Summary of Designing From the Margins:
Tools and Examples for Practitioners

Purpose

Bellwether Education Partners developed this toolkit to support the use of collaborative human-centered design in education. This approach aims to engage the people who are most directly affected by the problem in creating solutions. Using these tools can help create and sustain solutions that reduce fragmentation in systems serving children and families.

This toolkit is intended primarily for groups aiming to bridge stakeholders serving children and families across different organizations and agencies, such as schools, foster care systems, homeless shelters, or health care providers — but the resources can be adapted for design processes that address a range of needs and services. We envision that this will be used by nonprofits, government agencies, and other organizations taking collaborative approaches to improving outcomes in their local communities.

Designing From the Margins

Typical problem-solving targets the "average" or "standard" user, the person who would fall within the center of a bell curve. **Designing from the margins** focuses on the intended beneficiaries with the most serious and concentrated needs, to make inclusive solutions that can meet everyone's needs. This design methods approach can be seen across different frameworks, such as human-centered design, targeted universalism, liberatory design, and designing for equity.

Applying Design Principles

There are core principles to a collaborative human-centered design process. We focus on three of them:

- *Design from the margins*: Emphasize and include perspectives of the people who are most deeply affected by the problem
- *Build understanding*: Bring stakeholders together to build relationships, empathy, and partnership
- *Shift mindsets*: Develop new mindsets that transform practice and help sustain solutions

Additional Resources

For details, examples, and further explanation of each phase in the design process, see the publication linked to this summary. To learn more about human-centered design and Bellwether's work on fragmentation and coherence, visit the following links:

Lost by Design (Bellwether Education Partners, 2021)

- A website featuring Bellwether's approach to improving outcomes for young people by addressing fragmentation, with a full library of resources on fragmentation and coherence.

Design Methods for Education Policy (Bellwether Education Partners, 2018)

- A website explaining and highlighting human-centered design methods as they apply to the context of education policy. Many of the external resources in this toolkit are featured on this site.

Creating More Effective, Efficient, and Equitable Education Policies with Human-Centered Design (Bellwether Education Partners, 2018)

- A publication that makes the case for human-centered design in education policy.

Acknowledgments

Framework

Designing From the Margins is a process that occurs in four phases, during which the facilitators and participants are working toward discrete goals.

Phase	Understand the Problem	Develop a Shared Vision/Solutions	Plan & Take Action	Monitoring & Continuous Improvement
Description	A working group forms and seeks to understand the specific challenges and needs of individuals directly experiencing the problem	Once the problem has been defined, the working group collaborates to identify what might be true in an ideal future — and options for how the group can bring that vision into reality	After aligning on a solution designed to address the problem, the working group develops a shared action plan to implement the solution, which should include clear lines of accountability	As the working group implements its plans, it can continue to reflect on how the problem is showing up and affecting community members — and adjust its plans and activities accordingly
Timing	1-3 months	2-4 months	5-10 months	Ongoing
Objectives	● **Form an inclusive working group –** Determine who should participate in the collaborative design process, ensuring that a range of agencies and perspectives are represented, including and especially those of people experiencing the problem most acutely ● **Develop a shared understanding of the problem –** Share and seek to understand the local landscape, outcomes data, and individual stories to inform a shared definition of the problem	● **Describe an ideal future –** Develop a shared description of how the problem is showing up, and what an ideal future state could look like if that problem were addressed ● **Decide what needs to change –** Collectively define and prioritize the processes, policies, and programs that need to change in order to realize the vision	● **Develop a shared action plan –** Collectively develop a plan that aligns activities and incentivizes collaboration across agencies/ stakeholder groups to address the problem ● **Define an accountability structure –** Outline the measures of success and a plan for tracking implementation progress as well as outcomes in the short/medium/long term	● **Enact the plan –** Put the plan into effect and learn as you go ● **Engage in shared reflection –** Collectively review data and continue to engage individuals who directly experience the problem ● **Adjust course as needed –** Where necessary, adjust or redefine the understanding of the problem, the vision for success, and/or the action plan
Mindsets that are key to success	● Value and include the perspectives of people with the most direct, acute experiences of the problem(s)	● Understand that the solution often does not require new programs, but rather more streamlined processes or shared practices	● Recognize that you/your agency is only part of the potential solution	● Accept that the solutions/plans may need to change in light of new data, information, or changing local conditions
Activities	● **Form a working group** ● **Gather data** ● **Make meaning of the data** ● **Define the problem**	● **Define the ideal end state** ● **Distill potential solutions** ● **Prioritize among potential solutions** ● **Decide which solutions to address**	● **Determine a shared approach** ● **Plan activities and timelines** ● **Create accountability structures**	● **Conduct regular reflection sessions** ● **Revise/adapt approach based on data and lessons from implementation**