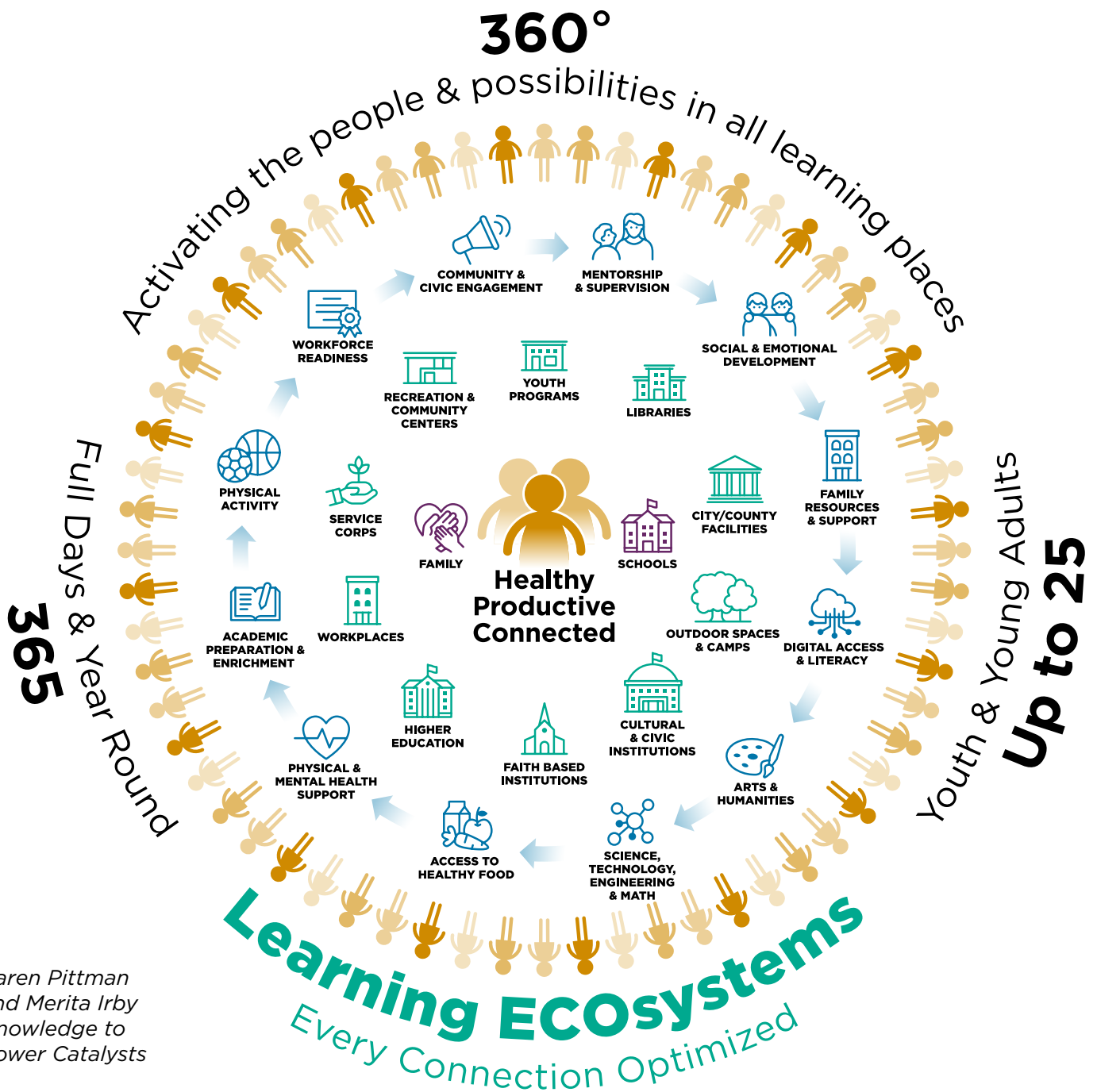


# When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive

Why Ecosystems for Anytime, Everywhere  
Learning Are Too Important to Ignore



Karen Pittman  
and Merita Irby  
Knowledge to  
Power Catalysts

Karen Pittman and Merita Irby. April 2026. When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive: Why Ecosystems for Anytime Everywhere Learning Are Too Important to Ignore. Alliance for Youth Thriving. Updated from July 2025.

**On the Cover:** Optimizing connections across 360° | 365 | Up to Age 25 Learning ECOSystems is a key commitment of the Alliance for Youth Thriving. Real learning happens anytime, anywhere — and it is never too late to help young people realize their potential.

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.

**Appreciation:** Thank you to our thought partners in the Centering Youth Thriving “Crew” that helped to plan the seminal From Systems to Ecosystems convening in April 2024 and worked with us over the subsequent year to hone these key ideas and form the Alliance for Youth Thriving. Particular gratitude to crew members Jane Quinn, Kathleen Osta, Mary Arnold, Michael Crawford, and Courtney Garcia for their formal review and fine-tuning of this updated version. Appreciation once again to Greg Sitzmann of Sitzmann Studio for his elegant design work and creativity in making conceptual graphics ever clearer. Finally, we would like to thank Kim Smith, Courtney Garcia, and the team at LearnerStudio for their support of the final review and refinement process and publication of this case statement.

**The Alliance:** 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 **Every Connection** is **Optimized** 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 founding partners of the Alliance for Youth Thriving.

# When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive

Why Ecosystems for Anytime, Everywhere  
Learning Are Too Important to Ignore

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**About:** The ideas presented in this document were refined through ongoing collaboration with the National Partners of the Alliance for Youth Thriving and are informed by the science of learning and development, the science of adolescence, and positive youth development research. The research grounding this work — along with a synthesis of converging perspectives from youth, families, educators, and business leaders — is summarized in a companion paper by the same authors: [Too Essential to Fail: Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response](#).

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# Overview

## Our Beliefs

### **When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive.**

This central truth grounds our work and is underscored by a powerful cycle of thriving.

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

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

**Every community contains a broader learning ecosystem that is too important to ignore.** Real learning happens in real life — in the myriad spaces where young people live, learn, work, play, and contribute.

**The boundaries of our evolving education architecture must formalize the commitment to anytime/everywhere/never-too-late learning** — moving beyond the traditional walls that define the school day, school year, and age of graduation — to help young people develop the competencies and skills they need to navigate and succeed in a rapidly changing world.

## Our Commitments

**Together, we must position learning ecosystems as civic infrastructure** — not supplemental or compensatory programming — essential to preparing youth for participation in a thriving democracy and inclusive economy.

**We must make an explicit commitment to co-designing and aligning our education infrastructure to support 360° | 365 pathways for youth and young adults** so they can gain competencies and earn credits through their work and contributions throughout their schools and communities.

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

- 1 Reclaim learning as a part of human development.
- 2 Embed academic standards in broader youth success goals.
- 3 Explicitly name the people and places that create anytime/everywhere/never-too-late learning possibilities.

- 4 Acknowledge the multiple systems that support anytime/everywhere/never-too-late learning and intentionally link them with formal education to co-design and strengthen vibrant learning ecosystems.
- 5 Adopt a community action framework that charts a course everyone can contribute to but is too large for any one entity to own.
- 6 Ensure those working closest to youth and families have the time, trust, tools, and resources to create meaningful learning experiences and well-lit pathways

## Accelerators for Shared Action and Innovation

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

- Affirm the common denominator — a shared purposes centered on a broad set of youth outcomes, advanced through powerful learning experiences.
- Elevate and partner with ecosystem stewards and purpose-built intermediaries.
- Optimize the mesosystem — the relationships closest to youth.
- See and connect the systems — without circumnavigating schools.

**The Alliance for Youth Thriving is committed to ensuring that Every Connection is Optimized creating more transformative learning ECOsystems where all youth thrive.**

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# Our Beliefs

**Young people have a powerful drive to thrive, but they need more fuel.**

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

This is especially true for adolescents. As noted in the [Promise of Adolescence](#):

*“Adolescent brains ... are specially tailored to meet the needs of this stage of life.*

*Adolescents must explore and take risks to build the cognitive, social, and emotional skills they will need to be productive adults.”*

*The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine*

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

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

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

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

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

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

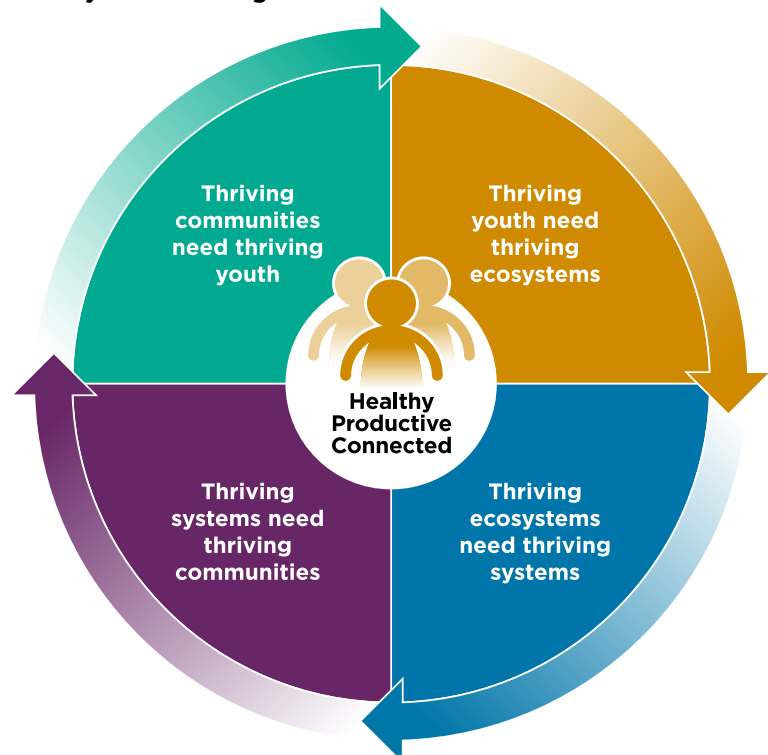
But when families, systems, and communities are stretched thin — without the human or financial resources they need — these connections can be harder to recognize and easier to dismiss. It may seem counterintuitive, but times of greatest challenge are when we need to turn outwards, not inwards, optimizing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

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

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

Widening our lens creates the space to shift our focus — from deficits and scarcity to assets and abundance.

### A Powerful Cycle of Thriving



*Alliance for Youth Thriving*

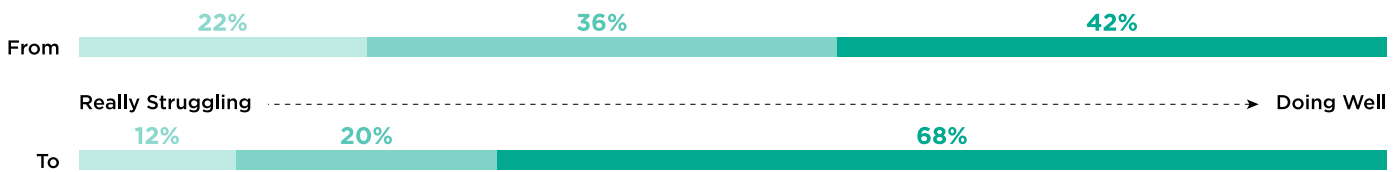
**All youth have potential**, but too many lack the opportunities, relationships, and conditions to thrive, putting our democracy and economy at risk.

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

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

### We Can Change The Odds

**Ensuring every high school student three developmental supports — strong relationships, challenging learning experiences, opportunities to make a difference — can dramatically change the odds that young adults are productive, healthy and connected to community.**



*Youth Development Strategies, Inc.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Renewing Education's Purpose

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

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

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

McGuire & Wilka

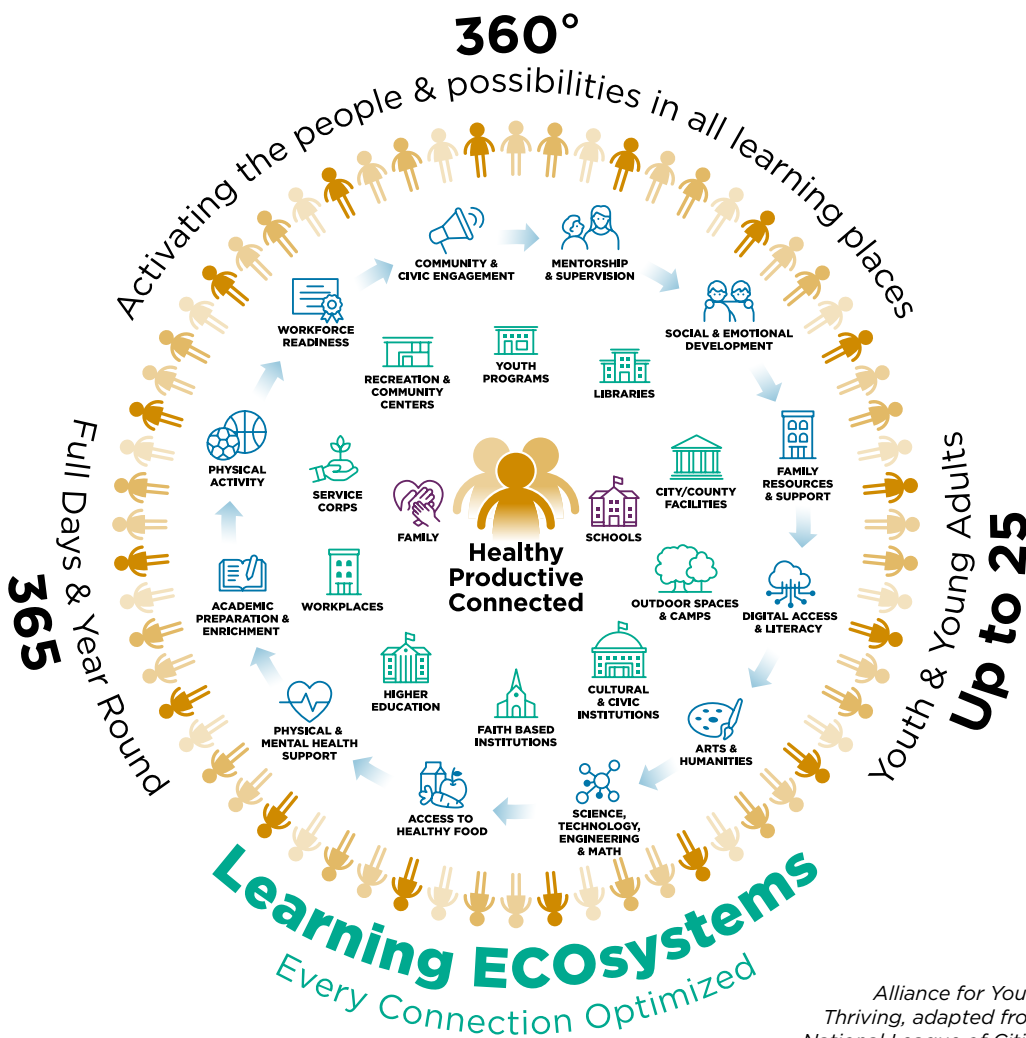
**Every community contains a broader learning ecosystem that are too important to ignore.** Real learning happens in real life, in the myriad spaces where young people live, learn, work, play, and contribute.

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

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

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

As places where young people and families come voluntarily and stay because of alignment with their goals and interests, they play 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 youth needs and interests, they are viewed more favorably than schools.



*Alliance for Youth Thriving, adapted from National League of Cities*

## The boundaries of our evolving education architecture must formalize the commitment to anytime/everywhere/never-too-late learning —

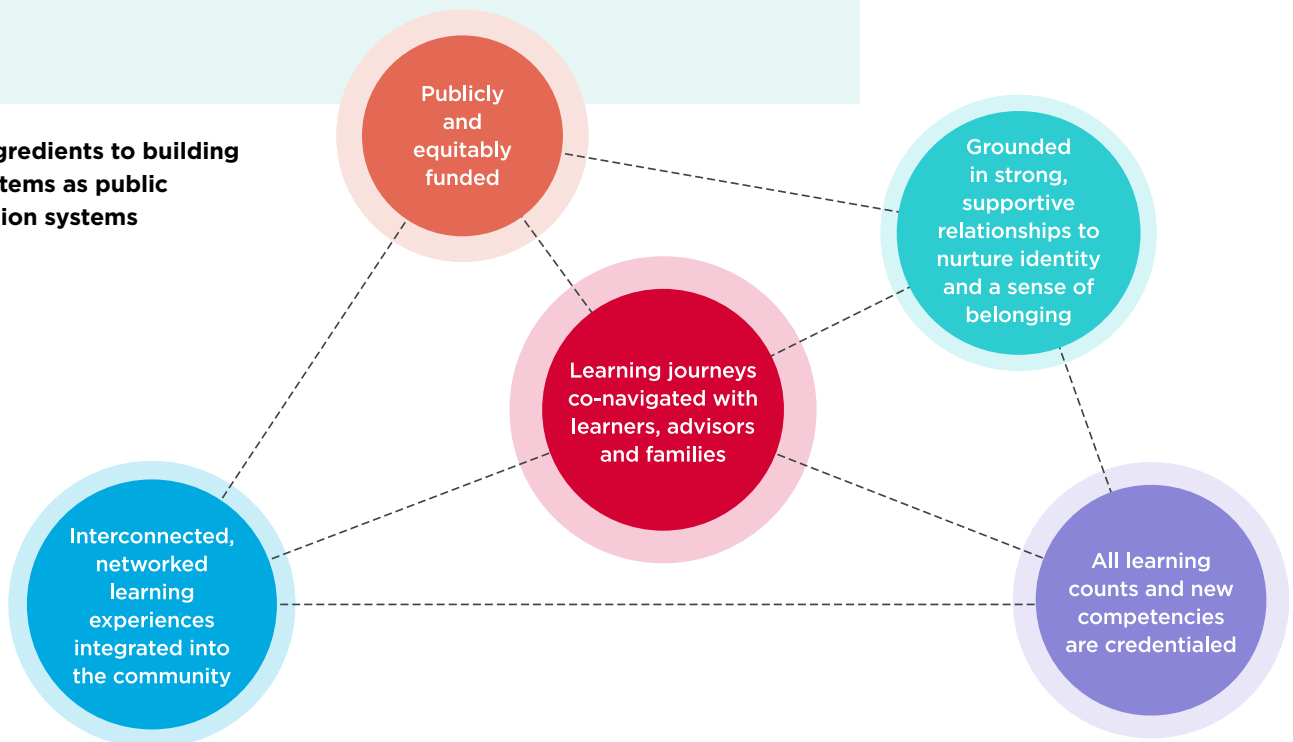
— moving beyond the traditional walls that define the school day, school year, and age of graduation — to help young people develop the competencies and skills they need to navigate and succeed in a rapidly changing world.

### Schools have softened the walls that separate school from community.

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

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

#### Key ingredients to building ecosystems as public education systems



Education Reimagined

**But school systems still operate within the traditional walls of formal accountability that define the school day, school year, and matriculation age.** The uptake on building learning ecosystems among education leaders signals the importance of community partners. But leaders in and outside of school systems are stymied by the enormity of the infrastructure changes required to institutionalize ecosystem stewardship.

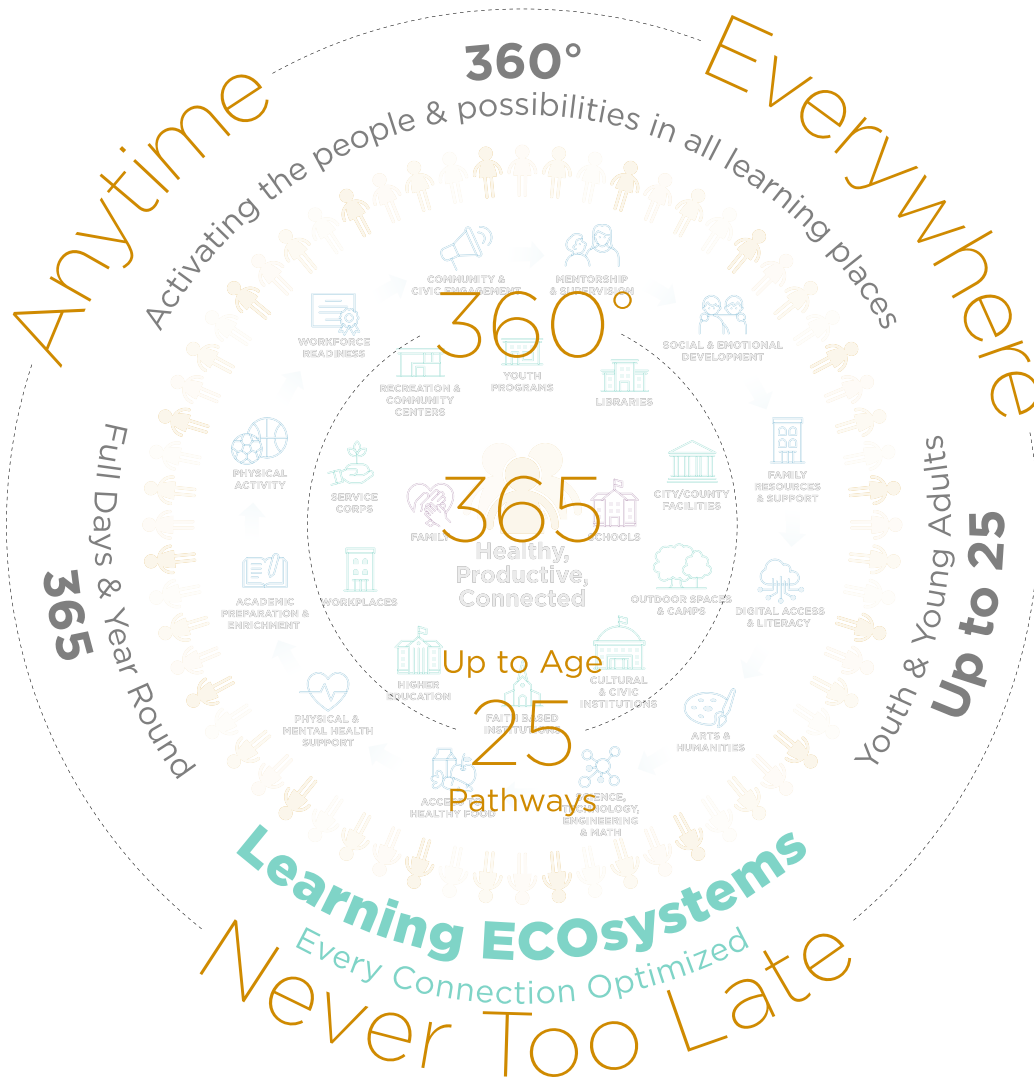
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# Our Commitments

**Together, we must position learning ecosystems as civic infrastructure — not supplemental or compensatory programming — essential to preparing youth for participation in a thriving democracy and inclusive economy.**

**We must make an explicit commitment co-designing a new public system to support 360° | 365 pathways for youth and young adults,** so they can gain competencies and earn credits through their work and contributions throughout their schools and communities.

This commitment has to be made at the top but activated on the ground – prioritizing the cultivation of regular opportunities for practitioners, youth, and families to connect across traditional system boundaries.



Alliance for Youth Thriving

## Shifting Mindsets

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



*Remake Learning*

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

- 1 Reclaim learning as a part of human development.
- 2 Embed academic standards in broader youth success goals.
- 3 Explicitly name the people and places that create anytime/everywhere/never-too-late learning possibilities.
- 4 Acknowledge the multiple systems that support anytime/everywhere, never-too-late learning and intentionally link them with formal education to co-design and strengthen vibrant learning ecosystems.
- 5 Adopt a community action framework that charts a course everyone can contribute to but is too large for any one entity to own.
- 6 Ensure those working closest to youth and families have the time, trust, tools, and resources to create meaningful learning experiences and well-lit pathways.

# 1 Reclaim learning as a part of human development.

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

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

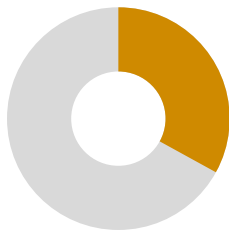
The words associated with thriving are dynamic, referencing an undeniably positive process. They suggest purposeful, forward movement towards desired states of being: fulfillment, health, happiness, empowerment. Thriving is a term used to describe individuals, systems, ecosystems, and communities, reflecting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

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

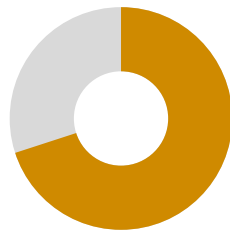
The words associated with learning are much more specific. They include words associated with the natural learning process (e.g., exploration, curiosity, experience) and broad learning outcomes (e.g., skills, knowledge, wisdom) as well as words associated with formal instruction.

## The words associated with education have a different vibe.

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



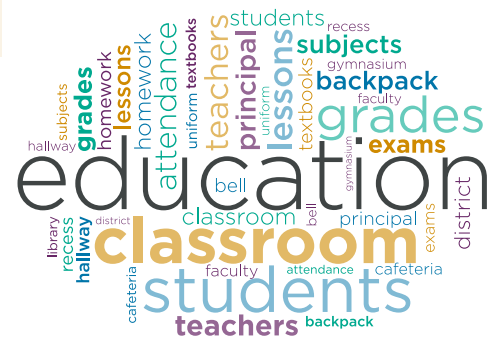
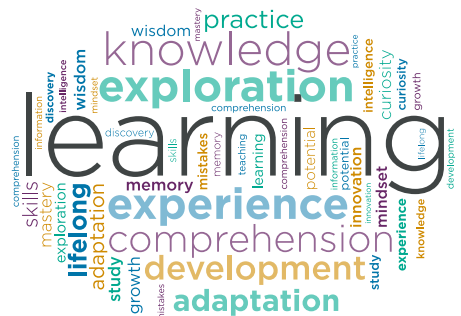
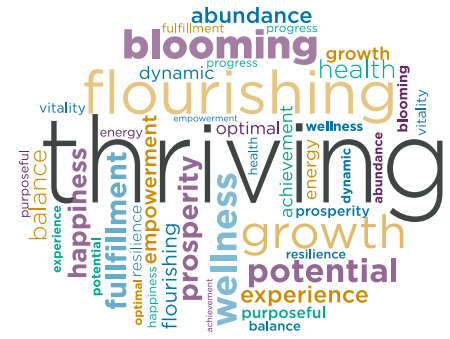
33% of high school students are engaged in school.



70% feel unprepared to pursue postsecondary pathways.

Gallup and Walton Family Foundation

## Word Clouds



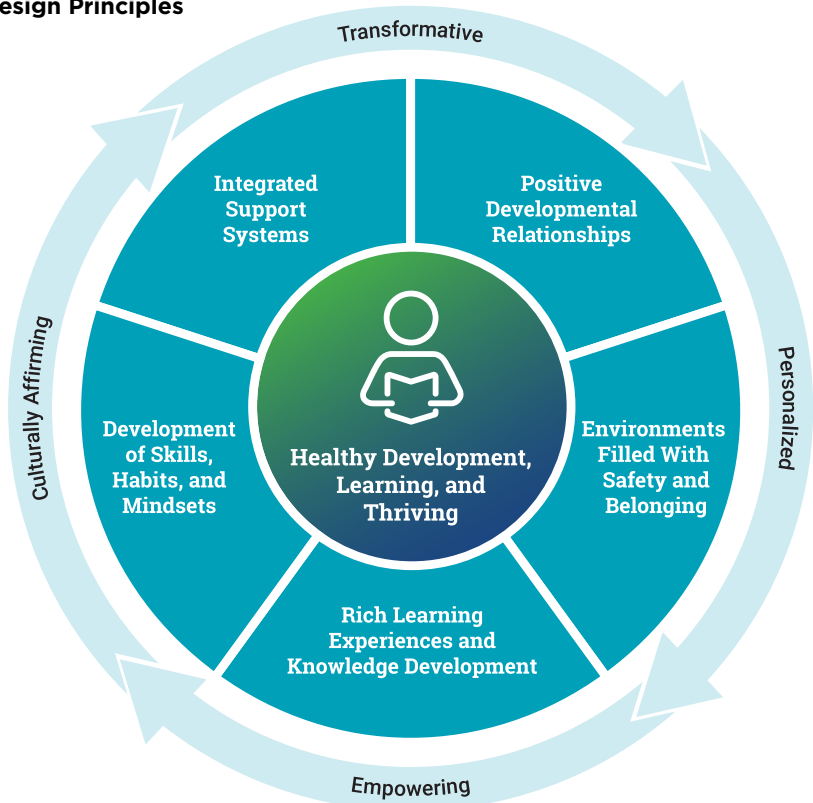
Word clouds generated using AI-assisted analysis identifying commonly associated words for each term.

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

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

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

**Design Principles**



*Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance*

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

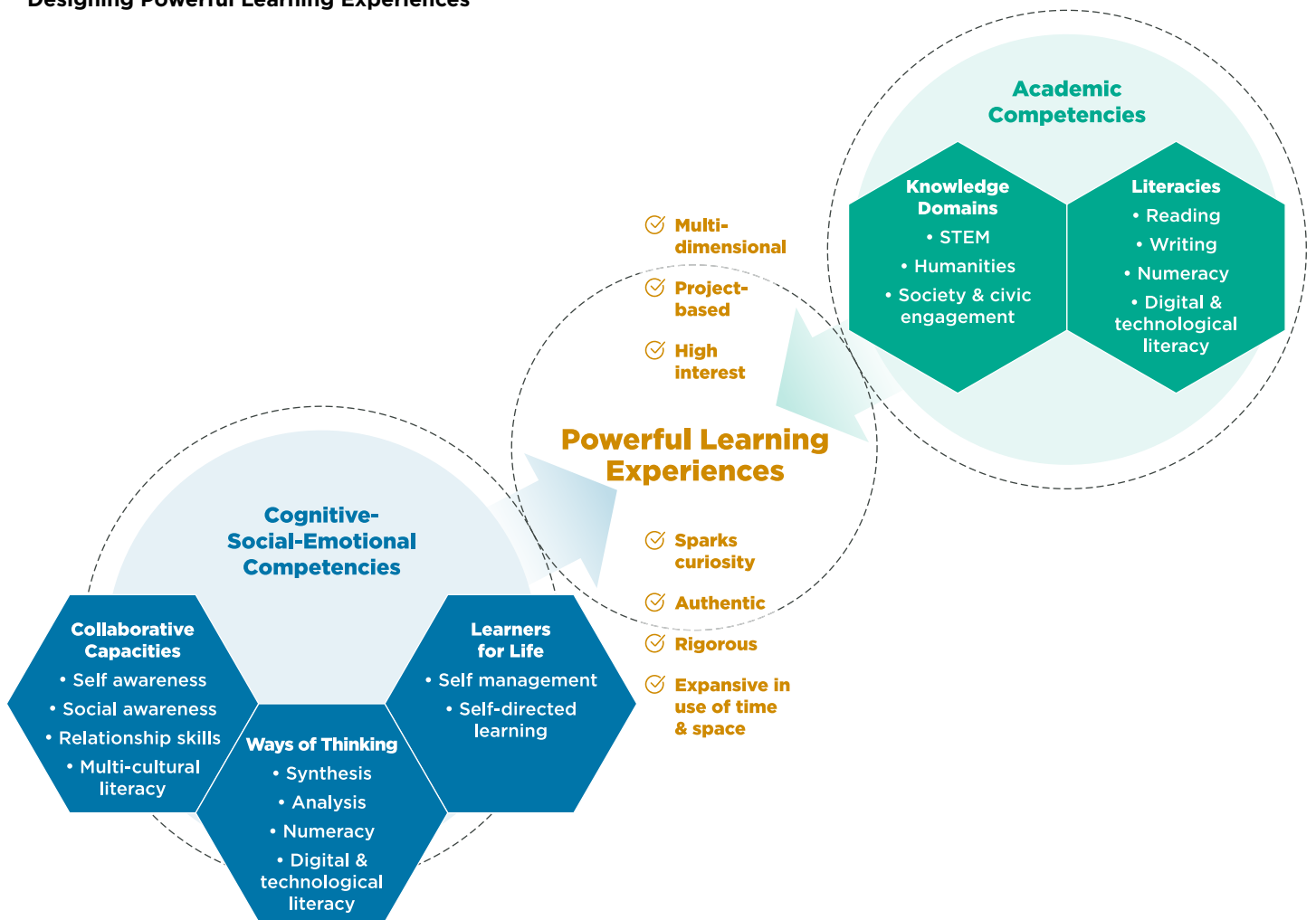
XQ Institute has created a Learner Outcomes Framework and Learning Experiences Development Checklist designed to optimize identity and agency development by defining five broad outcome areas that link traditional academic and SEL goals across academic, cognitive, and social and emotional domains. Through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

**Foundations for Young Adult Success**



UChicago Consortium on School Research

**Designing Powerful Learning Experiences**



Adapted from XQ Institute

## People

### Direct Relationships

- Peers
- Parents
- Community Volunteers
- Paraprofessionals
- Mentors
- Success Coaches
- Program Providers
- Educators — Formal & Informal, School- & Community-Based
- Other Professionals & Specialists (e.g. Librarians, Counselors, Nurses, Artists, Employment Trainers)
- Support Staff

## Places & Spaces

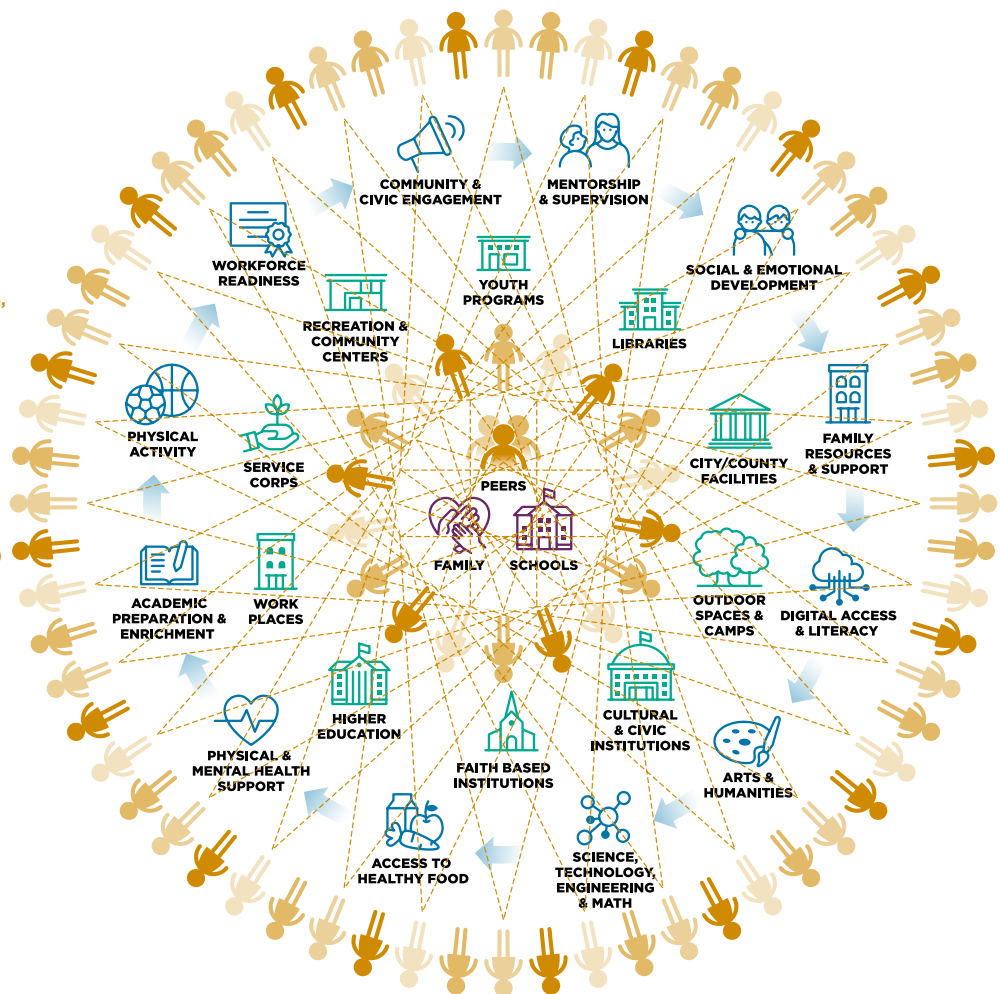
- Families / Homes
- School Building
- Youth Programs
- Libraries
- Recreation Centers
- City Facilities
- Outdoor Spaces
- Museums, Zoos, Aquarium, Galleries, Theaters, Convention Centers
- Faith-Based Buildings
- Higher Education
- Reengagement Centers
- Mobile Learning Vehicles
- Makerspaces
- Group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

## Possibilities

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

## 3 Explicitly name the people and places that create anytime/everywhere/never-too-late learning possibilities.

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



#### 4 Acknowledge the multiple systems that support anytime/everywhere/never-too-late learning and intentionally link them with formal education to co-design and strengthen vibrant learning ecosystems.

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

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

To the right is a starter list of systems and networks found in communities that receive public funding to support staff and volunteers creating learning possibilities in places and spaces like those listed at left. These systems are not as large, visible, or robust as schools. But they have alternative value networks that, if aligned, can provide concrete success stories related to real infrastructure problems (e.g., transportation, assessment, staffing) that can build public confidence in providing the long-term support needed to fully institutionalize changes in our broader public education systems.

Bringing youth, staff, and administrators from these systems into conversations about infrastructure alternatives will allow these systems to improve their outcomes while also contributing to the learning **ECO**system in which **Every Connection** is **Optimized**. Navigators and stewards within and across these systems play key roles in seeing and nourishing the abundance of ecosystems and are also key starting points for linking and aligning existing infrastructure. (See list to right and inner circle of ecosystem graphic.)

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

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

*Christensen Institute*

#### Learning Infrastructures

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

#### Navigators & Stewards

- **At the individual level** — success coaches, mentors, case managers, navigators, transition coaches
- **At the site level** – school- or community-based coordinators of enrichment opportunities, wraparound supports, and pathway connections.
- **At the system level** – expanded learning coordinators, network facilitators, and intermediary staff working within and across learning infrastructures
- **At the community and regional level**, leaders and backbone staff of coordinating bodies, children’s cabinets and cross-sector alliances

## 5 Adopt a community action framework that charts a course everyone can contribute to but is too large for any one entity to own.

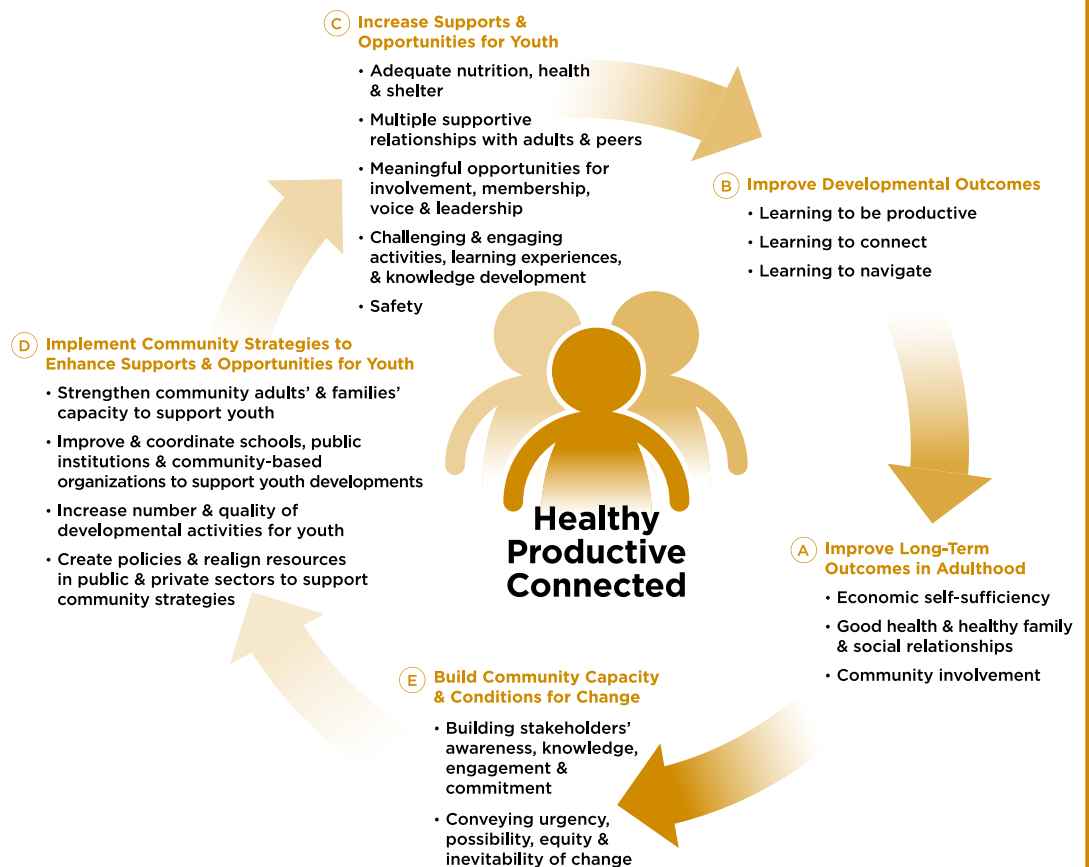
The Alliance for Youth Thriving has embraced and updated the Community Action Framework for Youth Development developed by Youth Development Strategies, Inc. (YDSI) that specifies the steps needed to change the odds for youth — from four in ten doing well as young adults to seven in ten doing well.

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

### We Must:

- (A) Affirm the **end goals of thriving** — young adults who are healthy, productive, and connected to family, community, and society.
- (B) Combine **academic and youth development standards** to define holistic learner outcomes — and ensure credit for learning whenever and wherever it happens.
- (C) Attend to **content and context to create learning and engagement experiences** that matter and last by supporting the professionals, volunteers, families, and near peers in the learning ecosystem.
- (D) Develop tools to give youth agency to map their **learning pathways** across the ecosystem by exploring the links between their identity, interests, needs, competencies, experiences, and success goals.
- (E) Empower young people, families, community volunteers, and professionals as champions of **learning ecosystems as civic infrastructure** essential to preparing youth for participation in a thriving democracy and inclusive economy.

### The Community Action Framework for Youth Development



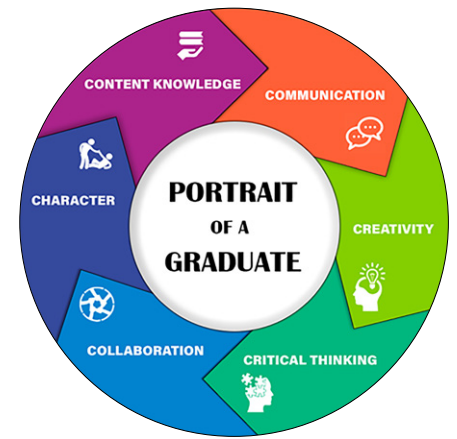
*Adapted from Youth Development Strategies Inc.*

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

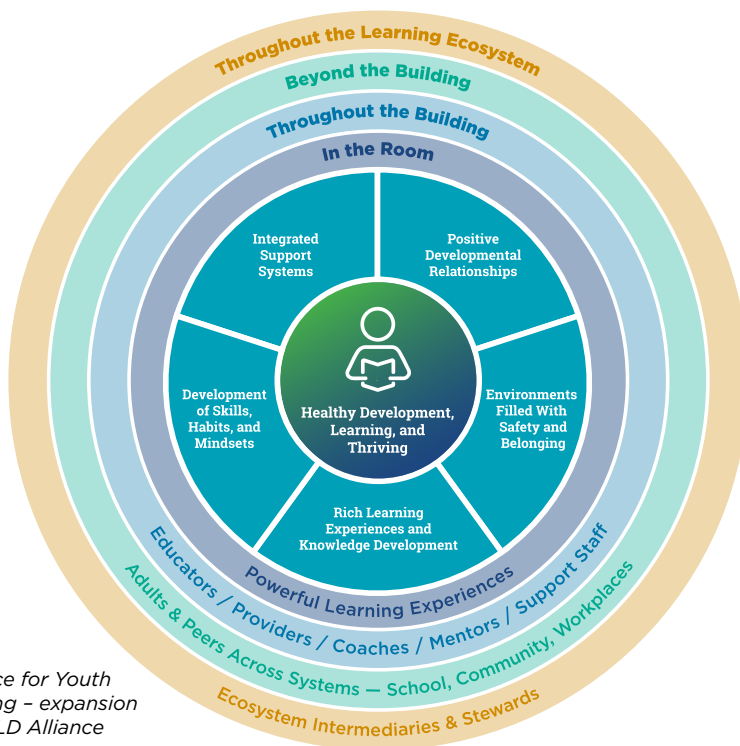
The emerging insights from science of learning and development — in particular the science of adolescent development — can be operationalized into a set of lenses that can help school, youth development, and workforce system leaders create space for ecosystem thinking within their organizations and across organizations.

**The five Design Principles in the Blue Wheel are non-negotiables for building powerful learning experiences.** Systems and settings prioritize them differently depending on the outcomes they focus on. But **attending to all of the principles is key** for any learning experience supporting youth thriving. The sample “Portrait of a Graduate” framework in the center helps us specify the broad set of learner outcomes that support youth thriving and remind us of their interconnection and relevance. Similarly, spelling out the layers of the ecosystem signals the importance of ensuring staff and learners have the time, trust, resources, and connections needed to optimize learning experiences. These are encircled by the powerful messages for all systems contained in the Blue Wheel’s outer ring – by working together we can activate the full ecosystem in ways that are empowering, personalized, culturally affirming, and, ultimately, transformative.

This work is best begun by engaging learners and educators in deep discussion about their learning goals, starting with a few simple but powerful questions that underscore the fact that learning and development happen in lots of contexts for lots of reasons, but that learning happens best in relationship-rich experiences that ignite youth’s sparks.



Portrait of a Graduate



Alliance for Youth Thriving - expansion on SoLD Alliance

**Understand the Learning Ecosystem from the perspective of young people and their families. Ask:**

- > **What** are you passionate about learning and doing?
- > **Where** — and with whom — 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?

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# Accelerators for Shared Action & Innovation

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

# A Common Denominator — and Three Accelerators

## Common Denominator — Shared Purpose

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.

This work is already underway and gaining traction. The opportunity now is to accelerate progress in three interconnected ways.

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### ACCELERATOR #1

## Optimize the Mesosystem — The Relationships Closest to Youth

The health of a learning ecosystem is best seen in the health of its **mesosystem** — the web of relationships — the people, places, and possibilities — that directly shape young people's daily experiences.

### To accelerate:

- Invest in the adults closest to young people — educators, mentors, youth work professionals, coaches, counselors — as the ecosystem's "keystone species," those who hold things together and whose well-being signals the overall health of the ecosystem.
- Ensure the adults closest to youth are well-resourced, supported, and compensated so they have the time, stability, training, and incentives needed to create powerful learning experiences with and for young people.
- Create additional structures, supports, and compensation for these adults to collaborate with one another within and across the places where young people spend their time, starting with learner-centered questions to help them see the whole learner and the ecosystem (*see box on page 21*).
- Cross-pollinate tools, practices, and resources that strengthen the relationships of the staff and volunteers in the mesosystem and reinforce the quality and coherence of learning experiences and learning environments.
- Galvanize public will to help communities align, adapt, and respond to shifting investments across public systems while mobilizing the broadest set of institutions and individuals in the ecosystem to support the learning and development of young people.

### Thriving Youth

Becoming more healthy, connected, and productive by engaging in powerful learning experiences and pathways

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### Thriving Communities

Deepening relationships between young people, families, and the adults that work with them most closely to shape young people's daily experiences and pathways

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## Thriving Systems

Becoming more learner-centered by looking outside their own boxes to tap into the fuller ecosystem that their young people navigate every day

## ACCELERATOR #2

### See and Connect the Systems — Without Circumnavigating Schools

Young people navigate multiple systems every day. Those systems must work together.

#### To accelerate:

- Align education, youth development, workforce, health, arts, and civic systems around shared responsibility for youth thriving.
- 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.
- Strengthen schools' roles as **learning hubs** that anchor learning while connecting young people to community partners and pathways
- Fully recognize the infrastructure and capacity of alternative systems and networks focused on learning, enrichment, development, and career pathways.
- Align systems through intentional, trust-building collaboration over time — through bottom-up solutions, not through top-down redesign.

## Thriving Ecosystems

Cultivated and connected by learning ecosystem stewards and intermediaries

## ACCELERATOR #3

### Elevate and Partner with Ecosystem Stewards and Purpose-Built Intermediaries

Alignment at this scale does not happen on its own.

#### To accelerate:

- Understand the differences between system leadership and ecosystem stewardship: *you don't have to control everything to connect with and leverage it for the benefit of your young people.*
- Identify and invest in purpose-built ecosystem intermediaries already stewarding connections.
- Support ecosystem intermediaries that take the time to build trust and translate core concepts into user-friendly, system-specific language; co-develop tools, training, and technology from the bottom up; reduce fragmentation, and shift mindsets from scarcity to abundance.
- Look for the ecosystem stewards already working in or near your system — find your way to their tables or offer to bring them together if they are not already connected.

# A Shared Commitment

When youth thrive, we all thrive — not because a single system succeeds, but because an ecosystem comes together around young people with shared purpose. Strengthening learning experiences, investing in the mesosystem, aligning systems to optimize their strengths, and elevating ecosystem stewards are not separate strategies. Together, they fuel the civic commitment and expanded architecture needed to ensure every young person can access well-lit pathways to a thriving future.



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

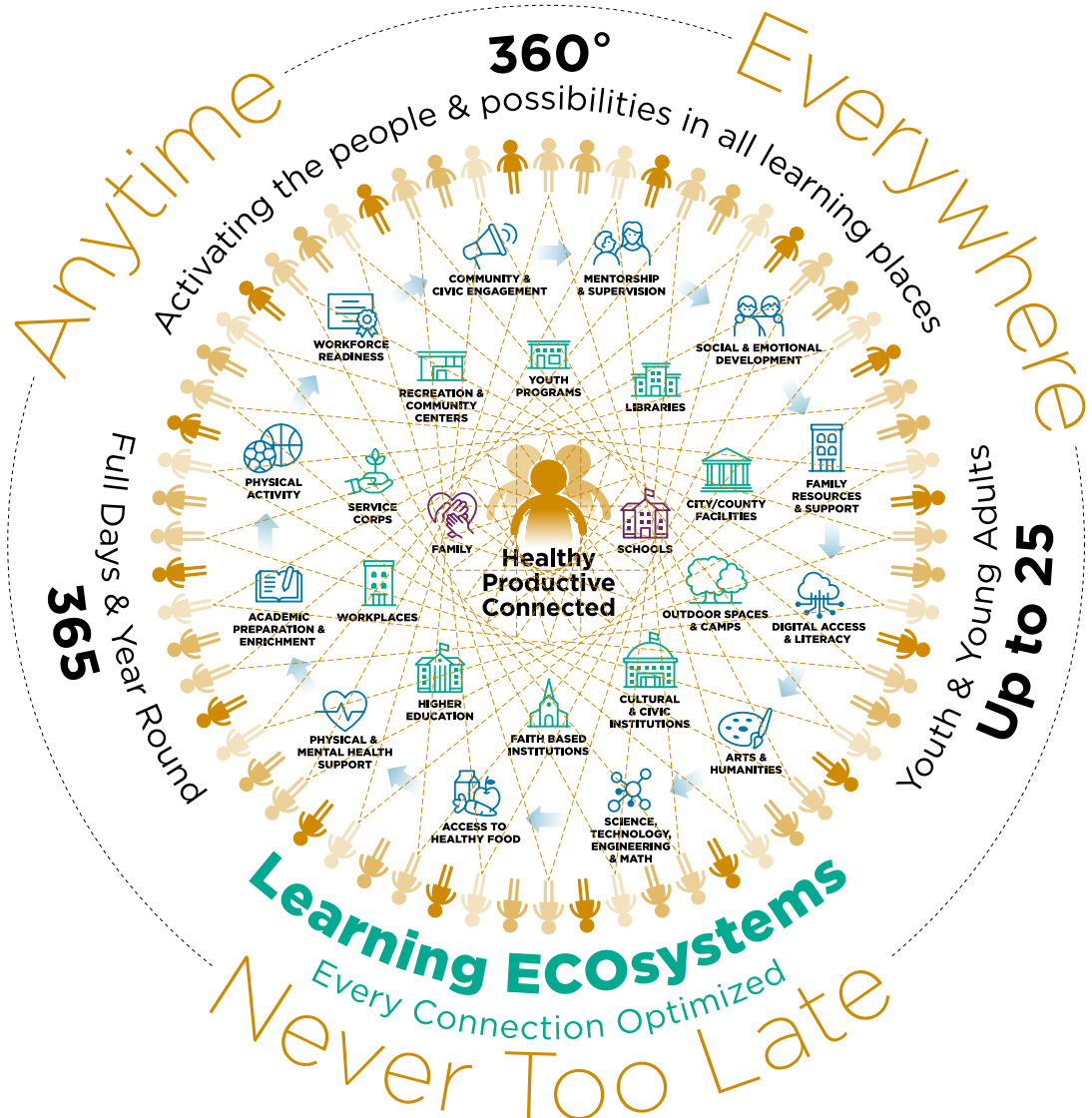
We bring together coalitions, campaigns, networks, and field leaders bridging across education, youth development, and workforce development to tackle common challenges and identify solutions in one sector that can accelerate progress in another.

We aim to accelerate efforts within and across our organizations and sectors to develop community-wide, year-round pathways for youth and young adults by optimizing the people, places, possibilities, and systems across the learning ecosystem.

We use our 360° | 365 | Up to Age 25 Learning ECOsystems lens to visually communicate our belief that real learning happens anytime, everywhere, and it is never too late to help young people realize their potential.

By optimizing these connections, we strengthen the cycle of thriving that links young people, communities, and the systems that support them into a dynamic learning ecosystem.

When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive.



Alliance for Youth Thriving

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Forum for Community Solutions • Attendance Works • Camp Fire • Campaign for Grade-  
Level Reading • Children's Funding Project • Christensen Institute • Coalition for Community  
Schools • Collaborative Communications • CommunityShare • The Corps Network • Education  
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