

Too Essential to Fail: Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response

Karen Pittman and Merita Irby



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Centering Youth Thriving webinars, including special sessions with Education Reimagined’s diverse, cross-sector stakeholders.

Many of these ideas were germinated and nurtured through work with long-time partners, including Dale Blyth, University of Minnesota (emeritus), Michelle Cahill and Lauren Bierbaum, XQ Institute, Michelle Gambone, Youth Development Strategies, Inc., Gene Roehlkepartain, Search Institute, Ross Wiener, Aspen Institute, and our co-leads of the Readiness Projects, Deborah Moroney, American Institutes for Research, and Hal Smith, National Urban League. We would also like to thank the full team at Education Reimagined for their extraordinary attention to both big ideas and fine details, as well as Thomas Arnett, Christensen Institute, whose writing in partnership with Education Reimagined informed our thinking. And, finally, immense gratitude goes to our small but mighty team at Knowledge to Power Catalysts, Katherine Plog Martinez, Traci Ganuza, and Wen Gomez for thought sharpening, permissions wrangling, and citations finessing, respectively.

Foreword

By Kelly Young

Founder, President Emeritus, Education Reimagined

In our calling to transform K-12 education, we are at an inflection point. The demand is rising for a new way forward for public education.

From all angles of our society, there is a yearning for something more—a public education system designed to align with what youth need, what parents want, and what our dynamic, ever-changing, and complex world requires. Educators want careers to fulfill the aspirations that brought them to the field. Employers and leaders seek the habits of mind and agility from their teams to create, collaborate, invent, and solve problems. Our public education system, envisioned 100 years ago, was not designed to fulfill these needs let alone enable us to reach our highest aspirations as individuals and as a society. As such, in its current form, it cannot rise to the role education must now play to support our young people to understand themselves, find their purpose, and contribute their gifts to their communities and the world.

This fundamental design challenge calls for systems-level invention—a new architecture and infrastructure for learning and human thriving. This is why Education Reimagined is uniquely focused on catalyzing and accelerating a new level of research and development into the future of learning, in order to create anew. We are coalescing the partners, raising the resources, and supporting the on-the-ground invention needed to create a new modern public system of education that is grounded in learners and their communities, not singular school buildings. This acceleration effort is advancing the vision of community-based, learner-centered ecosystems, a public system in which individual communities—and all their unique assets—become the classroom, the lab, the library, and the playground of learning.

In all the rich and deep conversations I have enjoyed with Karen Pittman and Merita Irby, I am ever affirmed that the appetite and support for this vision exists in greater force than most realize. This is particularly true in the positive youth development (PYD) field, within which our young people already have access to vibrant offerings where they can learn a wealth of valuable skills; build meaningful relationships with peers and adults; and explore myriad activities, fields, and endeavors. By co-founding and growing the Forum for Youth Investment and then joining forces with Katherine Plog Martinez to form Knowledge to Power Catalysts, Karen and Merita have successfully elevated the contributions of PYD organizations and leaders in transforming the learning and lives of our nation's children. These leaders are pivotal in a transformed learning ecosystem and practitioners in this space deserve recognition for the learning they ignite. And it is time our public education system took heed.

All R&D starts with strong research and insight gathering, to form and solidify hypotheses, and understand landscapes that can support prototyping, testing, and deeper understanding toward the full demonstration of proof of concept. In this vein, we invited the Knowledge to Power Catalysts team to offer their perspectives and share the data and research that has informed their thinking on what is most needed for the future of public education. This paper shares that work, bringing forth several dimensions of current understanding, including data that supports the existing demand, research and frameworks that interrogate a community-based approach, and paths forward that are being explored.

Education Reimagined is grateful for all the ways Karen, Katherine, and Merita have opened our eyes, pushed our thinking, offered new ideas, and strengthened what we can see as possible for the future. This paper is one collaboration of many that we will embark on together.



Executive Summary

Public education is one of the most important investments the United States makes in its future. But public confidence in our system of public education has been declining since the mid-seventies. Half or more of Americans had a lot of confidence in public schools until 1989, but in June 2023 the confidence percentage was 28%.

Opinion polls provide an important glimpse into the American psyche, especially when they show consistent trends over time and across stakeholder groups. Dissatisfaction, as noted, is at an all-time high. Yet even in the face of high dissatisfaction, the resistance to change is enormous. This is precisely because the system is too essential to fail. While it isn't working well, it still meets enough functional requirements for enough people that no one wants to risk dismantling it without a convincing alternative.

We must find a way to solve this challenge, because we share Education Reimagined's belief that the time is right to advance a vision of equitable, publicly-funded, learner-centered ecosystems. But making this shift in system architecture requires even harder shifts in thinking. Instead of thinking of learning as an individual outcome, learning must be recognized as a process that exists because of the interactions between any and all ecosystem actors.

The question is how to find a believable first step toward this shift in thinking that can help reduce the resistance.

The answer is clearly found in the examples of learner-centered education working within the current education system in all pockets of the country. But these bright spots shine as exceptions. Without support, they are not strong enough to inspire the fundamental changes needed.

If we look carefully, however, we see the calls for these shifts in thinking about the purpose, practices, and partners of the learning ecosystem in:

- ▶ The **detailed polls** of the public, parents, young people, employers, teachers, and out-of-school-time educators that demonstrate a huge hunger for a system of public education that supports multiple pathways toward competency-building, agency, and character development.
- ▶ The **foundational academic research** on learning and development that demonstrates the impact these broader ecosystem approaches can have on learner outcomes and young adult success.
- ▶ The **existing local infrastructures** in place to support collaborative partnerships focused on learning and development opportunities outside of the academic classroom, but critical to youth success.
- ▶ The **system change theories** that can help communities assess their readiness for systems-level reinvention.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the evidence base for each of these themes. The goal is to build overall confidence in our collective ability to enact local change because we are already actors in learning ecosystems that stretch far beyond the school building.

Ecosystems exist. But many are unhealthy, and all are highly inequitable. Looking carefully at our experiences in the broader learning ecosystems will help us reimagine the role that the public education system plays in supporting learning ecosystem health and equity.

Defining Learning Ecosystems

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*

Introduction

Our centuries-old commitment to public education is based on the belief that a strong democracy requires an investment in ensuring that children develop the core competencies and confidence needed to be ready for work and civic life.

In a 2020 TIME magazine article, Derek W. Black, author of *School House Burning*, sums up the historic ties between education and democracy:

Even before the United States had a Constitution, its founders were advocating for the creation of public education systems. The United States was an experiment in democracy unlike anything the world had seen, turning away from government dominated by elites and hoping that the common man could rule himself. If this experiment had any chance of standing the test of time, the nation needed...to prepare everyday citizens for self-government.

In the nation's early years, one of the first steps...was to shift educational responsibility from the individual to government. This was no small task. At the time, education was almost entirely a private and religious affair. But if it was going to be a natural extension of this new republican form of government, public education had to become a duty that government owed its citizens. [John] Adams was explicit: The education of "every rank and class of people, down to the lowest and the poorest" had "to be the care of the public" and "maintained at the public expense." Its importance required that "no expense...would be too extravagant."

The original commitment, of course, did not include enslaved people or women. These were hard-won expansions. But, as Black sets forth, for the first time in our history our fundamental commitment to free and public education as the cornerstone of our democracy is in jeopardy:

While the country's public education system is firmly established now, the underlying challenges of maintaining it and achieving its goals are resurfacing today. Those challenges range from the government's responsibility for operating and funding public schools—particularly a challenge during the pandemic—to the need for those schools to unite culturally disparate and politically polarized communities.

Confidence in public schools has been on a steady decline since the mid-seventies when Gallup started its Confidence in Institutions polling. Until 1989, Gallup reported half or more of Americans expressing a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in public schools. The average dropped to about 40% between 1989 and 2006, when it began to hover around 30%. The confidence level dipped in 2019, spiked in 2020 with an initial public rallying around schools and teachers at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then settled back at 28% in June 2023.

A decline in confidence is understandable. According to 2023 Trends in K-12 Education by Hanover Research, historically high turnover rates are straining teachers' bandwidth and well-being—300,000 educators and other staff left the classroom in the first two years of the pandemic. More than half of educators say they are planning to leave the profession earlier than planned because of the pandemic, and one in four school superintendents left their jobs in the past year. Math and reading scores are declining while ongoing disparities persist, including double-digit gaps between Black, Hispanic, and multiracial students achieving a 3.0 GPA and their white peers; disproportionate disciplinary citations; and disproportionate suspensions of Black students compared to white (3:1). Overall, students are feeling the strain—during the pandemic more than a third of high

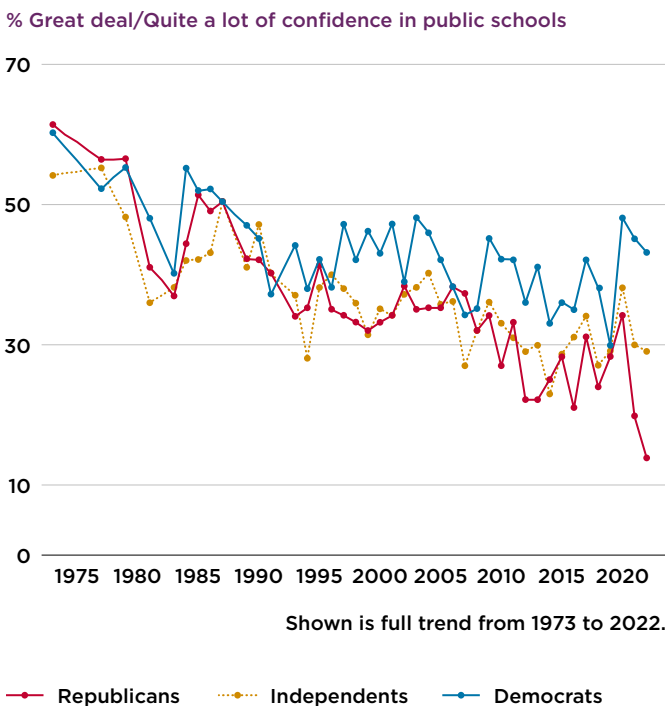
school students felt their mental health was “not good” most or all of the time. All of these signs of strain, present before the pandemic, have been vastly accelerated.

Especially amid these challenging realities, rapidly growing partisan differences give credence to the concern noted above about the difficulties schools face in uniting polarized communities.

Unpacking Gallup’s polling data, Democrats have generally been more confident than Republicans about the quality and direction of public education, averaging seven points higher for “a great deal/quite a lot of confidence” since the start of Gallup’s polling (see figure 1). Prior to the pandemic, the previous high gap was 19 points in 2013, likely related to partisan disagreements over the Common Core educational standards. Then in 2019, opinions converged due to a sharp decline among Democrats, and modest increases among Republicans and independents. After an initial uptick in confidence from all groups at the beginning of the pandemic, the gap soared to a record 25 points in 2022, and increased further to 29 points in 2023. The percentage of Democrats reporting high confidence levels dropped slightly from 2020 to 2023 (from 48% to 43%), while Republican levels dropped 20 points in the same period (from 34% to 14%). And for the first time since 1973, fully half of Republicans reported very little or no confidence in public schools (see figure 2).

The size, speed, and spread of the partisan gap in views should give us pause. Confidence in public schools does not differ significantly by age, gender, region of the country, or parental status. However, lack of confidence among Republicans when paired with staunch defense among Democrats creates a maelstrom

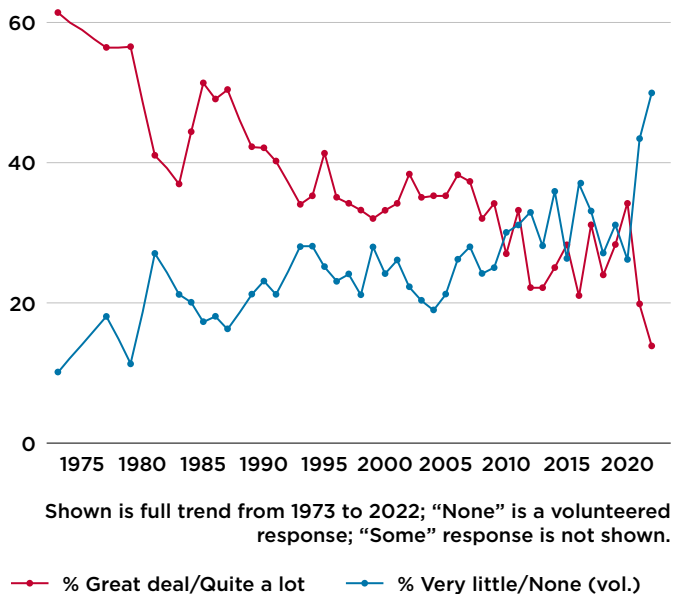
FIGURE 1 **Americans’ Confidence in U.S. Public Schools, by Party ID**



Gallup

FIGURE 2 **Republicans’ Confidence in U.S. Public Schools**

Now I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society. Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little. **Public schools**



Gallup

that makes renewing our commitment to public education challenging, if not impossible, at a time when the changes needed are as profound as those faced during the Industrial Revolution.

The word democracy comes from two Greek words: *demos*, meaning people, and *kratos*, meaning power. To support the democracy, given increasing economic, political, racial, and cultural diversity of the populace, the public education system itself will need to become more democratic. To fulfill the broader **purpose** and educate learners in ways that “unite culturally disparate and politically polarized communities,” the system must find a way to maintain the commitment to universal access while ensuring all learners and families have the power, within parameters, to choose learning **practices** and **partners** that best meet their children’s needs and interests.

The US is not alone in seeking a path forward for public education in an increasingly complex and interconnected global economy. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)—a forum of 37 democracies with market-based economies that collaborate to develop policy standards to promote sustainable economic growth—recently 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).

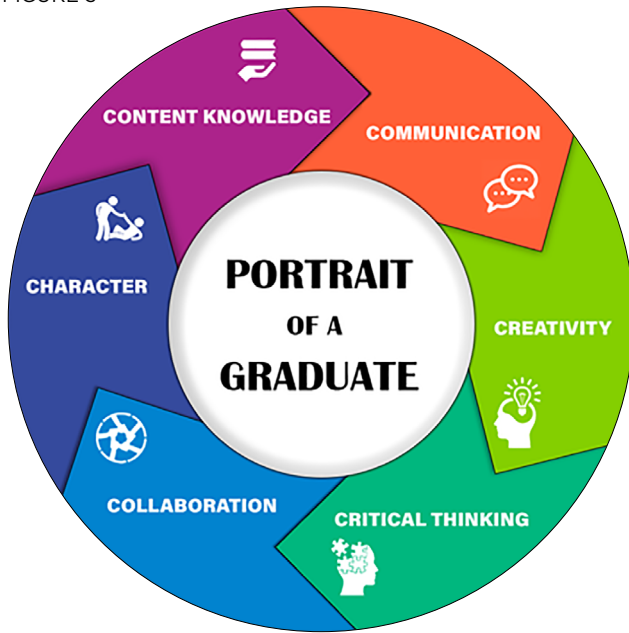
All four scenarios are possible. But are all equally good for renewing our democracy?

It is relatively easy to imagine a future in which the system’s entrenched reliance on standardized content, grades, and assessments persists, even in the face of the public’s strong desire for change. Responding to increased pressure, public funding could flow to private and community-based alternatives that supplement or provide full-blown alternatives to traditional schooling, such as the “education outsourced” and “learn as you go” models. These new modes could begin to address the inequities in access and give parents more ability to find educational practices that fit their learner’s needs and interests. However, such approaches would likely sidestep the unique contribution of the “school as learning hub” model, which redefines the purpose of schooling as supporting community-based opportunities for competency-based learning.

OECD’s “learning hubs” scenario is the only one in which the structural changes enable not only the partner and practice shifts but the reimagined purpose of schooling that parents, learners, and employers are looking for, and researchers say are needed. It has the potential to be not only efficient, but also effective and equitable. Some version of this model may be essential for the health of our democracy. This scenario, however, is also the most difficult to enact. It requires levels of power-sharing and coordination between the formal school systems and decentralized community ecosystems that have not been fully imagined, much less fully realized.

To support the democracy, given increasing economic, political, racial, and cultural diversity of the populace, the public education system itself will need to become more democratic.

FIGURE 3



Example from Coeur d’Alene, Idaho

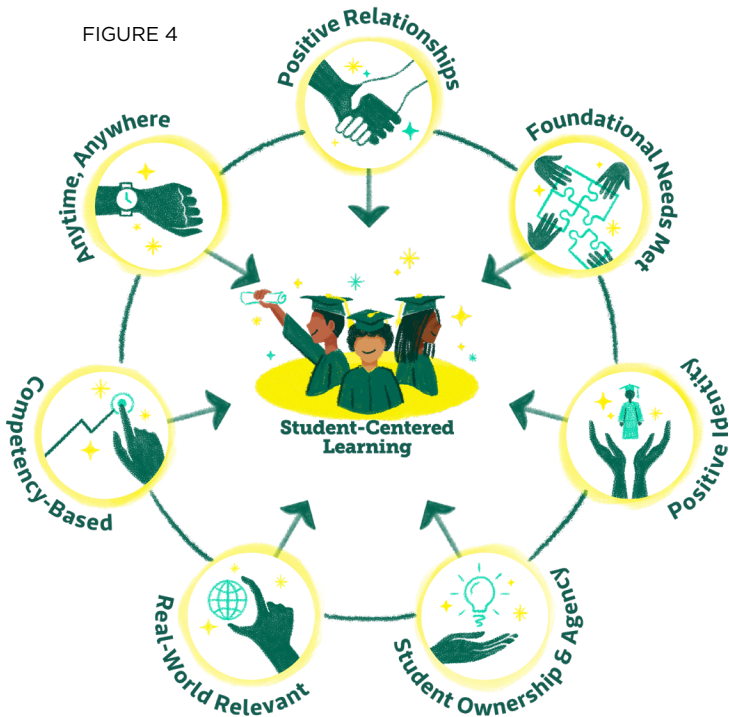
PURPOSE

Building Competence and Character

There is broad stakeholder agreement that the definition of a successful adolescent goes beyond grades, test scores, and diplomas. School systems around the country are engaging their communities to define and articulate the characteristics of a graduate who is both prepared and motivated to make a difference. (For more on Portrait of a Graduate efforts, see Panorama Education’s guides and examples. The local example shared here was highlighted by Spotlight Education.)

These “portraits” echo a definition of youth thriving developed by Richard Lerner of Tufts University. The Five C’s Model of Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a framework that outlines five psychological, behavioral, and social characteristics that indicate that youth are thriving—competence, confidence, connection, character, caring—and, when developed at high levels, ultimately result in a sixth C related to contributing to community and society.

FIGURE 4



Education Evolving

PRACTICES

Learner-Centered Environments

These more generous and meaningful definitions of learner goals are often accompanied by equally generous definitions of the learning environments needed to support them. As with the graduate portraits, schools and communities are encouraged to develop research-informed frameworks that reflect the priorities and language of their community.

For example, Education Evolving, a nonpartisan, Minnesota-based nonprofit, has developed a vision of equitable student-centered learning that uses simple phrases to describe the elements most often cited in learner-centered design models. Figure 4 illustrates these elements: positive relationships, foundational needs met, positive identity, student ownership and agency, real-world relevant, competency-based, and anytime/anywhere.

PARTNERS

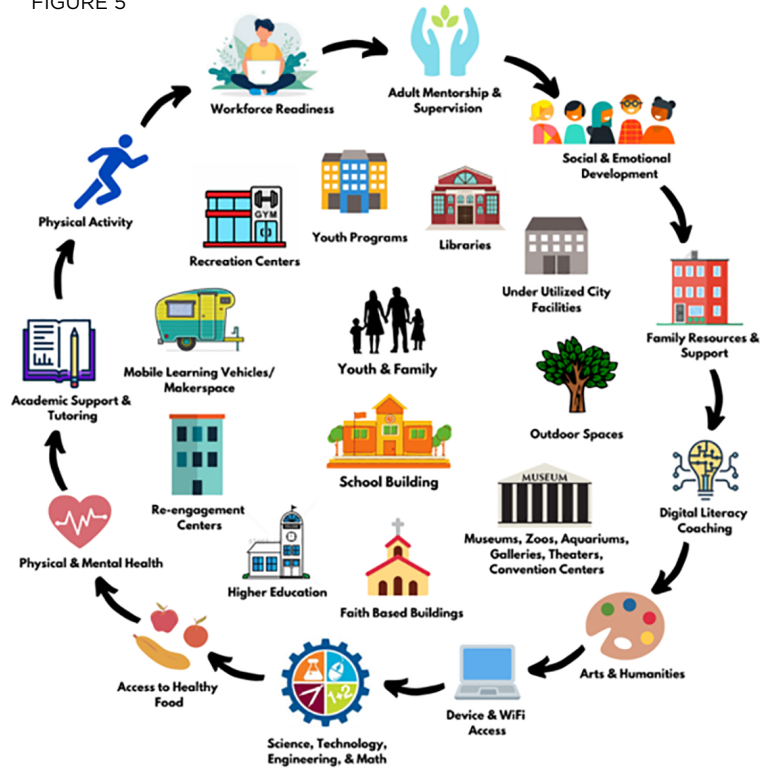
Within the School and Across the Ecosystem

A young person’s learning and development is not solely guided by classroom teachers but rather a robust network of adults. A Brookings Institution study analyzing national educational data found that fully half of school employees are non-classroom teachers or administrators (e.g., counselors, librarians, classroom aides, administrative staff, bus drivers, food service workers), accounting for one-quarter of public school budgets. Non-classroom employees are supplemented by staff connected to other public systems or nonprofits who come into schools to enrich learners’ experiences. Many of them are outsourced by organizations in the community that support learning outside of the school building and school day.

The diagram in figure 6 was developed by the National League of Cities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was created as a visual to help mayors convey the many places in their communities where there are staff and volunteers who support learners in different ways.

Schools and families are at the center of the diagram because school is recognized as the public institution designed specifically to prepare every child for adult success. The range of other actors and other goals (beyond academic success) shown in the diagram is humbling, even to those who have intellectually embraced the concept of whole-child education and argue for better integration of the resources in a community’s learning ecosystem (the nexus of people, places, and possibilities in young people’s lives). These actors have taken on increased responsibility for interest-driven learning (e.g., in arts and culture) to take advantage of new learning modalities.

FIGURE 5



National League of Cities

Moving from Teacher-Centered Schooling to Learner-Centered Ecosystems

Schools are the only public institution that focuses only on children and that all children are required to attend unless other formal arrangements are made. Logic would dictate that every aspect of schools, therefore, should have the learner in mind since they were purportedly built for this audience.

The schools built at the turn of the 20th century, however, were built with the teacher at the center, with the assumption that they were controlling a classroom of “average” children. Content was standardized. Curricula were designed to be taught to same-aged students in the same way, in the same amount of time, assessed in the same way. Diplomas, consequently, were and still are more a sign of perseverance (seat time) than competence. Schools with high graduation rates are deemed successful, even if their students are not fully prepared for work, life, or further education. In *Tinkering toward Utopia*, David Tyack and Larry Cuban refer to these operating rules as “the grammar of schooling.” Similar to grammar in language, these rules, once learned, are so deeply embedded that they are not a part of conscious thought. In language, if someone breaks a rule, it just sounds wrong. In school, if someone breaks a rule, it doesn’t feel like school.

The grammar of schooling is still largely intact. But the vocabulary of schooling has exploded. There are a variety of approaches designed to humanize teaching and learning within the conventional school model. Project-based learning, personalized learning, deeper learning, social emotional learning, team teaching, student advisories, and community-based learning are just a few approaches designed to help schools move toward this goal.

All these programmatic add-ons are attempts to put the learner at the center rather than the teacher, shifting the teacher’s role from instructor to guide. In general, these programmatic approaches reflect three broad directional changes that require system-level responses to scale and sustain:

- ▶ renewed **purpose** directed toward the development of real-life competencies;
- ▶ learner-centered **practices** that support active engagement and rigorous, relevant, relationship-rich work; and
- ▶ community-centered **partners** who offer regular, routinized opportunities to learn from and collaborate with individuals and organizations in their schools and in their broader communities.

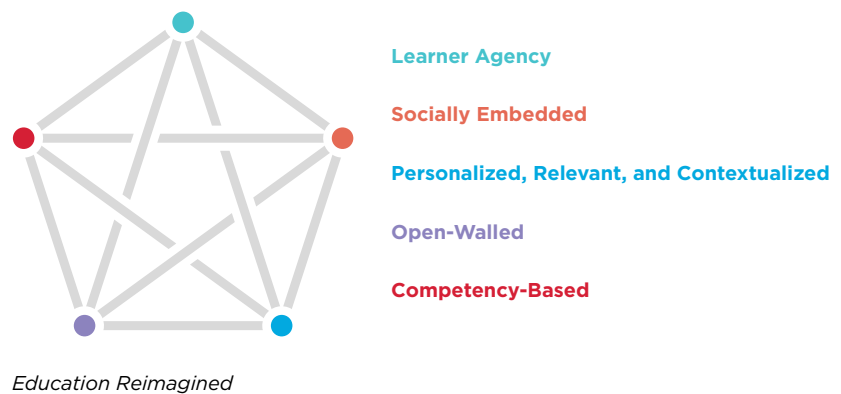
The challenge with these add-ons, as will be explored later, is that learner-centered programmatic approaches of some kind are found in most schools. But true learner-centered education requires conscious efforts to knit these components together to create a new grammar that can serve as the foundation for building fundamentally different educational experiences for all learners.

Education Reimagined has worked with their diverse network to create a simple but powerful heuristic of the interconnected components of learner-centered experiences (see figure 6). The graphic suggests both the stability that occurs when all components are linked and the instability when one or two components are inserted without sufficient scaffolding.

The components speak to the three big shifts being called for:

- ▶ Shifting **purpose** toward building competencies and learner agency.
- ▶ Shifting **practices** toward being more personalized, relevant, and contextualized.
- ▶ Shifting **partners** toward being not only more open-walled, but more socially embedded—strengthening purposeful relationships within and across school and community partners.

FIGURE 6 **Elements of Learner-centered Education**



In This Paper

Moving from programmatic add-ons that apply to some learners, in some classes, in some schools and districts toward a new architecture that supports population-level improvements will require all stakeholders—educators, parents, young people, community members, policymakers, researchers, advocates—to not only act differently, but think differently in order to act together as ecosystem partners. There is a latent but strong consensus across these key stakeholders about the need to shift mindsets and systems to establish an aligned learning and development ecosystem that enables each and every child to thrive. There are many forces that make this a key moment for a bold national response.

SECTION 1

A Convergence of Perspectives documents the strong preferences among the public for movement toward the purpose, practice, and partner shifts revealed in recent polls. It includes differentiated polling of parents, students, employers, teachers, and afterschool educators.

SECTION 2

Validation from Research reviews the foundational research from the fields of positive youth development and science of learning and development. We review four studies that, while they have clear implications for schools, take a developmental, learner-centered approach to understanding determinants of youth success and reinforce the importance of a strong, integrated learning and development ecosystem.

SECTION 3

Identifying Levers for Change uses compelling framing from the Christensen Institute to explain why the public education system is so unresponsive to community demands for change. We also review popular models for bringing school and community learning systems together that offer incomplete but promising footholds from which to build new ecosystem architecture.

SECTION 4

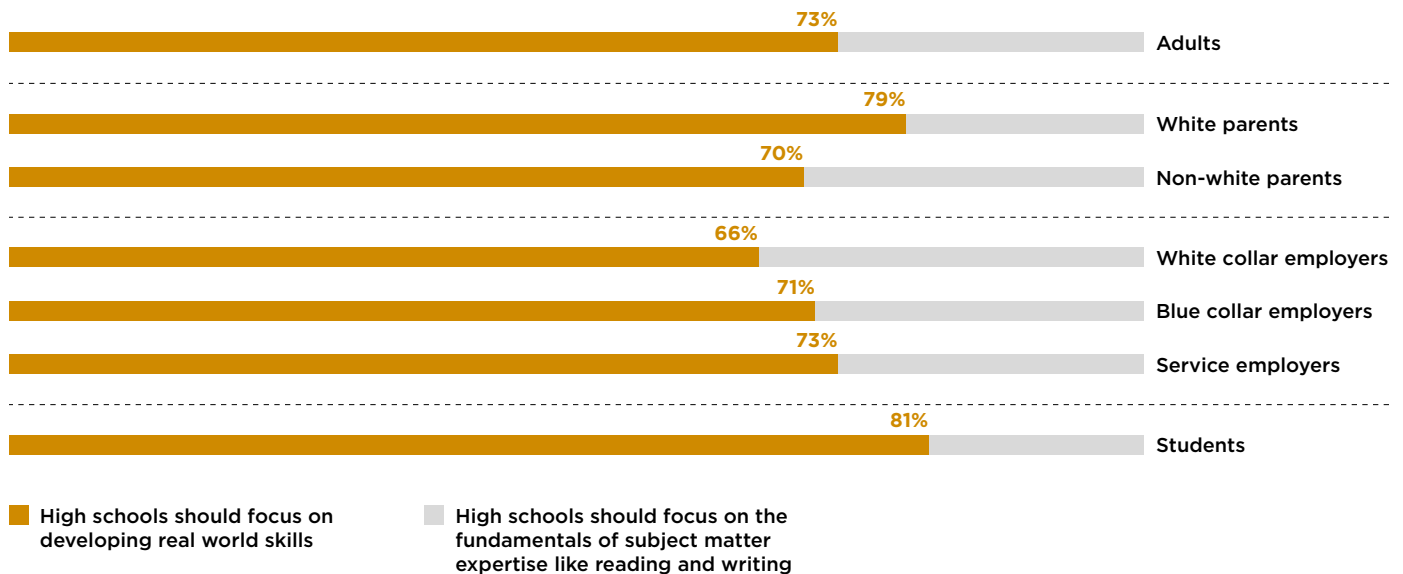
A Potential Path Forward offers a formal model for assessing the likelihood that major change can be accomplished and profiles emerging partnerships that may have the power to disrupt the hegemony schools now have because of how learning is delivered, measured, and credentialed.

A Convergence of Perspectives

The COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on learner challenges such as learning loss, mental health, and chronic absenteeism. All are absolutely legitimate concerns. But it is important to put these real concerns about learner well-being in the context of growing consensus about the need for major recalibrations of public education's purpose, practices, and partners.

In 2019, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation and the Global Strategy Group published the results of an online survey of more than 1,000 adults (half of them parents), 500 high school students, and 500 employers for their Visions of the Future Report. The conclusion across all groups: high school graduates are not being prepared for the future. All groups agree that developing real world skills is more important than focusing on subject matter expertise.

FIGURE 7 Which of the following comes closest to your opinion about high school preparation?



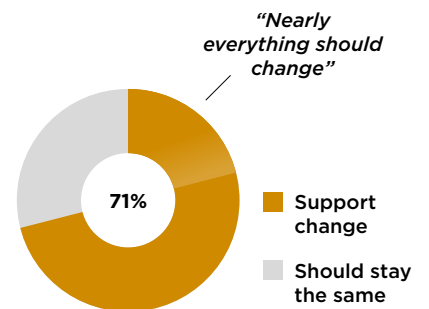
Kauffman Foundation and Global Strategy Group

This section digs in deeper to examine the perspectives held by each of these four stakeholder groups—the public, young people, parents, and employers—looking at the specifics behind their visions, their levels of satisfaction with the current system, and their proposed (or executed) plans for changing, supplementing, or circumventing the system.

Public Perspectives

It can be difficult to accurately gauge the public’s perspectives on education, but new research is attempting to reveal what Americans truly desire from our education system.

The Purpose of Education Index, started in 2019, represents “the first-of-its-kind private opinion study of the American people’s priorities for the future of education in America.” This index was created by Populace, a think tank co-founded by Todd Rose, former Harvard professor and author of *The End of Average*. Populace uses “tools and methodologies that minimize distortions found in many traditional public opinion polls to reveal not only what Americans want most—and least—from our K-12 education system, but also what they believe about other people’s priorities.”



The vast majority of the general population believes more things about the educational system should change than stay the same, including 21% who say nearly everything should change.

Populace

FIGURE 8 Purpose of Education Index— 2022, Top 10 Private Priorities

- ① **Students develop practical skills** (e.g. manage personal finances, prepare a meal, make an appointment)
- ② **Students are able to think critically to problem solve and make decisions**
- ③ **Students demonstrate character** (e.g. honesty, kindness, integrity, and ethics)
- ④ **Students can demonstrate basic reading, writing, and arithmetic**
- ⑤ **All students receive the unique supports that they need throughout their learning**
- ⑥ **Students are prepared for a career**
- ⑦ **Students advance once they have demonstrated mastery of a subject**
- ⑧ **Students can demonstrate an understanding of science** (e.g. biology, chemistry, physics)
- ⑨ **All students have the option to choose the courses they want to study based on interests and aspirations**
- ⑩ **Students are evaluated by assessments through tests administered by teachers as part of a course**

Populace

Populace has conducted this survey annually since 2019 with the most recent one completed in the fall of 2022. The public, oversampled for parents, was asked to provide their private opinions of 57 education priorities developed through focus groups. In order to curtail respondents rating all as important, they were asked to select between two choices in a series of forced-choice questions. The resulting list of their top 10 private priorities is telling (see figure 8).

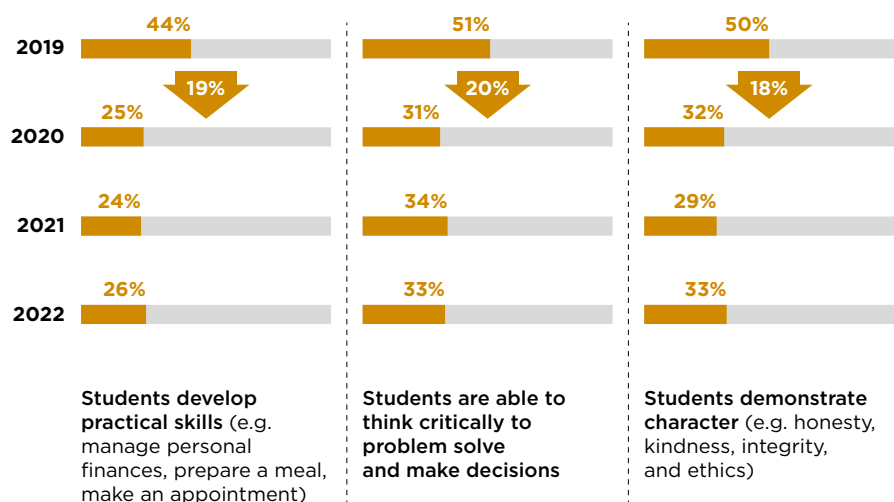
The public privately values the broad, real-world definition of competence used in the Portrait of a Graduate and Positive Youth Development frameworks. They rate demonstrating character even higher than demonstrating basic reading, writing, and math skills. They believe students should develop practical skills (e.g., managing finances) but also be able to think critically, solve problems, and make decisions. They want students to demonstrate an understanding of science, but also be prepared more generally for a career. In short, they want well-rounded students who are well prepared for the workforce and for living fulfilling lives.

The public also had private opinions about how these goals should be achieved consistent with the elements of learner-centered education described by Education Reimagined and others. They want learners to get the support they need when they need it. They want them to have the ability to choose courses they are interested in and to work at their own pace. They want them to advance when they have mastered the material, having been evaluated by assessments administered by their teachers, not standardized tests.

Public confidence in the ability of schools to achieve these priorities was not high before the pandemic. Their assessments dropped with the pandemic and for the most part haven't bounced back, with the top three priorities seeing almost 20-point drops (see figure 9).

The challenge, of course, is that the public doesn't believe others share their views. This makes them not only reluctant to share their own, but likely contributes to the

FIGURE 9 Level of Satisfaction with Schools—A Persisting 20% Drop since 2019



Populace

confusion about the types of consensus-based actions that might be possible. Privately, most Americans do not prioritize college as the end goal for education and eschew a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Most prioritize meaningful and fulfilling work and think schools should provide opportunities to demonstrate character. Looking across the priorities, collective illusions are the rule, not the exception.

Collective Illusions in Education: What we misjudge about others' priorities

Most Americans do not prioritize college, but they think most Americans do. The most glaring collective illusion centers on the ultimate objective of a K-12 education system. Despite overwhelming agreement that society prioritizes a K-12 education system that prepares students to enroll in a college or university (perceived rank #3), this study found that the American public personally deprioritizes college preparation (47th of 57 priorities—a 44-rank difference)...Put another way, Americans think that preparing students to enroll in college is a high priority for most other people, but in private they actively deprioritize it.

A hidden priority: meaningful and fulfilling work. Even though Americans privately want an education system that prepares children to do work that is personally meaningful and fulfilling (#14), they believe it is among the bottom-half of society's priorities for the K-12 education system (#36). While Americans personally place value on an education system that prepares students for meaningful work, they believe the rest of society does not share their priority.

The desire for one-size-fits-all education is an illusion. In the face of overwhelming demand for an individualized educational system, Americans think most people still prefer a one-size-fits-all approach—but this is a collective illusion. Privately, the general population revealed they prioritize an education system where all students have the option to choose the courses they want to study based on interests and aspirations (#9) and they get whatever amount of time they need to learn a new concept or skill at their own pace (#13). Yet it is generally believed that society rejects those educational elements, especially flexibility in learning pace (#52 perceived societal).

The public's overlooked priority: demonstrating character. The general population has consistently underestimated the importance of student character to others in society. For the past four years, the demonstration of character has only been perceived as a middling priority for society at large, yet Americans have privately viewed it as a consistent, top 10 priority. The collective illusion fogs the general population's recognition that many around them also prioritize students demonstrating character.

Collective illusions are the rule, not the exception. Collective illusions are not restricted to the top and bottom private priorities of American adults—the general population tends to drastically over- and underestimate society's priorities relative to their own personal priorities. For more than half of the 57 tested attributes, there's a gap of 10 or more between personal and perceived priority ranks, suggesting there's widespread misunderstanding of Americans' K-12 educational priorities. Americans vastly underestimate the general appeal of their personal priorities for the K-12 education system—there is a gap of more than 20 ranks for four of the general population's top 15 private priorities. For example, there is a 39-point difference between the 13th-ranked private priority (all students get whatever amount of time they need to learn a new concept or skill at their own pace), and its perceived societal rank—the largest underestimated priority for any attribute.

Based upon Populace's Purpose of Education Index

The following quote from a high school student in New York sums up learners' opinions about needed shifts in schools' purposes, practices, and partners:

“The activities that I engage in outside of school are profoundly instrumental to my educational experience because they are typically where I intentionally place myself when the school system fails to provide me with the knowledge and experiences that would benefit me culturally. ...For me, work with outside organizations feels more purposeful and intentional compared to school, where everything is structured and it’s a one-size-fits-all formula.”

Transcend

Youth Perspectives

Tapping into youth perspectives, a recent study of students reinforces what decades of research have already shown us about what makes a difference for young people.

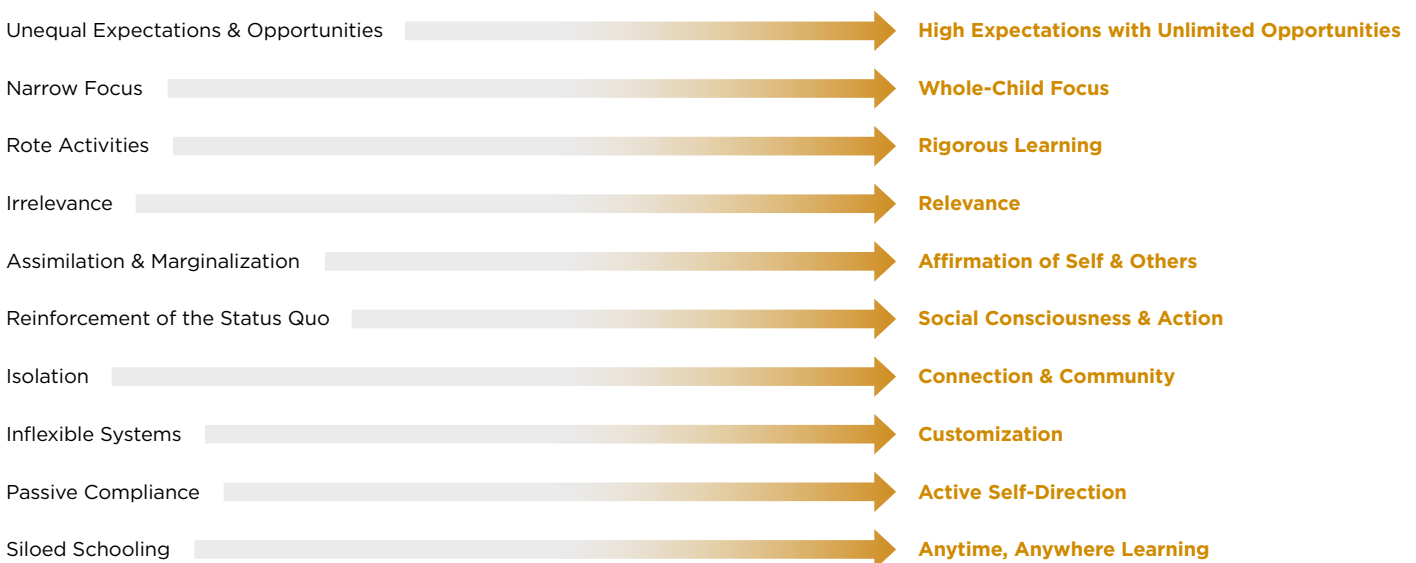
In 2021 and 2022, Transcend, a national nonprofit, partnered with hundreds of communities across the country to support them in listening to more than 20,000 young people about their experiences. Dedicated to supporting ten essential shifts in young people’s educational experiences (see figure 10), Transcend shared discussion and survey tools so communities could ask their students about the degree to which they were experiencing the ten “leaps.”

The survey data confirms the breadth of students’ sentiments about their in-school learning:

- **Only 31%** say that what they learn is connected to life outside the classroom.
- **Only 35%** say they get to learn about things they are interested in.
- **Only 29%** say they have a say about what happens to them.
- **Only 31%** say they can choose how to do their work.

Learners aren’t just looking for freedom to do what they want. They want to be challenged. They want to make a difference. Following interests doesn’t have to come at the expense of academic rigor. In fact, young people are calling for and flocking to environments where they can have both.

FIGURE 10 **10 Leaps Required for Equitable, 21st-Century Learning**



Transcend

Transcend’s interviews and focus groups affirmed that learners aren’t engaged in their core academic classes, but are engaged in their elective courses, extracurricular activities, and clubs. Ironically, the places and spaces where students aren’t tested are where meaningful learning seems to be happening.

Transcend found that when students reported they were experiencing four key leaps they were 67% more likely to report that they learned a lot in school. The four leaps included being held to high expectations with unlimited opportunities; being engaged in rigorous learning and critical thinking; seeing school as relevant to their needs and interests; and experiencing customization of the focus, pace, sequence, and supports for learning. Ninety-seven percent of students who reported positive experiences on these four leaps reported that they learned a lot in school compared to 58% of those who did not report experiencing all four.

Research confirms that the starting point for these more meaningful learning experiences is developmental relationships with teachers and other adults. A national nonprofit that has led decades of foundational research on positive youth development, Search Institute defines developmental relationships as those that express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities. Surveys of middle and high school youth show that only four in 10 learners feel they have strong developmental relationships with their teachers, compared to six in 10 with staff in their buildings who have student support roles, and seven in 10 with staff in youth organizations. These findings help unpack the distinction between roles and settings. Both help determine how youth and adults interact. This data shows that adults who have the freedom to lead with relationships in schools are able to develop relationships with teens that are almost as strong as those developed in more flexible out-of-school settings.

Parent Perspectives

The rapid shifts in how parents were forced to rethink the purposes, practices, and partners involved in their children’s learning during the pandemic provided impetus for capturing their reflections. Two surveys done at the beginning of the pandemic reveal parents’ concerns for their children and thoughts about how schools should respond.

The National Survey of Parents, commissioned by the Walton Family Foundation, gauged how parents would like to see the federal stimulus funding for education used.

Parents supported the American Rescue Plan (73%), but want assurances that the funds will be used to enact “bold change,” not for business as usual. They want transparency about how the money will be spent and measures of its impact on student performance. Black, urban, and upper-income parents were the most vocal, with two-thirds wanting bold changes. But the percentage wanting bold change was less than 50 percent for small-town/rural parents.

For most parents, bold also meant broad. Whole child, whole community is not a goal for parents; it is a given. They value schools and schooling, but they want the school day filled with broader opportunities for interest-driven engagement, social emotional learning, leadership development, and joy.

In the survey, when given a list of 14 possible steps that could help their children succeed, more than 50% of parents agreed with 13 of the 14 strategies offered. The outlier was expanding learning time through longer school day/school year

60 percent or more of parents wanted bold changes that provided:

- ① **More choice in schools and in learning options (like career-focused offerings and tutoring).**
- ② **More balance to support the whole child.**
- ③ **More support and development for teachers and better tools to support learning in person and online.**
- ④ **More funding to support the youngest learners and those with the greatest learning needs.**

Walton Family Foundation

(only 45% agreed with this strategy). Parents want their schools to do better with the time they have. But they are not ready to give up the flexibility to select activities in the hours after school and during the summer.

Parents spend over \$200 billion annually on supplemental learning supports for their children, according to a 2022 report produced by Bellwether, a national nonprofit focused on transforming education. Half of this is spent on afterschool and summer programs. In 2021, Learning Heroes, a nonprofit focused on equipping parents with information to help their children succeed in school, found that two thirds of parents relied on afterschool programs (operating in person or virtually) during the pandemic. Because these programs are not fully a part of the public education system, many have fees. Accessibility and affordability are barriers. The Afterschool Alliance reports that for every child in an afterschool program, three are waiting to get in.

These programs meet working parents' childcare needs. But their value goes beyond supervision. Choice and flexibility—the freedom for them and their children to decide which programs or activities to participate in—is a key reason parents seem to be more satisfied with their programs than they are with their schools. The 2021 study by Learning Heroes showed that parents' assessment of out-of-school-time (OST) settings was high before the pandemic and stayed high or even grew as these programs found creative ways to stay connected to participants—maintaining staff and peer relationships, hosting safe outdoor activities, and creating small learning pods.

Parents see school, home, and OST settings developing complementary sets of the life skills they value highly. Parents are very clear on how the purposes and practices differ between schools and community programs (see figure 11). It is

FIGURE 11 **Developing Life Skills - Parents See Distinct Yet Reinforcing Roles**

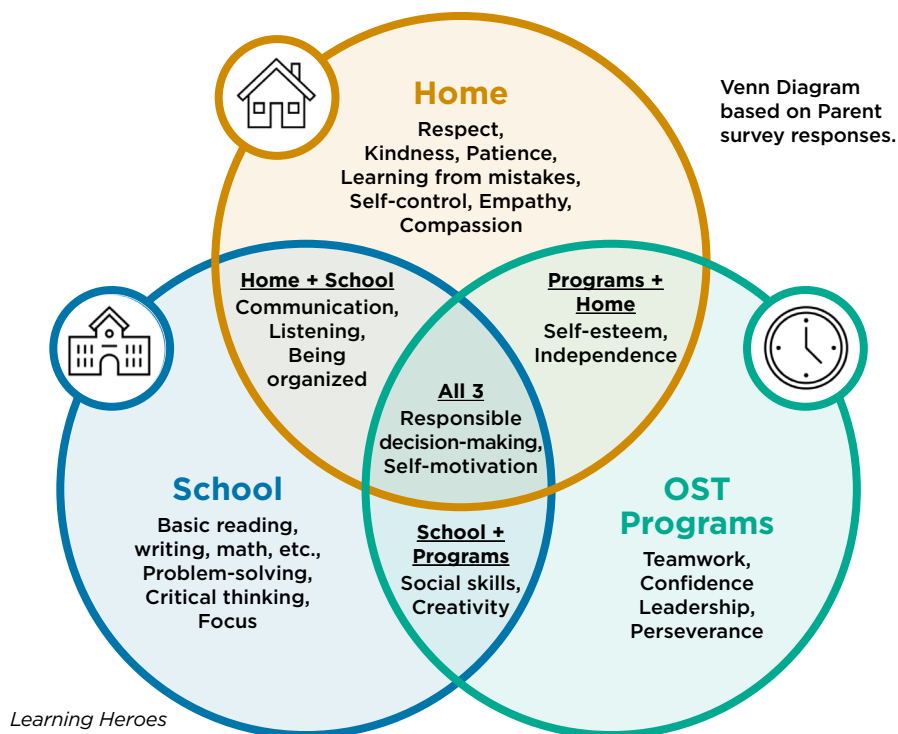
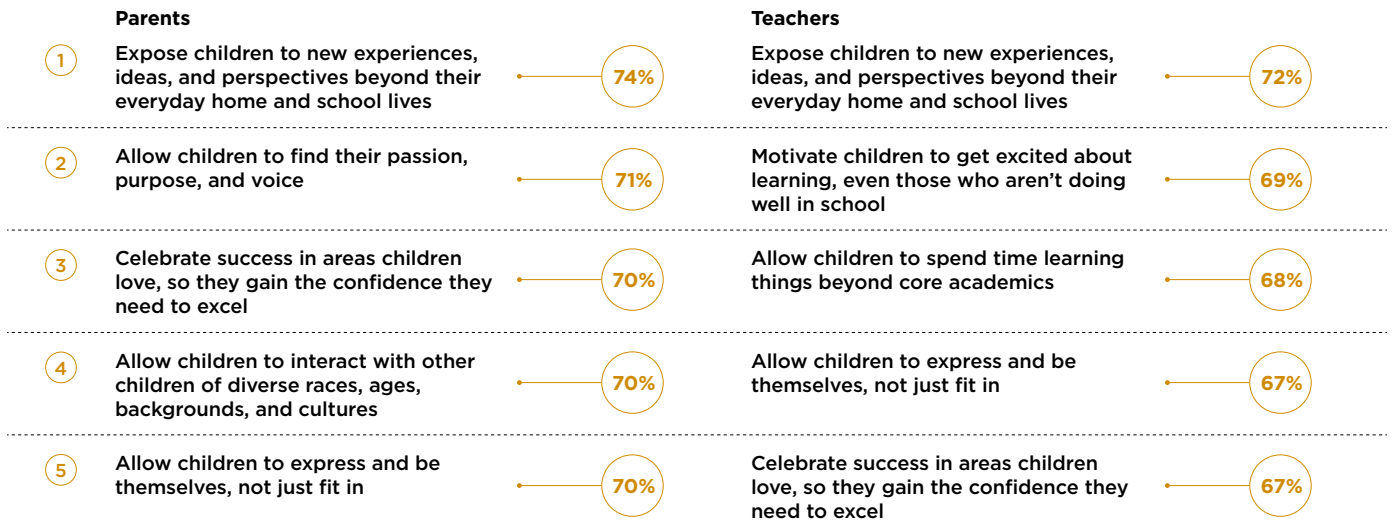


FIGURE 12 **Top 5 Motivations to Enroll Children in OST Programs**



Learning Heroes

interesting to note that parents see the skills most commonly associated with social-emotional learning programs as either the shared responsibility of all three settings or the primary responsibility of family and OST. Only cognitive skills (problem-solving, critical thinking) were seen as the sole domain of schools. This division of labor does not, and certainly need not, reflect reality. It does, however, reinforce the public's narrow impression of the role of conventional schooling.

When asked what they valued the most about OST programs, parents' top five motivations included many of the elements associated with learner-centered approaches (see figure 12, column 1). The surprising but comforting finding is that teachers generally agree that these programs provide the kind of flexible, identity-affirming, interest-driven learning experiences they rarely have the freedom to provide during the school day in conventional schools (see figure 12, column 2). More than a third of teachers think afterschool programs are essential while only 16 percent described them as merely "nice to have." This consistency across both parents and teachers provides an opportunity to elevate these programs as places that generate excitement for learning.

Employer Perspectives

The average number of jobs held in a lifetime is 12.1. The average number of years in a job is 4.1. Millennials expect to change jobs every three years. And ideas about what work is, what the workplace is, and what a strong workforce looks like are changing at a pace few could have imagined.

According to McKinsey & Company, which is one of the largest global management consulting firms, these numbers underscore a future of work that is rapidly changing.

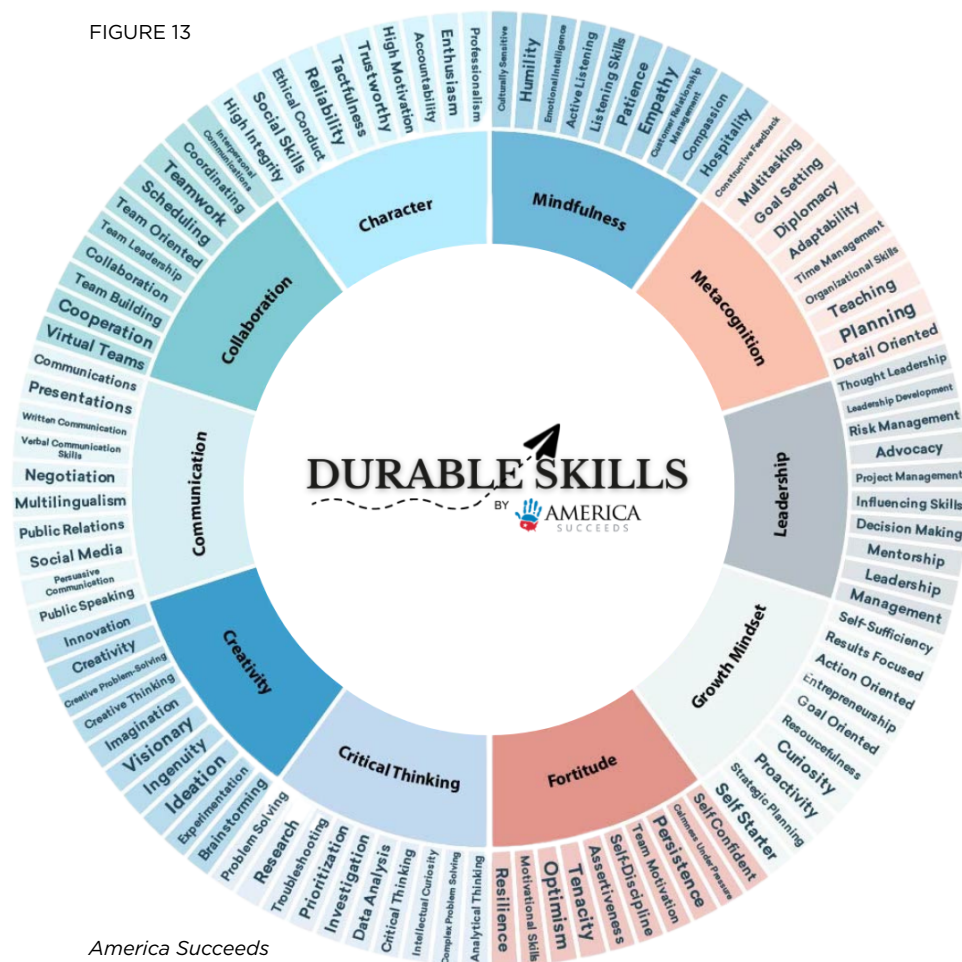
America Succeeds is an education advocacy nonprofit that engages business leaders in modernizing education systems. In 2022, it partnered with Lightcast, a labor market data company, to conduct a comprehensive analysis of more than 82 million job

McKinsey regularly posts articles on their website to share the latest on the future of work and leads with this analysis:

The world of work is changing. Artificial intelligence and automation will make this shift as significant as the mechanization in prior generations of agriculture and manufacturing. While some jobs will be lost, and many others created, almost all will change. The COVID-19 crisis accelerated existing trends and caused organizations to reevaluate many aspects of work.

McKinsey & Company

FIGURE 13



Whether or not a student obtains a postsecondary credential, this research underscores the critical role of these skills in moving into and along job pathways. As we look toward economic recovery and meeting the challenge of building a diverse, inclusive workforce, we believe better integrating Durable Skills in K-12 education will help ensure a broader group of learners ultimately find success in their careers and communities.

America Succeeds

America Succeeds

descriptions across 22 occupational sectors to catalog and identify the top 100 specific skills employers are looking for. They introduced the term “durable skills,” preferring that to soft skills, to emphasize the fact that these are skills that are consistently in demand across industries and sectors. In their report, they grouped the skills into 10 categories: character, collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, fortitude, growth mindset, leadership, metacognition, and mindfulness (see figure 13). Across all categories, the top 10 durable skills employers seek are communications, customer service, management, leadership, detail oriented, problem solving, planning, presentations, written communications, and interpersonal communications. The study found that employers seek these types of durable skills nearly four times more frequently than the top five technical or hard skills.

Two things are worth noting about the similarities between what employers and parents are looking for:

- ▶ **Character, once again, is singled out.** This category includes broad values or virtues (e.g., integrity, trustworthiness, ethical conduct, reliability) as well as social skills and high motivation.
- ▶ **As with parents, employers are looking for a range of skills** that go well beyond academics to include a wide range of assets including values, attitudes, knowledge, and broader competencies (clusters of skills, knowledge and ability used to tackle a specific task).

Cross-Group Validation

Purpose. The verdict is in. Parents, young people, employers, and the general public all agree that the primary purpose of K-12 education is not to prepare learners for higher education. It is to prepare them for work, life, and citizenship. For the first time in recent history, according to Paul Tough, author and journalist who focuses on inequality in education, most parents say they prefer that their children not enroll in a four-year college. Only about a third of Americans now say they have a lot of confidence in higher education. This shift means that high school should be considered a pivot point toward life rather than a pass-through station on the way to a higher degree.

Parents, students, and employers all agree that the most important thing a student can do is get a high school diploma. After that, however, according to the Kauffman Foundation survey referenced earlier, all believe the best thing to do to prepare for the job market is to get an additional credential or employer recognized skill, not an AA or BA degree (see figure 14). Employers were the most adamant on this point. More than two thirds of employers value learners' investments in employer- or industry-certified skills over academic degrees (68% versus 51% for an associate's or vocational degree versus 47% for a four-year college degree). This preference held up across sectors and types (white collar, blue collar, or service industry). Three quarters (76%) of white-collar employers have hired someone with just a high school degree if they had strong skills and/or work experience.

High school should be considered a pivot point toward life rather than a pass-through station on the way to a higher degree.

FIGURE 14 **Employers more likely than others to value experience, but think best thing a student can do is get a HS degree with credential**

Please indicate how important, currently, you think it is for students to do each of these things.

	% Very important				
	Adults	Employers	Students	White parents	Non-white parents
To receive at least a high school diploma	83	78	87	78	84
To receive a high school diploma and an additional credential or employer recognized skill	57	68	58	58	53
To have a mentor guiding them as they explore career paths	51	56	50	48	57
To have participated in internships or externships in college	36	46	40	32	47
To receive an Associate's degree or vocational degree	38	51	34	42	41
To receive a four-year college degree	31	47	50	34	46
To have participated in internships or externships in high school	30	40	35	23	45
To have worked a job for wages in high school	32	50	30	30	35
To have participated in a high quality pre-kindergarten program	24	35	22	23	28

Kauffman Foundation and Global Strategy Group

Practice. This shift in purpose requires shifts in practice. Ninety-one percent of those surveyed think connecting students to real-world learning opportunities like internships and giving them credit for real-world learning is a top or major priority. Doing this requires increases in learner agency and choice. Eighty-seven percent think focusing on building character traits and important skills should be a priority. Doing this requires more focus on relationships and responsibilities. There were no significant differences in the opinions of parents, employers, and students. In contrast, only 28 percent prioritize developing special academies for academic study, and only 23 percent think increasing the number of students who receive good grades so that they can be competitive for college is a top priority. These big shifts are consistent with the components of Education Reimagined’s learner-centered framework and require comprehensive revamping of practices through such processes as those described in Transcend’s 10 Leaps.

Partners. When surveyed, these end-user groups were less specific (or they were asked less specific questions) about who schools should partner with. But the overwhelming calls for schools to not only offer opportunities for real-life experiences but give students credit for them suggests a strong desire for schools, especially high schools, to begin to see themselves as learning hubs for identifying, coordinating, and accrediting relevant, rigorous learning experiences for each and every student. Every icon in the National League of Cities Learning Hubs graphic, as seen in figure 5 on page 11, is a potential learning or employment partner. And every young person and parent is a potential collaborator. But first the playing field needs to be leveled.

Conclusion

Standardized content offered in standardized ways assessed with standardized tests is clearly not what stakeholders want. Nor, to be clear, is it the totality of what even the most conventional schools currently provide. But these industrial-age concepts are the core value propositions upon which the architecture of our public education system was built. The hegemony of these concepts has seeped into our everyday language:

- School and out-of-school time
- Academic and non-academic competencies
- Education and enrichment programming
- Formal and informal learning
- Curricular and extracurricular activities
- Core and elective courses
- Classroom and non-classroom personnel
- Learning and development

In theory the “ands” in these common phrases should be additive if not multiplicative. They should signal ecosystem diversity. In reality, however, the “and” is often conceived of as “versus.” The second-ordered words (and the organizations that lead with them) compete with the schools for time, resources, and overall legitimacy and usually lose out in spite of high stakeholder preferences for the second shift, as the non-school, non-core, non-credited part of the learning ecosystem is sometimes called.

Turning widespread stakeholder dissatisfaction into coordinated community action requires coordinated challenges to outdated school-centered definitions of where, when, how, why, what, and with whom learning happens and, equally important, how it is funded and measured.

The best way to galvanize demand for a public education system that fully embraces these “second shift” people, places, and possibilities is to stop thinking about how to fix the system and focus instead on understanding how learning happens and how learners engage with the larger learning ecosystem.

Validation from Research

“Learning happens everywhere, all the time” is not just a slogan. It is science. This contention underlies every child development theory since the 1970s when psychologist and human development expert Urie Bronfenbrenner introduced his iconic model of the microsystem of people, places, and possibilities in a child’s life (e.g., family, school, library, playground, afterschool center, place of worship) in the center of concentric circles showing larger systemic forces.

Most non-school educators take for granted that learning is not only lifelong but “lifewide”—occurring across experiences and locations. Important learning experiences have always happened in “unstaffed” settings (like playgrounds, parks, alleys, riverbanks, friends’ basements) and in generally staffed places (like libraries, zoos, and museums).

Over the past two decades there has been a persistent increase in organized, non-school settings offering a breadth of opportunities (both in-person and virtual) for enrichment, skills development, and exploration. These organizations could be even more available, accessible, affordable and, ultimately, more collectively accountable for learners’ success if parents, policymakers, and the public had more confidence that their instincts about what matters for youth success are correct. Equally important, these instincts must be translated into public policy and practice to elevate the educational value of interest-driven, relationship-rich, non-classroom learning.

National Research Council Confirms Power of PYD Approach.

In 2002, the National Research Council, a branch of the National Academies of Science, published *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, a 400-plus page consensus document produced by an august interdisciplinary commission of researchers. The commission was charged with deciding whether there was sufficient evidence to recommend positive youth development as an approach for working with “at risk” adolescents. Their strong, affirmative response galvanized the youth development field.

The report affirmed the wide range of personal and social assets that support youth development (school success was one of 30 named). It spelled out the characteristics of settings that support development—physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, appropriate structures, positive social norms, opportunities to belong, opportunities for skill building—and highlighted the importance of integrating approaches across family, school, and community settings. The report also offered detailed statements for each characteristic and outlined what harmful settings look like.

The report was (and still is) seen as a huge win for programs that believe that context trumps content—that young people don’t thrive in settings where they are not valued.

The idea of “positive youth development programs” has emerged over time as common shorthand for a philosophy asserting that “problem-free is not fully prepared,” that remediation and prevention services alone are not enough, and that schools have to be supported and complemented by broader options in the community. (Pittman and Irby, 1996; Pittman et al., 2000b)

National Research Council

The value of this broader positive youth development (PYD) approach has been established as effective for addressing youth problems. The approach was officially adopted by the federal government in 2008 by the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, a coordinating group that brings 23 federal agencies together to find effective ways to address youth problems. This working group developed a mantra—*positive experiences + positive relationships + positive environments = positive youth development*.

Many of the shifts in purpose, practices, and partners strongly suggested by the PYD approach have been taken on by schools (e.g., student advisories, service learning). But both the value of this approach and of this interagency working group have not been fully recognized as vehicles for moving from systems to ecosystems. The US Department of Education, for example, has been engaged in the working group primarily around ancillary, albeit important, programmatic supports to learning (e.g., school violence, school safety, school health). This is just one example of how the implications of a youth development approach for how learning happens during the school day has not been fully recognized.

This section summarizes four well-researched, well-respected developmental frameworks that explore key aspects of what it takes to support child and youth success in multiple life domains across systems and settings:

- ▶ **Youth Development Strategies Inc. (YDSI).** Groundbreaking research on the adolescent predictors of young adult success, its prevalence (the percentage of young people who are thriving or struggling), and the impact providing developmental supports even as late as high school can have on youth outcomes.
- ▶ **The Search Institute.** Decades of research on the relationship between the number of assets young people have in their lives (e.g., their commitment to learning, their social support networks) and their likelihood of engaging in risky or positive behaviors.
- ▶ **The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.** A widely used framework for explaining not only the foundations of young adult success but also how these assets develop progressively from early childhood onward.
- ▶ **The Science of Learning and Development Alliance.** An exhaustive compilation of recent research, including neuroscience, that elevates the importance of resilience, relationships, and contexts and offers design principles for optimizing learning settings.

This research evidence can be used to galvanize community-level commitments to creating learner-centered environments that leverage all community assets to support learning by emphasizing the broader commitment to cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

Defining Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support they need to build on their leadership strengths.

Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs

Evidence that Positive Youth Development Supports Contribute to Youth Success

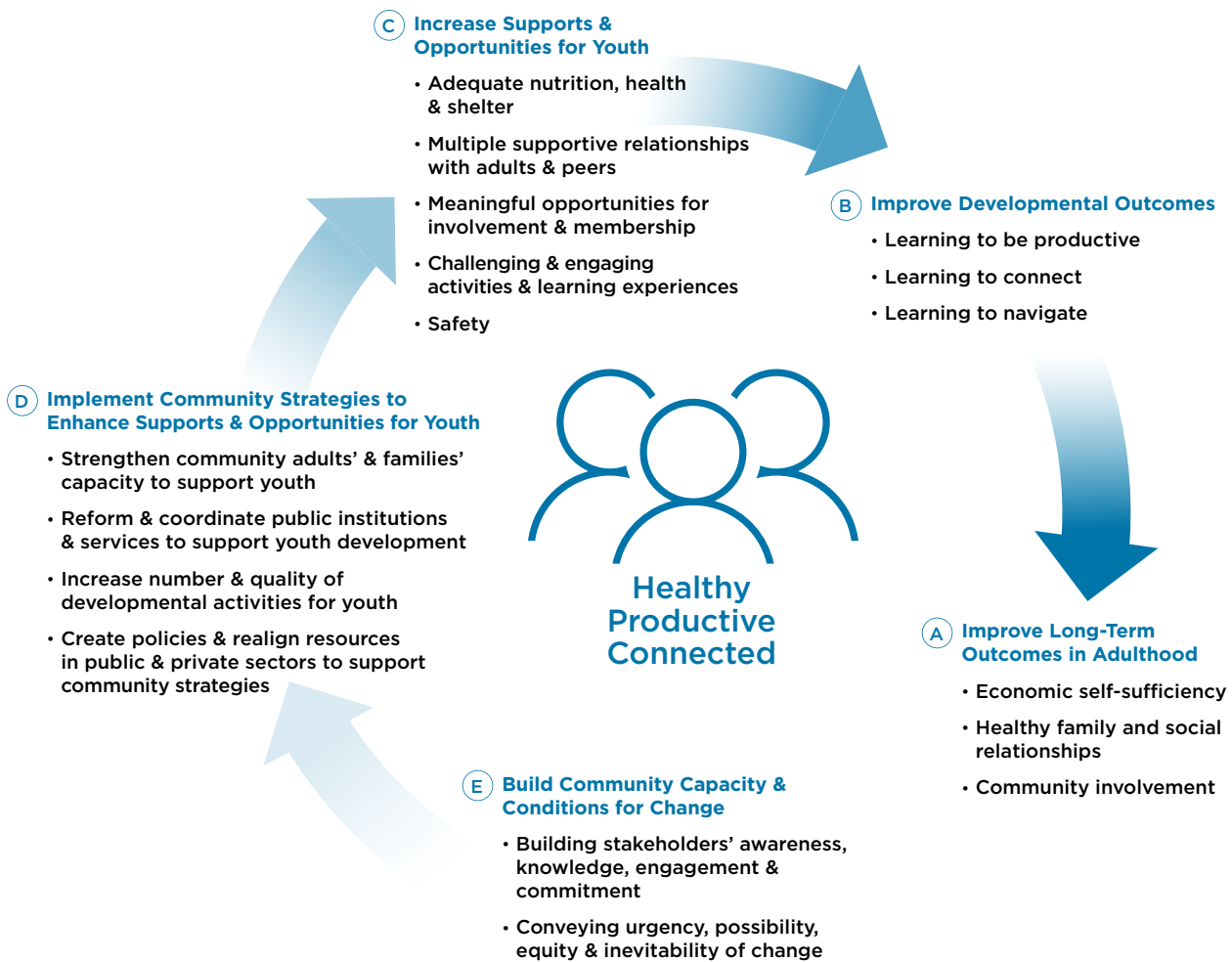
Youth Development Strategies Inc. (YDSI), a pioneering PYD policy research organization, took up the question of whether positive youth development approaches and developmental outcomes contributed to young adult success in a landmark 2002 study. Building a longitudinal data set from multiple research studies, YDSI identified easily understandable indicators for young adults in their early twenties (20–24) for each of the three big success areas—being productive, healthy, and connected. They then pulled out the “bookend groups”—those who were doing well in these life areas, and those who were really struggling. They then used longitudinal data to tease out what contributed to their success and, equally important, what difference it would make if these ingredients were in place from students’ entry into high school all the way into their young adulthood. The conclusions were cause for both outrage and optimism:

- ▶ Only 42% of young adults studied were doing well in any two of the three basic areas: productive (employed or in post-secondary schooling), healthy (managing health risks, engaged in healthy relationships), and connected (voting, participating in religious, community, or civic organizations). Twenty-two percent were doing well in none, and were actively in trouble in at least one area (e.g., dropped out, committing criminal acts once a month).
- ▶ High school seniors who were productive (graduating with good grades and plans, having healthy relationships throughout their high school years, developing skills to help them avoid risky behaviors) were four times more likely to be doing well as young adults and eight times less likely to be in trouble.
- ▶ Learners who had strong positive relationships, challenging and engaging learning experiences, and opportunities for meaningful involvement, contribution, and membership throughout their high school years were five times more likely to graduate fully prepared for the next phase of life. Having strong developmental relationships gives young people as much of a boost as having challenging learning experiences or meaningful opportunities to connect and contribute.

The YDSI research demonstrates the power of providing developmental supports during the high school years. It also answered the question of how many more young adults could be productive, healthy, and connected if these developmental supports were available throughout their lives, if families and community adults had more capacity to support youth, if public institutions including but not limited to schools fully supported youth development, and if communities were filled with high-quality developmental activities. Simulation analysis found that *if every high school student received these sustained supports from people in any of the places where they spend their time, the percentage of young adults who are doing well could increase from 42 to 68% and the percent in trouble could be reduced from 22 to 12%.*

As shown in figure 15, YDSI summarized these connections into a framework that starts with the end in mind, depicting what it takes to improve long-term outcomes in adulthood. Having demonstrated the impact of providing developmental supports

FIGURE 15 **Community Action Framework for Youth Development**



Youth Development Strategies Inc.

(Box C) on high schoolers' developmental outcomes (Box B) and the impact, in turn, of their readiness as teens on their success as young adults (Box A), the team went beyond the research to put additional key steps into the causal equation:

- ▶ Create policies and realign resources in public and private sectors to support community strategies. (Box D)
- ▶ Build stakeholders' awareness, knowledge, engagement, and commitment. (Box E)
- ▶ Convey the urgency, possibility, equity, and inevitability of change. (Box E)

The Community Action Framework for Youth Development is not only a powerful analysis of what is possible, but a compelling depiction of what is needed. It draws the bigger picture, emphasizing that no one system or setting could possibly provide all of the supports and opportunities needed for the long-term success of young people.

Demonstrating that Developmental Assets Matter

Search Institute, a leading PYD research organization, offers simple, actionable, evidence-based frameworks that help parents, practitioners, and policymakers cut through the piles of recommendations on how to address youth problems and promote youth success. Their foundational work on asset development done in the early 2000s was critical for communicating the idea that every young person, regardless of circumstance, has strengths within themselves and reliable supports in their lives. These internal and external assets may not be sufficient to overcome institutional and systemic inequities, but their proximate importance should not be overlooked.

Search intentionally combined these two types of assets in a single framework to emphasize the dynamic connection between the individual and their families, schools, community organizations, and peers. In their 40 Developmental Assets framework, 20 assets reflect a young person's commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. An additional 20 reflect caring support, empowerment, expectations, and involvement in outside activities provided by families, schools, community organizations, and peers.

Key findings include:

- ▶ Young people don't need every asset to thrive. Young people have about 20 assets on average. Most (78%) have between 11 and 30.
- ▶ Young people report finding external assets in all the places they spend their time. But families are the strongest source.
- ▶ The number of assets a teen has is more important than which ones. The number is a strong predictor of both thriving and risky behaviors, including but not limited to school performance, as demonstrated in the stairstep data in figures 16 and 17.
- ▶ Racial and ethnic differences in assets aren't as large as they are in academic achievement. White and Asian teens averaged 21. Black teens, 20. Latinos, 18.6. The stairstep benefit of having more assets works the same across racial and ethnic groups.
- ▶ The average number of developmental assets young people have drops four points from 6th to 12th grades, leaving older teens vulnerable.

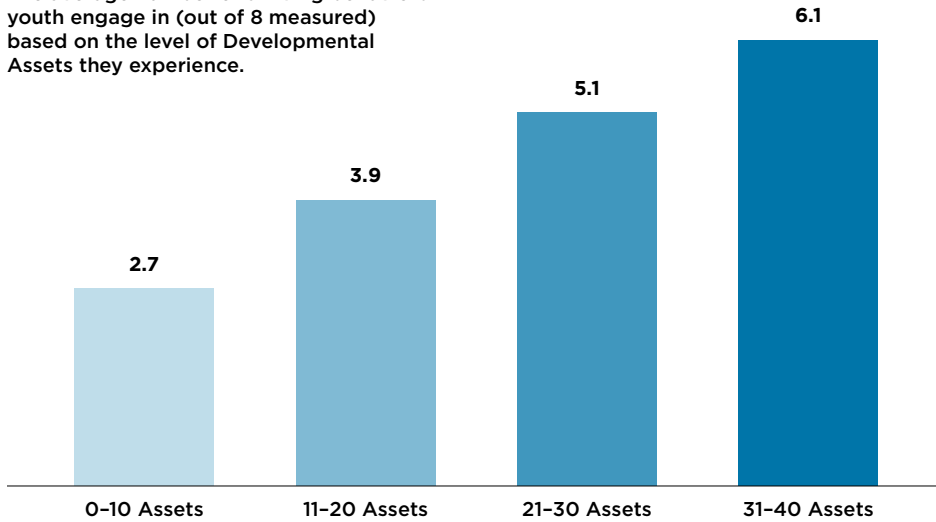
Search's findings helped bring currency to the PYD approach by demonstrating the value of this approach to all young people, not just vulnerable youth. Their decision to bring the survey to communities through coalition-building increased community awareness, urgency, and optimism that sparked collaborative action.

Combined, Search's research and community action work helped demonstrate the importance of differentiating between the proximate, more malleable developmental assets that contribute to a thriving orientation and the larger economic and social factors that create thriving opportunities. Building strong developmental relationships with young people (expressing care and providing support, but also challenging growth, expanding possibilities, and sharing power) to help them develop their spark (the thing they are passionate about, committed to, and good at) helps them build social capital, even in environments with relatively sparse opportunities.

FIGURE 16 **Assets and Thriving Among US Youth**

Youth who have higher levels of Developmental Assets are much more likely to engage in thriving behaviors.

The average number of thriving behaviors youth engage in (out of 8 measured) based on the level of Developmental Assets they experience.



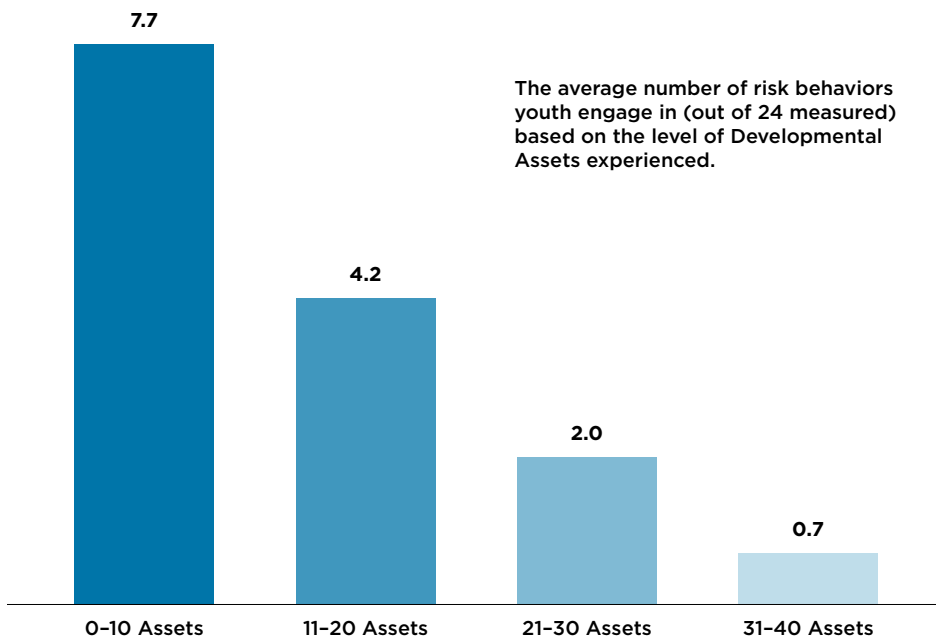
Based on surveys of 121,157 youth, grades 6-12, between 2012 and 2015
Search Institute

8 Thriving Indicators:

- Succeed in school
- Help others
- Value diversity
- Maintain good health
- Exhibit leadership
- Resist danger
- Delay gratification
- Overcome adversity

FIGURE 17 **Assets and Risky Behaviors Among US Youth**

Youth who have higher levels of Developmental Assets are much less likely to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors.



The average number of risk behaviors youth engage in (out of 24 measured) based on the level of Developmental Assets experienced.

24 Risk Behaviors, including:

- Alcohol
- Tobacco
- Inhalants
- Marijuana
- Other Drug Use
- Driving & Alcohol
- Sexual Intercourse
- Anti-Social Behavior
- Violence
- School Truancy
- Gambling
- Eating Disorder
- Depression
- Attempted Suicide

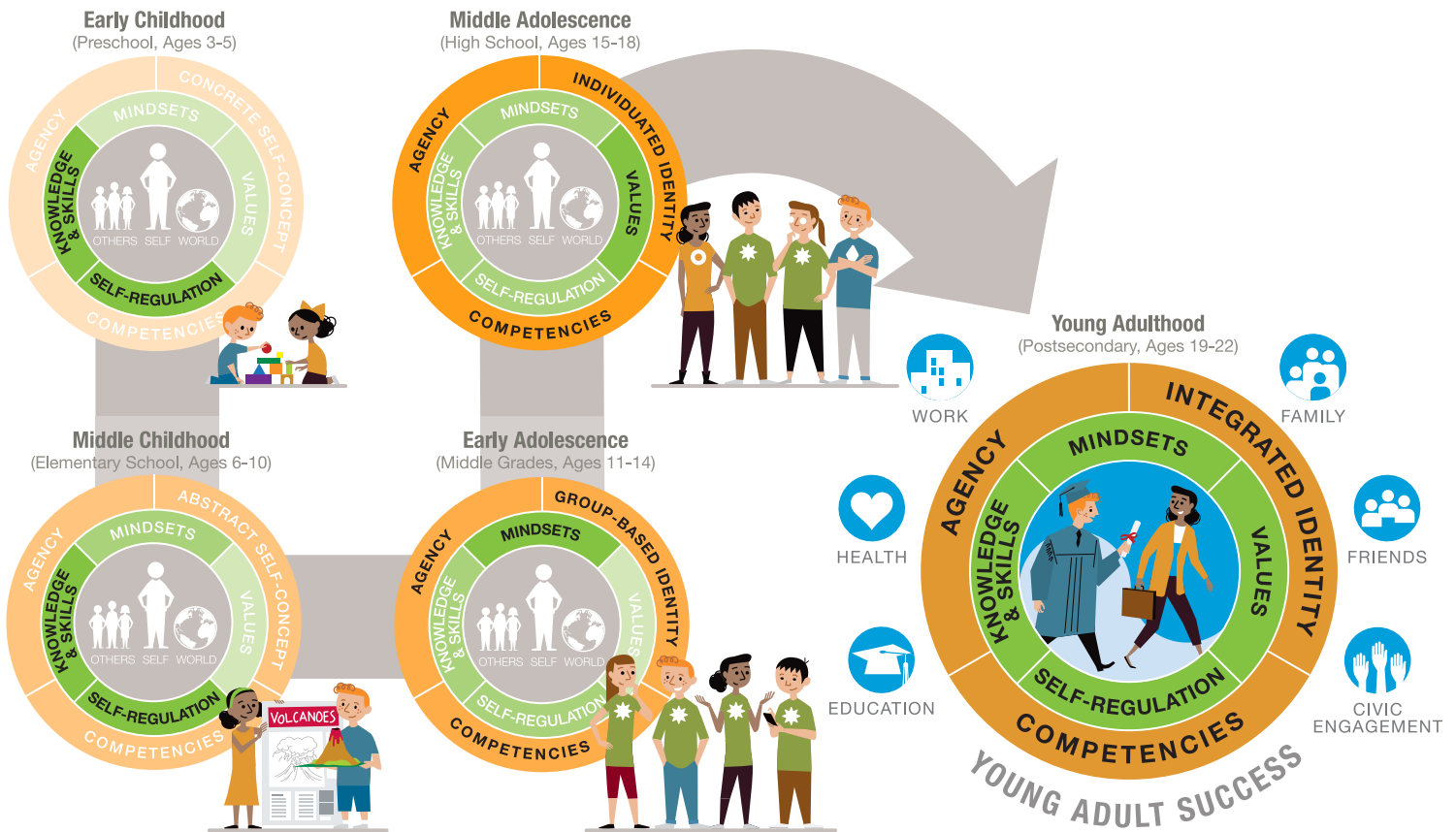
Based on surveys of 121,157 youth, grades 6-12, between 2012 and 2015
Search Institute

Well-Framed Reminders to Acknowledge the Developmental Progression

The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research brings a strong developmental perspective to their work with K-12 schools and community organizations. Given the growing recognition that academic skills alone are not enough for young people to become successful adults, the UChicago Consortium did a comprehensive review of evidence both 1) to discern what young people need to develop from preschool to young adulthood to be successful in college, work, and life, and 2) to determine the kinds of experiences and relationships that guide the development of these factors in and outside of school.

From this research, the UChicago Consortium produced the Foundations for Young Adult Success infographic, an excerpt of which is shown in figure 18.

FIGURE 18 Developmental Progression



Funded by The Wallace Foundation

The premise is that children learn through developmental experiences that combine action and reflection, ideally within the context of trusting relationships with adults. Over time, through developmental experiences, children build four foundational components (self-regulation, knowledge and skills, mindsets, and values) that underlie three key factors of young adult success (competencies, a sense of agency, and integrated identity).

The UChicago Consortium’s developmental drumbeat is invaluable. Whether at home or school, in an afterschool program, or out in their community, young people are always developing. Success goes beyond education and employment to include healthy relationships, a meaningful place within a community, and contributing to a larger good. Broader societal contexts, systems, and institutions shape youth development—often creating big disparities in opportunities and outcomes. Adults also play a pivotal role and can give young people a better chance at successful lives by understanding and intentionally nurturing their development.

Developmental Experiences Require Action and Reflection

*Children learn through developmental experiences that combine **Action** and **Reflection**, ideally within the context of trusting relationships with adults.*



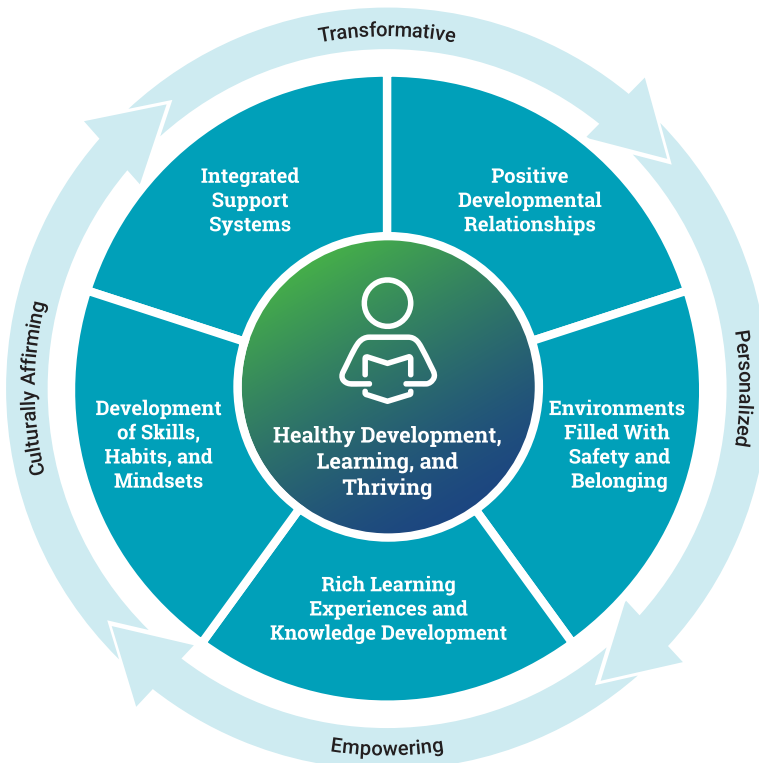
KEY	FOUNDATIONAL COMPONENTS	Developmental Focus During this Stage
	FOUNDATIONAL COMPONENTS	Ongoing Development
	KEY FACTORS	Emergence of Key Factors

Neuroscience Confirmation of the Importance of Resilience, Relationships and Contexts

The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance is a resource hub for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers committed to translating rigorous research on how learning and development happen for field use. The Alliance offers this summary of their extensive, multidisciplinary research review:

- ▶ **Every child, no matter their background, has the potential to succeed in school and life.** But no two young people learn in precisely the same ways. There is no average learner.
- ▶ **Learning is social and emotional.** The environments, experiences, and cultures of a young person's life are more influential than their genes. Learning and development in any domain is sacrificed when the whole child is ignored.
- ▶ **Supportive contexts and relationships matter.** The human brain is remarkably malleable and can be changed by strong, supportive relationships and the conditions they create.

FIGURE 19 **Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design**



Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment and in association with the SoLD Alliance

- ▶ **The effects of trauma on learners can be reversed.** When children experience sustained trauma, the fight or flight switch becomes much more sensitive or just stays on, even in situations adults would assume are safe. The effects of sustained trauma can be undone in relationship-rich environments.

The science reviewed by the SoLD researchers speaks to all learning settings and all developmental stages. The initial push, however, was to engage education leaders and policymakers around two big ideas. First, taking time to build relationships to make sure that learners have a sense of safety and belonging isn't taking time away from learning—it is laying the foundation for it. And second, engaging with the broader learning and development ecosystem is pivotal for learners' growth and success.

The Alliance partners translated their findings on how learning happens into a set of design principles for educators. As shown in figure 19, the five elements in “the blue wheel” are nonnegotiables. If any are absent, learning and development and thriving are compromised. But the principles play out differently in different contexts. Alliance partners created two design principles playbooks—one for teachers, school staff and administrators, one for the staff and directors of community-based organizations and institutions—to emphasize the importance of learners and educators working together to optimize the constraints and opportunities associated with specific settings.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago, the compelling convergence of research and evidence led major systems of child welfare, juvenile justice, and community-based programs to lift up and affirm a youth development approach to their work. Today, there is an opportunity for converging understanding to inform approaches across all systems and settings—including education. The evidence on how learning and development happen and what it takes to support thriving young people is clear.

With an exponentially increasing number of education leaders embracing a child- and youth-centered approach to learning and development, the country has an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the broader ecosystem of how and where learning and development happens. Why? Because this critical mass of the people in the primary system accountable for learning have not only decided that they cannot support the whole child alone, but that they should not try.

We have an understanding of what people say they want, and what the academic community has uncovered regarding what works. So how do we tackle the next big leap? The next step is to find the strongest footholds and foundations for making the jumps to the bigger purpose, bolder practices, and broader partners needed to support child and youth thriving.

With an exponentially increasing number of education leaders embracing a child- and youth-centered approach to learning and development, the country has an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the broader ecosystem of how and where learning and development happens.

Identifying Levers for Change

It is important to be clear. School leaders are acutely aware of the need to revisit their purpose and practices. And they are actively looking for partners. They are not operating under the same assumptions as they were 100 years ago or even 10 years ago.

Most schools are “hybrids,” the term used by Ulcca Joshi Hansen, award-winning author of *The Future of Smart*, to characterize how schools introduce “add-ons”—student advisories, team teaching, project-based learning, school gardens, school-based clinics, inclusive sports—to better address and engage the whole child. Jal Mehta, a professor at the Harvard School of Education, likens this bolt-on approach to “driving with the brakes on.”

It takes years to move from add-ons to a new whole, to completely transform a school’s purpose, practices, and partners. But mature, complete, innovative models of learner-centered schools exist. These models have brought the ideas of relationship-rich, competency-based, community-centered education to life during the school day as part of the official coursework needed for graduation. Big Picture Learning, EL Education, and Urban Assembly are three examples of carefully curated approaches that have been researched and replicated and offer training and support to schools and districts across the country. The XQ Institute, Next Generation Learning Challenges, and Transcend are all examples of national organizations building and supporting innovation networks that insist on deep examinations of the purpose of education before bringing in new practices and partners.

These innovators have found ways to rethink teaching and to engage the full staff as implementers of the school’s mission. They often have community partners working alongside teachers and non-classroom staff in the building, bringing in local expertise and tapping into national organizations like Playworks, City Year, and Communities in Schools, whose primary focus is to support learners in the school building during the school day. They also engage community-based youth organizations (like the Boys & Girls Clubs, the YMCA, and Horizons) to work directly in and with schools to provide daily enrichment programming on campuses before school, after school, and during the summer. And they offer field-based learning experiences through partnerships with the myriad of local organizations throughout the broader learning and development ecosystem.

Some are now setting their sights on system-level change, but most began working with individual schools operating inside traditional local education systems as exceptions to the old ways of doing business. None, however, have found ways to achieve the simple but powerful goal articulated in OECD’s third scenario: **schools act as learning hubs for all learners in the entire community.** Achieving this goal requires a new architecture for public school systems to retain central functions (including financing, transportation, accreditation, and human resources) while allowing competency recognition to drive ecosystem development, leveraging resources from other institutions in the community.

The need for a new architecture is becoming increasingly clear. Dissatisfaction is at an all-time high. Ideas about the purpose, practices, and partners that should undergird public education are at odds with the conventional public schools operating model. The academic research supporting these shifts continues to build.

But there are strong headwinds to enacting this idea. The foundation of public education, while showing cracks, is still deep, and the footholds, while numerous, are discomfitingly shallow. Education and community leaders who think they have made some system-level progress (or gained insights through failures) are eager to help envision bolder, more complete solutions. Understanding the mindset limitations associated with their starting points, however, is critical.

The Glass Half Empty: The Constraining Value Networks of Conventional K-12 Education

In his work at the Clayton Christensen Institute, senior research fellow Thomas Arnett attributes the societal legitimacy of the traditional system to “the powerful, yet underappreciated, collective force of a school’s value network.” In a 2022 report commissioned by Education Reimagined, he argues that changes like updating curriculum and technologies are easily made because they don’t challenge the operating model. In contrast, “other types of innovations—such as competency-based learning, flexible learning pathways, or other hallmarks of learner-centered education—prove perennially difficult for established schools to adopt because they don’t fit well with the capabilities of the conventional model or the priorities of its value network.”

In a one-page chart (reproduced in figure 20), Arnett makes the constraints that the traditional education value network imposes on schools and school leaders frighteningly clear. In general, the resources (human, material, and physical),

FIGURE 20 **Some of the common components in the organizational model of a conventional school**

Value Propositions	Resources	Financial Formula	Processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide universal access to a standardized, common body of knowledge that every child will be taught in predetermined subjects ▶ Provide instruction focused on preparing students for standardized assessments ▶ Provide a reliable mechanism to rank and sort learners for college and career opportunities ▶ Provide access to electives and extracurriculars (sports, photography, yearbook, band, theater, journalism) to keep learners engaged in school ▶ Provide opportunities for youth to make friends ▶ Train children and youth to comply with the norms of schooling ▶ Provide custodial care for a portion of the day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Conventionally trained and certified teachers who are experts in providing direct instruction for specific grade levels or content areas ▶ Curriculum that divides content into courses, units, and lessons ▶ Campuses designed for hundreds of students, with classrooms arrayed along hallways ▶ Classrooms each with a whiteboard, a projector screen, a teacher desk and individual desks and chairs for students ▶ Multi-purpose rooms for assemblies ▶ Spaces for sports and play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Per-pupil state funding based on attendance counts on designated days ▶ Local property tax revenue ▶ Federal, state, and philanthropic grants ▶ Public bonds to fund facilities ▶ Fees and fundraising for extracurriculars 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Direct instruction provided for a class of 20-35 students by one teacher ▶ Classroom management and student discipline strategies for ensuring student compliance during teacher-led instruction and activities ▶ Hiring and job assignment based on certifications ▶ Uniform school schedules with blocks of time for each subject controlled by master scheduling ▶ Individualized education plans (IEPs) for students diagnosed with disabilities ▶ Assigning credit for a course based on seat-time requirements ▶ Advancing students who earn passing grades (A through D) ▶ Assessing college readiness using standardized test results and ranking students by GPAs

financial formulas, and operating processes (e.g., grouping, scheduling, planning, assessing, management) of any organization align with its value propositions (its primary purpose). These components are tightly integrated in school systems—it is difficult to change one component or even subcomponent without changing many others.

This is why transformative change is hard to sustain. Arnett suggests that there are seven value propositions that drive conventional schools. The top three value propositions (first column on the left) are the hallmarks of conventional education most adults experienced and, for the most part, expect their children to receive: consistent, predetermined subject matter; standardized assessments; and reliable rankings and reports for matriculation into college or work. The remaining four propositions are notably less robust. Although they include offering electives and extracurriculars, they hardly embody a commitment to whole-child education, even in its lightest applications.

Juxtaposing Arnett's value propositions with parents' responses to Populace's Purpose of Education Index (discussed in Section 1) highlights the tensions between what end-users want and what conventional schools do. It also provides a clue as to why end-users, in spite of their levels of dissatisfaction, find it easier (and safer) to work around the system rather than mobilize to change it.

In figure 21, we illustrate these tensions by listing the conventional school value propositions in the left column with corresponding priorities from Populace's Purpose of Education Index in the right column. As described in Section 1, this survey asks participants for their private opinions about 57 different educational priorities, and the resulting rankings reveal how important (rank no. 1)—or not (rank no. 57)—each priority is to the public.

Six of the seven K-12 value propositions show up in the bottom quarter of the priorities from the Populace survey, with rankings ranging between 42 and 56 out of 57. An exception within this list is related to arts electives and extra-curriculars, which shows up in the top half of priorities.

The last value proposition, free custodial care, was the only one not covered in the Populace survey. This reliability, however, is a powerful inducement to business as usual. Schools are multi-service organizations that provide the basic instruction all end-users want, while also providing custodial care and easy access to other supports (transportation, meals, health screenings, extracurriculars, peers).

FIGURE 21 **Arnett's K-12 Value Propositions x Populace Priorities**

K-12 Value Propositions	Priorities Ranks (out of 57)
▶ Provide universal access to a standardized, common body of knowledge that every child will be taught in predetermined subjects	#42 All students study a common set of courses with few options for electives
▶ Provide instruction focused on preparing students for standardized assessments	#49 Students are evaluated by how they rank against other students on standardized tests
▶ Provide a reliable mechanism to rank and sort learners for college and career opportunities	#47 Students are prepared to enroll in a college or university
▶ Provide access to electives and extracurriculars (sports, photography, yearbook, band, theater, journalism) to keep learners engaged in school	#29 Students can demonstrate artistic skills (e.g., art, music, theater) #56 Students develop athletic talents
▶ Provide opportunities for youth to make friends	#50 Students develop friendships
▶ Train children and youth to comply with the norms of schooling	#52 Students learn social norms and appropriate behavior
▶ Provide custodial care for a portion of the day	

Christensen Institute

Populace

Parents like the flexibility and customized learning opportunities they get in afterschool and community programs but need the reliability and functionality of public schools.

When schools closed during the pandemic, parents, teachers, and learners turned to community partners for space and staffing support. While these “pandemic pods” were primarily an option for families that could afford them directly, their creation en masse resulted in a time-limited experiment of doing schooling differently. The vast majority of those who turned to this option expressed greater satisfaction with their pandemic pods than pre-pandemic schooling, according to *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, a report on pandemic pods by the Center on Reinventing Public Education at Arizona State University. But once schools reopened and the resources were reconsolidated, parents found it difficult to personally arrange for access and funds to support not only teachers, but transportation, food, and auxiliary learning supports. In large part, the reopening of schools marked a return to business as usual.

Parents like the flexibility and customized learning opportunities they get in afterschool and community programs but need the reliability and functionality of public schools. Most families can find enough of what they really need or want in schools to make abandoning the full range of free services that come with public schools not a viable option.

Arnett’s conclusion regarding the future of creating equitable, learner-centered ecosystems is sobering: “new models of learner-centered education can only take root successfully within value networks that align with their distinctive priorities.”

The next section explores two types of existing alternative value networks that have established operational structures committed to ensuring equitable access to learning and development opportunities: community schools and local collaboratives.

The Glass Half Full: Hub Models Working to Align with What Families and Youth Need

The idea of consolidating functional capacity to support the coordination of services and partners is not new. Communities have the general idea that schools, families, and learners should be at the center of a hub of services and opportunities. The new idea? These partners are part of an integrated ecosystem that enhances learners’ success by ensuring that each has multiple, coordinated, credited learning connections to people, places, and possibilities with multiple community partners during the day, year-round.

Both school systems and communities have taken leadership in this space:

- ▶ School systems have expanded services (e.g., school-based clinics), expanded learning time (e.g., after-school programs and year-round schedules) and expanded partners (e.g., dual-credit programs with community colleges). The community schools model addresses all of these goals.
- ▶ Community leaders have established cross-sector cradle-to-career collaboratives, issue-specific coalitions, and out-of-school time provider networks focused on improving the accessibility, quality, and continuity of learning and development supports for young people and their families. Increasingly, these collaboratives are becoming a part of the permanent local infrastructure.

For more on these examples, see **A Nascent Infrastructure: Identifying the Starting Points** on pages 42 and 43.

FIGURE 22 **The Ecosystem Supporting Out-of-School Learning**

Learning can happen anywhere, everywhere and all the time.



*Draft for discussion purposes
Campaign for Grade-Level Reading*

The reason these efforts are noted as “half full” is that these hub models are focused on coordinating nonacademic “wraparound” services and supports to ensure the child is ready to learn when they enter the classroom or “enrichment” (i.e., interest-driven opportunities for exploration and mastery). Even when they are based in schools, these coordinating models are not usually focused on expanding responsibility for primary academic **learning** opportunities. Thus, they fall short of OECD’s definition of learning hubs as centralized operating functions that leverage resources from other institutions by allowing competency recognition to drive ecosystem development.

But the footholds for ecosystem integration are there. These city- or county-wide coordinating efforts have increased community partners’ awareness of and comfort with each other. They have reinforced the basic idea that children and youth are supported by an ecosystem of partners that extends well beyond schools. They have increased routinized interactions with school leaders and their understanding of the constraints that come with their power and resources. They have developed new staffing and resourcing models that may provide alternative foundations for the new learning ecosystem architecture needed.

Perhaps most importantly, they are giving communities new heuristics that convey the range of institutions and organizations in the learning ecosystem. For example, in the colorful graphic in figure 5, page 11, the National League of Cities depicts Community Learning Hubs with an array of learning needs and learning institutions.

Coordinating learning across multiple places and spaces in the community will require a new kind of coordinating infrastructure. In many places, collaborative infrastructures exist but are primarily focused on nonacademic “wraparound” services and supports or “enrichment” opportunities. These structures—including community schools, governmental coordinating bodies, cross-sector collaboratives, provider networks, and mobilization efforts—will help provide the foundations, pillars, and beams of a new architecture that centers learning as well as other aspects of development.

Community Schools

Community Schools are a popular and prevalent example of a school hub model designed to engage parents and community partners in supporting the whole child. Interest in this comprehensive, integrated strategy has grown over the past three decades as educational entrepreneurs and community partners worked to develop such innovative approaches as the Beacon schools, the Children’s Aid community schools, and the University of Pennsylvania’s university-assisted model. The community schools movement recently received a large infusion of federal funding and promotes strategies to increase the integration of school and community by broadening student goals, broadening available services, expanding the times and places where learning happens, and involving parents and community in planning, decision-making, and implementation.

In 2017 the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) and the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) popularized a framework that outlined four pillars of community schools that were prevalent in the field: 1) individualized, integrated student supports (wraparound services), 2) expanded, enriched learning times, 3) active community and family involvement, 4) collaborative leadership and practices. It might be assumed that having family and community partners more involved during the day and in the building would lead to changes in purposes and practices directly related to teaching and learning. But influencing classroom practice and student assessment were not explicit goals in the early models created during this generation of community schools in the US.

More recently, the National Education Association proposed six pillars of community schools: 1) strong and proven curriculum, 2) high-quality teaching, 3) inclusive leadership, 4) positive behavior practices, 5) family and community partnerships, and 6) community support services. NEA’s pillars emphasize the importance of strengthening teaching and learning as a key commitment to supporting the whole child. Their opening definition of community schools, however, falls short of the learner-centered approaches research and end-users emphasize:

Community schools are public schools that provide services and support that fit each neighborhood’s needs, created and run by the people who know our children best—all working together. In community schools, as in all schools, teachers teach and students learn—but with a focus on the whole child: an integrated focus.

Also recognizing the need to have explicit learning goals, the Learning Policy Institute joined forces with three other national organizations to create Community Schools Forward. This partnership was created to respond to the growing interest in the community schools strategy from state and local governments seeking to advance educational and economic opportunities and address historic educational inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. They updated the original four-pillar model, proposing two new “essentials” focused on learning and the learning environment: 5) rigorous, community-centered classroom instruction, and 6) culture of belonging, safety and care. Their updated description of community-centered classroom instruction begins to blur the lines:

Teaching and learning in the school infuses high-level content and skills with real-world learning opportunities. The curriculum is deeply connected to the local community and students’ identities, cultures, and experiences, providing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful inquiry-based learning and problem-solving.

This updated framework is more than just theory. Rich examples of community schools that have pioneered rigorous community-centered classroom instruction, including the UCLA Community School in Los Angeles and Middle School 50 in the South Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, New York, have been captured in a recent book authored by four early leaders in the national community schools field. The challenge for the community schools’ movement will be whether it is able to parlay a focus on expanding partners into an opportunity to rethink the purpose and practices of classroom learning.

Governmental Coordinating Bodies & Cross-Sector Collaboratives

Having a well-educated population is key to the economic viability of a community. It influences everything from the tax base to the cost of social services to competitiveness in recruiting new businesses. Many county councils have developed offices or initiatives to develop shared interagency agendas for child and youth success to increase cross-agency efficiencies in key functions such as data, communications, and community engagement and align efforts across jurisdictions. Such offices at the county or municipal level often play a role in cross-sector collaboratives that engage the nonprofit, faith, philanthropic, and business communities as well.

Education is a major focus for the National League of Cities. Increasingly, mayors are running on education platforms and building collaborative infrastructures inside and outside of their offices. Mayors have established Offices for Children and Youth that staff children's cabinets or coordinating councils to address the broader set of issues that hamper learning and development, often coordinating city data to develop neighborhood plans. And while mayors do not usually have superintendents as a part of their cabinets, many offices are funding and coordinating with, if not formally housing their cities' afterschool intermediaries—staffed entities charged with coordinating leadership, setting standards and supporting program quality, and consolidating data to support parent access.

Mayors' commitment to education was evident during the pandemic. They used their coordinating muscles to fill the multiple gaps left when schools closed: partnering with nonprofits to address basic needs like housing, food, and mental health services; purchasing unused school buildings to create new "learning hubs" to promote learning, provide recreational activities, afterschool programs and wraparound services; and investing in afterschool and summer learning. At the older end of the education pipeline, mayors are investing in partnerships with employers and post-secondary education to support dual enrollment and trade and apprenticeship programs for youth and young adults.

Provider Networks

All families know these learning and development resources exist somewhere. Few, however, have the time and resources needed to use them fully. For many, these resources simply are not available in their community (e.g., green space deserts). Even when they are available, other factors such as awareness, accessibility, affordability, approachability, and appropriateness combine to not only dampen usage but also make it highly inequitable. The Afterschool Alliance reports that for every child in an afterschool program there are four children waiting for programming slots. High demand is driven by high satisfaction. The Alliance surveys also find extremely high parent satisfaction with their children's learning experiences (upwards of 85%). Out-of-school time coordinating networks establish the leadership, public-private connections, quality standards, and community-wide data management supports needed to manage the diverse partners in community learning ecosystems. Every Hour Counts is the national umbrella organization for these networks "dedicated to expanded learning, equity, and making learning fun."

Mobilization Campaigns

In addition to collaboration across the entities that focus on children and youth as part of their "day job," there are an increasing number of coalitions with great potential for ecosystem activation. They focus on the mobilization and engagement of community organizations, community members, and caregivers themselves.

The Campaign for Grade Level Reading was created to address the impact of this inequity on learners. Its mission is to "disrupt the generational cycle of poverty by improving prospects for early school success for children growing up in economically challenged, fragile, and otherwise marginalized families." Focusing on early school success, the Campaign provides backbone support to a network of local and regional coalitions in more than 350 communities in almost every state powered by over 5,200 local organizations and supported by more than 100 national partners.

Remake Learning started in Pittsburgh. It ignited international interest with Remake Learning Days, the world's largest open house for the future of learning. It has grown into a multi-state network of more than 1,200 members to bring educators and innovators together to develop "more engaging, relevant, and equitable learning experiences that prepare young people to thrive in a rapidly changing world."

Similarly, a graphic developed by the Campaign for Grade Level Reading highlights the importance of empowering parents and community businesses to support learning (see figure 22). This image from the Campaign’s Everyday Places and Spaces Initiative starts in the upper left with parents. Moving clockwise, it turns to everyday places that are a part of families’ daily lives. Next it moves to the cultural and recreational places parents know about but don’t always have access to because of cost, transportation, or comfort level. The graphic lands with the structured community programs parents rely on for both childcare and interest-driven learning.

Studying this graphic raises questions: How and where do schools fit into this picture? Are they a fifth circle? If this is the out-of-school learning ecosystem, what is the in-school one? Is this getting us closer to the OECD scenario of a learning ecosystem in which the core functions are centrally maintained but competency recognition drives ecosystem development by leveraging resources from other learning institutions? How much does terminology (school/out-of-school) get in the way?

Conclusion

The K-12 value network is a strong countervailing force to change. But the mismatch between the conventional K-12 value propositions and what families and communities actually want points to opportunities for concerted action. With a clear purpose—a reimagined way of supporting learning and development—the various coordination and mobilization efforts at the local level could be challenged to create an interconnected infrastructure. In the next section we turn to what it will take.

A Potential Path Forward

This paper suggests that the needed shifts in purpose, practices, and partners resonate within the alternative value networks associated with after-school and summer learning, with PYD researchers, with workforce developers and employers, with local child and youth collaboratives, and with parents. So why haven't these groups come together to demand change?

Returning to the analysis put forth by Thomas Arnett, he suggests that the reason innovative approaches do not take hold at the system level is that they are working within the existing value network for K-12 education—a value network that still adheres to these value propositions:

- ▶ The curriculum-based learning that goes on in core academic classes is more valuable than the interest-driven learning that happens elsewhere, even inside the school's electives and extracurriculars.
- ▶ The grades and test scores associated with these classes are more relevant than real-world evidence of competence.
- ▶ The only learning experiences that count towards graduation (and therefore can require attendance and receive guaranteed public funding) are those offered by schools.

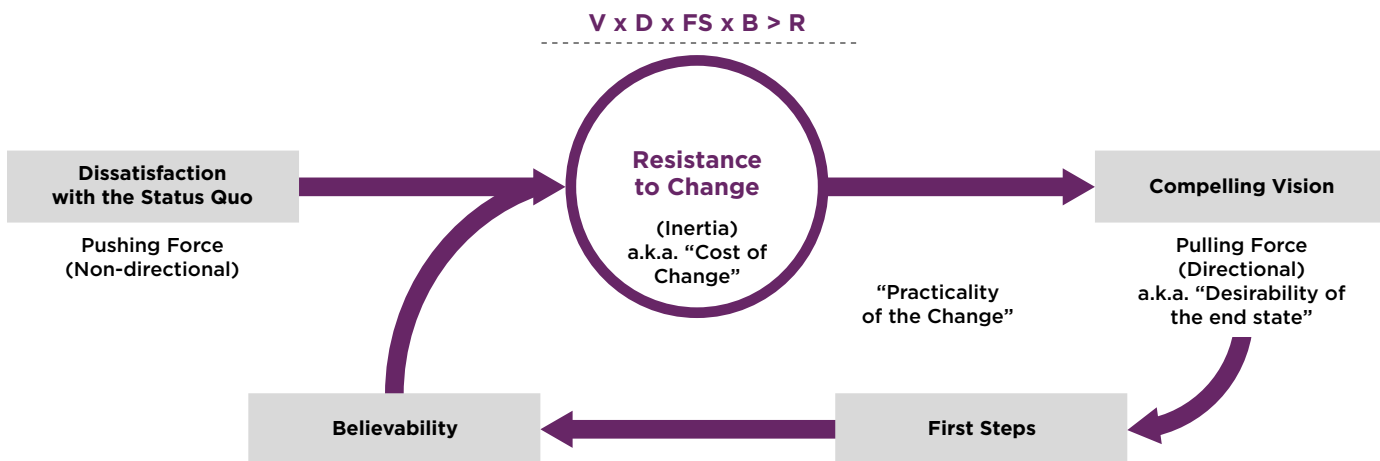
So how do we address this disconnect between private opinion and public commitment? The answer lies in a formula that seeks to predict the likelihood of major institutions successfully executing major change initiatives.

Unpacking Systemic Resistance to Change

In discussions of public education, the resistance to change is enormous. It is not coming only or even primarily from educators. It comes from the generally held belief that the public education system is impenetrable and impervious to change. To understand how to overcome this resistance, we can look to a formula designed to predict what is needed for massive changes to take effect.

This formula was refined and popularized over decades by organizational change consultants and academics, including David Gleicher, Richard Beckhard, Ruben Harris, and Kathleen Dannemiller. The diagram in figure 23 illustrates the change formula: **vision x dissatisfaction x first steps x believability** all have a multiplier

FIGURE 23 Causal Diagram of Beckhard's Change Formula



Humanperf

effect and together must be strong enough to overcome the **resistance to change**. Low scores on any factor make it less likely to overcome resistance. Let's take stock of the factors needed to overcome this resistance.

- ▶ Consensus around a **vision** for renewing the purpose, practices, and partners of a system for public education seems to be hidden just below the surface, clouded by jargon that recently has taken on increasingly political overtones.

Score: High, but not visible

- ▶ The **dissatisfaction** with the K-12 system's core value propositions—standardized curricula, standardized tests, credentials that rank learners rather than recognize their competencies—is palpable.

Score: High, but unfocused

- ▶ The plethora of **first-step plans** designed to address specific pieces of the puzzle are confusing and deflating.

Score: Low, due to cacophony and confusion

- ▶ And, since the vast majority believe that a public education system is essential, the tolerance for its shortfalls is very high because the **believability** in the likely success of first step plans posed thus far—the “practicality of the change”—is extremely low.

Score: Low

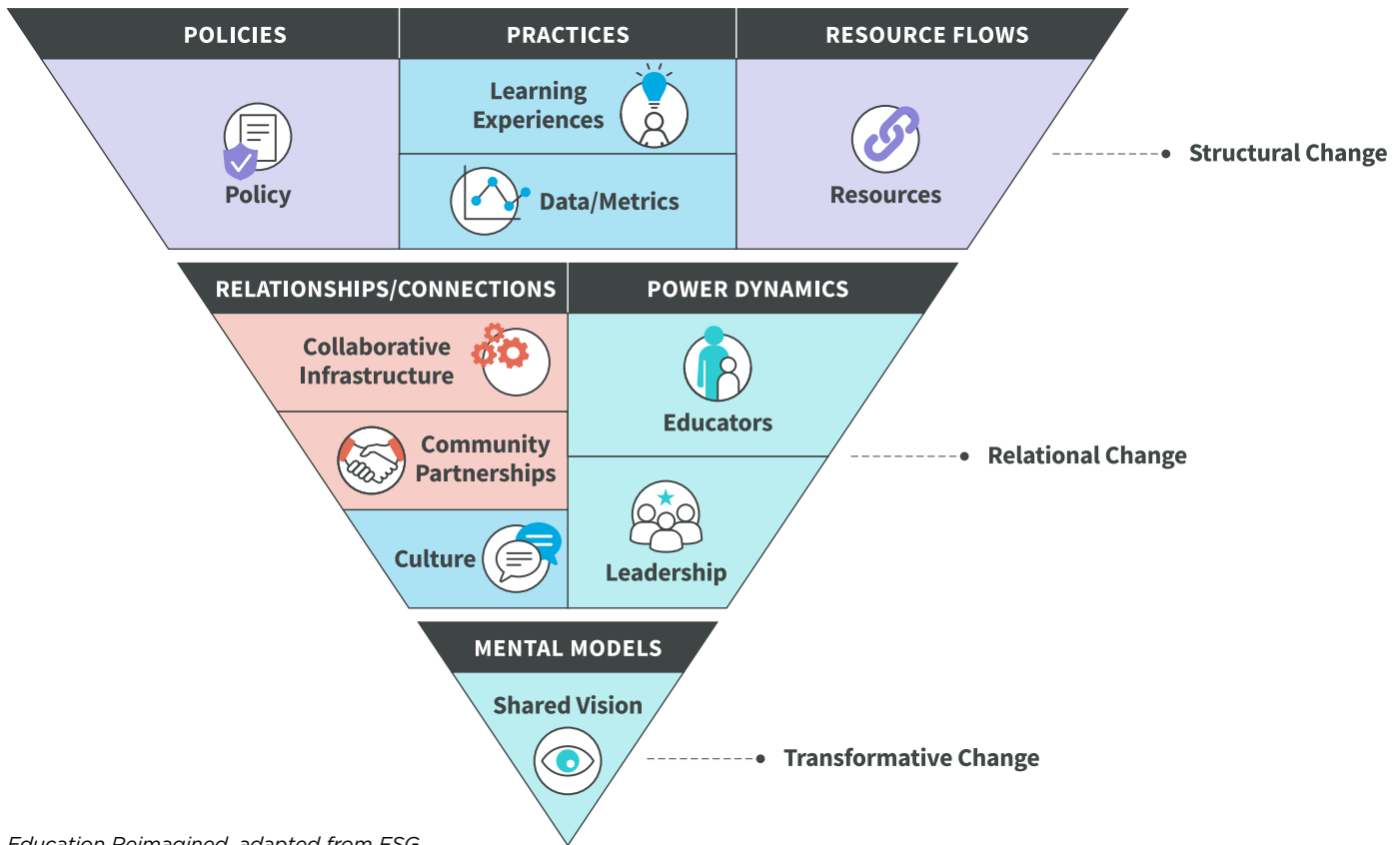
How, then, do we increase the coherence of our plans and our collective belief that change is possible? By recognizing, bringing together, and building upon the learning ecosystem partners who are already working in our communities and moving from boutique responses that work for some learners to systemic changes that work for all.

Mapping the Ingredients for Systems Change

Much can be learned from exploring efforts already underway. Working with The History Co:Lab, Education Reimagined has developed an Ecosystems Readiness Framework based on conversations with learner-centered practitioners. The framework and a landscape analysis of selected communities already on the path to creating learning ecosystems for all learners are captured in the 2023 report *Ecosystems for the Future of Learning*, commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. These proof points will be invaluable for increasing the believability of the idea that it is possible to create “a new modern public system of education that is grounded in learners and their communities, not singular school buildings.”

In the report, Education Reimagined proposes a framework scaffolding of 10 key domains of systems change grouped under four levers (people, practices, conditions, connections). This framework emerged from the organization's conversations with practitioners and systems leaders working toward ecosystem invention. The authors increased the utility of the framework by mapping its characteristics onto a widely used systems change map developed by John Kania, Mark Kramer, and Peter Senge of FSG, a global nonprofit consulting firm focused on social change. The system change map outlines key elements of systems change, such as policy, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, and power dynamics.

FIGURE 24 Ecosystems Readiness Framework mapped to “The Water of Systems Change”



Education Reimagined, adapted from FSG

In the Ecosystems for the Future of Learning report, the authors note:

When taken together—even if not all shifting at the same time—these elements can collectively affect systems change in education. ...When the framework is viewed in this model, there is new insight into how to prioritize and organize the work of pushing on multiple levers. For example, it illuminates the importance of setting shared vision as the foundation upon which the other levers must be pushed.

This model and this emphasis on the shared vision as the starting point for transformational change bring us full circle. Is the resistance to change solely a factor of stakeholders’ disbelief that the public system of education can change? Or is it also a factor that they don’t recognize the foundations and footholds for change that are already valued and used in their communities?

Creating Systemic Permissions, Protections and Architecture to Support Change

The hegemony that comes with the century-old belief that “official” learning only happens in school classrooms makes it almost impossible to realize the full potential of the OECD scenario that emphasizes competency recognition as the driver for ecosystem development. Thomas Akiva and Lori Delale-O’Connor, University of Pittsburgh education scholars,¹ sum up the dilemma well in “The Promise of Building Equitable Ecosystems for Learning”:

Schools have societal legitimacy through regulative systems; that is, they receive tax dollars, and students are legally required to attend. Without such provision, non-school youth programs must primarily seek legitimacy through...shared understanding, cultural support, social expectations.

They make the case for two bold assertions about what it will take to build healthy, equitable ecosystems:

ASSERTION 1: Realizing the promise of learning ecosystem approaches will require expanding beyond narrow views about what is valued as learning, what learning spaces are considered legitimate, and who is “deserving” of learning opportunities.

ASSERTION 2: Realizing the promise of learning ecosystem approaches will require expanded notions of adult leader expertise for supporting learning and development. (Akiva, Delale-O’Connor, and Pittman 2020)

These assertions give focus to Arnett’s conclusion that new models of learner-centered education require value networks that align with their distinctive priorities. The authors are not suggesting that these alternative value networks need to be created. They are suggesting that they need to be recognized and legitimated in a way that expands our definition of public education, pushing away from the conventional standardized curricula, assessments, and certification paths.

Equally important, they are suggesting that the key to ecosystem health is not to focus on whether the children and youth are productive, healthy, and connected. The primary focus should be on whether the adults employed by the separate systems that support youth thriving have the capacity and motivation to see themselves as interconnected actors in the learning and development ecosystem who are valued for their diversity. Making this shift starts with giving these adults permission **and** protection.

This point was made in an interview with a former deputy state superintendent who worked in a state that had taken great strides to give district and school leaders permission to innovate. He shared with some disappointment that the uptake was not as strong as he had hoped. But his main reflection came from the fact that those who had taken the most risks in changing their core operating models were concerned that, without protection, they would likely not be able to survive if opposition surfaced or when the state and local leadership winds changed.

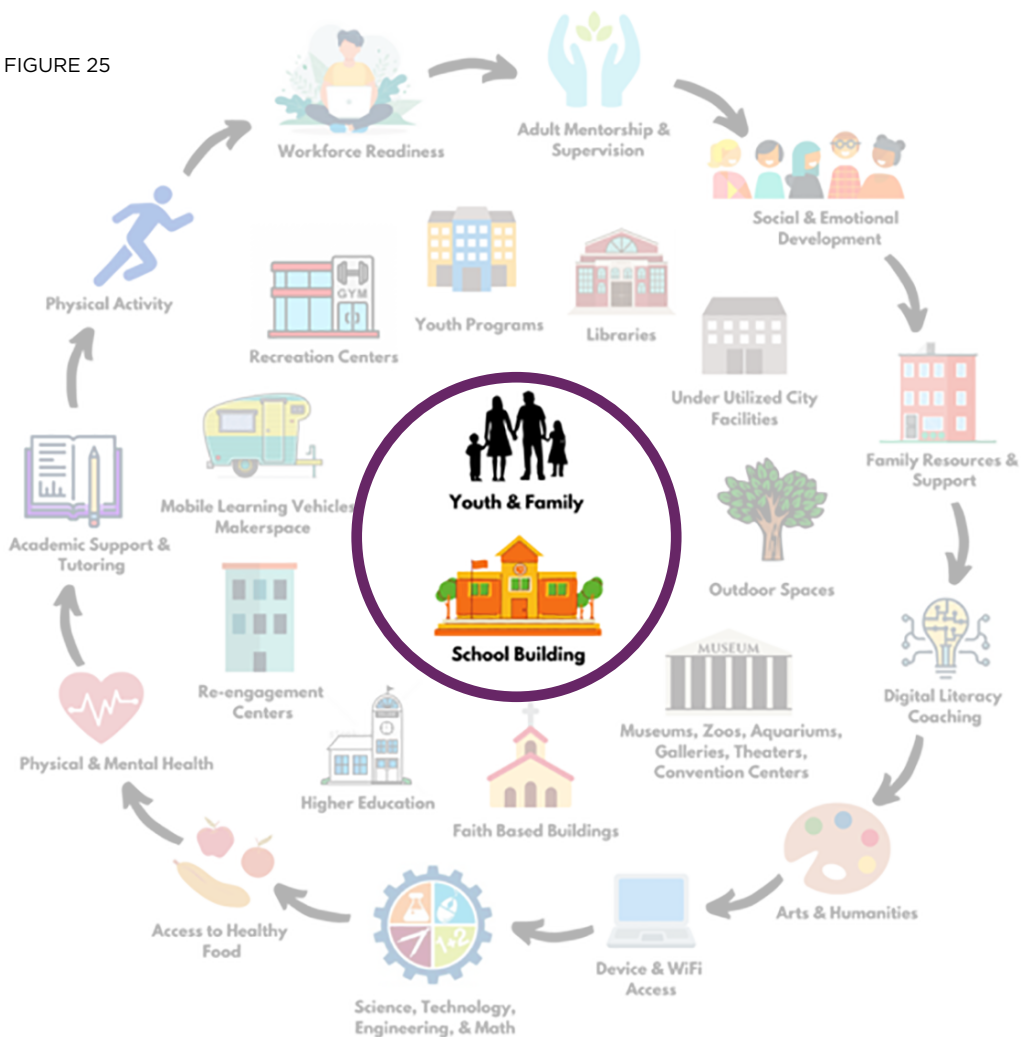
.....
¹ Karen Pittman, co-author of this paper, also contributed to this journal article.

The primary focus should be on whether the adults employed by the separate systems that support youth thriving have the capacity and motivation to see themselves as interconnected actors in the learning and development ecosystem who are valued for their diversity.

Leaders can offer innovation “permission.” But innovation “protection” requires a new architecture. The basic blueprint for this architecture is outlined in the OECD school learning hubs scenario: “schools retain most functions, but competency recognition drives ecosystem development, leveraging resources from other institutions.” The simplest visual of this architecture is the Community Learning Hubs graphic included at the beginning of this paper.

Here we share it again in figure 25 with an added emphasis on the center. There is a reason that the family and the school building are in the center of the graphic: They represent the constancy in relationships and contexts young people need to thrive. Unless they are terribly dysfunctional, schools and families are the home bases from which learning explorations are launched. This is why, unless families believe school is actually harming their children, dissatisfaction with the quality of the learning experiences sends parents out into the community to complement and supplement learning, rather than into the schools to push for change. In a perverse way, the larger the gap between what is desired and what is delivered, the greater the resistance to attempt bold change. The reliability and functionality of schools as universal-access, multiservice agencies make them too essential to fail. Getting parents, policymakers, and the public to buy into changes that, per OECD, “leverage the resources from other institutions” in the ecosystem requires

FIGURE 25



reassurance that “schools retain [the] functions” that stakeholders rely on the most. These essential functions include universal access; integrated services (e.g., transportation, food, childcare); and basic academic instruction, assessment, and certification.

Using Competency Recognition to Drive Ecosystem Development

The public school system’s hegemony in the learning ecosystem is not just connected to the fact that it has sole responsibility for academic instruction, assessment, and certification. It is intricately connected to the fact that the mechanisms for executing this responsibility are tightly linked to the 100-year-old Carnegie Unit, the idea that the most effective and equitable way to deliver key academic content is to divide it up to be delivered didactically in 120 hour-long time blocks. The Carnegie Unit undergirds the more familiar idea of “seat time” and the corresponding constructs—standardized curricula, standardized tests, standardized credits, and transcripts.

The keys to building the new public school architecture lies in the middle phrase in the OECD definition:

“competency recognition drives ecosystem development.”

In 2022, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching—the organization that created the Carnegie Unit—announced their intent to build a “new currency of education based upon meaningful skills and accomplishments demonstrated through commitment.” The foundation is establishing partnerships with organizations like the Educational Testing Service (the inventors of the SAT), the XQ Institute (creators of a major national campaign and fund to “rethink high school”) as well as with post-secondary institutions and education innovators.

This major public commitment may be the first time end-users—the learners, parents, businesses, and higher education institutions that work with tests and transcripts because they are universally accepted—can envision a path forward together. Such a path does not immediately eliminate traditional measures of the functional literacies and knowledge young people need, but integrates these into a fuller complement of tools that support learner agency and competency development.

A Needed Assurance about Positive Learner Outcomes

But end-users need one more type of assurance to let go of the standardized approach to teaching and learning they have grown comfortable with. Specifically, that the transmission of fundamental literacies and knowledge the public school system will still be accountable for—even within this new architecture—can be guaranteed in learning environments that lead with the features parents most value in community learning settings—relationships and learner agency.

A 2023 report from the University of Chicago Consortium for School Research, the organization that produced the graphic in figure 18 depicting Foundations of Young Adult Success, offers this assurance. Some key findings from their recently released study, *Investing in Adolescents*, demonstrate the value of encouraging

adults, especially teachers, to focus on engagement and relationship building as key factors in learners academic and broader life success:

- ▶ Students' long-term trajectories were most strongly influenced by fostering student growth on socioemotional development and behaviors. In a range of areas, supporting multiple dimensions of student growth had up to double the positive impact as fostering only test score growth. These included self-reports of socioemotional development for ninth-graders, test scores, high school graduation, post-secondary enrollment, and post-secondary attendance in year two.
- ▶ In the short run, one of the most remarkable findings was that fostering socioemotional development and fostering test score growth had nearly identical impacts on ninth-grade test scores.

Making the Case for A New Architecture for Learning

What is now needed are broad campaigns and bold demonstrations to get all stakeholders **thinking differently** about what it takes to encourage systems to support the learning ecosystem.

Marijke Hecht and Kevin Crowley, scholars with the University of Pittsburgh School of Education, explain the power of this shift well in an academic journal article, *Unpacking the Learning Ecosystems Framework*:

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.

To bring ecological thinking to our understanding of the interplay between the broader learning ecosystem and the public education system, an analogy from the environmental field might prove useful.

Around 100 years ago, our nation's schools and our nation's dams were designed to meet the needs of the industrial age they were formed in. Efforts to remake these structures to meet the country's evolving needs have some interesting and instructive parallels. In community after community faced with the crumbling infrastructure of dams, "remove" or "rebuild" has been a thorny question. And for decades, environmentalists—concerned with the health of rivers and the well-documented impacts on the surrounding ecosystem—have called for a moratorium on new dam building and the shutdown or tight regulation of ineffective dams. However, sparked by the realization that the sustainable energy solutions needed to address climate change will require hydroelectric solutions, environmentalists

began quiet negotiations with dam operators. The results were impressive. In 2020, after two years of intensive negotiation, a working group issued a Joint Statement of Collaboration that became the basis for successful legislation. 40 Members of Congress signed a letter to the President recommending that the plan be included in the Administration's infrastructure proposal. A \$3 billion allocation was included in the 2022 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to support both/ and solutions that could advance the renewable energy and storage benefits of hydropower while also enhancing the environmental and economic benefits of healthy rivers. A new vision for dams has been established.

Like dams, schools were built to enhance the community's well-being and productivity. The idea that public schools have an impact on their surrounding learning ecosystems makes sense intuitively, but it is too vague to guide shifts in accountability for sustained, community-wide action to address those impacts. And while education reformers have certainly called for moratoriums on new school buildings (e.g., large high schools) or for tight regulation of ineffective schools (e.g., No Child Left Behind), calls for school improvements are much more common. Comparatively, however, they have probably been less effective. Perhaps this is because school infrastructure improvement plans do not require independent environmental impact statements that document the potential impact (positive and negative) not only on learners but on the full learning ecosystem that those learners are a part of.

Remember, just as dams must balance energy production with environmental needs, schools must balance standardized education with nurturing diverse talents. Let's build educational ecosystems that thrive like healthy rivers!

This provocative sentence was offered up by an AI platform at the conclusion to an exchange exploring the power of the schools/dams analogy.

Local education infrastructure projects should not only to be reviewed for potential harm to the learning ecosystem. They need to be incentivized to build educational ecosystems that "thrive like healthy rivers."

Conclusion

Now is the time to entice the country to move towards a new education architecture that leverages the full complement of community resources needed to empower and support learners for life, work, and civic engagement. But resistance will remain strong, even in the face of growing dissatisfaction, unless we find ways to build community optimism that bold, sustainable change is not only possible but decidedly doable.

OECD's schools as learning hubs scenario spells out this vision. The convergence of public perspectives and research findings give us the confidence. The Youth Development Community Action Framework gives us the roadmap and a starter list of ecosystem components that will need to be as clear and measurable as those proscribed in traditional environmental impact statements.

The stars are aligned. The goal is achievable. The public commitment to education—and a system that nourishes and is nourished by the broader learning ecosystem—is essential for our young people and our nation to thrive.

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