

#1 IN THE SERIES

 Bellwether

# Charting a Course

Increasing Access to Learning Options  
Through Navigation

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**Beta**<sup>★</sup>  
BY BELLWETHER



## Introduction

**T**oo many of America's K-12 students are struggling. Just 26% of eighth grade students were proficient in math and 31% were proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2022.<sup>1</sup> On the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 42% of students reported experiencing persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.<sup>2</sup> Inequities also persist. Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are less likely to be on grade-level<sup>3</sup> and more likely to struggle with mental health.<sup>4</sup>

It may not be a coincidence that many families<sup>i</sup> are now looking for greater personalization in education and more support for their students' social-emotional well-being. Meanwhile, innovative learning models are redefining the landscape; technological advancements are enabling new types of solutions to emerge; and a wave of policies and parents increasingly "voting with their feet" is changing how dollars flow and where students learn.

The confluence of profound student need, families' interest in alternatives or additions to traditional schooling, and new advances in policy and technology has created **a rare window of opportunity in which more innovative, personalized, and flexible learning is possible.**

Taking advantage of this opportunity, however, is not as simple as it seems. Regardless of whether families are participating in private school choice, supplementing their child's education with extra tutoring or art

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i In this series, the term "family" refers to family or community members taking responsibility for the education and future of a child, including grandparents, foster parents, legal guardians, and other family members. Students are also included in this definition since they participate in educational decision-making, especially as they get older.



classes, replacing a traditional school experience with a microschool or home-school co-op, or accessing work-based learning experiences, participating in the learning ecosystem is complicated. It requires families to evaluate more options and increases the number of decisions they make. Direct funding programs like education savings accounts (ESAs), microgrants, or tax credits and deductions help defray costs by providing families with funds to spend on learning options but create additional complexities. **The potential for overwhelm is high — and it's particularly high for families furthest from opportunity.**

All families who wish to participate in the diverse and dynamic ecosystem of learning options should be able to do so. To make this possible and equitable, it's essential to help families navigate the complexity of the ecosystem.

**Luckily, there's a great deal to learn from navigation organizations** (defined for this series as entities that provide information and guidance to families to help them access learning options). Navigation organizations and the individual navigators they employ identify the learning options available; earn the trust of families to understand students' needs, interests, and goals; address logistical barriers to access; and/or build families' confidence in their choices.

Navigation organizations initially emerged to help families access private and charter schools. Now, they often provide guidance as families explore a broader array of learning options.

Alongside navigation organizations, several technology platforms have also emerged to collect and aggregate information about learning options, providing families with centralized and searchable resources. In some cases, these platforms also serve as the conduit for families to receive and spend public funds. New tools powered by advances in artificial intelligence are capable of aggregating and processing large amounts of data; combined with the ability to process and produce natural language, they also have the potential to unearth novel tools to support the navigation process.

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## What are learning options?

Learning options include any experience — whether provided by a school, community-based organization, local business, college or university, or online operator — designed to support students' growth and development.

Schools of choice (e.g., private and charter schools) are considered a main source of learning options for families. But learning options also include a broader array of more flexible, modular experiences that families seek, including tutoring programs, academic clubs, or community sports. These options often provide *less* than a full school experience on their own but can be combined with other options to create a comprehensive education.

Learning options may be supplemental to the experiences students have in a traditional school, such as sports teams or tutoring. They may also supplant the traditional school experience, as do microschools or home-schooling.

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However, as direct funding programs grow and families' interest in and demand for learning options increases, so too will the number of families who experience barriers to access — **and navigation organizations may not be able to keep pace.** Direct funding programs often have complex requirements, causing navigators to spend more time on helping families access funding than on helping them select the learning options that best meet their child's needs. The lack of aggregated information about what learning options exist, and their quality, forces many navigators to build and update their own lists, often manually. These issues make navigation resource-intensive; as a result, organizations providing hands-on support for families face challenges to scale and sustainability.

This series unpacks the barriers to access that families face, the variety of solutions that navigation organizations have developed, and the challenges that limit the reach and impact of those solutions. It then offers recommendations for how to help navigators address these challenges and support more families and students.

Figure: Charting a Course in the Learning Ecosystem



### Alone in the Storm

Many families are overwhelmed by the sea of choices available and decisions to be made. Without help, they may feel stuck, or unable to move forward in accessing new learning options.



### Navigating Together

Navigators help families make sense of their options based on their child's different needs, goals, and interests. As families determine how they want to proceed, navigators can help them identify and seize opportunities.

## Complexity hinders families' access

In many ways, families across the country have never had more access to learning options. More microschools and hybrid schools exist now than before the COVID-19 pandemic began.<sup>5</sup> Options aimed at helping students recover learning lost during the pandemic, like tutoring, have also grown within an expansive ecosystem of supplemental learning (e.g., after-school programs, occupational therapies, enrichment activities).<sup>6</sup> The ecosystem is increasingly large, dynamic, and diverse. In fact, many families already participate in the learning ecosystem. Before the pandemic, U.S. families were spending more than \$200 billion annually on educational activities for their children.<sup>7</sup>

But participating in the learning ecosystem requires families to dedicate more time and energy to making decisions on behalf of their children. For many families, those decisions can be daunting. For some families, the entwinement of those decisions with other needs and constraints creates barriers that are insurmountable without support (Figure).

Surveys continue to show a mismatch between family demand and participation. In a recent EdChoice survey, for example, 35% of parents reported being interested in tutoring, compared with the 16% currently participating.<sup>8</sup> In another survey by Tyton Partners, 48% of parents indicated they were interested in new learning experiences for their children but were not yet pursuing change.<sup>9</sup>

**The disconnect between family demand and participation is indicative of challenges that complicate families' access to learning options, including financial constraints, logistical barriers, and limited access to the information they need to make decisions.<sup>ii</sup>**

Tight budgets constrain families' choices. Whether families are enrolling their child in a full-time private school, securing after-school care, or arranging private music lessons, these options cost money that many families don't have. Half of parents in a recent survey by Tyton Partners cited affordability as a challenge.<sup>10</sup> Participation rates bear this out; survey data from 2022 indicates that 30% of low-income students did not participate in any out-of-school learning options, compared to just 6% of high-income students.<sup>11</sup> Other

socioeconomic issues may also create barriers to access for families who lack broadband internet, live in rural areas and/or in areas of concentrated poverty, or are highly mobile due to unstable housing or employment.

**Direct funding policies have emerged and expanded to help families afford learning options.** As of March 2024, 16 states have passed policies to create ESA programs.<sup>12</sup> An additional 10 states have microgrant programs in place, though some are funded by federal COVID-19 relief dollars and are set to expire soon.<sup>13</sup> Many others have policies that provide families with tax credits to defray educational expenses.<sup>14</sup> The financial resources these programs provide are considerable support but can create new complexities for families depending on their design and implementation. For instance, some ESA programs have received criticism for high levels of participation by families who were already home-schooling or enrolled in private schools, and commensurately low levels of participation by families furthest from opportunity.<sup>15</sup>

On top of program design and implementation, **logistics such as transportation and scheduling create additional complexity.** According to HopSkipDrive, a firm specializing in transportation solutions for students and families, “37% of parents and caregivers listed figuring out transportation and children’s schedules as the most stressful part of the school year.”<sup>16</sup> Two-thirds of parents say they would have their child participate in more extracurricular activities if transportation options were offered.<sup>17</sup> Transportation is frequently a barrier to access for students participating in work-based learning or other learning opportunities outside the classroom.<sup>18</sup>

**Families also lack access to information** about what learning options exist and which provide high-quality programs aligned with their child’s needs, interests, and goals. Some families may be aware of and able to access data through online resources designed for that purpose; more often, information is housed on obscure government websites and in formats designed for policy analysts and academic researchers. Survey data show that, in selecting learning options for their child, between 30% and 40% of families struggle with awareness of program types and specific providers.<sup>19</sup> Many families need support in finding and selecting the learning options that are best for them.

## Navigation organizations enable families’ access

Navigation organizations have existed across the country for decades. Initially, many of the navigation organizations best known in the education community emerged to help families access school choice. For example, Families Empowered was founded in 2009 to help families in Texas navigate school choice. In 2015, EdNavigator launched in New Orleans and Boston, and Kids First launched in Chicago; both organizations support families’ access to school options (Disclosure).<sup>20</sup>

Building on the approaches of early navigators in school choice, other organizations have emerged to help families navigate different learning options. RESCHOOL Colorado, founded as an initiative of the Donnell-Kay Foundation in 2013, was perhaps the first to expand navigation supports in 2017 to help families access a wider variety of learning options outside of school.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Love Your School, West Virginia Families United for Education, Minnesota Afterschool Advance, and others have also done so.<sup>22</sup>

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### What is navigation?



**Navigation** is a suite of services and supports that provides families with the information and guidance they need to access learning options. It can also include the process of helping families participate in direct funding programs, where they exist.

**Navigation organizations** are entities that provide navigation services and supports to families.

**Navigators** are a defining characteristic of most navigation organizations. These individuals provide personalized information and guidance to families and — depending on families’ needs — invest in building trust and relationships with families, understanding families’ and students’ needs, and building their confidence to shape students’ learning.



Organizations or individuals who don't call themselves "navigators" but nonetheless play the same role are too often overlooked. The South Dakota Afterschool Network and Boston After School & Beyond are two examples of organizations that help families access quality after-school programs.<sup>23</sup> Educators, coaches, and other adults help students connect to programs or services in their communities; neighbors, family members, and friends form social networks that disseminate information and relay advice and experience.

While navigation organizations vary on the particulars — not all navigation organizations offer all types of support to every family — their services and supports generally fall into four categories.

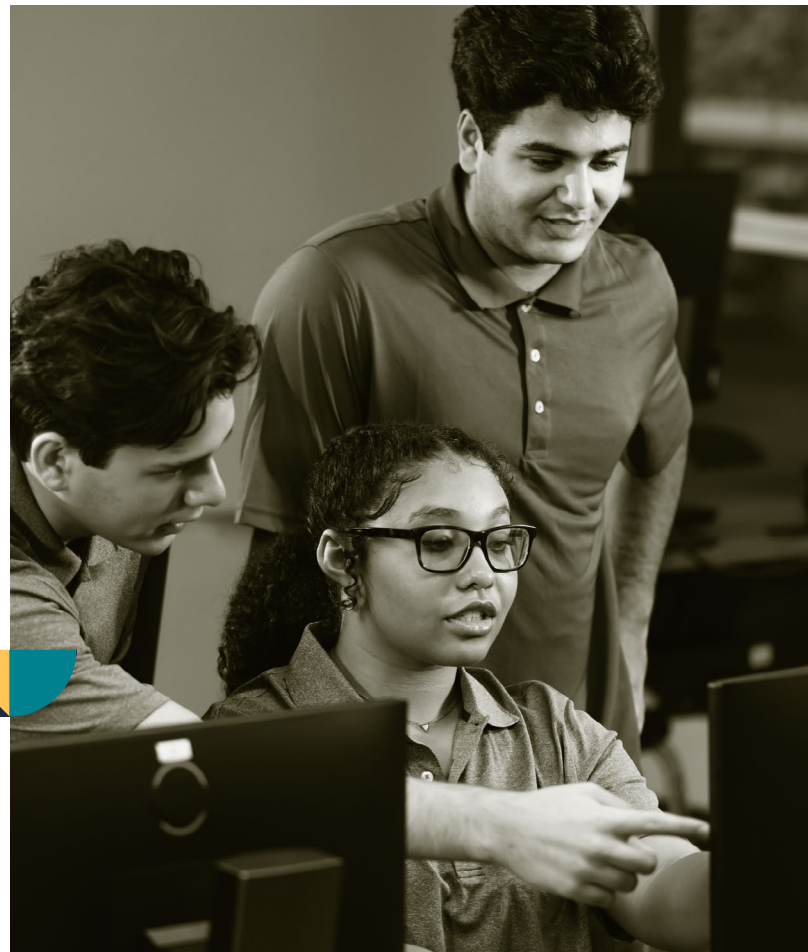
**Understanding students' needs, interests, and goals:** Navigation often requires navigators to build trusting relationships with families. Families share information about students' needs, interests, and goals, and navigators help families find the options and possibilities best suited to them. In finding the right match between what students need and what learning options provide, navigators provide personalized support and center a family's best interests.

**Identifying potential learning options:** Navigators leverage their knowledge of the community, relationships with providers, and experiences with families to develop curated lists of learning options. Ideally, their expertise helps families find high-quality options. In some cases, they may create or leverage existing technology platforms for this information. Rather than each family having to explore the options independently, navigation solutions help families focus on finding what works for them.

**Addressing logistical barriers to access:** Navigators understand how public systems and programs work, and they help families complete applications necessary to access funding or enroll in learning options. In some cases, navigators can also provide support on other logistical barriers. For instance, they can guide families to schools, programs, services, and other community resources that fill gaps in basic and logistical needs, such as food, internet access, and transportation.

**Building families' confidence in their choices:** Many families are hesitant to try something new.<sup>24</sup> Most family members' schooling resembled the traditional K-12 public school system still in place today; it's familiar to them. Navigators, on the other hand, have insight into what alternative options look like. They can help families envision new opportunities for their children, whether by connecting them with like-minded families or by offering guidance and reassurance about a family's choices.

Not all families will need all types of support or a wide range of resources. In many cases, families may already have a learning option in mind and need someone to help them figure out how to access public funding; in others, families may have a general sense of what they're looking for but would benefit from a person or resource to help identify available providers. Regardless, navigation solutions are necessary to bridge the gap between what families want for their children and their ability to access it.



# Navigation organizations face constraints that limit their reach and impact

**B**uilding a relationship with families is resource-intensive, requiring a lot of time to establish trust and understand families' needs. Often, especially in the absence of strong information systems, navigation organizations also do their own research to understand local policy environments and collect information on providers and their services. The time and resource intensity of navigation services create constraints that limit their reach.

**States' policies and provider landscapes vary by region and over time**, creating different opportunities and constraints that affect families' access and to which navigation organizations must be able to respond. For instance, if a rural community lacks a robust supply of learning options, navigators are limited in the in-person options they can help families access and may instead find themselves helping families parse the seemingly infinite number of virtual programs. If another community has a large or fast-evolving ecosystem of providers, navigators may be hard-pressed to develop an accurate and up-to-date understanding of what's available or which options are high quality.

The challenge of understanding the provider landscape is exacerbated by a **lack of aggregated, coherent provider data**. There are some online registries of learning providers; for instance, KidsOutandAbout.com maintains a repository of community assets available to residents and visitors across 45 local regions.<sup>25</sup> Outschool.com curates a list of virtual options vetted for quality and recommended to families.<sup>26</sup> Some navigators have invested their own time and resources in creating registries to support their work and aid families. For instance, RESCHOOL Colorado created the Discover Learning resource for families in Denver to find activities for their children outside of school.<sup>27</sup> Love Your School in Arizona has followed another approach by partnering with Schoolahoop to embed a directory of school choice options on its website.<sup>28</sup>

These resources are valuable and can become increasingly powerful tools in the future, but they're the exception to the norm. Most communities lack a single source of reliable information about the opportunities available. Moreover, **few existing resources provide families or navigators with robust information about the quality of learning options**, whether in the form of student outcome data, family reviews, program inputs, third-party certifications, or other measures. Navigators must often create their own sources of information and/or work without reliable data. This affects navigators' ability to determine whether learning options are well-suited to students' needs, interests, and goals.

Direct funding programs can also affect the options available and **how families and navigators access information about them**. State program administrators have adopted a greater role in compiling approved options, often in partnership with technology providers like ClassWallet, Odyssey, or Merit.<sup>29</sup> These platforms help navigators and families understand which learning options families can access and purchase with public funds. However, while direct funding programs help families afford learning options, the intersection between the options that are available and the options that can be purchased with public dollars complicates the role of navigators.

Other aspects of direct funding programs also affect navigators. Multi-faceted student eligibility criteria and application processes can hinder families' participation; detailed and lengthy provider review processes can limit the number of approved options; reimbursement-based payment structures can limit access for families who cannot carry up-front costs; and confusing communications with state agencies not accustomed to engaging families can undermine trust. Navigators must often dedicate their resources to helping families find their way through these policy structures and processes, which then **takes time and energy away from understanding families' needs** and finding learning options to meet them.

Despite the complexity that direct funding policies can create, they have unlocked increased family demand for learning options. In ESA programs alone, participation has increased from about 22,000 students in five states





in 2020 to about 326,000 students in 15 states in 2024.<sup>30</sup> Alongside growing family demand for learning options, the need for navigation support is also increasing. As one analysis of ESA implementation summarizes, “When navigating new payment platforms or enrolling their children in ESA programs, [families] will inevitably have questions ... **Parents need good information, and they need to have their questions answered promptly.**”<sup>31</sup> This is especially true for policies dedicated to serving families furthest from opportunity, who face greater barriers to access.

The increased need for navigation support highlights another constraint, however: the ability of navigation organizations to scale and sustain their work.

Many navigation organizations struggle with scale and sustainability. **Primary challenges include finding reliable sources of revenue alongside strategies for reducing the cost of what is often a resource-intensive service model.**<sup>32</sup>

Philanthropic investments have helped to launch navigation organizations and, in some cases, are sources of revenue for ongoing operations. However, they’re not reliable, long-term solutions. Some navigation organizations have partnered with third parties to embed navigation services within other programs. For instance, RESCHOOL Colorado and EdNavigator partnered with employers to offer navigation services as an employee benefit.<sup>33</sup> Still others have accessed public dollars to support their work. Student Success Agency, a nonprofit that helps high school students navigate their learning options, receives funding from the federal Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) program.<sup>34</sup> Despite philanthropic sponsors and creative solutions, navigation organizations will continue to wrestle with the challenges of scale and sustainability. **New approaches are necessary to ensure navigation organizations can continue to meet increasing family demand.**



# Conclusion

Navigation support will become increasingly important in the years ahead. The number of families interested in customizing their child's learning is increasing, including families furthest from opportunity.<sup>35</sup> More public policies are empowering them with the purchasing power to participate in a broader learning ecosystem beyond the traditional K-12 school system. And new learning options are emerging to meet families' demands. While demand and supply are growing, however, the connective tissue between them is nascent.

Families often struggle to understand what options are available, and they have few reliable and accessible sources of information to help. Learning options cost money that many families don't have, and while direct funding programs make them more affordable, the programs themselves add complexity to the process. Even when families understand what learning options are available and have funding in hand, deciding which options best fit their child's needs can be daunting.

By providing support and guidance to families to address logistical barriers to access, identifying available learning options, understanding student needs, and building families' confidence in their decision-making, navigation solutions create that connective tissue. Nonetheless, navigators also face major constraints that limit their reach and impact.

**The accompanying briefs in this series explore these constraints across three dimensions: 1) policy, 2) quality information, and 3) scale and sustainability.**

Policymakers, public officials, funders, intermediaries, technology platforms, and navigators themselves all have a role to play in supporting new solutions that address barriers to access. If done well, it's possible to envision a very different future of learning in which *all* families have the information, support, and guidance to access the options that help their children thrive. ✦

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Addressing constraints on navigation will increase families' access to learning options.

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## Coming Soon

### Charting a Course: Navigating Policy to Access Learning Options

Policies that help families afford to participate in the learning ecosystem come with barriers; as navigators work to help families overcome these and other logistical barriers, it takes away from their ability to help families select learning options that meet their child's needs, interests, and goals. Better policy designs and stronger implementation of direct funding programs can minimize these logistical barriers and enable navigation organizations to direct more resources to providing educational guidance.

### Charting a Course: Navigating to High Quality Learning Options

The ecosystem of learning options is plagued by a profound lack of information about what learning options are available and whether they're "high quality." The lack of valid and reliable data hinders navigators and takes time and effort away from their relational work. With more provider data at their fingertips, navigators would be able to help families find and explore more personalized opportunities for their students.

### Charting a Course: Scaling and Sustaining Navigation Supports

Increasing family demand for learning options comes with increased demand for navigation support, but many navigation organizations have struggled with scale and sustainability. Navigation organizations need new sources of revenue combined with strategies to manage costs; they must also explore the potential for advancements in new technologies to help.

# Methodology

The following analyses in this series are based on a review of past research and analysis on navigation solutions; interviews with experts in policy and technology as well as a wide range of organizations who help families access learning options; and insights from Bellwether’s work with grant recipients in the Filling the Gap and Assembly grant programs. Because there is not a comprehensive list of navigators in education and various organizations and individuals play this role in varying degrees of formality, the research and insights should be interpreted as a synthesis of the authors’ research findings rather than a definitive or comprehensive analysis of navigation services in the education sector.

The following individuals lent their perspectives and expertise on this series, including:

**Amy Anderson**  
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Beta by Bellwether is an initiative to jump-start bold solutions to structural problems in the education sector. Beta moves beyond imagining a new sector by bringing together viewpoint- and experience-diverse teams from across education to create blueprints and tools for leaders around the United States. Our goal is to help build an education system that better serves all young people — particularly those from systemically marginalized communities — and models a new way forward for the sector. For more, visit [bellwether.org/beta](https://bellwether.org/beta).



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](https://bellwether.org).

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## Disclosure

Bellwether works with organizations and leaders who share our viewpoint-diverse commitment to improving education and advancing equity for all young people — regardless of identity, circumstance, or background. As part of our commitment to transparency, a list of Bellwether clients and funders since our founding in 2010 is publicly available on our website. An organization's name appearing on our list of clients and funders does not imply any endorsement of or by Bellwether.

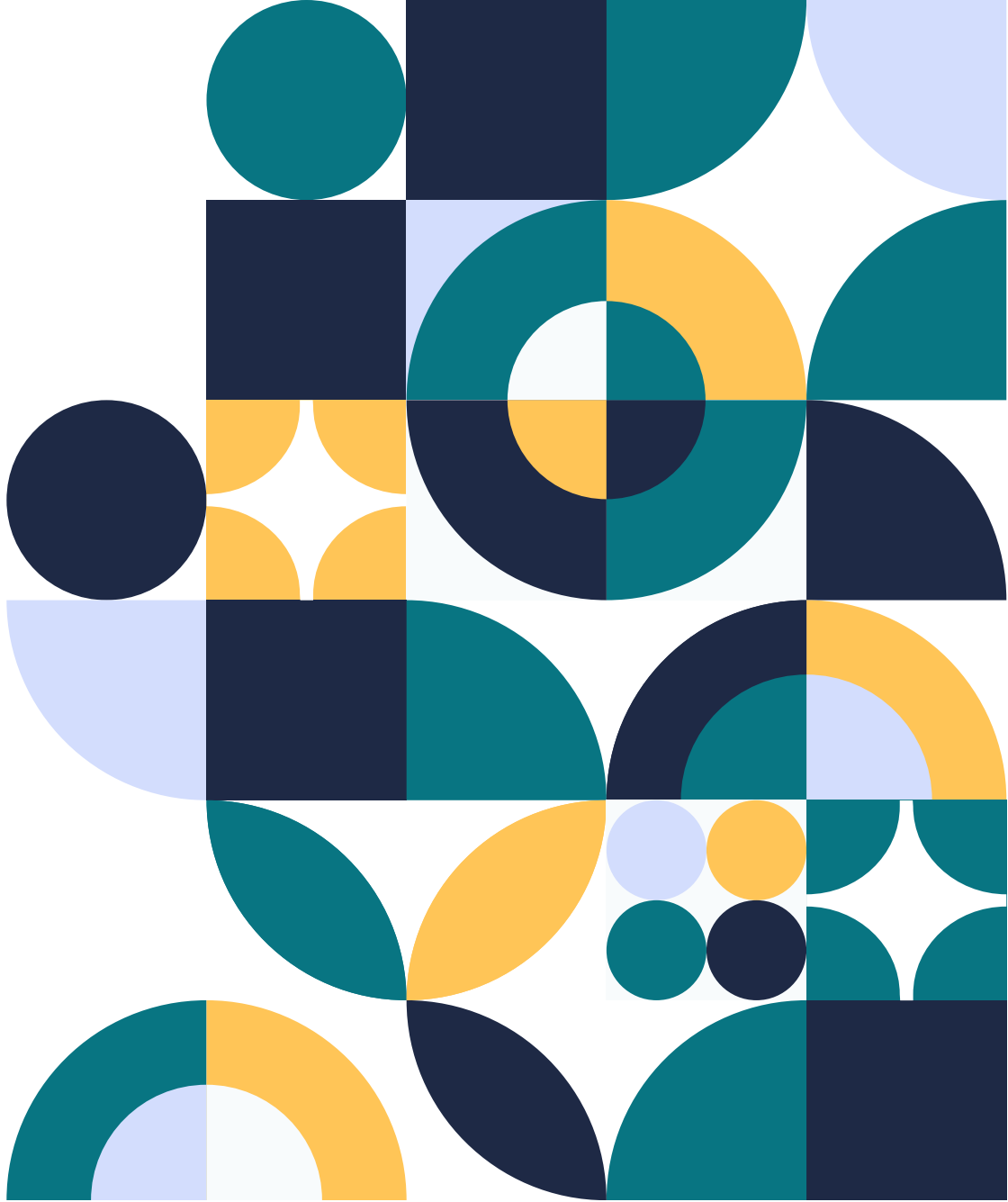


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