

DAY ONE PROJECT

Investing in Community Learning Ecosystems

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Summary

Developed during a different industrial era, today's education system was never designed to meet modern learners' needs. This incongruity has heaped systemic problems upon individual educators, blunted the effectiveness of reforms, and shortchanged the nation's most vulnerable young people — outcomes exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19. Building back better in a post-pandemic United States will require federal investments not only in schools, but in "learning ecosystems" that leverage and connect the assets of entire communities. Tasked with studying, seeding, and scaling these ecosystems in communities across the country, a **White House Initiative on Community Learning Ecosystems** would signal a shift toward a new education model, positioning the United States as a global leader in learning.

Challenge and Opportunity

The Challenge: Though the pandemic's true toll has yet to be realized, school districts nationwide are grappling with cratering tax revenue, soaring costs, and potentially historic levels of learning loss — at least as traditionally understood.¹ Early forecasts show that some students could return to school in September an entire year behind. Students of color, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families will likely bear the brunt of these losses; in fact, data suggest that it's happening already.² All of this threatens to widen inequality and hobble the country's recovery.

However, the education system's underlying problems long predate the novel coronavirus. For decades, the shortcomings of what was once considered "normal" were well documented in middling international rankings and yawning opportunity gaps. Despite the invaluable, even heroic work of American educators, schools alone are no longer sufficient for addressing the complex needs of today's learners — a fact made plain by COVID-19.

The Opportunity: As the Biden-Harris administration considers policies for a post-pandemic United States, it is crucial that efforts to rebuild the nation's education system aim not toward "normal" but toward an altogether new model of learning — one equipped to expand children's opportunities; meet their interests and needs; and offer diverse paths to success.

¹ Valerie Strauss, "Perspective | How Covid-19 Has Affected School Budgets so Far - and What Lies Ahead without More Federal Aid," The Washington Post, October 7, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/10/07/how-covid-19-has-affected-school-budgets-so-far-what-lies-ahead-without-more-federal-aid/>.

Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and Learning Loss--Disparities Grow and Students Need Help," McKinsey & Company, December 8, 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help#>.

² Erin Richards, "Students Are Falling behind in Online School. Where's the COVID-19 'Disaster Plan' to Catch Them up?" USA Today, December 17, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/education/2020/12/13/covid-online-school-tutoring-plan/6334907002/>.

It is telling that despite the immense challenges of COVID-19, the vast majority of American parents have little desire to get back to business as usual. According to recent polls, nearly two-thirds want to leave “normal” behind and rethink education instead.³ As one pollster put it, “Never in my lifetime have so many parents been so eager for so much educational change.” And while most parents consider the education system to be in a state of crisis, they are also optimistic — a full 63 percent say education’s best days are ahead.⁴

The Biden-Harris administration has an opportunity to make it so. Building back better will require investments not only in schools, but in community-wide “learning ecosystems” that leverage and support the collective efforts of classrooms, science centers, libraries, museums, parks, afterschool programs, makerspaces, and more. With components both public and private, virtual and natural, learning ecosystems reflect today’s connected, interdependent society. The partnerships forged within them spark and spread high-impact innovations; support collaboration among formal and informal educators; provide opportunities for young people to solve real-world problems; and build more equitable, resilient communities.

Nearly every community contains the components of effective learning ecosystems. By studying and investing in the mechanisms that connect them, the federal government can seed and scale ecosystems that augment — and even transform — the ways that students learn.

Plan of Action

To build back better in American education, the Biden-Harris administration should establish a **White House Initiative on Community Learning Ecosystems** designed to provide communities with the tools and resources to ensure that every child can thrive. This initiative, which can be modeled on the Obama-Biden White House Initiatives on Educational Excellence for African Americans and Hispanics, should have four major components: 1) an executive director; 2) a staff from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development; 3) an initial allocation from a federal stimulus package; and 4) a mandate to work across federal agencies and with state, local, and tribal governments, educational agencies, nonprofit organizations, foundations, corporations, and members of the public. Specifically, this initiative should:

- **Establish a national commission on learning ecosystems.** Tasked with studying learning ecosystems in the U.S. and abroad, the commission would identify best practices and

³ Beth Hawkins, “New Poll Finds Parents Want Better Distance Learning Now, Online Options Even After COVID, More Family Engagement,” The 74 Million, November 17, 2020, <https://www.the74million.org/article/new-poll-finds-parents-want-better-distance-learning-now-online-options-even-after-covid-more-family-engagement/>.

⁴ Bruno Manno, “Analysis: What Do Parents Think About K-12 Education During & After COVID-19? Schools Are in Crisis, But Better Days Are Ahead, Survey Finds,” The 74 Million, November 30, 2020, <https://www.the74million.org/article/analysis-what-do-parents-think-about-k-12-education-during-after-covid-19-schools-are-in-crisis-but-better-days-are-ahead-survey-finds/>.

recommend federal policy that 1) strengthens existing learning ecosystems and 2) nurtures new ones. Led by the initiative's executive director, the commission should be composed of representatives from a variety of sectors, including education (early childhood education, elementary and secondary education, informal education, higher education, career and technical education, and adult education), labor organizations, research institutions, corporate and financial institutions, public and private philanthropic organizations, and nonprofit and community-based organizations at the national, state, regional, and/or local levels. See *executive orders linked in the footnotes for specific examples of similar commissions*.⁵

- **Establish an interagency working group to identify and coordinate efforts on learning ecosystems already underway within the federal government.** Because learning ecosystems are comprised of diverse cross-sector organizations, those organizations are often supported by a variety of federal agencies with missions that span everything from workforce development to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education to arts and culture. An interagency working group, modeled on the National Science and Technology Council's Subcommittee on Federal Coordination in STEM Education, will help identify existing activities, research, and funding for learning ecosystems across the federal government and will foster coordination and collaboration to maximize the effectiveness of federal investments.⁶
- **Establish a competitive grant program to support pilot projects.** As part of its next request for COVID-19 recovery and stimulus funding, the Biden-Harris administration should include a federal grant program of \$100 million to bolster learning ecosystems nationwide. These federal grants could seed new ecosystems in communities selected by the commission; larger grants could also support innovation among proven ecosystems. (Several promising ecosystems are operating throughout the country already; however, many are excluded from federal funding opportunities by narrowly-focused requests for proposals.) This grant program can be administered by the initiative's Department of Education staff.
- **Host a White House summit on learning ecosystems.** Bring members of the commission together with learning ecosystem leaders and practitioners from across the country, along with cross-sector community leaders. A White House summit could underscore promising practices, share lessons learned, and highlight monetary and in-kind commitments to

⁵ "Executive Order -- White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, July 26, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/26/executive-order-white-house-initiative-educational-excellence-african-am>.

"Executive Order 13555--White House Initiative On Educational Excellence For Hispanics," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, October 19, 2010, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/10/19/executive-order-13555-white-house-initiative-educational-excellence-hisp>.

⁶ Published in 2018, The United States' federal Strategy for STEM Education calls for fostering "ecosystems that unite communities" as a key approach toward "a future where all Americans will have lifelong access to high-quality STEM education." Committee on STEM Education of the National Science and Technology Council, *Charting a Course for Success: America's Strategy for STEM Education*, Executive Office of the President of the United States, December 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/STEM-Education-Strategic-Plan-2018.pdf>.

support local ecosystems. The summit could leverage the philanthropic commitments model developed and used by previous administrations to secure private and philanthropic support for learning ecosystems across the country.⁷

- **Establish an ongoing learning ecosystems grant program for scaling and implementing lessons learned.** As new learning ecosystems form and existing ones evolve, the Department of Education should continue to request appropriations to provide grants that support learning ecosystem partnerships between communities that allow innovations in one city or region to take root in another.
- **Invest in research, publications, convenings, outreach, and engagement efforts that highlight local ecosystems and make their work more visible.** The ongoing grant program can include funding for opportunities that elevate the benefits of learning ecosystems. Events such as Remake Learning Days Across America build demand for modern learning among parents, caregivers, and community leaders, ensuring grassroots buy-in and lasting change.⁸

⁷ Ryan Rydzewski, "What's Next for the Philanthropic Commitments Model?," *The Heinz Journal* 16, no. 2 (2018): 58–64, <https://remakelearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Heinz-Journal-Fall-2018-pages-61-67.pdf>.

⁸ "Remake Learning Days Across America," HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/remake-learning-days-across-america>.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why should learning ecosystems be part of the country's recovery efforts?

Learning ecosystems include diverse players that offer students more choices and more opportunities to explore their environments. As students deepen their understanding of the problems that face their communities, ecosystems provide authentic opportunities for impact. In greater Washington, D.C., teachers partner with cultural institutions to develop curricula based on young children's ideas about how to improve the city.⁹ In Kansas City, Missouri, high school seniors partner with entrepreneurs and industry professionals to solve real-world problems like ectopic pregnancies and salmonella poisoning.¹⁰ And in Pittsburgh, students partner with scientists to conduct cutting-edge cancer research.¹¹

Learning ecosystems can also boost local economies. In eastern Kentucky, an ecosystem of school districts, universities, and economic development organizations empowers students to reimagine former coal land for entrepreneurial purposes.¹² And in West Virginia, an ecosystem of student-run companies has helped the state recover from natural disasters.¹³

Finally, learning ecosystems support equity and resilience by directing additional resources to the students who will benefit most — an approach that will grow ever more essential as rates of pandemic-induced poverty soar. A focus on working alongside and supporting learners in poverty, learners of color, learners in rural areas, girls in STEM, and learners with disabilities is a cornerstone of Remake Learning, a Pittsburgh-based ecosystem of more than 600 schools, museums, libraries, and other spaces.¹⁴ Amid the outbreak of COVID-19, members of Remake Learning formed the Pittsburgh Learning Collaborative, a coalition of organizations that provides food, devices, a 24/7 hotline, and more for vulnerable learners and families.¹⁵

In which communities can learning ecosystems thrive?

Nearly every community boasts entities that can expand children's opportunities, meet their interests and needs, and offer multiple paths to success. These entities include science centers, museums, libraries, businesses, parks, afterschool programs, makerspaces, and more.

A 2020 report released by HundrED, a Finland-based nonprofit, profiles sixteen of the most

⁹ "DC-Maryland-Virginia: Promoting civic agency in the early years," HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/dc-maryland-virginia-promoting-civic-agency-in-the-early-years>.

¹⁰ "Kansas City: KC STEM Alliance's Senior Capstone Innovation Experience," HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/kansas-city-kc-stem-alliance-s-senior-capstone-innovation-experience>.

¹¹ "Hillman Academy," HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/hillman-academy>.

¹² "Eastern Kentucky: Re-Envisioning Community Spaces," HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/eastern-kentucky-re-envisioning-community-spaces>.

¹³ "West Virginia: Simulated Workplace," HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/west-virginia-simulated-workplace>.

¹⁴ "Remake Learning," HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/innovations/remake-learning>.

¹⁵ Melissa Rayworth, "Facing a School Year like No Other, The Pittsburgh Learning Collaborative Builds a Growing Culture of Cooperation," *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, August 18, 2020. <https://www.philanthropy.com/paid-content/independent-sector/facing-a-school-year-like-no-other-the-pittsburgh-learning-collaborative-builds-a-growing-culture-of-cooperation>.

promising learning ecosystems operating throughout the United States.¹⁶ Though each is connected in different ways — via staffed intermediary organizations, virtual platforms, science centers, and other mechanisms — they tend to share several characteristics in common: they create new learning pathways for young people; they are “porous around the edges” with low barriers to membership; and they support learner agency and problem solving.¹⁷

How do learning ecosystems differ from other education reforms?

While schools have long been bastions of progress thanks to the work of educators, the current system’s one-size-fits-all model was never designed for the connected, quickly changing world in which students now live. Tomorrow’s graduates will be tasked with thinking critically, working collaboratively, and tackling the intractable problems that COVID-19 magnified: rampant inequality, intense political and cultural divides, and extreme ecological changes and pressures.

Preparing students to tackle these problems will require more than tweaks to the current model. According to a 2019 report by the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), the returns on decades of well-intentioned reform efforts “seem to be reaching their limit as learning gains and reductions in inequality are incremental at best.”¹⁸

Rather than reforming the current model, learning ecosystems augment and transform it. For example, among members of Pittsburgh’s Remake Learning ecosystem, a robotics company partners with classrooms to teach coding and STEM. Librarians partner with teaching artists to provide weeklong deep dives into topics attractive to young people. The ecosystem’s publications, campaigns, and events help innovations spread from one community to another.¹⁹

How do learning ecosystems benefit American teachers?

Ecosystems support collaboration and community among educators even beyond their classrooms, schools, and districts. In 2018, for example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education launched PAsmart, a \$30 million initiative designed to enhance the state’s education and workforce development efforts. PAsmart’s “Advancing Grants” of up to \$500,000 each support cross-sector ecosystems that include educators from different districts and agencies. The South Fayette Township School District near Pittsburgh received an Advancing Grant to expand computer science not only for its own learners, but also for those in seven neighboring districts across four counties. Representing a microcosm of Pennsylvania, educators from these districts work side-by-side to identify crucial skills and design new ways to teach them, enhancing their collective impact.²⁰

¹⁶ Ryan Rydzewski, *Spotlight: Learning Forerunners Across America*. HundrED, October 2020. <https://hundred.org/en/collections/learning-forerunners-across-america>.

¹⁷ “Local Learning Ecosystems: Emerging Models,” WISE, April 30, 2019, <https://www.wise-qatar.org/2019-wise-research-learning-ecosystems-innovation-unit/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Spotlight on Pittsburgh,” HundrED, <https://hundred.org/en/collections/pittsburgh-usa>

²⁰ Gregg Behr, Tom Wolf, and Pedro Rivera, “As PAsmart’s Second Round of Funding Approaches, Here’s How Educators Are Changing Lives in Pittsburgh and Statewide,” NEXTpittsburgh, December 4, 2019. <https://nextpittsburgh.com/features/as-pasmarts-second-round-of-funding-approaches-heres-how-educators-are-changing-lives-in-pittsburgh-and-statewide/>.



About the Author

Gregg Behr is the founder and co-chair of Remake Learning, an internationally acclaimed ecosystem of educators, scientists, artists, and makers working to ignite children’s curiosity, encourage creativity, and foster justice and belonging in Pittsburgh-area schools, libraries, museums, and more. An advisor to the Brookings Institution and the Fred Rogers Center, Behr directs The Grable Foundation, a Pittsburgh-based philanthropy dedicated to improving the lives of children. He is the co-author of *When You Wonder, You’re Learning: Mister Rogers’ Enduring Lessons for Raising Creative, Curious, Caring Kids*, forthcoming from Hachette in April 2021.



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