong learning.
- **School Unwalled:** Leveraging diverse resources beyond boundaries of the school building and the school day to provide learners with enriched opportunities, engaging the community and utilizing local assets.
- **Broader Definition of Educator:** Integrating informal educators, mentors, coaches, and other caring adults into students’ learning journeys to diversify expertise and tap into community support.
- **Credit for Out-of-School Learning:** Recognizing and accrediting learning that occurs outside of traditional classrooms and school hours, ensuring all educational experiences are valued and contribute to holistic development.

These Future Features served as a lens with which to identify the examples studied in this project. The profiles elevate how the Future Features are surfacing and working together, from policy to practice, in each unique context to both address challenges communities are facing and create personalized and relevant learning experiences for young people.

As you review these eight profiles, consider:

- How do you see the Future Features showing up in these learning ecosystems?
- In what ways are they uniquely adapted to the community’s strengths, needs, and context?
- What evidence do you see of their impact on learners, families, and the broader community?

Butler Area School District

BUTLER COUNTY, WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

Community Context and Challenge: Butler Area School District serves 6,000 learners in a community once defined by its strong steel industry. After the loss of one of its mills in the 1990s, the region faced an economic downturn, resulting in economic diversity ranging from deep generational poverty to affluent families. When Superintendent Brian White arrived in 2017, the district was going through a difficult transition. One of the district's elementary schools had high levels of lead in the drinking water, and community trust was completely shattered. The school board and Superintendent White worked hard to rebuild trust through process-oriented change driven by extensive community engagement, initially developing a strategic plan and a shared vision. More recently, they engaged over 400 stakeholders in developing Butler's "Portrait of the Graduate" with competencies that include focusing on "being a good human being, working for others, caring for others, and communicating" rather than subject-specific skills.

Learning Ecosystem in Action: In Butler, things have started to look different and for the better. Community members serve as educators, and learning extends far beyond school walls. Each of the seven elementary schools has developed unique focus areas (agriculture, creativity, career education) that are supported by community advisory boards, relevant experts from Butler County Community College, Slippery Rock University and the Penn State University Extension, nonprofit leaders, governmental leaders, and local business leaders.

The district has launched innovative approaches, like converting a local Scouting America camp into a year-round learning site, where struggling seniors pursue personalized merit badge pathways to graduation. Students pursue personalized pathways with voice and choice in their learning, earning competencies as they progress. These are formally recognized by the districts, as are community-based learning credentials that can be earned through programs like their partnership with Slippery Rock University's Equestrian Program or their 4-season greenhouse.

The district is transforming Main Street into a learning lab where students earn credentials or pursue real-world internships through partnerships with local businesses and municipal government. This holistic approach creates an interconnected web where students' passions drive their learning journeys, community expertise enriches educational experiences, and all learning, whether in a school or a greenhouse, is honored and recognized.



Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

- Flexible Graduation Requirements: [Pennsylvania Act 158](#) and [Chapter 4 of Pennsylvania Code](#), combined with Pennsylvania’s focus on standards instead of course requirements, enables **credit for out-of-school learning**.
- Pennsylvania regulations support a **broader definition of educator** by allowing Local Education Agencies to develop alternative teacher evaluations utilizing [Locally Developed Alternate Teacher Evaluation System](#).
- The [Pennsylvania Innovation Guide](#), developed through a partnership with KnowledgeWorks and Remake Learning, comprehensively elevates the flexibilities that can be leveraged to enable the implementation of all Future Features.

Embarc Chicago CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Community Context and Challenge: Embarc Chicago emerged from the recognition that students in large, under-resourced schools were isolated not only within the four walls of their buildings, but also from the broader opportunities within Chicago itself. As a result, Embarc was founded to address the stark inequity in access to experiential learning and the systemic barriers that prevent young people from seeing and belonging in spaces they’ve never been before. While even well-resourced selective enrollment schools may not offer this many external experiences, Embarc students graduate having participated in as many as 24. Embarc’s mission centers on shifting narratives for both students (about their own sense of belonging) and community adults (about what young people deserve access to), recognizing that the privilege inherent in traditional education structures limits opportunities for the students who need them most.

Learning Ecosystem in Action: Embarc helps to connect Chicago schools with nearly 100 community partners, creating over 10,000 real-world learning experiences for students every year. The organization runs two main models: a cohort-based “core” program and a “whole school” model. In the core program, groups of 25–30 students stay with the same teacher for three years, engaging in a social-emotional learning (SEL)-driven curriculum and hands-on community experiences. The “whole school” model is where every student gets access to community-based learning, while all staff participate in professional development.



By working with partners, ranging from cultural institutions like theaters and museums, to behind-the-scenes access to restaurants and corporate partners, Embarc transforms everyday spaces into youth-centered learning environments. The team also trains adults in these spaces to connect meaningfully with teens and support their growth, and weave in what they are learning in community spaces into other daily instruction. The result is a learning model that breaks down the walls between school and the world beyond it. Learners even earn elective or civics credit for these experiences, if they are enrolled in the full course, which also provides postsecondary preparation as they transition from high school. Embarc is actively working to build a district-wide framework that formally recognizes experiential learning as a core part of education in Chicago.

Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

- Chicago Public Schools' vetted **vendor** process enables Embarc Chicago to partner with districts while implementing their approach that includes supporting **learner agency** and **school unwallled**.
- Chicago Public Schools' **strategic plan** prioritizes exceptional and diverse talent, connectedness and well-being, and 21st-century learning environments. This allows schools to build in collaboration with Embarc to their Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP), which is the strategic planning process of schools that also meets the federal and state requirements of a school improvement plan. It also supports a broader **definition of educator**.
- Embarc partners with the **CPS student travel office** to ensure that experience sites that don't have "traditional" academic value are approved through the lens of the SEL and wellness priorities within the district, enabling **school unwallled**.

Da Vinci RISE High LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Community Context and Challenge: Da Vinci RISE emerged from a recognition that traditional schools often fail students experiencing complex trauma and systemic barriers limiting their ability to prioritize and access school. The school addresses the fundamental question of what education would look like if built around the needs of young people facing homelessness, mental health challenges, foster care, probation, and other systemic barriers that make traditional schooling impossible. Serving approximately 200 students across two campuses, with 50% being current or former foster, homeless, or probation-involved youth, RISE tackles the reality that for students experiencing trauma, the system has removed choice and agency, forcing them into standard systems that are not personalized at all, rather than allowing them to do something they love.



Learning Ecosystem in Action: RISE is a healing-centered learning ecosystem that integrates wraparound services directly into education by co-locating classrooms within community-based social service providers across Los Angeles. The school employs a team of trauma-informed holistic coaches—including social workers, therapists, psychologists, case managers, and behavior interventionists—who work alongside teachers using project-based learning and mastery-based grading from the Da Vinci network.

Learners can pursue multiple graduation options, including a unique RISE pathway focused on independent living skills, personal projects, and transitional support in areas like housing, employment, and wellness. RISE also offers two career pathways shaped by student interests and lived experiences: one in mental health (in partnership with Kaiser Permanente Medical School to train community health workers), and another in digital media for students interested in storytelling and self-expression.

Through partnerships with trauma-informed organizations like Indivisible Arts (SEL through the arts) and New Earth’s “Down To Earth” and “F.L.O.W, - Fluent Love of Words” (science-based and literature-based programming), RISE weaves healing into humanities, arts, and science. The result is a safe, supportive environment where students can connect learning to their realities—and imagine futures beyond their current circumstances.

Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

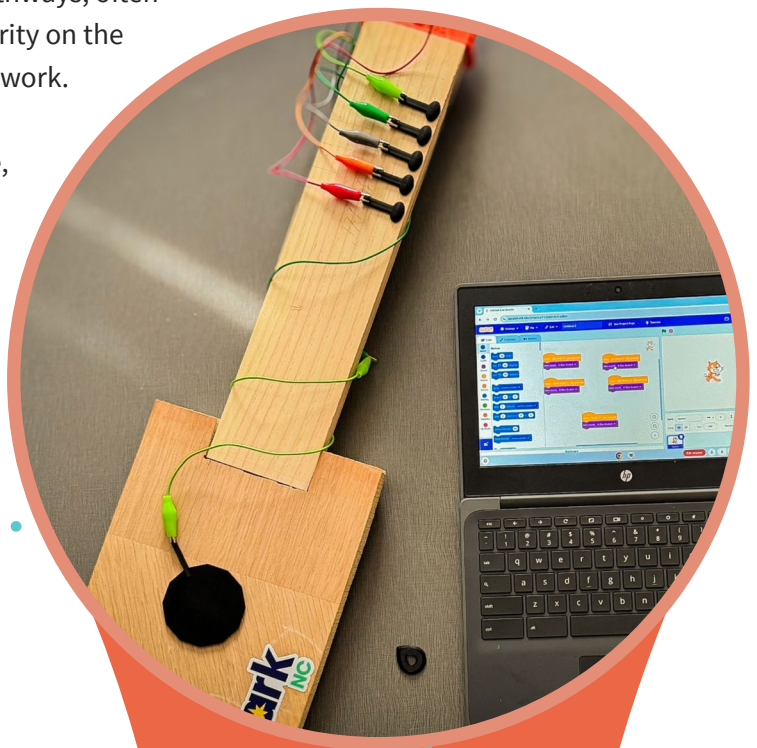
- **County-Wide Benefit Charter** removes district boundaries, increasing the access to learners that can be served and enabling **school unwalled**.
- California’s **Independent Study** policy enables Da Vinci RISE to implement **school unwalled** in order to create a flexible approach for learners also balancing consuming life demands.

SparkNC

STATEWIDE ACROSS NORTH CAROLINA

Community Context and Challenge: SparkNC emerged to address the growing demand for skilled workers in high-tech fields, while confronting the reality that many students, particularly those from historically underrepresented groups, cannot envision themselves in technology careers. Operating across 18 (and growing) North Carolina public school districts serving over 420,000 high school students, SparkNC tackles the challenge that traditional education systems often fail to provide relevant pathways to high-demand tech careers like cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, software development, and data analytics. The initiative recognizes that students need flexible, personalized learning opportunities that connect directly to real-world applications and career possibilities, rather than traditional time-bound, grade-focused approaches that may not align with individual learning styles or career interests.

Learning Ecosystem in Action: SparkNC functions as a statewide learning ecosystem through its innovative network of SparkLabs, which are physical collaborative spaces located in participating districts where students engage in hands-on, personalized learning experiences. The program operates through a competency-based Learning Management System that allows students to choose from over 60 modular, stackable learning units across various high-tech fields. Learners progress at their own pace and earn high school credit through achieved competence, rather than seat time. Students can explore different pathways, often switching from artificial intelligence to cybersecurity on the same day, and can earn transcript credit for their work. SparkNC bridges education and industry through extensive partnerships with companies like Apple, SAS, and IBM, where students visit campuses, receive mentorship from tech professionals, and work on real-world challenges.



SparkLab Leaders who serve as learning facilitators expand what is possible when we think of educator roles. They are liaisons for inter-district collaborative opportunities, partnerships with community colleges, and with local universities who often provide both physical lab spaces and pathways to learners for credentials or college credit. This comprehensive approach creates an interconnected web where students direct their own learning journeys, industry professionals serve as advisors and real-world project partners, and learning transcends traditional district boundaries to provide access to cutting-edge technology education regardless of a student's home school's capacity or resources.

Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

- **NC S687** enabled the establishment of SparkNC, bringing to life **school unwalled**. This statute also created the flexibility for SparkNC's R&D approach and industry and district partnerships.
- **HB529, Section 7.62** enables Spark NC's High-Tech Accelerator partnership and **credit for out-of-school learning**.
- **Addressing both school unwalled and credit for out-of-school learning, SL2024-57** allowed SparkNC to expand beyond their initial district partners, it ensured that their credit met the computer science graduation requirement, and opened the possibility for them to expand into health sciences.

Native American Community Academy (NACA)

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Community Context and Challenge:

NACA emerged to address the reality that schools with high Native American populations have historically set “disconnected expectations” for their students, rarely providing access to education that effectively supports Native identity, culture, language, college preparation, and community connection. Serving students from 60 tribes across Albuquerque and surrounding Pueblos and tribal lands, NACA addresses the complex barriers facing indigenous youth, while operating in a context where three-quarters of students come from families where no one has attended college.



Learning Ecosystem in Action: NACA functions as a culturally-grounded learning ecosystem by integrating academic excellence with Indigenous identity development through a holistic approach that makes wellness central rather than an afterthought. The school implements a comprehensive curriculum that weaves together Indigenous studies, storytelling, oral traditions, cultural history, Native languages, community presentations, and service learning within a rigorous Common Core-based college preparatory framework. The innovative “NACA Wellness Wheel” guides programming for students, staff, and families across intellectual, physical, social/emotional, and community relationship dimensions, with Personal Wellness coursework addressing traditional land and plant medicines, body autonomy, and expression.

NACA operates extensive community partnerships, including First Nations Community Healthsource for school-based health services, Bernalillo County Pathways for housing and employment connections, and an Indigenous farm hub that provides land-based learning experiences connecting students from age five through college with traditional farming practices, indigenous languages, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. This comprehensive approach extends learning beyond school walls through community-supported agriculture, computer science initiatives, and partnerships with organizations like Amazon to co-design a climate curriculum that centers Indigenous values and knowledge systems, creating an interconnected web where cultural identity, academic excellence, and community wellness reinforce each other. NACA’s experience demonstrates how centering cultural identity and wellness within an interconnected learning ecosystem can serve as a model for communities nationwide.

Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

- **[New Mexico’s Indian Education Act](#)** and **[Charter School law](#)** provides the flexibility and ability to shape culturally relevant offerings to learners, fostering **learner agency**.
- **[Yazzie/Martinez lawsuit decision](#)** in New Mexico is pushing for policy change that will give local tribes more educational sovereignty and funding so they can do comparable work to NACA in uplifting language and culture to strengthen learner’s cultural identity and **learner agency**.



Rock Tree Sky

OJAI, CALIFORNIA

Community Context and Challenge: Rock Tree Sky (RTS) emerged from recognizing that traditional schooling often fails to develop the “capabilities that are far more durable and essential for creating a great life”: habits of mind like setting one’s own goals, fostering healthy relationships, and engaging the world with curiosity and a learning mindset. Located in Ojai, California, RTS serves families enrolled in independent study programs or homeschooling families who seek community connection while maintaining educational autonomy, addressing the reality that many families want alternatives to conventional schooling but need consistent peer groups and positive adult mentors. The learning center operates on the principle that when students have more agency retained in their learning and identity development from a younger age, they maintain the natural curiosity and self-direction that traditional systems often diminish.

Learning Ecosystem in Action: The Rock Tree Sky learning community is able to partner with Ojai Unified School District as an Independent Study enrichment provider, through the Summit Independent Study Program, enabling learners across the Ojai community to access self-directed learning experiences. RTS receives \$3,200 annually per learner from the district for students who attend RTS “enrichment” programming. This innovative funding model bridges formal district requirements with autonomous learning approaches, serving 200 students—from preschool through high school—with programming that emphasizes deep connection to place, creative expression, and social-emotional learning through outdoor explorations, field trips, and STEAM activities.

RTS has expanded its ecosystem role by coordinating monthly meetings with other learner-facing nonprofits in the community, and by creating collaborative opportunities for expanded learning and collective advocacy with city leadership. The organization also operates the Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELOP) camps for 150+ district students during intersessions, delivering their self-directed pedagogy within traditional district programming. This comprehensive approach creates an interconnected web where families retain educational choice while accessing consistent community support, students direct their learning while building essential skills through authentic experiences, and the broader community recognizes informal learning as legitimate education that enhances what districts can offer to meet diverse family needs and learning styles.

Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

- California's [Independent Study](#) policy enables **school unwallled** so learning can be customized to meet learners needs and interests.
- California's [Expanded Learning Opportunities Program](#) enables Rock Tree Sky to expand access to their approach to learners, supporting **learner agency** and **school unwallled**.

Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative

SOUTHWEST COLORADO

Community Context and Challenge: The Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative (SWCEC) emerged to address the challenge facing rural districts, where small schools struggle to provide comprehensive career pathway opportunities due to limited resources, capacity, and geographic isolation. Founded initially as an informal group of leaders from five local school districts and two institutions of higher education during the pandemic, SWCEC recognizes that rural students often lack access to diverse career exploration opportunities available in larger districts, while local economies need skilled workers in specific industries. The collaborative addresses the reality that individual small districts cannot sustain robust career programs on their own, particularly in high-demand fields requiring expensive equipment or specialized expertise.



Learning Ecosystem in Action: SWCEC functions as a regional learning ecosystem by operating as a formal nonprofit that facilitates shared resources, coordinates multi-district partnerships, and connects education directly with workforce development across southwestern Colorado. The collaborative includes seven districts (Bayfield, Dolores, Dove Creek, Durango, Ignacio, Mancos, and Silverton) and two colleges (Pueblo Community College and Fort Lewis College). This enables districts to share high-quality career courses through innovative models like cross-enrollment, where students from one district can take specialized courses at another district with cost-sharing agreements based on consumables and equipment needs. SWCEC coordinates regional career pathways spanning construction trades, healthcare, hospitality & tourism, environmental, and education while maintaining extensive business partnerships that provide authentic work-based learning experiences, including internships, job shadows, and industry mentorships.

The organization bridges traditional education and workforce development by positioning itself across multiple sectors, enabling it to secure diverse funding sources, and create direct connections between student learning and regional economic needs. This approach creates expanded learning and career opportunities regardless of their home district's size. Educators share expertise across district boundaries, and rural communities can retain young talent through meaningful career pathways that demonstrate the viability of thriving locally.

Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

- Districts have the flexibility to establish MOUs to establish shared course agreements, enabling **school unwall** expanding opportunities for learners.
- **Concurrent Enrollment:** At no cost to learners, Colorado's concurrent enrollment policy enables access and credit for postsecondary courses.

Tacoma Public Schools

TACOMA, WASHINGTON

Community Context and Challenge:

Tacoma Public Schools (TPS) turns the entire city into a learner-centered ecosystem. Education is not confined to classrooms or bell schedules, but embedded in the life of the community. Each week, learners step beyond the school building to connect their learning with real places and real people. This comprehensive approach, in which relationships are critical, creates an interconnected community where students access authentic learning experiences across the entire city. Partnerships with theaters, parks, museums, libraries, and local businesses transform Tacoma into a living classroom, creating opportunities where knowledge meets action, and students see the relevance of what they are learning.

Community organizations serve as active education partners and learning venues, field experts bring real-world expertise directly into the curriculum, and the boundaries between school and community dissolve to create a seamless learning environment where students develop both academic skills and civic engagement while contributing to their community's vitality. Tacoma Public Schools operate on the principle that traditional education structures can limit learning possibilities, and instead embrace the philosophy that learning happens everywhere and all the time, making community assets inseparable from the school experience.

Learning Ecosystem in Action: Tacoma Public Schools' prioritization of personalization and the learner experience is evident across the district with the ongoing expansion of innovative approaches to learning and partnerships. For example, TPS and the Port of Tacoma are creating the Maritime 253 Skills Center. This regional center's focus will be on maritime logistics, sustainability, and skilled trades, preparing students for careers tied to Tacoma's working waterfront. Three schools in the district, IDEA, SAMI, and SOTA high schools, emerged to transform public education by partnering with community resources and emphasizing creativity, inclusion, and learner agency within a fully inclusive model. Serving over 1,700 learners across three specialized public choice schools—SOTA (Visual Arts and Performing Arts, opened 2001), SAMI (Physical Science, Life Sciences & Math, opened 2009), and IDEA (Industrial Design, Engineering and Art, opened 2016)—these schools address the need for innovative education approaches that connect learning directly to real-world applications partnering with community assets.



The three schools employ field experts as part-time adjunct instructors and maintain extensive partnerships with the Children’s Museum of Tacoma, Tacoma Fire Department, the Mayor’s Office, Native nations (particularly around salmon conservation), small businesses, and colleges. These partnerships are explicitly reciprocal, with student work visible throughout the community, including artwork and slogans at city docks, demonstrating how learners contribute meaningfully to community life while learning. The district provides free public bus transportation for youth and vans for hard-to-reach locations, while utilizing the SchoolLinks platform for college and career readiness coordination.

Spotlighted Enabling Policies and Conditions:

- **Revised Code of Washington 28A.300.550** (Innovation Schools) enables flexibility for implementing **school unwallled** and **credit for out-of-school learning**.
- **Jobs 253 and Jobs 253 Credentialed** programs provide paid internships, industry-recognized credentials, and direct-to-work opportunities that build social capital and economic mobility enabling **learner agency**, **school unwallled**, and **credit for out-of-school learning**.

Emerging Themes

Across these eight learning ecosystems, the specific legislation, rule, or flexibility activated and conditions cultivated are as unique as the communities themselves, adapted to the state and local regulations and realities. However, key themes did emerge around the nature of these enabling policy conditions, providing guidance and inspiration for other localities interested in advancing similar efforts.

One key insight is that learning ecosystems grow and develop when policies are fundamentally integrated, particularly when they intentionally enable flexibility. This alignment fuels more cohesive design, development, implementation, and sustainability for learning ecosystems. In contrast, isolated policies that seek to offer room for innovation often fail to address the interdependencies that ecosystems must navigate, inadvertently constraining what is possible. For example, funding models tied to seat-time create nested sets of constraints that have far-reaching impacts, such as how they affect where credentialed learning can happen or who can be involved in a child’s learning experience. On the other hand, when policies are designed from an integrated approach, there is an opportunity to create openings and possibilities for systems to work more seamlessly.

Equally important, policies are most effective when they are co-created with learners, caregivers, and communities as partners, ensuring that policy development reflects community values and needs. The most transformative examples connect education, industry, and community through coordinated policy frameworks, balancing clear statewide vision and technical support with local autonomy for community-driven ecosystem design. This kind of locally responsive policy implementation enables communities to leverage their unique assets, address local needs, and co-create the values that will drive an ecosystem’s accountability structures in collaboration with diverse community stakeholders.

In each of the eight learning ecosystems profiled, these principles of integration, flexibility, and co-creation came to life in tangible ways. Four domains stand out as key exemplars, corresponding with the Future Features outlined above, of how aligned, responsive policy approaches can unlock the growth of learning ecosystems:

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| 1 | OPENING JURISDICTIONAL BOUNDARIES | 3 | RETHINKING EDUCATOR CERTIFICATION AND EVALUATION |
| 2 | EXPANDING FLEXIBLE LEARNING MODALITIES | 4 | GRANTING CREDIT FOR LEARNING WHEREVER IT HAPPENS |

For each domain, you'll find example mechanisms from these communities, along with guiding questions to invite reflection on the opportunities and constraints impacting your own context. Together, the domains, examples, and prompts can serve as a starting point for envisioning opportunities for learning ecosystems and advocating for policy shifts that expand what's possible for learners and families in your community.

- 1** | **Jurisdictional Flexibility and Boundary-Breaking Policies** are critical to learning ecosystems because the conventional system's current silos make it difficult to realize cross-sector opportunities. While ecosystem design can emerge from many entry points—both within and outside of the public education system—traditional boundaries still constrain this potential. Thus, policies that enable ecosystems to emerge from outside the current system, while allowing them to plug into public education systems and funding, offer an important opportunity to discover how successful ecosystems can operate. These policies are most effective when they prioritize interoperability, creating seamless connections across K-12 education, community-based organizations, higher education, and workforce.

EXAMPLE MECHANISMS:

- Inter-district agreements: A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) enables shared course arrangements and offerings between districts.
- County-wide charter authority: Remove district boundaries for charter school enrollment.
- Innovation school designation: Provide a flexibility mechanism to embed learning within community spaces and partners.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What geographic, institutional, or regulatory boundaries currently prevent your community from accessing the learning opportunities or partnerships you most want to create?
- What community assets (businesses, nonprofits, cultural organizations, higher education institutions) are you unable to fully leverage due to current policy constraints?
- Which boundary-breaking mechanisms already exist in your state but remain underutilized in your region?
- What public education funding models could support learning across ecosystems?

Flexible Learning Modalities are essential to learning ecosystems because they recognize and support diverse ways of organizing learning beyond traditional classroom structures, accommodating learners' real-life circumstances and enabling community-based partnerships. Policies supporting independent study frameworks, flexible scheduling, and alternative learning pathways enable deeper personalized opportunities, while allowing ecosystems to leverage diverse learning providers. These policies expand where learning occurs and create multiple pathways for learners to pursue learning across systems, while the funding they unlock can be invested to shape diverse learning experiences and build necessary ecosystem infrastructure.

EXAMPLE MECHANISMS:

- Independent Study Frameworks: Policy that enables learning outside traditional classrooms.
- Community Partnership Authorities: Enabling districts to partner with external organizations as learning providers.
- Delinking funding from seat-time: Expands the possibilities of where learning can happen when funding is not driven by how much time a learner spends in a classroom.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What barriers currently prevent your community from offering flexible scheduling or alternative learning modalities to accommodate learners' diverse needs?
 - How might independent study or flexible learning frameworks enable your ecosystem to better serve learners?
 - What community partnerships could be strengthened if learners had more flexibility in when, where, and how they engage in learning?
-

Flexibility for Educator Certification and Evaluation is fundamental to learning ecosystems because traditional educator evaluation systems are often compliance-oriented and create barriers to meaningful relationship-building with learners. Likewise, while many adults—mentors, families, and community members—bring valuable insight and capacity, rigid certification requirements too often prevent them from contributing meaningfully. Policies that enable alternative evaluation systems grounded in professional growth, combined with effective non-educator certification pathways, dramatically expand the pool of adults who can safely and effectively play a role in an ecosystem. These policies unlock community assets and expertise that would otherwise remain inaccessible to learners' educational experiences, as well as creating more diversified and specialized roles for adults in an ecosystem.

EXAMPLE MECHANISMS:

- Alternative Teacher Evaluation Systems: Local authority to develop growth-oriented, relationship-focused evaluation frameworks.
- Partial Certification Requirements: Flexibility for intermediary organizations, allowing only a certain percentage of staff to be certified educators.
- Community Educator Pathways: Recognition of non-credentialed adults with relevant community-based experiences and expertise.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What community expertise and diverse professional backgrounds are you unable to leverage due to rigid certification requirements?
 - How do current educator evaluation requirements in your community prioritize compliance over relationship-building and professional growth?
 - Which alternative evaluation frameworks already exist in your state but remain underutilized in your region?
-

4

Credit Flexibility is essential to learning ecosystems because it validates diverse learning experiences and creates pathways for learners to demonstrate mastery through real-world application, rather than traditional seat-time requirements. Competency-based or standards-based policies—combined with recognition for work-based learning, industry partnerships, and community experiences—enable ecosystems to award credit for authentic learning that occurs outside traditional classroom structures, while connecting learners directly to career pathways and postsecondary opportunities. These policies remove barriers of pace and place in credentialing, allowing learners to progress based on demonstrated competency and stack credentials that align with their individual goals and interests. Ecosystems thrive when communities have the authority to create performance or competency-based assessments, aligned with community-defined outcomes, while quality assurance mechanisms operate in the background to ensure equity and impactful learning.

EXAMPLE MECHANISMS:

- **Competency-Based Progression:** Credit awarded based on demonstration of mastery rather than seat-time requirements.
- **Work-Based Learning Credit:** Credit for community and workplace experiences, which is also integrated into graduation requirements.
- **Concurrent or Dual Enrollment:** Access to postsecondary credit during high school at no cost to learners.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- What learning experiences currently happening in your community go unrecognized because they don't fit traditional course structures?
- How might shifting from seat-time to competency-based progression change what becomes possible for learners with diverse paces and learning styles?
- Which work-based learning or industry partnership opportunities exist in your region that could provide stackable credentials for learners?

Conclusion

This exploration of eight diverse learning ecosystems, overlaid with the Future Features, reveals how communities are creatively leveraging existing policies and conditions to address their unique challenges. By examining how these communities navigate their distinct contexts and constraints, this brief opens the door to deeper conversations about the untapped potential within current policy opportunities, as well as illuminating outstanding barriers restricting innovation. The profiles and themes are a starting place for education stakeholders to engage in critical dialogue about which existing flexibilities might be activated in their context, what additional conditions need to be cultivated, and how policy can be reimaged to truly enable the emergence of learning ecosystems.

These resources are available for further exploration of learning ecosystems and the shifts required to support them:

- [Ecosystems for the Future of Learning](#)
- [Futures to Forge](#)
- [Shift: How cultivating an ecosystem remade Pittsburgh's learning landscape](#)
- [State-Level Policy and Conditions Landscape Analysis: Progress and Possibilities to Support Learner-Centered Education and Ecosystem Design](#)
- [Too Essential to Fail: Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to Remake Learning and those who gave their time to share their stories and wisdom to inform this brief:

Amy Besida, Embarc Chicago
Brian White, Butler Area School District
Clara Raley, Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative
Dana Brinson, SparkNC
Kevin Aten, Pueblo Community College
Erin Whalen, Da Vinci RISE High School
Jim Bailey, Rock Tree Sky
Liz Minks, IDEA Tacoma Public Schools
Lynn Moody, SparkNC
Patrick Fredricks, Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative
Sara Butler, Empower Schools
Tyler Samstag, Remake Learning
Valerie Kie and Matthew Kull, NACA Inspired Schools Network (NISN)
Zane Rosette, Native American Community Academy (NACA)

The photos in this brief were provided by and are attributed to each featured learning ecosystem.

