



education 
reimagined

WHERE LEARNING LIVES:

Insights from the
Learner-Centered
Ecosystem Lab

December 2025



Preface: An Invitation

What happens when communities believe young people can lead their own learning?

What happens when learning is seen as unfolding everywhere—in parks, kitchens, rec centers, cultural spaces, workplaces, and in relationships?

Imagine if sparks of curiosity and imagination in overlooked places were recognized as integral to education.

Imagine systems that trade compliance and competition for coherence, collaboration, and care.

This report offers an invitation to see education not as a top-down system, but as a learner-centered ecosystem: adaptive, interconnected, and rooted in community. One that reflects how learning truly happens: in layers, across settings, and over time.

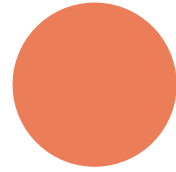
We wrote this for those who believe every young person deserves an education that helps them discover who they are, develop their gifts, and contribute meaningfully to the world. We wrote this for those who recognize the need for responsive and equitable systems that make learning relevant for their lives today and tomorrow.

This is not a catalog of what is broken, nor a denial of the harsh realities and inequities many face today. Instead, this report offers a window into what might be built: an education system that sees, values, and supports whole people in whole communities.

As Ruha Benjamin wrote, “We must populate our imaginations with images and stories of our shared humanity, of our interconnectedness, of our solidarity as people. A poetics of welcome, not walls.”¹

This report is not a final word, but an opening. It’s a chance to see what’s possible when education stems from the ecosystems already surrounding young people.

What might emerge if the central question shifted from *What’s not working?* to *What can grow here?*



Introduction

What will it take to transform public education into a living, interconnected ecosystem?

This question guided our work over the past year as Education Reimagined convened the Learner-Centered Ecosystem Lab. We partnered with twelve communities across the country that are reimagining education as part of the life of a place and the structures needed to sustain it. They are weaving connections among people, places, and opportunities to create more coherent systems of learning. Together, we learned what it takes to grow ecosystems in practice.

The pages that follow offer both a record of what has emerged and an invitation to imagine what's still possible.

We begin with the research that supports an ecosystem approach, then describe the Lab sites and their communities, and finally share insights that we hope will guide others in their work. Taken together, these experiences and insights reveal a new pattern for public education that grows from local innovation and expands opportunity for all learners.

Across the Lab, we saw ecosystems taking shape in both practical and profound ways. Learning environments formed new partnerships with community organizations, districts, museums, parks, and local businesses. Learning

experiences were designed to match learners' developmental readiness—from safe spaces of discovery for our youngest learners to expanding levels of autonomy and exposure as their capacities develop. Schools and other learning environments served as home bases that foster belonging, relationships, and care.

We saw educators thriving in ecosystems through reimagined roles and daily work that grew more collaborative, humane, and sustainable. Advisors acted as steady and trusted guides, helping young people connect their interests to meaningful experiences. Across communities, new systems began to take root, grounded in the realities of learners' lives today and designed to help them shape and navigate their futures.

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 relationships across and within their communities. Ecosystems make education a community-wide endeavor, weaving together expertise, resources, and partners in support of our children's growth and development.

In these ecosystems, young people are able to:



Grounds for an Ecosystem Approach

Decades of research now provide a clearer picture than ever of how young people learn, grow, and thrive. Insights from human development, the science of learning and development, and systems thinking point to the same conclusion: Young people flourish in environments that are coherent, relevant, and rich in relationships and support.

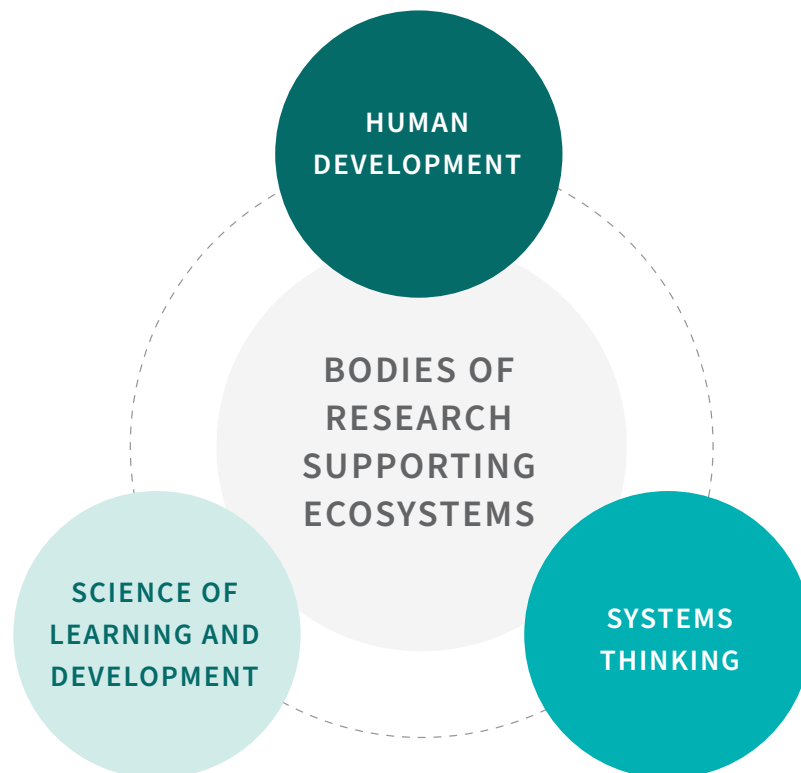
Human development research shows that growth happens within the layers of relationships and environments that shape young people's lives.² No single setting can meet all of a young person's interests, needs, and aspirations.³ Ecosystems respond to this reality by surrounding learners with webs of intentional relationships across multiple settings, connecting them with trusted adults—from elders to employers—who together support all domains of development.

The **science of learning and development** tells us that young people learn best in contexts that feel safe, supportive, and engaging.⁴ Curiosity and motivation thrive when learning connects to their lives, relationships, and interests.⁵ Ecosystems make this possible by starting with what young people need to grow socially, emotionally, and academically, rather than only organizing learning around narrow measures of achievement.

Systems thinking emphasizes that growth unfolds within a web of relationships and environments, as schools, homes, and communities are all interconnected and influence one another.⁶ The wider systems of policy, culture, and technology also connect and shape these environments, influencing how young people learn and grow. Ecosystems bring these elements together, aligning people, places, and practices so that learning feels consistent and supportive no matter where it happens.

Together, these three bodies of research point to ecosystems as a natural and practical expression of what young

people need most. Recent syntheses of related research supported by Education Reimagined, such as [Too Essential to Fail](#), [Ecosystems for the Future of Learning](#), and [Designed to Thrive](#), further develop this case.⁷ Leading organizations across the field, including [Remake Learning](#), [UNESCO](#), and [Economist Impact \(as commissioned by the Jacobs Foundation\)](#), also point to community-connected models as a powerful path forward for education.⁸ Evidence points to a positive impact in communities implementing elements of an ecosystem approach to education, including increased engagement, cognitive competencies, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, postsecondary outcomes, and more.⁹



When ecosystems align with how development and learning truly happen, they create environments that support both individual growth and collective thriving. The power of ecosystems is that they integrate these theories together into a cohesive educational system.

The work of building learner-centered ecosystems is not only about education—it is about strengthening the very fabric of society. Ecosystems answer the urgent needs in front of us by preparing young people for fulfilling lives and economic mobility, supporting their wellbeing, and cultivating the habits of civic life. As research reminds us, democracy itself is rooted in relationships, which are also the most powerful drivers of adolescent growth and flourishing.¹⁰

What Thriving Ecosystems Make Possible



When young people are seen, supported, and able to thrive, they help their communities flourish.



When communities have the resources and power to grow, they nurture the diverse needs, strengths, and dreams of all learners.



When systems expand access and opportunity, everyone moves toward collective wellbeing and shared prosperity.

This is the potential of ecosystems: learning as a community-wide responsibility, opportunity as a shared commitment, and thriving as a collective possibility. These ideas are not new; many before us have suggested or embraced similar approaches. What is new is applying the idea of ecosystems more broadly to public education. And this is not just theory. **Across the country, ecosystems are already taking root in rural, urban, and suburban communities alike, showing that this vision is both possible and underway.**

About the Ecosystem Lab

Beginning in September 2024, Education Reimagined convened twelve sites from across the country that were growing their local ecosystems (see the table on page 8 for descriptions of the sites). Over twelve months, Lab participants shared stories, built solutions, and explored what it truly means to create ecosystems of learning—from piloting new technologies to leveraging tools that recognize learning across all aspects of life. All of the sites share a commitment that every young person is known, seen, and loved. They view [learner-centered education](#) as a powerful way to deliver on that commitment and see ecosystems as the best way to reach all learners systemically.

While they vary in size, context, culture, and stage of development, all of the Lab sites recognize that schools, though critically important, cannot shoulder the responsibility for future generations alone. They also see the value of coordinating systems and supports that strengthen coherence and connection across their communities. From our year of partnership, Education Reimagined gleaned insights into how these ecosystems operate and what can be learned from their successes and challenges. The next section of this report highlights these insights.



Emerging Insights

As we studied the Lab sites and synthesized data from a cross-site survey¹¹, six cross-cutting insights emerged that capture both the promise and the practical realities of building learner-centered ecosystems:

- 1 Ecosystems are purpose-driven.
- 2 Ecosystems are adaptive and dynamic.
- 3 Ecosystems are rooted in place.
- 4 Ecosystems are powered by relationships.
- 5 Ecosystems are deeply human.
- 6 Ecosystems enable lasting transformation.

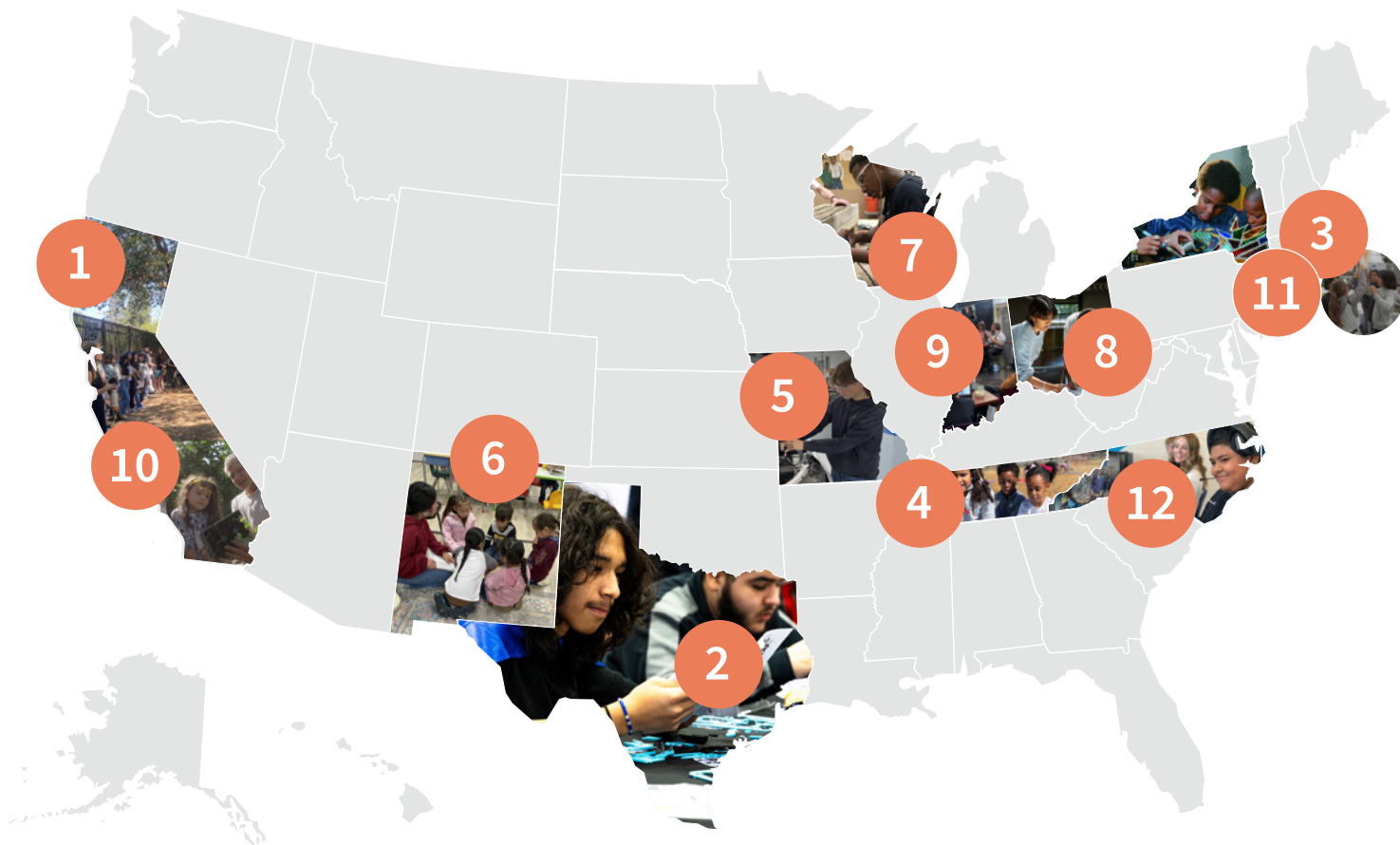


In the following sections, we explore each of these characteristics, combining what we observed at the Lab sites with findings from the cross-site survey. For each of the six insights, we provide:

- a description unpacking what we observed and how it plays out in practice;
- examples from Lab sites that bring the insight to life; and
- “look-fors” and guiding questions for leaders to consider in their own contexts.

Taken together, these six insights represent opportunities we see across diverse communities and contexts to build thriving ecosystems. They’re not prescriptions, but rather invitations to reflect, adapt, and apply innovations in ways that honor local culture, assets, and needs.

LEARNER-CENTERED ECOSYSTEM LAB SITES



1 Big Picture South Valley
Ukiah, California
At Ukiah's [Big Picture South Valley](#) High School, the community is creating an ecosystem of learning rooted in Indigenous traditions and pedagogy in partnership with the Big Picture Learning Native American Initiative. By blending internships, projects, and cultural practice, South Valley High supports Native youth in leading their own learning while strengthening their communities.

2 Big Thought
Dallas, Texas
In Dallas, [Big Thought](#) has built an ecosystem where schools, artists, and community partners come together to enable learning experiences around each child's creative potential. From pre-K through age 24, Big Thought's citywide initiatives allow young people to access creative opportunities that expand learning beyond classrooms and nurture leadership, equity, and belonging.

3 FabNewport
Newport, Rhode Island
[FabNewport](#) weaves a network of more than 40 partners to give young people choice-filled summers and year-round pathways into leadership, wellness, and work. Its ecosystem centers each child's Positive Future Vision, and connects families, schools, and community organizations so young people can discover passions, explore opportunities, and pursue their unique dreams and aspirations.

4 **The Lab School of Memphis** Memphis, Tennessee

[The Lab School of Memphis](#) connects inquiry-driven learning inside classrooms with real-world projects across the city. Its ecosystem approach blends creativity and community to help its learners grow as problem-solvers and innovators.

5 **Liberty Public Schools** Liberty, Missouri

[Liberty Public Schools](#) is cultivating a district-wide ecosystem of learner-centered practice for over 12,000 young people. By piloting and scaling new approaches, it ensures every learner has access to meaningful, personalized opportunities that extend into the community.

6 **NACA (Native American Community Academy) Inspired Schools Network** New Mexico

The [NACA Inspired Schools Network \(NISN\)](#) is expanding many ecosystems of culturally grounded, learner-centered education across the country. Schools emphasize Native values, community voice, and leadership, creating environments where every learner can thrive in identity and purpose.

7 **Norris School District** Mukwonago, Wisconsin

In rural Wisconsin, [Norris School District](#) has built an ecosystem of trauma-informed care that blends education, wellness, and community supports. Learners build and pursue their learning journeys, co-creating goals with specialists and connecting to resources that honor their whole selves and contexts, to get to their next best place.

8 **The PAST Foundation** Columbus, Ohio

[The PAST Foundation](#) is designing and studying the Columbus EcosySTEM Initiative, which bridges schools, industry, and communities. By embedding STEM and work-based experiences, it helps young people see the world itself as a laboratory for growth.

9 **Purdue Polytechnic High Schools** Indianapolis, Indiana

[Purdue Polytechnic High Schools](#) are advancing a learner-centered ecosystem centered in microschool advisories that connect learners with universities, industries, and civic partners. Through project-based and STEM learning, they open flexible pathways for underrepresented students to find their purpose as they contribute to their community.

10 **Rock Tree Sky** Ojai, California

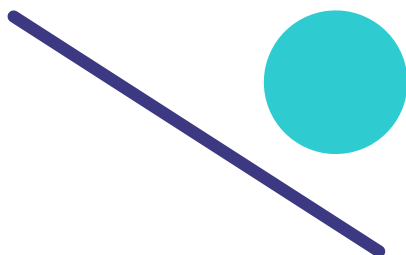
[Rock Tree Sky](#) is working with the Ojai Unified School District and a wealth of community partners to cultivate the Ojai Learning Ecosystem for K–12 learners. With outdoor explorations, creative projects, and youth development support, young people grow in connection to place, peers, and mentors.

11 **Runway Green** Brooklyn, New York

[Runway Green](#) is transforming an abandoned airfield into a living ecosystem of learning. The campus will integrate STEAM, environmental stewardship, and community partnerships to create hands-on opportunities for learners.

12 **SparkNC** North Carolina

[SparkNC](#) is building a statewide ecosystem that connects 25 school districts and their learners with industry and higher-education organizations in high-tech pathways. Through personalized, competency-based learning, young people choose their own learning paths and stack experiences toward credit, while gaining real-world experience and charting futures in fast-growing fields.



1

ECOSYSTEMS ARE PURPOSE-DRIVEN

They emerge as a more natural and logical way to organize education when the purpose of learning shifts to support every child in understanding themselves, and then embracing their gifts and applying them in their communities.

In a learner-centered ecosystem, young people explore who they are, what they need, and where they want to go. Purpose becomes the anchor for both the individual and the system. This requires clarity and steadfastness to a shared vision for learning that itself centers each child's journey. Education looks different if learners are building skills through interests like engineering or cooking, or through pursuits like mindfulness or human rights, rather than only following a uniform curriculum.

As they grow academically, socially, and personally, learners move at a pace and in spaces that fit their lives. Educators and mentors connect them with resources and opportunities that meet their needs. Learners find meaning and connection to the world through projects, internships, and partnerships that strengthen their communities, while preparing them for the future.

Across the twelve ecosystems, survey results showed that strength of vision and culture are strong predictors for successful ecosystem growth. A learner-centered vision aligns efforts and creates an environment of trust, respect, and belonging. A clear direction allows partners to see their role, while culture-building activities foster mutual respect and psychological safety.

Norris School District in Wisconsin and Rock Tree Sky in California both show what it looks like when education is organized around helping young people discover who they are, develop their gifts, and contribute to their communities. Though different in context, each demonstrates how centering purpose can transform learning into a deeply personal and community-connected endeavor.

“The purpose of a place like Norris is to help learners figure out what their next best place is when they leave us.”

JOHNNA NOLL,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
NORRIS SCHOOL DISTRICT



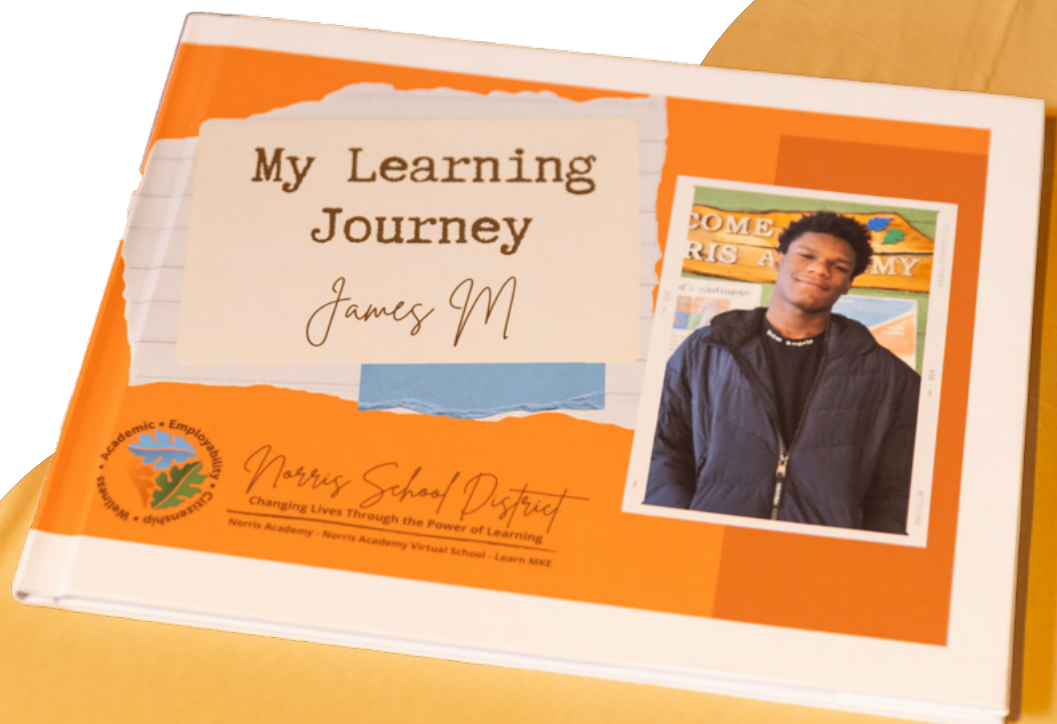


IN PRACTICE

Norris School District is focused on helping each child get to their next best place. Many young people arrive at Norris having experienced trauma and struggled in conventional school settings. In response, Norris expands opportunities and support across Mukwonago, Milwaukee, and the state, connecting learners with the people and resources they need.

At both the individual and system levels, learning begins with each child's strengths and aspirations. Every learner creates a profile that guides growth across four dimensions: academics, employability, citizenship, and wellness. This living profile shapes a personalized journey, with learners co-designing plans and pathways alongside specialists and a broader learning network. The result is

community-based, relevant learning—from internships and mentorships to projects that connect their passions with practical contributions close to home. Through its work in the Ecosystem Lab, Norris forged new partnerships with social service agencies already trusted in underserved communities. By building learning hubs within these agencies, Norris has created new entry points for learners and authentic, community-embedded opportunities. These collaborations expand the district's purpose-driven work, weaving together a network of support that helps each young person move forward on their educational journey.





IN PRACTICE

Rock Tree Sky (RTS) in Ojai, California, supports young people to discover who they are, follow their curiosity, and share their gifts with the community. Learners co-create their days with mentors through projects, internships, and service, while families participate through the RTS Village parent organization, strengthening shared ownership of the learning culture. Founder Jim Bailey recognized that this work could not remain within one school. If learning is about self-discovery and contribution, it must become a community endeavor.

This realization sparked the [Ojai Learning Ecosystem](#), which now connects schools, nonprofits, and civic leaders. In partnership with the school district, RTS staff and district educators co-lead spring and summer programs, giving families direct experience of learner-centered

education. Collaborations with groups such as [Once Upon a Watershed](#) and the [Ventura Land Trust](#) provide teens with paid opportunities in areas like environmental stewardship. Work with city leaders is driving new investments in youth and civic participation, positioning the Ojai Learning Ecosystem as a community priority. As Bailey noted, “Learner-centered ecosystems are not just about academic learning but healing communities.” At RTS, learning and belonging are inseparable, making their purpose not just a starting point but a daily practice.

This year, that practice expanded further into the community. The Rock Tree Sky team convened local stakeholders to share mission statements and identify common ground, leading to monthly meetings to co-create a shared vision

for the Ojai Learning Ecosystem. At the same time, the RTS team began shaping a public narrative, publishing editorials, speaking at school board meetings, and inviting families and neighbors to see what already existed and what was emerging. Through these efforts, the community itself is increasingly carrying the work forward, clarifying direction and cultivating a culture of trust, respect, and belonging.



When an ecosystem is purpose-driven, you might find the following:

- Learning journeys begin with who learners are and what they need.
- Resources and supports are aligned together, working to help learners meet their goals.
- Educators and partners guide learners toward meaningful experiences and opportunities to contribute to their communities.



Consider how these questions might guide your work:

- How do our decisions impact learners and their families?
- What structures and practices will allow learners to know themselves well, and be known well by others?
- How will new learning opportunities add value to our community? Who else could we bring into the ecosystem?



ECOSYSTEMS ARE ADAPTIVE AND DYNAMIC

They are intentionally designed for ongoing learning, flexibility, and growth to respond to the evolving needs of individuals and communities.

Learner-centered ecosystems are neither static nor chaotic; rather, they grow and adapt purposefully with changing conditions, including shifts and advances in technology, cultural contexts, and broader social change. Ecosystem evolution is driven by continual learning about what works and what doesn't, enabling families and educators to show up in ways that best support young people and their dynamic lives. Structures and relationships are designed to listen, adapt, and respond with creativity and care to the needs of young people and community partners.

Across the ecosystems in the Lab, adaptive leadership, governance, and research stood out as essential components for keeping ecosystems responsive. Leadership must be both visionary and

practical, clear in setting direction yet adaptable to shifting needs. Governance works best when distributed, engaging actors at all levels and supported by enabling policies. Research functions as a real-time tool for guiding practice, accountability, and adaptation. Together, these elements ensure ecosystems remain dynamic, flexible, and emergent.

Liberty Public Schools and Purdue Polytechnic High Schools showcase how this adaptability comes to life in service of strong, aligned vision. Liberty Public Schools embeds cycles of reflection, redesign, and innovation into the district's DNA, while Purdue Polytechnic High Schools nests pockets of agile innovation within supportive structures to fuel new levels of discovery.

“Different kids thrive in different contexts. So if we're serious about creating a true ecosystem, the more shapes and sizes we can offer kids for their learning environments, the better.”

LACEY BEATTY,
FOUNDING FACULTY,
PURDUE POLYTECHNIC
HIGH SCHOOLS





IN PRACTICE

Liberty Public Schools shows how learning networks grow through constant adaptation. For more than a decade, Superintendent Jeremy Tucker and his team have nurtured a culture of shared vision and innovation. Distributed leadership, community engagement, and feedback loops ensure leaders listen and adjust in real time. Change is not a disruption but part of the natural rhythm of their work. At a recent leadership retreat, every job-alike team, from operations to secondary principals, sketched its own vision of Liberty's future. Comparing the visions revealed alignment, gaps, and new possibilities, and it reinforced the importance of ongoing collective reflection and flexibility.

Adaptability also shows up in Liberty's Real World Learning initiative. When data revealed not all learners were earning a

[Market Value Asset](#) such as an internship, client-connected project, or college credit, educators responded by co-designing earlier opportunities, expanding pathways that connect student interests with practical contributions.

This year, Liberty used the Lab to step back and view its work through a wider lens. After more than a decade of innovation, leaders now face the challenge of coherence: weaving partnerships, learner progressions, and shared vision into one living whole. Through retreats and mapping, they began practicing how to tell their story not as isolated programs but as a connected design. Liberty demonstrates that being adaptive and dynamic is not only about launching new initiatives, but also about cultivating shared understanding and making the work visible to everyone.





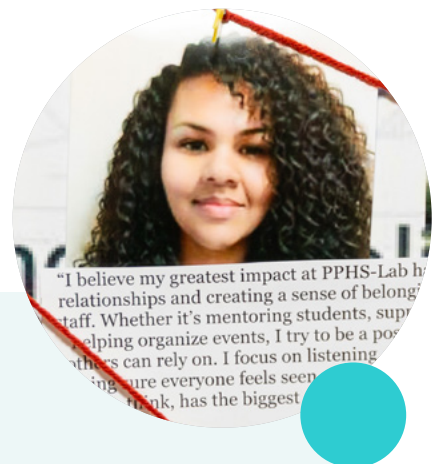
IN PRACTICE

At **Purdue Polytechnic High Schools (PPHS)**, adaptability means designing relationships and routines that enable teams to listen deeply, adjust quickly, and respond to learners' lived experiences. This is most visible in PPHS's pilot microschool, a small environment tailored to student interests and local needs while still connected to supports like transportation and special education.

By reducing reliance on rigid schedules and traditional constraints, the microschool allows learners to pursue extended projects, internships, and community-based experiences as opportunities arise. Students often spend long stretches immersed in chosen work, showing how the approach evolves in response to curiosity rather than the other

way around. As advisor Tamika Riggs explained, comprehensive high schools can do amazing things for some, but a microschool allows PPHS to adapt more rapidly and meet the needs of learners who might otherwise be overlooked. This year, PPHS deepened the connection between its microschool and the surrounding neighborhood, guided by the vision that student and community success is a shared responsibility. Advisors and leaders prototyped student-led events and built partnerships with nonprofits and faith-based groups, expanding volunteer and internship opportunities. As an example, five students piloted internships with the [Englewood Community Development Corporation](#), using asset mapping to understand local needs and reimagine how they could contribute.

These pilots not only offered authentic learning but also surfaced what supports advisors, learners, and mentors need to balance academic requirements with community-based learning. PPHS shows how adaptive, dynamic practices keep learning human-centered and responsive to place.



When an ecosystem is adaptive and dynamic, you might find the following:

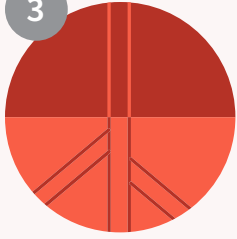
- Learning environments shift schedules or offerings in response to learner and family needs and feedback.
- Learners adjust their journeys as new interests and opportunities emerge.
- Success is measured both by holistic learner outcomes and by the ecosystem's ability to adapt.
- Organizations share resources and roles flexibly to meet new priorities.



Consider how these questions might guide your work:

- What's working, what's not, and how can we keep improving?
- How can we respond more quickly and flexibly to what learners need right now?
- Who else should be at the table, and how do we make our work visible so others can join in?
- What shifts in policy or practice would make flexibility a consistently exercised muscle?
- What needs to change in our structures so that adaptability is possible?

3



ECOSYSTEMS ARE ROOTED IN PLACE

They can't be copied or transplanted. Each one grows from its community, shaped by people, resources, and environment.

In ecosystems, context is not an afterthought—it is the foundation. Learning unfolds in the everyday spaces and places young people know and care about. Community members are essential to the growth of the next generation and are valued as powerful assets for their wisdom, experience, and contribution. Public systems, like transportation, partnerships, and technology, are designed to flex to what families and learners most need as they craft and pursue their learning journeys. While findings can be shared across different ecosystems, the work is not about replication. Because each ecosystem grows from its own place and context, what thrives in Memphis may not take root in rural Montana. Ecosystems honor where they are grounded, aligning with local ecology, economy, and culture while linking to broader networks of knowledge and opportunity.

Equity and access emerged across the ecosystems in the Lab as moral and practical imperatives, but communities equally stressed that these commitments

must be rooted in local context. Policies, geography, demographics, and workforce conditions shape how ecosystems are structured and resourced, influencing advisory systems, credentialing, program access, and funding. By drawing on the strengths and realities of their communities, leaders meet youth and families where they are, rather than imposing prescribed solutions that overlook existing assets or ignore inequities.

FabNewport and the NACA Schools Network illustrate this principle: FabNewport continues to adapt its vision and offerings to the distinct communities of Newport and Providence, and the NACA Inspired Schools Network grounds learning in land, language, and story to honor and sustain Indigenous traditions and culture. Both show how ecosystems become coherent, responsive, and equitable when they grow from place.

“Our goal is to ensure that all students are holistically well, and to prepare them to be caretakers of the land. We need imbue Native youth with a sense of who they have been, without shutting off their ability to imagine who they might ultimately want to become.”

VAL KIE,
SENIOR DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION
AND TRANSFORMATION,
NACA INSPIRED
SCHOOLS NETWORK





IN PRACTICE

FabNewport in Rhode Island shows how an ecosystem can respond to the unique contexts of two very different communities: Newport and Providence. Founded in 2013 as a makerspace in Newport, FabNewport has since expanded into Providence, tailoring its work to each city. In Newport, opportunities are shaped by the city's maritime and tourism economy, natural landscapes, and historic traditions. In Providence, the work builds on the strengths of a diverse urban community and its artistic culture. This dual presence underscores FabNewport's commitment to place-based responsiveness, designing with a deep awareness of who learners are and where they live.

The Newport Experience (NEX) immerses young people in biking, sailing, hiking, and exploring their city, making learning inseparable from local heritage and environment. At the same time,

FabNewport connects its programming to Rhode Island's emerging [Blue Economy Action Plan](#), linking education to marine industries, sustainability, and science.

This year, the organization deepened its role as a convener, forming a coalition with aligned partners, like the [Norman Bird Sanctuary](#) and the [Conanicut Island Sailing Foundation](#), to serve as the backbone of the local ecosystem. These partnerships are tackling challenges such as transportation, funding, and cultural inclusion, helping the ecosystem become more navigable, sustainable, and visible. The shift from one-off partnerships to shared infrastructure marks a critical step in building an ecosystem grounded in clarity, trust, and collective leadership.





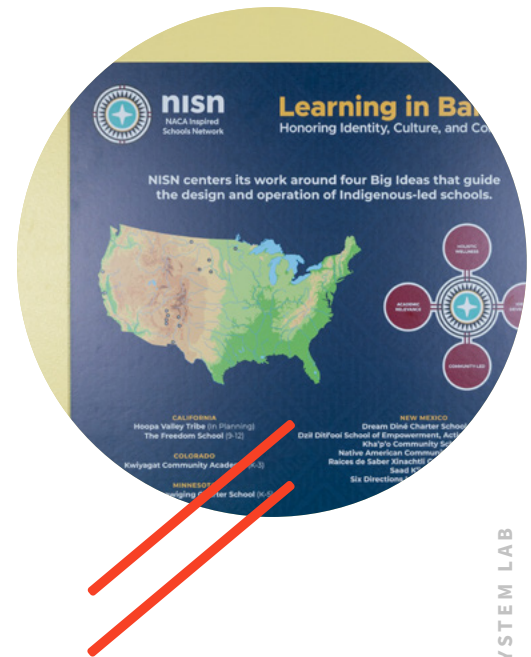
IN PRACTICE

Born from the Native American Community Academy and now spanning across the region, the growing ecosystems of the **NACA Inspired Schools Network (NISN)** serve as a reminder that the future of learning must grow from the roots of place, culture, and community voice.

Honoring place at NISN begins with honoring land, language, and story. Schools are rooted in Indigenous communities' history, culture, and traditions, designing learning ecosystems that reclaim narrative control and align education with community values. Indigenous values anchor learning in community identity, fostering belonging and connection. Learners study local history, oral traditions, and contemporary Indigenous issues, linking knowledge directly to the place and who they are.

At [Oceti Sakowin Community Academy](#), for example, growing interest in Lakota language education has extended beyond classrooms, with parents and grandparents learning alongside children. The school itself is part of a larger 20-acre development that anchors learning in land and culture.

This year, Education Reimagined learned alongside the NISN Growing Together Fellowship, as the group focused on the Mission Driven Story Cycle—a powerful framework and process of data collection where families, educators, and community members share what is strong and what must change in their schools. Storytelling, ceremony, and cultural practices are treated as essential forms of data that hold equal weight with academic outcomes.



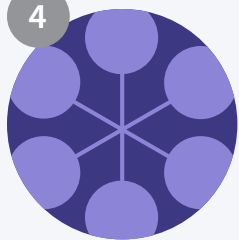
When an ecosystem is rooted in place, you might find the following:

- Learning is connected to local history, culture, ecology, and economy.
- Community assets like elders, entrepreneurs, and cultural institutions are activated as learning partners.
- Learners tackle real local challenges to create impact within and beyond their community.
- Practices affirm culture and identity to build belonging.



Consider how these questions might guide your work:

- What local assets, people, or places could be activated as partners in learning?
- Who is currently excluded from access to learning in our community. How do we change that?
- How do we design learning that strengthens both individual opportunity and community wellbeing?
- How can we design ecosystems that endure over time while honoring the places from which they arise?



ECOSYSTEMS ARE POWERED BY RELATIONSHIPS

Trust, shared decision-making, and collaboration are the foundation of healthy, thriving ecosystems. By flipping traditional power dynamics, ecosystems enable shared power and governance to fuel collective action.

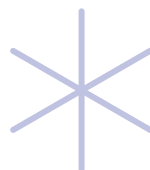
Who you know—and who knows you—is a powerful factor in a learner’s success. That’s why ecosystems design for collaboration, not just hope for it. They build networks of mutual respect and interdependence by redistributing power, listening deeply, and making decisions together.

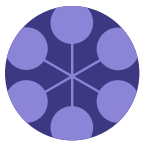
In the cross-site survey, a majority of leaders in the Lab described collaboration and partnerships as the lifeblood of their ecosystems. They emphasized that no single organization can meet all of a young person’s needs; it takes schools, higher education, local organizations, faith institutions, employers, and families working together. Leaders pointed to cross-sector networks, interdistrict partnerships, and family engagement as strategies for building trust, transparency, and shared responsibility.

Examples from the Ecosystem Lab bring this principle to life. In Columbus, the PAST Foundation shows how trust and cross-sector collaboration can weave education and community institutions into a shared fabric of opportunity. In New York City, Runway Green demonstrates what happens when learners, families, and community members co-design governance itself—education is not delivered to people but co-created with them. Both illustrate how ecosystems grow stronger when relationships drive decision-making.

“We wanted to be clear this isn’t about building another school: It’s about building a community where learning is co-stewarded by young people, families, and partners.”

GEOFFREY ROEHM,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
RUNWAY GREEN





IN PRACTICE

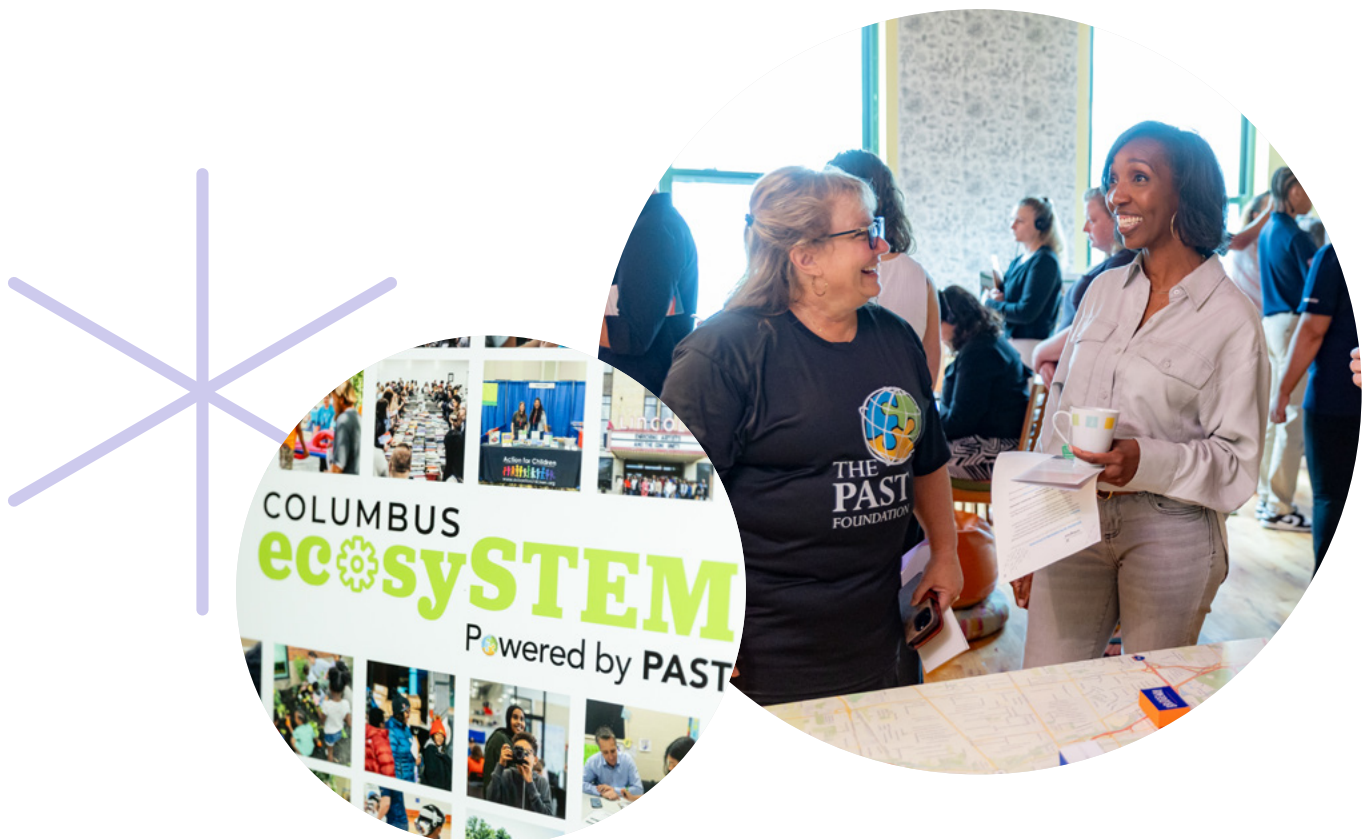
The PAST Foundation has cultivated the Columbus EcosySTEM, a living, learner-centered ecosystem built on relationships, connecting districts, higher education, nonprofits, employers, and families. Their community geomapping effort illustrates this shift: What began as a simple asset map evolved into a dynamic tool co-created with families and organizations, aligning services, closing gaps, and making opportunities visible.

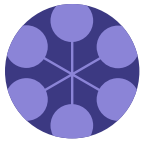
As Chief Strategy Officer Marcy Raymond explained, “The Ecosystem Lab experience helped me evolve from leading projects to leading ecosystems, grounded in equity, shared ownership, and a long view of impact.” That evolution is evident in how PAST redefined leadership by moving from input to co-creation. Young

people and families are positioned as drivers of design, visible in microschool partnerships with local districts and the University of Cincinnati (UC), where learners shape advisories, projects, and early college coursework. When UC waived standard entrance requirements, first-generation learners gained direct access to college credit, shifting power from institutions to families and communities. This power shift—codified through advisory councils, extended social capital, and open enrollment models—shows how equity can be embedded as infrastructure.

This year, PAST strengthened ties on two fronts: launching microschools with UC and local districts where students earn credentials and college credit while in

high school, and partnering with the [Columbus Foundation](#) to convene a three-year community of practice with more than a dozen funders, schools, and nonprofits. Together, these moves deepen trust and create durable infrastructure. The Columbus EcosySTEM shows how public education can be restructured not through isolated reforms but through a network where young people, families, and partners design learning side by side. The Columbus EcosySTEM is transforming public education not through isolated reform, but through a durable, trust-based infrastructure of relationships.





IN PRACTICE

At **Runway Green**, relationships are the foundation of both planning and governance. A community design team of learners, alumni, families, and local residents guides campus and program decisions, ensuring education is created with the community, not delivered to it. As project manager Aysha Kahn explained, “Our community design team is our governance model. Parents, alumni, learners, and local leaders sit at the table together shaping what comes next.”

This co-design process represents a shift from top-down decision-making to shared governance built on trust. After years of community-driven design, Runway Green is now formalizing its governance model with the goal of sharing it as a blueprint for other learner-centered ecosystems.

This year, Runway Green clarified how it works with [Launch Expeditionary Middle and High Schools](#), the schools where it began as an idea. The schools test and run innovative programs that bring Runway Green’s vision to life, while Runway Green provides expanded facilities and opportunities to support them. Together, the two organizations reinforce one another: Launch offers a learner-centered home for students, and Runway Green grows the capacity and opportunities that make this possible. Their partnership shows how ecosystems can thrive when relationships shift power and sustain collective action. Through the Lab experience, Runway Green worked to strengthen governance, improve resource flows, and increase board engagement, all guided by equity and community voice.



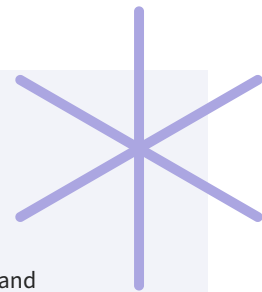
When an ecosystem is powered by relationships, you might find the following:

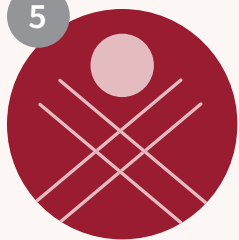
- Decision-making and responsibility are shared across learners, families, educators, and community members.
- Partnerships bring together schools, community organizations, employers, and families.
- A culture of care, reciprocity, and mutual support is present.
- Structures for transparency, feedback, and public learning are evident.



Consider how these questions might guide your work:

- Who is missing from our decision-making, and how do we bring them in?
- What practices are we using to build and sustain trust across our community?
- Do young people and families feel surrounded by caring, supportive relationships in this ecosystem?





ECOSYSTEMS ARE DEEPLY HUMAN

They center joy, discovery, and humanity in every aspect of the learning experience with healing and love.

Ecosystems cultivate joy and belonging, surrounding young people with care and encouragement that fuel both learning and wellbeing. They create spaces where curiosity is celebrated, relationships are nurtured, and learners feel safe and seen as they find their path to a fulfilling future. As bell hooks reminded us, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.”¹²

Across the Lab, the healthy development of young people consistently emerged as one of the highest priorities, elevated above structural and logistical considerations. Communities emphasized that ecosystems are deeply human, centering personalized pathways, social-emotional growth, and learner agency. Real-world experiences and supportive

adult relationships provide relevance and discovery. This underscores that the ultimate purpose of ecosystems is not systems themselves, but the humanity, healing, and love at the heart of learning.

The Lab School of Memphis and Big Picture South Valley offer two different windows into what it means for ecosystems to be deeply human. In Memphis, joy and creativity form the foundation of daily learning. In Ukiah, students lead healing work that addresses trauma and substance abuse in their community. Together, they show how centering care and belonging can transform both individual lives and whole communities.

“I’ve needed to change my expectations of what school should look like. I had always thought school was about achievement. Now I know what I’m looking for is growth—and seeing whether my son is truly thriving. That’s my measure of success now.”

ROSI LARA,
PARENT,
LAB SCHOOL OF MEMPHIS





IN PRACTICE

The Lab School of Memphis embodies the belief that ecosystems are humane systems, where joy, healing, and love create the conditions for learning. Families describe their experience as profoundly different from traditional education—even restorative. The school is not just a place of academics but a community where children are fully known and supported in mind, body, and spirit. By centering humanity and wellbeing, the school shows that learning takes root when joy, dignity, and belonging come first.

This commitment is lived out through rhythms of care and creativity within the ecosystem. Play, movement, and nature-based experiences make wellbeing a foundation, not an add-on. Local artists lead theater, music, and visual arts, nurturing imagination and confidence. Weekly Forest School sessions at [Gnarled Oak Farm](#) connect learners to nature

and to values of identity, justice, and activism. Joy is treated as essential and love as infrastructure, building a learning ecosystem animated by humanity and connection. It's Me Among the Trees™ curriculum connects learners to nature and to values of identity, justice, and activism.

This year, The Lab School advanced its mission in ways that deepened its identity as a loving, human-centered ecosystem. Expansion into new communities with satellite studios was paired with tools to ensure that care, belonging, and dignity remain at the center. It built an internal learning hub with practitioner resources, coaching videos, and training in equitable practices, equipping adults to show up with the same humanity they

ask learners to embody. New community-based pathways, from tattoo artistry to aesthetics, gave learners opportunities to discover their gifts in ways that honor their culture and creativity. And through partnerships, projects infused service and pride back into the community. In each step, the Lab School treated growth not as scaling programs, but as widening circles of care, love, and possibility for young people and their families.





IN PRACTICE

Big Picture South Valley in Ukiah, California, is designing an ecosystem where healing is inseparable from learning. In a region shaped by intergenerational trauma, rural poverty, under-resourced social services, and the lasting impacts of genocide and displacement, students and staff asked a profound question: How can school itself become a place of restoration and care?

Twice a week, the student leadership group leads Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to address substance abuse both inside and outside of school. Through peer interviews, community partner panels, and collaborative research, they investigated the roots and impacts of substance use. To reflect and share what they learned, students co-created a large collage mural—an expression of grief, insight, and possibility that now anchors their ongoing efforts to extend healing into the wider community.

This year, South Valley deepened that healing work. Learners expanded their participatory research on health and wellness, moving from storytelling to designing concrete projects that address substance abuse in their community. In collaboration with [Big Picture Learning's Native American Initiative](#), the school also created new pathways for youth leadership in wellness and culture. At the Lab's culminating event, Ukiah learners participated in and presented a mural they had created to illustrate this idea. As they shared their work, they declared, "The opposite of addiction is connection." These efforts demonstrate how a deeply human ecosystem can hold humanity, care, grief, and possibility together, and how, when young people are trusted as leaders, they can guide their communities toward restoration and collective healing.



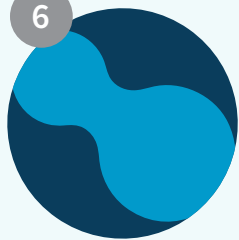
When an ecosystem is deeply human, you might find the following:

- Learning experiences are designed to spark joy, curiosity, and creativity.
- Spaces prioritize healing, safety, and wholeness.
- Policies and practices honor the dignity and humanity of every learner and their family.
- Regular rituals and celebrations build belonging and connection.



Consider how these questions might guide your work:

- Are our learning experiences sparking joy and meaning for young people?
- How are we honoring the humanity of our families in what we design?
- What does dignity look like in our community, and how does it show up in our daily practices?



ECOSYSTEMS ENABLE LASTING TRANSFORMATION

Ecosystems weave together the structures and practices needed to create systems where education equity and innovation are the norm.

Lasting transformation is the clearest sign of ecosystem growth. At their core, ecosystems widen access so opportunity is not defined by zip code. They stretch resources across neighborhoods, coordinating partners and ensuring all young people can share in opportunities. Transformation lasts when ecosystems stay flexible and responsive, treating innovation as an ongoing practice of listening and adapting. Sustainable change takes root when communities share responsibility for learning and embed equity, culture, and innovation into daily life.

Survey results from the Lab confirmed this shift: Learner-centered ecosystems are moving beyond school-centered approaches toward shared community responsibility. Schools, families, local

organizations, and businesses are taking joint ownership of the ecosystem through coordinated planning, efforts, and engagement. Roughly half of the sites showed early signs of transformation, particularly through increased community responsibility for education.

Big Thought and SparkNC show how ecosystems can move from innovation to lasting transformation. In Dallas, Big Thought demonstrates how youth voice and community leadership can anchor change so it endures over time. SparkNC shows how inter-district collaboration and state-level alignment can scale innovation in ways that make equity and opportunity part of the system itself. Both remind us that ecosystems don't just spark new ideas but create the conditions for those ideas to last.

“We want to foster wider and deeper ownership. We have a lot of people adrift right now. But when you have a healthy system, you have a healthy city. And when you help young people lead their own development, and share what they're learning directly with other young people, you've succeeded in shifting away from thinking of young people as recipients of programs, and towards seeing them as true co-leaders and co-creators.”

GREG MACPHERSON,
CHIEF BIG THOUGHT
INSTITUTE OFFICER





IN PRACTICE

Big Thought shows how transformation lasts when equity and youth leadership are built into the system itself. For years, it has invited young people to chart their own journeys, name their gifts, and link them to real opportunities using and informing co-created tools like the Creator Archetype Framework, Six Dimensions of Quality Observation & Coaching, and the Youth Learning Journey. As KJ, a learner and board member, reflected, “Big Thought has helped me take my authenticity and channel it in ways that other people can receive it... for me, Big Thought is the neighborhood.”

What makes this work transformative is how it crosses boundaries. Employers, civic leaders, nonprofits, and youth gather in communities of practice to address challenges and co-create solutions. Youth voice isn’t an add-on

but the engine of change, making young people co-leaders in shaping Dallas’s future. By treating transformation as a continual process of listening, prototyping, and iterating, Big Thought embeds equity into its infrastructure. This is why the Dallas ecosystem endures and continues to grow: It’s alive to the wisdom and leadership of the next generation.

This year, Big Thought expanded its reach by redesigning the Youth Learning Journey with young people to guide the development of One Door, a new platform

that will make their growth and goals visible to employers and civic leaders. Big Thought also convened more than 80 organizations in an Opportunity Youth Community of Practice, aiming to align efforts and confront systemic barriers that contribute to youth disengagement. These moves show how sustainable transformation is built by embedding youth leadership and collective responsibility into the city’s fabric.





IN PRACTICE

SparkNC provides opportunities for communities across North Carolina to be a part of bigger systems and state-level transformation. By providing hubs of innovation across the state, called SparkLabs, SparkNC ensures more learners and communities are able to access STEM-related learning experiences and work opportunities, particularly for those who may not yet see pathways for themselves into tech careers. SparkNC's inter-district collaborative spans 25 school districts and is intentionally aligned with state policies like competency-based credits and flexible hiring processes. This combination ensures innovation is not a temporary pilot but a sustainable feature of public education. By linking the broader ecosystem with industry needs in fields like AI, cybersecurity, and data

analytics, SparkNC shows how learning and workforce opportunity can reinforce each other to create durable systems.

This year, SparkNC invited learner insights and partnership to co-design solutions that helped to remove barriers to access and opportunity across its 17-district network. Learners and the SparkNC team saw an opportunity to strengthen a web of connections to allow learners to directly access opportunities offered across the state by businesses, higher education institutions, SparkLab leaders, and other learners. As a result, learners co-designed app prototypes, pitched them at a showcase hosted by Apple, and received feedback from peers and professionals. These prototypes are now guiding the design of the SparkNC digital ecosystem.

By laying the foundation for a platform that is equity-centered by design, SparkNC is embedding new structures and practices that ensure equitable opportunity for all. Learners gain timely access, adults have tools to help create more timely opportunities, and industry partners connect directly with students. This marks a pivotal step in lasting transformation and toward a future where learners co-create their own pathways into high-tech careers, supported by an ecosystem built for inclusion and responsiveness.



When an ecosystem enables lasting transformation, you might find the following:

- Accountability is shared across schools, families, and communities.
- Public-private partnerships sustain equity and innovation at both the local and state levels.
- Industry and business partners are intentionally woven into ecosystem design.
- Structures are in place to make opportunities accessible to every learner.
- A culture of abundance and possibility fuels ecosystem growth.



Consider how these questions might guide your work:

- How do we ensure this work endures beyond any single leader, program, or grant?
- In what ways are equity and inclusion being built into the system itself, not added on?
- Where do we see abundance in our community, and how can we build from it?

From Roots to Reach

After a year of deep partnership with twelve diverse learner-centered ecosystem sites, we have seen creative new systems take root and begin to flourish in every community. Educators, families, organizations, and learners are coming together across generations and backgrounds to reimagine education built on trust, equity, and shared purpose. Each site shows what becomes possible when communities grow something greater than the sum of their parts.

Ecosystems are purpose-driven, adaptable, rooted in place, powered by relationships, deeply human, and transformative. These ecosystems remind us that, rather than patching broken structures, we can build something more resilient and better together. As Ruha Benjamin observes, society is in the eye of multiple storms.¹³ The question is no longer whether change is needed, but whether systems will be built for all to thrive, or whether existing ones will go on protecting the few while excluding the many. This moment calls for imagination, courage, and collective design. The questions before us are urgent:

- *How might we contribute, in our own communities, to the growth of ecosystems?*
- *What solutions will help us build systems that reflect our shared humanity?*
- *How might we work together to shape a future where every young person thrives?*

As writer and activist Arundhati Roy reminded us: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way ... if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”¹⁴

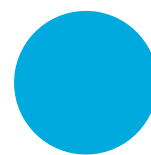
Over the past year, glimpses of that world have been visible in the voices of youth daring to dream bigger, in the work of ecosystem builders knitting new connections, and in communities choosing collaboration over competition. The roots are taking hold, their reach is expanding, and communities are already shaping this future. But we must not assume that building learner-centered ecosystems is the work of a few leaders or organizations. It is the work of all of us. Together, we can ensure it becomes a future where every learner thrives.

Acknowledgments

We'd like to thank the countless partners who helped make not only this report—but the work it reflects—possible.

- **To ecosystem builders:** This work is a commitment to you.
- **To learners and families:** This work is a reflection, a noticing, and a promise to you.
- **To community members:** This work is an invitation to you.
- **To supporters and champions:** This work endures because of you.
- **To funders and partners:** This work is made possible by you.

Sources of inspiration are everywhere if we're willing to look. We hope this report serves as a spark and a scaffold for your own ideas and dreams. We look forward to walking alongside you as your learner-centered ecosystems root.



NOTES

1. Ruha Benjamin, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2024).
2. Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development* (Harvard University Press, 1979); National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures* (The National Academies Press, 2018); Richard M. Lerner et al., *Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science*, Vol. 1: Theory and Method, 7th ed. (Wiley, 2015).
3. David Osher et al., “Drivers of Human Development: How Relationships and Context Shape Learning and Development,” *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 1 (2020): 6–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650>.
4. Pamela Cantor et al., *Whole-Child Development, Learning, and Thriving* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).
5. Pamela Cantor et al., “Malleability, Plasticity, and Individuality: How Children Learn and Develop in Context,” *Applied Developmental Science* 23, no. 4 (2019): 307–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398649>.
6. John Kania et al., *The Water of Systems Change* (FSG, 2018), https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change/.
7. Karen Pittman and Merita Irby, *Too Essential to Fail: Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response* (Washington, DC: Education Reimagined, 2024), <https://education-reimagined.org/too-essential-to-fail-why-our-big-bet-on-public-education-needs-a-bold-national-response/>; Education Reimagined and The History Co:Lab, *Ecosystems for the Future of Learning* (Washington, DC: Education Reimagined, 2023), <https://education-reimagined.org/ecosystems-for-the-future-of-learning/>; Education Reimagined, *Designed to Thrive: Guidebook to Equitable, Community-Based, Learner-Centered Ecosystems* (2023), <https://designedtothrive.education-reimagined.org/>.
8. Remake Learning, *Forge Futures: Preliminary Findings from the Summit* (Pittsburgh: Remake Learning, 2024), <https://remakelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Futures-to-Forge-FINAL-1.pdf>; UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 2021), <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707.locale=en>; Economist Impact, *Learning Ecosystems Framework* (commissioned by Jacobs Foundation, 2022), <https://jacobsfoundation.org/first-ever-global-learning-ecosystems-framework/>.
9. Kristina L. Zeiser, James Taylor, Jordan Rickles, Michael S. Garet, and Michael Segeritz, *Evidence of Deeper Learning Outcomes: Report 3, Findings from the Study of Deeper Learning* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, September 2014), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED553364.pdf>; Jordan Rickles, Kristina Zeiser, Rui Yang, and Michael Garet, “Deeper Learning and Student Outcomes,” *Journal of Educational Change* 20, no. 4 (2019): 523–49.
10. Pamela Cantor, Fernande Raine, and Susan Rivers, “The Science of Experiential Civics,” *The Standard* 25, no. 4 (2025), National Association of State Boards of Education, <https://www.nasbe.org/the-science-of-experiential-civics/>.
11. A survey was administered across twelve ecosystem sites (with an 83% response rate) to capture information on their activities and community engagement. This report includes only high-level insights; full results are documented in a separate resource.
12. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994).
13. Ruha Benjamin, *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 7.
14. Arundhati Roy, *War Talk* (South End Press, 2003).

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