CommunityShare

Stewards Helping Educators Optimize Their Community's "Human Library"

> "I've been doing community projects throughout my career. But CommunityShare opened up a whole avenue of resources for me … I was an island … Now I have a whole community of people that are connected to me."
>
> *Educator*

> "CommunityShare is the bridge we have been missing between educators and the vast experience and practical knowledge available in the community. It gives people like me an opportunity to invest my years of experience into the next generation of innovators, creators, and leaders."
>
> *Community Partner*

COMMUNITY SHARE

> "Our goal is to close the representation gap for girls and Hispanic youth in STEM fields. Community Share mentors help my students see themselves in those professions."
>
> *Educator*

By Karen Pittman & Merita Irby — Knowledge to Power Catalysts

First in a series of in-depth Steward Stories designed to accompany *Learning Ecosystem Intermediaries: Cultivating Connections Across Systems & Ecosystems to Help Youth Thrive*

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This is an in-depth version of a Steward Story highlighted in <u>Learning Ecosystem Intermediaries: Cultivating Connections Across Systems & Ecosystems to Help Youth Thrive</u>. CommunityShare is one of four "how we built this" stories of mature local ecosystem intermediaries that have had significant impact in strengthening powerful learning experiences and pathways for youth and young adults in their communities. Commissioned by Remake Learning, the publication explores how the "Future Features" of education (e.g., schools unwalled) are being realized in learning ecosystems today. The brief defines ecosystem intermediaries, explores the differences between ecosystem stewardship and system leadership, and highlights both commonalities and distinctions across this diverse set of intermediaries. It concludes with tips for emerging ecosystem stewards and for system leaders who can accelerate their own work through partnering with these nimble cultivators of learning ecosystems.

<u>Remake Learning</u> is an internationally recognized intermediary, advancing the design and stewardship of learning ecosystems — networks that connect schools, communities, and institutions to better support young people in a rapidly changing world. Over two decades, what began as a Pittsburgh-based convening has evolved into a globally influential learning ecosystem, informing how regions across the country and world organize learning across schools, museums, libraries, early learning centers, out-of-school programs, and more.

The **<u>Alliance for Youth Thriving</u>** is a coalition of coalitions, campaigns, networks, and field leaders bridging across education, youth development, and workforce development. We work together to maximize 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 ecosystem. Together, we work to strengthen **ECO**systems where **E**very **C**onnection is **O**ptimized by collaborating, sharing resources, and advocating for policies and practices that center youth well-being, learning, and thriving at every stage of their journey. **When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive.**

Merita Irby and Karen Pittman of **<u>Knowledge to Power Catalysts</u>** are managing partners of the Alliance for Youth Thriving.

COMMUNITYSHARE

Founded in 2015 in Tucson, Arizona, **CommunityShare** is a nimble nonprofit organization that connects students and educators to the skills, knowledge, and lived experiences of people in their own communities by asking everyone to imagine their community as a "human library." CommunityShare optimizes connections between people, places, and possibilities throughout the learning ecosystem that make learning more relevant, relational, and rooted in place, addressing all four of the **Future Features** highlighted by Remake Learning.

Developed by teachers for teachers, CommunityShare was built to address findings from their field research: educators who understand the value of real-world learning for their students find community engagement daunting for three reasons — time, trust, and training.

CommunityShare has developed and continues to improve an innovative **Online Platform** that serves as a one-stop "human library" to quickly match educators with community members who bring specific expertise and life experiences to contribute to real-world projects. And they have responded to suggestions and start-up challenges with a range of **Capacity-Building Services** that include personalized coaching and professional learning opportunities for educators and community stewards based on decades of experience supporting organizations as they weave together their unique community assets to support real-world learning.

To date, CommunityShare has connected more than 85,000 students and their educators with community partners to co-create meaningful, real-world learning experiences across 12 states — with more in the wings.

Tackling Real World Challenges with Real World Experts

At Billy L. Lauffer Middle School in Tucson, Arizona, teacher Jackie Nichols wanted her students to see themselves in STEM fields. "Ninety-five percent of my students are members of the BIPOC community. I teach in a Title I district. Many of my students' families don't have scientists, researchers, or engineers in them — yet. But one of my goals has been to shift that picture," shared Nichols.

Through CommunityShare, she connected with engineers, landscape architects, artists, and even Senator Mark Kelly to help students design "cities of the future." In a later project, she partnered with University of Arizona researcher Dr. Adriana Zuniga-Teran, to lead a multigenerational mentoring project where university faculty and graduate students mentored high schoolers, who in turn mentored middle schoolers to use geospatial technology to map access to parks and green spaces.

By the end of the program, over 80% of participants reported feeling confident about pursuing higher education. According to Lexana, a former student of Nichols and participant in CommunityShare projects: "I used to think that engineering, science, and research were for smart people. Then I discovered that I'm 'smart people.'" Lexana is now on a full scholarship studying engineering at Arizona State University

*Learn more about the project in **Mapping a Path to Equity** published by Getting Smart.*

Their model is delivering measurable impact against traditional measures of student readiness:

- **98%** of educators reported an increase in student engagement and social emotional skills
- **96%** of students developed critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration skills
- **87%** of students showed increased career and college readiness

Equally important, they have demonstrated the power of connections. In Pima County, Arizona, where the work began, CommunityShare's thriving regional ecosystem has connected **23,000** learners with community partners and real-world learning experiences since its inception. In the 2024-2025 school year alone, over **7,000** learners were connected to community partners. Educators at **316** schools/learning sites were signed up on the CommunityShare platform, as well as **408** individual community partners representing nearly **600** organizations.

These top notes provide an introduction to what CommunityShare does. But the takeaway lessons to be learned are found in the stories of how it began, how it evolved, and how it has increased the confidence, competence, and connections of the youth and adults in the human library, starting with the following narrative timeline.

Josh Schachter
Local Ecosystem Steward and Storyteller

Long before CommunityShare, founder Josh Schachter was exploring ecosystems. Trained in ecosystem management and social ecology, Josh learned early that living systems depend on relationships, adaptation, and resilience.

As a young field researcher studying lemur behavior, he saw how small disruptions in one part of an ecosystem could ripple through the whole. But he also understood the ecological values of interdependence, reciprocity, and the collective well-being of the whole.

Later, as an educator, he noticed similar patterns in schools: connections between students, teachers, and communities that thrived with nurturing but easily broke down when shifts occurred. This observation grew into a passion that became CommunityShare, an organization that now supports a network of regional learning ecosystem stewards.

Timeline

Forging Connections

2006 Josh and Julie Kasper, an ELL instructor, invite students to explore the "Meaning of Home" through writing and photos, which reveal isolation and disconnection from community. They **ask students to design community projects based on their life experiences and interests**.

Over eight years, students connect with nearly 100 community partners that support dozens of student-designed projects. But Josh is the main connector.

When Josh leaves the high school, the partner connections soon disappear.

Strengthening Connections

2012 **Seeking a more permanent and more democratic way to connect** students and educators with the people in the community, **Josh gathers a small circle** of artists, educators, graduate students, technology thinkers, and others **to brainstorm ideas for creating a "human library"**

2012-13 Are spent conducting **hands-on workshops, listening sessions and surveys with over 7,000 educators and community members** to identify challenges and opportunities. The group works to develop solutions to address them.

2013 CommunityShare **pilots its match-making concept** of connecting educators and community members with a low-tech Google Doc **in a single school.** In the same year, **an Educator Advisory Council** is created with a small group of educators to inform direction of CommunityShare.

Sustaining Connections

2014 **A beta version of the unique two-way digital platform is built** that makes it easy for educators and community members to find each other based on interests, learning goals, and project ideas. The platform became known as a "match.com for learning."

Uptake continues to grow organically, especially in two Tucson champion districts. CommunityShare decides not to pursue top-down expansion after **a district's decision to implement Community Share in 4 schools in 2014 had mixed results** — reinforcing the need for a ground up approach and greater clarity of what needs to be in place at the school level.

The renamed **Educator Action Council** evolves into a **formal community of practice** called a fellowship — led by and providing grants to educators.

2015 **CommunityShare is founded** and operated as a fiscally sponsored project under CITY Center for Collaborative Learning.

Scaling Connections

2020 CommunityShare **adds a third pillar to the model, developing an ecosystem stewardship toolkit and professional learning** to enable the work to grow to multiple places across the country.

CommunityShare **is invited to expand outside of Tucson and launches in Las Cruces, NM,** with a local nonprofit. CommunityShare and the local nonprofit learn together how to grow the work outside of Tucson.

2021 **Educators** participating in the fellowship decide to **lead, launch and facilitate CommunityShare Educator Fellowships** in partnership with their district education foundations.

2022 CommunityShare **launches a national fellowship** so educators can develop their practice in community-engaged learning.

2023 CommunityShare **transfers stewardship of the Tucson work** to the Pima County School Superintendent's Office to increase local ownership and sustainability. CommunityShare **begins operating as its own nonprofit.**

2026 CommunityShare **scales to work with communities across 12 states**.

THE "HOW WE BUILT THIS" BACKSTORY

1. FORGING CONNECTIONS

Helping Students Connect and Change Their Communities

CommunityShare's roots stretch far deeper than its 2015 founding. Long before the organization existed, founder Josh Schachter and his colleagues began weaving together a response to multiple challenges. Why do so many young people feel disconnected not just from learning but from their communities? Why, with so much expertise in the community, does it remain a latent, untapped resource that rarely shapes what happens in classrooms? And why do educators who understand the value of real-world learning for their students find it daunting to engage the community as part of the solution?

For Josh, an early assignment for English language learners in his Tucson high school proved pivotal. As part of a multimedia storytelling project about the idea of "home," the students' photographs captured not only their isolation but the deep challenges they saw in their community. The images were sobering and identifying solutions daunting. Josh and his co-teacher, ELL instructor Julie Kasper, began to reach out to community members who could partner with students on projects to address their concerns.

These projects helped students see that they could make a difference in their communities today. For example, they turned a barren, sunbaked part of their high school campus into a design challenge. Partnering with local landscape architects, they learned the principles of landscape architecture, sustainability, and visual design. Using newly acquired Photoshop skills, they created a detailed plan to transform the neglected area into a shaded outdoor learning space. The students presented their proposal to the maintenance crew and school leaders, secured grant funding, and ultimately implemented the redesign themselves. In the process, they discovered how academic skills — from writing and photography to math and environmental science — could come alive through a real-world project that visibly improved their school and community.

The initial "meaning of home" photographs continued to strike a chord with community leaders as well. A visiting city council member had the photos displayed in the council gallery, where they were seen by federal lawmakers. This led to an invitation from Congressman Raul Grijalva for students to speak at a Congressional briefing, sharing not only their photos and stories but also their recommendations concerning refugee and immigration policy. They partnered with Senator John McCain's office and sponsored an exhibit of the photos in the Senate rotunda.

2. STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS

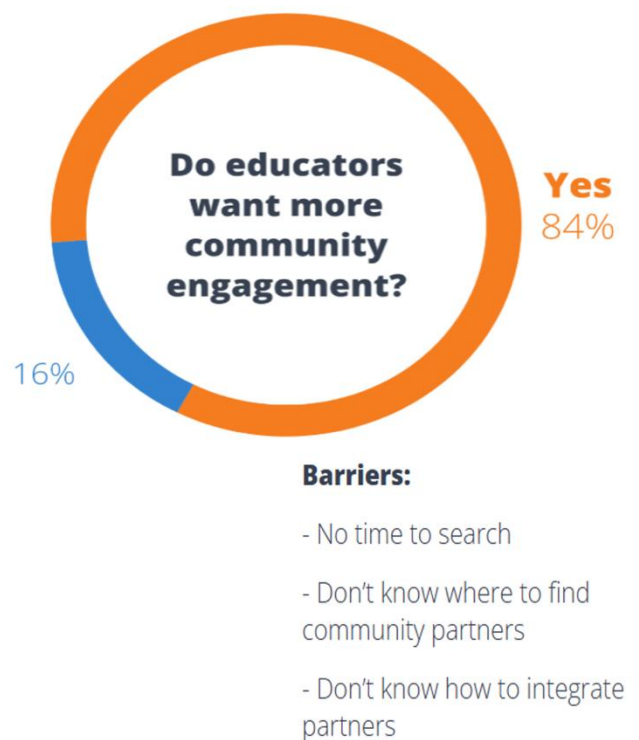## From Individual Relationships to a Human Library

When Josh left Catalina High School in 2014, so did many of the community connections he had developed. Relationships, trust, and social capital traveled with him rather than remaining embedded in the system.

Seeing this unfold, Josh began to imagine a more democratic way to connect students and educators with the wealth of human experience around them — a "human library" open to all. He gathered a small circle of educators, artists, and technologists to design a structure that could make these connections accessible, equitable, and lasting. Together they sketched out the early version of CommunityShare: a digital platform supported by local learning communities, co-designed by educators for educators, and grounded in the belief that everyone has wisdom worth sharing.

As part of their information gathering, they surveyed educators across southern Arizona. The survey found that 84% of educators wanted more engagement with community partners, but most didn't know where to look, didn't have time to find partners, and lacked training to design meaningful collaborations. Teachers were interested in community-engaged learning but constrained by limited time, community networks, and preparation to design these kinds of experiences.

Launched in 2015, CommunityShare works to address these three barriers by reimagining our entire communities as classrooms. The initial offering — and still a core component of their approach — is a digital platform that makes it easy for educators and community members to find each other based on shared interests, learning goals, and project ideas. The platform became known as a "match.com for learning." The goal is to ignite more equitable learning ecosystems by

… why do educators who understand the value of real-world learning for their students find it daunting to engage the community as part of the solution?


Do educators want more community engagement?

Yes 84%

16%

Barriers:

- No time to search

- Don't know where to find community partners

- Don't know how to integrate partners

creating a "public cloud" of social, cultural, creative, and intellectual capital that any educator can access.

From the start, CommunityShare was never just about technology. It was about culture change — about helping educators, students, and community members see themselves as co-learners and co-creators in a shared ecosystem of personal growth and collective efforts to improve their communities.

Co-designed by educators for educators, CommunityShare was shaped by an Educator Action Council that met bi-monthly to guide the solutions as they were being developed. This action council became the core of a community of practice that helped build the capacity and comfort of teachers with this approach to community-engaged learning.

Human Library: Revealing & Sharing Funds of Knowledge
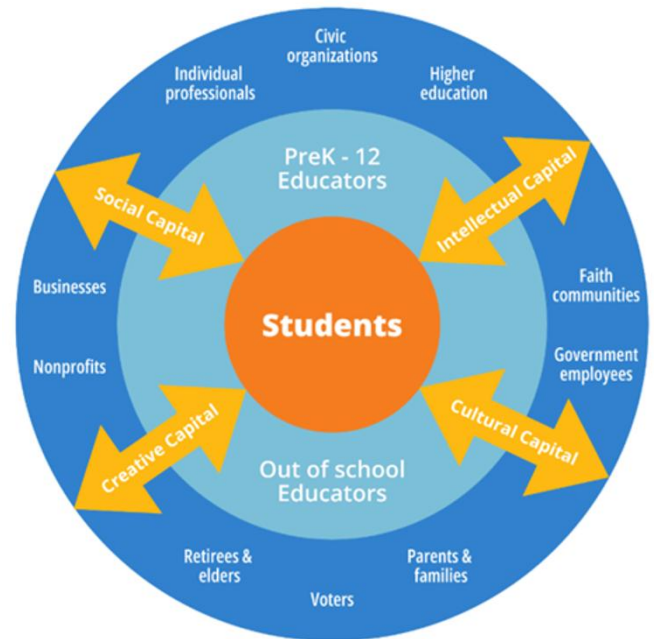
"The seed of the idea sprouted...

Over eight years, we brought in nearly a hundred community partners to support whatever projects the students were working on. Topics and expertise varied, including health, healing, immigration, war, social justice, and climate change. It was amazing to see the learning that can happen when students have an authentic voice in their learning journey, paired with passionate community partners."

– Josh Schachter, CommunityShare

Excerpt from Making Connections: The Human Library of CommunityShare

3. SUSTAINING CONNECTIONS

Lessons in Uptake and Local Growth

In the years following its launch, CommunityShare's roots in Tucson deepened through steady word of mouth and a growing community of champion educators. What began with a handful of teachers evolved into a vibrant local network. Uptake spread most rapidly in two Tucson districts where early adopters modeled what was possible: energized classrooms, visible student agency, and authentic community partnerships.

In 2014, more teachers began to own the mission. The Educator Action Council evolved into district fellowships spearheaded by two champion teachers in two districts. This fellowship program provided coaching, stipends, and project supplies funding to teachers developing real-world learning projects with community collaborators.

The fellowship program became so highly valued that in 2021 educators participating in the fellowship decided to lead, launch, and facilitate CommunityShare Educator Fellowships in their own districts, approaching their local district foundations for support. District education foundations are nonprofit intermediaries that support educator champions while aligning with broader district goals, helping schools fund projects, gather impact data, and build lasting district-community partnerships.

Committed to adding value, the CommunityShare team continued refining its supports. The team reaffirmed its commitment to "by teachers, for teachers" growth — allowing expansion across Pima County to unfold through local interest and readiness rather than top-down directives. Offline, the team deepened investment in educator-driven professional development, school-based artist residencies, storytelling workshops, and seed grants for educators.

Online, they improved the platform's usability and added new tools for ecosystem mapping and monitoring, integrating features that allowed educators, students, and partners to track collaborations and share impact stories.

"I used to feel anxious and overwhelmed about establishing community partnerships, but now I trust myself more to engage in lasting, meaningful relationships with diverse stakeholders that deepen students' understanding of unit questions."

– CommunityShare National Educator Fellowship Participant, Oakland, Calif.

A Cautionary Tale

As momentum grew, so did the learning about what it takes for real-world, community-connected learning to take hold. When one Tucson superintendent — impressed by teachers' and students' enthusiasm — invited four schools in his district to adopt the approach, the results were mixed. Two schools flourished, while two struggled to integrate the practice.

The contrast revealed an important truth: authentic engagement can't be mandated from the top down.
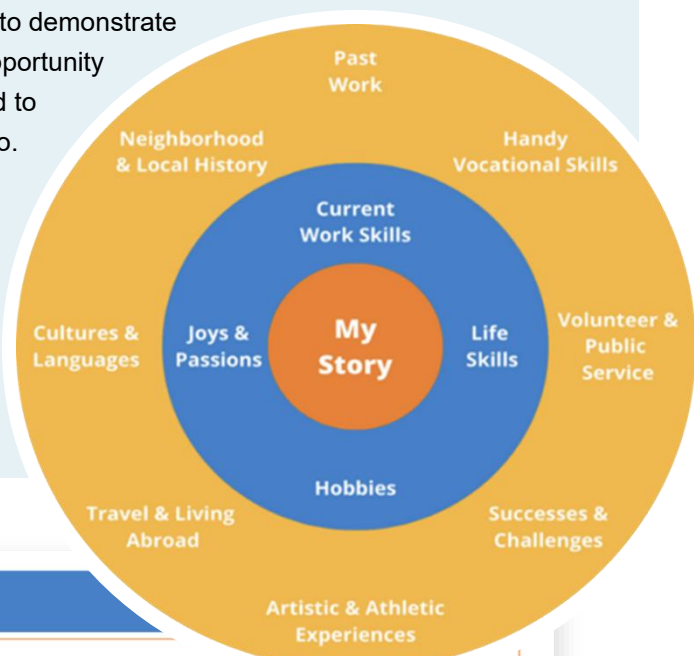
Sustainable change depends on teacher ownership and organic growth — educators choosing when, how, and with whom to design their projects, supported but not directed by their systems.

These stories — supported by data and photos — helped funders and communities see how partnerships translated into student engagement, skill development, and civic connection.

The tools and technology behind the Human library platform are key to CommunityShare's organic growth in Pima County where CommunityShare has grown from a handful of classrooms to a thriving regional ecosystem. Over 7,000 learners were connected to community partners in 2024-25 alone. Educators at 316 schools/learning sites were signed up on the CommunityShare platform, as well as 408 individual community partners representing nearly 600 organizations.

The Partner Profile template has been continuously refined to set the right tone for both project designers and project contributors. The match.com features of the platform save both parties time. But the intentionality and detail behind the profile are what make it successful.

For community partners the profile has been carefully designed to demonstrate CommunityShare's interest in the whole person, providing an opportunity to share their passions, skills, life experiences, and interests and to specify the kinds of activities they feel they can best contribute to. The participation bar for new partners is not fixed, suggesting a contribution of as little as 5 hours annually, to encourage engagement and to help community partners dip their toes into working with educators and students. For some partners, those first hours result in immense meaning and strong connections that lead to connections with educators, students, and projects

year after year. CommunityShare stewards monitor the platform to ensure that educators posting projects receive matches to review and that potential partners receive the information they need to be confident of the fit. Partner contribution is tracked and celebrated on the platform.

Teachers now use CommunityShare as an essential part of how they design learning — with many integrating community partners into core curriculum. Local stewards track participation through the digital platform and supplement it with qualitative feedback from educators, providing a dynamic view of how relationships deepen and learning outcomes shift over time. The emphasis is on matching individual partners to educators and students. However, CommunityShare tracks the organizations that individual partners represent in their profiles, recognizing the role organizations play in making volunteering possible. In the 2024-25 school year, there was a 20% increase in the number of partners signing up. Last year, there was a 20% increase in the number of organizations affiliated with individual partners.

4. SCALING CONNECTIONS

Building the Capacity of Local Ecosystem Stewards

By 2020, CommunityShare's quiet success in Tucson had begun to draw attention nationally and even globally. An invitation from Las Cruces, New Mexico, provided both opportunity and challenge: How could the team share what worked locally without exporting a fixed model? How could they honor the principle that every ecosystem must grow from its own soil?

In response, the team added a third foundational pillar to complement its educator professional learning and digital platform: **steward capacity building**. This pillar focused on cultivating individuals and organizations that could serve as local "ecosystem stewards" — people capable of weaving relationships, aligning assets, and nurturing trust within their communities.

Designing this component meant articulating what Josh and the Tucson team had done intuitively for years. What *was* a steward? What did effective stewardship look like across contexts? To answer, the team mapped Josh's own practices — relationship building, asset mapping, storytelling, and responsive coaching — into a replicable set of mindsets and capacities.

To guide this work, the team codified its **onboarding model** for regional partners such as school districts, youth-serving intermediaries, and community coalitions. Each partnership begins with a shared design process and clear non-negotiables:

- Dedicated staffing for at least one steward role.
- Resources to co-design a community engagement plan with the CommunityShare team.
- Ongoing coaching and peer learning focused on asset mapping, storytelling, and evaluation.

"CommunityShare brings together our educators and community members to create meaningful, hands-on learning experiences that offer connection, purpose, and support for our students, teachers, and the broader community. Being part of this work — and helping spark those connections as a Community Share steward — is incredibly fulfilling."

– Sheryl Wells, Steward, Flagstaff, Arizona

Stewarding Learning Ecosystems

The ecosystem is only as healthy as the
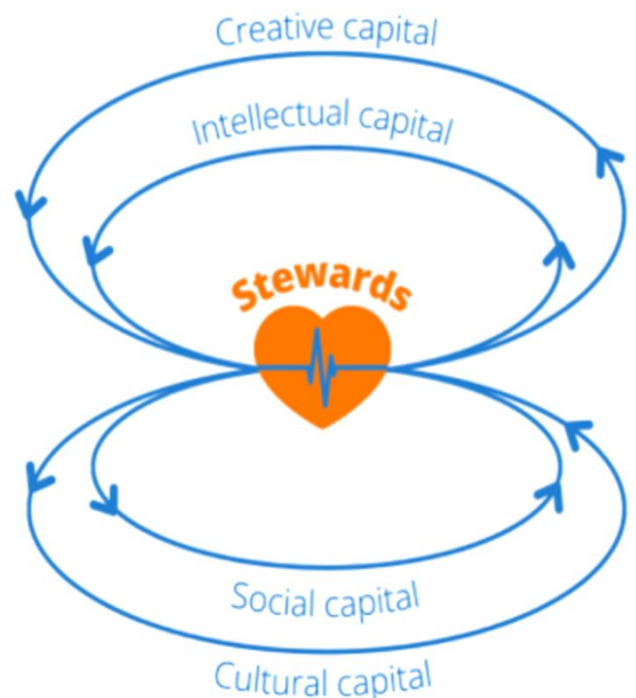
The steward is so central to CommunityShare's success that they have come to describe the online platform as circulatory system — moving information, opportunity, and energy — and the steward as the heart that keeps things moving at a steady pulse.

These stewards quickly became the heart of CommunityShare's circulatory system — translating between educators and community members, monitoring platform activity, organizing events, and documenting impact.

As new regions came on board, the profile of the steward role evolved further. The team recommended a distributed model where one or more stewards are focused on supporting educators and other stewards are focused on engaging community members.

Between 2020 and 2025, CommunityShare expanded to 12 states supported by partnerships with local and national philanthropic institutions. To help diversify CommunityShare's revenue, they also developed a membership model in which the networks they support pay a fee, subsidized by philanthropy, for the platform and services. Each new region is supported based on lessons learned from the national network but adapted to local context — its own blend of history, relationships, and opportunity.

Optimizing Local Ecosystems Across the Country

CommunityShare now provides coaching and capacity building to local stewards and the organizations that host them — school districts, nonprofit networks, out-of-school programs, or municipal agencies. Through collaborative planning and peer learning, stewards develop shared language, data practices, and strategies for deepening community engagement.

Each region defines its own stewardship approach, but common activities include community asset mapping, outreach and recruitment, organizing events, supporting educators, sharing stories of impact, and gathering data to reflect on progress.

CommunityShare's growth has been through adaptation rather than replication – cultivating regional learning ecosystems rather than exporting a rigid model. This approach has proven flexible enough to serve urban districts, rural counties, and cross-sector coalitions alike.

On Stewardship

Ecosystem Stewards embody the belief that transformation doesn't depend on heroic leadership, but on distributed care — a network of people who see themselves as co-responsible for the health of the whole contributing to the health of the learning ecosystem in a range of ways:

Cultural Translators — bridge builders who help educators and community members understand one another's languages, values, and contexts.

Pollinators / Weavers — connectors who move ideas, energy, and people across traditional boundaries, ensuring that innovation travels.

Conveners — hosts who gather stakeholders and create space for collaboration and collective visioning.

Surveyors — observers who scan for patterns, gaps, and emerging opportunities, seeing both the trees and the forest.

Storytellers — narrative shapers who surface voices from the margins and highlight how individual actions contribute to the whole.

Disruptors / Pioneers — change agents who challenge norms and prototype new ways of learning

– Josh Schachter, CommunityShare
  as interviewed by WISE in **Stewarding Learning Ecosystems: The CommunityShare Story**
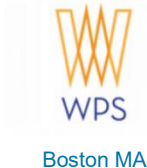
Passing the Baton

Developing and supporting a national network of stewards meant transferring the role of local steward to a local organization. In 2023, the Pima County School Superintendent's Office began acting as a regional intermediary — engaging community partners and teachers across 18 districts.

Regional Partners as of February 2026

CommunityShare's regional partners are growing opportunities for educators, partners, and students to co-create real-world learning experiences that contribute to resilient, thriving youth and communities.

See CommunityShare - Where We Work for evolving list of partners.

Pima County AZ	Denver CO	Las Cruces NM	Flagstaff AZ	Bullitt County KY	Memphis TN
Cincinnati OH	Wellesley MA	Boston MA	Western North Carolina	Putnam County IN	Cochise County AZ
Lansing MI	Kensington NH	Riverside CA	Boulder CO	Andover MA	Tewksbury MA

As of 2025, CommunityShare's platform and related programs had reached more than **85,000 students** nationwide. Educators report significant increases in student engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking, and in their own confidence designing meaningful, real-world learning experiences. Many begin with a single project and go on to mentor peers or lead district-wide initiatives — evidence that community-engaged learning can become a sustainable cultural practice rather than a one-off experiment.

These numbers are impressive, but CommunityShare's potential for further scaling is linked to the team's successful adaptation of the model. The regional networks are generating a diversity of projects, each shaped by local context, environment, culture, opportunities, and challenges.

On the following page are just a few examples of hundreds of projects created with CommunityShare. Each project demonstrates what happens when learning connects with community — students discover their voice, the relevance of their learning, and their potential to shape the world.

Students Shaping Their World

In Tucson, Arizona, high school teacher Cynthia Lopez connected with university researchers, artists, and community members to study pollution from trichloroethylene (TCE) — a chemical that has impacted families in their southside neighborhood for decades. Community members shared personal stories, scientists guided students in designing experiments and researching green chemistry alternatives, and artists helped them create a mosaic mural to honor those affected. **"**Students realized they have solutions and their voices matter," Lopez reflected.

In Las Cruces, New Mexico, high school students investigated the relationship of humans with the Rio Grande and how to sustain this important water source for generations to come. Through CommunityShare, teacher Claudia Lemus connected with a number of community advisors who mentored students as they explored the region's water crisis and potential solutions. Working collaboratively, they developed and tested water models before presenting their findings at the local Water Convention and Las Cruces Water Festival.

In Bullitt County, Kentucky, fourth-grade teacher Megan Eskridge and her team of educators and instructional coaches at Shepherdsville Elementary brought their reading curriculum to life through an eight-week community-engaged learning project. Guided by the question "How can a place affect how we live?" students interviewed people across generations — from kindergartners and fellow fourth graders to high school students and family members — to gather a range of perspectives on what their community needs. Students presented to a panel that included the School Superintendent, Mayor, and district leaders, who offered feedback and invited students to continue the conversation at City Hall.

Elementary school teacher Mercedes Pemberton-Negrete in Tucson, Arizona, sought to strengthen her students' literacy skills. Through CommunityShare, she partnered with Navajo author and storyteller Daniel Vandever, who introduced students to picture books featuring Indigenous and Latino characters. "Students could see themselves in the stories," she shared. Inspired, students began writing and retelling their own stories, and families joined in. "Parents who rarely buy books wanted to purchase copies because their children came home so excited," she said. By the end of the school year, 94% of her students were performing above grade level, up from just 12%.

David Cullison, a woodworking teacher at Fourth Avenue Junior High in Yuma, Arizona, wanted his students to apply their carpentry skills to something meaningful. After learning that a local domestic violence shelter needed furniture, his class decided to build and donate a five-piece dining set. With mentorship from a professional cabinetmaker he connected with through CommunityShare, students designed, budgeted, and built the set from raw lumber. They also wrote personal essays about what the dining table meant in their own homes — a place of connection, conversation, and family. "I've been doing community projects throughout my career. But CommunityShare opened up a whole avenue of resources for me. I've been doing this for a long time, but I was an island, I was doing it on my own. Now I'm not doing it on my own — I have a whole community of people that are connected to me," Cullison shared.

5. 2025 and Beyond

Scoping Opportunities for Greater Impact

Josh and the CommunityShare stewards heard over and over from rural communities that they often do not have access to the diversity of partners in more urban regions. They recently expanded the platform so that if educators cannot find a local partner, they can now search across the national human library being developed by each network collectively. Several other steps are being finalized or developed that can increase uptake and impact, moving CommunityShare even closer to supporting year-round, community-engaged learning projects designed by school and community partners and potentially including older youth in new ways:

- **"Choose your own adventure" interface.** The labels *teacher* and *partner* that directed participants into specific roles have been reworked. Network members are now asked which mode they are in. And they are encouraged to see themselves as both. This feature has just been added, but the team is already seeing teachers sign up to be partners. Equally important, it lets partners in out-of-school time organizations — who previously could list events and programmatic opportunities in addition to offering expertise — now also invite experts to further enrich the learning experiences they are developing in their programs.

- **Year-round learning project matching.** Traditionally, because of the focus on matching classroom teachers with community partners, the number of matches in the summer months drops sharply since partners couldn't search for matches. The new interface allows more opportunities for projects during the summer as participants can act in both roles.

- **Support for single sites.** As CommunityShare becomes a movement and news about the advantages of the approach spreads, Josh and team get more requests from individual educators, schools, and community organizations that want to dip their toes into the water. They are in the process of modifying and piloting a new model to bring the platform and capacity-building support to single schools, out-of-school sites, and more. These sites will develop their own local learning ecosystem, while contributing to and accessing the larger national human library.

- **Increasing the civic visibility of young adults**. Individuals using the CommunityShare platform must be at least 18 years of age. High school students can co-design projects with educators and lead them, but they cannot post them. CommunityShare is exploring potential pathways for youth to engage with the platform and for youth to serve as stewards in their own local communities to support growing the regional human libraries.

- **Continuing to promote the idea of co-stewards for better ecosystem coverage**. The team is piloting the idea that high school students could participate in human library building as a part of a school, community, or service learning project, under the supervision of a lead steward. They are also promoting the benefit of identifying part-time stewards within or with deep knowledge of different sectors in the ecosystem (K-12, business, nonprofit community, cultural and civic organizations)

- **Virtual partnering with regions beyond the current network.** Now that the benefits of long-distance partners have been demonstrated, CommunityShare finally has a response to national and global companies and organizations that are interested in promoting the opportunity with their staff but need to ensure availability beyond the 18 current regional networks. Josh believes success stories featuring virtual partnering on their website and making it possible for organizations to post program and event offerings outside of the regional networks will open up more expansion possibilities.

- **Looking for better ways to measure ecosystem health.** As CommunityShare's reach expands, so does its ambition to understand and strengthen the health of the ecosystems it supports. Counting matches or partnerships tells only part of the story. The deeper question, Josh argues, is: How vibrant are the relationships that hold the ecosystem together? Drawing on his background in ecology, Josh likens this work to assessing the resilience of a living system — vitality is reflected in diversity, interdependence, and the ability to regenerate

To explore this, the team is collaborating with stewards and educators to develop indicators that reveal both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of ecosystem health. Quantitative measures track a range of data points — such as the number of partners and connections, gaps in partner needs, and outcomes of projects. Qualitative indicators capture subtler but equally important dynamics: shifts in perceptions among educators and partners, the spread of new ideas, and the sense of support and shared purpose among participants.

Measuring these "living indicators" is less about compliance and more about collective reflection. Stewards are learning to observe patterns — where connections are flourishing, where energy is waning, and where new relationships might spark renewal. Over time, these observations will help regions see themselves not as collections of individual projects but as evolving systems of learning and contribution. By documenting the pulse of their communities in this way, CommunityShare aims to demonstrate what thriving looks like when people, partnerships, and purpose align — and offer others a model for measuring the health of their own learning ecosystems.

THE ART OF CULTIVATING STEWARDSHIP

CommunityShare is one of a handful of intermediary organizations profiled in this series because of their impressive track records as adaptive, collaborative, innovative, learning ecosystem stewards. System leadership and ecosystem stewardship require different mindsets, skills and strategies. Both roles are needed. Ecosystem stewardship, however, is a much newer concept that is not well-understood. Studying organizations custom-built for this purpose accelerates the discovery of the essential elements needed.

There is incredible innovation happening across the country at all levels, from single classrooms to entire systems. Much of this innovation is focused on helping schools retool to support the features stakeholders believe are essential for the future that is becoming our present. Remake Learning, the purpose-built Pittsburgh-based intermediary that funded this project and whose Remake Learning Days invite communities everywhere to celebrate their learning ecosystems, names four **Future Features**: learner agency, broader definitions of educators (beyond the traditional classroom teacher), acknowledgement of learning spaces beyond the school walls, and credit for learning beyond the school building, day and year.

CommunityShare's commitment to community-engaged learning is clearly consistent with these **Future Features**. Equally important, for the purposes of this case story, the team's tireless work over the past two decades aligns with what we have tentatively named *the Six Essential Ts of Ecosystem Stewardship*: Trust, Time, Translation, Training, Tools, and Technology.

"Learning ecosystems may be found anywhere, but it takes careful stewardship to help them thrive. In cities and suburbs, small towns and rural villages, communities are beginning to recognize the people, places, resources and experiences that help young people learn as part of a complex and dynamic web of relationships. These communities are taking steps to cultivate their learning ecosystems to better serve children and youth."

– Shift, Remake Learning

Trust, Time, Translation: The Essentials for Forging and Sustaining Connections

Trust is at the core of CommunityShare's philosophy. The idea grew and spread at the "speed of trust" (a concept popularized by Stephen Covey). It was created by teachers for teachers who were looking for ways to help their students trust their lived experiences and feel trust in their communities. Even as CommunityShare's support moved into its latest phase, supporting networks across the country, the team continued to prioritize this "speed of trust" principle. Opportunities are presented, but potential ecosystem stewards control the pacing and path of community and system engagement. And educators decide when, how, and with whom to activate projects with individual partners.
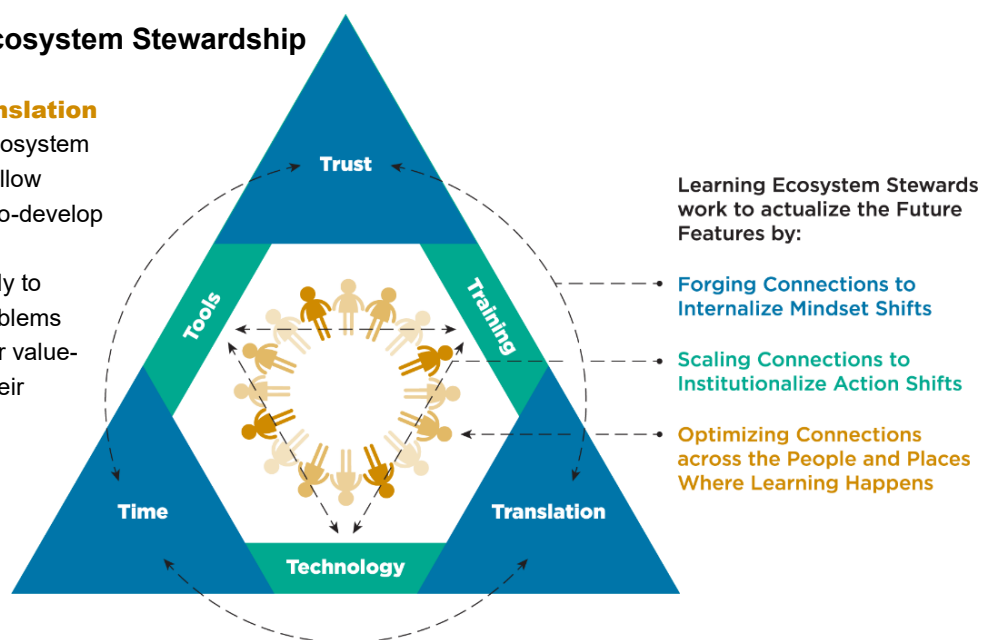
Translating this intertwined set of ideas into language that captured people's imagination while conveying the essential elements was critical. Josh's storytelling background, coupled with the time taken in the early years doing focus groups, interviews, and surveys with stakeholders, gave the group what they needed to create a rich vocabulary. The name, **CommunityShare,** and the rich operating language — *human library, ecosystem stewards, community-engaged learning —* were developed early and used consistently by a diverse group of people who understood the importance of language when communicating a new idea. CommunityShare's recent decision to enable users of their platform to sign up as both educators and partners signals opportunities to change roles depending on an individual's needs is an example of their continued commitment to adapt and improve to optimize connections.

Building this base took **time**, but the timeline for the work was set by the stakeholders to ensure that the solutions developed could truly help educators save time. The group that convened in 2012 to brainstorm ideas adopted a formal structure in 2015 only after the group was convinced there was a time-saving solution worth investing in and growing. And CommunityShare's experience with the mixed response to the well-intentioned effort of a superintendent to introduce the opportunity to pre-selected schools reinforced their commitment to "grow at the speed of trust" principle.

Essential Elements of Ecosystem Stewardship

Trust, Time, and Idea Translation are the essential elements of ecosystem leadership that, once in place, allow intermediaries to authentically co-develop and adapt tools, trainings, and technologies, working collectively to identify and address shared problems and, in so doing, sustaining their value-added stewardship roles with their ecosystem partners.

Trust

Tools

Training

Time

Technology

Translation

Learning Ecosystem Stewards work to actualize the Future Features by:

Forging Connections to Internalize Mindset Shifts

Scaling Connections to Institutionalize Action Shifts

Optimizing Connections across the People and Places Where Learning Happens

Tools, Trainings, Technologies: The Essentials for Sustaining and Scaling Connections

CommunityShare saves educators time, but it requires significant time investments at the ecosystem level. Once in place, the matching system streamlines the search process. But decisions about when, how much, and how long are up to educators and partners.

The **human library technology is the enticing visual entry** point into CommunityShare's approach. Registered users have access to the full library across the full CommunityShare national network. Demonstrations of the platform are electric. For the first time, people can literally see a way to tap into the abundance of expertise in their communities. But CommunityShare is more than a matching platform. It requires ongoing, dedicated time investments at the ecosystem level.

To keep the ecosystem stewardship concept alive, the CommunityShare team has had to develop a set of readiness criteria that need to be met before they share the platform software with a new community. These start with having dedicated staff with time to participate in an intensive coaching process to engage their community and fully embrace the principles of stewardship, providing opportunities for the effective use of CommunityShare's **tools, trainings, and technologies**.

The iterative development of partner and project profiles and reflection forms is key to CommunityShare's success. The **tools** are designed to support reflection and increase clarity. Upfront effort increases match success, so stewards encourage profile completion. Opportunities to post stories about progress build pride and community ownership. Transparent analysis of platform data builds community ownership. CommunityShare's commitment to co-developing better measures of ecosystem health will help ensure continued growth.

CommunityShare's **training and fellowship programs** have been developed by and with educators in response to their desire to increase their and their peers' confidence in building community-engaged learning projects. The addition of a third component to the model — ecosystem stewardship coaching — was a direct response to the recognition of the need to name and nurture the attributes associated with a stewardship mindset.

> *"By providing educators with robust, detailed profiles that highlight not just the work experiences but also their life experiences, the platform offers a deeper understanding of the people they and their students will engage with. Through experiences with CommunityShare, community partners also gain a better understanding of the daily realities of public education, educators and students."*
>
> – Josh Schachter, CommunityShare