

Known, Supported, Connected

Essential competencies and roles for educators
in thriving learner-centered ecosystems

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Introduction

Do you remember that one person—maybe a teacher, mentor, neighbor, or community member—who saw something in you that even you struggled to believe in? Maybe they listened when others were talking over you. Maybe they introduced you to something that sparked a curiosity you still carry today. Or maybe they simply showed up at the right moment, offering encouragement or connection when you needed it most. For many of us, that presence changed the trajectory of our lives.

Today, too many young people are telling us a different story. They feel disconnected, unseen, and unsure if anyone truly knows them. Research and lived experience both point to what educators have understood for decades: Belonging, deep relationships, and support from caring adults are what make learning possible.¹

Across the country, communities are designing new ways to ensure every young person has that kind of support. They are building learner-centered ecosystems—networks of people and places that expand the definition of where, when, and with whom learning happens. In an ecosystem, learning is not confined to a classroom. It flows across schools, homes, libraries, museums, workplaces, and community spaces, with educators, mentors, coaches, and other caring adults working together so each learner is known, supported, and connected.

WHAT ARE LEARNER-CENTERED ECOSYSTEMS?

Learner-centered ecosystems are a new way of organizing and supporting education. They connect young people to meaningful experiences, opportunities, and resources across their communities.

In these ecosystems:

- Young people co-create learning journeys with educators, mentors, peers, and families.
- They access learning in diverse spaces and settings, both physical and virtual.
- They build their skill sets to contribute meaningfully to their communities, now and in their futures.

Ecosystems make education a community-wide endeavor, weaving together expertise, resources, partners, and local assets in support of our children's growth and development.

¹ Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

What sets these ecosystems apart is that each young person follows their unique learning journey, shaped by their strengths, interests, and the assets of their worlds. The ecosystem itself is designed to support these journeys, where children learn in community, contributing to their peers, families, and localities. For these journeys to thrive, the adults in the ecosystem, whether they work in schools, local organizations, cultural institutions, or workplaces, must be able to build strong relationships, guide learning in varied contexts, and connect learners to opportunities that help them grow.

As these ecosystems emerge [across the country](#) and [Education Reimagined](#) seeks to spur their development and uplift lessons learned from trailblazing leaders, a key question arises:

What competencies do educators need to thrive in a learner-centered ecosystem?



With support from a Moonshot Grant from [Remake Learning](#), we partnered with [Runway Green](#), an emerging learner-centered ecosystem in Brooklyn, New York, and engaged with other learner-centered ecosystem sites nationally to explore this question. We engaged educators, community partners, and learners in listening sessions, site visits, and collaborative conversations. In this exploration, we sought not to generate a definitive list of competencies set in stone, but to surface a living starting point or an initial set of insights and possibilities that communities can adapt, test, and grow as the work of building ecosystems continues to evolve.

RUNWAY GREEN

Runway Green was an especially powerful testing ground because it grew directly out of Launch Expeditionary Learning Charter School, an Outward Bound middle school grounded in character-building, real-world fieldwork, and deep advisory structures. Those strong experiential learning roots gave it a uniquely grounded understanding of how to weave together teamwork, inquiry, and learner agency. Building on that foundation, Launch's vision expanded beyond a single school: Its leaders established Runway Green as a separate nonprofit to bring broader ecosystem ambitions to life. At Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Field, Runway Green is now crafting a seven-acre, public-private experiential learning campus—bringing together farms, labs, workforce training, partner-led projects, and credentialed pathways to serve thousands of New York City students in green economy careers.

Our learnings affirm what many educators seek to be successful: the support and structures to know children well, to be in sustained relationship with them, and to have the networks and resources to respond to their needs and aspirations. The conversations were not about creating a new kind of educator, but about expanding our understanding of who serves as an educator, and identifying the shared competencies necessary to establish strong relationships and guide learning across the whole ecosystem.

This report shares what we learned. It offers a set of roles and competencies for educators in learner-centered ecosystems, and insights for communities creating the conditions where every young person is known, supported, and connected to the opportunities they need to thrive. The voices we heard were clear. They painted a vision of education where belonging and connection are not left to chance, but intentionally designed into every learner's experience. They also reminded us that this vision is not a distant ideal. It is possible now.



WHY THIS MATTERS

We are in a moment of [profound change](#) in education. The boundaries that once defined where learning happens, who guides it, and what it looks like are being pushed. Young people are growing up in a world where access to knowledge is paramount, where skills are learned in countless contexts, and where relationships are as important to learning as content.

At the same time, the pressures on young people are increasing. Many report feeling disconnected, stressed, and unsure of the practical application and relevance of learning they do in school. Educators, too, are stretched thin and asked to meet every need without the network, support or time to truly know learners. Contemporary SEL frameworks affirm that when young people develop skills like self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship-building, their sense of belonging and readiness to learn deepen—highlighting why transforming our systems is so urgent.²

In this context, learner-centered ecosystems [offer a way forward](#). They make it possible to see every young person as part of a living network of relationships, resources, and opportunities. They expand the definition of educator to include the full range of adults who can guide, mentor, and inspire learning inside and outside school walls. And they invite us to design the systems, roles, and competencies that can bring that vision to life. At the same time,

momentum is building as communities across the country are beginning to imagine and test [new ecosystem approaches](#). The urgency of this moment calls for fresh perspectives to inform that visioning, so local leaders, educators, and partners have a starting place to design and grow their own ecosystems.



² Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), “SEL Framework: What Are the Core Competencies of Social and Emotional Learning?,” CASEL, 2020, accessed September 21, 2025.



The question of **what competencies educators need in these ecosystems** is not an abstract one.

It goes to the heart of what it will take to make learning personal, connected, and relevant for every young person. These competencies are the connective tissue that allows an ecosystem to function: They enable educators to build trust, adapt to varied contexts, and work in partnership with one another to meet the needs and aspirations of each learner.

By identifying and defining these competencies, we can help communities:

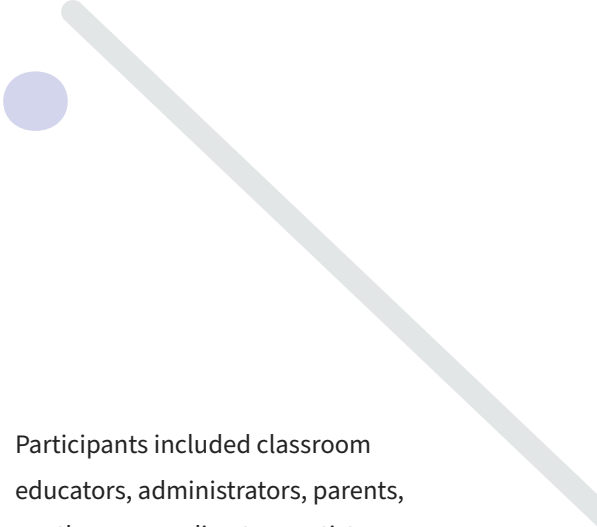
- Strengthen the relationships and roles that make learning possible,
- Provide professional learning and support structures that sustain educators over time, and
- Build a shared language for what it means to guide learning across the whole ecosystem.

In short, this work matters now because it addresses one of the most urgent and enduring needs in education: ensuring that every young person is known, supported, and connected to the opportunities they need to thrive—not by chance, but by design.

EXPLORING THE COMPETENCIES

From the beginning, our goal was to design an inquiry process rooted in listening, co-creation, and real-world examples. Together, we gathered insights not only from Runway Green's network, but also from other sites growing their ecosystems. Over several months, we:

- Convened two **educator gatherings** with the staff of Runway Green;
- Hosted a **community listening session** with Runway Green partners, including business leaders, community leaders, and parents;
- Posed these questions at site visits with educators and administrators serving a diverse range of youth and community demographics, including these emerging ecosystems:
 - **Rock Tree Sky**—a self-directed learning community in Ojai, California, anchoring the development of a broader community-based learning ecosystem across the valley;
 - **SparkNC**—a North Carolina initiative connecting high school students with cutting-edge experiences in technology, game design, AI, and other future-focused fields through a statewide network of schools and partners;
 - **The PAST Foundation**—a Columbus-based nonprofit design and research organization that partners with schools, businesses and communities to co-create innovative, real-world learning models and ecosystem initiatives;
- Tested emerging ideas in **field-wide conversations** to hear from people in diverse geographies and settings.



Participants included classroom educators, administrators, parents, youth program directors, artists, business owners, cultural workers, and learners themselves. This breadth was intentional: We wanted a picture of competencies that would hold true across roles, settings, and communities. What follows are the competencies we heard named most often and most strongly: practices and mindsets that educators in every setting identified as essential for supporting a young person's unique learning journey in the ecosystem.

Exploring the Competencies: Here's What We Heard



Across all settings, participants affirmed that the heart of this work is **knowing each learner deeply** and being able to guide them across varied contexts toward meaningful opportunities.

In an ecosystem, learners are supported by teams of professional educators whose strengths are complemented by the contributions of families, community members, and other stakeholders to learners' journeys. Given this, a single educator is not expected to be and do everything for a child. In fact, ecosystems offer the opportunity for new levels of specialization and diversification for professional educators. While our primary focus in this report is on professional educators, we also heard repeatedly that other stakeholders bring essential expertise and roles. Incorporating community educators and neighbors represents a significant shift from conventional models and expands what is possible for learners and ecosystems alike.

From our meetings and conversations, we approached the question of competencies through the lens of ecosystems and considered what educators need when learning unfolds across schools, families, and community spaces. Viewed this way, the competencies that surfaced were less about specific techniques, and more about ways of being and ways of working that enable educators to thrive in a connected, relationship-centered ecosystem. These are not soft skills or general dispositions alone, they represent a professional body of expertise that requires intentional development, investment, and ongoing practice.

What follows is not meant to be a comprehensive or definitive list, but rather a set of potential competencies that are particularly distinctive in an ecosystem context. We offer them as prompts to expand thinking and as starting points that communities can adapt, test, and build upon as they shape their own visions.



**BUILD AND
SUSTAIN TRUSTING
RELATIONSHIPS**



**NAVIGATE AND
CONNECT ACROSS
CONTEXTS**



**GUIDE LEARNING
WITHOUT
CONTROLLING IT**



**PRACTICE CULTURAL
AND LOCAL
RESPONSIVENESS**



**ADAPT AND
PROBLEM-SOLVE
IN REAL TIME**



**COMMIT TO
CONTINUOUS
GROWTH**

1

BUILD AND SUSTAIN TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS

The foundation of an educator’s work in an ecosystem is knowing each learner deeply—who they are, where they come from, what they care about, and where they hope to go. Trust grows from consistency, respect, and a willingness to show up in ways that signal, “I see you, I believe in you, and I’m here to walk alongside you.”

Educators described trust as the currency that makes every other part of their role possible.³ Without it, learners will not open up, take risks, or step into opportunities you suggest or make available. Building trust is slow, intentional work that is earned moment by moment, and sustained through care and presence.

“A starting place is really believing that there’s more in you than you know, and that there’s more in everybody you know. Our responsibility as educators is to nurture that brilliance in every single one of our kids and families.”

EDUCATOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“You have to care in order to pay attention. You have to care to connect.”

**COMMUNITY PARTNER,
RUNWAY GREEN**

“Young people have to know you believe in them, not just in words, but in how you show up for them every day.”

**COMMUNITY PARTNER,
RUNWAY GREEN**

When trust is present, learners and educators can take risks together. The relationship itself becomes a source of strength and growth.

³ Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider, *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

2

NAVIGATE AND CONNECT ACROSS CONTEXTS

In an ecosystem, learning happens in many places—across schools, homes, neighborhood spaces, and field sites. Educators must be able to move between them with ease, connecting a learner’s goals to experiences and opportunities in the community, and vice versa. This requires being attuned to what’s happening in the spaces learners experience, maintaining strong relationships with mentors and partners who work alongside young people, and spotting openings that align with a learner’s goals.

The best connectors don’t just know the resources, they know how to scaffold them into meaningful learning pathways. They can translate an internship, a project, or experience into chances to build durable skills and academic knowledge alongside personal growth. They carry a mental map of assets, people, and places, and they know how to align those with a learner’s goals at just the right moment. Just as importantly, they help ensure that learning doesn’t slip through the cracks: They identify ways to codify experiences so that they count, are recognized, and become part of a learner’s ongoing journey.

“I need eyes and ears everywhere—on the space, the community—to draw students into what’s alive and changing around them.”

EDUCATOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“[My role] hinges so much on connection, being able to be flexible and shift, to connect the dots between spaces.”

ADVISOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“We have to leverage every asset in our community, so learners see that what’s here matters, too.”

PRINCIPAL, RUNWAY GREEN

As ecosystems mature, this connective role becomes even more essential, helping to knit together a patchwork of experiences into a coherent, visible learning journey that belongs to the learner.

3

GUIDE LEARNING WITHOUT CONTROLLING IT

Educators in ecosystems create the conditions for learning rather than dictating its path. They help learners ask questions, make choices, and navigate challenges, stepping in to support but not to steer every move.

This begins with a shift in mindset. Guiding without controlling requires humility and openness, a willingness to acknowledge what you do not know, to learn alongside students, and to trust that the process, while sometimes messy, will lead to growth. Caring is not peripheral here but the foundation of authentic learning.⁴ It also means allowing space for learners to experience failure, reflect, and try again—knowing these moments often lead to the deepest learning.

“Relinquish control. Be on the journey with them. Model how to find out about something you don’t know.”

EDUCATOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“Trust in the unfolding. It’s not having an agenda. In the unfolding, and in this kind of ‘in time’ and ‘present’ relating—so much unfolds.”

**EDUCATOR / MENTOR,
ROCK TREE SKY**

“We need to be okay with letting them fail and learn from it. That’s where the real growth happens.”

**COMMUNITY PARTNER,
RUNWAY GREEN**

This capacity to guide without controlling is a cornerstone competency that allows learners to take ownership of their growth while still knowing they are supported by a trusted adult.

⁴ Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).

4

PRACTICE CULTURAL AND LOCAL RESPONSIVENESS

Educators in an ecosystem see and honor the cultures, histories, and lived experiences that each learner brings. They integrate local knowledge, traditions, and stories into learning experiences, ensuring they are relevant and affirming. They also do the internal and collective work of identifying and unlearning biases that can limit how they see a learner’s potential.

This responsiveness builds trust and makes learning meaningful. It positions educators not just as guides to academic skills, but as partners in a learner’s identity development and sense of belonging.⁵

“We need an asset-based mindset. Start with what’s in the learner’s home, their family, their community, and elevate that.”

**ADMINISTRATOR,
RUNWAY GREEN**

“Unpack your biases and assumptions that might keep us apart; see young people as whole humans with lived experience.”

EDUCATOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“Cultural relevance isn’t a bonus—it’s the foundation for trust and engagement.”

**YOUTH DEVELOPMENT LEADER,
RUNWAY GREEN**

When educators embrace cultural and community responsiveness, they position themselves as partners in belonging, thus holding space where learners’ full identities are recognized as strengths.

⁵Karen F. Osterman, “Students’ Need for Belonging in the School Community,” *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 3 (2000): 323–367.

5

ADAPT AND PROBLEM-SOLVE IN REAL TIME

Educators in ecosystems are agile. They adapt to changing circumstances, whether it's a shift in schedule, a learner's changing needs, or an unexpected challenge in the learning environment. This flexibility is paired with resilience, modeling for learners how to respond constructively to setbacks.

Adaptability is not reactive; rather, it's intentional. It comes from a readiness to improvise, see multiple pathways forward, and partner with learners in finding solutions.

“Things will go crashing sometimes—and it's okay. What matters is being calm, finding solutions, and trying something new.”

EDUCATOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“Be ready to navigate ambiguity. We can't know everything in advance, and that's part of the work.”

EDUCATOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“It's about resilience—bouncing back with the learner, not just for them.”

EDUCATOR / MENTOR,
ROCK TREE SKY

Adaptability in this sense is a defining competency, and one that models for learners how to face uncertainty. It commits to building that same capacity in them, so resilience and problem-solving become shared strengths.

6

COMMIT TO CONTINUOUS GROWTH

The work of educating in an ecosystem demands an ongoing learning mindset. Educators reflect on their practice, seek feedback, and continually adapt to the learners they serve today—not just the ones they’ve taught before.

Continuous growth is also about modeling curiosity for learners—showing them what it looks like to take risks, make mistakes, and improve over time. In an ecosystem, this growth is often mutual: Educators learn from learners just as much as learners learn from them.

“We have to model that we’re learners too—taking risks, struggling, and growing alongside our students.”

EDUCATOR, RUNWAY GREEN

“Reverse mentorship is powerful. Ask kids what they want to teach you.”

COMMUNITY PARTNER,
RUNWAY GREEN

“Stay curious about human behavior. Keep evolving your practice so it serves the learners you have today, not the ones you had ten years ago.”

PARENT, RUNWAY GREEN

A commitment to continuous growth rests on mutuality and recognizing that educators and learners can learn from one another, building respect and deepening the relationships that make learning thrive.

The Roles of Educators in Learner-Centered Ecosystems



Our work with Runway Green began with a focus on competencies—what educators need to know and be able to do to thrive in an ecosystem. As conversations unfolded, a related question emerged: **What roles can make it possible for educators to fully embody those competencies?**

In our listening sessions, participants described how centering the unique learning journey of each child would require a shift in how educator roles are structured. They imagined a learner’s path moving fluidly through many settings such as a classroom, a library, a makerspace, an internship, a performance stage, or a science lab. They stressed that for these experiences to form a coherent and meaningful whole, educators would need time and responsibilities organized for connection, guidance, and coordination.

They were clear that these roles could not simply be added to the end of an already full schedule. Many spoke about the need to rethink how time is used, with more flexibility to meet learners where they are, to spend time in neighborhood spaces, to plan with other educators, and to follow a learner’s progress over weeks, months, and years.

Examples they offered included reorganizing staffing so that some educators could focus primarily on advising and relationship-holding, while others would take the lead in designing learning experiences or building partnerships. Some imagined shifting time away from traditional teaching loads to create space for meeting with families, visiting field sites, and coordinating opportunities across sectors.

These ideas were rooted in a shared belief: If we want every young person’s journey to be supported, connected, and purposeful, we must design educator roles with that promise in mind from the start.

The ideas that followed aren’t rigid job descriptions or one-size-fits-all templates. They are sketches or provocative starting points for thinking about the structures and positions that can allow educators to do their best work. Every community is unique. The roles an ecosystem needs will depend on its learners, partners, assets, and aspirations. Still, across settings, we heard recurring roles that help weave together the people, places, and experiences that shape learners’ journeys



THE CENTRAL ROLE: ADVISOR

One role stood out above all others in its potential impact on a learner's success: **the advisor.**

Whether called a learning advisor, mentor, or guide, this is the anchor for a young person's unique journey, and the primary relationship-holder who knows the learner deeply, stays connected over time, and helps them navigate the full breadth of their learning experiences. Advisors see the whole learner in the context of their family and community, and attend to academic progress, social-emotional growth, personal goals, and an evolving sense of purpose. They help learners make meaning of their experiences, reflect on their growth, and chart clear next steps.



For an advisor to be effective, the role must be designed with the time, flexibility, and authority to:

- Build and sustain strong relationships with each learner and their family;
- Collaborate across settings with other educators, mentors, and partners;
- Support learners in making choices, solving problems, and overcoming obstacles;
- Coordinate the learner's experiences so they form a coherent, connected journey; and
- Guide the learner to curate a complex network of relationships and social capital.

Without this dedicated function, the ecosystem risks becoming a loose collection of opportunities, rather than a meaningful pathway entwined with a learner's goals. The advisor's role is what keeps the learner at the center.

Just as importantly, advising is not only about one-to-one relationships. It is about cultivating a learning circle where many learners feel connected, where belonging is shared, and where guidance is understood as collective work.

MORE ROLES THAT SUPPORT THE JOURNEY

While the advisor holds the anchor relationship, participants also described other functions that make a learner's journey whole. Educators and community members named these roles not as established job titles, but as [functions](#) they saw ecosystems needing in order to support every young person. These are capacities that different adults in the ecosystem can fill depending on context and need.

- **Bridgekeeper (Family–School–Community Liaison):** Aligns home, school, and community life so learning flows without interruption. This role ensures a learner's growth is understood across contexts, weaving together family priorities, school progress, and after-hours exploration.
- **Growth Mentor:** Supports learners through personal, social, emotional, and academic growth, fostering agency, resilience, and purpose. This role represents the adults who help young people steady themselves when challenges arise, and remind them of their strengths and connect them to professional services when needed.
- **Journey Designer:** Co-creates personalized learning pathways with learners and families, drawing on in-school, community-based, and online opportunities. It is the function that helps a young person see how different experiences add up to a coherent whole.
- **Community Connector:** Maps local assets and partnerships, opening doors to mentors, field experiences, and real-world challenges. This role ensures opportunities in the wider community are linked and integrated into a learner's evolving pathway.
- **Portfolio Curator:** Helps learners document and reflect on their work over time, gathering evidence of skills, growth, and achievement across contexts. This function ensures that learning is visible, recognized and counts, wherever it happens.
- **Internship Coordinator:** Organizes work-based experiences and partnerships, making sure young people can access and succeed in professional settings that expand their horizons.

These sketches were offered not as formal job descriptions but as ways to imagine how time and responsibility could be organized differently. They remind us that if we want every young person's journey to be supported and connected, ecosystems need adults who can hold these functions—sometimes as dedicated roles, sometimes woven into existing ones.

Conclusion

These findings are an invitation. They invite us to see educators as members of a broader network of care and learning. They invite us to expand our definition of where, when, and with whom learning happens, and to ensure that every educator, whether in a classroom, a museum, a makerspace, a workplace, or a neighborhood center, has what they need to help young people flourish.



And they invite us to act and to build the systems, partnerships, and supports that make these competencies and roles not exceptional, but expected. To create the conditions where the promise we make to every learner—to be known, supported, and connected—is fulfilled intentionally, not left to chance. And to make the same promise to educators so that they, too, are supported and connected, with the time and resources to develop these competencies, so that both learners and educators can grow and thrive together.

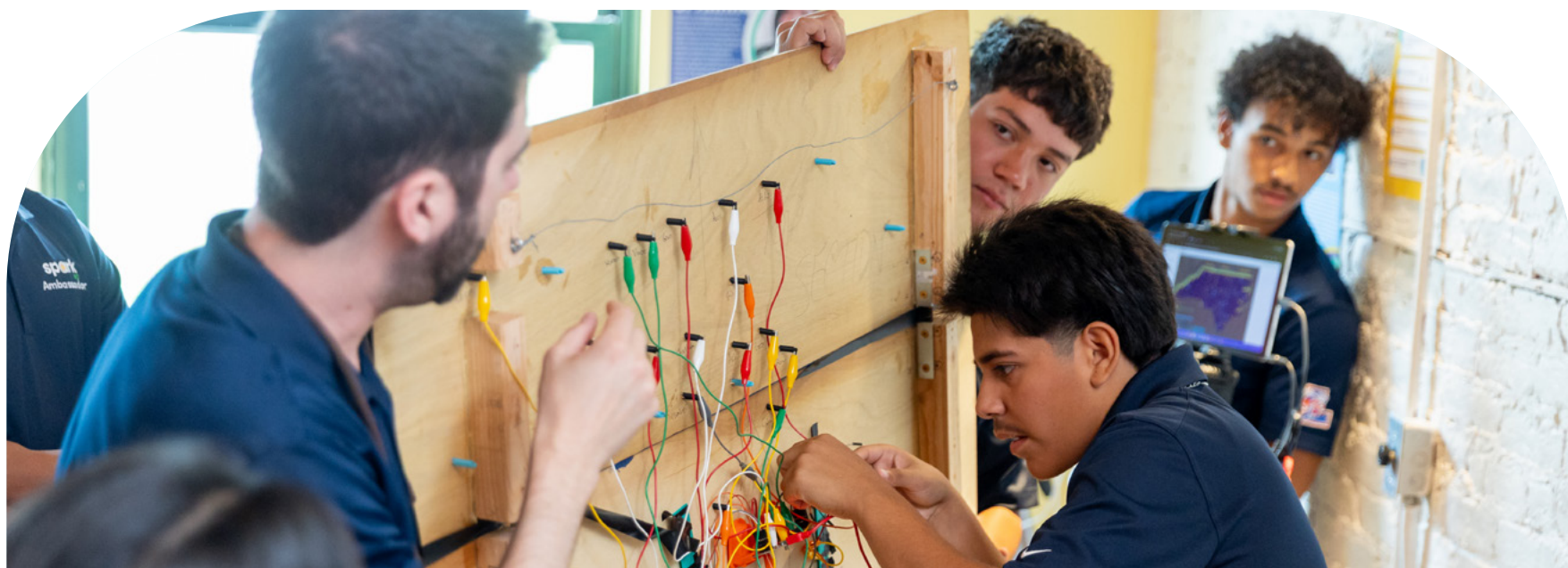
As you consider these roles and competencies, you might ask:

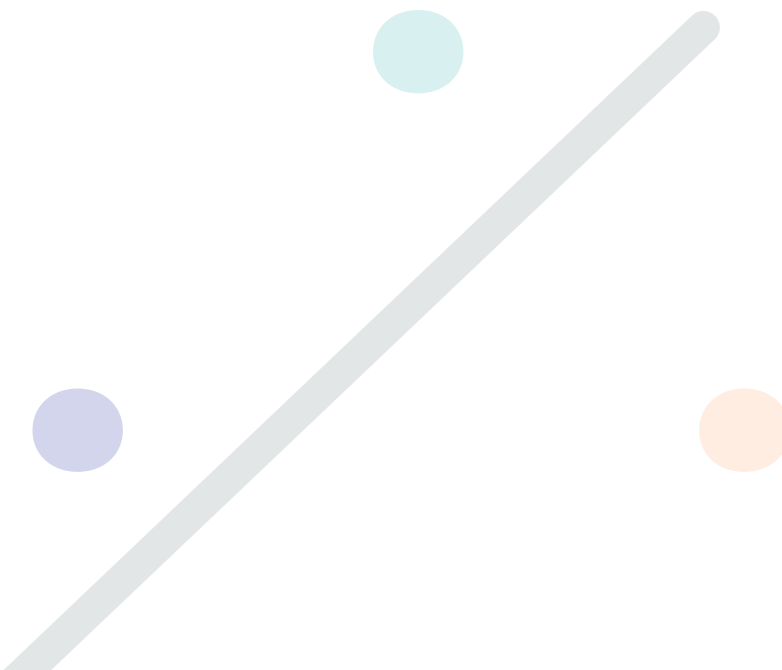
Which of these roles or functions are already alive in your community?

Where are the gaps that, if filled, could most strengthen the learner experience?

How might time, resources, or partnerships be reimagined to make these functions possible?

What structures would help educators embody these competencies in practice?





We are grateful to the educators, partners, and learners whose generosity, love, and thoughtfulness made this work possible. Their voices remind us that this is not only about transforming systems, but also about honoring the relationships at the heart of learning. In their vision, we see that the definition of “educator” widens to include the mentors, artists, cultural leaders, and community partners whose contributions make learning whole. And in this vision, we see a future where every young person’s journey is unique and full of possibility, and where every educator is trusted, supported, and celebrated for the essential role they play in making that future real.

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