



The Assembly Grant Program

New Solutions That Connect Families With Learning Options

GRANT PROGRAM BRIEF

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About the program

The demand for flexible, personalized learning options is on the rise. Whether families are looking for learning options to supplement or replace the traditional school experience, however, their access to those options too often depends on their financial means and the time and energy they can devote to identifying the options that work best for them. The scale of family demand and the increasing complexity of the learning ecosystem demand new scalable and sustainable solutions to the challenges of navigation.

The Assembly Grant Program will provide grants of up to \$100,000 to organizations designing or developing new solutions to help families furthest from opportunity access flexible, personalized learning options. Select grantees will be invited to apply for a second round of up to \$300,000 in funding to support implementation in early 2024.

[Read more](#) about Bellwether's work on Assembly.

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Demand for personalized, flexible learning experiences is on the rise

Seven in ten parents are interested in exploring new learning options for their children, whether changing schools or finding different out-of-school options.¹

Many express interest in extracurricular activities, tutoring, or alternative learning formats like learning pods, microschools, and home-schooling.²

Declining enrollment in public schools suggests that many families are looking for something the traditional school experience doesn't provide.³

¹ Christian Lehr and Adam Newman, "Choose to Learn 2022: Connecting In- and Out-of-School Learning in a Post-Pandemic World," October 26, 2022.

² "The Public, Parents, and K-12 Education: A National Polling Report," presentation, Morning Consult and EdChoice, April 2023.

³ Thomas Dee, "Where the Kids Went: Nonpublic Schooling and Demographic Change During the Pandemic Exodus from Public Schools," Urban Institute, February 9, 2023.

There has been exciting progress toward increasing equitable access to learning options

An increasing number of states have **policies** that provide direct-to-family funding to defray the costs of learning options.

Long-standing **learning options have expanded**, and innovative new options have emerged to meet family and student needs.

Navigation pioneers (including Bellwether's Filling the Gap grantees) have helped **increase awareness** of opportunities for Assembly-based learning.

Meanwhile, numerous entities play a role in increasing equitable access to learning options

Family-serving organizations provide information as well as hands-on and relationship-based guidance to those trying to navigate their options.

Technology companies or providers help streamline access to funding, aggregate information about available learning options, and/or facilitate payments between families and learning option providers.

State agencies and other program administrators coordinate the implementation of public programs by defining processes and directly or indirectly providing technical assistance to families.

Nonetheless, families furthest from opportunity still often face barriers to assembling learning options



Amar's parents are concerned that he is disengaged at school and want to play a greater role in shaping his learning and development. They've heard of a microschool that serves small groups of students and does a lot of project-based learning. They think it could be a fit for him but don't know how they might afford it. **Amar's family needs access to funding.**



David's family is satisfied with the instruction he is receiving at school, but both of his parents work full-time, and they want him to have experiences in the afternoons that support his mental health and ability to express himself. They've asked their friends and neighbors but aren't sure that any of their suggestions are right for David. **David's family needs information.**



Abby was doing well in school before the pandemic but missed a lot of content while learning online. She has been falling further behind since going back to school. Her mom thinks she needs tutoring over the summer, and she knows she is eligible for a microgrant from the state to pay for it, but she doesn't have time to figure out how to get the funding or find a good tutor. **Abby's family needs guidance.**

All families and students must have access to funding, information, and guidance.

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In partnership with the Walton Family Foundation, Bellwether invites applications for up to \$100,000 to support the design or development of **new solutions that will increase access to personalized, flexible learning options for families and students furthest from opportunity.**

Funding may be used to support a wide variety of activities, including user research or stakeholder engagement to identify unmet needs; the design of new tools, resources, or approaches to providing support to families; and/or the piloting of advancements in new technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence) or services and their refinement in response to feedback.

New solutions must improve how families access one or more of the following:

Funding

Streamline how families enroll in programs that provide public funding to defray the costs of learning options.

Information

Provide the information families value most in searching for and selecting available learning options.

Guidance

Support families in selecting high-quality learning options that align to students' individual needs.

Grant Program Timeline

Funding will be awarded in two phases to support the design, development and implementation of new solutions.

Phase 1 will provide up to \$100,000 in funding for the design or development of new solutions.

July 11, 2023	Bellwether releases the Call for Applications.
Aug. 22, 2023	Phase 1 applications due.
Late September 2023	Applicants are notified of whether their application will be funded.
Mid-October 2023	Grantees receive up to \$100,000 in funding.
October 2023- January 2024	Grantees design or develop their solutions.
Late January 2024	Grantees report Phase 1 outputs of their work.

Phase 2 will provide up to \$300,000 in funding for the implementation of new solutions.

February 2024	Select grantees are invited to apply for additional funding up to \$300,000
March 2024	Phase 2 applications due.
April 2024	Applicants are notified of whether they will be funded and receive up to \$300,000 in funding.
April - August 2024	Grantees implement their new solutions.
September 2024	Grantees report outcomes of their work.

Eligibility

Entities eligible to apply for funding include:

- Family-serving organizations,
- Technology companies and providers, and
- State agencies or state program administrators.

For-profit entities are eligible to apply if they intend to use the grant for charitable purposes and agree to comply with procedures for assuring that grant funds are spent solely for the charitable purposes intended.

An eligible entity may not be the lead on more than one application.

Competitive Priorities

Bellwether will give special consideration to applications that propose:

- Partnerships between two or more eligible entities that enable coordinated solutions for families and students furthest from opportunity.
- Solutions that have leveraged or will leverage user research, human-centered design, and/or stakeholder engagement to ensure solutions are responsive to the experiences, needs, and perspectives of families and students furthest from opportunity.
- Solutions that facilitate participation in and satisfaction with publicly funded programs in which
 - a) families have direct control over funding,
 - b) families can use funding for a variety of learning options that either supplement or supplant a traditional school experience, and
 - c) families can use funding for a variety of learning expenses that may include but are not limited to school tuition.

Publicly funded programs include but are not limited to education savings account programs or microgrant programs.

Grant Program Rules

The Assembly Grant Program Rules include detailed information about:

- Submission Requirements
- Intellectual Property Rights and Dissemination of Grant-Funded Work
- Participation in the Grant Program and Public Relations
- Conflicts of Interest
- Bellwether's Rights

To apply, you must acknowledge that you have read and agree to the Grant Program Rules. You can review the full Grant Program Rules [**here.**](#)

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Phase 1 Output Metrics

Metrics are an opportunity to communicate the ambition of your work, create a foundation for measuring progress, and establish an approach to assessing success.

Phase 1 metrics should communicate **ambitious, reasonable, and measurable goals** for what the applicant intends to accomplish with up to \$100,000 in funding over a **period of approximately 3 months**. Phase 1 metrics should:

1. Define reasonable, measurable **outputs** of the applicants' work. We imagine that this will often include the design of a deliverable or the achievement of an important milestone in the design or development of your solution.
2. Describe how the applicant will provide **evidence of the design or development** of its solution by the end of Phase 1.

Example Phase 1 output metrics are included in the examples at the end of this brief.

Phase 2 Outcome Metrics

To understand the intended impact of the applicant's proposed solution, Bellwether also asks applicants to describe the metrics they anticipate using to assess the implementation of their solution in Phase 2.

Phase 2 metrics should communicate **ambitious, reasonable, and measurable goals** for outcomes the applicant intends to realize with up to \$300,000 in funding over a **period of approximately 6 months**. Phase 2 metrics should:

1. Define reasonable, measurable **outcomes** of the applicants' work. The metrics should position the applicant to measure whether their solution is increasing access to flexible learning options.
2. Describe how the applicant will provide **evidence of the implementation** of their solution by the end of Phase 2.

Phase 1 grantees who are invited to apply for Phase 2 will have an opportunity to revise these metrics as part of the Phase 2 application process.

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Applicants are required to submit a budget that outlines the **intended use of funds for a Phase 1 grant up to \$100,000.**

Applicants may share their budget in the format their organization uses or use [the basic template here](#).

Applicants may, but are not required to, include additional information that outlines the full cost of solution design or development beyond the resources from this grant. If applicants choose to do so, it should be **clear what portion of the full budget will be supported by funds from this grant.**

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Following are several examples of the kinds of solutions Bellwether is interested in. Examples are illustrative; they are not meant to serve as exemplars or exclude any of the creative ideas applicants may have.

Example 1: A state agency and family-serving nonprofit partner to establish quality standards for navigation providers

Phase 1: Design or Develop New Solutions

\$50,000 Grant

Solution Development: A state agency and family-serving organization partner to create a set of quality standards for navigator providers eligible to receive funding from the state's ESA program, which serves low-income families.

Output Metric: A fully developed, comprehensive set of quality standards for navigators, published on the agency and organization's website.

Phase 2: Launch, Pilot, or Implement New Solutions

\$200,000 Grant

Solution Implementation: The state agency and family-serving nonprofit use the quality standards to rate all navigator providers in the state. The nonprofit shares the ratings publicly on its website, with links to high-quality navigators. The state develops a plan to survey program participants at the end of the year about the quality of navigation support they received.

Outcome Metric: By September 2024, 80% of families who visit the ratings website click through to individual high-quality navigators. 80% of families are satisfied with navigator quality, with no gaps by population subgroups.

Example 2: A technology provider develops new tools to identify users who need additional navigation support

Phase 1: Design or Develop New Solutions

\$100,000 Grant

Solution Development: A technology provider analyzes patterns in user behavior on its platform to identify families who have enrolled in a program but have not used the funding available to them. The technology provider conducts user research to identify the information and support the families need to fully leverage their resources. They reach out to users, especially those from historically disadvantaged communities, to connect them to additional support or guidance, including family-serving organizations that provide relationship-based navigation.

Output Metric: A prototype of new tools to analyze user experience data and a responsive approach to connecting families to additional support or guidance.

Phase 2: Launch, Pilot, or Implement New Solutions

\$250,000 Grant

Solution Implementation: The technology provider leverages multiple testing approaches to better identify families who need additional support or guidance and streamline connections to navigation organizations. The technology provider embeds the new approach into its platform experience for all users.

Outcome Metric: By September 2024, 25% of unengaged or dissatisfied users receive support from a family-serving nonprofit, and 10% of unengaged or dissatisfied users enroll in or participate in flexible learning options.

Example 3: A family-serving organization develops a tool that solicits information about student needs and suggests aligned options

Phase 1: Design or Develop New Solutions

\$75,000 Grant

Solution Development: A family-serving organization conducts stakeholder engagement to develop a questionnaire that solicits information from families about students' needs, interests, and goals; it shares the questionnaire on its website for navigator providers and technology providers to use. Navigation providers use the questionnaire to guide families; a technology provider uses the questionnaire with a small group of families on its platform to create or improve its search algorithm connecting families to aligned learning options.

Output Metric: A questionnaire to better assess what families are looking for and connect them to aligned options, as well as a confirmed partnership with a technology provider to embed the questionnaire in the platform they provide to families and students.

Phase 2: Launch, Pilot, or Implement New Solutions

\$300,000 Grant

Solution Implementation: A technology provider embeds the questionnaire in its platform and leverages machine learning or other advanced technologies to continuously improve how it uses families' responses to connect them to aligned learning options.

Outcome Metric: By September 2024, family satisfaction with the platform and with the learning options they select for their children increases by 10%.

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A panel of judges will review each application to confirm eligibility and determine the strength of its responsiveness to the questions in the Call for Applications. Bellwether staff and external advisers will then review the top applications for their ingenuity and potential impact. Final funding decisions will be made by the Bellwether team.

In addition to the competitive priorities, applications will be assessed against the following criteria:

- The target population of the solution meets the definition of families furthest from opportunity, and the application includes a compelling explanation for why the applicant selected the target population.
- The application describes specific barriers to access faced by the target population, as well as data or evidence that substantiates the applicant's understanding of the target population's experience.
- The application describes a novel, logical, and compelling solution to the barriers faced by the target population.
- The application demonstrates that key leaders have the experience, expertise, and track record to successfully steward the design or development of the solution.
- The application articulates a clear vision for how to sustain and scale the solution after design, development, and initial implementation, ideally with decreasing, minimal, or no reliance on philanthropy.
- The application metrics reflect an ambitious but reasonable vision for the design or development of the solution and its potential for impact on families furthest from opportunity.
- The application demonstrates a commitment to sharing what applicants learn during the design or development of their solution to extend its impact to the broader field.

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Assembly

An approach to education that enables families and students to select a variety of flexible, personalized learning options aligned to their needs, interests, and goals – whether in addition to or in place of a traditional school experience.

Families and students furthest from opportunity

Students furthest from opportunity are from historically marginalized communities (including students of color, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, low-income students, students experiencing homelessness, children and youth in foster care, and migratory students) who may be unable to access learning options.

Family-serving organization

An entity that has established trusting relationships with families and students on issues of education and may also serve as a navigator.

Human-centered design

A process of product development that begins and ends with the “needs, contexts, behaviors, and emotions of the people that the solutions will serve.”³

Learning option

An experience offered by a family, nonprofit, business, or other entity in which a student receives services or supports to advance their learning and development. Learning options include schools of choice, as well as more modular and flexible options like after-school enrichment programs, tutoring, or home-school co-ops.

³ Jason Weeby, “Creating More Effective, Efficient, and Equitable Education Policies with Human-Centered Design,” Bellwether, February 2018, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED585907>. See also <https://designforedpolicy.org/>

Navigator

A person, organization, or tool that helps families and students identify high-quality options and select those best aligned to their needs, interests, and goals.

New solution

A tool, resource, or approach that connects families to funding or provides information or guidance to help them access flexible learning options.

Technology company or provider

An entity that has developed a digital platform, web-based tool, or resource that aggregates learning options and helps families and students identify, select, and pay for them.

User research

A process by which service providers engage target customers to provide feedback on their product and inform efforts to identify and address areas for improvement.

Where can I find more information about the grant program?

Please see the [grant program website](#).

Questions? Contact proposals@bellwether.org.

For more information about Assembly by Bellwether, please visit the [Assembly website](#).

Our Vision

At Bellwether, we envision a future where all young people have access to an equitable and excellent education, and they live lives filled with opportunity. We envision an education system that is effective, equitable, and responsive.



Thank You

