Learning Ecosystem Intermediaries

Cultivating Connections Across Systems & Ecosystems to Help Youth Thrive

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Knowledge to Power Catalysts

ALLIANCE FOR YOUTH THRIVING

KNOWLEDGE TO POWER CATALYSTS

Commissioned by Remake Learning

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Remake Learning 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 **Alliance for Youth Thriving** 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 **Knowledge to Power Catalysts** are managing partners of the Alliance for Youth Thriving.

Introduction

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

In May 2024, Remake Learning and The School Superintendents Association (AASA) convened more than 200 forward-thinking educators, community leaders, and innovators at the Forge Futures Summit to discuss a future of education where human flourishing is prioritized and learning ecosystems can thrive. Four key features emerged indicating the group's collective priorities for what future learning ecosystems should include.

The principles behind these four features are widely embraced today. The Portrait of a Graduate movement is one of many examples of the great strides school leaders are taking with their communities to incorporate these principles into a shared vision of public education.

The term "future" acknowledges the challenges system administrators must tackle to infuse the principles of learner-centered education and ecosystem stewardship into a 150-year-old system — changing policies, priorities, and practices to encourage and reward risk-taking, collaboration, and agency in their staff and learners.

The question is not whether change is needed, but how it can happen faster, ensuring that changes made will help those farthest away from opportunity thrive rather than fall farther behind.

Future Features

Learner Agency. Empowering learners through opportunities tailored to their passions and interests, and providing voice and choice to utilize project-based methods and competency-focused pathways for personalized and lifelong learning.

School Unwalled. Leveraging diverse resources beyond boundaries of the school building and the school day to provide learners with enriched opportunities, engaging the community and utilizing local assets.

Broader Definition of Educator. Integrating informal educators, mentors, coaches, and other caring adults into students' learning journeys to diversify expertise and tap into community support.

Credit for Out-Of-School Learning. Recognizing and accrediting learning that occurs outside of traditional classrooms and school hours, ensuring all educational experiences are valued and contribute to holistic development.

Futures to Forge, Remake Learning

In 2025, Remake Learning commissioned several briefs to provide examples of where and how these **Future Features** are being put into policy and practice.

Education Reimagined, a national nonprofit that supports a growing network of learner-centered education partners across the country, was asked to uplift the policy levers and conditions that are making this work possible and sustainable. **Seeds of Possibility** explores how learning ecosystems are being brought to life in eight diverse communities through organizations ranging from small nonprofits and single high schools to school districts and statewide initiatives.

Knowledge to Power Catalysts was asked to develop in-depth case stories of how people are working to address present problems in current education by embracing one or more of the **Future Features**. Building on our two earlier explorations of learning ecosystems, we decided to focus on nonprofit intermediaries that — like Remake Learning and two of the eight organizations featured in Seeds of Possibility — were intentionally created to steward connections between people, places, and possibilities in their communities or regions, benefiting multiple schools, organizations, and neighborhoods.

Ecosystem stewardship and system leadership require different mindsets, skills, and strategies. Both management approaches are needed. But one is much better understood than the other.

Studying organizations custom-built for ecosystem stewardship provides insights that can help system leaders uplift the importance of ecosystem intermediaries and implement shifts that inspire and empower their staff and learners to become more adaptable, collaborative, innovative, and effective.

This brief explores the elements of ecosystem stewardship and extrapolates lessons from case studies of four mature local ecosystem intermediaries that, like Remake Learning, have had multifaceted impact on the quality and accessibility of learning experiences for adolescents. The four intermediary organizations are:

CommunityShare — a nimble nonprofit 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." Founded in Tucson, Arizona, they are growing a network of regional learning ecosystems across the country.

The PAST Foundation — an educational R&D prototyping facility that partners with K-12 schools, post-secondary institutions, and industry and community partners to design and research innovative programs that deliver rigorous, relevant education to students in Central Ohio and beyond.

Providence After School Alliance — a nationally recognized intermediary that helped a mid-sized city reimagine itself as a coordinated learning campus — aligning schools, city agencies, and community organizations so young people can access high-quality learning opportunities beyond the school day.

Heart of Oregon Corps — a nonprofit in Central Oregon that engages young people ages 16–24 in paid work, job training, education, and service that strengthens communities and opens pathways into skilled careers.

These "Steward Stories" provide generous snapshots of each intermediary's foundations, approach, and impact, and include leader profiles and narrative timelines using a "how I built this" approach that emphasizes key decisions made along the way. They can be found in Section 3, beginning on page 16.

Preceding the stories, we explore key concepts — defining learning ecosystems, stewards, and the idea of purpose-built ecosystem intermediaries. Following the stories, we unpack what we learned — offering up takeaways both for system leaders and for ecosystem stewards.

Key Concepts

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.
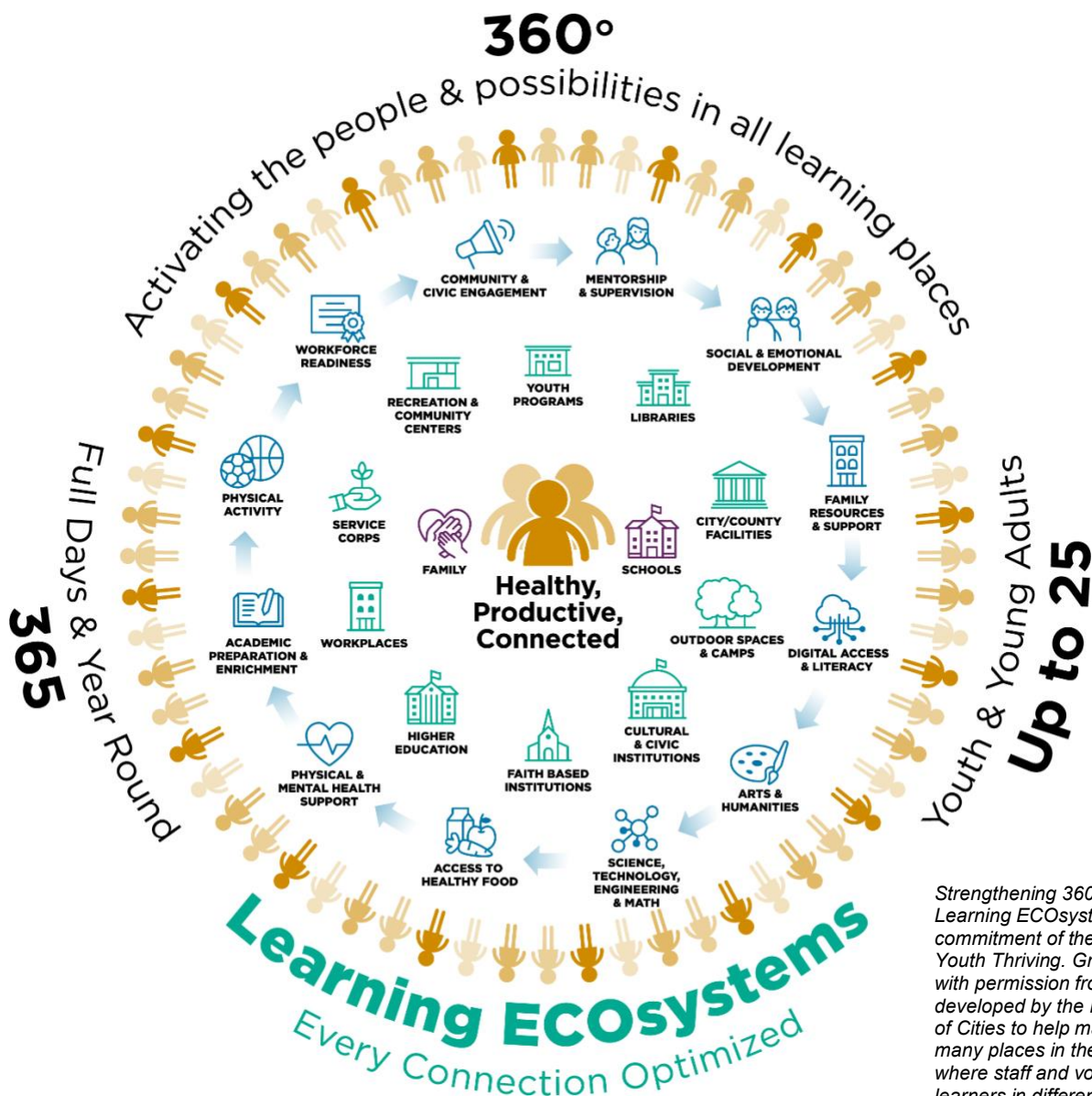
Shift, Remake Learning

What are Learning Ecosystems?

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

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 afterschool and summer hours as well as with older youth who have left school with or without diplomas.

Strengthening 360|365|Up to 25 Learning ECOsystem is a key commitment of the Alliance for Youth Thriving. Graphic adapted with permission from the visual developed by the National League of Cities to help mayors convey the many places in their communities where staff and volunteers support learners in different ways.

As places where young people and families come voluntarily and stay because of alignment with their goals and interests, they play 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, as suggested by a 2021 Learning Heroes study.

Even when making great strides towards incorporating the **Future Features**, most school districts are still operating within the September-to-June, 8-to-3, preK-to-12 box that leaves families struggling to find and finance the "anytime, anywhere" community-engaged learning experiences science tells us are critical for youth thriving.

Parents, educators, and leaders from all sectors are echoing young people's calls for a revamped public education system that acknowledges the emerging research on the importance of rich, rigorous, relevant, and varied real-world experiences to deeper youth engagement and young adult success. As communities broaden their view of education to include the entire learning ecosystem, they need to widen the aperture to see the opportunities for anywhere, anytime learning for teens and young adults and address differences in access related to income and geography.

Defining Learning Ecosystems

A learner-centered ecosystem is an adaptive, networked structure that offers a transformed way of organizing, supporting, and credentialing learning that focuses on nurturing the development of whole human beings within caring communities. It provides the conditions for partnership among young learners, their peers, and adults, emphasizing the importance of each learner's agency and enabling them to make meaningful choices about their learning and their contributions to society. Young people and their families are supported to engage with a vibrant world of learning experiences, make sense of them, identify areas for growth, and see next steps. The community and world become the playground for learning with libraries, community centers, churches, public parks, school buildings, and businesses all being seen as valid and valuable sites for learning. The power of technology is leveraged as a means to widening access to learning opportunities; to flexibly acknowledge, track, and credential a child's learning journey; and to make it translatable to families, employers, and higher education institutions.

Education Reimagined

You live in a learning ecosystem. Part inspirational metaphor, part conceptual framework, part real phenomenon, a learning ecosystem is the complex web of people, places, and forces that shape our learning experiences. Every community contains elements of a learning ecosystem: schools, of course, but also childcare centers and preschools, museums and libraries, community centers and public parks, afterschool clubs and summer programs, internships and mentorships, and countless everyday encounters with the unexpected.

Remake Learning

Using ecological thinking changes the way we see the ecosystem itself: it is no longer a collection of participants and learning places with separate essences that need to be connected for individual children. Instead, the learning ecosystem emerges as a constellation of intertwined and entangled elements, where learning happens through dynamic relational processes among the people, places, and stuff we find across/within/ between school and out-of-school places. By taking a deeper look and exploring the dynamic processes of learning ecosystems, we may be better able to manage systems that offer more equitable lifelong and lifewide learning opportunities.

Marijke Hecht and Kevin Crowley
University of Pittsburgh School of Education

Challenges Facing Systems Within the Learning Ecosystem

Expanding understanding of the kinds of people, places, and possibilities that contribute to youth success can create expectations that lead to increased connections within and between their school, community-based youth development, and workforce readiness systems.

But these system leaders face very real and very different challenges, challenges that limit their ability to encourage their staff to be good ecosystem stewards. Education leaders are battling chronic absenteeism and teacher shortages. Out-of-school time (OST) leaders are facing increases in demand at a time of increased costs and funding uncertainty. Workforce development leaders are struggling with increased misalignment between the training schools provide and the skills industry needs. Each is still recovering from the lingering effects of COVID-19 while grappling with unsettling impacts associated with federal funding uncertainties while anticipating adjustments needed to exist in the age of AI.

But these very real pressures can lead to system-specific decisions that can inadvertently starve components of the learning ecosystem.

Top 5 Issues Comparison Across Education, OST, and Workforce Development Sectors ... plus challenges facing young people entering the workforce

K–12 Schools	Afterschool & Summer Learning	Workforce Development Systems	Young People Entering Workforce
Teacher Shortages	Funding Instability & the End of Pandemic Relief	Misalignment Between Training Programs & Industry Needs	Limited Mentorship Opportunities
Student Mental Health & Well-being	Staffing Shortages	Insufficient Wraparound Supports for Learners & Workers	Skills Gap & Insufficient Experience
Chronic Absenteeism	High Demand & Limited Capacity	Fragmented Partnerships Between Education & Employers	Increased Competition & Job Market Anxiety
Learning Loss & Academic Recovery	Access & Equity Gaps	Inadequate Pathways Connecting Credentials to Quality Jobs	Adapting to Rapid Technological & Workplace Change
Funding Inequities & Budget Cuts	Pressure to Deliver Academic Recovery	Short-Term Funding Cycles & Lack of Sustainable Infrastructure	Mental Health & Resilience Challenges

Source: AI-generated synthesis created to support cross-sector sense-making. Developed for illustrative and discussion purposes. Not intended to represent a comprehensive or authoritative analysis.

Afterschool and summer programs, for example, may decide to prioritize slots for elementary school students, to address parents' need for childcare, scaling back on interest-driven opportunities for teens to gain real-world experiences and skills employers want. Schools, responding to sluggish improvements in both attendance and achievement, may decide to drive more academic supports into their expanded learning programs, curtailing enrichment opportunities that increase learner engagement. Workforce development programs, under pressure to deliver rapid placements, may default to short-term job matching and familiar credentials — even as programs are being challenged to be more innovative, agile, and responsive to rapidly changing economies and skill needs.

The good news is that system leaders share parents' and young people's definitions of the learning opportunities needed to ensure young people are future ready, echoing the **Future Features** list. Portrait of a Graduate and similar frameworks, supported by learner-engagement surveys, are driving change in K-12 education evidenced through uptake in broader competency definitions and credit for competency building in community. But each of these systems have their own value networks that, while not as constraining as the K-12 value network, still factor in their ability to respond to new demands.

Every community has individual teachers and community educators who have embraced the **Future Features** working inside of traditional organizations. Many have innovative schools and nonprofits that have built vibrant learning communities that engage all learners and educators working inside of traditional school, OST, and workforce development systems. And a growing number of communities have innovative districts that have enriched learner experiences through strong partnerships that connect learners with community places, people, and possibilities during the school day and school year for enrolled students.

Communities and regions, however, are just beginning to knit together connections across school year and expanded learning, post-secondary education and training, and economic development and youth and community thriving. Community-wide ecosystem intermediaries exist in or adjacent to each of the major systems. These ecosystem stewards take a more dynamic approach to creating and cultivating the connections that matter to ensure young people have the powerful learning experiences needed to develop and thrive. This is why learning from organizations purpose-built for ecosystem stewardship is important.

System Leadership & Ecosystem Stewardship

Systems are designed to ensure the reliable delivery of services or products designed to meet specific needs of defined consumers or clients. Ecosystems are dynamic and natural, changing in response to interactions among their members and with the environment. Systems and ecosystems both benefit from excellent management. But the focus, definition, and traits involved require different mindsets.

Leadership vs Stewardship	
Leadership	**Stewardship**
Focus: Vision, direction, influence and decision-making	**Focus:** Responsibility, sustainability and care
Definition: The act of guiding individuals or groups toward a goal, often involving strategic thinking, motivation, and innovation.	**Definition:** The careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care, often with a long-term or ethical perspective.
Key Traits: 1. Setting direction and goals 2. Inspiring and influencing others 3. Making decisions and solving problems 4. Driving change and progress	**Key Traits:** 1. Preserving and protecting resources (people, environment, culture) 2. Acting with integrity and accountability 3. Serving others and the greater good 4. Ensuring sustainability and continuity

To be clear, most system leaders are acutely aware of the ecosystem resources and risks outside of their control. And many system leaders are working diligently to translate the principles of ecosystem stewardship into their systems — changing policies, priorities, and practices in ways that encourage and reward risk-taking, collaboration, and agency in both staffs and learners. These changes are difficult to achieve in any system. But they are especially difficult in education systems governed by very rigid, tightly interconnected operating rules.

Well-managed ecosystems may look more like **organized chaos** — a term organizational management experts define as "a situation that appears disordered and chaotic on the surface but actually has an underlying order or structure. It often describes systems, environments or processes where there is a high level of activity, complexity or apparent randomness, yet everything functions effectively and efficiently due to hidden rules, patterns or organization."

Research documents that this approach leads to greater adaptability, collaborative decision-making, innovation and creativity, and trust in the potential unleashed when connections between and among ecosystem actors are optimized. Trust, in our experience, is the critical first ingredient. Without trust, ecosystem actors — young people,

family members, educators, learning partners — will not have the freedom and guidance needed to continue to adapt, collaborate and innovate. For school and community organization leaders committed to activating the four **Future Features** in their schools and programs, this work begins by extending trust to learners, families, and front-line staff. Those closest to the learning experiences need time to examine the constraints on their understanding of how, where, and why learning happens that are imposed by the century-old "grammar of schooling" so that they can create a vocabulary that works for them.

National organizations like **Big Picture Learning, Education Reimagined, EL Education, Getting Smart, History Co:Lab, Knowledgeworks, Learner Studio, Next Generation Learning Challenge, Transcend,** and **XQ Institute,** to name just a few, have been crowd-sourcing language, tools, trainings, and strategies with networks of innovative local school and district partners. These case stories are well documented and broadly shared.

In this brief, we zoom in on local intermediaries that, from the beginning, were designed to strengthen learning ecosystem connections between youth, educators, and community partners that can benefit the entire community, not just those enrolled in a particular school or program.

Exploring Learning Ecosystems — Related resources from Karen Pittman & Merita Irby

Too Essential to Fail: Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response brings together a preponderance of evidence from disparate sources that, combined, gives us the confidence we need to create "a new education architecture that leverages the full complement of community resources needed to empower and support learners for life, work, and civic engagement." Commissioned by Education Reimagined in 2024, *Too Essential to Fail* helped galvanize the coalition of coalitions that is now the Alliance for Youth Thriving.

When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive reminds us that increasing youth thriving is doable. Every young person has the potential to thrive under the right conditions and every community has an opportunity and obligation to improve those conditions. This walk through of the key ideas undergirding the Alliance for Youth Thriving was developed in close consultation with Alliance National Partners.

Both publications emphasize that moving from systems to ecosystems thinking is not a call to sideline schools. It is a call to have schools function as hubs for leveraging school and community resources to provide rich learning experiences that build real-world competencies, commitments, and connections that support youth thriving.

What Ecosystem Intermediaries Do

Ecosystem intermediaries work with school, youth development, and workforce leaders to build vibrant, equitable learning ecosystems where every connection is optimized. Ecosystem intermediaries work closely with key partners to increase access wherever and for whomever it is most needed, creating tools and trainings to accelerate spread and ensure quality. They are careful to ensure that they are adding value to the learning landscape rather than competing in it.

Most communities have one or more nonprofit intermediaries — an out-of-school time network, children's collaborative, provider coalition — that provides or coordinates training, funding, advocacy, planning and recruitment for their members. The role of mature ecosystem intermediaries, however, is broader.

Effective learning ecosystem intermediaries:

❖ **Focus on improving the design and availability of learning experiences and pathways across systems and throughout the community,** contributing to the development of critical skills and competencies needed for young people to be productive, healthy, and connected.

❖ **Actively work to partner with and create opportunities for educators** in their school districts and broader communities to expand access to learning experiences built around the **Future Features** in school and community.

❖ **Commit to ensuring that teens farthest from opportunity are future-ready**, with the competencies, connections, and experiences needed to thrive in work, learning, and life.

❖ **Develop system-level solutions and network structures** that have been or could be leveraged by K-12 and/or adapted or adopted by other communities.

❖ **Design or adapt tools, technologies, and trainings that can be packaged for use by others** and are part of larger networks that support knowledge transfer of best practices across learning systems focused on academic, social/emotional/civic, or workforce readiness development.

❖ **Adopt or develop measures of learner, educator, and community impact** that can complement traditional accountability or impact measures.

Close-up: How Shifting Mindsets Catalyzed Ecosystem Partnerships

Remake Learning is a regional intermediary that has seeded opportunities for interaction across people, places, and possibilities in the Greater Pittsburgh Learning Ecosystem for 20 years and is now fueling ecosystem stewardship across the country and around the world. The five pillars of their approach to fostering growth and connections across a regional network — **Convene. Champion. Communicate. Catalyze. Coordinate** — are consistent with the priorities shared by other mature ecosystem intermediaries. Remake Learning's origin story is chronicled in The Remake Learning Playbook (see excerpt on following page). The quotes and examples of network collaboration shown below are pulled from Shift, their 2024 report sharing examples of the shifts in action that can result from shifting mindsets.

"Schools have long been the most pivotal component of our learning ecosystems. And while schools are—and will continue to be—essential, they are not alone. Families routinely look for and find enriching, meaningful, and fulfilling learning experiences outside of school."

"The learning ecosystem is not a replacement for schools. Instead, it's a "both/and" vision—one that embraces all that schools can be by tending to the vital lifelines that link schools to the rest of life."

remake learning.

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.

Teachers meet up at their own playground.

transformED is where teachers in the Pittsburgh region meet, play, and learn. At hands-on workshops and during unstructured "playtime," educators practice new instructional methods, try out technology, and learn alongside peers and experts.

Everybody knows everybody.

Educators in Pittsburgh rub shoulders with technologists, teaching artists, museum staff, and municipal leaders. They grow their networks, build their knowledge, expand their perspectives, and restore their energy. They know each other as colleagues and as friends.

Learning shows up in everyday life.

Word games appear in public bus shelters. Sensory playgrounds soothe patients in a children's hospital. An interactive tree sculpture engages kids and families strolling through the park.

The lines between "in school" and "out-of-school" blur.

On any given day, students in Duquesne City Schools fly drones, craft African masks, produce short films, design mobile apps, or have one of a dozen other deep learning experiences. By partnering with out-of-school learning providers, the school district broadens students' horizons for learning.

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

A middle school can open inside a museum.

When Manchester Academic Charter School needs a space for its growing student population, it teams up with the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh to redevelop a historic post office building into MuseumLab, a place for kids aged 10 and older to explore hands-on art and technology.

A school district can breathe new life into a hospital.

Seeing the natural overlap between education and health care as two essentials every community needs, Allegheny Health Network and Northgate School District reimagine a shuttered suburban hospital as a place for health, wellness, learning, and innovation.

Bright ideas germinate, grow, and propagate.

Schools across the region share ideas to personalize learning. California Area School District creates an individualized learning plan for each student. South Allegheny School District provides students daily "flex" periods for personalized experiences. The regional Personalized Learning Working Group facilitates the exchange of these ideas and many more.

Families and schools work together as partners.

Parents as Allies, a community of 28 school districts across western Pennsylvania, is trying out small hacks to unlock powerful alliances between educators and parents: teachers texting with families, tech-support hotlines for parents, and low-stakes social events to build trusting relationships.

Modern-day "Freds" build real-life neighborhoods of learning.

Assemble, a community space for art and technology, opens new doors to learning for kids and families in the neighborhood of Garfield. The Oasis Project builds a makerspace and plants an urban farm, enriching the lives of kids in Homewood. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh helps tweens and teens learn out loud through hands-on projects, game design, music production, and more.

Excerpts from SHIFT

Strategic Stewardship

Guiding the network, supporting its members, and sustaining an environment where learning innovation thrives.

The Remake Learning Network first came together as a small group of like-minded people who met to exchange ideas over breakfast. In its earliest days, these personal, informal gatherings helped innovators communicate, seed some of the first collaborative projects, and build momentum. But as networks grow in size and complexity, direct coordination often becomes necessary.

Even in a self-organizing network where partners come together and begin collaborating right away, intentional coordination helps networks go farther, quicker. Philanthropies often lead the way, using funding to focus the network's attention and set regional priorities.

Rather than selecting a single organization to lead the network, consider a spoke-and-hub or constellation model that empowers teams of organizations to act as "network hubs" for different sectors of the network. The best candidates for these hubs are intermediary organizations that act in the best interests of the network, allowing other network members to focus on their core mission and programmatic activities.

Hub organizations play several roles. As conveners, they bring people together and build the field. As catalysts they invest money and resources to get new ideas off the ground or help exciting projects to develop. As communicators, hub organizations enhance networks members' ability to tell their story effectively and efficiently, internally and externally. As champions, hubs lift up the accomplishments of network actors, regionally, nationally, and internationally. And, as coordinators, hub organizations connect the dots, recommen priorities for the network, and connect those priorities to national resources.

In Pittsburgh, The Sprout Fund, a nonprofit organization, serves as a connector of the many spokes of the network and offers a suite of support services to all network members. At the leadership level, the Remake Learning Council brings together major community leaders drawn from government, higher education, school districts, and the private sector. The Council sets a long-term agenda for the network and brings the collective resources of Pittsburgh's major institutions to bear.

Excerpt from The Remake Learning Playbook
Chapter 3: The Learning Network

Steward Stories

> **CommunityShare**

> **PAST Foundation**

> **Providence After School Alliance**

> **Heart of Oregon Corps**

Steward Stories

These "Steward Stories" capture lessons learned from interviews with the leaders and founders of four mature, purpose-built ecosystem intermediaries. The starting points, paths, and targets set by these stewards are as varied as the conditions and opportunities present within their communities. But they share similarities in vision and approach.

The founders of all four nonprofits articulate a vision for stewarding an integrated learning ecosystem in which all youth and young adults find pathways to success that wind through and draw upon the full set of assets in their communities and bridge across the systems of education, youth development, and workforce development. They have all worked to bring aspects of the Future Features into the present — enriching learning experiences and improving outcomes for youth and young adults. They have all sought to do so through deep collaboration and trust-building with a diverse range of partners.

While they share similarities in philosophy and approach, each ecosystem steward had a different starting point, reflecting their personal strengths and the community opportunities and conditions. Each, however, chose a focal point for their early efforts.

CommunityShare emboldened teachers to develop community-facing projects by matching them with community experts — bringing meaning to their school courses that created formidable bonds beyond the school building and school day. As part of building their "human library," they recently changed the language on their matching platform profile to encourage everyone to see themselves as a potential project designer or contributor, increasing opportunities for year-round projects supported by schools, community organizations, and local businesses.

The PAST Foundation engaged business and industry leaders to develop real-world projects and programs for and with students as part of a vibrant STEM ecosystem. Starting first in the afterschool and summer hours but always with the intent of building educators' confidence and capacity to bring these approaches into the school day, they recently added industry fellowships for teachers and portable innovation labs that can be parked at schools for teachers to use.

The Providence After School Alliance challenged community-based program providers to fill the void in interest-driven skill-building after-school and summer activities for teens on school campuses to maximize opportunities for alignment with school staff and curricula. One of the nation's leading provider networks, PASA partnered with workforce boards to provide young people with greater access to jobs and recognition for out-of-school learning and with the state Department of Education to Rhode Island's All Course Network — demonstrating what it looks like when community-based learning is treated as a true extension of education, not an optional add-on.

Heart of Oregon Corps engages 16-24-year-olds directly, challenging those sidelined by public systems to work-learn-earn-and lead by creating a model rooted in belonging and real work where youth leaving the justice system, navigating poverty or recoiling from school failure join work crews to build confidence, build skills, connections, and credentials while responding to real community problems. They have built a regional workforce development and learning ecosystem that connects youth, employers, schools, public land agencies, community colleges, and community-based partners through layered pathways

The Stewards Stories that follow provide overviews of each intermediary's foundations, approach, and impact plus brief snapshots of the stewards themselves. They also include narrative timelines using a "how I built this" approach that emphasizes key decisions made along the way, exploring what it took to forge, strengthen, sustain, and scale connections.

COMMUNITYSHARE
Imagine Your Community as a Human Library

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.**

Developed by teachers for teachers, CommunityShare was built to respond to what their field research found to be the three reasons educators who understand the value of real-world learning for their students find it daunting to engage with the community: 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, Middle school teacher Jackie Nichols wanted her students to see themselves in STEM fields. "95% 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. Since its inception 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. 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.

For more on CommunityShare's tools, technology, and training, see the Close-Up on pages 35 and 36.

Timeline

Forging Connections

2006 Josh and Julie Kasper, an ELL instructor, invite students 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 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 "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**.** The formal work to improve and sustain the model's components kicks in.

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**.

At its core, the **PAST Foundation** is an educational R&D prototyping facility that pushes the boundaries of education, inviting the world to design, build, and engage in experiences that connect learning to life. PAST partners with K-12 schools, post-secondary institutions, and industry and community partners to design and research innovative programs that deliver rigorous, relevant education to students in Central Ohio and beyond, offering three broad types of services:

- Creating research-based student experiences, engaging student programs, and providing opportunities for real-world application of knowledge (and can help clients develop tailored design challenges
- Providing professional learning experiences, collaborating with educators, administrators and industry leaders to create strategies designed to give real meaning to educational content.
- Conducting research, including research syntheses and evaluating programs to measure impact and outcomes in schools and districts in Central Ohio and across the country.

To date, the foundation's innovative approaches to bring STEM education to life for students and educators through transdisciplinary problem-based learning in field sites and with industry experts have reached **over 3.2 million students** and more than 24,000 educators have participated in **596 programs** at over **120 locations.** PAST has worked and collaborated with well over **500 business**

Isra and Willow's Keynote on the Summer Workforce Internship

"The PAST Foundation Summer Workforce Internship Program provided 70 interns with a transformative eight-week experience. About 25 interns returned this year, while approximately 45 new students joined the program for the first time.

During this time, we gained hands-on experience and earned industry-recognized credentials in various fields, including CAD and Additive Manufacturing, Drone Flight, Media Production, CompTIA Fundamentals, Entrepreneurship and Small Business, and Healthcare Six Sigma. In addition to earning credentials, we worked on projects such as the Passion Project with Leaders of Today and the AI Industry Project with Deloitte.

We all actively engaged with real-world projects and dedicated ourselves to various tasks throughout the program. Our involvement in these projects not only enhanced our skills but also allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the workplace. Through hands-on experience and practical challenges, we refined our skills and developed insights that are crucial for success in navigating the professional environment.

This internship may have been the first step into the professional world for many of us, helping us acquire valuable life skills needed to become productive and reliable young adults.

and industry partners focused on linking learning to life, and **1,000 school districts** across the country have been influenced by their work. The PAST Foundation has leveraged millions of foundation, corporate, and public dollars to ensure that all Central Ohio youth build strong STEM identities to secure their futures.

This case story focuses on PAST's decision to become a catalyst for systemic transformation working with education, community, business, and industry partners to create ongoing program-based learning opportunities for high school students and educators that build the skills and mindsets needed for the region's current and future workforce.

PAST believes that summer and out-of-school time aren't breaks from learning; they are opportunities to make learning come alive. Their STEM-focused summer programs give students and educators the opportunity to explore real-world challenges through immersive, hands-on experiences. Whether indoors at the Innovation Lab or outdoors in the community, every program is designed to spark curiosity, build confidence, and develop future-ready skills.

PAST's programming reaches thousands of students in the afterschool and summer months, brings fully equipped portable labs to them during the school day, and provides professional development for teachers and administrators, including fellowships that award industry certifications, all in partnership with industry and business.

Annalies Corbin
Local Ecosystem Steward, Field Scientist, and Real-World Learning Enthusiast

PAST's roots trace back to Annalies' training as an anthropologist and field scientist. Her early career in Montana, the High Arctic, and the Pacific Northwest taught her that learning transforms people when they work side by side on real problems. That orientation toward authentic, collaborative problem-solving became the foundation on which PAST would eventually be built.

Throughout the 1990s, she ran field schools around the world—immersive experiences in which young people and professionals worked together on challenges in archaeology, ecology, and engineering. These were not simulations; they were real-world projects with real-world stakes. Annalies saw the profound effect these experiences had on learners. At the same time, Annalies saw communities everywhere wrestling with a shared challenge. Young people were capable, curious, and eager for relevance, yet the systems around them—schools, industries, universities—were not designed to harness that energy.

She began bringing together educators, researchers, employers, and families to co-design learning experiences rooted in real work. These early efforts were prototypes of what would become PAST's transdisciplinary, ecosystem-based model: a way of organizing learning around questions and problems that matter, rather than the boundaries of traditional disciplines.

Timeline

Forging Connections

2000 Dr. Annalies Corbin and an international network of anthropologists and field scientists **found the PAST Foundation to link real-world research with learners.**

PAST designs and delivers field schools for teens and adults nationwide in **partnership with Yellowstone National Park, Lincoln Zoo School, universities, and public agencies —** introducing thousands of learners to authentic, transdisciplinary field science.

2005 **Annalies moves to Columbus, Ohio,** and, sensing industry and education leaders' interest, decides to **explore opportunities to infuse PAST's models into the region.**

With a catalytic startup donation, PAST transitions **from a project-based collective to a program-based nonprofit** and relocates its headquarters to Columbus, Ohio.

Strengthening Connections

2006 PAST partners with **Ohio State University, Battelle Memorial Institute, and regional education leaders to help launch the Metro Early College High School** on OSU's campus. PAST leads transdisciplinary program design, beginning with **Garbology, which earns national recognition.**

2007 PAST and Battelle conduct a **combined ethnographic and policy network study** of STEM design and implementation at Metro, **influencing national thinking about STEM school models.**

2008 Metro's success contributes to the formation and **early growth of the Ohio STEM Learning Network**. PAST provides design support, capacity-building, and coaching for emerging STEM schools across the state.

2012 PAST launches a **Professional Learning Network** to help educators adopt inquiry-driven, project-centered, transdisciplinary learning.

Sustaining Connections

2015 PAST renovates and then **opens the 32,000 sq ft PAST Innovation Lab** (PIL), an independent educational R&D and prototyping facility supported by private donors, foundations, and industry partners.

The Innovation Lab becomes the hub for student programming, educator training, curriculum prototyping, and ecosystem design — expanding opportunities for hands-on STEM learning across Central Ohio.

2018 PAST co-launches its first **K–12 to college microschool pathway** (Early IT) with the **University of Cincinnati, three district partners, and Deloitte**, focused on underserved and first-generation college-bound

2021 PAST builds new **community programming, expands summer and afterschool learning, partners with industry** to offer real-world STEM pathways, and deepens statewide influence in career-connected learning.

Scaling Connections

2022 PAST launches Portable Innovation Labs (PILs) with major support from **Battelle**, bringing mobile, modular STEM labs directly to school campuses statewide.

2023 PAST forms a new **partnership with 100 Roads to build hybrid, virtual, and metaverse-enabled learning spaces.**

2024 PAST, 100 Roads, and Education Reimagined develop **pilots for Virtual Home Bases** — a new advisory-centered model integrating physical and digital learning spaces.

Summer STEM programming engages nearly 10,000 learners and 70 high school interns in hands-on learning and credentialing pathways, in partnership with almost 50 organizations.

Founded in 2004 in Providence, Rhode Island, the **Providence After School Alliance (PASA)** is a nationally recognized intermediary that helped a mid-sized city reimagine itself as a **coordinated learning campus** — aligning schools, city agencies, and community organizations so young people could access high-quality learning opportunities beyond the school day.

PASA was designed to respond to a stark local challenge: in the early 2000s, statewide data revealed that **nearly 70% of middle school students in Providence** went home to empty houses. Supported by a Wallace Foundation planning process and championed by a newly elected mayor committed to youth voice and civic engagement, Providence set out to answer a bold question: What would afterschool look like if the city itself functioned as a coordinated learning system?

PASA's signature innovation was the **AfterZones**: neighborhood-based learning "campuses" that clustered middle schools with youth-serving organizations, resulting in coordinated access to hands-on STEM, arts, sports, leadership, and enrichment. Young people shaped the design directly, making clear that they would **"walk across the city for quality — but not cross the street for something boring."** PASA was one of the first OST intermediaries to adopt quality standards based on youth development principles. PASA later expanded its ecosystem approach into high school through **The Hub**, creating studios and pathways that connected youth with educators, community experts, cultural institutions, and industry mentors. This work helped pioneer one of the country's early

Local Innovation, National Influence

Over the decades, PASA has been a leader in demonstrating the difference an afterschool system can make across the learning ecosystem. They were one of the first systems to negotiate transportation access for students, working with the district's bus service provider to guarantee free transportation to and from programs. A 2010 Public/Private Ventures 'evaluation of AfterZone programs found that participants attended school more frequently, with attendance gains increasing for those who participated in both years. They also earned higher math grades on average — by about one-third of a letter grade. These results sparked PASA's decision to expand to high school. [Wallace Foundation]

As PASA expanded its focus to the high school years, they were a leader in demonstrating what credit-for-learning could look like in out-of-school time. They helped to shape Rhode Island's All Course Network (ACN), a statewide catalog that allows students to enroll in free, credit-bearing opportunities — including work-based learning and career credential pathways — expanding what "school credit" can include. In one pre-pandemic example, PASA collaborated with **Roger Williams Park Zoo and Carousel Village,** the **Providence Public Library,** and **DownCity Design** to deliver ACN-approved learning experiences, giving students access to hands-on, interest-driven learning led by community experts while earning credit.

examples of **out-of-school learning recognized for graduation credit**, including through Rhode Island's **All Course Network** — demonstrating what it looks like when community-based learning is treated as a true extension of education, not an optional add-on.

To date, PASA has served **more than 17,000 Providence youth** and helped stabilize opportunities in a city marked by frequent leadership transitions. Its ecosystem infrastructure has influenced afterschool and expanded-learning efforts in **30+ cities nationwide**, including through networks such as **Every Hour Counts**.

PASA's long-term value has been both practical and strategic: it has shown that ecosystem-building requires **more than strong programs** — it requires **coordination, trust, shared systems, ongoing cultivation** and a commitment to quality standards and professional development.

But its local operational challenges reflect the need for more sustainable public funding for ecosystem stewards. This important work was hard to sustain after the pandemic, especially with shifts in city, district, and PASA leadership (the founding executive director retired in 2021). As the number of programs serving teens dropped, PASA stepped in to directly provide services. The second executive director, wisely recruited from within, led the organization through the post-COVID era and then stepped down in 2025. An experienced OST intermediary executive was brought in as interim ED to help chart the next phase of PASA's journey going back to **reforge connections** by focusing on its unique strengths: local trust, city partnerships, and community responsiveness.

Hillary Salmons
Community Organizer and Systems Builder with Grassroots Credibility

Hillary's path to youth development and systems-building started long before Providence — in the places where she learned what community power really looks like. At 18, she left home for a fishing village off the coast of Newfoundland to run a summer camp, an early immersion in what it means to build trust and create opportunity in a tight-knit community. In college, she was drawn to organizing and community work, and during her time living in Japan she learned to mobilize resources and back community-led solutions — including work supporting refugees in Southeast Asia.

But it was in New York City — during the Koch-era fiscal crisis — that she sharpened her systems instincts, working alongside titans of youth development as part of a movement to strengthen grassroots nonprofits and school-community partnerships through initiatives like the Beacons.

By the time she landed in Providence, Hillary had a rare combination of street-level credibility and political fluency: she could move comfortably between the grassroots and the "systems," translate across worlds, and leverage institutional dollars toward community-designed work. With a newly elected mayor who recognized the latent power of Providence's youth activists, arts organizations, and neighborhood institutions, Hillary was ready to leverage a major funding opportunity into cultivating a learning ecosystem designed to last.

Timeline

Forging Connections

2001 Statewide data reveals nearly **70% of RI middle school youth** lack adult supervision after school, catalyzing urgency around OST infrastructure.

2003 Newly elected Mayor **David Cicilline** champions youth development and sees OST as a high-leverage strategy for improving outcomes without being trapped in school-system gridlock.

2003 The Wallace Foundation invests a **$1M planning grant**, and Providence convenes a broad cross-sector design process (100+ stakeholders) to map assets and design an intermediary model.

2004 Wallace provides an additional **$5M implementation grant** for scaling a citywide system.

2004 PASA is formally established as an independent nonprofit; **Hillary Salmons** becomes founding ED.

2004–2005 PASA establishes a foundational operating principle: it is not a provider — it is the organization **responsible for aligning the ecosystem around access, quality, and coordination.**

Strengthening Connections

2005 PASA launches the **AfterZone initiative**, clustering middle schools and providers into neighborhood "campuses" with shared schedules, transportation supports, and coordinated enrollment.

2005–08 AfterZones expand citywide, reaching five sites and proving the model can scale across diverse neighborhoods.

Mid–late 2000s Youth voice becomes a defining feature of design: students make clear they will "walk across the city for quality — but not cross the street for something boring."

2006–2010 PASA builds long-term political durability by codifying a standing agreement with city leadership — a mechanism renewed after elections that protects the ecosystem from turnover and keeps the mayor deeply tied to PASA's success.

Late 2000s PASA strategically stabilizes its funding base through **21st Century grants**, anticipating the end of Wallace dollars and the lack of state investment in OST.

Sustaining Connections

2011 PASA launches **The Hub**, bringing its ecosystem model into high schools through studios, pathways, and mentorship-based learning experiences.

2010s The Hub expands partnerships with educators, community experts, and industry mentors — **strengthening career-connected learning** and building bridges between OST and graduation pathways.

2016 PASA integrates Hub learning with Rhode Island's **All Course Network**, helping establish one of the nation's earliest credit-bearing OST pathways.

2010s PASA becomes a widely-cited **national example of community-based intermediary work**; its model influences efforts in dozens of cities through **Every Hour Counts** and other networks.

2020 COVID forces PASA and the OST field nationally to **shift into emergency response modes**: food distribution, crisis support, and rapid pivots to virtual/outdoor delivery.

Scaling Connections

2021 PASA returns to in-person programming and continues direct service through multiple school sites. **Hillary Salmons retires. Ann Durham**, with PASA since 2014, **assumes the ED role.**

2021-2023 Increased funding, **including $350,000 in congressionally delegated funds** to support STEAM summer camps, enables PASA to offer 820 free afterschool and summer programs serving 5,100 youth. Invests heavily in **rebuilding Providence's youth development workforce and provider network** following post-pandemic staffing shortages and program closures. Actively seeks new program providers, training them on youth development principles. Collaborates with District to align OST programs with new priorities.

2024 PASA is recognized as a **Bank of America Neighborhood Builders** awardee**.**

2025 Ann Durham steps down and Eric Gurna assumes interim role. Discussions underway re: **balance between direct delivery versus ecosystem-wide functions** as PASA works to stay nimble and responsive to the most pressing community needs.

Heart of Oregon Corps (HOC)
is a Central Oregon–based nonprofit that engages young people ages 16–24 in **paid work, job training, education, and service** that strengthens communities and opens pathways into skilled careers. Founded in 2000 by three community changemakers who shared a simple but radical belief: young people who have been pushed to the margins can thrive when they are given meaningful work, supportive adults, and a real chance to contribute.

From the beginning, HOC embraced a corps-based model rooted in **belonging and real work**. The founders saw the poor results associated with the traditional deficit-focused supports provided to young people leaving the juvenile justice system or navigating poverty. HOC flipped that equation by creating a model where youth earn wages and build work habits, credentials, and confidence while addressing real community challenges — restoring public lands, building affordable housing, and supporting childcare access.

YouthBuild
Heart of Oregon Style

When Heart of Oregon Corps launched YouthBuild in 2009 with a $1.1M grant, it went all in. It became a licensed construction contractor, deepening school partnerships and expanding into trades and housing pathways. In 2024, **74%** of YouthBuild members earned pre-apprenticeship certifications and **79%** obtained OSHA 10 Construction cards. **17** members earned their high school diplomas or GEDs.

With three construction partners, YouthBuild members completed their first BlitzBuild, joining forces with two out-of-state YouthBuild program teams to build five sleeping shelters in just one day!

"I didn't know where my life was heading, and while others saw me as a lost cause, Heart of Oregon reached out and offered me a helping hand. Now, here I am, graduating high school nearly a year early and working at Sunlight Solar. What I'm most grateful for isn't just the skills they taught me — like being a professional in the workplace or building walls on a jobsite — but for showing me that what truly matters in life is the time we spend improving our community" - Jacob B

Taking the YouthBuild model beyond construction, HOC launched a Child and Youth Development Track with Sisters Parks and Recreation Pre-School. 16 corps members have earned their Child and Youth Care Certifications since the track launched in 2022.

"YouthBuild created an encouraging, judgment-free environment that pushed me to believe in my potential, overcome challenges, and stay committed to confidently earning my diploma. I truly couldn't have done it without Heart of Oregon's endless support!" – Jackie

Heart of Oregon has evolved from a single service corps into a **tri-country workforce and learning ecosystem**, connecting youth, employers, schools, public land agencies, community colleges, and community-based partners through layered pathways. HOC has responded to community needs by introducing national programs like Conservation Corps, YouthBuild, AmeriCorps and developing local ones like a thrift store and a childcare workforce track. These projects are sprinkled across the region, supported by integrated infrastructure such as transportation, case management, academic support, coaching, and employer partnership development.

Heart of Oregon engages about **225 youth** annually who earn more than **$1M** each year in wages and stipends and receive **$125k** in AmeriCorps education awards annually. To date, HOC has served **over 5,000 young people** across the tri-county area, a neighboring county, and the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

HOC's partnership footprint spans multiple school districts, juvenile justice, public land agencies (including long-standing Forest Service collaboration), regional workforce systems, employers and industry groups, and disability transition services — reflecting its role as a learning ecosystem connector. HOC is sustained through a blended partnership and funding model that includes fee-for-service contracts (e.g., natural resources and recycling-related work), federal program grants (AmeriCorps and YouthBuild), and long-term employer engagement through an Employer Advisory Council and regional business networks.

For the region, HOC is a long-term investment in community capacity and a reliable workforce pipeline. For young people, it provides something many have never experienced: peer belonging, consistent mentorship, trauma-informed support, and a structured pathway that turns service into skills, and skills into careers.
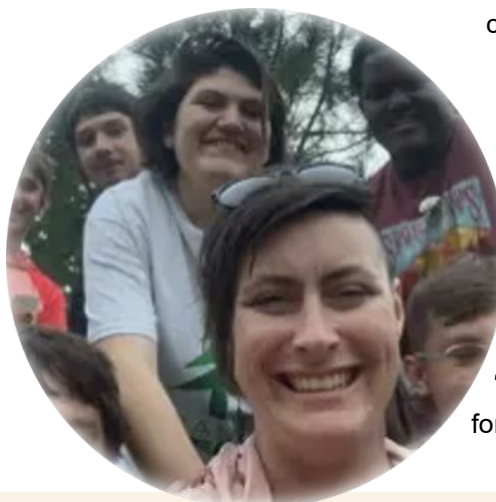
From the Three Ds to Laura Handy
Bridge Builders are Believers that All Youth Deserve Opportunities to Work, Learn, Earn, Lead...and Belong

Heart of Oregon Corps was founded in 2000 by three Central Oregon leaders — Dan Saraceno, Dennis Maloney, and Dave Holmes, known affectionately as "the three Ds" — came together around a shared belief that young people deserved real opportunities to contribute, earn, and build a future. Dan was a school counselor and advocate for youth with disabilities and alternative pathways. Denny was the director of Deschutes County Juvenile Justice and an early restorative justice practitioner. Dave led juvenile justice work crews and drew from his own lived experience as a formerly court-involved youth and Army Command Sergeant Major. Together, they launched Heart of Oregon Corps as a community-rooted workforce and learning model that connected youth — especially those facing barriers — with paid work, supportive relationships, and meaningful service projects that strengthened the region.

Laura Handy joined Heart of Oregon Corps in 2006 to help implement HOC's early AmeriCorps work. With a background in youth development and community-based leadership—including mentoring youth in detention, domestic violence shelter work, teen girls' programming, and outdoor leadership — she recognized the power of the corps model. Laura stepped into the executive director role in 2012 and has since helped guide the organization through periods of rapid growth and major disruption, strengthening its partnerships with schools, employers, and rural communities while keeping the focus on paid pathways that build skills, confidence, and lasting opportunity. Today, she is leading the effort to create a permanent campus — including classrooms and training areas, equipment storage areas, and confidential meeting rooms so that when a young person needs privacy, staff no longer have to say "grab your coat, let's go for a walk."

Timeline

Forging Connections

1998 The 3 Ds begin meeting around a shared question: What would it look like to give youth real work, real wages, and real responsibility instead of cycling them through punishment, disconnected services, or dead-end jobs?

2000 Heart of Oregon Corps is founded by Dave Holmes, Dennis Maloney, and Dan Saraceno in partnership with Deschutes County Juvenile Justice as **a restorative, work-based alternative for court involved and disengaged youth**. 99 enroll in the 1st year.

2001 Partners with the U.S. Forest Service to **launch the Central Oregon Youth Conservation Corps**, running **21 summer** crews and **3 year-round** crews.

2002 Raises funds to purchase **3 vans and 3 trailers**, building early infrastructure for growth.

2003 More **than 500 youth** hired — an early signal that regional youth will respond to opportunities for work, learn, earn, lead.

Strengthening Connections

2006 Adds the **AmeriCorps Civic Justice Corps**, a national pilot program to demonstrate the **restorative justice power** of national service.

2007 Launches an **Employer Advisory Council** designed to be "low lift" for employers (two meetings a year) while building a ladder of deeper involvement through mock interviews, jobsite tours, mentoring, and board participation. **Bend Broadband** and **Mt. Bachelor** are early members.

2008 **Opens the Bend office**, expanding presence and access.

2008–2012 Grows quickly during the Great Recession, because it can translate dollars into actual paid jobs—**from 140 to 260 youth jobs annually** as **public agencies and partners ask, "Can you hire more youth?"**

2009 **Launches YouthBuild with a $1.1M grant** and becomes a licensed construction contractor, deepening school partnerships and **expanding into trades and housing pathways.** Strengthens entrepreneurial fee-for-service backbone.

2011 Unveils a new mission focused on jobs, education, and stewardship.

Sustaining Connections

2012 **Founder Dave Holmes retires; Laura Handy is promoted to executive director,** bringing the youth development lens into sharper focus.

2012 Opens a **Thrift Store** in downtown Madras as a **job skills training program for youth who experience disabilities**, reflecting the founders' commitment to disability inclusion.

2013 **Expands** year-round AmeriCorps programming to Prineville**, strengthening regional reach.**

2014 Builds its **20th affordable home** (over 30 homes built to date).

2015 Launches **Camp LEAD** (Leadership, Empowerment, Advocacy, and Development) a short-term "springboard" experience designed to **build confidence of youth who experience disabilities** before transitioning into integrated crews.

2016 Reaches **$1M in total AmeriCorps scholarships** awarded.

Scaling Connections

2017 "Fleet for the Future" capital campaign **raises $500K+ for upgraded vehicles and equipment** to ensure crews can reliably respond to commitments

2018 Opens a **dedicated facility in Prineville** at Ochoco Crossing.

2019 Launches a 3-year **Data Driven Impact Initiative** to strengthen data practice and improve equitable youth outcomes. **Hires and trains 300 youth each year, paying $700K+** in wages and stipends for conservation, trails, housing, and thrift store programming.

2020 **Celebrates 20 years of "training tomorrow's workforce today"** while continuing to adapt program models without losing the core components.

2021 Stays operational during COVID, keeping crews running by using extra **newly- rented warehouse space for social distancing**.

2025 Breaks ground on **new Workforce Development Campus** in Redmond — an expanded regional hub for training, support services, and deeper employer partnerships.

Takeaways

> **For Aspiring Ecosystem Stewards**

> **For System Leaders**

It is not surprising that the professional training, experience, and preferred approach to life of the stewards profiled made these leaders uniquely qualified to develop organizations committed to ecosystem stewardship. They were not only comfortable with the principles of organized chaos, but they also led with it — personally demonstrating the power of being adaptive, collaborative, innovative trust-builders.

The similarities in the decisions these leaders made strengthened our rationale for capitalizing the "ECO" in **ECO**system: **E**very **C**onnection **O**ptimized. These stewards intuitively understood the importance of staying nimble, looking for scalable, sustainable ways to strengthen connections between people, places and possibilities for learning. Connections between practice and policy. Connections between individual learner outcomes and learning experiences. Connections between collective mindsets and commitments.

These stewards have generated an impressive number of adaptable products: tools, trainings, and technologies that have been used in their communities to strengthen the weave of the learning ecosystem fabric. Many of their home-grown, road-tested innovations are now in wider use in their regions and even across the country.
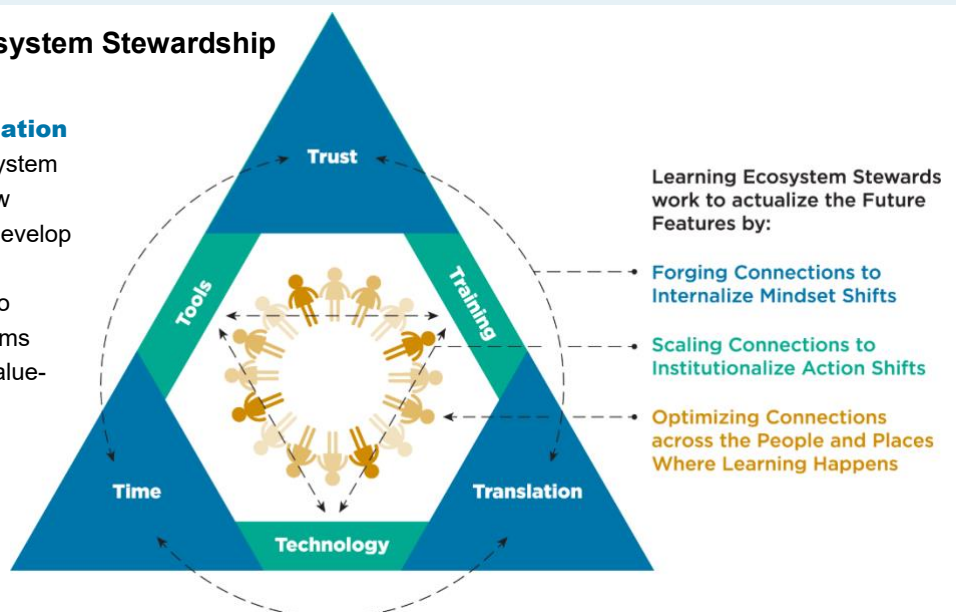
There is no shortage of tools, trainings, and technologies in use within school and community organizations that have been brought in recently to help staff create more relationship-rich, learner-centered, competency-based learning experiences. But, as many education transformation observers report, these infusions are often short-lived because they are implemented from the top-down — met with resistance from front-line staff — or hit operational ceilings within systems as they attempt to grow from the bottom up.

The graphic below emphasizes the importance of the early formational work these stewards did before formalizing their organizational structures or designing new tools and trainings. What follows are five suggestions for aspiring ecosystem stewards, drawn from our extensive interviews with these leaders, that build from one age old idea: **Let Form Follow Function**.

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.

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

Tips for Aspiring Ecosystem Stewards

Here are four suggestions if you or someone in your organization or initiative is interested in becoming or recruiting an ecosystem steward and developing a learning ecosystem intermediary organization.

❶ Don't rush to create a formal organization. Allow time for listening, translating, and trust-building.

These leaders took the time needed — sometimes years — to forge ideas from deep, authentic conversations, build trust across stakeholder groups, and find the right words to translate complex ideas into accessible plain-speak before codifying organizational goals and strategies.

In each case, these leaders' collaborative trust-building work began before the official nonprofit was started. The seeds of their ideas were planted two to ten years before founders' nonprofit organizations were incorporated. Founders attribute their intermediaries' long-term success to this upfront time investment and continue to emphasize the **importance of time (not timelines) for optimizing trust-based connections.**

They prioritized time to brainstorm and problem solve with diverse stakeholders allowed their teams to listen, learn, and find opportunities to **translate the Future Features** into language that resonates across their local systems, young people, and families. This care with words can be seen in their taglines and website language.

❷ When ready, create a flexible structure outside of — or insulated from — the operational constraints of K-12 or other public systems.

The leaders profiled created nonprofits. Some stewards have had success creating sanctioned, well-insulated operations inside of systems. Even when the seed of the idea was germinated within, **all found this step necessary, because of their desire to innovate solutions quickly**, responding to a current problem with an eye towards catalyzing improvements consistent with one or more Future Features.

Key to their acceptance as stewards was their ecosystem partners' **trust that they were adding value that could attract more resources** to improve quality and reach rather than competing for funding. Trust banked allowed stewards to optimize connections between and among the people and places by helping partners shift from scarcity to abundance mindsets as they began to see themselves as part of an effort to improve learning experiences across the larger learning ecosystem, contributing to the achievement of shared goals.

❸ Stay focused on optimizing learner experiences as the best path to improved learner outcomes.

These leaders defined success as increases in the quantity, variety and accessibility of high-quality learning experiences for all learners regardless of the school or youth programs where they were

enrolled. Their strategies often targeted different population groups and neighborhoods initially (e.g., PASA's focus on middle schoolers first). But their sites were always set on scaling solutions that could be used by multiple staff, organizations, and systems to make the **Future Features** a current reality. Their stories and timelines are filled with examples of:

- Promoting **Learner Agency throughout the community** by directly creating opportunities for youth to have more control over what, when, with whom and how they learned, focusing on real-world opportunities for building competencies and connections that matter.

- Institutionalizing the principles behind **School Unwalled** by developing strategies and systems that make it easier for partners and resources beyond the school building, day and year to contribute and connect to consistent (versus ad hoc) opportunities to learn, lead, and earn credit or wages, creating more visible and varied learning pathways. Efforts ranged from proposing new transportation routes, to co-locating activities to creating shared information directories for use by all learners, educators, and families.

- Operationalizing a **Broader Definition of Educator** by developing informal and formal opportunities for educators, mentors, and coaches in school and community organizations to not only be recognized and supported but have opportunities to work together across system boundaries, filling time and space in and beyond the school day and year.

- Normalizing the idea of getting **Credit for Out-of-School Learning** by creating sustainable paths for teachers to find partners to take learner projects into the community; engaging industry, business and city services leaders to co-design competency-building learning and work experiences with youth that lead to industry credentials; or developing quality standards and enriched program content to help out-of-school time program providers engage teens in interest-driven school credits.

④ **Design tools, trainings, and technologies to improve connections not control actions.**
Co-develop and adapt solutions working collectively to identify and address shared problems and, in so doing, sustaining their value-added stewardship roles with their ecosystem partners.

- In developing these resources, **they worked from the bottom up** keeping the end users in mind. By staying focused on learner engagement and learning experiences, these ecosystem stewards were able to support continuous improvement by co-developing or adapting tools, trainings, and technologies, structures that relayed needed information to their network members in formats they could use.

- **They were iterative, adaptive, and nimble.** They were not afraid to change or take risks and honest about naming mistakes. This allowed them to both grow and retrench when needed. Over time, their ecosystem partners came to value these traits and turn to them for solutions to challenges.

- **They recognized the need to develop all three components in tandem.** Tools, training and technologies were developed based on demand and improved based on feedback. But they were never marketed as stand-alone solutions

COMMUNITYSHARE

Imagine Your Community as a Human Library

Imagine your community as a "human library" in which community members reveal and share their wisdom, skills, and lived experiences with educators and students through real-world projects driven by students' passions.

TOOL:

A tested and refined "profile" for a community partner

CommunityShare profiles highlight the skills, interests, and life experiences of potential community partners, including photos and personal statements. By providing educators with robust, detailed profiles that highlight not just the work experiences, but also their life experiences, lived histories and past projects of potential partners, 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.

TECHNOLOGY:

A "match.com" for educators and expert volunteers

CommunityShare's online platform serves as a human library of regional wisdom and expertise that connects students and educators with community partners and allows educators to co-create real-world learning projects that align with students' interests. STEM professionals, artists, entrepreneurs, higher education faculty and students, retirees, parents, and other professionals from local nonprofits, government agencies, companies, and more create online individual profiles that reveal the professional skills and life experiences they would like to share. Educators post real-world learning projects outlining learning goals, student interests, and more. The platform automatically matches community members to projects, allowing educators to select and invite partners and partners to accept invitations. Community members matched with classrooms can serve as volunteer mentors, project collaborators, content area experts, fieldtrip hosts, guest speakers, internship sites, and more. Educators can also engage community partners virtually because the local platforms are part of CommunityShare's national network. This is a gift for rural communities where access to diverse professionals is often more limited.

TRAINING:

Professional development in project-based, real-world learning

Capacity building is equally central to CommunityShare's success. Though many educators see the value of these real-world learning experiences, many have little experience designing them. To support educators in co-designing real-world learning experiences, CommunityShare developed an intensive educator fellowship and other professional learning experiences. The fellowship experiences, which are five months long, support a cohort of teachers in developing the mindsets, skills and confidence to co-design real-world learning experiences with their students and community partners, provide 1-1 coaching, and seed grants for project

COMMUNITYSHARE Partner Profile

Sara Stone

- Las Cruces, NM
  247 miles away
- Assistant Museum Curator
  Las Cruces Museum System

Collaboration Options
- Virtual

Activity types I want to collaborate on
- Advisor
- Challenge
- Competition
- Demonstration
- Guest Instructor
- Interview
- Job Shadow
- Mentor
- Speaker
- Tour
- Workshop

About Sara

I am a very creative person and enjoy teaching. I understand not all people are the same so I strive to find ways to help others learn better.

Skills & Experiences

Education and Training
Early Childhood & Pre-K Educator
I teach pre-k classes. I have two years of taking child growth and development classes at NMSU

Agriculture and Veterinary Science
Gardening
I am a gardener and have networked with professors that specialize in agriculture.

Sports, Health and Fitness
Athletes and Sports Competitors
I have played soccer for seven years and I played at the college level in tournaments.

Arts: Visual, Performing, and Fine Arts
Drawing and Painting
I have my bachelor's degree in studio art. I'm an artist. I've worked with painting, drawing, ceramics, metalsmith and printmaking.

Sports, Health and Fitness
Coaching
I was a soccer coach for about 4 years, I coached pre-k to 13 year old's.

Life Skills
Excited to advise about...
Interviewing for a job. Dressing for career success. Navigating college life.

costs.

Tips for System Leaders

Here are five ways that you can see and strengthen learning ECOsystems where Every Connection is Optimized, including identifying and lifting up the boundary-spanning stewards already doing this work in your communities

① **SEE the full learning ecosystem** — **from the perspective of young people and families**. Move beyond mantras — like "learning happens everywhere" — to actively map, understand, and cultivate the full array of people, places, and possibilities across the learning ecosystem. Start by asking young people and their families about all of their learning experiences — inside and beyond your work with them. To broaden your aperture and bring the fuller ecosystem into focus, ask the young people you work with:

- What are you passionate about learning and doing?
- Where do you find your most powerful learning and skill-building opportunities? Both within your school building and across your community?
- How relevant and rigorous is what you're learning with us?
- How can we help connect you to the people and places you need, ensure you get credit for learning you've already done, and support you on your path forward?
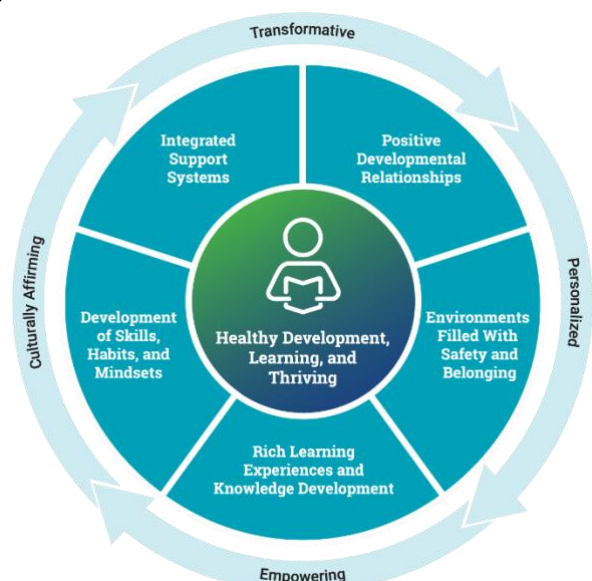
② **ZOOM IN on shared purpose** — **powerful learning experiences and pathways.** Across schools, programs, and communities, one common denominator consistently emerges where youth are thriving: **a shared purpose centered on a broad set of youth outcomes, advanced through powerful learning experiences.** This reflects a growing consensus that young people need more than academic knowledge alone. They need opportunities to build skills, agency, identity, and belonging through learning experiences that are relationship-rich, competency-building, and increasingly porous — extending beyond the classroom walls across schools, programs, workplaces, and community settings.

To ensure you are sparking discussions about learning and success, not just about schooling and graduation:

Guiding Principles

The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance is a resource hub for researchers, practitioners and policy makers. They have operationalized their main finding — that every child has the potential to succeed because environments, experiences, relationships and contexts matter more than genes — into five guiding principles commonly referred to as The Blue Wheel.

This graphic is widely used to help practitioners across systems understand the importance of focusing on all of the principles, even though they are in systems that prioritize or are held accountable for only one or two.

See Design Principles for Schools and Design Principles for Community-Based Settings, Science of Learning and Development Alliance

- Use tools like the Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance's "Blue Wheel" (see box) to emphasize the non-negotiables for all learning experiences and also uplift the differences between learning settings so they can be more fully optimized.
- Acknowledge the research on "the new absenteeism" that distinguishes between being present and being engaged to reinforce the need to co-develop criteria for transformative learning with all education stakeholders.
- Familiarize yourself with research-based surveys and tools that can provide honest learner and educator assessments across settings (e.g., **Transcend's Leaps Student Voice Survey, XQ Learner Competencies, UCCSR's Cultivate Survey, Hello Insight's Surveys**.)
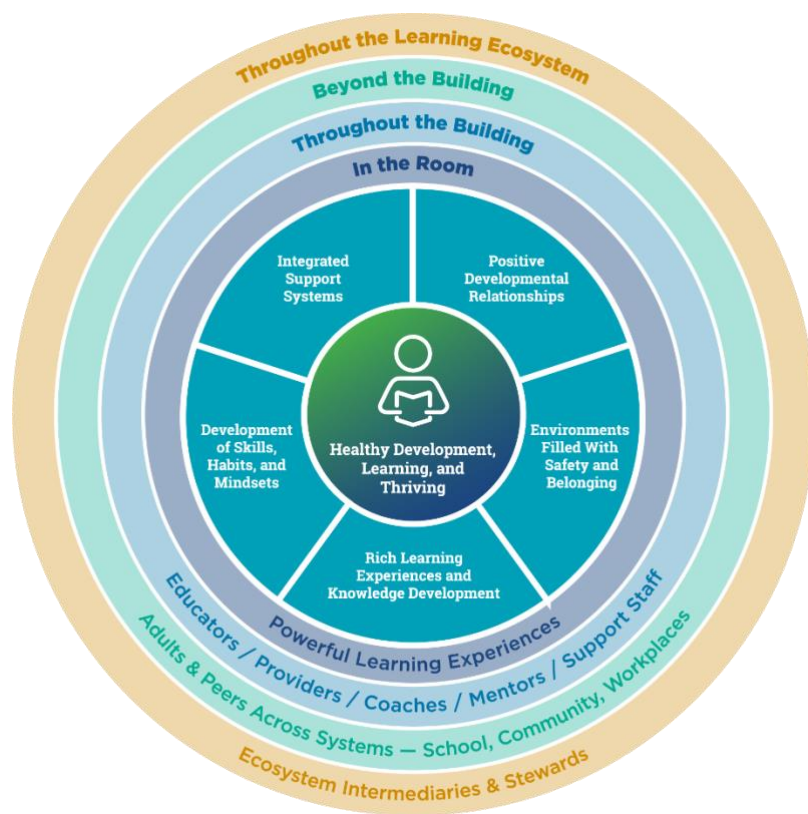
③ **OPTIMIZE the Mesosystem: The People, Places and Possibilities Closest to Youth**

The health of a learning ecosystem is best seen in the health of its **mesosystem** — the web of relationships — the people that staff the places and shape the possibilities that directly shape young people's daily experiences. Drawing from bio-ecology, we can think of these staff as the "keystone species." Their health and connection is a key indicator of overall ecosystem health.

To accelerate mesosystem health, prioritize investments in the keystone species — educators, mentors, youth work professionals, coaches, counselors — starting with those inside your buildings and system:

- Create paid time and stable structures for these adults to see and find one another within and across the places and spaces where young people spend their time. Don't over-program these opportunities.
- Use shared reflection and learner-centered questions to help adults see the whole learner and understand the roles they play in their development. (What do they contribute that complements academic instruction if they are not in the classroom?)
- Create opportunities for them to 'walk in each other's shoes," using language from When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive or other resources that spell out the roles and places in the ecosystem, to help them verbalize what they are seeing.
- Cross-pollinate tools, practices, and resources that strengthen the relationships of the staff and

Activate the Guiding Principles Across All Places, Spaces, and People Within Your System and Beyond

volunteers in the mesosystem and reinforce the quality and coherence of learning experiences and learning environment

④ **UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE with the other systems in the learning ecosystem.**

Focus on your shared purpose as a way to recognize and elevate the expertise and approaches of people and places working directly with youth across the learning ecosystem, especially where young people have found success through innovative and alternative approaches beyond the traditional classroom. These may be found in alternative schools and pathways developed by school systems as well as in community-based systems.

- Move from siloed systems to interconnected infrastructure — including aligned approaches to learning experience design, credit, standards, transportation, data, and learner supports — that makes learning pathways visible, navigable, and equitable
- Explore schools' roles as **learning hubs** that anchor learning while connecting young people to community partners and pathways outside of their scope.
- Fully recognize the infrastructure and capacity of alternative systems and networks focused on learning, enrichment, development, and workforce and career pathways

⑤ **SUPPORT & STRENGTHEN stewards and intermediaries already at work.** Identify, invest in, and learn from ecosystem stewards — the cultivators of organized chaos and creativity — and the purpose-built intermediaries that they are developing to engage young people and families and help them connect into powerful, co-created learning experiences across the learning ecosystem. In your community, you may not have a mature intermediary like those profiled. But before building something new, look across your community to find people and places where the essential elements of ecosystem stewardship are already at work. Ask:

- What organizations or collaboratives are working to make connections across the fault lines in the full learning ecosystem? The divides between school and afterschool? School year and summer? Teens and young adults?
- What organizations are working with multiple systems to improve outcomes for specific populations? System-involved youth? Immigrant families? Learners with disabilities?
- Which leaders are trusted boundary spanners? People invited to the table because they can see the big picture beyond their organizations and priorities?
- Who is already working to ensure youth, families and front-line staff are fully present in community change efforts?

Together, we can co-imagine a future of learning supported by a nimble civic infrastructure that ensures equitable access to powerful pathways that help every young person thrive. We can expand the goal from rebuilding individual systems to scaffolding across systems and settings — co-creating community-wide, year-round, credit-bearing learning experiences and career pathways for youth and for young adults — 360º | 365 | Up to Age 25.

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