Bellwether

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

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SEPTEMBER 2023

Case Study

Prodeo Academy

By engaging Prodeo Academy in an inclusive strategic planning process, Bellwether's School Cohort Program helped the school reset its culture and accountability systems and improve student performance during a critical period of growth.

Background

Prodeo Academy (Prodeo) is a network of public college preparatory charter schools with campuses in St. Paul-Minneapolis, Minnesota. The school network (here after, school) serves a diverse student population of approximately 1,000 students in pre-K through grade 8 across two campuses. Prodeo is dedicated to developing critical thinkers and reflective leaders, with a vision to create an "innovative network of schools known nationally for best practices around student achievement and character development, fostering impactful educators, closing the opportunity gap, and building stronger communities."

Recognizing the need to continuously assess and validate the effectiveness of their practices, Prodeo's administration, in partnership with and using funding from Great Minnesota Schools, engaged in two rounds of the Cohort Program with Bellwether's Academic and Program Strategy team, starting in fall 2019. This case study provides an overview of why Prodeo engaged in the strategic planning process and what factors account for the success of this work.

Building a Plan to Improve School Culture, Climate, and Academics

When Prodeo embarked on its partnership with Bellwether in 2019, the school was met with a series of opportunities for growth across various dimensions. In its relatively short six-year existence, Prodeo's commitment to academic excellence remained steadfast, and the school was proactive in addressing areas of development. As the student body expanded to meet the growing educational needs of its St. Paul and Columbia Heights communities, Prodeo enrolled its entire waitlist in 2019, leading to a 40% surge in new student enrollment across select grades.

At this time, the school undertook a dedicated effort to enhance student achievement, bringing it up to state averages. Simultaneously, the school recognized the importance of establishing a clear program vision, fostering consistent instructional practices, and implementing an effective talent management process. This strategy reflects Prodeo's commitment to cultivating an environment that is conducive to optimal student learning.

The school's decision to engage in Bellwether's Cohort Program occurred at a critical time; Prodeo was growing while addressing several unresolved challenges. The decision to work with Bellwether also occurred just before the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that could have been disastrous for the school:

> *"Bellwether came in ... and then the pandemic hit. We were really glad that we jumped in at the time we did, it was [the] worst year we had ever had. We knew that couldn't go on any longer! It was the right time to say, 'Okay, rip this Band-Aid off, get tough feedback.'"*
>
> —CHANCEY ANDERSON
> Co-Founder, Prodeo

Through an initial assessment of needs, Prodeo determined, with the help of Bellwether, that its key focus areas for the strategic plan would be to double down on the school's efforts to improve the school culture and climate as well as revise its approach toward academics — with the idea that both areas were inextricably linked.

Prodeo's Path to Success

Through its engagement with Bellwether, Prodeo made several changes in its leadership and organizational functioning that improved its school culture, climate, and academics. First, in terms of school climate, the school adopted a Responsive Classroom approach to address long-running behavior struggles in classrooms. Teachers reported that behavior management was a "big thing" when they started the work with Bellwether; they were looking for more restorative justice approaches that would address disciplinary issues while keeping kids in the classroom. Responsive Classroom provides an evidence-based approach to discipline that focuses on engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness.

The changes in discipline policies had a major impact. In 2019, around 20% of teachers at one of the campuses felt that there were consistent expectations and consequences for student behavior at the school. In 2023, the percentage of teachers who felt this way jumped to 63%. Similar jumps were seen at other campuses in the Prodeo network.

Prodeo also focused on making diversity, equity, and inclusion decisions that improved staff culture. A key component of this effort was an increase in the diversity of the school's teacher workforce, primarily through creating a Grow Your Own teacher preparation program that recruited support staff and other educational assistants at the schools who were interested in becoming teachers. Overall, the goal of this initiative was to make sure that the school's "culture was consistent from classroom to classroom."

The second major area that Prodeo focused on was academics, particularly curriculum, coaching, and accountability. The school adopted new high-quality instructional materials after a thorough review of students' needs, adopting Eureka Math, Wit & Wisdom for English, and other programs. Prodeo was interested in curriculum that went beyond teaching basic skills to focus on higher-level competencies: "We were choosing certain curriculum 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," according to a teacher focus group participant.

Third, the school also invested heavily in better coaching for teachers. "We've completely changed our coaching from essentially 'grows and glows,' which everybody was doing, to more concrete 'see it, name it, do it,' [which allowed us to get] better faster," according to a teacher focus group participant. The coaching further focused on improving the use of data and evaluation tools to inform instruction and student progress. Overall, the teachers at Prodeo report that coaching improved teacher capacity and morale:

> *"I feel like coaching and observations went up 100% this year. ... I have seen a lot of positives come out of that for every teacher in our academy ... it's more coaching, we're working together to really meet our goals. ... Everyone has felt positive and experienced some growth areas, too."*
>
> —TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT
> Prodeo

Teachers responded positively to these changes. From 2019 to 2022, there was a nearly 35-percentage-point increase at one of the campuses in positive views on leadership. In 2019, only 46% of teachers at this school agreed that the school's leaders articulated a clear overarching vision that drives priorities, goals, and decision-making. In 2023, nearly 80% of the teachers agreed with this sentiment. Similar jumps occurred at other schools in the Prodeo network.

In addition, while less than half of the teachers in 2019 felt that the school was committed to improving their instruction, 90% of teachers felt this way in 2023 — a considerable shift in perspective.

The key factors accounting for the success of Prodeo include creating a mindset shift across staff, codifying new and existing practices, focusing on high-impact priorities, and building systems of accountability as outlined below.

Creating a Mindset Shift Through an Inclusive Planning Process

Bellwether focused not only on bringing in proven procedures and high-quality materials, but also on ensuring that the Cohort Program process was inclusive of a broad group of stakeholders in the building and the community. As one school leader remarked, Bellwether consistently asked questions, like:

> *"'Have you gotten a family perspective? Have you gotten the teacher perspective?' It was so much more comprehensive… They would push us, 'Have you asked everybody?' We'd respond with reflection, 'Actually, we want to ask students.' Or, 'We want to ask the families in this way.' We've actually been adding groups. [These questions have] helped us think through the breadth of strategic planning."*
>
> —CHANCEY ANDERSON
> Co-Founder, Prodeo

This inclusive approach also changed the way the school saw strategic planning:

> *"I have a better vision for what strategic planning with Bellwether looks like, and it's shaped the way that I think about it. We pulled all the right people in. We have way more people involved, people own different sections of it."*
>
> —CHANCEY ANDERSON
> Co-Founder, Prodeo

By involving more stakeholders in designing the plan, Prodeo was able to get much broader buy-in for it. As the leaders of the school also described it, each person involved in the planning was able to see how their unique role connected to that of others and contributed to the larger goals of the plan:

> *"If you asked any of our leaders about the work they're doing, they'd be able to tell you exactly how it connects back. They'd be able to tell you how the work connects to [the work of others]."*
>
> —TEACHER FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT
> Prodeo

This was different from previous attempts at strategic planning, when Prodeo's leaders didn't involve as many people or think through how interconnected the process needed to be. That created barriers to implementation, as Chancey Anderson, the school's co-founder, described:

> *"When we first attempted strategic planning, we didn't think as critically about the role of different stakeholders in implementing the plan. So that created some confusion. For example, our operations director was like, 'Wait, I'm on attendance? I didn't realize that.' Because we had not thought through planning in this way, we were hitting barriers all the way through it. Our operations director would say, 'I can try to do that, but I didn't plan for it.' Since he wasn't involved in creating the priority, he understandably felt like we were dumping it on him.'"*
>
> —CHANCEY ANDERSON
> Co-Founder, Prodeo

During that experience, Prodeo's strategic plan had to shift as they went along because of these barriers. With Bellwether, Prodeo was much more successful at implementing strategic planning because its leadership had thought through all of the different pieces of the process and the people involved:

> *"Now, we can do much more because our stakeholders understand how they are involved individually as well as how their plans overlap with other leadership team members. They all are connected to each other, so it not only fosters more effective collaboration, but it has made a significant impact on our efficiency and effectiveness as a network."*
>
> —CHANCEY ANDERSON
> Co-Founder, Prodeo

Codifying Practices Through an Iterative Process for a Growing Network

Another key component to Prodeo's success was its focus on codifying practices as the school's network was expanding. Prodeo's leaders didn't really know what was wrong with their school, or didn't necessarily know what successful practices would look like. The Cohort Program helped them realize, for example, that they weren't clearly and consistently communicating with teachers about standards for instruction and behavior. Once leaders realized that they needed to codify practices as the network expanded, that was a big "aha!" moment for them. They were able to implement systems to ensure consistency across the organization.

Bellwether helped the school identify these critical knowledge areas. As school leaders remarked, Bellwether kept asking: "How have you codified that? How does everybody know that's important? Are you telling everyone that's important?" Bellwether pushed the school's leaders to make all these implicit processes explicit by recording and organizing them.

The process of codification helped the school on multiple levels, providing a consistent set of rules and procedures and better knowledge management. This has been crucial for schools like Prodeo, which see considerable mobility in their staff. For instance, knowledge can be shared with new staff much more effectively than before, when that knowledge only existed in the heads of a few people:

> *"As you get bigger, you have to intentionally codify every important aspect of your culture. As a principal, there were systems and structures I put in place, but didn't codify so that they were in place for the next set of leaders. We are now taking time to name what those critical aspects of our culture are and then codify them."*

—CHANCEY ANDERSON
Co-Founder, Prodeo

Tailoring the Planning Process by Focusing on the Highest Priorities

In addition to codification, Prodeo was successful in setting priorities in its strategic plan and focusing on improvement areas that would have the greatest impact toward its goals. Bellwether supported this effort by helping the school identify these target areas and a sequence for addressing them:

"Together with Bellwether, we identified the areas that were not only where we struggled the most, but areas that would have the highest impact. Knowing that we had a lot of work to do, we narrowed in on what was most critical: first, focusing on solidify classroom instruction and then tiering it out from there."

—CHANCEY ANDERSON
Co-Founder, Prodeo

Having a core set of priorities that are stable, and don't change year to year, also helped ensure the consistency and sustainability of Prodeo's strategic plan:

"I think something that feels really important to me and I think is reflected in this new revision [of the strategic plan] through this cohort is that we have priorities. … The priorities don't change throughout the years, but the tasks that we feel like we can tackle or the scaffold and steps that we need to take to achieve those priorities will be what will change. I think that's been a really positive shift going through this process."

—SARA ZINDA
Founding Middle Academy Principal, Prodeo

Building Systems That Are Data- and Evidence-Driven

Prodeo's partnership with Bellwether has resulted in significant improvements in the school's approach to using data. While Prodeo reported that it already had a strong foundation in collecting and utilizing data to drive instruction and practices, Bellwether encouraged the school's leaders to think about their values and priorities when using data, which ultimately helped them align their use of information with instruction and curriculum.

The use of data has also enhanced accountability systems at the school, particularly through the TNTP Insight surveys, which help drive their instructional practices. This comprehensive shift in data usage has brought about substantial positive changes within Prodeo:

"Another big goal this year is making sure that we're looking at the data and seeing, you know, how that relates to what we're doing every day in the school. But we are making sure that that data aligns with where we're moving with our curriculum[.]"

—SARA ZINDA
Founding Middle Academy Principal, Prodeo

In addition to data-driven instruction, Prodeo has expanded its data collection efforts to assess social and emotional learning (SEL) as well as school culture. Prodeo started tracking all behavioral referrals, as well as social work referrals and the use of other wraparound services. The school also began doing more observations and feedback on behaviors seen in the classrooms and facilitating discussions around SEL with teachers. All of this helped staff and teachers gain a deeper understanding of their students' needs and make more informed decisions to support their social and emotional well-being.

Conclusion

Through the Cohort Program's inclusive and tailored process, Prodeo created an actionable plan to help reset its culture and academics. These changes have been sustained through an inclusive strategic planning process that codified practices, prioritized high-impact decisions, and built effective systems for accountability. All of this helped the schools increase quality at a time of rapid expansion.

While working with Bellwether, schools in the network saw growth in student performance. The St. Paul Primary Academy showed the most growth in state test scores of any school in the entire cohort during this period, in both ELA and math. Growth rates for Columbia Heights Middle Academy were similarly strong during this period. While this case study doesn't test the causal role of the improvement plan on student achievement growth, it's clear that the school, which decided to partner with Bellwether on a second strategic plan in 2022, has begun building the base necessary for sustained growth in student performance.

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**.

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