

Systems Leadership + Ecosystem Stewardship

Cultivating Year-Round, Community-Wide Ecosystem

Connections to Fulfill the Public Education Promise

Karen Pittman & Merita Irby, Knowledge to Power Catalysts



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

Shift, Remake Learning

This summary of *Thrive STEM Intermediaries: Cultivating Connections Across Systems and Ecosystems to Help Youth Thrive*, commissioned by Remake Learning, was prepared for AASA's Public Education Promise Toolbox.

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

- **The principles behind these four features are widely embraced today.** The Portrait of a Graduate movement is one of many examples of the great strides school leaders are taking with their communities to incorporate these principles into a shared vision of public education.
- **The term “future” acknowledges the challenges system administrators must tackle** to infuse the principles of learner-centered education and ecosystem stewardship into a 150-year-old system – changing policies, priorities, and practices to encourage and reward risk-taking, collaboration, and agency in their staff and learners.
- **The question is not whether change is needed, but how it can happen faster**, ensuring that changes made will help those farthest away from opportunity thrive rather than fall farther behind.

FUTURE FEATURES

Across the 11 big ideas, these features emerged indicating the group's collective interests and priorities for features they hope future learning systems will include:

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

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

BROADER DEFINITION OF EDUCATOR Integrating informal educators, mentors, coaches, and other caring adults into students' learning journeys to diversify expertise and tap into community support.

CREDIT FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNING Recognizing and accrediting learning that occurs outside of traditional classrooms and school hours, ensuring all educational experiences are valued and contribute to holistic development.

School leaders are working diligently to transform the “grammar of schooling” ossified in a 150-year-old system to offer the features youth, parents, school and community educators, and business leaders want that build real skills for real life by incorporating more relevant challenges and real-world experiences.

Making the **Future Features** a current reality for every learner challenges school leaders to think differently.

School administrators across the country are inspiring and empowering their teams to:

- **Enhance the learning experiences they create.** Continue to use the shift from seat-time to competency recognition to accelerate efforts to create family, community and business partnerships to enhance the learning experiences of their learners when they are officially in school – in and outside of classrooms.
- **Understand the learning experiences other systems create.** Sit with community, youth development, and workforce development leaders to develop a full picture of learning opportunities available to youth and families that are not only outside of their walls but outside of their control.
- **Co-imagine a nimble civic infrastructure to ensure equitable access to 360° | 365 | Up to Age 25 learning pathways.** Jointly agree to expand the goal from rebuilding individual systems to building community-wide, year-round, credit-bearing learning experiences and career pathways for youth and for young adults needing more transition time that optimize the connections between the people, places, and possibilities within the different systems.
- **Champion the development of ecosystem stewards and ecosystem intermediaries,** purpose-built nonprofit organizations that operate independently from youth-serving systems – complementing, rather than competing with organizations that work with youth and families directly – building bridges across the fields of education, youth development, career pathways, and health.

Systems leadership and ecosystem stewardship require different mindsets, skill sets, strategies and structures. Both types of leadership are critical. One is much better understood than the other.

[Learning Ecosystem Intermediaries: Cultivating Connections Across Systems and Ecosystems to Help Youth Thrive](#) uses case studies of four mature local ecosystem intermediaries to examine the differences between ecosystem stewardship and system leadership. The report, commissioned by Remake Learning, defines ecosystem intermediaries, summarizes the commonalities that contributed to their success, reviews their strategies for working with school and other system leaders, and offers action steps for system leaders. [Strategies for addressing the first three challenges are covered in two of our earlier reports: [Too Essential to Fail – Why Our Big Bet on Public Education Needs a Bold National Response](#) and [When Youth Thrive, We All Thrive.](#)

Two-page pullouts from the full document follow that:

- **Describe what ecosystems intermediaries do** and provide quick introductions with links to the four intermediaries profiled.
- **Describe how ecosystem intermediary leaders work** and define the essential elements of ecosystem stewardship.
- **Offer five ways school administrators can do more** to champion and strengthen year-round learning ecosystems where every connection is optimized by incorporating the SoLD Design Principles at every level.

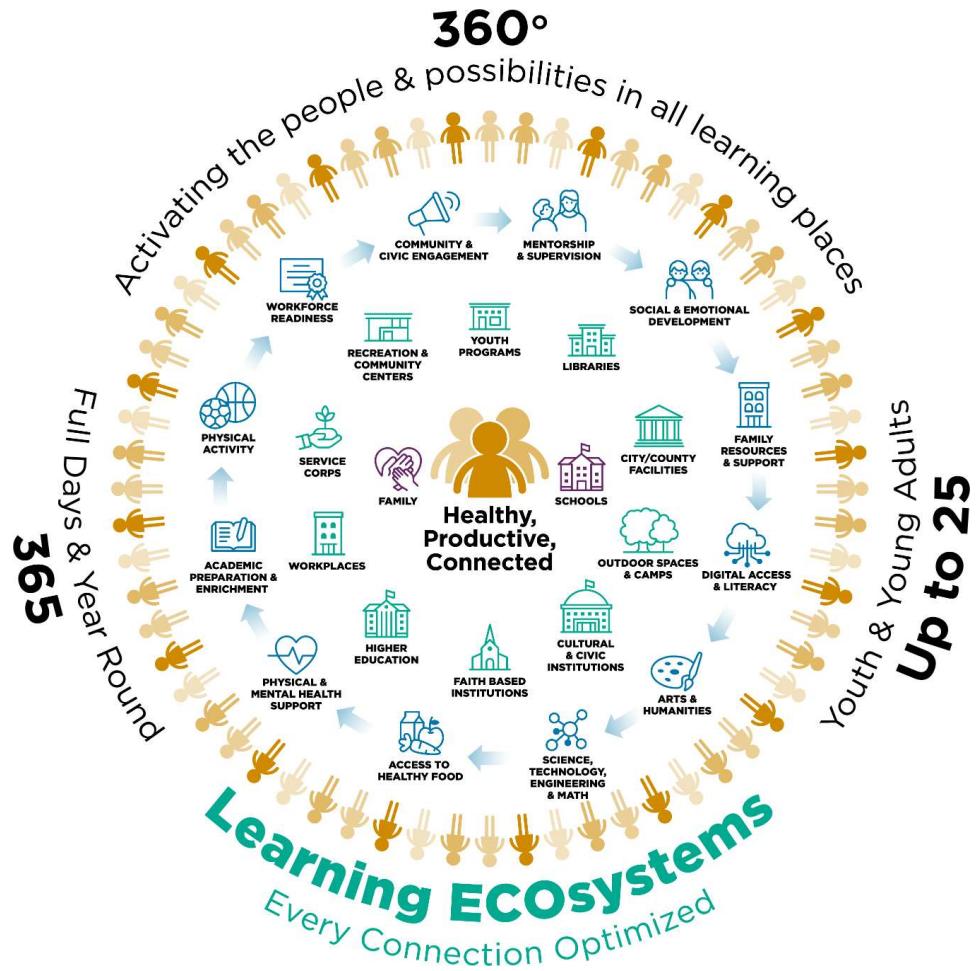
What Do Ecosystem Intermediaries Do?

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

Most communities have one or more nonprofit intermediaries – an out-of-school time network, children’s collaborative, provider coalition – that provides or coordinates training, funding, advocacy, planning and recruitment for their members. The role of mature ecosystem intermediaries, however, is broader. Rather than focusing on improving schools or scaling programs, they focus on increasing the quality, quantity, and accessibility of high quality learning experiences throughout the full range of organizations where youth spend time.

Effective learning ecosystem intermediaries:

- **Focus on improving the design and availability of learning experiences and pathways across systems and throughout the community**, contributing to the development of critical skills and competencies needed for young people to be productive, healthy and connected.
- **Actively work to partner with and create opportunities for educators** in their school districts and broader communities to expand access to learning experiences built around the **Future Features** in school and community.
- **Commit to ensuring that teens farthest from opportunity are future-ready**, with the competencies, connections, and experiences needed to thrive in work, learning, and life.
- **Develop system-level solutions and network structures** that have been or could be leveraged by K-12 and/or adapted or adopted by other communities.
- **Design or adapt tools, technologies and training that can be packaged for use by others** and are part of larger networks that support knowledge transfer of best practices across learning systems focused on academic, social/emotional/civic, or workforce readiness development.
- **Adopt or develop measures of learner, educator, and community impact** that can complement traditional accountability or impact measures.



Learn more about four mature nonprofit ecosystem intermediaries that selected different starting points for forging connections for real-world learning in their communities. Click on their websites or link to the report overview to read their 3-page How I Built This stories with detailed timelines.



Imagine Your Community as a Human Library



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



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



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

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

How Do Ecosystem Intermediary Leaders Work?

Well-managed ecosystems may look more like [organized chaos](#) — a term organizational management experts define as “a situation that appears disordered and chaotic on the surface but actually has an underlying order or structure. It often describes systems, environments or processes where there is a high level of activity, complexity or apparent randomness, yet everything functions effectively and efficiently due to hidden rules, patterns or organization.” Research documents that this approach leads to greater adaptability, collaborative decision-making, innovation and creativity, and trust in the potential unleashed when connections between ecosystem actors are optimized.

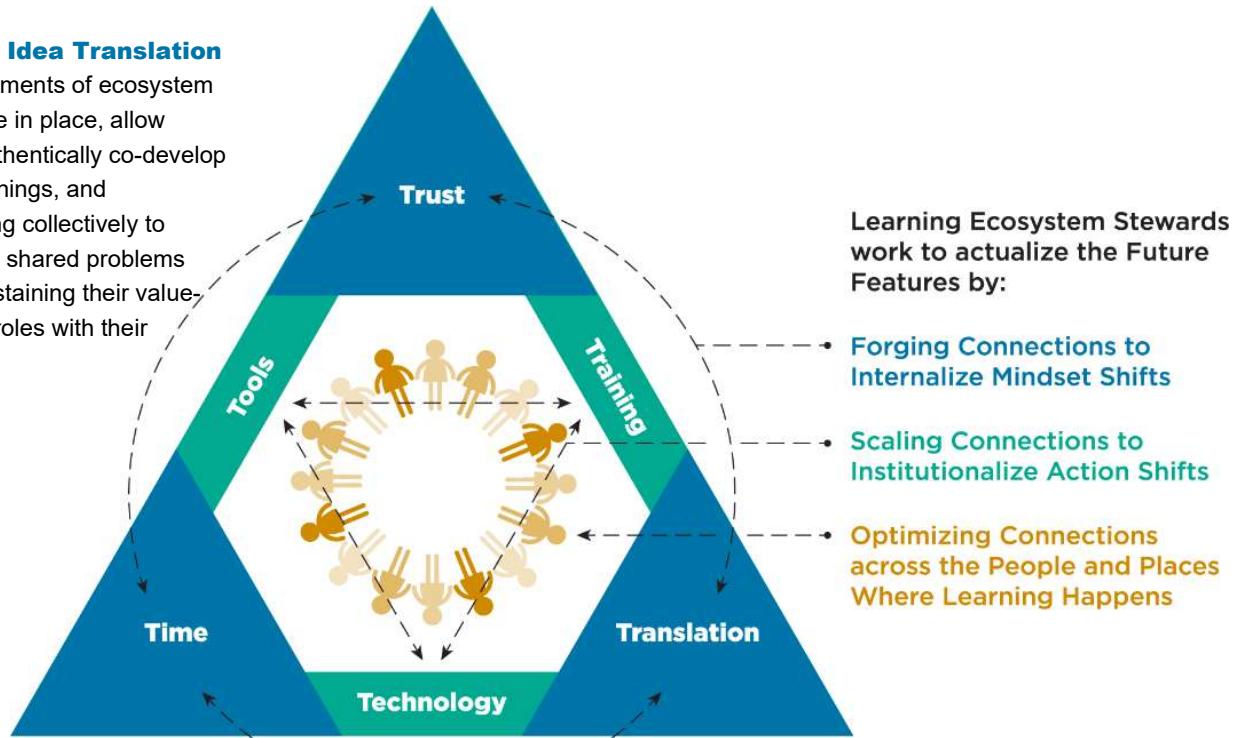
Ecosystem stewardship is different from system leadership. Both types of management are essential but require different mindsets, skills, and strategies. **Effective ecosystem intermediary leaders:**

- **Are natural boundary spanners** who see the complexity and connections in the ecosystem, are comfortable with the organizing chaos and creativity, are professionally grounded in interdisciplinary approaches, and take the time to build trust through extensive listening, engagement, and co-creation. They have often had experience inside systems.
- **Lead with trust building**, taking the time needed to forge ideas from deep, authentic conversations, build trust across stakeholder groups, and find the right words to translate complex ideas into accessible plain-speak before codifying organizational goals and strategies.

Essential Elements of Ecosystem Stewardship

Trust, Time, and Idea Translation

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



- **Formalize their initiatives in flexible structures outside of the K-12 operating system**, even if the seed germinated within, because of their desire to innovate K-12 and alternative education solutions quickly, responding to a current problem with an eye towards implementing one or more **Future Features**.
- **Find ways to embed the Future Features at all levels (from practice to policy) using language that resonates across systems and settings** to improve the experiences of *all* learners regardless of where they are enrolled or neighborhoods where they live by:
 - Promoting **Learner Agency throughout the community** by directly creating opportunities for youth to have more control over what, when, with whom and how they learned, focusing on real-world opportunities for building competencies and connections that matter.
 - Institutionalizing the principles behind **School Unwalled** by developing strategies and systems that make it easier for partners and resources beyond the school building, day and year to contribute and connect to consistent (versus ad hoc) opportunities to learn, lead, and earn credit or wages, creating more visible and varied learning pathways.
 - Operationalizing a **Broader Definition of Educator** by developing informal and formal opportunities for educators, mentors, and coaches in school and community organizations to not only be recognized and supported but have opportunities to work together across system boundaries, filling time and space in and beyond the school day and year.
 - Normalizing the idea of getting **Credit for Out-of-School Learning** by creating sustainable paths for teachers to find partners to take learner projects into the community; engaging industry, business and city services leaders to co-design competency-building learning and work experiences with youth that lead to industry credentials; or developing quality standards and enriched program content to help out-of-school time program providers engage teens in interest-driven learning linked to school credits.

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

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

All four scenarios are possible and can even coexist. But all are not equally good for renewing our democracy. The Future Features are best realized with schools as learning hubs, retaining the functions that guarantee access to safe, supportive environments and instill core skills and values needed for learning, work and life while facilitating easier and more equitable access to and credit for learning acquisition when and where it happens. **Ecosystem intermediaries play a complementary hub role, assuming functions aimed at maintaining the innovation, adaptability, and collaboration features that are the hallmark of a healthy learning ecosystem.**

What More Can School Administrators Do?

Here are five ways to bring ecosystem thinking into your systems at all levels – from inside classrooms to across systems and ecosystems.

1 SEE the full learning ecosystem — from the perspective of young people and families.

To broaden your aperture and bring the fuller ecosystem into focus, ask the young people you work with:

- What are you passionate about learning and doing?
- Where do you find your most powerful learning and skill-building opportunities? Both within your school building and across your community?
- How relevant and rigorous is what you're learning with us?
- How can we help connect you to the people and places you need, ensure you get credit for learning you've already done, and support you on your path forward?

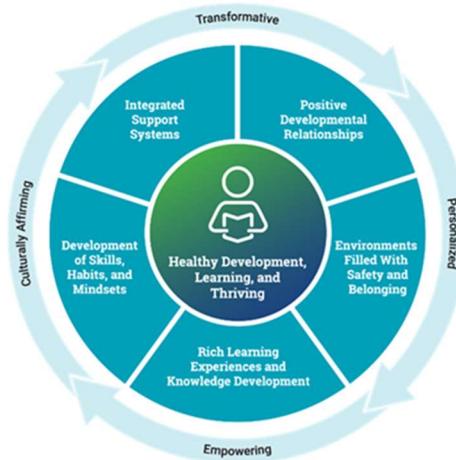
2 ZOOM IN on shared purpose — powerful learning experiences and pathways.

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

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

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

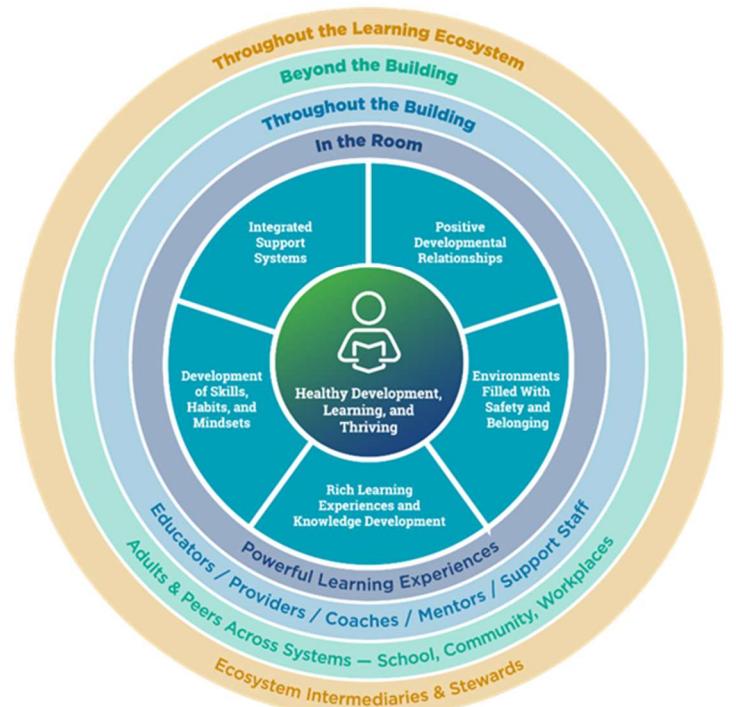
The Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance is a resource hub for researchers, practitioners and policy makers. They have operationalized their main finding — that every child has the potential to succeed because environments, experiences, relationships and contexts matter more than genes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



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

Below, we have modified the Blue Wheel in two ways.

- 1) To specify each of the levels where the principles apply in schools and other systems.
- 2) To insert a familiar definition of youth success, the Portrait of a Graduate, inside the wheel.



3 OPTIMIZE the Mesosystem: The People, Places and Possibilities Closest to Youth.

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

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

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

Elevate the expertise and approaches of people and places working directly with youth across the learning ecosystem, especially where young people have found success through innovative and alternative approaches beyond the traditional classroom. Bring these experienced educators together to examine ways to:

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

5 SUPPORT & STRENGTHEN stewards and intermediaries already at work.

Identify, invest in, and learn from ecosystem stewards. Before building something new, look across your community to find people and places where the essential elements of ecosystem stewardship are already at work. Ask:

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

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