A Learner-Centered
Ecosystem

BY

Dr. Katie Martin

Learner-Centered
COLLABORATIVE

Acknowledgments

This report was written by **Dr. Katie Martin,** Co-CEO of Learner-Centered Collaborative, (LCC) author of *Learner-Centered Innovation* and *Evolving Education*, a former middle school teacher, and a mom. You can hear more from Katie on **The Learner-Centered Collaborative Podcast** and sign up for her weekly newsletter, **Bright Spots,** where she shares highlights of educator practice from the field.

The development of the Learner-Centered Ecosystem Framework would not have been possible without the vision, dedication, and expertise of the Learner-Centered Collaborative team. Their leadership in developing and shaping learner-centered systems and their deep commitment to learner-centered transformation are evident in every element of this framework. Through thoughtful collaboration, research-informed design, and relentless focus on what learners need to thrive, the LCC team has created a model that empowers educators and communities to bring a shared vision for learning to life.

Learner-Centered Collaborative is a non-profit, co-led by Dr. Katie Martin and Dr. Devin Vodicka, that emerged from decades of experience in education. We are guided by the persistent truth that a learner-centered approach is the foundation for a successful, thriving learning community. And we know that a shift to learner-centered is a collaborative endeavor.

We want to thank the hundreds of schools and partners that have informed our work throughout the years, and therefore contributed greatly to the thinking shared in this report, including all of our current and former **partners.**

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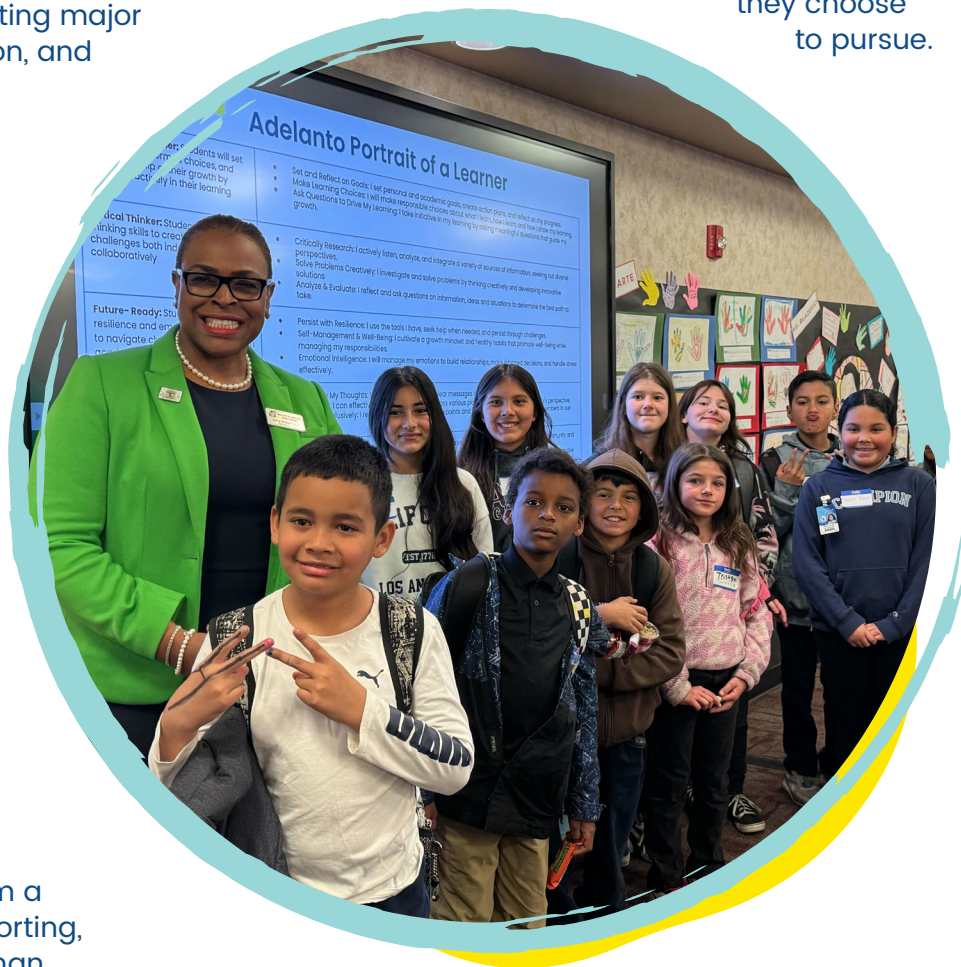
Introduction to a Learner-Centered Ecosystem

Despite the tireless efforts of educators, families, and communities, our education system is no longer meeting the needs of today's learners. A **Gallup survey** from 2024 provides multiple data points that indicate this. Engagement is alarmingly low—between 25% and 54% of Gen Z K-12 students report that school fails to engage them, with non-college-bound students feeling the most disconnected. This disengagement directly impacts readiness: while 79% of students express optimism about the future, fewer than half feel prepared for it. The disconnect extends beyond school walls. Only 30% of high school graduates believe their education prepared them well for life after graduation, and over half of employers say young people entering the workforce are not job-ready—citing major gaps in critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability.

At the same time, the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and digital technology is reshaping every aspect of society. Yet rather than helping students and educators harness these tools, many schools are banning them outright. Most teachers have not been trained to integrate AI effectively into learning, and students are left without the digital fluency or ethical foundation they need. In America's Heartland (the Midwest and non-coastal South), only **one-third of Gen Z adults** feel somewhat prepared to use AI in the workplace, and only 40% of students believe they will be ready after graduation.

Most schools are still operating from a model built for the industrial era—sorting, ranking, and standardizing rather than preparing students to thrive in a complex, fast-changing world. What learners need today is entirely different: social-emotional awareness, strong relationships, continuous learning, problem-solving, critical thinking, and

the ability to navigate and leverage emerging technologies. It's time to move beyond outdated systems and design ones that are based on the science of learning, human development, and aligned with the world we live in.

This shift requires listening to learners, applying insights from research and practice, and designing learning experiences grounded in purpose and possibility. The path forward is not about marginal tweaks—it's about reimagining the very foundation of how we educate. By creating a learner-centered ecosystem, we can unlock deeper engagement, cultivate lifelong skills, and ensure students are ready for whatever future they choose to pursue.

School-Centered Education

The traditional education system, designed to support the industrial era, emphasizes efficiency, standardization, compliance, ranking, sorting, and task completion. For over a century, it has achieved its intended goals by prioritizing operational and logistical efficiency through teacher-directed learning, fixed course offerings, set curricula, predetermined schedules, and seat time as a prerequisite for grade advancement. While this system has worked for some, it has also limited the definition of success, favoring certain talents and ways of being "smart" while marginalizing others. This model, rooted in the needs of a bygone era, is outdated. Today's society demands a learner-centered approach that works for all learners.

Student-Centered Education

A student-centered model moves in the right direction, layering in opportunities for community building, leveraging technology, and giving students more choice. This approach may incorporate standards-based systems and even include learning beyond traditional school and classroom settings. However, it does not necessarily encompass a **paradigm shift** to propel us beyond the industrial model of education. Most student-centered models still operate within a school-centered paradigm focused on receiving and transmitting information.

Learner-Centered Education

In a learner-centered paradigm, the education ecosystem is designed to develop whole-learner outcomes—the foundational knowledge, skills, and mindsets that equip learners with the competencies to know themselves, thrive in community, and actively engage in the world as their best selves. Doing so requires rethinking everything we do in education at the school, district, state, and federal level—from how we define and measure success to when, where, and how learning happens to who a learner is in the first place.

> **What learners need today is entirely different: social-emotional awareness, strong relationships, continuous learning, problem-solving, critical thinking, and the ability to navigate and leverage emerging technologies.**

School-Centered → Learner-Centered

School-Centered	Learner-Centered
Focus is on the most effective teaching.	Focus is on producing the most effective learning.
Teach to the average and manage expectations.	Variability is the norm; the uniqueness of learners is built upon.
Relationships and Social and Emotional Learning are secondary to learning.	Relationships and Social and Emotional Learning are embedded in the learning and community.
Learners are sorted and ranked.	Each learner has unique strengths and areas of growth and learns at their own pace.
Success is defined by GPAs and standardized test scores.	Success is defined on an individual basis; each learner has their own unique strengths, interests, and goals.
All learners follow a standardized path, place, and pace.	Each learner navigates a personalized path to demonstrate proficiency of knowledge, skills and dispositions.
Education is done to the learner.	Education is done by (and with) the learner.
Plans are implemented top down.	Plans are co-designed with input from all involved, including learners.
Failure has large consequences.	Failure is a part of the learning process.
The status quo is maintained.	Collectively, we evolve to create what's best for learners and learning.

An important distinction in a learner-centered paradigm is that "learner" includes every person in our schools. This extends beyond young people and certificated staff to include custodial team members, co-teachers, lunch teams, bus drivers, community members, and anyone else who contributes to the school culture.

When we see everyone as a learner, we hold equal expectations around outcomes, no matter age or role. Using one clear **Portrait of a Learner,** rather than multiple portraits for learners, educators, or systems, creates a unified north star. A learner-centered education ecosystem shows how outcomes, learning environments, and experiences are all connected. It's grounded in research and the science of learning, which also defines the key educator skills, school structures, and enabling conditions needed to support those outcomes.

Shifting From a School-Centered to a Learner-Centered Paradigm

A paradigm shift begins with a shift in mindset—one that challenges the dominant assumptions, values, and structures of an existing system. In education, this means rethinking the fundamental purpose of school: moving away from a model designed for standardization, control, and instructional efficiency, and toward one rooted in **agency and the full development of each and every learner.**

A paradigm shift is not just a change in strategies or practices—it's a change in the underlying beliefs and mental models that shape how we see the world and make decisions. In the school-centered paradigm, success is often defined by compliance, content coverage, and test scores. In the **learner-centered paradigm,** success is redefined as purpose-driven, personalized, and grounded in deeper learning and well-being. This new paradigm is sometimes referred to as **Horizon Three Learning,** as we aim to redesign education to meet the needs of the future.
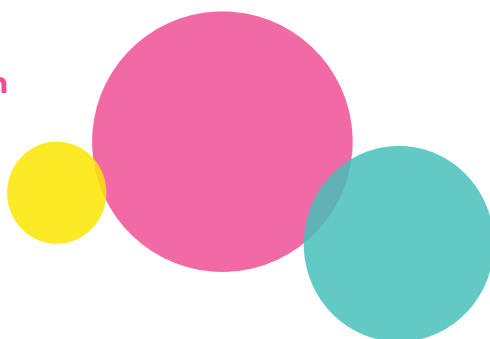
Making this shift is complex and doesn't happen overnight. We must evolve our practices—**dismantling the old system while simultaneously building the new.** This dual reality requires us to operate in both paradigms, coaching teams to let go of familiar habits and structures, while also supporting them to imagine and test new approaches aligned with learner-centered values.

We learn by doing—and the iterative process of designing new practices, gathering evidence of impact, and refining over time is what begins to **reshape systems and beliefs.** When educators and leaders see the joy, engagement, and growth that emerges from learner-centered approaches, their mindset shifts become solidified. The theory becomes lived experience.

This is the work of transformation: not just implementing new programs, but shifting the very foundation on which our education systems are built.

At Learner-Centered Collaborative, we have worked with hundreds of schools and districts to shift to learner-centered models. While each learning community's journey is unique, they all start with a desire to do what is best for learners and collaborate to develop consensus around the whole-learner outcomes they value most for learners to develop.

When we ask youth, educators, community members, families, and business leaders what outcomes matter most, we consistently hear confidence, effective communication skills, collaboration across differences, a sense of joy and purpose, and being contributing citizens. These are often referred to as **Durable Skills.** If these are the outcomes we want, we need to hold them as our north star and evolve our systems and structures to ensure we are working together to develop them.
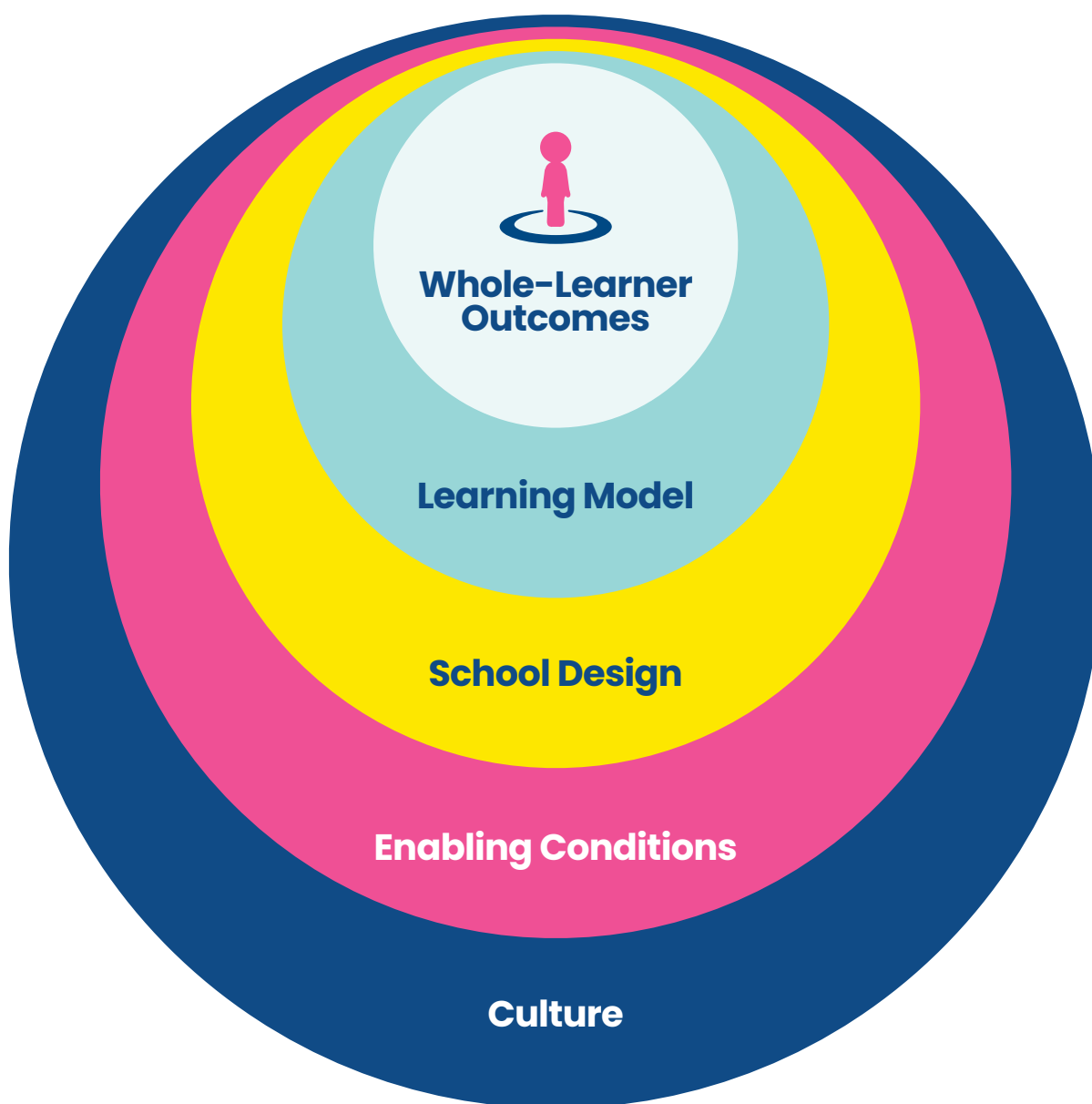
Designing a Learner-Centered Ecosystem

For young people to thrive today, we need to design learner-centered ecosystems that support the conditions and experiences necessary to achieve our desired outcomes.

An ecosystem is a dynamic community of interconnected elements that interact and evolve within a shared environment. A **learner-centered ecosystem** requires us to center learners at every level—students, educators, families, and communities—and to reimagine success beyond narrow metrics like GPAs and test scores. It calls for a broader, more holistic orientation toward the skills, competencies, and mindsets needed to thrive in a rapidly changing, interconnected world.

The following model represents a learner-centered ecosystem and builds off of the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, a renowned developmental psychologist best known for developing the **ecological systems theory,** which explains how a child's development is influenced by multiple layers of environmental systems, from family to broader societal contexts (like school). It has five layers, starting from the inside out: Whole-Learner Outcomes, Learning Model, School Design, Enabling Conditions & Culture.

The following sections identify both research and practical examples of educators designing, leading, and facilitating learner-centered ecosystems within each layer.

Whole-Learner Outcomes

Learning Model

School Design
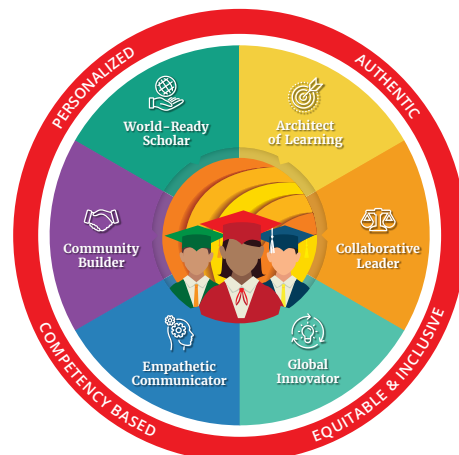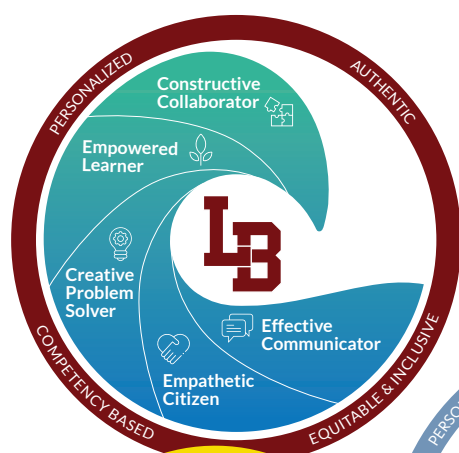
Enabling Conditions

Culture

Whole-Learner Outcomes

The knowledge, skills, and mindsets critical for learners to thrive in life, work, and citizenship

A learner-centered approach prioritizes the full scope of a child's developmental needs to ensure every learner has opportunities and support to reach their fullest potential. As the **Learning Policy Institute** notes, "Decades of research have demonstrated the need for education strategies that recognize the connections between children's social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development, as well as their physical and mental health."

A powerful way to expand our view of success is to create and use a Portrait of a Learner, a comprehensive and holistic representation of a learning ecosystem's desired outcomes that can function as a school or district's promise to the community. It aligns practices to a shared vision of success for every learner and honors each learner's unique identity, strengths, goals, and aspirations. A Portrait of a Learner defines the knowledge, skills, and mindsets a community commits to developing in learners throughout their time in the system to maximize their potential for success in school and beyond.

Portraits of a Learner from South Allegheny School District, Laguna Beach USD, Escondido USD and Santa Ana USD. See more examples **here.**

While literacy and numeracy are foundational knowledge and skills, they should be the floor. Whole-learner outcomes and accompanying lifelong competencies raise the ceiling for what and how we learn. Rather than simply covering a narrow set of standards, we expand our approach, identifying key competency progressions that span K-12. We then align resources, curriculum, systems and schedules to support learners in developing these desired competencies through interdisciplinary approaches.

Although the community defines these outcomes, each learner (from kindergarteners to the superintendent) has unique strengths, interests, and goals that influence the outcomes and the evidence they show for each of these competencies. For example, when thinking about problem solving competencies, a 3rd grader might be able to create a cardboard game and describe how it works to classmates and family members, a 9th grader could research a problem and pitch their solution to a community challenge, and a teacher (an adult learner) may come up with a new program to address chronic absenteeism and pitch it to the school board.

Leander ISO learners are empowered to be …
Critical & Creative Thinkers who seek and solve problems through curiosity, flexibility, and innovation.

Skills	Adult Learner Indicators	9-12 Indicators I Can Statements	6-8 Indicators I Can Statements	3-5 Indicators I Can Statements	K-2 Indicators I Can Statements
Inquiry	• I leverage my curiosity to post questions and frame problems in ways that open up thinking and possibilities. • I ask and investigate meaningful questions. • I analyze, evaluate, and interpret information from diverse sources to generate my own ideas about a topic or issue.	• I leverage my curiosity to post questions and frame problems in ways that open up thinking and possibilities. • I ask and investigate meaningful questions. • I analyze, evaluate, and interpret information from diverse sources to generate my own ideas about a topic or issue.	• I can harness my curiosity to pose questions in ways that encourage a deeper level of thinking. • I can investigate meaningful questions. • I can generate my own ideas about a topic or issue by researching information from diverse sources.	• I can be curious and ask questions about topics that interest me to drive my learning. • I can inquire about a topic by asking questions and conducting research. • I can generate my own ideas about a topic or issue by researching information.	• I can be curious by asking questions. • I can ask questions to learn more about things that interest me. • I can create my own ideas based on what I've learned.

At Leander ISD, they have defined their Portrait of a Learner in developmental bands that span Kindergarten through adults.

Progressions

Defining the skills and what proficiency looks like across a developmental spectrum is critical to help both educators and learners understand the skills they are working to develop. Creating progressions can help articulate the skills and make the larger competencies more tangible and actionable. For example, we all want to be skilled communicators, but it doesn't just happen by chance. We need to teach the discrete skills, give opportunities for safe practice, provide coaching and feedback, and offer multiple opportunities to grow and demonstrate these skills over time.

OUTCOME

DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS

Analytical Innovator	Learners think critically and solve problems creatively.				
Competencies	**Level 1**	**Level 2**	**Level 3**	**Level 4**	**Level 5**
Critically Research I analyze, integrate and evaluate a variety of sources of information, seeking out diverse perspectives.	• I ask simple what, why, how, where questions	• I ask questions to help me understand the things I'm interested in • I can describe the difference between fact and opinion • I can describe how different sources view something	• I ask questions to help me understand the problems I want to explore. • I identify facts based on evidence in sources • I can explain where sources are from and how they might be biased, and whether they are reliable • I seek out a variety of resources from different perspectives in my research	• I ask clear and precise questions that show a deep understanding of the problem • I analyze sources, distinguishing between fact and opinions using evidence • I uncover assumptions and biases by considering whose voice is being represented and whose voice is being left out and I seek out additional sources that have diverse perspectives • I think critically about whether I agree or disagree with a source of information and explain my thinking with evidence	• I ask informed questions and seek to dive deeper into root causes and similar problems • I analyze the credibility of sources based on biases and the used of evidence • I synthesize information from a variety of sources to make informed judgements

COMPETENCIES

PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTORS

Progressions describe the performance descriptors for each competency within a Portrait of a Learner Outcome at 5-6 developmental levels that could be associated with grade bands (i.e. level 1 is for TK-K and level 2 is for grades 1-2 learners).

How Learner-Centered Collaborative supports systems in defining whole learner outcomes

Co-designing a community's Portrait of a Learner begins with **discovery visits**—immersive, relationship-building experiences that help us understand the unique assets, stories, and aspirations of the community while deeply empathizing with learners. From there, we engage in **visioning work** with community that explores the evolving demands of our world and the skills learners need to thrive in life, work, and citizenship. Together, we then synthesize insights to draft a set of **learner outcomes** that reflect shared hopes for the future. These drafts are refined through **iterative community feedback,** then brought to life through a clear, compelling visual that makes the vision tangible and accessible. To move from vision to action, we build a **shared understanding and collective commitment** by creating learner-centered progressions, celebrating bright spots, and supporting teams as they **prototype and test new ideas** aligned to the Portrait. This inclusive, iterative process ensures the Portrait of a Learner is both rooted in community values and responsive to the future learners are stepping into.
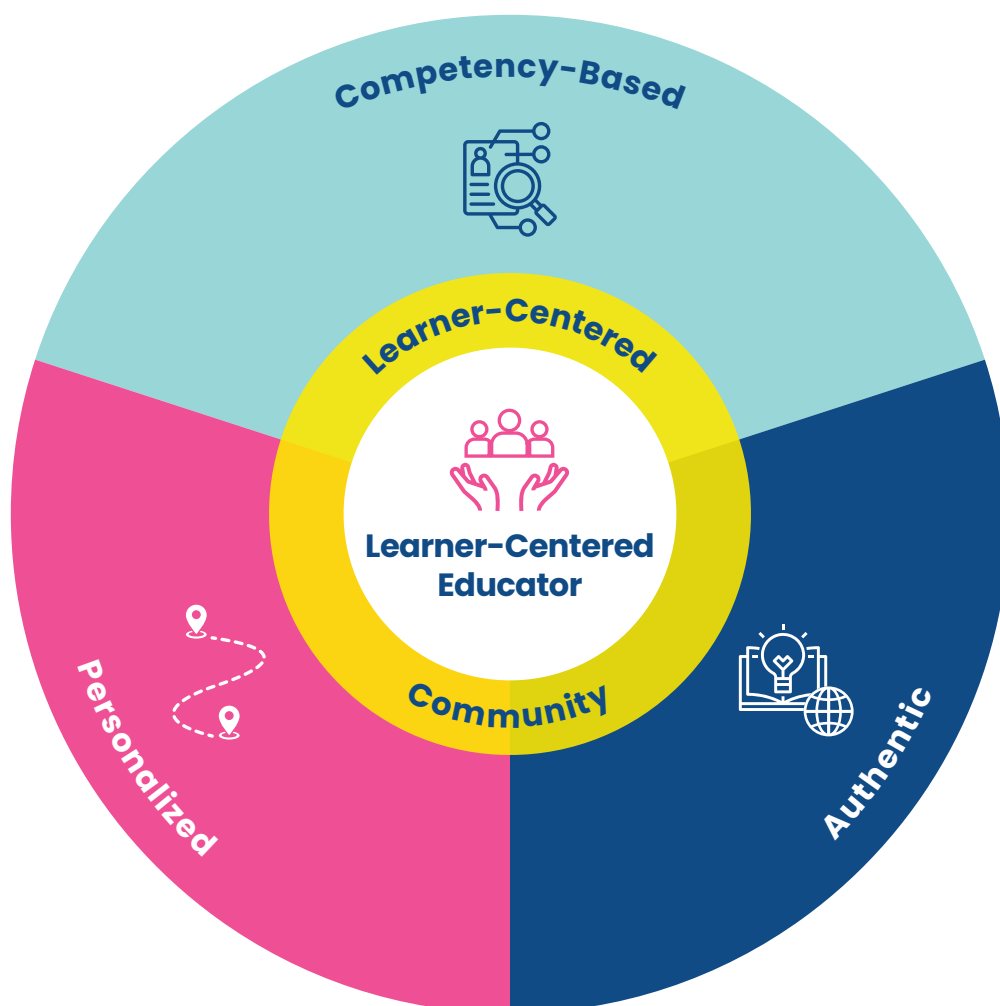
Learning Model

Aligning educator mindsets, learning community design, and learning experiences to cultivate learner-centered ecosystems and support professional learning, evaluation, curriculum, and resource allocation.

Once a shared vision for learner success is in place, we can begin bringing that vision to life within the daily student and educator experiences. This isn't about starting from scratch; it's about building on what's already working and intentionally designing learning that helps students grow toward the outcomes defined in the Portrait of a Learner.

At Learner-Centered Collaborative, we've drawn from **leading research** in the learning sciences and practical application with our school and district partners to identify three key elements of a learner-centered learning model:

- Embracing a **learner-centered mindset** and a reflective and collaborative approach to teaching and learning practices, leveraging technology as a tool.

- Designing **learner-centered communities** with flexible spaces and use of time that amplify learner voice, intentionally build community, and cultivate a sense of belonging.

- Creating **learner-centered experiences** that are authentic, competency-based, and personalized.

Learning Model Elements

Learner-Centered Mindset: A learner-centered educator embraces a mindset that prioritizes the needs, strengths, and interests of each learner. They continuously reflect on their practice, using feedback and evidence to adapt instruction and improve learning outcomes.

Collaboration is a cornerstone of their work. They engage with colleagues to share ideas, co-design learning experiences, and support one another's growth. Additionally, they use technology intentionally, not as a substitute for teaching, but as a tool to enhance personalization, deepen engagement, and expand access to meaningful learning experiences. This commitment to growth, collaboration, and purposeful use of tools supports a dynamic and responsive learner-centered environment.

What this looks like: A 3rd-grade teacher regularly meets with her grade-level team to reflect on student progress and share what's working in their classrooms. When she notices some students are disengaged during writing time, she brings this challenge to the group. Together, they brainstorm new strategies, and she adjusts her instruction to incorporate more student choice and real-world writing prompts. Her openness to feedback and belief that all students can thrive drives her to continuously adapt and improve her practice.

A high school English teacher believes in equipping students with the tools they need to navigate a rapidly changing world. She introduces AI writing tools not as shortcuts, but as supports for brainstorming, revising, and refining their work. Together, the class discusses the ethical use of AI—when it's helpful, when it crosses a line, and how to maintain academic integrity. She models how to prompt AI tools for idea generation while encouraging students to bring their own voice and critical thinking to their writing. Collaborating with colleagues, she helps develop shared guidelines and reflections that support learners in using AI responsibly and thoughtfully.

Designing Learner-Centered Communities: This means creating an environment where all students feel seen, heard, and supported to thrive. This begins with **cultivating a sense of belonging** that requires centering

each learner's unique identity, integrating diverse perspectives into learning experiences, and co-designing inclusive policies that ensure every student can thrive.

Building community requires dedicating time to fostering relationships, developing self-awareness and self-management skills, and co-creating routines that nurture trust and connection. To embrace the needs and goals of learners, **utilizing flexible spaces and time** is critical to shifting out of a school-centered model. This requires intentionally structuring physical and digital learning environments that adapt to diverse needs, including rethinking furniture arrangements, using spaces beyond the classroom, and designing flexible schedules.

Finally, educators **amplify learner voice** by regularly seeking feedback and involving students in decision-making, empowering them as active participants in their learning.

What this looks like: A 5th-grade teacher transforms her classroom into multiple zones: a quiet reading nook with floor cushions, a collaborative project table, and standing desks for movement-based learners. She also integrates "Flex Friday," where students choose how to spend part of their day—whether it's catching up on assignments, pursuing a passion project, or joining a peer-led workshop—giving them voice and ownership over their learning time.

In a middle school social studies class, students help co-create class norms and rituals that reflect their values and cultures, such as a rotating "culture spotlight" where students share traditions or stories from their families. The teacher intentionally selects texts and resources representing a wide range of voices, and holds regular reflection circles to ensure all students feel seen and valued.

A high school advisory program begins each semester with community-building activities and learner surveys about how students prefer to learn, communicate, and collaborate. The advisor uses this input to adapt group norms and learning approaches. Mid-semester, students conduct peer interviews and collaboratively lead a class meeting to propose improvements to how their advisory space functions.

Creating Personalized, Competency-Based, and Authentic Learning Experiences

Personalized: Personalized learning is the practice of designing and facilitating experiences that allow learners to understand their unique needs, interests, and goals. It empowers educators to meet students where they are, providing multiple pathways for growth and ensuring every learner has voice and choice in how they engage with content, demonstrate understanding, and drive their own learning journey. Personalized learning is ultimately about what students do to empower themselves with the support of their educators.

What this looks like: A middle school teacher creates flexible learning playlists that allow students to explore science concepts at their own pace and interest level. An elementary educator holds regular goal-setting conferences with students to co-create learning plans tailored to their strengths and needs.

Competency-Based: Competency-based learning experiences are mastery-driven. Learners have clear goals and flexible pathways to demonstrate what they know and can do. This approach shifts the focus from seat time and pacing guides to meaningful progress, ensuring all learners advance based on evidence of understanding. With timely feedback and just-right supports, students are empowered to take ownership of their learning and move forward with confidence.
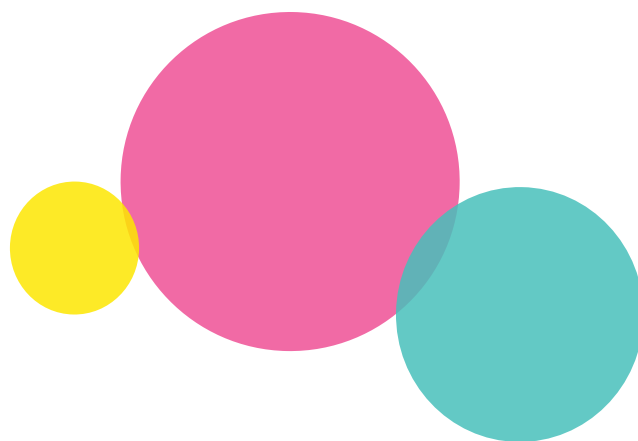
What this looks like: A high school math teacher uses learning progressions so students can track their progress and demonstrate proficiency. He builds in cycles of feedback where students can reflect, revise their work, and demonstrate their learning in other ways.

A middle school student defends her learning on the Portrait of a Learner and shares examples of her growth from her portfolio.

Authentic: Authentic learning is purpose-driven and relevant to real-world contexts. Educators help students see the value of their work beyond the classroom. This approach increases engagement and deepens understanding as learners apply their knowledge in meaningful, often collaborative ways that reflect how learning shows up in life, work, and citizenship.

What this looks like: A 4th-grade class partners with community organizations to conduct empathy interviews, design solutions to local community issues, and present them to city council members.

Learners investigate the health of a local watershed by collecting and analyzing water samples in collaboration with a city environmental agency. They study data trends, learn about environmental science, and develop multimedia presentations to share findings and recommendations with local government and community groups.

Professional Learning Competencies for Educators

Within each element is a set of **educator competencies** that strengthen and support implementation of the learning model, including an outline of educator mindsets and skills needed to design, facilitate, and assess within the learner-centered ecosystem. These competencies support educators with self-assessment, identifying strengths and opportunities for growth, and charting their unique professional learning path. In a competency-based professional learning system, educators could earn **micro-credentials,** professional learning credits, and even salary increases based on demonstrated impact.

To change how students learn, we must change how educators learn. Central to this approach is creating professional learning experiences for educators to develop necessary mindsets and skills, work with others to engage in authentic work, and demonstrate competence at their own pace. This is the lens through which we build our **self-paced courses,** and it guides the professional learning experiences we co-design with our partners.

Overall, this learning model serves as a foundation for transforming a school or district's learner-centered vision into reality. By aligning educator mindsets, community design, and learning experiences, we create environments where all learners can thrive. Grounded in research and shaped by real-world practice, this model offers a clear path for professional growth, systems alignment, and meaningful learning outcomes.

How Learner-Centered Collaborative supports systems in designing learner-centered communities and learning experiences

Innovation Cohorts with Learner-Centered Collaborative are designed to support educators with all three elements of the learning model. Through a series of in-person and virtual sessions paired with resources such as strategy pages, tools, and **courses,** educators self-reflect on the educator competencies, make meaning together, collaborate on performance tasks, provide each other feedback, and share the culmination of their learning and work through a Celebration of Learning.
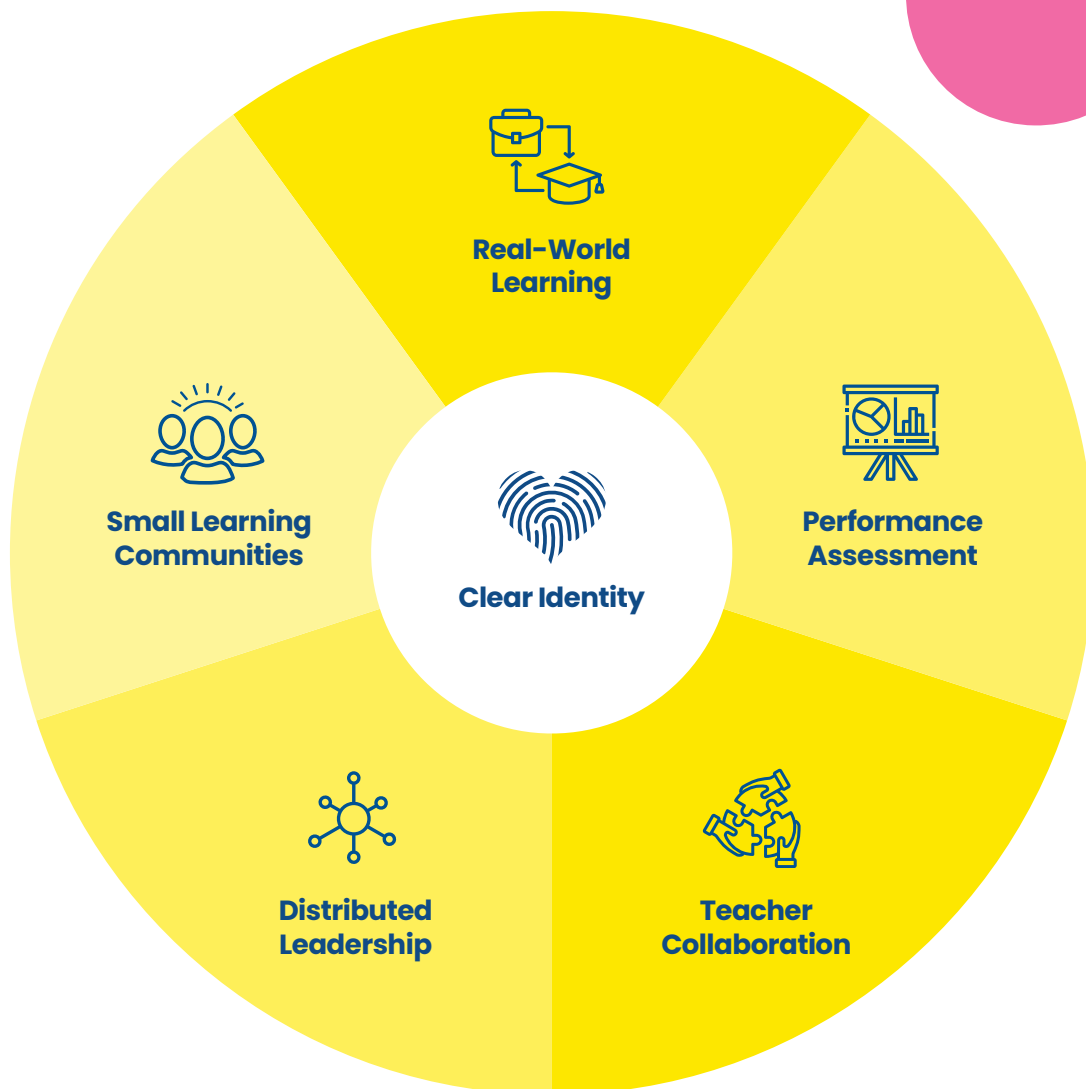
School Design

School structures are intentionally designed to support learner-centered practices.

While individual teachers can lead important learner-centered shifts, scaling this approach across a school or system requires intentionally designed structures and systems that act as levers for lasting change. Districts play a key role in setting policy and allocating resources, but much of the transformation happens at the school level, where significant autonomy and flexibility shape what learning looks like in the classroom.

Some new school models are intentionally built from the ground up with learner-centered design in mind. Space, staffing, and culture are aligned to a bold, modern vision. While these

"lighthouse" schools offer powerful examples, they are not the only path to realizing a learner-centered approach.

Through our visits to more than 100 diverse schools—from micro-schools in island communities to rural campuses spread across wide regions to large, urban school sites—we've identified five key structures that consistently support and enable learner-centered practices, all based in a clear, learner-centered identity of the school.

Real-World Learning

Small Learning Communities

Clear Identity

Performance Assessment

Distributed Leadership

Teacher Collaboration

At the Center

Clear identity: A compelling focus of the school, grounded in the district or organization-wide vision, that organizes the structures in a way that is unique to the community to develop the desired outcomes for learners.

What this looks like: Mālama Honua Public Charter School stands as a compelling example of a school with a clear and purposeful identity, deeply rooted in Hawaiian cultural values and traditions. Inspired by the worldwide voyage of the Hōkūle'a, the school's mission is to cultivate the "mind of the navigator" in both students and educators—developing individuals who are compassionate, curious, and capable of navigating life with wisdom and integrity.

This identity is not merely symbolic; it permeates every aspect of the school's approach. Through place-based and project-based learning, students engage in experiences that connect them to their community and environment, fostering a deep sense of responsibility and stewardship. The integration of indigenous knowledge systems with 21st-century skills ensures that learners are not only academically prepared but also culturally grounded. By aligning its educational practices with its core values, Mālama Honua creates a learning environment where students develop a strong sense of self and purpose, exemplifying the power of a clear and coherent school identity.

School Design Structures:

Small Learning Communities: Learners belong to multiage small groups organized by a caring adult. These groups create a sense of community and support social emotional and academic development. These structures are sometimes called **advisory,** crew, teams, or houses. Another way to think about small learning communities is to rethink cohorts of students and educators to create small learning communities across classes in a larger school building or to cohort students in ways other than grade level.

What this looks like: Conway Academy of Expeditionary Learning in Escondido, California, exemplifies the transformative power of EL Education's Crew model in fostering a learner-centered culture. At Conway, Crew is both a structure and a culture that permeates the school environment, promoting collaboration, support, and shared responsibility among students and staff. This approach encourages students to work together, support one another, and strive for collective success, embodying the ethos of "we are Crew, not passengers."

The Crew program at Conway is integral to building strong relationships and a sense of belonging, which are essential components of a learner-centered ecosystem. By engaging in regular Crew meetings, students develop social-emotional skills, reflect on their learning, and set goals, all within a supportive community. This consistent practice not only enhances academic achievement but also nurtures character development and a commitment to the school's values.

Conway's implementation of the Crew model demonstrates how intentional structures can create a cohesive and empowering school culture. By embedding Crew into the daily fabric of the school, Conway ensures that every student is known, supported, and challenged to be their best self, illustrating the profound impact of small learning communities on student success.

Real World Learning: Regularly sanctioned time and structures for learners to engage in authentic work, across disciplines and with community partners. This may look like blocks of time for interdisciplinary and community-connected projects with multiple educators, design thinking challenges, or days set aside for extensive fieldwork and/or internships.

What this looks like: KM Global, a charter school within the Kettle Moraine School District in Wisconsin, stands as a compelling example of real-world learning in action. Designed for students eager to engage with education through purposeful interaction and influence, KM Global emphasizes personalized learning pathways that extend beyond traditional classroom boundaries. Students participate in internships, job shadows, and field experiences,

allowing them to apply academic knowledge in authentic settings and gain valuable insights into potential career paths. This approach not only fosters academic excellence but also cultivates leadership skills and a global perspective, preparing students to navigate and make a positive impact in an increasingly interconnected world. By integrating real-world experiences into its curriculum, KM Global empowers students to take ownership of their learning and equips them with the skills necessary for success beyond high school.

Performance Assessment: Assessment and reporting of student progress includes evidence of how learners have grown and developed whole-learner and academic outcomes through competency-based and authentic performance assessments. This could include **exhibitions of learning, student-led conferences, portfolios, defenses of learning,** and **competency-based reporting.**

What this looks like: SEEQS (School for Examining Essential Questions of Sustainability) in Honolulu, Hawai'i, offers a compelling model of performance assessment through its Portfolio Defense process. This approach enables students to reflect on and demonstrate their learning by curating a portfolio of work that showcases their development in five key Sustainability Skills: reasoning analytically, thinking systemically, collaborating productively, managing effectively, and communicating powerfully.

In their 8th-grade year, students select exemplars that represent their growth in each skill and present a live defense before a panel comprising teachers, peers, and community members. This process not only assesses academic achievement but also fosters self-awareness, critical thinking, and public speaking skills. By engaging in this rigorous reflection and presentation, students take ownership of their educational journey and prepare for future academic and life challenges.

The Portfolio Defense at SEEQS exemplifies how performance assessments can be integrated into a learner-centered educational model, emphasizing real-world skills and personal growth over traditional testing methods.

Teacher Collaboration: Educators have regular, structured time during the work day and throughout the year to learn together, collaborate and co-teach. The time is used to learn and apply new strategies, co-design interdisciplinary projects and learning experiences, reflect on implementation, review data, and create plans to support learners.

What this looks like: Design39 Campus (D39C) in San Diego, California, stands out as a leading example of educator collaboration, having reimagined traditional school structures to prioritize collective growth and innovation. At D39C, teachers are known as "Learning Experience Designers" (LEDs), reflecting their active role in co-creating learning experiences. Each morning, LEDs dedicate an hour before students arrive to collaborate in various teams, planning interdisciplinary projects and sharing strategies to support student learning.

This commitment to collaboration is further supported by the school's design, featuring open, flexible spaces that encourage teamwork among educators. By embedding collaboration into the daily routine and physical environment, D39C fosters a culture where educators continuously learn from one another, leading to more dynamic and responsive teaching practices.

Through these intentional practices, Design39Campus exemplifies how rethinking school structures can empower educators to work together effectively, ultimately enhancing student learning experiences.

Distributed Leadership: Structures that support and facilitate shared ownership and agency at all levels, including opportunities for learners and educators to make decisions. These include structures such as student advisory, Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT), and school committees.

What this looks like: Vista Innovation & Design Academy (VIDA) in Vista, California, exemplifies distributed leadership by empowering educators to take on leadership roles that align with their passions and expertise. At VIDA, leadership is a shared endeavor, with teachers actively participating in decision-making processes and leading initiatives that enhance the school's learning environment.

For instance, educators at VIDA are encouraged to design and lead professional development sessions, mentor peers, and spearhead innovative projects that reflect the school's commitment to design thinking and deeper learning. This approach not only fosters a sense of ownership among staff but also cultivates a collaborative culture where diverse perspectives contribute to continuous improvement.

By distributing leadership responsibilities, VIDA ensures that decision-making is informed by those directly involved in teaching and learning. This model promotes adaptability, encourages innovation, and strengthens the school's capacity to meet the evolving needs of its students. Through its commitment to shared leadership, VIDA demonstrates how empowering educators can lead to a more dynamic and responsive educational environment.

How Learner-Centered Collaborative supports systems in designing learner-centered schools

Designing a new school or going through an entire school redesign process requires a team and support. Learner-Centered Collaborative supports **School Design Teams** through a human-centered design process beginning with empathy work to understand the community's needs, culminating in a clear Framework for the Future that defines the school's clear identity and how it will design for the 5 school structures identified as critical for learner-centered schools and a plan to launch the new model.

How These School Structures Support Community Schools

Learner-Centered Collaborative's school redesign process is deeply aligned with the goals and strategies of **California's Community Schools Initiative.** Both efforts emphasize whole child development, systems that support all learners, and strong school-community partnerships. At the core of Learner-Centered Collaborative's approach is a structured yet flexible design process that begins with empathy and community voice—key elements of the Community Schools framework. By guiding school teams to co-create a clear identity grounded in local values and aspirations, and by supporting the design of five essential school structures—small learning communities, real-world learning, performance assessment, teacher collaboration, and distributed leadership—Learner-Centered Collaborative helps build the conditions and learning experiences that community schools aim to foster. These structures enable schools to address academic, social-emotional, and community-connected goals in integrated and sustainable ways. Whether launching a new model or redesigning an existing school, this process provides a roadmap for transformation that centers students, empowers educators, and aligns seamlessly with California's vision for learner-centered community schools.

Community schools prioritize real-world learning practices rooted in the identity of students and connected to their communities. An example of the school redesign process at Felicita Elementary, a **Community School** in Escondido Union highlights the power of leveraging Learner-Centered Collaborative's school structures to not only provide wrap-around supports for schools, but fundamentally shift what happens inside the classroom to break down walls and structures to ensure that learning is personalized, competency-based, and authentic. As a result of the community redesign process they defined their school's **Framework for the Future,** a bold vision for their school, and outlined 5 Big Moves that describe the action items they will take to bring their vision to life.

Felicita Elementary's 2025–2026 Big Moves

Big Move #1
Focus on Global Framework Competencies with Problem-Based Learning by partnering with California Global Education project and creating Problem-Based Learning units tied to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Big Move #2
Create Community with Felicita Families (small learning communities) by defining Felicita culture, maintaining mentors and developing lessons for teachers.

Big Move #3:
Learn with Explore Classes through grade-level rotations taking 3 exploratory classes per year.

Big Move #4:
Student Leadership with a Focus on Public Speaking including implementing a student council, a student ambassador and advisory program and classroom greeters.

Big Move #5:
Create Staff Leadership Teams including a curriculum building team, a community partnership team and a culture team.
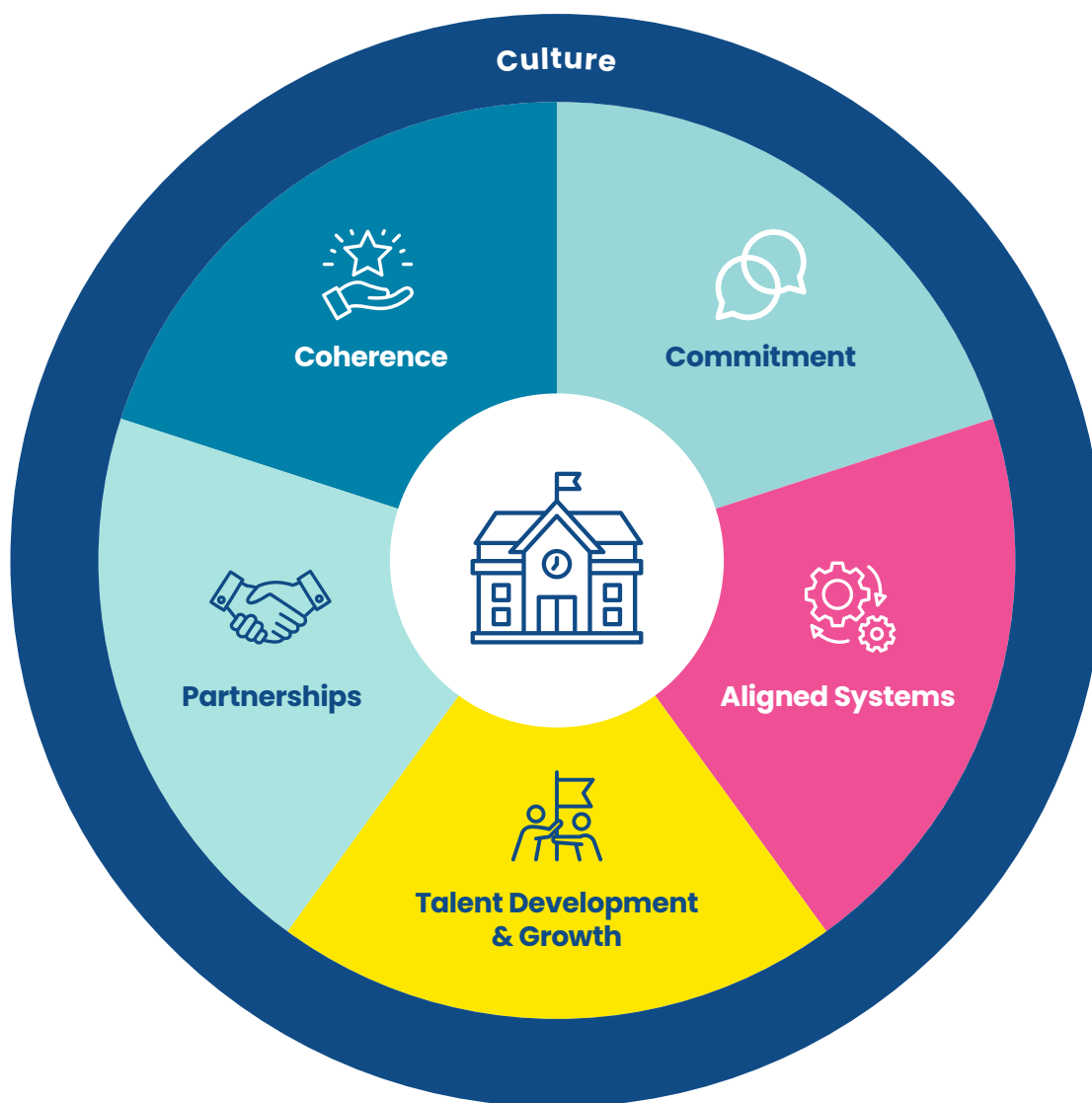
Enabling Conditions & Culture

The conditions necessary to support the development of whole learner outcomes.

As we work to reimagine our education ecosystems, we must pay close attention to the conditions in which we teach, learn, and collaborate. **Research** consistently shows that learner-centered practices flourish when educators have the **time, support, and trust** to do what's best for their learners—both in the classroom and across the school community. Yet rising demands, burnout, and turnover are real challenges that impact educators and the learners they serve.

It's no surprise that teachers and leaders often leave systems where they feel unsupported, undervalued, or unequipped to meet students' needs. We can change this. By creating conditions that empower educators as professionals and position learners as active agents, we build systems that **inspire leadership rather than demand compliance.**

More than a century after the design of industrial-era education systems, we now stand at the threshold of a learner-centered era. It's up to all of us to carry forward the lessons that still serve us, let go of what no longer does, and co-create new systems that meet the needs of today's learners. Attending to the **enabling conditions** in our schools and communities is essential to making that vision a reality.
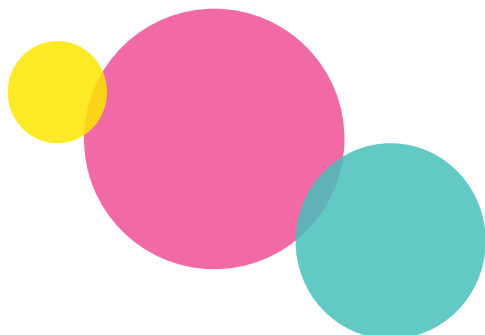
Enabling Conditions

Coherence ensures everyone in the system is moving in the same direction, guided by a shared understanding of purpose and priorities. It begins with a **shared vision**—one that is shaped by the voices of learners and the broader community and reflects collective aspirations for what learners need to thrive. This **vision** is more than words on a page; it is a unifying force that aligns mission, values, outcomes, and expectations for teaching and learning across all stakeholders. Coherence is sustained through **clear goals and strategies**—a well-defined Blueprint, or strategic plan, that outlines desired outcomes and success metrics that allow people to take actionable steps to turn the vision into reality. When coherence is strong, every decision and initiative feels connected, purposeful, and grounded in the bigger picture.

What this looks like: Escondido Union School District exemplifies what's possible when a system is anchored in coherence. Through a deeply collaborative process with students, families, educators, and community members, the district has developed its **Framework for the Future**—a comprehensive foundation that includes a community-designed vision, mission, and core values, along with a Portrait of a Learner, a districtwide Learning Model, and clearly articulated "Big Moves" with five-year goals and success indicators. This cohesive framework serves as the north star for everything from leadership development to **school redesign** and professional learning. In Escondido, coherence ensures that every initiative is connected to a shared purpose, creating alignment and momentum across the system—and turning vision into reality.

Commitment is built through transparent communication, active listening, and a collective drive to bring a shared vision to life. This includes ensuring clear, open, and accessible communication that fosters trust and shared understanding across the community. Feedback loops are intentionally designed to invite input, reflect on practice, and support continuous improvement. Central to this process is the amplification of learner voices—ensuring students' perspectives and experiences are not only heard, but meaningfully shape decisions and practices. Through storytelling that celebrates bright spots and progress, communities are inspired to stay engaged and deepen their commitment to the collective vision. Together, these elements create ownership, responsiveness, and forward momentum toward a shared vision.

What this looks like: Encinitas Union School District built a deep commitment to learner-centered transformation by co-creating a shared Profile of a Learner and aligning it with a strategic plan grounded in community aspirations and values. From the outset, the district engaged educators, families, and students to define the knowledge, skills, and mindsets most essential for learners to thrive. This shared vision became a touchstone for change, guiding decisions and creating a sense of collective purpose. As the district undertook the complex task of redesigning report cards to reflect this vision, they prioritized transparent communication and established structured feedback loops to gather input, address concerns, and make iterative improvements. By honoring community voice and working collaboratively through change, Encinitas fostered trust, built ownership, and strengthened commitment to creating assessment practices that reflect the whole child.

Aligned systems are the backbone of a sustainable learner-centered ecosystem, ensuring that every policy, practice, resource, and metric reinforces the shared vision for learner success. This alignment starts with a commitment to **measure what matters**—prioritizing organizational and individual metrics that reflect whole-learner growth, wellness, and progress. **Learner-centered policies** further this vision by placing the needs and interests of learners at the forefront, shaping regulations and guidelines that promote engagement and agency. **Resource allocation**—from time and space to curriculum and staffing—is intentionally designed to support personalized, flexible learning environments. Finally, a strong **digital infrastructure** enables these practices by ensuring the right tools and systems are in place to support seamless, equitable access to learning. When systems are truly aligned, they don't just support learner-centered practices, they amplify them.

What this looks like: Northern Cass, a rural school district in North Dakota, has broadened their view of success from a single standardized metric to include metrics aligned to their strategic plan, including: impactful partnerships, engaged learners, empowered educators, and learner growth and performance. To tell their story, they have designed a **dashboard to measure what matters and communicate their goals** and progress to the broader community.

Growth and development are essential to sustaining a learner-centered ecosystem, ensuring every team member thrives and continuously evolves. Grounded in **high expectations and meaningful support,** this condition builds on individual strengths, talents, and aspirations to foster a culture of continuous learning. Through **cycles of learning,** educators engage in ongoing opportunities to learn, apply new strategies, reflect on their practice, and grow in alignment with the shared vision. **Evaluation and feedback** are framed as tools for development—not judgment—incorporating self-reflection, evidence, coaching, and actionable feedback to highlight strengths and surface areas for growth. Thoughtful **hiring and induction practices** ensure new team members are smoothly integrated and aligned with the organization's mission, values, and culture from the start. Together, these elements create a dynamic environment where individuals are empowered to improve, innovate, and lead.

What this looks like: Eastern Hancock Schools in Indiana have reimagined their teacher evaluation system to prioritize professional growth over traditional judgment-based assessments. Recognizing conventional evaluations often induced anxiety and failed to support meaningful development, the district introduced the Teacher Growth Plan in fall 2023. This initiative emphasizes self-reflection, personalized goal-setting, and collaborative feedback, positioning educators as active participants in their professional journey. By shifting the focus from numerical scores to qualitative growth, Eastern Hancock fosters a culture where teachers feel supported and empowered to enhance their practice, ultimately benefiting student learning outcomes.

Aligned systems are the backbone of a sustainable learner-centered ecosystem, ensuring that every policy, practice, resource, and metric reinforces the shared vision for learner success.

How Learner-Centered Collaborative supports systems in creating the enabling conditions for learner-centered evolution

Through the development of a **Framework for the Future and Blueprint** Learner-Centered Collaborative supports systems in developing coherence and shared commitment through communication strategies.

In **Leadership Academies** and **Design Teams,** educators build their capacity as learner-centered leaders and collaborate with cross-functional teams to develop aligned systems, initiate learner-centered growth, and create development plans and partnerships that support their vision.

Partnerships are a powerful driver of learner-centered ecosystems, expanding what's possible for learners by connecting schools with families, communities, and broader networks of support. **Family partnerships** foster meaningful communication and collaboration, ensuring families are active participants in their children's learning journeys. **Community partnerships** deepen relevance and engagement by linking learning to real-world opportunities and addressing broader community needs— bringing authentic experiences into and beyond the classroom. Through **networks,** schools tap into collective wisdom, sharing resources, knowledge, and innovations that accelerate progress toward shared goals. When partnerships are strong and intentional, they break down barriers, expand access, and enrich the learning experience for all.

What this looks like: A powerful example of community partnerships in action is Remake Learning, a network based in the greater Pittsburgh region that brings together educators, families, community organizations, libraries, museums, and industry partners to reimagine learning for today's youth. By fostering collaboration across sectors, Remake Learning creates opportunities for learners to engage in authentic, real-world experiences that are relevant to their lives and futures. Whether it's connecting students with local makerspaces, supporting youth-led civic initiatives, or aligning learning experiences with regional workforce needs, the network exemplifies how community

partnerships can break down silos, expand access, and make learning more engaging and meaningful. Their work shows that when schools and communities come together around a shared vision, powerful learning ecosystems emerge that serve all learners.

Culture

A cross-cutting element that underpins each level of this ecosystem is **culture.** This includes the mindsets you hold about learners and learning, the ability to trust the people you engage with—from the youngest learners to the adults you collaborate with—and, finally, the belief in your collective ability to make an impact in the lives of young people by equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets to thrive in school and life.

Culture isn't mandated. It is co-created through the everyday beliefs, behaviors, and interactions of the community. While leadership sets the tone by modeling mindsets, fostering trust, and creating conditions for collaboration, the true strength of a thriving culture comes from shared ownership. When adults align around a belief in each learner's potential and engage in ongoing reflection and learning, they build the collective momentum needed for lasting change. This kind of transformation is driven by a shared mindset that is reinforced daily through relationships, feedback, and consistent practice. It's this cultural foundation rooted in learner-centered mindsets, relational trust, and collective efficacy that allows innovation to flourish and empowers students and educators to grow.

Evolution in education requires adults to examine their commitment and foster **learner-centered mindsets and beliefs,** which are essential for creating a learner-centered educational environment. By prioritizing **relational trust** among educators, students, and the community, a strong foundation is built that encourages open communication and mutual respect. Furthermore, the emphasis on **collective efficacy** ensures that all members of the educational community believe in their shared ability to achieve positive outcomes and have the resources to do so. Together, these elements create a cohesive and empowering atmosphere that promotes the success and well-being of every learner.

Scaling innovation requires spreading a mindset, not just a footprint, as noted by Bob Sutton and Huggy Rao, Stanford professors and authors of "Scaling Up Excellence." They found that across diverse organizations, "scaling depends on believing and living a shared mindset throughout your group, division, or organization." Spreading and updating a mindset requires relentless vigilance, repeatedly stating beliefs and living behaviors. Innovation flourishes when teachers collaborate on best practices, are provided opportunities to question, learn, and explore new methods, and are guided by a common vision and support.

Day-to-day interactions within the ecosystem impact what educators believe, how they learn, and how they design opportunities and experiences for their students. Professional learning must be embedded in an ecosystem redefining success measures, prioritizing learning at all levels, and evolving to meet community needs. Change in education is about creating better ecosystems for learning and innovation, not just better programs or tools.

What this looks like: Mineola Public Schools exemplifies a learner-centered culture where leadership, innovation, and community collaboration converge to empower educators and students. Under the visionary guidance of Superintendent Dr. Michael Nagler, the district has redefined traditional education by fostering environments that prioritize learner agency, personalized learning, and real-world application. Initiatives like Synergy at Mineola High School embody this ethos, offering students opportunities to co-design their learning experiences, engage in community-based projects, and develop competencies that extend beyond the classroom.

By integrating tools such as **Badge Books** and emphasizing **reflective practices,** Mineola ensures learners are active participants in their educational journeys. This commitment to a shared vision and continuous growth extends to educators and their own learning and growth opportunities and professional experiences that model learner-centered practices. Creating a culture of learning and innovation has **shifted mindsets** across the system and positioned Mineola as a beacon of learner-centered education, demonstrating the profound impact of a culture that values every stakeholder's contribution.
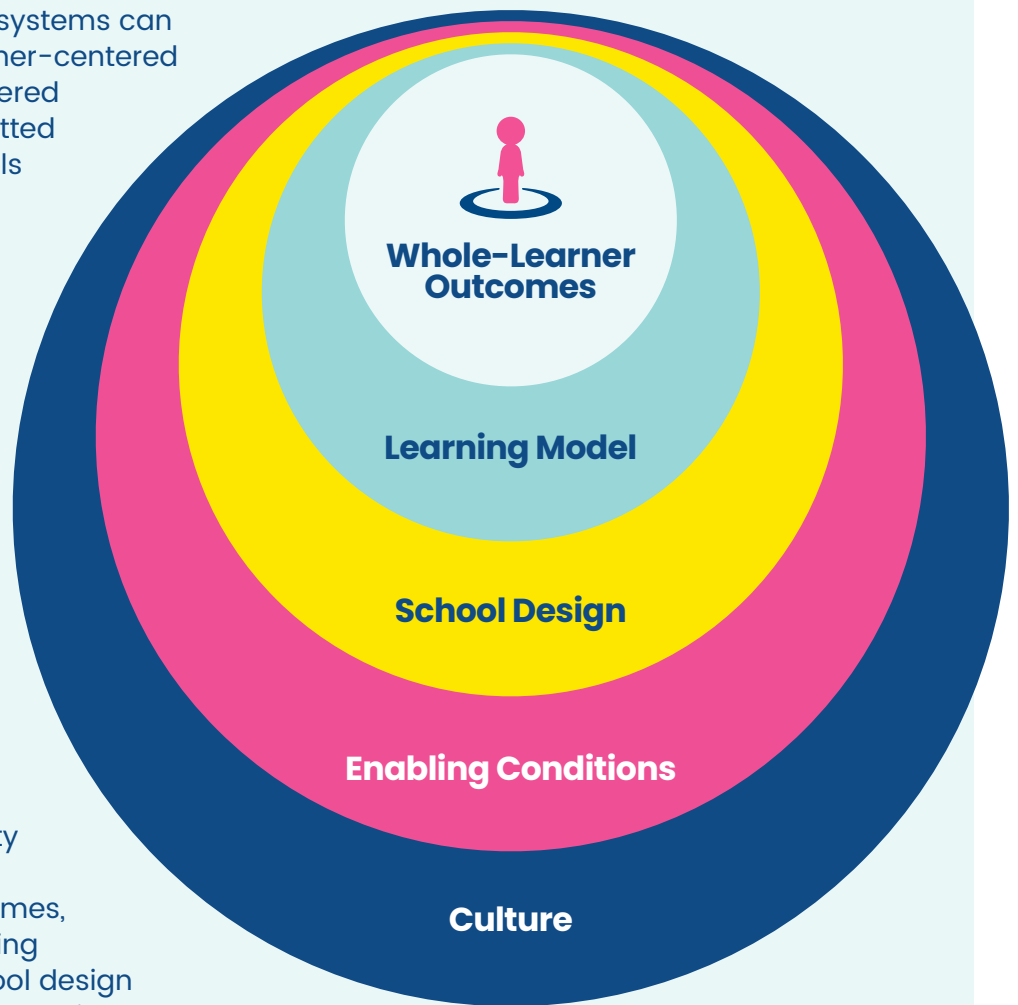
Yes, You Can Shift to a Learner-Centered Model

Schools that exist in current systems can and are transitioning to learner-centered paradigms. At Learner-Centered Collaborative we are committed to not leaving existing schools and their learners behind. It's critical that we evolve systems to support public schools in this shift. We all have a responsibility to consider how we can support existing systems to serve today's and tomorrow's learners. Each of us has an important role to play in this process.

The good news is that humans designed our current system, and we can redesign it too. Nothing stands in the way of doing this again. It starts with clarity as a community about our desired whole-learner outcomes, articulating the vision including the learning model and school design structures, and creating the enabling conditions while cultivating a learner-centered culture to achieve a shared vision.

Whole-Learner Outcomes

Learning Model

School Design

Enabling Conditions

Culture

Although the aspiration is bold, it's the small, intentional steps that build the momentum needed to create new, transformative models. By making these shifts, we can learn, grow and evolve to ensure that all learners have meaningful experiences and opportunities to know who they are, thrive in community, and engage with the world as their best selves. **Onward!**

Ready to begin or accelerate your learner-centered journey?

Explore more **resources on our website** and connect with our team at **collaborate@learnercenterd.org** to learn more about how we can **support you** to Create Coherence, Build Capacity, CoDesign New Systems and Structures, Measure What Matters, and Catalyze Networks as you make the shift towards learner-centered education.