

THE IMPACT

The Ripple Effect
of Reimagining Support
for Learning Differences

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“When they arrive, they think there isn’t really a space for them. And when learners leave, they have really changed **what they believe their place in the world is.**”

Learner-centered site leader

Introduction

After years of struggle, young people with learning differences may believe there is no place where they truly belong. But what happens when that belief shifts? What happens when a young person discovers they are not a “problem” to be fixed, but an individual with unique strengths and gifts to contribute to the world around them?

This kind of transformation becomes possible when education systems are designed to evolve in response to learner variability. At the sites featured in this work—where more than 45% of learners navigate their education with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 plan—this is achieved through **learner-centered education**. This approach is defined by five key elements:

- 1) Learner Agency;
- 2) Socially-Embedded;
- 3) Personalized, Relevant, and Contextualized;
- 4) Open-Walled; and
- 5) Competency-Based.

To explore how learner-centered environments support youth with learning differences, we conducted a multi-case study with a team of practitioner-researchers. In our companion brief, [The Approach: Reimagining Support for Learning Differences Through Learner-Centered Education](#), we explore how these sites reframe foundational mindsets, redesign organizational architecture, and realize daily practices. **Building on those findings, this brief examines how the learner-centered approach creates a ripple effect, with impact beginning with the individual learner and then extending out to those around them.**

As you read this brief, consider the impact of your work within your own context. Specifically, we ask that you reflect on how your current practices shape the lives of your learners and the wider community.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This publication is part of a series by Education Reimagined, with funding provided in part by Oak Foundation. To explore the complete series and related resources, visit our [Learning Differences Research Series](#) page.

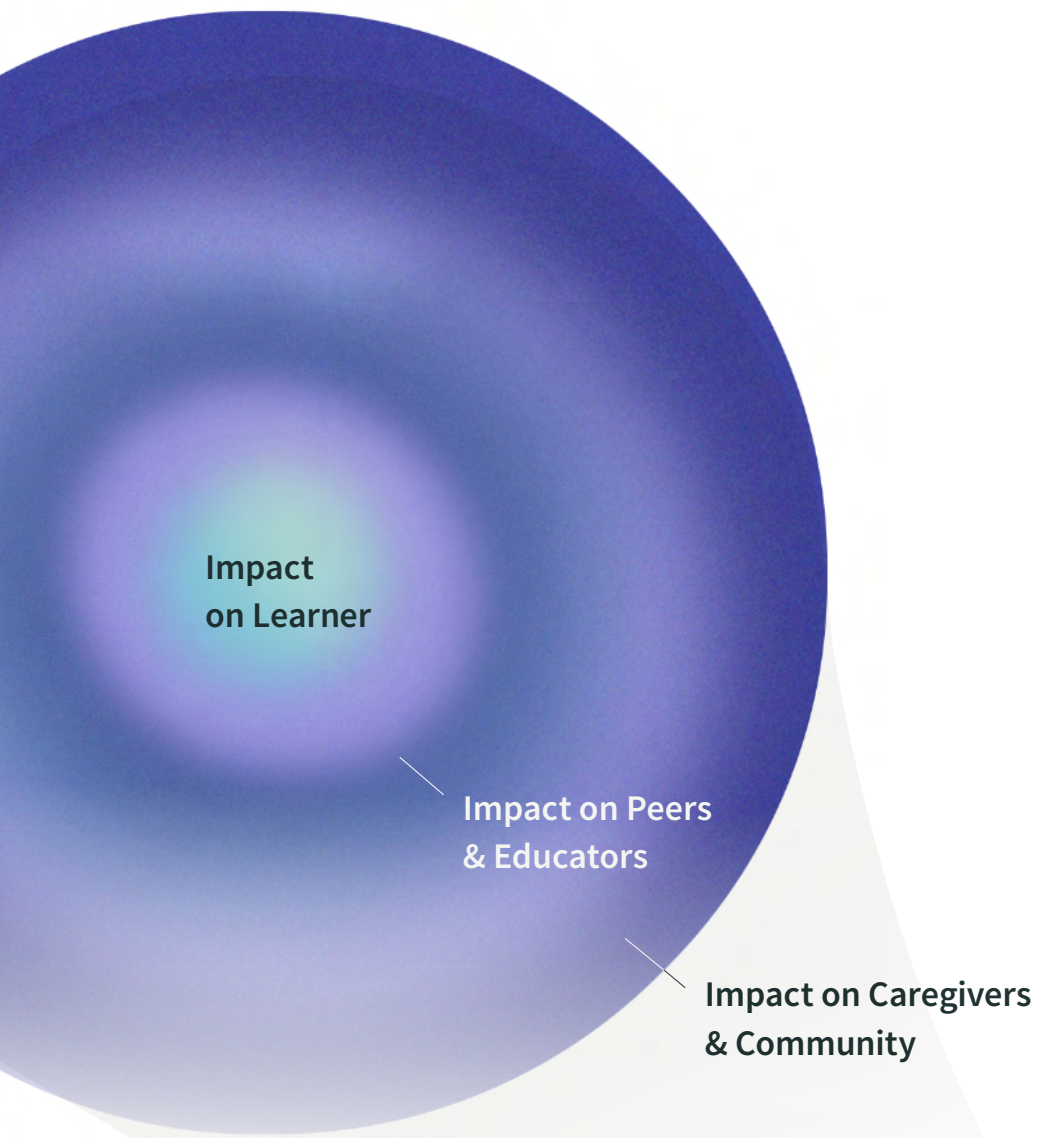
The table below provides an overview of our research study. For more details on the methodology and descriptions of the sites, please see our [Research Study Overview](#).

Case Study Overview

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

Overview of Participating Sites: 2024–2025 Academic Year

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



Reciprocal Level of Impact

When a learning environment honors the full humanity of every child, the impact can be felt at multiple levels. Our research reveals how this transformation begins with the individual and radiates through the learning environment, creating a resonance of shared value for families and the broader community.

Impact of Reimagining Support for Learning Differences

| Transformation Level | Impact on Stakeholders | Areas of Impact |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Individual | How learners transform and develop | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Learners Rebuild Identity and Agency• Learners Develop Foundational Academic Skills• Learners Expand Possibilities for Their Future |
| Learning Environment | How learners' peers and educators evolve together | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Peers Drive Culture of Mutual Support• Educators Achieve Resilience through Collaboration |
| Families and Broader Community | How caregivers and community members engage and invest | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Families Find Relief and Partnership• Community Partners Gain Reciprocal Value |

Designing learning environments for the diverse needs of youth creates a level of accessibility and flexibility that benefits the entire community (King-Sears et al., 2023; Osher et al., 2020). This occurs through a phenomenon known as the “curb-cut effect,” where designs intended for a specific group provide unexpected benefits for everyone (Blackwell, 2017). Within educational contexts, this effect manifests through developmental relationships that create interdependent systems, wherein the growth of one participant strengthens the capacity of others (Osher et al., 2020). Beyond school walls, the collaborative partnerships between schools, families, and community members further expand this ripple effect (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

By prioritizing the needs of young people who are most commonly at the “edges,” we can create education systems that have a wider reach. Specifically, findings from our study suggest that addressing the needs of youth with learning differences serves as a catalyst for broader change by expanding the benefits of learner-centered education. In the following sections, we show how this occurs by examining each level of impact through stakeholder voices, site examples, and aligning research.

Reflecting on Your Impact

We invite you to use the following questions as a starting point for exploring how a ripple effect might take shape within your own context:

- 1 | How are your current practices shaping outcomes for youth with learning differences and those in their support networks?
- 2 | What areas of relational or systemic impact are emerging but have not yet been fully realized or acknowledged in your work?
- 3 | What stories or data could make your “invisible” ripples of impact more visible to others?

Individual Transformation: Impact on Learners

At the participating sites, youth with learning differences who have struggled for years are able to 1) rebuild their identity and sense of agency, 2) develop foundational academic skills through applied learning, and 3) envision more expansive possibilities for their future.



Learners Rebuild
Identity and Agency

It's Okay
to be Different

After years of internalized failure, learners at the studied sites **find healing by rebuilding trust within cultures of unconditional acceptance**. This process is sustained as learners and staff move beyond “adult versus kid” hierarchies toward partnerships grounded in the gradual release of responsibility. An 11-year-old Norris learner with autism, Disruptive Mood Dysregulation Disorder, and anxiety explained: “I need to be treated as an equal and they recognize me as an equal here. Whereas at my old school, a lot of them were like, ‘I’m the adult, you’re the kid. You listen to me, you don’t talk back to me.’”

Embracing such relational shifts changes how young people interact with those around them, as evidenced by a **sharp decline in behavioral incidents** across all the sites. As an Avalon middle school learner with autism shared, “I used to get in a lot of fights. I have not gotten into a single one here.”

This atmosphere of enduring care and acceptance fosters a sense of safety and belonging. For instance, one graduate described Norris as a “loving, supporting, nurturing” environment that feels like a family. Being cared for in this way allows learners to **strengthen their emotional literacy**. One educator shared: “They’ll say, ‘I’m feeling anxious’ or ‘I’m getting mad,’ which they never did before.” In turn, learners report **experiencing genuine joy** in the learning environments. As one practitioner-researcher simply put it: “Overall, students are just happier.”

Research Connections

Research shows that emotional literacy instruction enhances self-awareness and emotion regulation skills, while warm, supportive teacher-student relationships serve as protective factors that support learners’ social-emotional development (Brackett et al., 2011; Pianta et al., 2012).

By building on authentic successes rather than the weight of trauma, young people at these sites **cultivate a strong foundation of self-belief**. Reflecting on the impact of LaFayette, one parent noted that now her son’s “belief in himself is huge.” Feeling this confidence helps learners **redefine their identity**. As a graduate with autism shared, attending Norris taught him “that it’s okay to be different and have different learning styles and emotions.”

This growth translates directly into **proactive self-advocacy** and the **development of practical skills** required to navigate various educational and professional environments. One learner captured this progression, explaining how being at LaFayette made it “easy to talk to people and learn how to communicate with anyone in the real world.”



Finding the Voice to Advocate

A learner with a reading disorder reflected on his experience at LaFayette Big Picture School: “I struggled academically pretty bad because I had poor self-advocacy skills and communication skills. I didn’t really feel confident in making sure I understood what was going on. But at this school, for the past 3 years, not only do I advocate for myself, but I’ve definitely picked up advocating for other people too.”

This shows how fostering a stronger sense of identity within a supportive environment empowers learners to transcend their own academic barriers and find a sense of purpose to advocate for others.



Learners Develop Foundational Academic Skills

When It's Tied to Their Interests, They Care

Across the sites, learners' academic identities shift as foundational skills are integrated into authentic, interest-based learning. Through individualized, competency-based progression, learners at the sites reported **shifting from subject avoidance to active engagement**. A Norris alumnus with an IEP described being "7 years behind" academically and initially thinking "there's no point. I'm already behind. Who cares?" But with persistent support, he explained, "I got it done. I got caught up."

By embedding support in work that learners care about, these sites show how **abstract concepts become tangible and translate into academic development**. A LaFayette parent described how their child struggled with foundational math concepts: "Reading a tape measure was something he'd never been able to do. But when his mentor started working with him on angles and measurements for welding, the math finally clicked." Similarly, an educator explained how leaning into a learner's love of sports statistics helped "soothe the math anxiety" that accompanied their significant difficulties with the subject.

Individual successes reflect broader trends observed across the studied sites. At Norris, where educators ensure academic skills are "baked into" projects, learners with IEPs **increase reading performance** by an average of 8 points and math by 4 points per trimester. Similarly, Avalon learners with IEPs have **consistently outperformed state averages** for students with IEPs on math and reading assessments. In the LaFayette Central School District, the opening of LaFayette Big Picture correlated with **graduation rates for learners with IEPs rising** from 50–70% to 95–100%. These outcomes suggest that anchoring academic skill development in meaningful work fosters both measurable competence and sustained engagement for youth with learning differences.

Research Connections


Studies show that multimodal approaches can support reading and math development (Wilschut et al., 2025), and utilizing concrete-representational-abstract progressions combined with personalized pacing can significantly improve mathematics performance (Miller & Kaffar, 2011).



Unlocking Skills with Real-World Projects

A Norris learner who had struggled with math decided to develop a food service proposal for the site. Working with an accountant as his mentor, the project required him to apply complex calculations for pricing, materials, and time management. When the learner noted that “there’s always at least one mistake that I have to go back and fix,” his mentor offered a practical strategy: “If the numbers don’t balance, you’ve got to go and hunt and find where you miskeyed.” Through this iterative process, the learner began identifying errors independently and developing his mathematical competence.

This shows how reframing mistakes as professional course-correction allows learners to build the persistence and accuracy required for academic skill development.



Learners Expand Possibilities for Their Future

Youth with Hope and Vision

At the sites, learning connected to authentic interests and work-based opportunities helps learners **discover direction and develop concrete plans for the future**. For example, one Norris learner built a guitar and discovered woodworking talents that led to ongoing work with guitar repair. A LaFayette learner's internship at a veterinary clinic sparked a passion for exotic medicine, he is now enrolled in a college studying pre-veterinary studies. At Avalon, an alumnus shared about how exploring both electrical work and music through projects allowed him to develop dual career pathways.

The sites also ensure that learners are **prepared for successful post-secondary transitions**. In particular, project-based learning appears to build research and organizational capacity, while portfolio systems empower learners to track and document their own growth. As one Avalon graduate explained, "When you are motivated to do a lot of project work, it highlights a lot of skills you need in college." He noted being well-prepared for research demands that his peers in college found challenging. In addition, he credits his college readiness to a capacity for self-advocacy developed through open-walled learning opportunities: "A big thing I learned from Avalon was how to reach out to people and to not be afraid."

Community members we spoke with commented on the **remarkable caliber of graduates** emerging from the sites. For example, after a LaFayette learner gained acceptance to the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), a local partner declared: "All of a sudden you start getting students into the CIA. It's not just putting a Band-Aid on them and throwing them across the stage. They're actually *excelling!*" This shift is also evident when an Avalon learner gained acceptance into a competitive program studying aerospace engineering at the University of Minnesota. As he described, at Avalon he went from being "the worst writer" to writing "with ease." As these stories illustrate, the sites provide the foundation for learners to **thrive even in demanding post-secondary environments**.

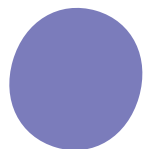
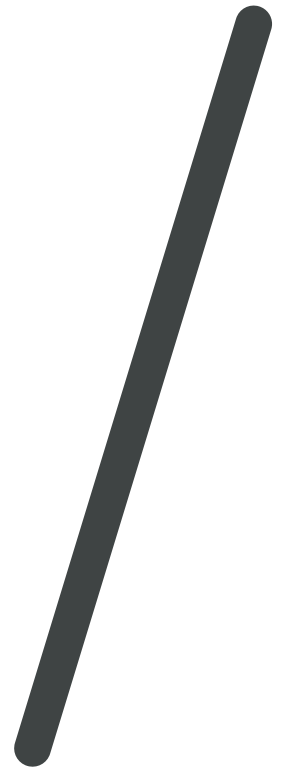
Research Connections

Research reveals how providing learners with choice and autonomy increases intrinsic motivation, and utilizing real-world, problem-based learning can effectively support skill development for young people with learning differences (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Gersten et al., 2009; Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Strengths Become Pathways to Work and Leadership

Through a therapy dog program offered at Avalon, a selectively mute learner found his voice. He began by communicating with “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” gestures, eventually progressing to speaking quiet commands to the dogs. The community partner described the transformation: “Oh my heart. . . he would talk to the dog and thank the dog!” As the learner’s skills grew, the partner offered him a paid position assisting a trainer in bringing therapy dogs to younger children in other schools. His work created a powerful ripple effect: three graduates from those schools went on to work in dog daycares, with one already advancing to an assistant manager position.

This shows how open-walled learning can translate a personal breakthrough into a professional path where learners can overcome challenges and help others do the same.



Learning Environment Transformation: Impact on Peers and Educators

The sites in our study create learning environments where growth extends beyond the individual to impact their peers and educators in two primary ways: 1) peers drive a culture of mutual support, and 2) educators achieve resilience through collaboration.



Peers Drive Culture of
Mutual Support

I Want to Help Kids
Like Me

All three environments serve as spaces where current learners actively mentor other learners, even while receiving support themselves. This creates a **self-sustaining culture of peer support** and a “pay it forward” culture. Across the sites, learners demonstrate a willingness to support newcomers and share what they are learning with others. As one practitioner-researcher observed, “Every graduate or student who’d been there for more than 2 months talked about or gave evidence of what they were learning. They were bringing it back and taking it forward.”

Cross-age mentoring creates a collaborative culture where **older learners support younger ones**. A prime example is LaFayette’s Reading Buddies program, where a learner who once struggled with a reading disorder now mentors elementary students. As one practitioner-researcher noted, “That is truly a full circle moment, and it has helped boost her confidence in reading.” Transitioning from recipient to resource also validates a learner’s progress, turning a former area of struggle into a platform for leadership. This culture of peer support can endure well beyond graduation. For instance, Avalon **alumni return as “community experts”** to guide current learners through their senior projects.

Research Connections

Research suggests that interventions promoting self-determination for learners with disabilities have positive effects across various levels and disability types (Burke et al., 2020), and that belonging-supportive learning environments contribute to positive academic and social-emotional outcomes for all participants (Healey & Stroman, 2021).

Our findings suggest that serving others provides learners with a **profound sense of purpose**. As another practitioner-researcher noted, learners at the sites have chances to discover that “you’re not doing something just for yourself, you’re actually gifting something, and it’s making a difference to others.” This culture reaches its peak when **alumni with learning differences return as staff members** to mentor students who face similar challenges. At Avalon, four graduates have joined their team, moving from receiving support to providing it. As one alumnus noted, it is a joy to support learners the way he was once supported.



Credibility and Empathy From Shared Experience

One Avalon alumnus arrived with a 0.62 GPA, an IEP, and a history of significant learning challenges. Reflecting on his previous school experience, he noted: “I was just stuck in a LC [Learning Center] classroom basically 80% of the day” and “I spent so much time in detention. There was a lot of punitive work that I was doing.” At Avalon, he found a different path, graduated, and eventually returned to serve as an educational assistant. When he tells a struggling learner, “I’ve been where you are,” he brings an irreplaceable credibility that is rooted in his own lived experience.

This shows how the sites’ strong culture of peer support empowers learners to move from being recipients of support to agents of change for the next generation.



Educators Achieve
Resilience through
Collaboration

You're Not Doing
This Alone

Our findings suggest that shifting to integrated support structures transforms the professional experience for educators. As one Avalon educator noted, “At my previous school, I would see the special education teacher twice a month tops, and the kids would be pulled literally into the basement. Now, I collaborate with the special ed teachers every single day.” Across the sites, consistent collaboration **mitigates the professional isolation** that can characterize teaching careers and bolsters long-term educator commitment.

Integrated support also **increases educators’ capacity to address complex needs**. At Avalon, a wraparound model provides onsite therapy services. At Norris, this culture is reinforced by leadership that explicitly “protects the staff to allow them to be their best selves.” One Norris educator explained that, unlike other schools where asking for help is seen as a weakness, they are “actively encouraged not to be on a power trip.” As one practitioner-researcher noted, the environment at Norris allows educators to remain “regulated, calm, accepting, and kind” even when working with youth experiencing significant trauma.



Research Connections

Research indicates that educator professional vitality increases in environments characterized by distributed leadership and collective responsibility (Kemper, 2020) and collaborative professional cultures support teacher effectiveness and retention (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

These collaborative structures translate into a level of professional sustainability made visible through **exceptional staff retention** that defies national trends. For instance, approximately 8% of teachers leave the profession annually, and an estimated 40–50% of first-year teachers leave within five years (Ingersoll et al., 2018; NCES, 2024). In contrast, educators at these sites experience the longevity that comes from shared responsibility and collective success. Avalon has maintained a **90% year-to-year retention rate over two decades**, with current teaching staff averaging 10 years of experience at the site, and nearly a third having served for over 15 years. Similarly, at LaFayette, over half of the 15-person staff has been with Big Picture for at least 9 years. For educators, a learner-centered approach can replace the exhaustion of “going at it alone” with a career-long sense of efficacy and professional belonging.



Culture Grows Through Collaboration

An Avalon high school educator described how their team intentionally pairs advisors to support each other and rotates these pairings yearly, noting that “when you start closing your door and doing things solo, you become stagnant as a teacher and you don’t grow.” As a practitioner-researcher observed, “Staff cohesiveness around a common purpose is the ‘secret sauce’ that allows a school culture to thrive regardless of daily challenges.”

This shows how structurally embedding collaboration replaces professional isolation with collective responsibility, ensuring that educators remain dynamic, continuously evolving, and deeply supported throughout their careers.

Family and Broader Community Transformation: Impact on Caregivers and Community Members

The environments in our study create ripple effects of impact that extend beyond their sites in the following ways: 1) families find relief and partnership, and 2) community partners gain reciprocal value from working with the sites.



Families Find Relief and Partnership

They've Got Him

Impact for parents often begins at home when daily friction about going to school finally subsides. A LaFayette parent described how no longer battling her son to attend school led to a **tremendous reduction in stress**; where once “he fought all the time,” he now goes willingly. A godmother of a learner who also attends LaFayette captured how she experiences a simple, profound joy seeing him “come out of school with a smile on his face.” This newfound stability often fosters an **optimistic outlook for their child's future**. As one Avalon parent reflected, “For years, I was terrified about his future. Now I think he's going to be okay.”

We found that the sites **offer parents profound relief**. One Avalon parent of a son with autism, ADHD, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia described a dramatic shift from her previous battles with schools: “There's days when I walk out of here going, ‘God, I'm cheating,’ or ‘This is too easy.’” She explained: “I don't have to battle. I don't have to struggle. I don't have to explain why this probably isn't the right approach. I just don't.” Relinquishing this burden allowed her to trade hyper-vigilance for a sense of assurance: “I feel like they've got him, and I've decided to trust it.” Across the sites, many parents described similar experiences and a **reclamation of their emotional energy** once consumed by constant advocacy battles.

Research Connections

Research demonstrates that when environments foster a sense of belonging, the benefits extend directly to the entire family system (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Osher et al., 2020).


As parents' faith in the sites increases, they **become powerful champions for the learner-centered approach**, creating a vital pipeline of endorsement beyond the campus walls. One Avalon parent noted that in her support group, whenever a family asks where to send their child, “inevitably four people raise their hands and say, ‘send them to Avalon!’” Word of the site’s **credibility reaches clinical professionals** as well. We were told that neuropsychologists in the community regularly write “your child needs to attend Avalon” directly into their evaluation reports. By advocating for these environments, families move from navigating a broken system in isolation to anchoring networks that are healing for their children and themselves.



From Constant Stress to Steady Support

A parent of a Norris graduate shared her story: “We had been through crisis after crisis. When we moved here, we weren’t getting daily phone calls to pick up our kid. Here, it felt like people were finally on our side.” Another Norris parent, the mother of an alumna with ADHD, echoed those sentiments: “I didn’t feel the daily stress that I felt while he was at other schools. . . . I was confident in his ability with the people that he was with.” She explained that after years of constant behavioral calls from other schools, she felt “a hundred percent confident” in Norris’ support—even when her son navigated the grief of losing his grandfather.

This shows how shifting from crisis management to authentic partnership changes things for parents by reducing their daily stress and rebuilding their trust in schools.



Community Partners Gain Reciprocal Value

Kids Ask Businesses “Why?”

Across all three sites, sustained partnerships with local organizations are sources of reciprocal value. Learners influence workplaces through their work contributions and by **offering fresh perspectives that spark new ways of thinking**. At Avalon, a community partner shared how these young people “think differently” and “approach problems differently,” which helps businesses “slow down and notice issues we had stopped seeing.” As one LaFayette community partner reflected, “You start by thinking you’re doing something nice for a kid. Then you realize you’re actually benefiting from their ideas and energy.”

Over time, the partnerships can influence **perceptions of workforce development**. For example, a partner captured the value of LaFayette’s approach: “This is how you build a workforce—by letting young people try, mess up, and get better while it still counts as learning.” At Norris, one partner explained how the experience made them “rethink how we train people in general, not just learners in school.”

Partners also shifted from seeing learners as short-term helpers to viewing them as emerging professionals and future colleagues. A community partner at Norris explained, “You start to see them not as kids helping out, but as people you may actually want to see working here.” Some mentors **actively recruit learners** while they’re still enrolled, like a LaFayette mentor who calls a learner repeatedly over school breaks and asks, “Can you come work for us?”

Partnering with the sites can also **change how community members perceive youth with learning differences**. A LaFayette partner described confronting assumptions within his own organization, where some members initially carried stigma about alternative education. But after working directly with learners—watching them prepare food for fundraisers, serve at community events, and take on real responsibility—their perceptions changed. He shared: “You start seeing them, and you start getting an idea of what the school is for.”

Experiences like these often **inspire community members to become advocates** for the sites. As a Norris community partner noted, “There are so many families and kids out there that don’t fit into the traditional school setting... we’re just trying to get the word out that there are options.”

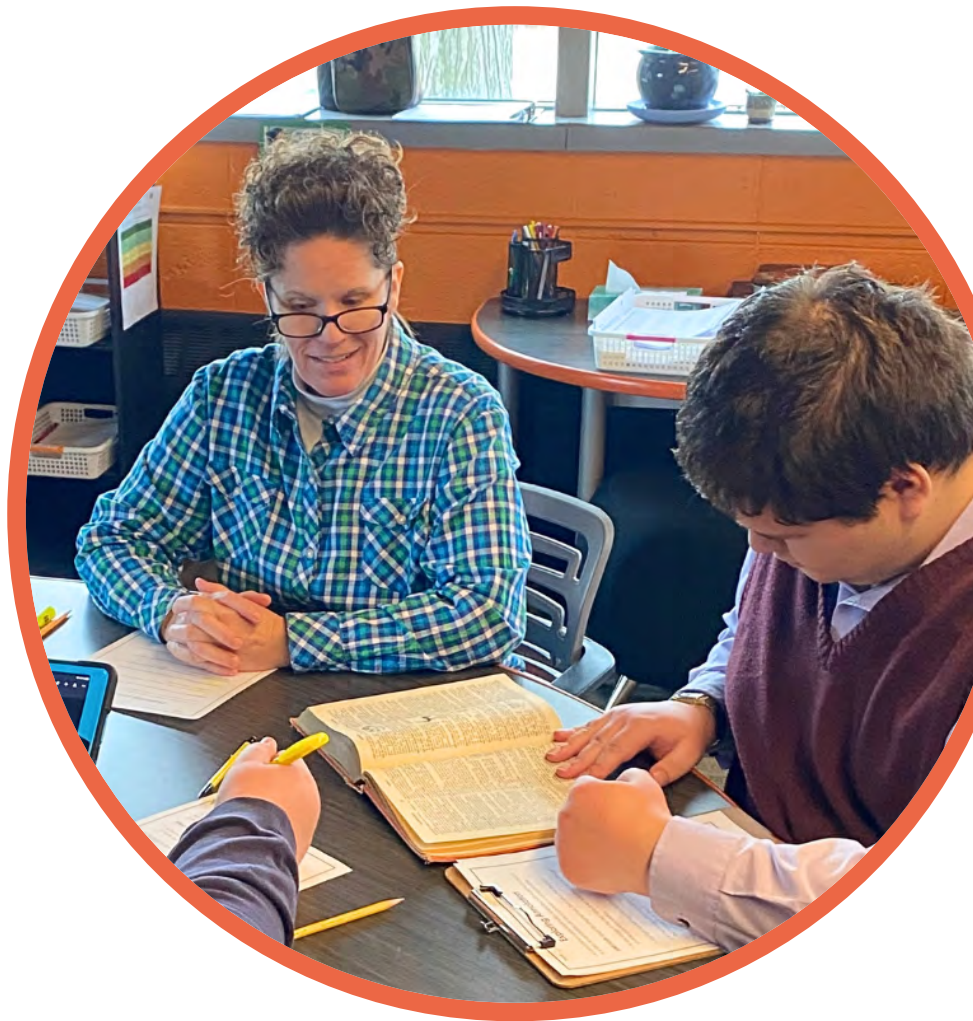
Research Connections

Research shows that self-determination interventions for learners with disabilities are associated with improved post-school outcomes, including employment (Wehmeyer et al., 2012).

From Internship to Enterprise

A LaFayette alumna with a reading disorder arrived at the school after years of academic and behavioral struggle. Educators noted that she “used to really struggle to be in school” and received behavior referrals frequently. At LaFayette, she received targeted reading support while interning at a local chocolate shop. During her placement, she developed new products using coffee from her parents’ local café and identified workflow improvements that increased sales at her internship. Years after graduating, she purchased the very business where she had interned. Today, LaFayette is partnering with her to establish new internship placements, ensuring the same doors that opened for her remain open for the next generation of learners.

This shows how a learner-centered approach builds resilient community infrastructure by turning individual growth into a collective asset, with interns eventually becoming local business owners and contributors to the community.

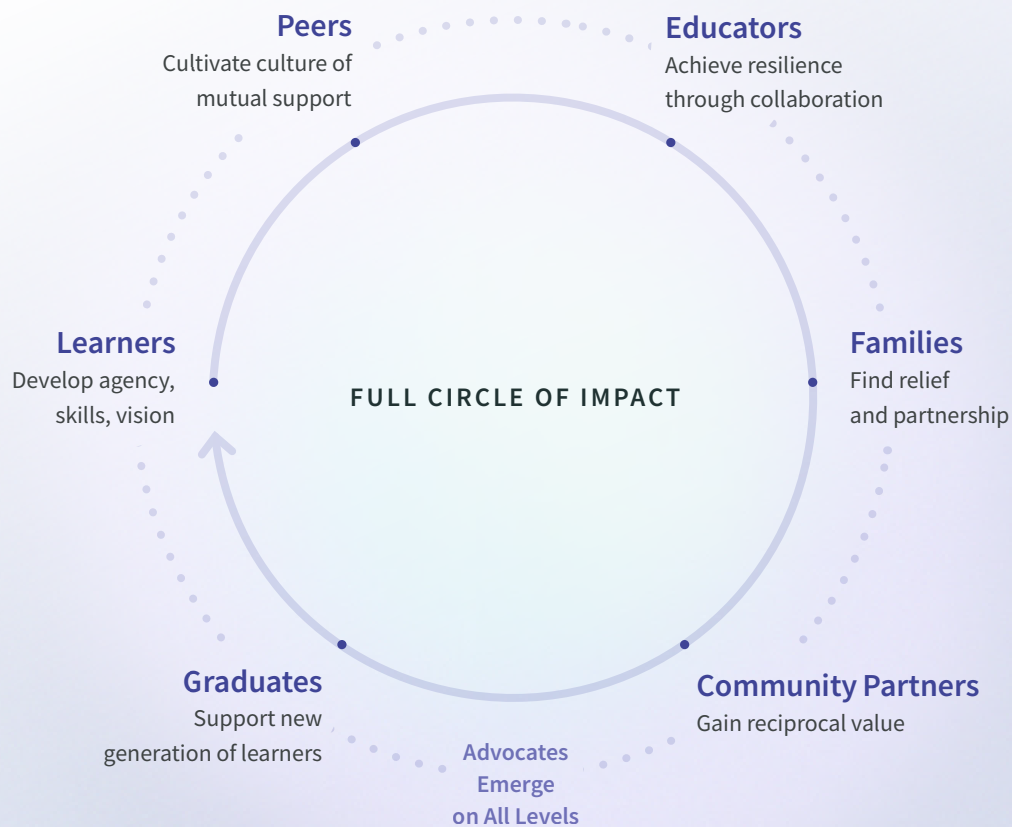


CONCLUSION

A practitioner-researcher captured the fundamental choice educators face: “How do we give learners the baseline relationships that they need and see them thrive versus ‘Let’s wait for them to scream out for help’ before we give them what’s developmentally appropriate?” Our study suggests that the environments featured in this brief do just this. They move beyond peripheral accommodations offered only after youth cry for help and, instead, weave support directly into the fabric of their model designs.

By shifting from accommodating learning differences to honoring a young person’s full humanity, these sites trigger a ripple effect that extends far beyond the individual. Learners grow and find vision; peers support each other; and educators build collaborative, resilient cultures. Families find long-awaited relief and partnership, while community partners find reciprocal value. Graduates return to serve as mentors and educators, and advocates emerge at every level—ensuring the sites and the broader movement can continue serving future generations of young people.

The Rippling Impact of Learner-Centered Education



For the complete series and related resources, visit our [Learning Differences Research Series](#) page.

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