LEARNING DESIGN CONSTRUCT 2: The Wider Learning Ecosystem

“Clearly, we face an urgent need to open up the learning landscape in America.... To do so, we need to create a richer fabric of learning opportunities for a diverse population of youth. The ‘we’ in this reform extends beyond traditional academic resources. A much broader segment of society needs to collaborate to find the domains and means to engage our young people in meaningful learning. Only then can we provide growth experiences that focus our young people’s passion and energy.”

—Robert Halpern, It Takes a Whole Society

One of the most striking implications of our exploration of the broader, deeper competencies required for a complex future is the realization that it is difficult, if not impossible, to help learners develop them without going outside the school walls. As definitions of readiness and success expand from good grades, high test scores, and a high school diploma to the kinds of agency and capability required for the age of accelerations, our students need new competencies: Content Knowledge that will enable learners — just as it does real-world practitioners — to solve problems, weigh options, and make decisions; Creative Know How, optimized for transfer in rapidly changing situations; Habits of Success that can be developed robustly in a variety of learning and work contexts; and Wayfinding Abilities that require “lines of sight” to careers and the adult world. As Halpern notes, “It makes little sense to take large numbers of inexperienced individuals who are the same age and relative maturity, place them in an isolated setting, and ask them to use that particular setting to grow, mature, gain knowledge, and experience.” But this is exactly what traditional schooling does.

A range of established learning opportunities for students already exists outside the formal school walls and day, including afterschool activities, library programs, and internships. While some of these offerings are excellent, the vast majority of students lack access to many of them. Students who do have access to such opportunities are likely to find what 2Revolutions calls “a labyrinth of siloed program sectors” with offerings that vary in quality, have little connection to academic work, and pay little attention to helping learners build social capital. To address the MyWays broader, deeper student competencies, schools need to better integrate the higher quality offerings from the established out-of-school sectors, offer students an even wider range of learning opportunities, and embed all of this into all students’ personalized learning paths. As Big Picture Learning says, “All students need to leave school — frequently, regularly, and of course, temporarily... To accomplish this, schools must take down the walls that separate the learning that students do, and could do, in school from the learning they do, and could do, outside.”

—Elliott Washor and Charles Mojkowski
temporarily... To accomplish this, schools must take down the walls that separate the learning that students do, and could do, in school from the learning they do, and could do, outside. The learning in both settings and contexts must be seamlessly integrated.” Big Picture calls it “leaving to learn.” As Michele Cahill describes it, this means, in essence, that “we [need] to redefine ‘school’ as a porous organization.”

We think of the Wider Learning Ecosystem as the broad expanse of opportunities beyond classroom learning that can enrich collective and individual learning as well as student agency — an ecosystem that is ever expanding and changing, with a spectrum from formal to informal prospects, accessed through a wide range of settings, media, and players. Our MyWays team is so convinced of the critical importance of engaging with this Wider Learning Ecosystem in a systemic and networked way that we are creating a separate resource on this topic, funded by the Barr Foundation; the forthcoming resource will be available on the MyWays website.

In this report, we provide a preview of what we’re finding, including a look at the benefits of wider ecosystem experiences in addressing the 5-5-5 Realities, the MyWays competencies, and Whole Learning. We also offer a model that organizes the ecosystem into five zones and a support infrastructure; describe a set of three engagement models for how schools, networks, and districts can incorporate the overwhelming benefits of “the real world” in their learning model; and provide a glimpse into a few design considerations for incorporating these benefits.

Exploring the Wider Learning Ecosystem

“At the heart of an ecosystem for learning is an ability to draw upon the assets of an entire city or community to support students as they grapple with the two primary tasks of adolescence: building competencies and forming their identities.”

— Michele Cahill, Smart Cities

Opportunities for learning are everywhere around us, presenting themselves all the time. While there is much joyful life learning to be pursued in this way, our work on the 5-5-5 Realities, adolescent development, and Whole Learning suggests that our students also need more intentionally organized and supported real-world learning experiences to help them prepare to navigate in an accelerating world. With the student at the center, the full spectrum of learning opportunities outside of classroom learning become what MyWays, with its focus on a broader, deeper set of competencies, calls the Wider Learning Ecosystem, or WLE.

In exploring the various ways that individual students can engage with learning, we found it possible to group most of the experiences relevant to K-12 learners that relate to learning, development, identity building, and social capital into five experience zones:
The Wider Learning Ecosystem
Five experience zones for expanding K-12 student learning and social capital

School-based extracurriculars. As many of us know, activities that are commonly regarded as being on the “periphery of schools” can offer more authentic, vital learning than core classes. Theater productions, science fair work mentored by local scientists, or business start-up clubs may be school-based but many access or emulate the real world.

College-based learning. While focused on academic or vocational knowledge, programs such as dual enrollment or early college let high school learners broaden their horizons into vastly expanded subject areas, as well as offering opportunities to practice and develop greater independence and self-direction.

Career-related learning. There’s no better preparation for the “whitewater learning” that students will need to do in their adult work lives than to get exposure now, in supported ways, alongside adults. This type of learning includes early career awareness and exploration, internships, apprenticeships, and paid work.

Community-mediated learning. Activities such as youth development programs and the offerings available through collective learning networks, which are offered by community organizations ranging from museums to maker spaces, give learners excellent opportunities to develop identity, agency, and social capital.

Everyday informal and formal learning. This zone captures informal learning with friends and family, online learning, participation in online communities of practice, and myriad other paths.

Navigating any of these zones requires a support infrastructure that enables young learners to access, engage with, and get the most out of the learning, growing, and networking they do outside the school walls. These supports echo the three parts of the MyWays Developmental Framework for Social Capital depicted in Report 4 as a tree, extending from root social supports that “sustain human well-being and growth,” through the trunk of adult developmental relationships that “foster self-exploration, growth, and engagement in the larger world” to the branches of connections and networks that provide the “resources needed to accomplish one’s goals.” In the Wider Learning Ecosystem, the webs of support and roles of institutional agents discussed in Report 4 are, as in the work/learn landscape, necessary for all young learners and absolutely vital for those who might start with fewer resources to begin with.

For more on the five zones, see the boxes at the end of this WLE learning section. But first, we explore why embracing WLE experiences is worthwhile. We also examine how educators can approach this opportunity to give their learners experiences that help them learn in ways particularly suited to a world that demands that they navigate complexity, exercise empathy, and practice other broader, deeper competencies.
The benefits of engaging with the Wider Learning Ecosystem

Engaging with the real world outside the school walls offers extensive benefits for learners, for educators, for schools, and for communities. The potential is still being explored, but some of the benefits already identified by those involved in wider ecosystem learning include the following:

- **Provides the opportunity and conditions for “whitewater learning”**
  
  A core benefit of this type of learning is that it offers students an authentic acceleration lane for dealing with our complex, uncertain world and its plethora of challenges and opportunities. This benefit is captured nicely by Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown’s concept of “whitewater learning.” They define whitewater learning as

  “the ability to acquire useful knowledge and skills while at the same time practicing them in an environment that is constantly evolving and presenting new challenges.... Our learning environments need to match the speed and degree of change happening in the world around us. Rather than systematically accumulating static ‘stocks’ of knowledge, students now need to learn how to actively participate in ‘flows’ of knowledge by engaging with others in the construction of new knowledge. This kind of knowledge is often put to use at the same time it is learned. It is most effectively acquired through solving problems with others in an environment that offers an abundance of challenges and unlimited opportunities.”

  Employers have been acknowledging this for some time; when asked for the most important factors in hiring a recent college graduate, their top choices relate not to academic performance but to more contextual, real-world experiences — including internships, jobs, volunteering, and extracurriculars.

- **Enhances deep learning through increased authenticity**
  
  Earlier in this report, we explored the need to increase the authenticity of learning experiences at the same time as we increase the level of critical thinking required of our learners. Engagement with the WLE offers a vastly increased array of learning experiences moving out the right hand **real-world abilities** axis, including those in the “golden rectangle” of situated learning. As highlighted by Thomas and Seely Brown earlier, such real-world settings are vital today because “our learning environments need to match the speed and degree of change happening in the world around us.... This kind of knowledge is often put to use at the same time it is learned. It is most effectively acquired through solving problems with others in an environment that offers an abundance of challenges and unlimited opportunities.” This is one of the most compelling reasons to embrace WLE.
 Increases opportunity to engage the seven principles of Whole Learning

Also earlier in this report, we presented the concept of Whole Learning, which draws together the characteristics of learning that targets the broader, deeper competencies, while incorporating lessons from learning science and successful deeper learning models. The seven principles of Whole Learning, repeated to the right, illustrate just how important a Wider Learning Ecosystem is to the practice of Whole Learning. While some of these principles rely fully on wider ecosystem opportunities, each of them is enhanced by learners acting in a variety of real-world communities alongside adults in meaningful work.

 Provides fertile ground for developing all four MyWays success domains

The variety of settings, challenges, and contexts available in the WLE provide rich opportunities for learners to work on all four MyWays competency domains. The exposure to authentic contexts and professional communities of practice enhance the application of Content Knowledge and opportunities to develop agile, transferable Creative Know How. The need for increased personal responsibility and social skills, the opportunities for personal choice, and the chance to test one’s responses to new and changing environments open doors to developing Habits of Success that more teacher-driven, static learning environments struggle to provide. The WLE offers perhaps the greatest additional opportunities for developing Wayfinding Abilities. Community and work-based learning in particular offer learners access to what Generation Schools Network calls “Visions of the Possible,” and Educurious calls “Lines of Sight” to career and adult life choices that schoolchildren from any background are less and less likely to be exposed to; such access is even more crucial for learners with deep but not wide or extensive networks. When out in the world, students can begin to try out acceleration lanes to their adult lives, finding out that more is expected of them, testing which learning strategies work when they are learning and doing at the same time, and asking themselves whether they are using all the assets they have.

 Offers connection to mentors and brokers, and other forms of social capital

As noted at the start of Report 4, “Opportunities do not float like clouds. They are firmly attached to individuals. If you’re looking for an opportunity, you’re really looking for people.” In that report, we show just how important the development of social capital is to the success of young people in the more uncertain, self-driven, flexible, and ever-changing society and economy they will need to navigate. In fact, we argue that social capital may be one of the key factors for success, as well as the limiting factor driving the opportunity gap for low-income students and students of color. Situating learning within real-world projects or work that involves adults, near-peers, community networks,
and professional communities of practice greatly increases the opportunities for youth to interact with mentors, coaches, brokers, and others who can act as connectors as these learners move out into the work/learn landscape in their wayfinding decade. As Report 4 points out, many internships and other WLE experiences fail to harness the potential for building social capital, but High Tech High, among a few other models, has long focused on this benefit (see the box at right).

- **Develops youth identity and learner agency**

  In Report 5, we discussed five developmental tasks of adolescence. Two of those — finding self, strengths, and direction, and acquiring capability and agency — are critically important to all students in developing success competencies; both tasks cry out for learning in the wider ecosystem, in which learners are called upon to develop their own resources and directions within highly challenging, and therefore stretching, situations, while also being surrounded by views of possible role models and (if they are fortunate) other supports that will enable them to safely prototype versions of themselves and work toward the self they want to be. As research cited in Report 4 suggests, the identity challenge for young people today is no longer about choosing fixed roles, but about ambiguity and continual choice. For this reason, “we need to take a long look at the conditions that prepare youth for a changing, uncertain future, including the experiences provided by the family, the peer group, the school, and the community as a whole”¹⁴ — precisely the developmental experiences in adult settings that occur across the WLE. At the same time, the development of agency, which MyWays defines as “a deep and durable self acting to shape one’s development and environment,” also varies by situation and is challenged by disorderly, unfamiliar circumstances. Experience in real and diverse situations is key to agency, and to help achieve growth, educators and youth advocates need to help students access and utilize a WLE that is unprecedented in its breadth and depth.

- **Improves student engagement**

  Student engagement is improved through a variety of factors, including greater satisfaction gained through the creation of productive and authentic outcomes, and greater meaning and the development of identity through connections to learners’ personal and community lives. Indeed, most of the other benefits listed above also result, as a secondary benefit, in the kind of deep student engagement in learning that improves and extends learning outcomes.

  —Ben Daley, CEO of High Tech High, tells students to choose a good mentor over what might seem like the perfect experience: “While students should look for an internship in an area of interest, they should also **carefully pick a mentor, a key piece of the experience.** It’s not about narrowly predicting what they are going to spend the rest of their life doing, it’s **much more about the relationship between mentor and student.**”¹²

  “Ultimately, the internship experience is a taste of the real world, a glimpse into various fields of interest and an enticement for what school can help students achieve. But the experience often develops personal growth, as well. **I think that internships are really, in essence, about an expansion of identity, of incorporating what you couldn’t have done before, and new relationships that you didn’t have before, into your sense of who you are.** And that’s something that’s a rare commodity in our classrooms, but it’s there in abundance in the internship experiences.”¹³

  —Rob Riordan, High Tech High
• **Offers additional opportunity to address equity issues**
Low-income learners, students of color, English-language learners, and those with disabilities often live in worlds with less wide-ranging community and work connections and fewer opportunities to develop other forms of social capital, while at the same time offering their own assets and funds of knowledge. In turning attention to the Wider Learning Ecosystem, we acknowledge this set of challenges up front and have designed into WLE programs and infrastructure ways to develop and enhance all learners’ abilities to build their own social capital offering. Since the 1990s, increasing income inequality and district funding cuts have only widened the extracurricular and enrichment participation gap between more- and less-advantaged families. While upper- and middle-class students have become more active in school clubs and sports teams over the past four decades, their working-class peers “have become increasingly disengaged and disconnected.”¹⁵ This is particularly counterproductive, as we begin to realize the ways in which active/authentic experiences might in fact play to the strengths of these students, and just how greatly these WLE experiences may effect later outcomes.¹⁷ We therefore need to ensure not only that all learners have access to potentially transformative experiences, but also that those who need it are given an enhanced support infrastructure. This infrastructure should support the development of critical consciousness to help learners access the WLE themselves. Efforts should also be aimed at structural change to make their ecosystem more equitable for other learners. MyWays, like UChicago’s Foundations for Young Adult Success developmental framework, highlights the need “to strike a balance between helping youth thrive in the world as it is, and develop the skills and dispositions they need to challenge a profoundly unjust status quo.”¹⁸

---

**Three ways schools engage with the Wider Learning Ecosystem**

In much of our exploration of the Wider Learning Ecosystem, we worked to keep the learner front and center. We adopted an institutional lens, however, to examine how schools organize their interaction with the Wider Learning Ecosystem in order to bring a transformed learning experience to their students. Schools and networks/districts start in different places and also have different aims for how they incorporate the WLE. In our initial scan of current practice, we’ve tracked three different approaches to such engagement:

- **Integrated engagement**: Wider Learning Ecosystem experiences are fully embedded and integrated in the school’s learning design.
- **Connected engagement**: schools connect directly at an institutional level with organizational partners to offer a particular set of WLE opportunities.
- **Facilitated engagement**: schools facilitate the engagement of individual learners with organizations or experiences of their choice within the Wider Learning Ecosystem.

---

“From an equity perspective, building an ecosystem that affords access to learning opportunities that extend and enrich academics is highly promising, as economically advantaged families are dramatically increasing their investments in student talent-building activities and experiences in the out-of-school time hours.”¹⁶

—Michele Cahill, Carnegie
Each of these approaches can be implemented along a spectrum of intensity. In addition, it is critical to note that these approaches are not mutually exclusive; some schools use two or more in combination. Schools looking for first steps, and those thinking deeply about longer-term strategies, should be able to find, somewhere in these conceptual options, inspiration for how they might increase their students’ engagement with the wider world.

**Integrated engagement**

Some schools’ learning designs have Wider Learning Ecosystem experiences baked into their DNA. In these cases, the wider ecosystem learning is almost always a rich “junior version,” structured to involve authentic process and meaningful product as well as real-world exposure, and to loop reflection and learning back into each student’s personal and academic learning plan. We will be exploring and analyzing these models further in our forthcoming WLE resource as they provide clues to vital design principles that can also be built into more circumscribed WLE experiences.

Perhaps the most succinct way to illustrate what makes these models different is to look at a well-known example: Big Picture Learning, the Rhode Island-based charter, which we cited at the start of this report for its practice of “leaving to learn.” Big Picture’s criteria for leaving to learn (see the box at right) illustrate what makes this embedded approach different from field trips, siloed service requirements, or individually organized, unconnected senior internship quarters: integration, reflection, personalization, and the value assigned to the WLE experience. Learners’ work inside and outside the school walls are connected and integrated in a way that genuinely changes both sides of the learning experience. Although it may not be surprising that these characteristics are visible in Big Picture Learning’s criteria for WLE opportunities, they are also woven through every one of the organization’s broader “10 distinguishers.” Learning Through Interests and Internships (LTI) clearly reflects this approach, but it is also evident explicitly or implicitly in almost every other distinguisher (look for parent and family engagement, treating each student holistically, assessment through public display of learning, an interdependence between school and community, and so on). As Elliott Washor and Charles Mojkowski put it in *Leaving to Learn,* “It’s not just about getting students out early and often, but about what they do when they get out, and how they bring their learning and accomplishments back to school.”

Examples of integrated, baked-in WLE exist throughout the five WLE zones, and seem particularly strong...
in career-related learning; see, for example, Generation Schools Network and Da Vinci Schools (both NGLC grantees) and Linked Learning.

**Connected engagement**

Schools may also opt to connect directly with organizational partners to offer a particular set of Wider Learning Ecosystem opportunities to their learners. This model offers the advantage of creating opportunities for a school’s entire student body, rather than relying on individual learner initiative (though within the partnerships, schools can still require learner initiative to locate and pursue particular learning opportunities). Further, some schools may see this model as easier to manage and quality-assure than individually-facilitated WLE learning, and the partnerships they pursue may further broader school/community goals.

Connected engagement often involves one-to-one partnerships between a school and one (or more) local companies, nonprofits, or community organizations for identified purposes. Schools might have such a partnership with a local community college for dual enrollment or early college programs, and/or with a local nonprofit that manages middle school shadow programs and high school internships. Establishing and managing these partnerships is a major undertaking, but can leverage broader innovation. Resources, toolkits, and exemplar cases provide guidance on setting up and managing such partnerships.

An alternative partnership model is to join in a multi-partner collective impact initiative with an existing (or forming) initiative. High-profile examples of learning collectives include Hive and LRNG (introduced in Report 4) and Education Innovation Clusters such as Remake Learning in Pittsburgh (see also the brief description of Hive in the box to the right). Hive and/or LRNG networks exist in more than a dozen US cities as well as globally, and other types of collective impact partnerships that include learning as at least part of their purpose also exist in some form in other cities and rural regions. The community-mediated learning zone section later in this report has more on this collective approach, as will the forthcoming MyWays Wider Learning Ecosystem resource. Full participation in this kind of collective impact requires a significant commitment, but also provides a potentially transformative way to engage learners with a participatory local learning ecosystem that offers not only an exciting, broad range of learning experiences, but also offers opportunities to build social capital that will serve participants well when they transition into the local work/learn landscape. For some insight into the process of creating such a network, see the Remake Learning Playbook, which covers “the
theory and practice of building learning innovation networks, the resources and strategies required to put networks into action, and the impact of the network in schools, museums, libraries, communities, and more.”

**Facilitated engagement**

In this model, the school’s role is to **facilitate the engagement of individual learners with organizations or experiences of their choice within the Wider Learning Ecosystem**. This may entail, for example, helping a student locate opportunities and navigate connections, as well as overseeing quality and outcomes. This model can be implemented on a limited front or become the core of the educational experience. On the more limited end, some high schools let learners take part in WLE learning for a few courses or credits of their curriculum or outcome requirements. Such schools may have one WLE facilitator to help guide and monitor students who are self-directed enough to organize an experience (such as an internship, service learning, or an independent online learning course for credit).

At the other end of the spectrum are schools that are all about facilitation. The [Virtual Learning Academy Charter School](https://www.vlacs.org) (VLACS), an NGLC grantee, has created an entire online system designed and built to support WLE learning in project- and competency-based ways; that system is now available for use by any individual student, school, or district in the country. Students can create their own flexible learning pathways of defined competencies through a mix of online courses, real-world projects, internships, and other experiences to earn a high school diploma. Relationships with their teachers, their college, career, and citizenship counselors, and their skills coaches are central to making this system work.²⁹

Many next generation learning models offer education that is personalized within the school or program, though few models accomplish this personalization by facilitating individual student-initiated access to diverse wider ecosystem learning on a large scale. Schools with integrated models, such as Big Picture, Da Vinci, and Del Lago Academy, often support this approach as well. For examples, see individual stories in Living Your Future’s blog on Nashville Big Picture High School and DaVinci Schools’ new non-classroom-based independent study RISE High, opened in fall 2017, to serve homeless, foster youth, and other students with diverse learning needs.

**Other design considerations for WLE experiences and systems**

Practitioners convinced of WLE’s significant value may wish to know more about how to design it into a new learning model, how to introduce it to an existing school-based design, or to how to build on a few successful but isolated real-world components. In our forthcoming MyWays WLE resource, we will explore these issues further, as well as curate existing tools to support the various development processes. Here, we highlight a few key issues and considerations flagged by our initial scan.
Essential design components
Two components that are clearly central are developing partnerships and establishing the necessary support infrastructure; the nature of each will depend on the engagement model you choose.

Partnerships that employ design thinking
Working outside school walls naturally calls for working with either organizations or individuals who live and work out there. Michele Cahill’s take emphasizes the centrality of such partnerships, as well as the agile, iterative way they need to work:

“[W]e needed to redefine ‘school’ as a porous organization and redefine ‘partnership’ as a core design element, not an add-on. When partnership is a core element of school design, students have opportunities for relationships with adults and experiences that literally expand the world that is well-known to them through connections with cultural organizations, professional and business settings, science and technical organizations, or community services.... Partnerships that are designed as core to schooling also can expand and deepen curriculum through themes, project-based learning, internships, student research, and expeditions. Design thinking gives real roles to partner organizations in a learning ecosystem.”30

Tom Vander Ark’s interview with Cahill (12m) offers more on partnerships, listening for discussion of design elements and principles, as well as the different types of partners. See also the Hive Learning Network and its collective impact partnership’s five core principles — creative & innovative, collaborative & cooperative, experimental & catalytic, relevant & consequential, equitable & open, and engaging & participatory — as well as Remake Learning’s seven lessons learned from its networking efforts over the past decade.

A broader, deeper support infrastructure
As our WLE construct suggests, appropriate supports are essential if learners are to benefit optimally from WLE learning. Given the nature of the wider ecosystem learning experience (increased learner agency, enhanced choice, new environments, more complexity, and greater real-world challenge), we urge educators to find inspiration in excellent youth development and school models that incorporate greater personalization and experiential learning programs (see the links at various points in this and other reports), as well as in Report 4’s MyWays Developmental Framework for Social Capital. A WLE infrastructure will need to emulate this framework’s attention to fostering well-being and self-exploration while also providing resources to enable learning and accomplishment of goals, all of which are particularly important for learners with social, emotional, or other challenges. Community partners can provide elements of this support, but schools will have to lead or instigate collective efforts on these fronts and ensure that (in all cases) the WLE experiences are integrated with classroom learning. This is likely to call for increased attention to advisories, guidance, coaching, and mentoring for all learners, and, for disadvantaged learners, even more intensive supports similar to those in the youth development programs featured in Report 4.
This support infrastructure will also need to be designed to support individual learner pathways that extend from middle school through to the wayfinding decade and the work/learn landscape described in Report 3 (particularly in the “Takeaway 4” section).

**What’s your goal? Depth and stages of implementation**

Deeply embedded and integrated Wider Learning Ecosystem learning offers substantial benefits to learners preparing for the complex and uncertain future. However, schools do not need to incorporate WLE into every aspect of their design to incorporate some of its benefits. Da Vinci Schools and Big Picture Learning represent one end of the spectrum: WLE design affects all aspects of the schools. (At Big Picture, for instance, “industry/third sector/community partners co-construct the assessment rubrics, so their standards and expectations become part of the school operating system and culture” and “relationships are horizontal, with learning being facilitated by a wide variety of adults and mentors”31). However, deep interaction with the WLE can also grow out of a defined service-learning component, such as the Cesar Chavez School for Public Policy’s progression of increasingly complex service-learning components, or a particular content focus, as in Colorado, where St. Vrain Valley public school district has partnered with IBM to integrate design thinking across its whole system. Authentic WLE learning can be included solely in parts of your curriculum, course, or schedule, and such opportunities can be implemented in stages over a period of years. One option, noted by Ron Berger of EL Education, is to try turning your field trips into “fieldwork,” having your students conduct research for a productive project by taking notes, taking photos, and interviewing experts.32 Regardless of the level of WLE integration, basic cultural and structural changes need to be embraced and implemented from the beginning, including ensuring that at least some opportunities are available to all students (including those with disabilities and at all levels of academic performance); that the learning in the WLE is linked to classroom learning; and that some kind of credit, badging, or evidence of learning outcomes is involved. For an excellent example of badging, see the box on Del Lago Academy’s Competency X badging system in Report 12.

**What’s your starting point?**

Plans for incorporating WLE into a school’s learning model will also depend significantly on where you start and the conditions within which you operate. These are crucial elements of the design picture, and our forthcoming WLE resource will analyze — and perhaps provide a decision tool for — various things you should consider depending on your starting point.

For example, a school already operating its classroom learning within a competency-based framework — but perhaps lacking significant experience working with community partners — will follow a much different path into the WLE than a school that has no track record with competency-based education, but considerable experience with external partners for, say, senior internships. While the former school may need to develop expertise in initiating and managing partnerships and creating a support infrastructure for
students spending time outside the school walls, the latter will need to put much greater thought into how to assess and validate the learning outcomes from new WLE experiences.

Many schools in New Hampshire, for instance, have transitioned to performance-based assessment (through the PACE program) and already address work-study practices (WSPs, which are that state’s approach to Creative Know How and Habits of Success). New Hampshire also has a forward-looking Extended Learning Opportunities (ELO) policy, defining ELO as the “acquisition of knowledge and skills through instruction or study outside of the traditional classroom methodology, including, but not limited to, apprenticeships, community service, independent study, online courses, internships, performing groups and private instruction.... School districts do not have to adopt ELOs; however, those that offer ELOs are required to have a policy for granting credits for students who successfully demonstrate competencies as a result of their participation.”

However, even some of the state’s districts that are furthest along with performance assessment and WSPs have yet to make significant inroads with experiential learning or increasing learner agency; thus, for these schools, incorporating ELOs/WLE learning would require development in agency and experiential learning areas.

An initial design step, then, would be to assess which (if any) of the following learning approaches are already incorporated into your school model and/or state or district conditions: personalized learning, competency-based education, performance-based assessment, experiential learning (including authentic PBL or related approaches), and learner agency. All of these approaches incorporate learning, assessment, and/or student support components that apply when building out WLE learning — though you may need to enhance the existing components to ensure that they work for the new learning environments and the challenges your students will be encountering.

**Broader systems issues**

Several other crucial systems issues must be addressed to successfully implement WLE learning design. Some of these are within the control of educators designing a model; others must be addressed at a larger ecosystem level. These will be explored in the forthcoming MyWays WLE resource; here we highlight two issues likely to require attention at the ecosystem level.

**Evidence, assessment, and crediting of learning outcomes**

Evidence, assessment, and credit involves a range of issues related to determining what students learn from authentic, complex experiences in the real world: How can we best collect evidence of learning outcomes? Who evaluates that evidence and how? How can learners best reflect on learning in iterative cycles that enable them to improve their skills? Beyond assessment as and for learning, how are such outcomes vetted for badging, larger credentials, and high school credit? Further, will the learning platforms let you store performance evidence so that learners themselves — as well as colleges and
employers — can access that evidence over time? Collecting and crediting learning evidence in the WLE is an emerging art, but various initiatives are attempting to make sense of what’s out there. In our forthcoming WLE resource, we will summarize progress in various badging movements, portable and stackable credentials, high schools providing credit for WLE learning, colleges and companies that assess candidates based on evidence of outcomes from experiential learning, and initiatives such as those in New Hampshire that give credit to prior learning accomplished inside or outside traditional classrooms. We will also look at the extent to which personalized learning and related platforms can facilitate how schools manage wider ecosystem learning and enhance the WLE experience for students. Project Foundry and SchoolHack’s LiFT, for instance, are designed with PBL and WLE learning in mind, while Big Picture Learning’s ImBlaze platform was designed to help run internship programs so that they connect to academics and carry as much learning value as possible. Summit Public School’s Summit Learning Platform and InnovateEDU’s Cortex are also targeted at the kind of personalized, competency-based learning found in the WLE.

New educator competencies and roles
If educators within the school walls have yet to move from imparting knowledge to guiding student learning, this mindset will need to be embraced in wider ecosystem learning. Nurturing educator support for a new vision can be challenging; change management for incorporating WLE learning will need to address this as well. Models in which WLE is fully integrated have nuanced educator recruitment, professional learning and practice, and a well-developed culture that engrains the value of authentic learning in the real world. Such models also have adapted educator roles to support both academic and social-emotional learning in that context. Big Picture Learning, for instance, already employs specialists who identify leaving to learn opportunities and establish relationships with mentors and coaches. In Report 7, we highlight schools that incorporate more adults with backgrounds in social work, psychology, counseling, and related fields into their core teams. Some might find Powderhouse Studio’s inclusion of a project manager on each learner support team surprising. However, if WLE learning continues to increase, we could soon see new educator roles similar to those projected by KnowledgeWorks: community intelligence coordinator, social capital platform developer, learning journey mentor, and education surveyor. Further, competency trackers could “tag and map community-based learning opportunities for competencies addressed”; learning naturalists could design assessments “to capture evidence of learning in students’ diverse learning environments and contexts”; and micro-credentialing analysts could “provide research-based comparative quality assurance metrics.”

More on the Wider Learning Ecosystem zones
The opportunities for learning anytime and anywhere, through organized programs, crowd-sourced initiatives, civic organizations, community maker spaces, online communities of practice, and even paid task work that also tracks competencies developed are proliferating. So, to end this section, we return to the five zones of opportunity for robust WLE learning. For further examples of learning in each zone, an analysis of zone characteristics — including common learning experience design, key zone institutions, and zone-specific partnership and funding considerations — and leads to tools and resources to help educators engage in each zone, see the forthcoming MyWays WLE resource.
School-based extracurriculars

A high school student once said to us, “I have a different idea for flipped learning. Why can’t we flip the way we learn in our extracurriculars into the main parts of the school day!” Jal Mehta makes this very argument in an excellent blog that asserts the “periphery” of schools is often “more vital than the core.” He teases out a set of characteristics that differentiate a high school theater program from standard academic learning — factors such as external audience, apprenticeship learning from near-peers, and the development of mastery, identity, and creativity.

Extracurriculars cover a range of activities; those of greatest value are as fully student run as possible, and involve a real-world experience or task. Robert Putnam summarizes the impressive range of “measurably favorable” outcomes for involvement in extracurriculars, even after controlling for family income and other variables: better academic performance and labor market outcomes, better work habits, higher aspirations, and college attendance. One study showed that those consistently involved in extracurriculars were 70% more likely to go to college.

- **Co-curriculars** are school-based activities that align closely with curricular academic subjects, such as science fairs, history fairs, and model United Nations. These co-curriculars can offer many of the “periphery” benefits discussed above, depending on the degree of learner self-direction involved and the authenticity of the activity. Some science and history fair projects, for example, can provide authentic experiences of what being a scientist or historian is actually like (rather than just “studying” science or history), particularly if students seek out professionals to mentor them in their research.

- **Extracurriculars** include theater, dance, and music productions; newspapers and literary magazines; and public service activities such as community action, environmental clubs, and Interact clubs. Such activities also offer opportunities for students to experience the benefits enumerated by Mehta above.

- **Business, science, and other career-oriented national extracurriculars** such as DECA, Virtual Enterprises (VE), Junior Achievement, and First Robotics, have clubs or chapters at a range of high schools and provide an additional outlet for Whole Learning in a real or virtual setting. In VE, for example, simulated businesses trade with 5,000 other VE firms in the US and globally using a Web-based simulated banking system.

College-based learning

While based in structured educational institutions, college-based learning offers high school students a vital opportunity to expand their horizons, not just by opening up a vastly expanded set of subject learning, but also by offering students chances to develop more independent study skills and other Habits of Success; interact with near-peers who can act as role-models for academic and social growth; gain access to additional adult mentors and brokers; and gain additional lines of sight to careers. Three of the most commonly used paths in this learning zone include dual enrollment, early college high schools, and individual access to credit and noncredit college offerings.

- Successful **dual enrollment** programs, in which high school students enroll in college courses for credit from both institutions, require co-design, co-delivery, and co-validation by the participating high school and college partners, but the results for high school engagement and postsecondary success are worth it. For more on these outcomes, see this Jobs for the Future report, and What Works Clearinghouse summary of research and outcomes.

- **Early college high schools** offer the opportunity to earn both a high school degree and an associate’s degree during the high school years. Examples here include the established Bard Early College network and the Middle College High School in Santa Ana, California, where the majority of seniors earn an associate’s degree before graduation; see also the early college design features of Jobs for the Future’s early college initiative.

- **Individual access to credit and noncredit bearing college courses** can also benefit learners. These learners might range from high schoolers looking for an academic challenge or to explore a more vocationally focused area, to a foodie sixth grader with dyslexia taking a noncredit, all-age community college cooking course, thereby building career awareness, playing to his strengths, and re-energizing his learning soul.
Career-related learning

The purpose of career-related learning is not to channel learners into specific career paths early (especially now that we can’t even predict what jobs — or, more likely, project-centered teams — will be available for our learners). Work is a vital part of adult life to which students today otherwise have very little access. Forming an awareness of broad career options helps motivate learning, while participation with adults in communities of practice enhances networks for social capital. There’s no better preparation for the “whitewater learning” that students will be doing in the future than to get out (in supported ways) into the work-based world while they can still integrate these experiences with school-based reflection and guidance. Career-related learning stretches from career awareness and exploration through career preparation and into training (for more, see Linked Learning’s Work-based Learning Continuum and related toolkit.)

- Career awareness and exploration activities can and should start in the elementary years, bringing people in to talk about their work and getting students out to visit workplaces. Generation Schools Network (featured in Report 10) starts in sixth grade with exploratory “intensives.” The Spark Program has three progressive offerings to help middle school students explore themselves and potential careers.

- Internships offer career exploration and preparation. Linked Learning, The National Academy Foundation, and Big Picture Learning (see their internship platform, ImBlaze) have all been developing their internship practice for years. See also these Teaching Channel videos on Deeper Learning school internships.

- For learners who have identified career interests early, career preparation can take a number of forms. Apprenticeship opportunities for high school students are expanding. In addition, as we explore in Report 3, other training options including bootcamps, badges, and certificate programs. While some of these are at the postsecondary level or higher, others are accessible to high school students.

- High school learners who do paid work, even without explicit training components, have been shown to improve their academic and life outcomes, provided that their work hours don’t extend beyond 15–20 hours per week.  

Community-mediated learning

These experiences include participation in the arts and performing arts, world languages, digital media, science, sports and fitness, hobbies, civic engagement, and service opportunities. Getting Smart’s Place-based Education Initiative has curated some excellent practice and resources relating to this zone. Such activities often offer excellent opportunities for learners to exercise choice and develop Habits of Success and Creative Know How.

- Individual community-based learning providers include libraries, museums, parks and rec departments, science centers, community centers, youth centers, YMCAs, and other traditional out-of-school time (OST) providers, which have been joined by community-run maker spaces, robotics clubs, and urban farms.

- Afterschool and other programs based on active youth development principles offer rich opportunities for developing the broader competencies and student agency as the programs have been targeting these qualities for years. (The MyWays framework incorporates youth development principles and encourages educators to learn from experienced youth development practitioners.) For examples, see Preparing Youth to Thrive, a field guide based on the practices of eight exemplary OST sites, with key program features and indicators. Youth action experiences, which engage learners in social justice and civic education change, can be particularly valuable.

- Emerging collective networks. In response to the fragmented provision of learning opportunities, a number of place-based initiatives have evolved. Among others, LRNG aims to “harness the assets of a community and transform it into a network of seamless pathways of in-school, out-of-school, and online experiences” in over a dozen cities. Hive Learning Networks, in five US cities, “empowers educators to build connected learning experiences...” through involvement with libraries, museums, schools, and nonprofit startups, as well as with individuals such as educators, designers, community catalysts, and makers. Meaningful participation in a collective ecosystem could provide transformational leverage for incorporating WLE into school design.
Incorporating these five zones of experience expands opportunities for Whole Learning in ways that are essential to prepare students for an age of accelerations. To deepen this work across the full range of competencies in both the school setting and the Wider Learning Ecosystem, we offer a set of eight neuroscience-based practices we call Levers for Capability and Agency.
Endnotes for Report 11


5 Michele Cahill, in foreword to Tom Vander Ark and Mary Ryerse, *Smart Cities That Work for Everyone: 7 Keys to Education & Employment*, Getting Smart, 2015, p. 17.

6 Ibid., p. 16.


13 Schwartz, “The Value of Internships.”


16 Claire Cain Miller, “Class Differences in Child-Rearing Are on the Rise,” The New York Times, December 17, 2015. Extracurricular activities epitomize the differences in child rearing in the Pew survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,807 parents. Of families earning more than $75,000 a year, 84% say their children have participated in organized sports over the past year, 64% have done volunteer work, and 62% have taken lessons in music, dance, or art; of families earning less than $30,000, 59% of children have done sports, 37% have volunteered, and 41% have taken arts classes.

17 Michele Cahill, in foreword to Smart Cities, p. 17, and in the EdWeek blog, “Leadership for Education Innovation.”


20 Education Reimagined’s *Practitioner’s Lexicon*, pp. 8–9; National Society for Experiential Education’s *Eight Principles of Good Practice for All Experiential Learning Activities*; and the Association for Experiential Education’s (12) Principles of Experiential Education Practice.


22 From the Hive Learning Networks.

23 See, for example, the partnerships described in Jobs for the Future’s *Co-Design, Co-Delivery, and Co-Validation: Creating High School and College Partnerships to Increase Post-Secondary Success*, 2015.
continuous communications improve both academic and employment outcomes for students.

For partnerships with companies (including speakers coming into schools and teacher externships), internships, and shadow programs, see Jessica Julixon’s American Youth Policy blog, “Keeping It Real: Building Bridges Between Employers and Schools.” Vander Ark and Ryerse’s Smart Cities provides a list of 10 partnership strategies to boost student employability (pp. 151–153), while KnowledgeWorks offers six lessons from the most successful partnerships in their network, along with six ways to maximize your partnerships.

See more about collective impact in Report 4 of this series, which summarizes John Kania and Mark Kramer’s five key elements of successful collective impact: common agenda, shared measurement systems, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communications, and a backbone organization. In Vander Ark and Ryerse’s Smart Cities, the authors dedicate a chapter to chronicling how schools and education organizations are using collective impact to partner with other organizations to improve both academic and employment outcomes for students.

Remake Learning in Pittsburgh.

Chris Sturgis, “Pushing the Envelope with Student Centered Learning at VLACS,” CompetencyWorks, April 14, 2015.

More for VLACS, see its website, as well as two CompetencyWorks blogs: Chris Sturgis, “Pushing the Envelope,” April 14, 2015; and Sarah Luchs, “Competency Moves Beyond Courses,” September 16, 2013.


Internships drive all learning, which involves students being offsite two days a week, having a wide range of learning experiences across the City. Offsite is almost more important than onsite activity. Assessment is holistic and industry/third sector/community partners co-construct the assessment rubrics, so their standards and expectations become part of the school operating system and culture. The process for how students acquire internships is brilliant in scaffolding and building their relationships with the wider community, and internships are seen as very much an academic experience, reframing the academic/vocational value divide which is very powerful. Relationships are horizontal, with learning being facilitated by a wide variety of adults and mentors.” Rosie Clayton, “Personalization and Real-World Learning at Big Picture Schools,” blog, Getting Smart, October 28, 2016.

Quoted by Larry Ferlazzo in “Response: Leveraging Field Trips to ‘Deepen learning,’” Classroom Q&A blog, EdWeek, December 12, 2016.


In addition to the forthcoming WLE resource, see more on crediting work outside the classroom, badging, assessment of prior learning, stackable credentials, broader transcripts, and other related topics in other reports in the current MyWays Student Success Series, especially: Report 3, within descriptions of work/learn landscape components and issues; Report 10, in links to career pathways and career development; and in Report 12, in sections on the fourth of the Five Assessment Strategies: Badging & micro-credentials. For parallel efforts in the European Union, see Recognition of youth work and of non-formal and informal learning within youth work Current European developments, Salto-Youth Training and Cooperation Resource Centre, April 2016.

Washor and Mojkowski, Learning to Learn, p. 110.


Extracurriculars, Mehta argues, have “an entirely different grammar,” as junior versions of recognized and valued adult activities from which they inherit “thick infrastructures” of meaning and expectation; see Jal Mehta, “Schools Already Have Good Learning, Just Not Where You Think,” Learning Deeply blog, EdWeek, February 8, 2017.


“A summer job makes a difference in classroom learning, Stanford scholar says,” Stanford News, September 1, 2015; Worrying declines in teen and young adult employment, Brookings report, December 16, 2015, quoting research from the National Research Council, academic, and government studies, and Robert Halpern.


Excerpted from Learning Design for Broader, Deeper Competencies, Report 11 of the MyWays Student Success Series, available at https://myways.nextgenlearning.org © 2017 EDUCAUSE. CC-BY 4.0