



## Shared Strategies: An Examination of Bellwether's School Cohort Program

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# Case Study

## Global Academy

*By using tailored improvement planning, Bellwether's School Cohort Program helped Global Academy to take curriculum, instruction, and student achievement to the next level.*

### Background

Global Academy (Global) is a public charter school in Columbia Heights, Minnesota, serving around 451 students in grades pre-K to 8 from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of the students at Global are first- and second-generation immigrants from countries within East Africa and the Middle East, and they live in homes where English is the second language. Around 44% of the students at Global Academy are English language learners.

The school, which follows the International Baccalaureate curriculum, prides itself on fostering a rigorous academic environment for its students. Global's learning environment encourages a holistic approach to student development with the goal of preparing young people for life in a global society.

Global also describes itself as "beating the odds" in its commitment to furthering student achievement for the community. According to a school leader interviewed, "[The] simple fact of the matter is we are [probably] the most successful school in the state in educating the demographics that we serve." While the school's overall academic results are average across Minnesota, the proportion of students performing at proficiency on math is higher at Global compared with other schools

in the Bellwether Cohort Program. The school, though, wanted to "make the next jump up to 70% or 75% of kids being proficient [in math and reading]," as one leader said.

To elevate its performance, Global, in partnership with and using funding from Great Minnesota Schools, engaged in the Cohort Program with Bellwether's Academic and Program Strategy team. This case study explores their experience in this collaborative process and offers lessons for other school systems looking to replicate Global's success.

### Creating a Successful Roadmap to Improve Curriculum and Instruction

Consistent with its improvement planning process, Bellwether began its engagement with a School Health Assessment for Global. The School Health Assessment, a comprehensive process that investigates all components of the school's program — academics, school culture, talent, leadership, and community engagement — identified several areas for change, such as implementing more high-quality curriculum, building a culture of data-driven instruction, and providing more intentional instructional coaching.



Four years later, after participating in one complete cohort cycle with Bellwether, Global was able to achieve multiple objectives, including:

- A more rigorous English language arts (ELA) and math curriculum with high-quality instructional materials.
- Pacing guides to ensure fidelity to the curriculum.
- Data-informed instruction.
- A vision for what effective instruction looks like on a schoolwide level.
- Coaching positions added to analyze data and support assessment and data use.

According to Global's leadership, these changes helped put them in a much better place and on a trajectory toward their goals of improving student performance. In terms of the curriculum, they remarked that "teachers do love the new curriculum. They do see it as more rigorous." The curriculum was further supported with better systems for curriculum mapping and data-driven instruction, which has helped the school to "track where their teachers are, what they are doing. ... They have really developed a much better sense of looking at student data and figuring out [where] they need to reteach."

The school also developed systems for training and coaching to support teachers in their instruction:

***"One of the things that came out of this whole process [with Bellwether] is really training and defining our academic coordinators, which we now call our assistant directors. Prior to this, we had used many different models. We've landed on one that is working really well. We have an assistant director in elementary and one in middle school."***

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

One of the key roles of these new assistant directors is to help teachers with data-driven instruction:

***“[Assistant directors] are in charge of also doing the data analysis with the teachers that came out of the Bellwether visit, and working with ANet, which has trained these coordinators for the last three years on how to ... work with staff on interim assessments and use the data.”***

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

Overall, teachers responded well to the changes. Results from the school’s annual TNTP Insights Survey showed that in 2019, 80% of educators at Global agreed that teachers at the school shared a common vision of what effective instruction looked like. In 2022, that number rose to 93%. Similarly, in 2019, 77% of the teachers felt that the feedback they got from being observed helped them improve student outcomes. In 2022, that number rose to 90%.

The key to the success of Bellwether’s work with Global is based on a tailored approach to strategic planning, expertise in key areas of education change, and consistency in support.

## **Building Trust by Aligning Support With the School’s Mission**

Bellwether’s Cohort Program is tailored to the needs of a school, its mission, and its identity. Global wanted any partner it worked with to understand and align the work with the school’s international vision and mission. This was important because Global had previously worked with consultants that it described as one-dimensional in their practices, using a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement, which led to poor results. However, Global’s work with Bellwether enabled the school to remain true to its mission:

***“I’m 43 years into this, I’ve worked with a lot of consultants. The thing [Bellwether] did that I thought was really wonderful is they wanted you to be absolutely true to the mission of your school[. ...] A lot of times, consultants come in and they’ve seen one model work, and they want you to become that model — whether it’s what you value or not. That was not the case with Bellwether. In fact, they pushed us [to remain true to our vision].”***

—HELEN FISK  
Co-Founder and Executive Director, Global

Bellwether’s tailored approach to strategic planning was further evident in its efforts to understand and offer solutions to the school’s challenges with its curriculum. Bellwether encouraged and assisted Global to find curricula that not only improved student content knowledge, but also made students more equipped to become productive citizens:

***“We were choosing certain curricula so that our students can increase their agency as global citizens and make sure they’re equipped to succeed not only in the classroom, but beyond. ... We’ve changed both our math and our reading curriculum in response to this. As an International Baccalaureate school, we still really want inquiry-based learning happening. We wanted to ensure that the curricula that we were choosing still really aligned with that [approach] but also was culturally relevant.”***

—GLOBAL TEACHER

Finally, Bellwether pushed the school to identify ways to measure student achievement that was modeled on its global approach:

***“We have a mission statement that centers on the International Baccalaureate program in global citizenship. [Bellwether] really pushed us to say, ‘If these are your values, if this is what you believe in, how do you know a kid has gotten there?’ ... That was an invaluable conversation to have.”***

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

## **Leveraging Deep Knowledge to Build an Actionable Improvement Plan**

Bellwether’s Cohort Program approach was also differentiated due to its focus on providing actionable support based on experience and deep knowledge of the field. According to Global’s school leaders, previous attempts at strategic planning had stayed at a more generic level, leaving the school without a specific road map for improvement, “We talked to other consultants, actually, before Bellwether, and they hadn’t given us any answers that really moved the needle at all or that we thought would move the needle.” In general, working with other consultants seemed much more aspirational:

***“Our previous strategic plan was a generic wish: ‘Wouldn’t this feel nice? Wouldn’t this feel good?’ ... The [Bellwether] developmental plan was really critical. It’s extremely thoughtful, very specific, very actionable.”***

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





Through the Cohort process, Bellwether helped Global focus less on what it already knew about its current instructional state, and more on what concrete steps it could take to improve. This ensured that every step laid out in the improvement plan was realistic, feasible, and measurable:

***“The other thing that is different about [Bellwether’s] approach is they assumed, for the most part, that you knew what wasn’t working in your school, and they were helping you to articulate that in a more specific way where you could do something actionable.”***

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

Global credits the solutions-oriented approach with helping the school get through the COVID-19 pandemic:

***“The pandemic struck right after we came up with a plan. We don’t think there’s any question that we would’ve weathered the pandemic as well as we did without thinking about [improvement planning] ahead of time and really trying to stay true to what we had developed with Bellwether through the pandemic to the extent that we could, as opposed to just surviving, getting through the couple of years.”***

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

When Global was unsure of what actionable steps to take to reach its goals, Bellwether was able to draw on its expertise to provide recommendations. For example, it helped Global identify a more rigorous curriculum package:

***“The other thing with Bellwether is they just know a lot of stuff about curriculum and could intelligently discuss different curriculum options ... or things they’d seen work in different places. That was helpful as well.”***

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

In addition to suggesting tools and approaches, Bellwether was able to explain the rationale behind specific steps that the school needed to take, helping leaders deepen their understanding of why certain actions could help drive improvement:

***“There was a big push on data-driven instruction, something which everybody’s always pushing on. Bellwether was able to do more — [giving] us compelling reasons why [it] would be helpful to increase the achievement of students as opposed to just collecting a bunch of data.”***

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

By providing a clear picture of the rationale behind data-driven instruction, Bellwether helped build the capacity of Global’s leaders and teachers to not only improve student performance but also make strategic decisions for the future.

## Creating Buy-In Through a Continuous and Iterative Approach

Global's sustained and iterative engagement with Bellwether — conducting the School Health Assessment, drafting the plan, doing the necessary homework, testing out assumptions — provided the basis for a workable and enduring solution. This type of process changed routines in the school as well as the mindsets of people involved. This was another key difference from the school's experiences with previous consultants:

*“The Bellwether process, the whole process stretched out over weeks where we had meetings, where we came back, and we’d have a chance to think about things. We’d have a homework assignment and come back, as opposed to [other consultants]. ... So it was just a much deeper level of conversation with Bellwether than with the [previous strategic planning efforts]. ... It was a far better value than a one-day, one-shot visit to find out stuff you already knew if you’re any good at your job.”*

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

The iterative nature of the engagement between Global and Bellwether solidified the Cohort Program's impact:

*“[Bellwether] did work with us with that detailed action plan afterwards to actually take their recommendations. That time spent after the review and after the data collection was what was always missing in other reviews.”*

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

The length of the process, its iterative nature and the depth of conversations throughout, helped to create confident school leaders with a strong sense of ownership of their school and its mission and goals:

*“By the time we had to talk to the board or the staff about this, we had internalized it enough. ... We had whittled it down to stuff that we knew really well. We could talk about [the strategic plan], no problem. That was part of it. We weren't standing in front of the staff or the board saying, 'Well, this is what Bellwether thinks.' We could confidently say, 'We need to do this, and this should work if we do this, and it has worked.'”*

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

Overall, by providing ongoing support that responded to issues in an iterative way, the Cohort Program helped to build the confidence and capacity of the school's leaders. This played a pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for lasting change that will continue now that the engagement with Bellwether has ended.

## Conclusion

The time and intensity that Bellwether brought to the work with Global helped the school to ensure that its leaders had the capacity and knowledge to follow through on the plan and its actionable steps. The Cohort Program helped the school identify the priority issues to focus on as well as find solutions that were aligned with its larger mission to train young people to be ready for a global world. Bellwether's tailored approach was also crucial in building trust with the school's leadership, staff, and teachers, creating broad buy-in from all key stakeholders.

As a result of the work with Bellwether, Global's teachers report more alignment in their vision of what good teaching looks like and are satisfied with new professional development efforts. Although this work has not yet improved student results in math and has brought only slight increases so far in ELA, it establishes a solid base from which the school can build for the future. Global leadership can repeat the planning process with Bellwether if needed to ensure the school is focused on the right action steps and continues to build alignment across all stakeholders.

Read [Shared Strategies: An Examination of Bellwether's Cohort Program](#) for an overview of key lessons learned.



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## 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](http://bellwether.org).

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