

Shared Strategies

An Examination of Bellwether's School Cohort Program

By Thomas Gold, Paul Beach, Melissa Steel King, and Leonard D.T. Newby

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Introduction

As education systems evolve and place greater emphasis on accountability and data-driven decision-making, school improvement planning has gained prominence as a systematic approach to address challenges, set goals, and implement strategies that lead to enhanced learning outcomes for K-12 students. For some schools, the process is compliance-driven; under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, every school identified as low performing by its state had to develop and implement a school improvement plan.

Currently, under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, districts with low-performing schools must partner with stakeholders to “locally develop and implement a comprehensive support and improvement plan for the school to improve student outcomes.”¹ Strategic or improvement planning is also required in other areas of education, including school accreditation² and as part of the process of authorizing charter schools.³

However, increasingly many schools are embracing improvement planning as a deliberate endeavor to enhance their educational practices and increase equitable access to high-quality learning for all students. Schools that are committed to continuous improvement and providing a high-quality education to their students are more likely to engage in comprehensive school improvement planning processes. One such example comes from Great Minnesota Schools (GMS), a nonprofit based in Minneapolis, which supports schools’ proactive efforts to build on their existing strengths to reach new student performance and other goals through improvement planning.

This analysis provides an overview of the Bellwether School Improvement Cohort Program (Cohort Program) and its work with schools supported by GMS. We present an overview of Bellwether’s three-stage process, starting with a comprehensive school “health” assessment, moving to stakeholder engagement, and finally to program implementation and progress monitoring. We then preview lessons learned from case studies of two schools — Global Academy (Global) and Prodeo Academy (Prodeo) — that have participated in the Cohort Program. Overall, findings from accompanying case studies suggest that the Cohort Program has helped build the organizational capacity of these schools to improve student achievement.

Interviews and focus groups with staff members and teachers demonstrate that the Cohort Program has led to improved school operations, greater teacher satisfaction with school leadership and professional development opportunities, and better systems for addressing student behavior management. Although our research was not structured to measure how the Cohort Program impacted student achievement, most public schools participating in the cohort have shown year-to-year improvements in mathematics and reading proficiency in the most recent years of state testing.

What Is School Improvement Planning?

School improvement planning processes often mirror strategic planning practices that are common in other industries.⁴ The goal of any strategic or improvement planning process is to develop a long-term vision, set priorities, identify strategies to achieve said priorities, and develop an implementation and monitoring plan that describes the activities various stakeholders will engage in to achieve the organization’s goals. Improvement plans can also serve as a North Star for school leaders when making complex decisions.

In general, improvement (or strategic) planning requires a focus on the following aspects of an organization:

- The context within which it operates.
- Its assets and strengths.
- The root causes of its problems.
- Its goals and strategies for achieving them.
- Metrics on its progress and accountability.

School Strategic Plans Vary Considerably Among Schools

Despite its prevalence in public education, very little is known about the quality of school improvement plans, what high-quality planning looks like, or how planning relates to student achievement. What evidence does exist suggests that school improvement plans can vary across schools but are low quality in general.⁵ School improvement plans tend to do a poor job of diagnosing the root causes of educational problems in a school (e.g., achievement disparities, chronic absenteeism). These plans are also somewhat narrow in their approach and generally do not consider the influence of outside factors (e.g., community engagement, political context).⁶

Perhaps most problematically, improvement planning is far too often approached from a compliance-oriented mindset, where just enough is done to meet policy requirements, but not enough is achieved to generate real change.⁷ As a result, these plans are surface level when it comes to examining the root causes of a school's challenges. In one study, researchers who analyzed 111 school improvement plans across 12 districts and seven states found that fewer than one-third of these cases looked at systemic issues when diagnosing the root causes of low levels of student achievement in mathematics and reading.⁸

Effective school improvement planning, however, can make a big difference. Some evidence shows that high-quality school improvement plans are positively associated with student achievement.⁹ One of the few studies to isolate the effects of specific plan components found that improvement plans with timely goals and frequent monitoring had the strongest association with student achievement.¹⁰ High-quality, detailed improvement plans can make it easier to implement the strategies and initiatives embedded in those plans.¹¹

Improvement Planning Faces Increasingly Complex School Systems

Schools across the country are often asked to provide many services for students and their families, leading to an increasing number of competing priorities. In addition to teaching core academics, schools are being tasked with improving students' social-emotional well-being, prioritizing college and career readiness, and providing meaningful enrichment activities.¹² The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent return to in-person instruction has also presented schools with an urgency to build strong cultures and climates that support student achievement and well-being.¹³

In addition, K-12 schools serve students with a multitude of non-academic needs, including students with disabilities, students experiencing mental health issues, and students whose primary language is not English.

Finally, school and district leaders must balance the priorities of a wide range of stakeholders while ensuring they are adhering to city, state, and federal policy mandates. A key responsibility of school leaders is surfacing the needs of students, families, staff, and the broader community and incorporating those needs into the operation of the school. Once the varying needs of different stakeholders are visible, school leaders must be able to balance competing priorities, find common ground, and develop a vision that reflects the perspective of all relevant stakeholders.

Producing high-quality school improvement plans requires significant training and time to do it well. Time, of course, is exactly what school system leaders lack. Bellwether's Cohort Program fills this void by providing school system leaders with the technical assistance and support they need to lead effective and inclusive school improvement planning efforts. By working with cohorts of schools, Bellwether is building a knowledge base on the experience of these schools and applying these learnings broadly across the sector. Bellwether's end goal is to leave a school in the hands of leaders with the awareness, competency, and motivation to create and execute its strategic vision.

Bellwether's Cohort Program Three-Stage Approach

Bellwether's Cohort Program operates across the country and is designed to make high-quality school improvement plans the norm rather than the exception. Bellwether works with leaders in districts, charter networks, and individual schools as well as the funders that support them to execute a three-stage process over the course of three to six months that results in high-quality, actionable improvement plans (Table 1). Bellwether's approach does not focus on just identifying the incremental change or process improvement. Instead, the Bellwether team works closely with school leaders to build their capacity to create lasting change — and develop the skill set needed to engage in independent, effective school planning.

TABLE 1: BELLWETHER'S COHORT PROGRAM THREE-STAGE APPROACH

Stage	Timing
Stage 1: Comprehensive School Assessment	Year 1: Months 1-3
Stage 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Plan Development	Year 1: Months 4-6
Stage 3: Implementation and Monitoring	Years 2-3

Stage 1: Comprehensive School Assessment

Bellwether's work with schools begins with a comprehensive School Health Assessment aligned with Bellwether's School Quality Review Framework (Figure 1). Depending on the needs of a particular school system, Bellwether may focus only on select components rather than the entire framework.

To conduct the School Health Assessment, Bellwether visits individual schools, interviews internal and external stakeholders, reviews key documents, and analyzes school-level data over the course of six weeks. Bellwether staff triangulate across these sources of evidence to rate each school on a simple five-point scale, with a rating of 1 indicating "significant progress needed" and a rating of 5 indicating "high quality" (Appendix). At the conclusion of Stage 1, Bellwether

provides school leaders with the results along with supporting evidence and a small set of recommended action steps.

Stage 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Plan Development

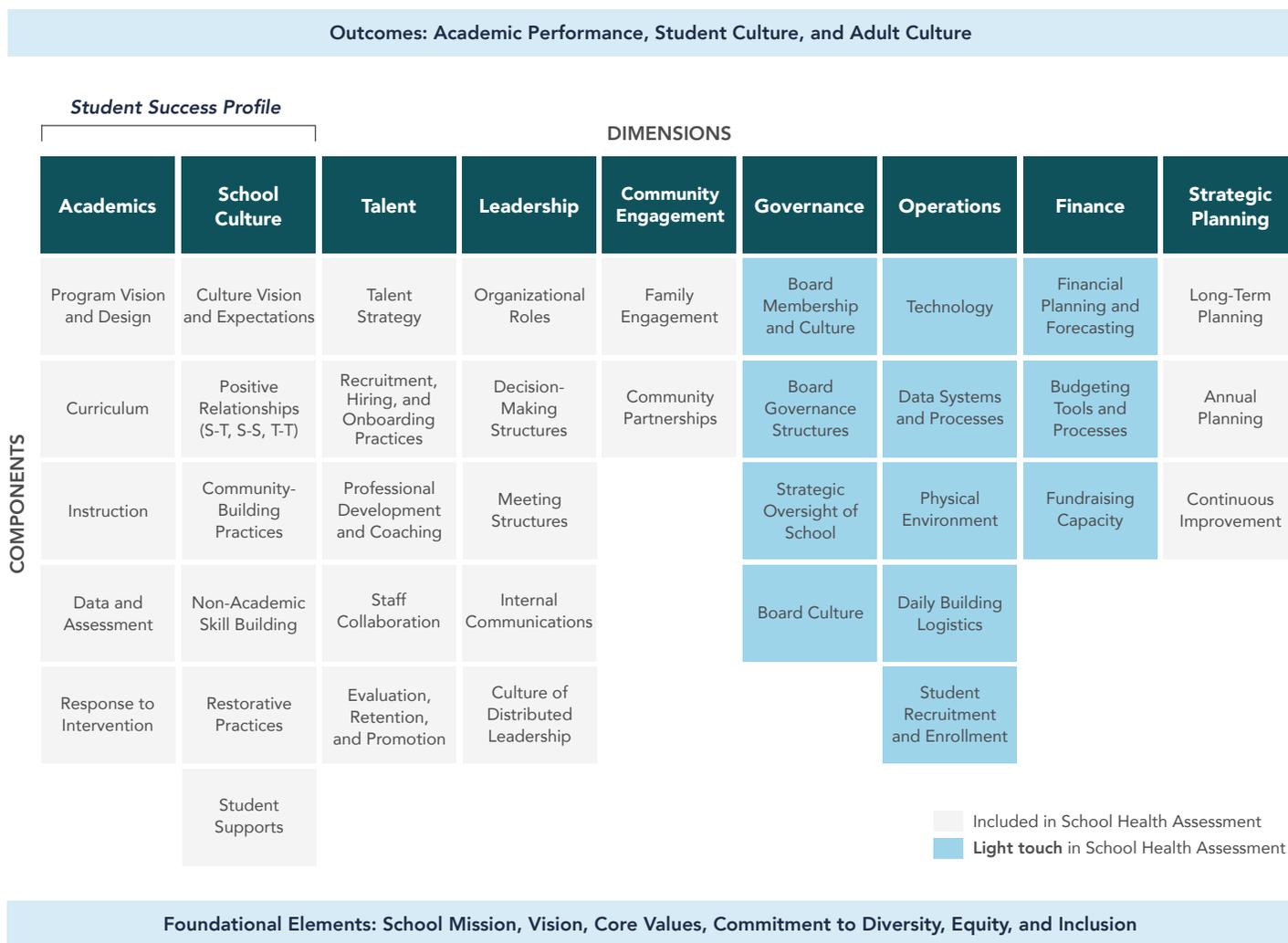
After completing a School Health Assessment, Bellwether works in close partnership with school leaders to develop a School Success Plan. Bellwether starts Stage 2 by helping schools form a steering committee comprising the school leaders, select teachers, and other staff that gathers input from a wide range of stakeholders, including students, parents, community members, teachers, administrators, and board members. The steering committee meets regularly with the Bellwether team to track progress and to oversee the implementation of new initiatives.

Using data from the School Health Assessment and input from key stakeholders, Bellwether facilitates the development of a Graduate Profile, which describes the school’s vision for the knowledge, skills, and dispositions a student should possess after graduating. With this Graduate Profile in mind and data on how students are currently performing against it, Bellwether supports the steering committee in creating three to five key priorities, identifying initiatives aligned to those priorities, and generating ambitious but achievable three-year target outcomes. Finally, aligning with best practices, Bellwether helps schools develop milestone goals aligned with three-year target outcomes along with a detailed progress monitoring plan.¹⁴

Stage 3: Implementation and Monitoring

Bellwether provides continuous implementation support for School Success Plan execution — a final and often overlooked stage of this work. The type of support a school receives is dependent on its specific priorities, but it can include identifying high-quality curricula and instructional materials, developing a professional development model, or deciding on how to expand programmatic offerings while ensuring equitable access. Bellwether summarizes the progress each school makes with yearly updates to its Success Plan Review. To do so, Bellwether gathers data and information in Stage 3, similar to what is collected during Stage 1.

FIGURE 1: BELLWETHER’S SCHOOL HEALTH FRAMEWORK



Lessons Learned

Based on an analysis of case study interviews, focus groups, and an initial examination of extant data, five factors are critical indicators of Bellwether Cohort Program success: focusing on equity, tailoring the approach to the school's needs, building trust with building leaders, leveraging deep content knowledge, and providing continuous support.

Leading With an Equity Lens

Bellwether's Academic and Program Strategy team's equity commitments articulate how they work with schools throughout the planning process (Table 2). These commitments start with a self-reflection on how one's own identities show up at and influence their work, promoting an approach of designing at the margins, developing processes that allow for ceding and sharing power, and advocating for making the invisible visible. In the initial stage of planning, Bellwether also works to acknowledge the past and understand the current social and political landscape within which the school is operating. These equity commitments are intentionally and explicitly integrated into each stage of work with schools:

"[A focus on equity] was a great baseline and a way for a lot of our staff members to self-reflect on how they are approaching our student population [and] people who are different from themselves."

—TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT
Global

Tailoring the Planning Approach

Bellwether leverages a school's existing mission, strengths, and goals, rather than trying to replace them. This is different from the practice of other organizations that come to a school with a specific product or framework that must be followed. Bellwether works alongside school leaders and staff to help them define their own approach based on the values the school stands for and its existing strengths:

"Everything felt very intentional and well-designed ... The process was something that was supportive for every school regardless of the situation they were in."

—SARA ZINDA
Founding Middle Academy Principal, Prodeo

TABLE 2: BELLWETHER'S ACADEMIC AND PROGRAM STRATEGY EQUITY COMMITMENTS

Equity Commitment	Description
Start With Yourself	Consciously reflect on how individual identity impacts our work by building in consistent, structured opportunities for identifying (and interrupting when necessary) the ways in which individual mindsets, biases, and prior experiences may help or harm our pursuit of equity.
Design at the Margins	Design systems that prioritize equitable processes and outcomes for systemically marginalized communities, knowing that these systems will more effectively serve all.
Cede and Share Power	Explicitly bring to the table those who have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes and center their voice in the pursuit of equitable outcomes for all students.
Make the Invisible, Visible	Explicitly name the assumptions, values, and context in which perspectives and recommendations are grounded; share information transparently and cultivate decision-making practices that prioritize inclusivity and equity.
Acknowledge the Past, Understand the Present, Design for the Future	Ground processes in historical local context, seek to understand how inequity plays out presently, and use those inputs to inform a transformational design of the future.

Source: Adapted from [228 Accelerator](#).

Establishing Trust With Schools

A core assumption of Bellwether’s model is that change cannot occur without building strong and trusting relationships with principals, teachers, and staff. Bellwether builds trust with schools, and once that trust is established, it helps school leaders strengthen their bond with their respective communities. In both cases, building trust requires holding oneself and others accountable:

“[A consistent point of contact] ... since the very beginning ... has been a really big factor in the success and the trust ... between Bellwether and the schools here.”

—MORGAN BROWN, MELISSA LONG, SHEILA KAVANEY
Portfolio Director, Director of Literacy, Senior Director of Operations & School Support (respectively), GMS

Leveraging Deep Content Knowledge and Experience

Bellwether’s Academic and Program Strategy team leverages its extensive experience working with schools and districts to build connections and share evidence-based practices. In the past year, the team served more than 60 schools, districts, and charter management organizations across the country.

Bellwether further operates as a critical friend, combining constructive feedback with genuine concern, fostering an environment of open dialogue and continuous growth:

“Bill [Durbin] and all the [Bellwether team members], they just know a lot. They’ve seen a lot of schools. They know a lot of stuff. They can give you advice, and also talk about how to formalize [curriculum], how to document it, how to actually have a much better idea of where you are and where you want to go.”

—HELEN FISK AND MELISSA STORBAKKEN
Co-Founders; Executive Director, Director
(respectively), Global

Providing Continuous Support Over Time

Bellwether’s work with schools focuses on building change incrementally over a period of three years. This is different from other organizations that seek change in six months or one year.

“[Strategic planning] was a ton of work. That was really intensive. It was more work than we thought it was, and it was absolutely worth it. We would do it again because of the [end] product.”

—MORGAN BROWN, MELISSA LONG, SHEILA KAVANEY
Portfolio Director, Director of Literacy, Senior Director of
Operations & School Support (respectively), GMS



Bringing It All Together

Bellwether's work with GMS-supported schools is an ideal microcosm to study the implementation and potential impact of the Cohort Program. On average, GMS-supported schools serve more non-white students and students eligible for free and reduced-price meals compared to the rest of the public schools in Minnesota. Most schools in the cohort have also shown some level of growth in student achievement over the past several years.

The GMS Cohort includes some Minnesota's most diverse and high-need schools.

The GMS Cohort Program includes 26 schools across nine charter networks, including 15 elementary schools, eight middle schools, and three high schools — all located in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Since four of the schools are private, and do not have publicly available data, we have excluded them from the summaries below. We have only included the data from the 22 public charter schools.

In general, the cohort schools are small, with 19 of the 22 public Cohort schools serving on average a smaller population of students compared to the rest of the schools in Minneapolis.¹⁵ In addition to being relatively small, the GMS Cohort serves some of the most racially diverse and high-need schools in the state (Figure 2).

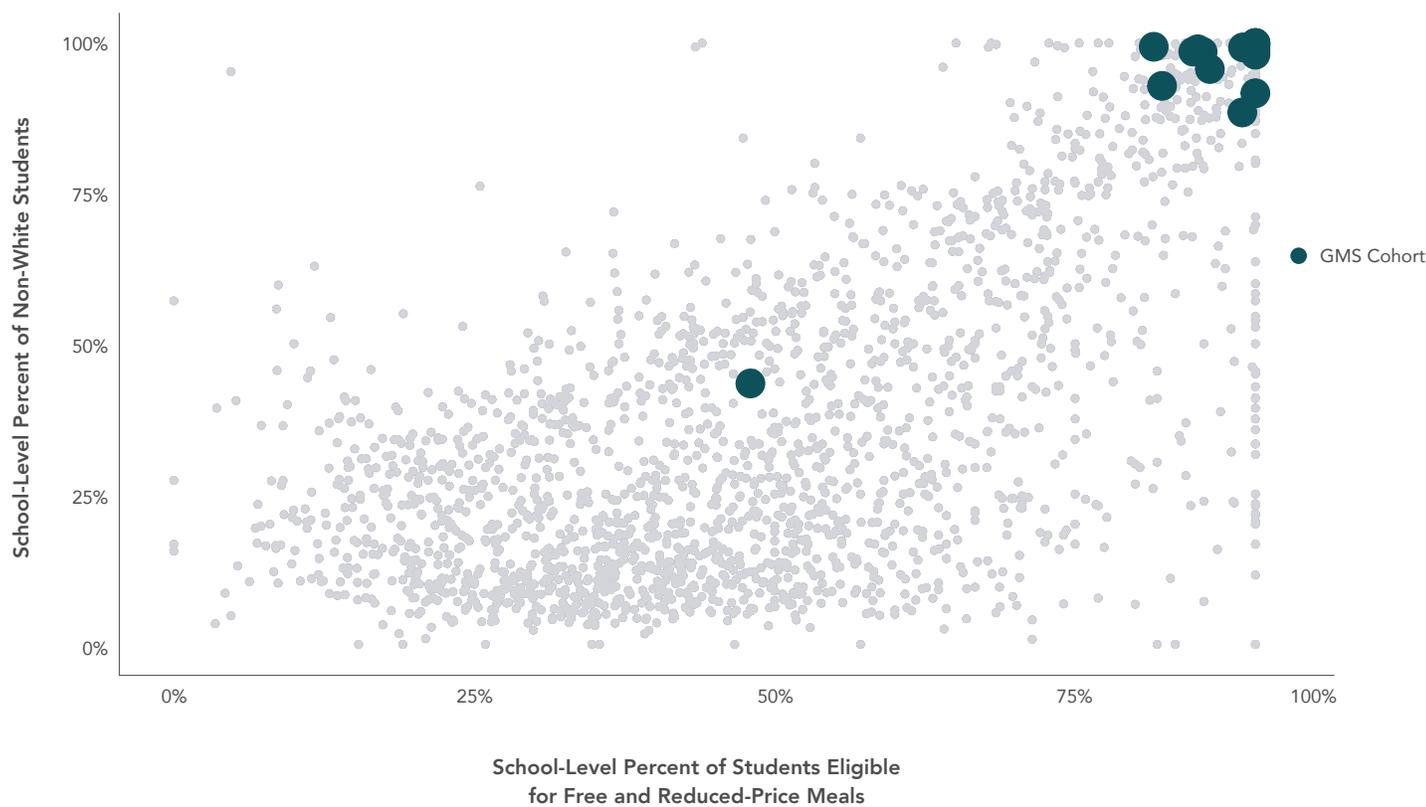
Nearly all public schools in the GMS Cohort enroll predominantly non-white students: In 13 schools more than 60% of students identify as Black (compared to 12% for the state), in four schools more than 78% of students identify as Asian American (compared to 7%

for the state), and in four schools more than 85% of students identify as Hispanic (compared to 11% for the state).¹⁶ Across the entire GMS Cohort, only 6% of students identify as white, as compared to 62% across Minnesota.

The GMS Cohort overwhelmingly includes schools that serve high proportions of students who are experiencing economic challenges. Nearly all — 20 of the 22 public schools in the Cohort — serve more than 80% of students who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals (compared to 43% for the state). Public Cohort schools are also among the most linguistically diverse in the state. Across the entire GMS Cohort, 41% of students are English learners (compared to 9% for the state).

Despite serving a high percentage of high-need students, public Cohort schools enroll a lower percentage of students who receive special education services. Across the entire public Cohort, 11% of students receive special education services (compared to 18% for the state).

FIGURE 2: GREAT MINNESOTA SCHOOLS COHORT'S DEMOGRAPHIC MAKEUP



Notes: Minnesota only reports free and reduced-price meal percent up to 90% for schools. Figure 2 shows that the public cohort schools serve predominantly non-white student populations as well as a high proportion of students who are experiencing economic challenges. Schools in the far right corner of the graph include those with the most students who identify as non-white and the most students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals. *Source:* Minnesota Department of Education's Data Center, *Enrollment Data Report*, 2023.

Schools in the GMS Cohort range widely in terms of student achievement.

When it comes to student achievement, with one exception, all public cohort schools are scoring below the state average for mathematics and reading proficiency on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments.¹⁷ Cohort schools are working diligently to address their achievement disparities and understand the diverse needs of the students they serve. As part of this work, there is a strong emphasis on year-over-year growth as an indication of a step in the right direction.

Despite below-average proficiency, most public cohort schools have shown year-to-year improvements in mathematics and reading proficiency in the most recent years of state testing. For example, of the 17 public charter schools serving grades K-12 with valid scores for the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, 14 showed cohort-to-cohort improvements in reading proficiency and 12 showed improvements in mathematics proficiency. At least four separate cohort schools showed gains of at least 10 percentage points in either subject — two of these schools in both subjects.



Conclusion

Bellwether's Cohort Program is collaborative by design, but not without its challenges. School leaders committed to improvement planning can benefit from three key takeaways from Bellwether's process.

- First, crafting the school improvement plan is just the beginning. Real success comes from effective management, sustained commitment, and ongoing monitoring by school leaders.
- Second, the adoption of a follow-on coaching and support model for school leaders amplifies plan execution and overall efficacy.
- Third, a holistic approach not only streamlines implementation but also empowers leaders to navigate future planning endeavors with heightened expertise and more confidence.

As the Global Academy and Prodeo Academy case studies demonstrate, while Bellwether's approach to supporting improvement planning follows a general framework, it adapts to each school's unique situation, recognizing that schools vary widely in student populations, communities, and challenges.

The experiences of GMS Cohort schools in Minnesota's Twin Cities metropolitan area demonstrate the power of tailoring school improvement efforts to fit schools' specific needs. Taking an equitable approach, building trust with school leaders, and having deep expertise all contribute to more effective and collaborative cohort programs and are guiding principles that schools across the country can use.

For more on Cohort Program lessons learned, read case studies of two participating schools — [Global Academy](#) and [Prodeo Academy](#). ✦

Appendix

SCHOOL HEALTH ASSESSMENT RATING SYSTEM

Rating	Description	Criteria
5	High quality	All quality indicators are met; the school/network is an exemplar to others.
4	Moderate quality	Most quality indicators are met; the school/network is doing strong work.
3	Some progress needed	Some quality indicators are met/results are inconsistent; the school/network is performing "on average".
2	Moderate progress needed	Several quality indicators are not met; the school/network is performing "below average".
1	Significant progress needed	Most quality indicators are not met; the school/network is performing below average and action is needed.

Endnotes

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About the Authors



THOMAS GOLD

Thomas Gold is a senior associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. He can be reached at thomas.gold@bellwether.org.



PAUL BEACH

Paul Beach is an associate partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. He can be reached at paul.beach@bellwether.org.



MELISSA STEEL KING

Melissa Steel King is a partner at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area. She can be reached at melissa.king@bellwether.org.



LEONARD D.T. NEWBY

Leonard D.T. Newby is a senior analyst at Bellwether in the Policy and Evaluation practice area.

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.

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