

GUIDING POLICY PRINCIPLES FOR LEARNER-CENTERED ECOSYSTEMS

The Vision: Learner-Centered Ecosystems

Across the country, communities are coming together to reconsider and reorganize how learning and education happen, developing learner-centered ecosystems that put young people and their learning journeys at the center. This transformation holds the possibility not only for stronger outcomes for young people but also for bolstered community cohesion, economic mobility, and civic life.

These communities are advancing a vision of education in which every child is supported to discover who they are, develop their gifts and capacities, and contribute them meaningfully to their community and the world. Grounded in relationships with educators, mentors, family, and peers, each young person helps shape their evolving learning journey so that it reflects their strengths, interests, needs, and aspirations, while drawing on the full breadth of learning opportunities within their communities and beyond. This work is not theoretical; communities across diverse contexts and geographies are already putting this vision into practice and developing new ways of organizing learning around young people.

IN THESE ECOSYSTEMS, YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ABLE TO:

CO-CREATE

learning journeys with educators, mentors, peers, and families.

ACCESS

learning in diverse spaces and settings, both physical and virtual.

BUILD SKILLS

to contribute meaningfully to their communities, now and in their futures.

Source: *Where Learning Lives: Insights from the Learner-Centered Ecosystem Lab* (Education Reimagined, 2025).

Realizing this vision will take more than changes in practice. It calls for reimagining the structures, systems, and conditions of public education.

Today, education is still organized primarily within schools and classrooms, while responsibility is concentrated within K-12 systems. Resources, information, and supports are often divided across spaces and sectors. This fragmentation can create duplication, gaps, and missed opportunities to draw on the full capacity of a community in support of its young people. Meeting the changing needs of learners and communities requires greater connection, adaptability, and cohesion across the systems and organizations that support them.

Learner-centered ecosystems offer a fundamentally different way of organizing learning around learners and their unique, yet interconnected, learning journeys. They are adaptive, networked structures through which learning happens across a community and responsibility for supporting learners is shared across people and organizations. Schools, families, community organizations, civic spaces, businesses, higher education institutions, early childhood providers, and other local assets become part of a more connected whole. This greater cohesion creates the capacity for the ecosystem itself to learn, respond, and adapt as learners' needs, community contexts, and the world change.

The potential for impact extends beyond individual learners. By organizing collective assets around young people and creating shared responsibility for their growth and development, communities themselves build greater capacity to come together around common challenges and pursue shared aspirations.

WHAT THRIVING ECOSYSTEMS MAKE POSSIBLE



Adapted from: Where Learning Lives: Insights from the Learner-Centered Ecosystem Lab (Education Reimagined, 2025)

Yet, today's policy environment was fundamentally designed for a more conventional system. Rigid, standardized structures anchored in compliance too often limit learner and community agency and constrain where and how learning is organized, supported, and credentialed.

A different policy orientation is needed—one that enables rather than prescribes, is informed by communities, and works across systems to create the conditions for new ways of organizing and supporting learning to emerge and endure.

How We Get There: Guiding Policy Principles

Policy plays a critical role in making this transformation possible. Policymakers can act not only as stewards of public systems and essential protections but also as enablers of innovation, learning, and adaptation. As communities build and evolve their work, states can help connect learning and assets across communities and use those insights to strengthen conditions for innovation more broadly.

Transforming systems while catalyzing local innovation also requires states to build the broader conditions and infrastructure for systemic research and development. Beyond individual policies, this calls for a shared vision, mindset, and ways of operating that enable states to learn alongside communities, connect insights across efforts, and continually improve the conditions in which innovation happens.

The guiding principles that follow sit within this broader orientation, identifying the conditions policy must create for communities to develop and sustain learner-centered ecosystems. They are directional commitments and are interdependent, reflecting the nature of ecosystems themselves. Together, they articulate how policy can enable locally designed solutions, build shared infrastructure and accountability across sectors, and ensure that learners, families, educators, and communities have real authority in shaping the systems that affect them. As ecosystem work matures across the country and the field learns more about what is needed, these principles will evolve to reflect that learning.

GUIDING POLICY PRINCIPLES

1. Policy should provide communities the **flexibility** to anchor in a shared vision for public education and reimagine how learning is organized, supported, and credentialed in service of that vision.

- **Enable communities to inform educational goals and outcomes.** Create room for communities to shape the intended outcomes for their children based on local context and aspirations, within defined broader national commitments to all learners.
- **Align accountability with locally informed outcomes.** Ensure assessment and accountability structures reinforce those outcomes and recognize the varied ways learners demonstrate what they can do and know.
- **Allocate and organize resources around learners and their journeys.** Enable public resources to support the ecosystem's infrastructure and operations, while being responsive to individual learners' needs and educational journeys, with learners and families as active participants in the process.
- **Expand where, how, and with whom learning happens.** Enable communities to build on local assets and opportunities, with learning across settings, pathways, and relationships recognized as part of a coherent learning journey.
- **Create protected pathways for experimentation and learning.** Enable communities to test and apply new approaches to organizing, funding, governing, supporting, and recognizing learning within clear public protections, with mechanisms for evidence and experience to support future policy and implementation.
- **Enable resources to flow across settings and partners.** Create flexibility for resources to align with the opportunities and structures of the ecosystem, supporting the people, places, and organizations contributing to learners' development.
- **Enable cross-sector collaboration and reciprocity.** Create space for partners across sectors to build reciprocal relationships, drive alignment, and share responsibility for the infrastructure, resources, and learning opportunities that support learners across an ecosystem.
- **Embed and maintain essential protections for learners.** Ensure increased flexibility does not compromise safety, due process, or civil rights and consistently evaluate for its impact on quality, outcomes, and access to maintain necessary guardrails.

2. Policy should create authentic and durable structures through which **those closest to the learning—learners, families, educators, and communities**—can shape the development of their ecosystems and the policies and conditions that support them.

- **Make policy accessible and transparent.** Ensure policies and policy processes are understandable and accessible so learners, families, educators, and communities can engage with, influence, and advocate around them.
- **Build durable mechanisms for shared decision-making.** Create structures for learners, families, educators, and communities to meaningfully engage as co-designers and decision-makers within the ecosystem, rather than relying on episodic or informal engagement.
- **Create feedback loops between communities and policy.** Ensure communities' experiences, needs, and learning inform policy decisions and how conditions evolve alongside ecosystem development.

3. Policy should create the conditions for communities to intentionally develop and sustain the shared infrastructure that supports learners' journeys and enables responsibility, resources, and capacity to be distributed and coordinated across the ecosystem.

- **Build capacity for creating and sustaining new ways of working.** Create the time, support, and resources for people and organizations to learn together, develop new ways of working, and shift the mindsets, practices, and relationships needed for shared responsibility across the ecosystem.
- **Strengthen coordination, signaling, and shared learning across the ecosystem.** Create infrastructure that allows information and learning to move across people, organizations, and systems, informing decisions and the ongoing evolution of the ecosystem in service of every learner.
- **Reimagine the resource base and how it is distributed.** Enable resources to be drawn from and coordinated across education, social services, workforce development, industry, higher education, and other systems, and organized across community, regional, or state levels in ways that best support learner needs and ecosystem development.
- **Identify and resource infrastructure gaps.** Ensure resources are directed toward gaps in the shared infrastructure learners and the adults supporting them need to access and navigate opportunities across the ecosystem, as well as the infrastructure needed for the ecosystem as a whole to function effectively.
- **Ensure quality across the ecosystem.** Establish approaches to quality assurance that align with the shared purpose and outcomes of the ecosystem and account for learning and experiences across the ecosystem as a whole, not only within individual institutions.
- **Enable interoperability across and beyond the ecosystem.** Ensure infrastructure allows learning records, credentials, and other signals of learning to be recognized and carried across settings and systems, supporting continuity in learners' journeys and trust across the ecosystem.
- **Evolve systems alongside new roles and ways of organizing learning.** Ensure system leader and educator preparation, professional learning, credentialing, and other systems evolve to support expanded adult roles across a network of learning opportunities.

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Jon Alfuth, Senior Director of State Policy, KnowledgeWorks

Amy Anderson, Executive Director, RESCHOOL Colorado

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David Cook, Principal Strategist, Learning Ecosystems Design

Stephanie DiStasio, Head of Network Engagement, Learning to Flourish Network, LearnerStudio

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Shawn Hoffman-Bram, Ph.D., Executive Director of Expanded Learning and Ecosystem Development, Eden Prairie Schools

Megha Juneja, Director of Innovation, Indiana Department of Education

Kristofer Koneazny, Director of Learning and Ecosystem Development, Norris School District

Meghan McCann, Former Interim Chief Program Officer, Forum for Youth Investment

Peter McWalters, Former Rhode Island Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Babak Mostaghimi, Ed.L.D., Partner, LearnerStudio

Shaunette Parker, Ph.D., Senior Director of Partner Relations, National School Choice Awareness Foundation

Jennifer Poon, Partner, Center for Innovation in Education

Marcy Raymond, Chief Strategy Officer, PAST Foundation

Tyler Samstag, Executive Director, Remake Learning

Sarah Snipes, Director, Division of Innovation, Kentucky Department of Education

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Kelly Tenkely, Founder and Executive Director, CultivatED Colorado

Doannie Tran, Ed.D., Managing Partner, Center for Innovation in Education

Keeanna Warren, Ph.D., CEO, Purdue Polytechnic High Schools

Randy Ziegenfuss, Ed.D., Professor, Moravian University