

RESEARCH SERIES SYNTHESIS

Reimagining Support for Learning Differences through Learner-Centered Education

How do learner-centered environments support youth with learning differences?

Our research suggests that they are...

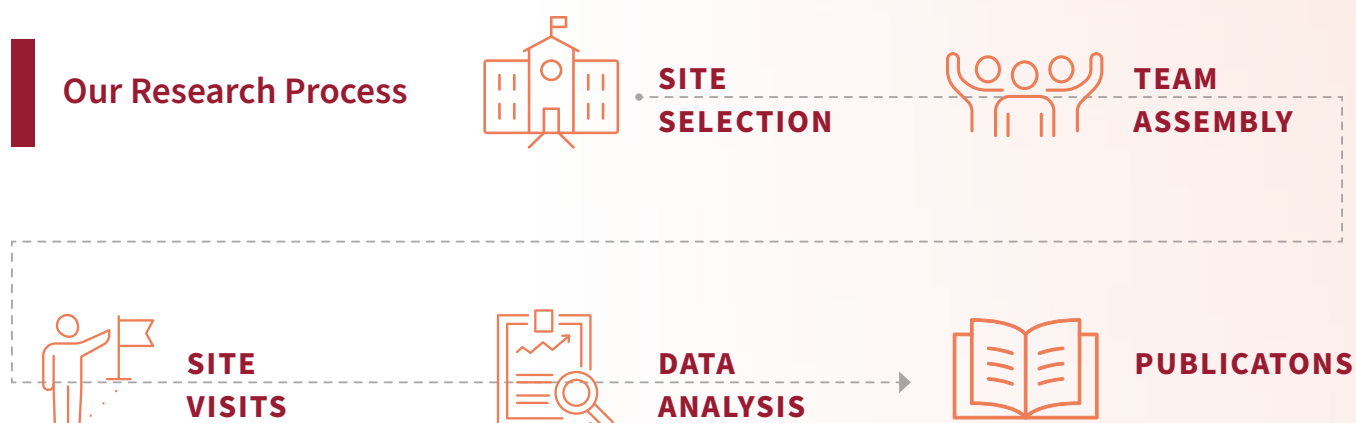
- 1 **Designed for differences**, with evidence-based supports embedded at every level for every learner
- 2 **Driven by mindsets** that reframe how learners are seen and supported from the ground up, across organizational structures and daily practices
- 3 **Creatively navigating policy and conditions**, turning system constraints into opportunities to better serve learners
- 4 **Cultivating learners' academic and personal growth** through cultures of belonging, healing, and interest-driven, real-world learning
- 5 **Generating a ripple effect of impact** for youth, educators, families, and the broader community

DEFINING OUR TERMS

- **Learner** refers to young people in learner-centered environments. Unlike “student,” which implies a passive role, “learner” encompasses the evolving ways that young people grow, explore, and understand the world around them.
- **Learning differences** include specific learning disabilities, neurological processing differences, and anyone experiencing a mismatch between how they learn best and how classrooms are typically designed—with or without a formal diagnosis.
- **Learner-centered education** focuses on the holistic development of young people by cultivating their sense of self and building meaningful relationships. Learning is grounded in individualized and real-world experiences that equip learners with the skills, habits, and strategies they need to thrive.
- **Learning environments/sites** are used as interchangeable terms for settings where young people learn, including K–12 schools, virtual spaces, youth development programs, and out-of-school providers.

STUDY OVERVIEW

We led a collaborative multi-case study across three public learner-centered schools during the 2024–2025 school year.



SITE SELECTION

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

TEAM ASSEMBLY

This research was conducted collaboratively. Leaders, educators, and advocates partnered with Education Reimagined as co-researchers, contributing their expertise and experience to the study.

Our Practitioner Team

- Scott Bain (King-Murphy Mountain School)
- Carrie Bakken (Avalon School)
- Kim Carter (Q.E.D. Foundation)
- Catayah Clark (Palmetto Pathways Academy)
- Susan Hart (LaFayette Big Picture School)
- Kristofer Koneazny (Norris School District)
- Liz Masters (Lab School of Memphis)
- Johnna Noll (Norris School District)
- Tim Quealy (Avalon School)
- Ayana Verdi (Verdi EcoSchool)
- Lela Wesley (Big Thought)

SITE VISITS

The research team conducted two-day visits to each of the learning environments.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data from site visits, focus groups, observations, surveys, and site documents were analyzed using thematic analysis.

PUBLICATIONS

Findings were documented in a series consisting of five briefs. Explore each of them below.

LEARN MORE

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

EVIDENCE FROM PRACTICE & LITERATURE

Grounded in a literature review of nine learning differences, this brief shows how conditions and practices observed at the three sites align with research on how to effectively support youth with specific learning needs.

WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

Learning Disabilities

(Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia)

Multimodal formats, flexibility, and universally accessible supports improve learning outcomes and confidence.

Neurological Processing

(ADHD, Executive Functioning, Dyspraxia, Sensory Processing)

Meaningful choice, movement, and scaffolding strengthen engagement and executive functioning.

Related Conditions

(Autism, Anxiety)

Smaller, relationship-centered communities and interest-based pathways support development.

WHAT SITES PROVIDE

- **Safety:** Learners feel secure, respected, and supported by adults.
- **Community:** Learners build meaningful connections that foster belonging and mutual contribution among peers and adults.
- **Advocacy:** Learners are empowered to voice their needs and shape their learning experiences.
- **Adaptability:** Learners access spaces and systems that accommodate their diverse needs and backgrounds.
- **Relevance:** Learners engage in experiences that connect to their interests and real-world contexts.
- **Choice:** Learners access multiple pathways and modalities to learn and demonstrate what they know.

“My ADHD would get to me. I could not sit down. [My school’s] options for breaks at the time were helpful in getting my school work done. I’d go to the gym and play basketball for 15 minutes. It worked for me. They would form to what I needed. It teaches you about yourself—knowing when you need to take that time to go away or get out of a situation. It was very beneficial for my schooling.”

— GRADUATE

“It’s night and day. She went from crying every day to wanting to come to school every single day—happy and joyful. She feels supported, and seen, and is making plans for her life that I didn’t think she’d be making as a 9th-grader.”

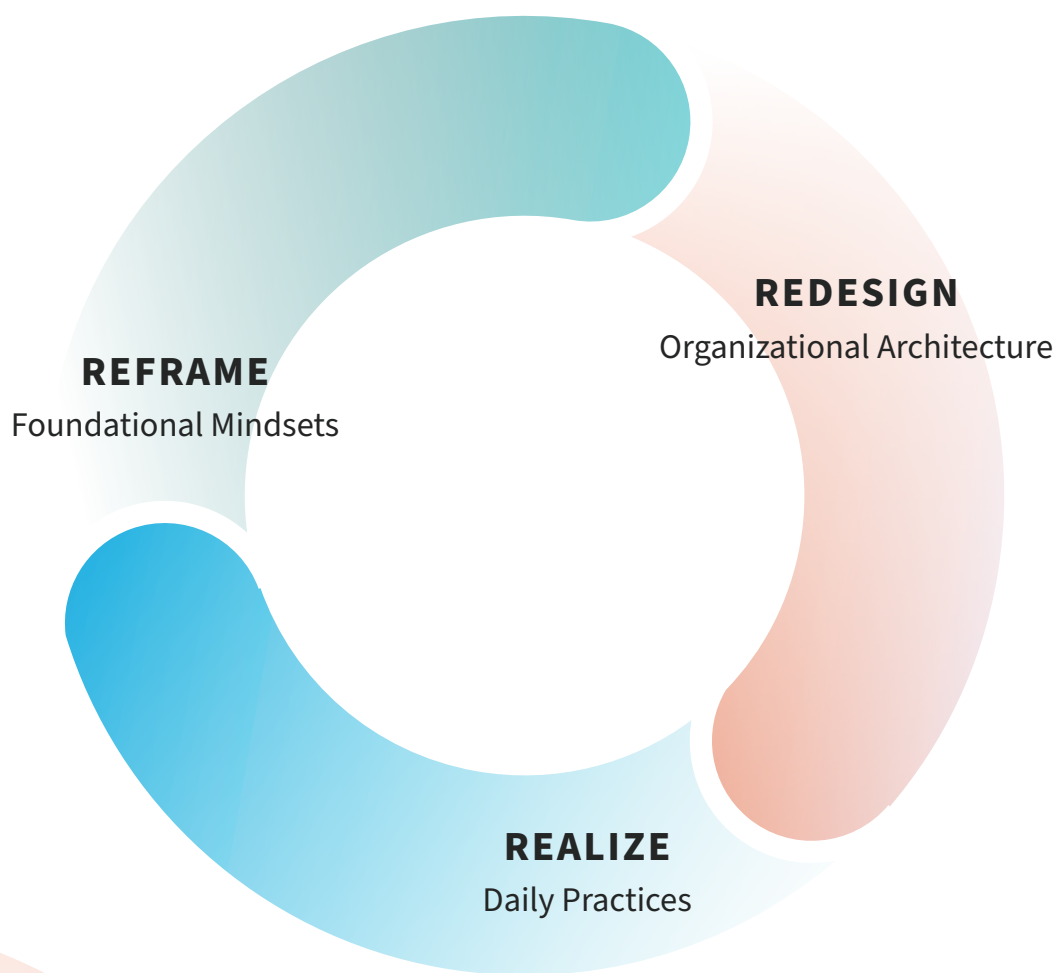
— PARENT DESCRIBING DAUGHTER’S TRANSFORMATION WITH ANXIETY

LEARN MORE

Addressing Specific Learning Differences Through Learner-Centered Education: Evidence from Practice and Literature

THE APPROACH

Where the previous brief examined specific learning differences, this one highlights the shared mindsets, structures, and daily practices that honor learners' strengths and cultivate their full potential.



REFRAME

The environments' foundational mindsets shape how they perceive learning differences and the potential of every learner:

Human-Centered Mindset

Every learner belongs and is worthy of unconditional safety, care, and deep understanding.

Strengths-Based Mindset

Every learner has strengths worth surfacing and leveraging.

Collaborative Mindset

Educators, learners, families, and community members are all essential partners in co-creating a young person's learning journey.

“[The first meeting] was totally about: Who are you? What do you want to get out of this? Where do you want to go? What do you like and don't like?”

— PARENT SPEAKING ABOUT MEETING WITH CHILD'S ADVISOR FOR THE FIRST TIME

REDESIGN

The environments' organizational architecture is designed to reflect and sustain learner-centered values:

Distributed Responsibility Structures

Teams of educators share decision-making and instructional roles, ensuring every learner is everyone's responsibility.

Sustained Relationship Structures

Multi-year bonds between educators, learners, and peers provide a network of support that evolves with each young person.

Embedded Support Systems

Responsive accommodations are naturally built in for all learners, regardless of formal diagnoses or plans.

Experiential Learning Pathways

Real-world, interest-driven experiences enrich and bring context to academic learning.

“You stick with the same teacher, the same advisor, and the same kids for 4 years. So, it definitely feels like a second family.”

— LEARNER

REALIZE

The environments' daily practices are enacted to meet the everyday needs of every learner:

Behavior as Communication

Educators respond with curiosity, seeking to understand the underlying needs a learner is expressing through their actions.

Exposure to Possibility

Learners engage with diverse fields and professionals to explore their interests and future pathways.

Self-Knowledge and Advocacy

Learners are guided to develop self-awareness and communication skills to actively direct their own learning and life paths.

“They get out into the community and, all of a sudden, all their gifts and beautiful skills just blossom.”

— EDUCATOR



WATCH VIDEO

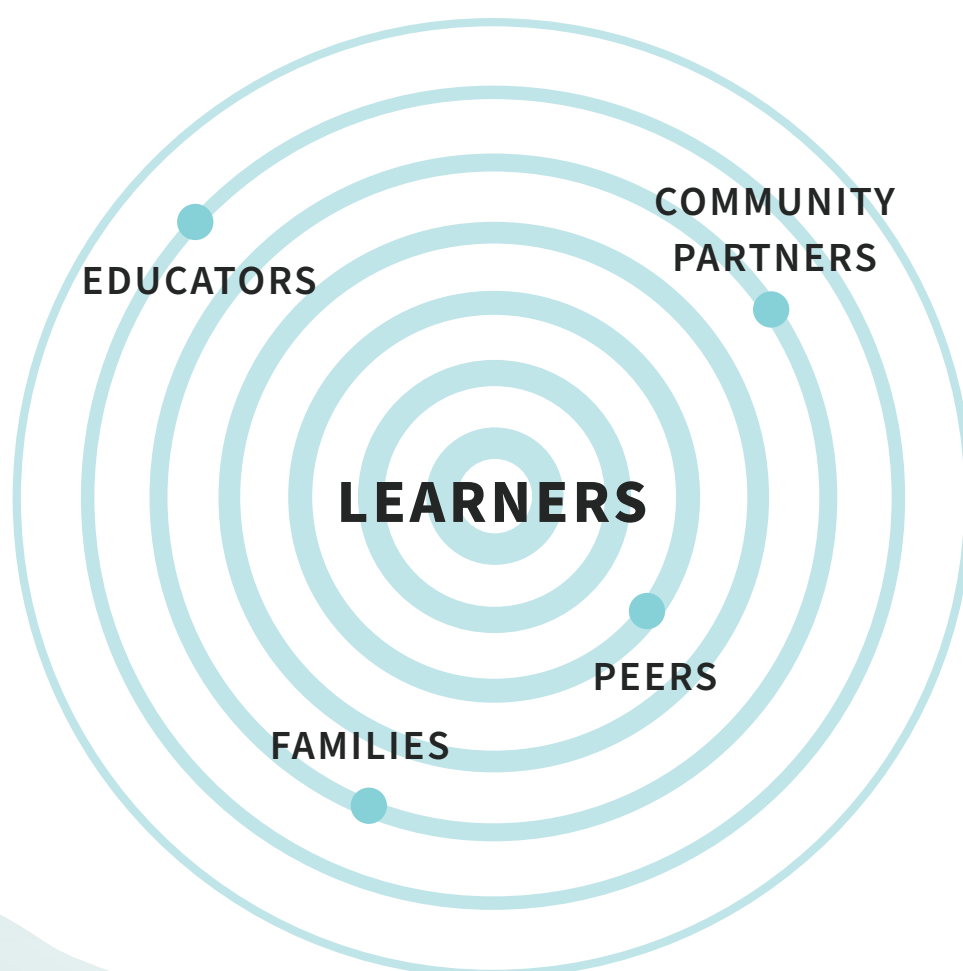
Learner-Centered Strengths: Navigating Learning Differences at Norris School District

LEARN MORE

The Approach: Reimagining Support for Learning Differences Through Learner-Centered Education

THE IMPACT

The learner-centered approach generates a ripple effect of impact, starting with the individual learner and radiating outward to peers, educators, families, and community partners.



IMPACT ON LEARNERS

Learners rebuild identity and agency, develop foundational academic skills, and expand possibilities for their future.

“I wasn’t really 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, I’ve picked up advocating for other people too.”

— LEARNER

IMPACT ON PEERS

Peers experience cultures of mutual support, collaborating and growing alongside one another through shared learning journeys.

“The older kids help the little kids, the little kids seek help from the older kids.

— PARENT

“It feels like a family.”

— GRADUATE

IMPACT ON EDUCATORS

Educators are sustained by a culture of collective strength, cultivating a shared purpose and strong staff retention.

“Collaborative structures translate into a level of professional sustainability made visible through exceptional staff retention that defies national trends.”

— LEAD RESEARCHER

IMPACT ON FAMILIES

Families find relief from constant battles to secure support for their child and, instead, experience genuine partnership.

“There are days when I walk out of here going, ‘God, I’m cheating’ or ‘This is too easy.’ I feel like they really [understand] him.”

— PARENT

IMPACT ON COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Community partners gain reciprocal value as learners bring fresh perspectives and meaningful contributions to their organizations.

“[A learner] ended up going to a chocolate shop, and her project was to introduce a chocolate that included her parent’s coffee. She goes on [with her life], and years later, she comes back and buys the chocolate shop she interned at.”

— SITE LEADER

LEARN MORE

The Impact: The Ripple Effect of Reimagining Support for Learning Differences

POLICIES & CONDITIONS

This final brief shows how learner-centered environments creatively navigate policies and conditions to prioritize learners' strengths and needs, even within the constraints of conventional systems.

STUDIED SITES ARE



Leveraging state and local flexibility



Addressing regulations with creativity and purpose



Reframing accountability and assessment



Building values through aligned professional teams



Creating policy influence through community advocacy

“As a school leader, you have to look at what the statute is, what the law is, and what accountability requires. Then you have to figure out what you actually have to do [to meet that].”

— SITE LEADER

“You’re looking for ways to play on the edges [in order to] do what’s right for students first when it comes to policy and procedures.”

— CO-RESEARCHER

LEARN MORE

Navigating Policies and Conditions: Supporting Youth with Learning Differences in Learner-Centered Environments



Explore the full learning differences series and access our library of resources, including podcasts, articles, and webinar recordings at education-reimagined.org/learning-differences.

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