When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive

360°

Activating the people & possibilities in all learning places

Full Day & Year Round 365

Learning ECOsystems Youth & Young Adults Up to 25

Every Connection Optimized

Workforce Readiness
Adult Mentorship & Supervision
Social & Emotional Development
Physical Activity
Youth Programs
Libraries
Recreation Centers
Under Utilized City Facilities
Family Resources & Support
Mobile Learning Vehicles/ Makerspace
Youth & Family
Academic Support & Tutoring
Outdoor Spaces
Re-engagement Centers
School Building
Digital Literacy Coaching
Physical & Mental Health
Higher Education
Museums, Zoos, Aquariums, Galleries, Theaters, Convention Centers
Faith Based Buildings
Arts & Humanities
Access to Healthy Food
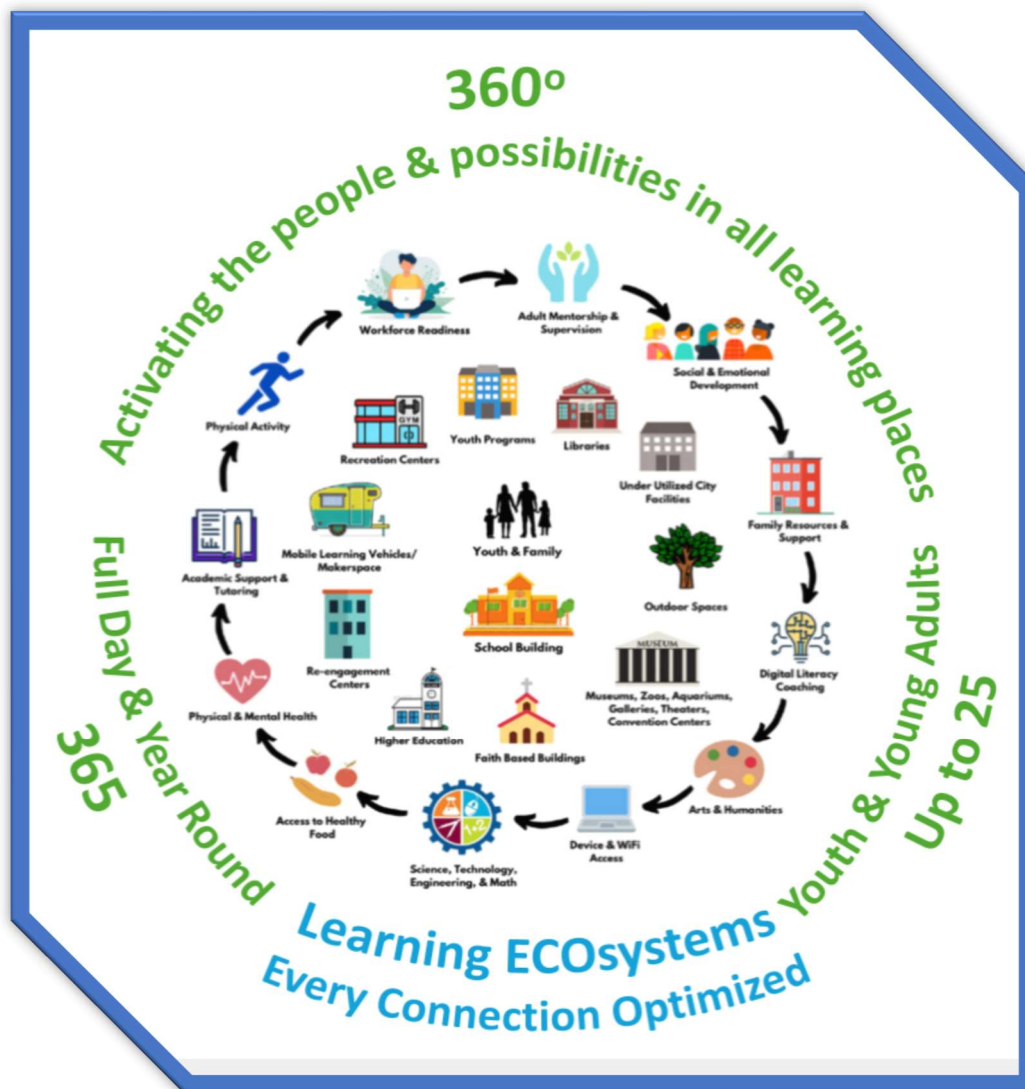Science, Technology, Engineering, & Math
Device & WiFi Access

ALLIANCE FOR YOUTH THRIVING

Why Empowering the People, Places and Possibilities throughout the Full Learning Ecosystem Is the Key to Building a New Education Architecture to Support Anywhere, Anytime Learning for All.

Young people have a powerful drive to thrive.
But they need more fuel.

Now more than ever, our young people need clear and powerful pathways for learning and engagement that optimize the people, places and possibilities in their learning ecosystem.

This is especially true for adolescents, whose "brains are specifically tailored to meet the needs of this stage of life. Adolescents must explore and take risks to build the cognitive, social and emotional skills they will need to be productive adults."*

*The Promise of Adolescence
National Academy of Medicine

When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive

All youth have potential, but too many lack the opportunities, relationships and conditions to thrive, putting our democracy and economy at risk.

Our public education system is too essential to fail. It holds a uniquely important place in the web of people, places, and possibilities in young people's lives.

Every community contains a broader learning ecosystem that is too important to ignore. Real learning happens in real life.

The boundaries of a new public education architecture must formalize the commitment to anytime, everywhere, never-too-late learning that helps young people develop the competencies and skills they need to navigate and succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Together, we must make an explicit commitment to co-designing a new public system to support 360° | 365 pathways for youth and young adults, securing full credit for competency building and connections with people and in places throughout their schools and community.

Shifting our focus from rebuilding systems to building dynamic learning ECOsystems can set off the cascade of shifts needed to ensure Every Connection is Optimized. We must:

1. Reclaim learning as a part of human development.
2. Embed academic standards in broader youth success goals.
3. Explicitly name the people and places that create anywhere/anytime/never-too-late learning possibilities.
4. Acknowledge the multiple systems that support anywhere/anytime learning and include them in the design of learning ecosystems as the new education architecture.
5. Ensure those working closest to youth and families have the time, trust, and tools to create meaningful learning experiences and well-lit pathways

We must position learning ecosystems as civic infrastructure – not supplemental programming – essential to preparing youth for participation in a thriving democracy and inclusive economy.

Now is the time to build the trust, alignment, and shared stewardship that make learning ecosystems real – through new roles, reimagined systems, and a deep commitment to thriving.

When youth thrive, we all thrive. This central truth grounds our work. And it is underscored by a powerful cycle of thriving that Is validated by research:

Thriving communities need thriving youth to drive innovation, fuel the economy, and reclaim democracy as changemakers.

Thriving youth need thriving ecosystems that provide opportunities to be productive, healthy and connected, building the sense of agency and identity needed to navigate a rapidly changing world.

Thriving ecosystems need thriving systems accountable for providing critical services and opportunities but also for stewarding connections between people and places across the ecosystem.

Thriving systems need thriving communities that hold a collective vision for their members and a commitment to advance the collective good that creates optimism and urgency for changemaking

When these connections are strong, they're easy to see and feel. There is vibrancy and confidence in our interactions.

But when families, systems and communities are stretched thin — without the human or financial resources they need — these connections can be harder to recognize and easier to dismiss. It may seem counterintuitive, but times of greatest challenge are when we need to turn outwards, not inwards, optimizing connections across the learning ecosystem.

Unprecedented funding and staffing shortages are constraining all our public systems and nonprofit community organizations. Deficit and scarcity mindsets stifle innovation, adaptability, collaboration and trust at a moment in our history when these attributes are needed to respond to rapid changes in every aspect of our lives, sped up by the age of AI.

Every public system is adjusting. But our education system is hemorrhaging families, learners, staff, funding and, most notably, public support as control of education funds is increasingly moved directly to parents.

Widening our lens creates the space to shift our focus –from deficits and scarcity to assets and abundance.
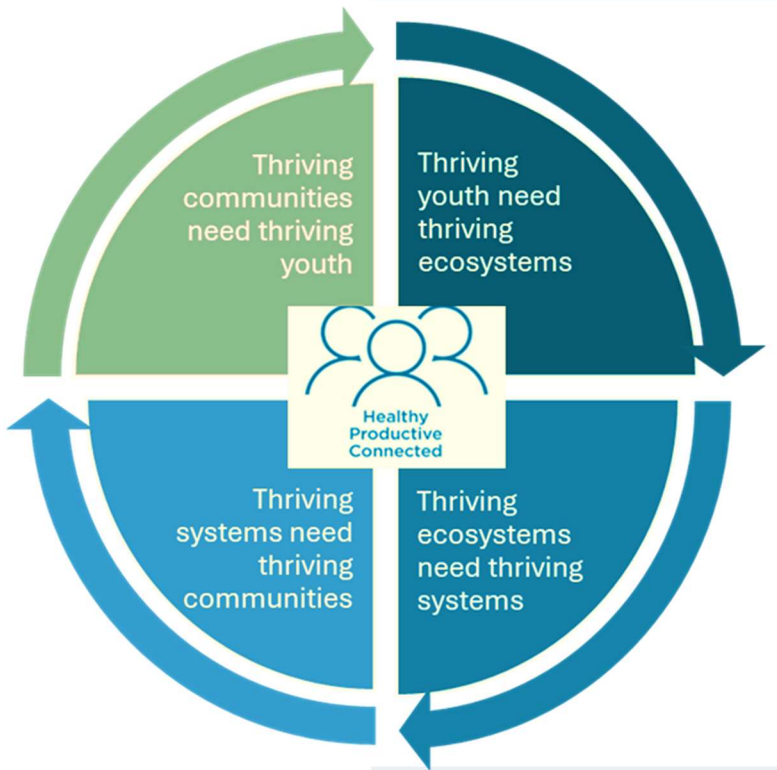
All youth have potential, but many lack the opportunities, relationships, and conditions to thrive, putting our democracy and economy at risk.

Young people are wired to seek new experiences, take risks, make a difference. By age 10 (the beginning of the period of adolescent development that extends until age 25), young people are looking for opportunities beyond the familiar confines of home and school.

We Can Change The Odds

Ensuring every high school student three developmental supports can dramatically change the odds that young adults are productive, healthy and connected to community.

From		
22%	36%	42%

Really Struggling **Doing Well**

To		
12%	20%	68%
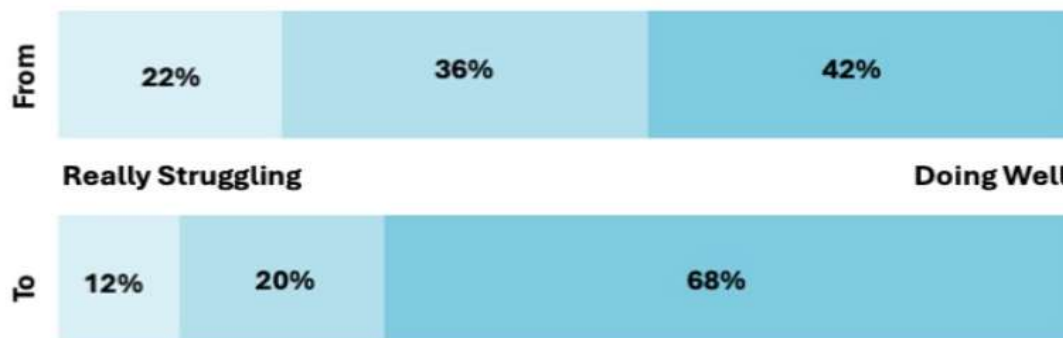
A 2002 landmark analysis of multiple longitudinal studies of young people from high school entry into their mid-twenties provided a yet-to-be-replicated glimpse of the impact of simple developmental opportunities – strong relationships, challenging learning experiences, opportunities to make a difference can have on youth readiness and young adult success.

The team at Youth Development Strategies, Inc. found that ensuring every young person these three basic supports throughout their high school years could increase youth success by 50% and reduce struggling by the same amount.

Equally important, they determined that every asset matters: positive relationships, challenging learning experiences, opportunities for meaningful contribution have strong, independent impacts on youth readiness.

There is no doubt that poverty, race and place are major determinants of opportunity. But young people's lack of preparedness – subjective and objective – is as much about the quality of opportunities for growth, challenge and contribution available, even to those with means, as it is about the quantity of opportunities within their learning ecosystems.

Our public education system is too essential to fail.

Schools are at the center of community learning for a reason. Along with families, schools are responsible for the safety and education of **all** young people. Public education is the only system charged with providing universal support. It holds a unique place in the web of people, places and possibilities in young people's lives.

Renewing Education's Purpose

…the neoliberal education reform era—first by redefining education's purpose toward individual returns, and second by falling short on grand promises of improvement—created long-term conditions for people to leave public schools and label them as failing. As a result, simply repeating the school reforms of past decades, but doing them better, appears unlikely to succeed. The changes that we need can flow only from a bolder, broader purpose for public schools in our changing multiracial democracy.

We suggest two fundamental goals for what this renewed democratic purpose for education should be:

- *Prepare young people to thrive in a diverse, changing democracy.*
- *Renew the public purpose of schools for our broader society.*

Kent McGuire & Matt Wilka. A Democratic Vision for Public Schools. Stanford Social Innovation Review. Fall 2024

But ultimately, young people's learning needs to be centered in community. As we move towards a new education architecture designed to "renew the public purpose of schools" we need to find ways to reconcile the need for a public system that maintains the core functions schools play with the demand for radical changes in the execution of those functions to create space for the new features students, educators, families, and employers are demanding and learning science supports.

We need a new education architecture to support learning across the ecosystem. The question isn't whether, it's how**.**

In 2020, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) issued a report outlining four scenarios for the future of learning.

- **Schooling extended** (continued reliance on academic certificates from accredited institutions)
- **Education outsourced** (diverse forms of private and community-based alternatives to schooling)
- **Schools as learning hubs** (schools retain most functions, but competency recognition drives ecosystem development, leveraging resources from other institutions)
- **Learn-as-you-go** (digitalized, AI-driven learning that allows knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be assessed and certified directly).

All four scenarios are possible and can even coexist. But all are not equally good for renewing our democracy. As learning hubs, schools need to retain the functions that guarantee access to safe, supportive environments that instill core skills and values and accredit their acquisition.

Every community contains elements of a learning ecosystem that are too important to ignore. Real learning happens in real life.

Learning happens in schools of course, but it is often piqued and applied in more informal settings in the community. Libraries, community centers, afterschool and summer programs, camps, re-entry centers, job training, internships service programs, and businesses offering part time and summer employment.

These systems often work with schools to enrich the learning experiences they orchestrate, bringing people in or sending students out during the school day.

But these systems and staff also interact independently with families and learners, during the out-of-school hours as well as with youth who have left school with or without diplomas.

As places where young people and families come voluntarily and stay because of alignment with their goals and interests, They play a critical complementary and sometimes compensatory roles in youth's lives. And because youth and families engage with these places voluntarily, customizing their experiences to match their needs and interests, they are viewed more favorably than schools.
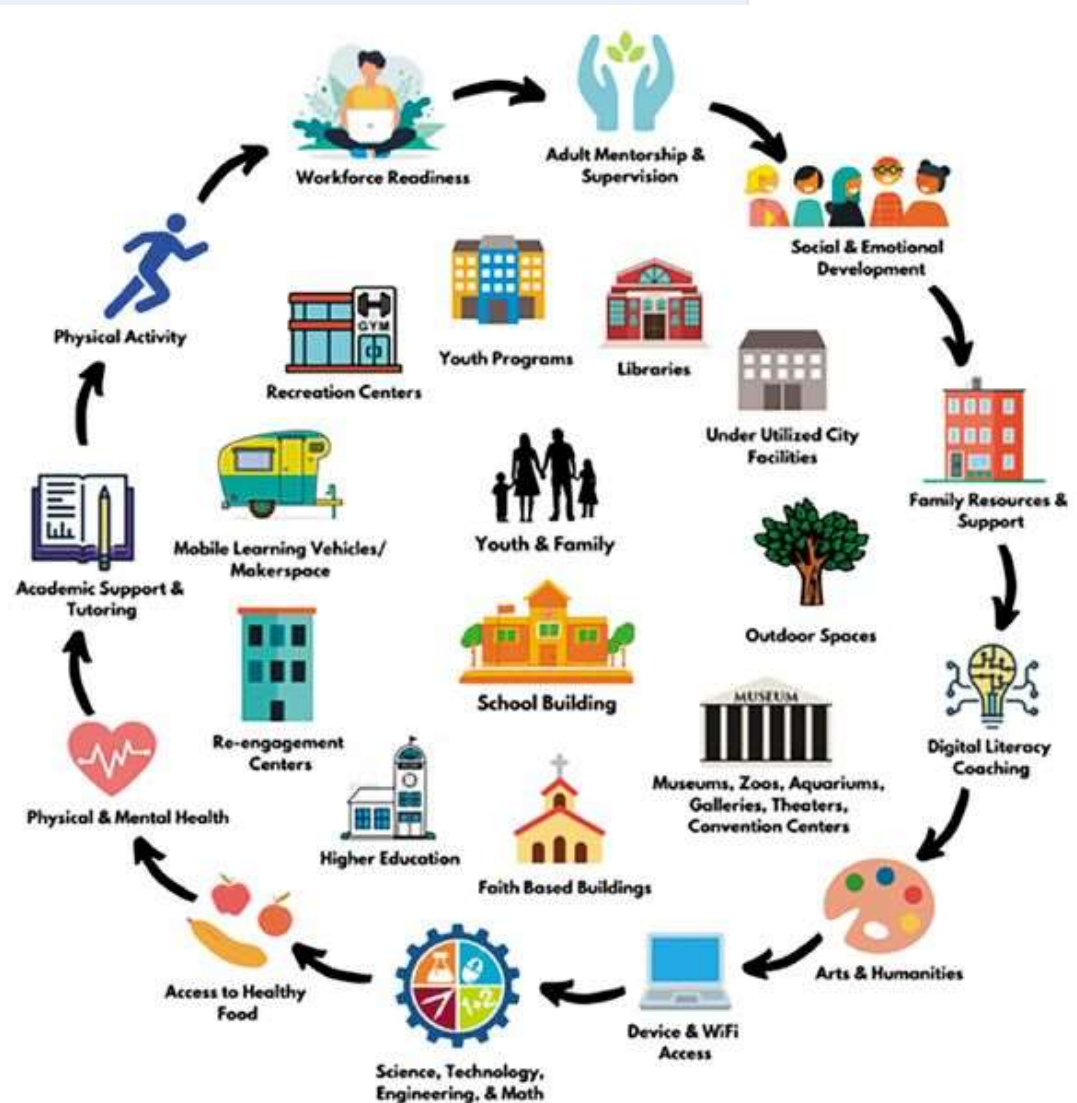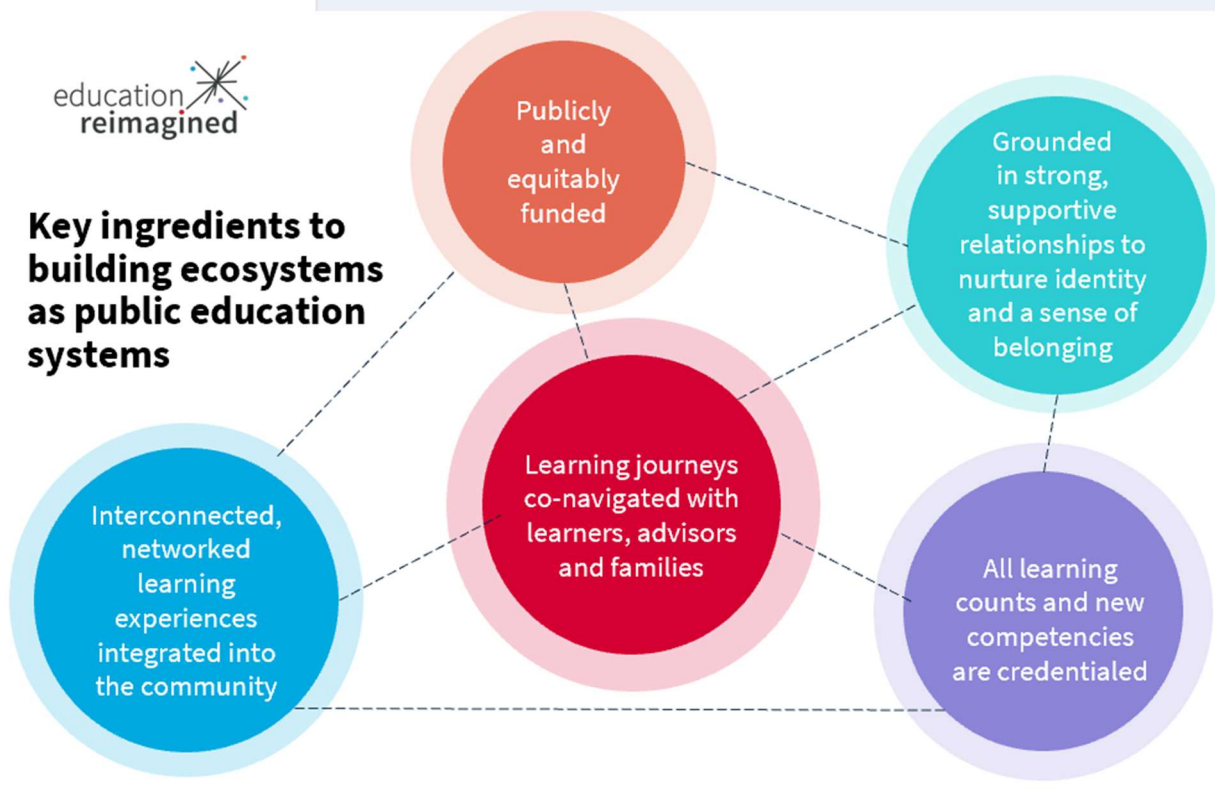

National League of Cities

The boundaries of a new public education architecture must formalize the commitment to anytime, anywhere, never-too-late learning *that helps young people develop the competencies and skills they need to navigate and succeed in a rapidly changing world.*

Schools have softened the walls that separate school from community.
Decades long changes in support of the *whole child* (beyond academic development) have led to changes in the *whole school* (broadening the definition of educator, acknowledging the importance of non-academic activities and non-classroom staff) and with the *whole community* (developing partnerships and giving credit for real-world experiences).

Education Reimagined's depiction of the key ingredients that need to be built into our new public education system are an excellent example of how these principles are being codified:

education reimagined

Key ingredients to building ecosystems as public education systems

Publicly and equitably funded

Grounded in strong, supportive relationships to nurture identity and a sense of belonging

Interconnected, networked learning experiences integrated into the community

Learning journeys co-navigated with learners, advisors and families

All learning counts and new competencies are credentialed

But school systems still operate within the traditional walls of formal accountability that define the school day, school year and matriculation age.

The uptake on building learning ecosystems among education leaders signals the importance of community partners. But leaders in and outside of school systems are stymied by the enormity of the infrastructure changes required to institutionalize ecosystem stewardship.

Together, we must make an explicit commitment co-designing a new public system to support 360O | 365 pathways for youth and young adults, securing full credit for competency building and connections with people and in places throughout their schools and community.

360°
anytime anywhere
Activating the people & possibilities in all learning places

360
365
Up to 25
Pathways

Full Day & Year Round
365

Youth & Young Adults
Up to 25

Learning ECOsystems
Every Connection Optimized

never too late

This commitment has to be made at the top but activated on the ground — prioritizing the cultivation of regular opportunities for practitioners, youth and families to connect across traditional system boundaries. Shifting our focus from rebuilding systems to building dynamic learning ECOsystems can set off the cascade of shifts needed to ensure Every Connection is Optimized:

1. **Reclaim learning as a part of human development**
2. **Embed academic standards in broader youth success goals..**
3. **Explicitly name the people and places that create anywhere/anytime/never-too-late learning possibilities.**
4. **Acknowledge the multiple systems that support anywhere/anytime learning and include them in the design of learning ecosystems as the new education architecture.**
5. **Ensure those working closest to youth and families have the time, trust, and tools to create meaningful learning experiences and well-lit pathways.**

Shifting Mindsets

Shifting our thinking can shift our reality. By broadening our view of education to include the entire learning ecosystem, we can unlock the limitless potential for learning inherent in our communities.

We can shift how the adults that power the learning ecosystem interact

We can shift how organizations and institutions tackle problems

We can shift how systems are structured

We can shift how families engage in education

We can shift how children and youth experience learning

Remake Learning. Shift. 2024

Reclaim learning as a part of human development. Examine how approaches to learning and thriving outside of academic classrooms can help shift mindsets from the current grammar of schooling toward a new grammar of learning.

An easy way to grasp the extent to which the current "grammar of schooling" – the core operating assumptions that silently undergird our expectations of what happens in schools – is to look at the differences between the words people associate with thriving, learning, development and education. One of these things is not like the other.

The words associated with thriving are dynamic, referencing an undeniably positive process. They suggest purposeful, forward movement towards desired states of being: fulfillment, health, happiness, empowerment. Thriving is a term used to describe individuals, systems, ecosystems and communities, reflecting our intuitive understanding of the interconnections between individual and collective thriving.

The words associated with development are equally positive, but put more emphasis on the process. Words like progress, advancement, change.

The words associated with learning are much more specific. They include words associated with the natural learning process (e.g., exploration, curiosity, experience) and broad learning outcomes (e.g., skills, knowledge, wisdom) as well as words associated with formal instruction.

The words associated with education have a different vibe.

It's not surprising to see terms like classrooms, bells, exams, textbooks, attendance, hallways, recess, subjects, lessons and grades. This is the language of schools. However, the absence of any words associated with learning, development or thriving is jarring. And it explains why, in most schools, learner engagement declines steadily with age while learner's anxiety about being ready for what comes next in life grows.
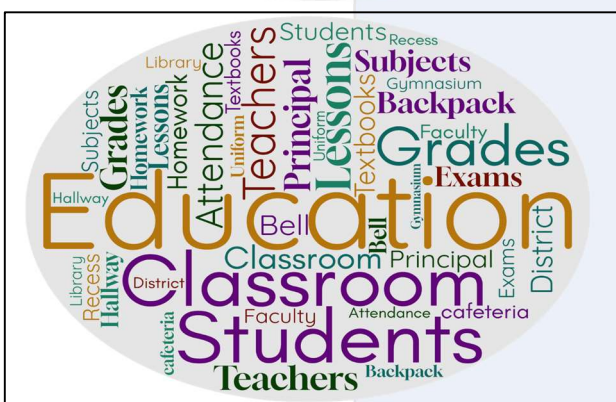
> 30% of high school students are engaged in school.

> 80% feel unprepared for making choices about what comes after high school.

Embed academic standards in broader youth success goals.
Define learner outcomes and experiences to reflect both foundational knowledge and real-world competencies, experiences and expectations.

The science of learning and development, the science of adolescence and positive youth development provide clear and compelling road maps for optimizing our definitions of learners, learner outcomes, learning experiences, and learning pathways that force us to be cognizant of the ways the grammar of schooling influences all of our thinking, and causes us to discount learning outcomes, experiences and partners outside of the academic classroom, including those in the school building.

The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance translated a multidisciplinary research review into five design principles that effectively define the non-negotiables of learning environments regardless of focus and place. Optimizing growth attention to each element, even if it is not an explicit priority for adults in that setting. Schools, for example, emphasize knowledge acquisition but can't ignore relationships and belonging. Youth organizations start with relationships but often avoid integrating traditional academic skill building.

The U. Chicago Consortium for School Research reviewed research on the developmental determinants of young adult success reminds us that competencies (no matter how broadly defined) are key to young people's broader pursuits of identity and agency (purpose). Optimizing the development of this troika of young adult outcomes requires creating learning experiences across settings that a) focus not only on knowledge and skill development, but values and mindsets and tools for self-regulation and, b) provide ample time for action (e.g., encountering, choosing, practicing, contributing) and reflection (e.g., describing, evaluating, connecting, integrating).

 XQ Institute, has created a Learner Outcomes Framework and Learning Experiences Development Checklist designed to optimize identity and agency development by defining five broad outcome areas that link traditional academic and SEL goals across academic, cognitive, social and emotional domains; showing how academic standards associated with single subject courses can be achieved in meaningful, rigorous, learning projects that adhere to core youth development principles and address the developmental needs of high school students.


Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment and in association with the SoLD Alliance
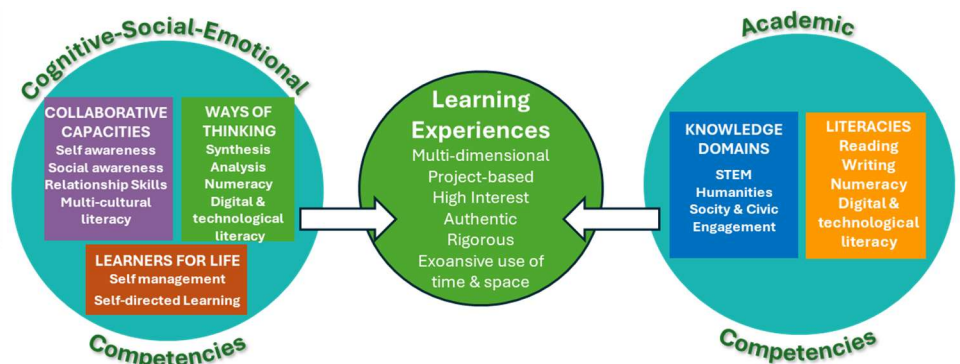
Explicitly name the people and places that create anywhere/anytime/never-too-late learning possibilities.

The simple act of naming highlights the abundance of opportunities we have to optimize learning experiences for youth throughout the ecosystem if we design a new architecture that prioritizes giving the people who work with youth the trust, time, training, tools and technology they need to make and help youth make connections across boundaries.
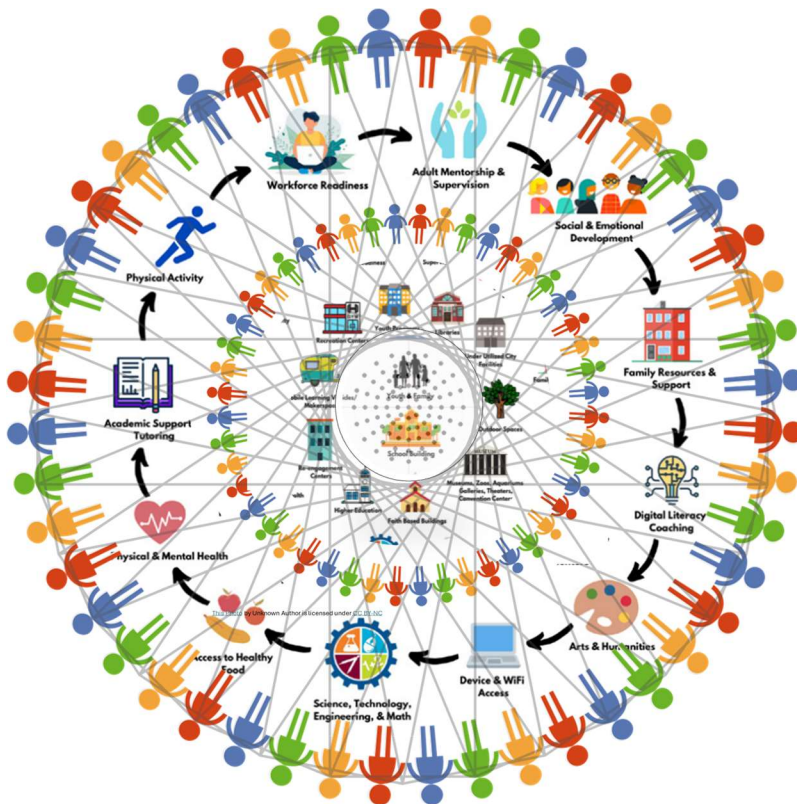
PEOPLE

Direct Relationships

- Peers
- Parents
- Community volunteers
- Paraprofessionals
- Mentors
- Success coaches
- Sports coaches
- Program providers
- Educators -- formal & informal, school- & community-based
- Other professionals & specialists (e.g. librarians, counselors, nurses, artists, employment trainers)
- Support Staff

PLACES & SPACES

- Families / Homes
- School Building
- Youth Programs
- Libraries
- Recreation Centers
- City Facilities
- Outdoor Spaces
- Museums, Zoos, Aquarium, Galleries, Theaters, Convention Centers
- Faith-based Buildings
- Higher Education
- Reengagement Centers
- Mobile Learning Vehicles
- Makerspaces
- Group Homes & Treatment Centers
- Everyday Spaces (e.g., barber shops)
- Workplaces / Businesses

POSSIBILITIES

- Academic Coursework
- Learning & Enrichment
- Adult Mentorship & Supervision
- Social & Emotional Development
- Family Resources & Support
- Digital Literacy Coaching
- Arts & Humanities
- Device & WiFi Access
- STEM
- Access to Healthy Food
- Physical & Mental Health supports
- Academic Support & Tutoring
- Physical Activity
- Alternative Education & Second Chance Programs
- Workforce Readiness, Internships & Summer jobs

Acknowledge the multiple systems that support anywhere/anytime learning and include them in the design of learning ecosystems as the new education architecture.

Traditional school systems are their own closed ecosystems by design. Because schools are accountable for the basic education and safety of all students, students and staff are assigned to specific schools, programs and classes. Increasingly, they have modified rules and responsibilities to allow community members in and orchestrate students' forays out of the building.

Different infrastructure is needed to acknowledge, accredit, and steward the development of learning experiences outside of their direct control that are available full day and year-round for youth and adults who are still completing their learning journeys as they move towards becoming productive, healthy, connected contributors.

These systems are not as large, visible or robust as schools. But they have alternative value networks that, if aligned, can provide concrete success stories related to real infrastructure problems (e.g., transportation, assessment, staffing) that can build public confidence in providing the long-term support needed to fully institutionalize changes in our broader public education systems.

This is a starter list of systems and networks found in communities that receive public funding to support staff and volunteers creating learning possibilities in places and spaces like those listed. Bringing youth, staff and administrators from these systems into conversations about infrastructure alternatives will allow these systems to improve their outcomes while also contributing to the Learning **ECO**system in which every connection is optimized. Navigators and stewards within and across these systems play key roles in seeing and nourishing the abundance of ecosystems and are also key starting points for linking and aligning existing infrastructure

"…Innovations that are hallmarks of learner-centered education prove perennially difficult for established schools to adopt because they don't fit well within the capabilities of the conventional model or the priorities of its value network.

New models…can only take root successfully within value networks that align with their distinctive priorities.

Thomas Arnett
Christensen Institute

LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURES

- School Systems
- School Innovation Networks
- Community Colleges
- Alternative Schools (within public education system)
- Service and Conservation Corps
- Summer Youth Employment
- OST Intermediaries & Provider Networks
- Workforce Development Systems
- Opportunity Youth Networks
- STEM Networks
- Public Libraries
- Cultural & Arts Collaboratives
- Parks & Recreation Systems
- Cross-System Collaboratives
- Community Schools
- Children's Cabinets

NAVIGATORS & STEWARDS

- **At the individual level** — success coaches, mentors, case managers, navigators, transition coaches

- **At the site level –** school- or community-based coordinators of enrichment opportunities, wraparound supports, and pathway connections.

- **At the system level** – expanded learning coordinators, network facilitators, and intermediary staff working within and across learning infrastructures

- **At the community and regional level**, leaders and backbone staff of coordinating bodies, children's cabinets and cross-sector alliances

Ensure the workforce closest to youth and families have the time, trust, and tools to create meaningful learning experiences and well-lit pathways.

The Alliance for Youth Thriving has embraced and updated the Community Action Framework for Youth Development developed by YDSI that specifies the steps needed to change the odds for youth (from 4 in 10 to 7 in 10 doing well as young adults).

As communities come together to ensure that young people have the key resources they need to thrive, we need to ensure that those who work directly with young people and their families have the flexibility and resources to **build relationships and forge connections** across the ecosystem that:

A. Affirm the **end goals of thriving** (young adults who are healthy, productive, and connected to family, community and society.
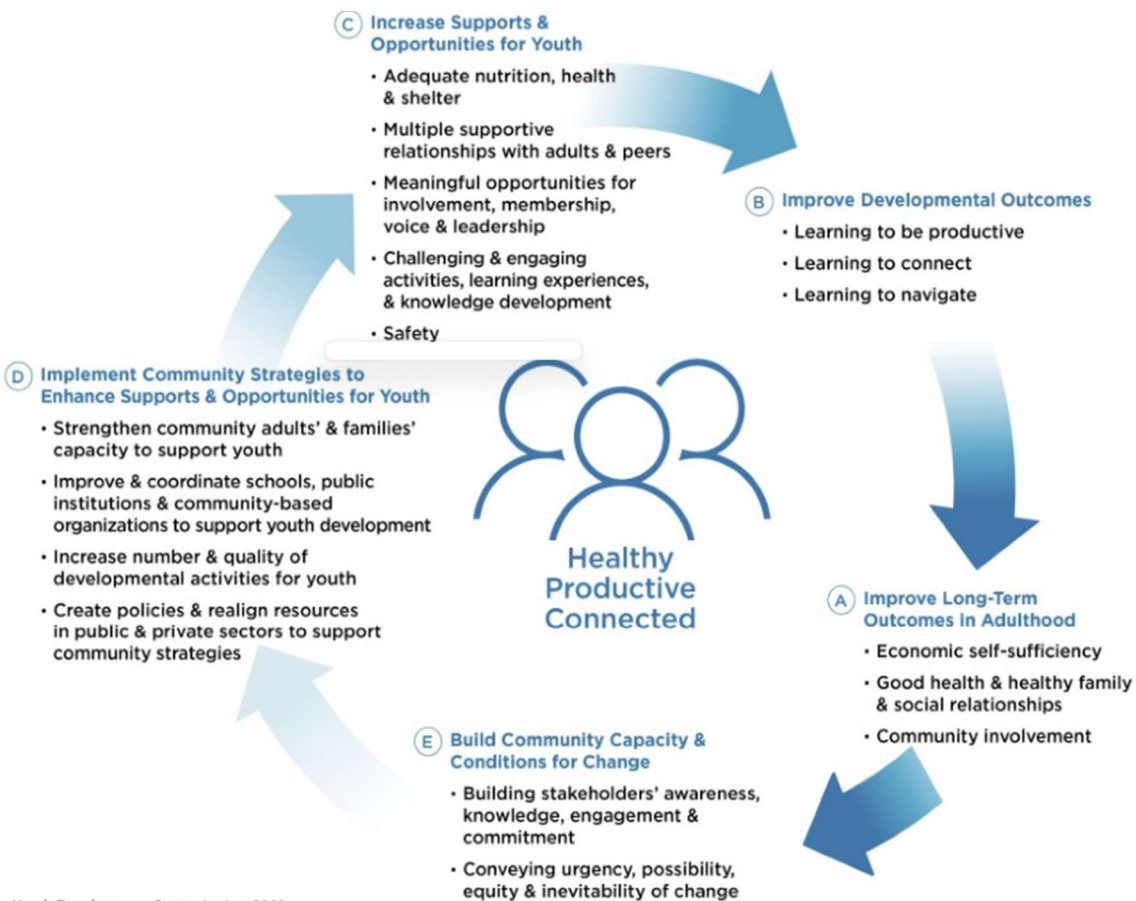
B. Combine **academic and youth development standards** to define holistic learner outcomes – and ensure credit for learning whenever and wherever it happens.

C. Attend to **content and context** to **create learning and engagement experiences** that matter and last by supporting the professionals, volunteers, families, and near peers in the learning ecosystem.

D. Develop tools to give youth agency to map their **learning pathways** across the ecosystem by exploring the links between their identity, interests, needs, competencies, experiences, and success goals.

E. Empower young people, families, community volunteers, and professionals as champions of **learning ecosystems as civic infrastructure** essential to preparing youth for participation in a thriving democracy and inclusive economy.

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development

(C) **Increase Supports & Opportunities for Youth**
- Adequate nutrition, health & shelter
- Multiple supportive relationships with adults & peers
- Meaningful opportunities for involvement, membership, voice & leadership
- Challenging & engaging activities, learning experiences, & knowledge development
- Safety

(B) **Improve Developmental Outcomes**
- Learning to be productive
- Learning to connect
- Learning to navigate

(D) **Implement Community Strategies to Enhance Supports & Opportunities for Youth**
- Strengthen community adults' & families' capacity to support youth
- Improve & coordinate schools, public institutions & community-based organizations to support youth development
- Increase number & quality of developmental activities for youth
- Create policies & realign resources in public & private sectors to support community strategies

Healthy Productive Connected

(A) **Improve Long-Term Outcomes in Adulthood**
- Economic self-sufficiency
- Good health & healthy family & social relationships
- Community involvement

(E) **Build Community Capacity & Conditions for Change**
- Building stakeholders' awareness, knowledge, engagement & commitment
- Conveying urgency, possibility, equity & inevitability of change

Youth Development Strategies Inc. 2002
Adapted with permission 2025

Now is the time to build the trust, alignment, and shared stewardship needed to make learning ecosystems real — through new roles, reimagined systems, and a deep commitment to thriving.

The Alliance for Youth Thriving is committed to building more transformative learning ECOsystems where all youth thrive.

Our alliance of coalitions, campaigns, networks, and field leaders is maximizing the success of efforts to develop community-wide, year-round pathways for youth and young adults by optimizing the people, places, possibilities, and systems across the learning system.

ALLIANCE FOR YOUTH THRIVING

When youth thrive, we all thrive.

The Alliance for Youth Thriving is an initiative of

KNOWLEDGE TO POWER CATALYSTS