Creativity From Necessity

A Practical Toolkit for Leaders to Address Teacher Shortages

By Nick Allen, Shirley Appleman, Anson Jackson, and Katie Vivalo Rouse

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Introduction

Bellwether scanned the country for ideas and resources that leaders can use to address staffing challenges in their schools.

This curated set of tools is intended to support school leaders who have the autonomy to manage the talent life cycle in their school community and are looking for practical ideas to strengthen their ability to recruit, hire, and retain exceptional educators.
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**Effort** = Rough estimate of the amount of time and work it would take a leader to plan and implement a given strategy, relative to other strategies.

**Cost** = Rough estimate of the total cost to plan and implement a given strategy, relative to other strategies.

**Timeline** = Rough estimate of when leaders could implement a given strategy (immediate = weeks, short term = 2-6 months, long term = 6+ months).
How to Use the Toolkit

Read pages 12-34 for the strategies, trends, and tools. For each of the three strategies identified, Bellwether surfaced three trends and two corresponding tools per trend. You can jump directly to each strategy:

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<th>Highlights strategies to guard prep time, find additional flex time, and identify teacher workload challenges</th>
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<td>Meet Teacher Needs</td>
<td>Illustrates strategies to nurture teachers and create a strong foundation for healthy staff culture</td>
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<td>Showcases creative staff and teacher recruitment strategies to fill open positions within schools</td>
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This toolkit was designed to “Build Your Own Adventure.” You could:
- Read the toolkit end-to-end for ideas that might work in your context.
- Go directly to the trends and tools that align to a current schoolwide priority.

While reviewing and deciding on a tool to adopt and adapt, consider:
- Do I have the autonomy to change or implement this tool?
- If I do not have the autonomy, do I have the social influence to impact adoption?
- Who else on my team can I collaborate with to create buy-in and support implementation?
- Do I have the funds to change or implement this tool?
- Do I have the capacity and skill set to implement this tool?
# Strategies Identified

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<th>Root Issues</th>
<th>Essential Questions</th>
<th>Why It Matters</th>
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<td>Protect Teacher Time</td>
<td>Low staff morale, high staff burnout</td>
<td>How do I leverage scheduling and/or placement of instructional personnel to maximize staffing without compromising high-quality instruction?</td>
<td>Educators want to impact their students’ lives. To enable teachers to invest their time in ways they are passionate about AND that translate to student outcomes, leaders have a responsibility to create systems that allow teachers to focus on instruction, maximize collaboration, minimize disruptions, and eliminate low-impact tasks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet Teacher Needs</td>
<td>Low staff morale, high staff burnout</td>
<td>How do I gather input from teachers about what they need and authentically engage them in decision-making? How am I building a school culture where teachers feel supported, both personally and professionally?</td>
<td>Job satisfaction rates for teachers are at an all-time low, with alarming numbers of educators thinking about leaving the profession sooner than planned. Now, more than ever, we need to elevate teacher voice and provide holistic supports based on what educators say they need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fill Staffing Gaps</td>
<td>Staff attrition, high vacancy rates</td>
<td>How am I tapping into nontraditional teacher pipelines to fill vacancies with high-quality candidates? How am I adjusting recruitment efforts to find and hire teachers?</td>
<td>The tightening labor market is forcing leaders to think outside the box to recruit and hire staff. Many leaders are trying new strategies to fill critical vacancies and are supplementing investments in new talent pipelines with a back-to-basics approach to recruitment.</td>
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**Approach**

Schools across the country are struggling to fill open teaching positions.

This challenge is not new: The U.S. has long faced critical shortages of math teachers, special education professionals, bilingual educators, and teachers of color, shortfalls that are often most pronounced in rural and lower-income communities. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these existing issues, wreaking havoc on our educational system and elevating staff shortages to crisis levels in many school communities.

Solving persistent staff shortages in schools will require long-term investments, systemic changes, and significant shifts in federal- and state-level policy. **We also know that school leaders can’t wait around.** Principals need solutions they can start implementing this academic year, next year, and in the future.

With this context in mind, **Bellwether scanned the country for ideas and resources that leaders can use to address staffing challenges in their schools.** Over 40 leaders with a diverse range of experience and perspectives, including leaders from a mix of urban and rural areas, large and small districts, and traditional and charter school environments were interviewed. Bellwether spoke with principals of individual schools, chief talent officers overseeing hundreds of schools, researchers with expertise in staffing shortages, and a wide range of other experts in the field.
Intention of Use

This toolkit is a set of tools, resources, and case studies designed to support school leaders to address staffing challenges. The toolkit is intended primarily for school leaders, particularly those with the autonomy to manage the talent life cycle — everything from recruiting and onboarding to staff development and culture building — within the school community.

Beyond school leaders, this toolkit may also be useful for anyone who directly supports schools: district leadership, intermediary organizations, philanthropic partners, and a range of other stakeholders in the broader school community. This toolkit is intended to be:

**Practical**
These tools are curated to help school leaders solve real problems affecting their school community.

**Intuitive**
This toolkit includes resources that are easy to understand and use for busy school leaders.

**Evidence-Based**
Wherever possible, Bellwether summarizes and cites the relevant research studies so school leaders can readily understand the level of evidence supporting a specific practice.
# Protect Teacher Time

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<tr>
<td>Provide Dedicated Planning Time</td>
<td>Teachers need dedicated prep time, ideally 40-90 minutes per day. The leaders Bellwether spoke to are prioritizing coverage for teachers so they have time for collaboration, curriculum internalization, and data conversations.</td>
<td>Researchers have observed that collaboration and prep time are correlated with teacher retention. In a 2014 survey in Wisconsin, state-certified teachers endorsed planning time as having the greatest positive effect on their ability to impact students, ranking this above more money or fewer disruptive students.</td>
<td>Finding Time for Collaborative Planning, Collaborative Planning Practices</td>
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<td>Reimagine Master Schedule</td>
<td>During the pandemic, many teachers appreciated the flexibility of remote working. To provide flexibility, planning time, and professional development (PD), many schools are reimagining their schedule and instructional models.</td>
<td>In a survey conducted by EmpowerEd and WTU, teachers reported that flexibility is the No. 1 factor that would help retain them. This has also been observed in the broader job market; in a 2021 survey, respondents indicated they value flexibility over higher pay and more vacation time.</td>
<td>Case Study: How Village Tech Moved to a 4-Day Instructional Model, Unlocking Time: New and Different Ways Schools Innovate With Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce Administrative Burden</td>
<td>To ensure teachers are focused on high-impact instructional roles and responsibilities, many leaders are using ESSER funds and grants to hire additional staff to take on administrative, non-instructional, operational responsibilities.</td>
<td>Researchers have observed that teacher job satisfaction is correlated with the support they receive from their principal. There are fewer studies examining how reducing administrative tasks for educators impacts teacher retention and student outcomes, suggesting this is an area ripe for future research.</td>
<td>Identifying Workload Issues: Structured Conversation, Job Descriptions for Support Personnel</td>
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Finding Time for Collaborative Planning

Creating a master schedule is a complex process with multiple dependencies. This tool from Education Resource Strategies outlines six strategies for school leaders to build sufficient collaborative planning time into the master schedule.

This tool will enable you to …

• Identify six strategies for finding sufficient time for collaboration.

• Outline concrete actions you can take to protect teacher prep time as much as possible.

• Answer the question, “How do we find time for meaningful collaborative planning?”
Collaborative Planning Practices

Providing guidance on how to best leverage planning time promotes teacher learning and efficacy. This tool by Instruction Partners offers guidance on implementing three foundational practices that can be executed collaboratively or independently: unit internalization, lesson preparation, and work analysis.

**This tool will enable you to …**

- Identify core practices to embed into collaborative planning time at your school.

- See examples and ideas for revamping collaborative planning practices at your school.

- Reflect on key leader actions to support each practice and identify areas for improvement.

Each practice is unpacked and highlights key leader actions and contextual considerations …

... and includes templates to help operationalize the practice.
Case Study

How Village Tech Moved to a 4-Day Instructional Model

This case study highlights the approach to transitioning to a 4-Day Instructional Model from the lens of a public charter school outside of Dallas, Texas. It highlights the technical process to operationalize this model as well as the adaptive components to consider when considering this shift.

This tool will enable you to ...

• Find out how one school shifted to a 4-Day Instructional Model.

• Access a sample school calendar and schedule to support a 4-Day Instructional Model.

• Learn more about funding implications of the 4-Day Instructional Model and its impact on staff.
Unlocking Time

New and Different Ways Schools Innovate With Time

To provide teachers with additional collaboration time and flexibility, schools across the country are carving out additional time by tinkering with the master schedule and/or instructional model. An Unlocking Time tool provides options to achieve this flexibility, such as implementing an early release day or using virtual learning days.

This tool will enable you to ...

• Find ways to provide staff with additional collaboration time and/or flex time.

• See examples of how other schools and leaders have creatively unlocked time for teachers.

• Explore alternatives to the traditional bell schedule in order to better protect teachers’ time.

This tool shares 27 unique strategies to innovate with time, some allowing for more teacher flexibility.
Identifying Workload Issues

Structured Conversation

To empathize with the teacher experience, leaders can facilitate a structured conversation to gain awareness of the tasks leading to workload imbalance. With this conversation, the leader is equipped with data to better inform next steps, including modifying or eliminating tasks, or, if applicable, identifying additional roles to hire.

This tool will enable you to ...

- Facilitate a structured conversation with teachers about their workload.
- Learn which responsibilities teachers find high impact and which they do not.
- Identify next steps to mitigate challenges and respond to specific staff needs.

This discussion protocol includes a description of “what” the conversation is about and “why” leaders should have it.

Also included is a step-by-step structure to guide leaders through the conversation with teachers.
Job Descriptions for Support Personnel

Several leaders Bellwether spoke with reported they have invested in support positions to mitigate the administrative burden placed on their teachers. To help school leaders who are interested in hiring additional support staff, we collected example job descriptions from districts across the country.

This tool will enable you to …

• Access job descriptions for administrative and/or non-teaching positions within your school.

• Find ideas for tailoring existing job descriptions to better meet the needs of your school.

• Consider administrative roles, including in your next school budget.

Harmony Public Schools

- Attendance Clerk
- GYO Teacher Intern
- Registrar
- Teacher Assistant
- Tutor

Chicago Public Schools

- School Clerk
- School Clerk Assistant
- Teacher Assistant
- Temporary Part-Time Seasonal
- Tutor Corps Tutor

KIPP SoCal

- Expanded Learning Instructor
- In-House Substitute
- Instructional Assistant
- Registrar
- School Operations Assistant
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# Meet Teacher Needs

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<td>Elevate Teacher Voice</td>
<td>Many of the school leaders Bellwether spoke with report that they are actively finding ways to gather authentic input and feedback from teachers so they can better meet their needs.</td>
<td>There is emerging research examining the interplay among school climate, relationships between school leadership and teachers, and related factors to understand whether and how those contribute to teacher retention.⁷</td>
<td>Empathy Interview Template</td>
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<td>Prioritize Teacher</td>
<td>Many school leaders Bellwether interviewed said they are prioritizing teacher development by investing in training, PD opportunities, and pathways to advancement within the classroom.</td>
<td>National longitudinal data showed high rates of attrition among beginning teachers, with more than 44% of new teachers leaving the profession within their first five years.⁸</td>
<td>Planning Stay Conversations</td>
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<td>Development</td>
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<td>Provider Holistic</td>
<td>Bellwether heard from leaders that, in the wake of the pandemic, they are increasingly investing in supports for teachers that go beyond traditional employment benefits to promote holistic well-being.</td>
<td>Emerging research from various fields, such as medicine,⁹ suggests that holistic supports for employees benefit their well-being. Ecological models of development suggest the personal conditions (emotional health and well-being) of adults are a necessary precondition for equitable learning.¹⁰</td>
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Empathy Interview Template

This template from the Learning Accelerator is designed to help school leaders conduct empathy interviews. Empathy interviews are an important way to begin understanding the perspectives of people in your school community who are not typically asked for their opinions, including teachers.

This tool will enable you to ...

- Lead a simple interview protocol to elicit stories and lived experiences from your teachers.

- Better understand the root causes of challenges impacting your teachers.

- Deeply understand the perspectives of teachers who are not typically asked for their opinion.

The template includes simple instructions for conducting interviews, including sample follow-up questions to probe deeper.

Take notes directly in the template so you can remember details and synthesize key themes from your conversations.
Planning Stay Conversations

Stay conversations with staff are a structured way for leaders to encourage their top teachers to stay at the school. This resource from TNTP provides school leaders with a simple seven-step structure for planning thoughtful conversations to learn more about what individual teachers need in order to stay.

This tool will enable you to …

• Understand what stay conversations are and why they can be an effective tool for teacher retention.

• Plan and lead thoughtful conversations with teachers you want to retain.

• Access example sentence stems to use in stay conversations with your staff.

Seven Steps for a Stay Conversation

1. Praise:
   - Highlight the positive. Link this teacher’s performance with the bigger picture impact you see this teacher making on their students & your school. Be clear they are a strong teacher and that you see and value their contributions to your school community.

2. Acknowledge:
   - Name that the past few school years have been challenging and that this teacher has been working very hard under difficult conditions.

3. Probe for a Pulse Check:
   - Start with a targeted question & encourage the teacher to share their feelings with you. How does the teacher feel about their work and their role in the school? Ask for their feedback. “What else can you do as a school leader to encourage them to return?”

4. Determine Intention:
   - Use probing & dialogue to determine whether this teacher is planning to stay at your school.

5. State Desired Outcome & Retention Strategy:
   - Tell the teacher you’d like them to stay and how you’d like to reward their performance.

6. Plan Ahead:
   - How will this reward actually play out? What can this teacher expect in the upcoming weeks and months?

7. Follow-up:
   - Set a timeline for follow up and make sure you follow up. Reiterate how much you appreciate the teacher’s contributions and that they are welcome to share feedback with you anytime.

TNTP reimagine teaching
Tips for Having a Stay Conversation

Be specific and genuine.
Be sure to communicate why you think the teacher is strong and share examples of their impact on students and the school community.

Recruit:
Remember that strong teachers probably have multiple options, and you are recruiting them.

Be transparent.
Be open about school challenges and how the teachers can be part of the solution. Ask for and appreciate feedback.

Listen for motivations.
Ask for specifics ideas the teacher has and leave an open line of communication.

Speaking in generalities.
It is important to let teachers know why they are valuable to your school and students.

Not executing on your next steps.
Follow through on all commitments agreed upon.

Implementation of retention strategies for compliance purposes.
Retention strategies are part of a robust, ongoing plan that is tailored to your school and teachers.

Superficial.
Avoid painting an overly rosy picture and be honest about instances where you may have missed opportunities to better support teachers.
Mentoring &
Induction Toolkit

Mentoring for novice teachers improves teacher effectiveness and retention. This Mentoring & Induction Toolkit from AIR defines the critical features of a comprehensive mentoring program. After creating a vision, jump into module 2 to learn about the mentor recruitment, selection, and assignment process.

This tool will enable you to ...
• Develop plans to create a mentor teacher program or improve an existing program.
• Outline mentorship roles and responsibilities for mentors, teachers, and principals.
• Structure and plan data-driven conversations to embed in your mentoring program.
Career Paths and Pay in an Opportunity Culture

A Practical Guide

This guide from Public Impact gives an overview of teacher career paths within the Opportunity Culture model, a school model that leverages multi-classroom leaders (MCLs) who reach more students with excellent teaching and earn a higher salary within a school’s current budget.

This tool will enable you to ...

- Identify ways to create professional pathways that keep your best teachers in classrooms.
- Learn more about the Opportunity Culture school model and MCLs.
- Understand options to differentiate pay for teachers in a budget-neutral way.

... and includes options for differentiating responsibility and pay structures for MCLs and other new teaching roles in ways that are budget neutral for schools and districts.
Case Study

How One Charter Network Is Rethinking Health and Wellness

This case study profiles the efforts of New York’s Prospect Schools to support the health and well-being of its staff members during and immediately after the pandemic. Learn more about its investments in health and wellness for adults across its school network.

This tool will enable you to ...

- Hear how Prospect Schools invested in adult health and wellness supports.
- Learn more about the initial results and indicators of the impact of this work.
- Gather recommendations to keep in mind when undertaking similar work in your school context.

The case study includes example services that Prospect Schools provide to teachers, with advice for school leaders interested in investing in health and wellness initiatives for their staff.
Teacher Well-Being in School Environments

Workbook

This resource from WISE: MedStar Georgetown Center for Well-Being in School Environments in Washington, D.C., is a comprehensive workbook filled with tools designed to help teachers develop their own personal well-being plans. Content is tailored for teachers and covers topics tied to emotional, physical, social, occupational, and intellectual well-being.

This tool will enable you to ...

- Support teachers to develop their own personal well-being plans.
- Access wellness-related resources and activities to incorporate into trainings and PD sessions.
- Find ideas for how to build skills and mindsets to enhance your teachers’ well-being.

The workbook is a free curriculum that is divided into 10 units, each with clear learning objectives and skill goals ...

... and includes a plethora of tools and activities, such as an inventory to help teachers identify sources of stress.
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<td>The leaders Bellwether spoke with reported they are increasingly investing in efforts to recruit and prepare members of their local school community (e.g., parents, alumni, paraprofessionals) to enter the teaching profession.</td>
<td>Preliminary evidence suggests that GYO initiatives can help diversify the teaching workforce. It is not yet known whether or how these programs affect teacher retention or student learning outcomes.¹¹</td>
<td>GYO Educators: A Toolkit for Program Design and Development</td>
</tr>
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<td>International and Virtual Teachers</td>
<td>To fill hard-to-staff roles, more leaders are turning to international and virtual teachers. Whether staffing in-person or virtual classes, leaders need to know how to recruit and effectively support these teachers.</td>
<td>Virtual classrooms exploded during the pandemic, and the growth in international teachers is an emerging trend in the field. According to the U.S. State Department, over 4,200 international teachers were employed by U.S. school districts in 2021, an increase of nearly 70% since 2015.¹²</td>
<td>Case Study: How Two Districts Are Using GYO Programs</td>
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<td>High-Dosage Tutoring</td>
<td>High-dosage tutoring models can both mitigate staffing challenges and accelerate student learning by enabling schools to attract a cadre of adults to regularly support students in individual or group settings.</td>
<td>High-dosage tutoring is a promising strategy for improving student outcomes with a growing research base; however, not all tutoring programs have been shown to improve student achievement. Leaders should choose specific models backed by evidence of impact on important outcomes.¹³</td>
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TOTAL

¹¹ Bellwether.org

¹² Bellwether.org

¹³ Bellwether.org
GYO Educators

A Toolkit for Program Design and Development

This toolkit from New America features a comprehensive collection of user-friendly research, policy, and practice resources for GYO practitioners and policymakers. The toolkit is divided into five sections aligned to different phases of the GYO development process.

This tool will enable you to …

• Understand how GYO programs can help diversify your teacher pipeline.

• Learn how to design a GYO program that fits the context of your school community.

• Strengthen current GYO initiatives in your school or district.

If you are new to GYO, Bellwether recommends starting with New America’s explainer video and exploring from there.
Case Study

How Two Districts Are Using GYO Programs

Bellwether profiles efforts to develop and launch GYO programs in a large urban district in Illinois (Chicago Public Schools) and a large network of charter schools in Texas (Harmony Public Schools). Hear directly from leaders about why they invested in GYO, what the work looks like, and early outcomes from their efforts.

This tool will enable you to …

• See how two districts implemented GYO programs.

• Understand the rationale behind these districts’ investment in GYO.

• Learn more about what we are beginning to discover from implementation of these GYO programs.

The case study includes direct links to resources these organizations used to set up and run their GYO programs.
Case Study

Sponsoring and Supporting J-1 Visa Exchange Teachers

In this case study, Bellwether outlines the work of YES Prep, a charter network in Texas with a growing number of teachers on J-1 visas. It includes an overview of their work to date, along with advice for school leaders who are interested in hiring and effectively supporting teachers from abroad.

This tool will enable you to …

• Learn more about how a district in Texas recruits and supports teachers on J-1 visas.

• Consider advice for designing and implementing a J-1 visa exchange program at your school.

• Understand key elements of working with J-1 visa-sponsoring organizations and recruiting partners.

This brief case study provides an overview of YES Prep’s nascent J-1 visa program, along with advice for leaders who are interested in setting up their own program.
Onboarding Strategies

Virtual or In-Person Instruction

This virtual onboarding guide from TNTP “shares key considerations for crafting strong onboarding experiences, whether they will take place in remote or in-person settings, and shares best practices for engaging new hires.” It is a great resource for developing effective onboarding processes for all school staff.

This tool will enable you to …

• Find ideas to create flexible onboarding plans for staff.

• Incorporate considerations for remote instruction in your onboarding plans.

• Strengthen your current onboarding practices more generally.

TNTP’s guide explicitly outlines “remote considerations” that can be applied to onboarding for virtual instructors.
This resource from the National Student Support Accelerator is designed to support educators in either launching a tutoring program or improving an existing one. The toolkit is organized across seven elements of tutoring programs, divided into two sections: Program Design and Program Implementation.

This tool will enable you to …

• Strengthen an existing tutoring program within your school or district.

• Estimate potential costs for a new tutoring program.

• Learn more about core elements of high-impact tutoring programs.

The toolkit outlines seven elements of high-impact tutoring programs.
Launched Tutoring Programs in Partnership With Community Organizations

This resource from Chiefs for Change is a robust guidebook for leaders interested in building a tutoring program in collaboration with a community partner. It outlines an eight-step plan to establish a local program and includes sample criteria for identifying potential tutors along with sample tutoring schedules.

This tool will enable you to ...

- Develop a comprehensive plan to work with external partners to launch a tutoring program.
- Access ideas and resources for improving a current tutoring program.
- Find examples of how other districts have implemented their tutoring programs.

The guidebook is designed around eight steps for building a successful tutoring program with a community partner (see page 5).

Resources include sample tutoring schedules for schools (see page 33).
Endnotes


4 See DC Educator Survey Results, 2020.


6 Amanda Olsen and Francis Huang, “Teacher Job Satisfaction by Principal Support and Teacher Cooperation: Results From the Schools and Staffing Survey,” Education Policy Analysis Archives 27 (February 2019): 11, https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.4174.


12 See J1visa.state.gov for more information.

13 See ProvenTutoring.org for more information on tutoring providers with a strong evidence base.
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We are particularly grateful to the organizations whose tools are highlighted in this toolkit. By amplifying their tools and efforts, we hope to continue working towards our shared vision: a future where all young people have access to an equitable and excellent education and live lives filled with opportunity.

The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.

About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit bellwether.org.

About Overdeck Family Foundation

Overdeck Family Foundation was established in 2011 by John and Laura Overdeck, with the goal of providing all children the opportunity to unlock their potential. The Foundation focuses exclusively on enhancing education, funding efforts both inside and outside of school in the areas of early childhood, informal STEM education, and K-9 programs that include supporting educators and student-centered learning environments. For more, visit overdeck.org.