Reimagining What's Possible

BELLWETHER'S 2026-2030 STRATEGIC PLAN





A Letter From Our Managing Partner

Bellwether was a scrappy startup when I joined as one of its first employees in 2010. Since then, we've grown to nearly 100 experts; partnered with more than 800 schools, systems, nonprofit and mission-aligned organizations, and funders nationwide; and released hundreds of publications that have helped leaders and policymakers make sense of the forces shaping their work. Through all of it, our North Star has never wavered: transforming education so that *all* young people can live fulfilling lives in flourishing communities.

But as much as we've accomplished, so much work remains to achieve our mission. We must lean even further into the mutually reinforcing power of supporting partners, informing the field, and bringing leaders together — Bellwether's original promise. We must continue working to improve the existing education system while also looking around the corner to what's next and living up to our name as a bellwether for the sector. And we must do all this work amid significant uncertainty from federal policy, shifting parent preferences, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), and more.

As we look to our next 15 years, we're making two key shifts, both powered by the thoughtful use of Al. We will **sharpen our strategic edge**, elevating portfolios of work that can make the greatest impact. And we will **reimagine how we help**, expanding our service offerings to be flexible, nimble, and accessible.

A future where all young people have access to an excellent education is possible. I see it every day in our partners' work — pockets of innovation and excellence in schools, communities, and organizations across the country. The challenge is making those pockets of excellence the norm.

In that spirit, I'm excited to share our next strategic plan and thank you for your partnership as we work together to meet this critical moment for young people.

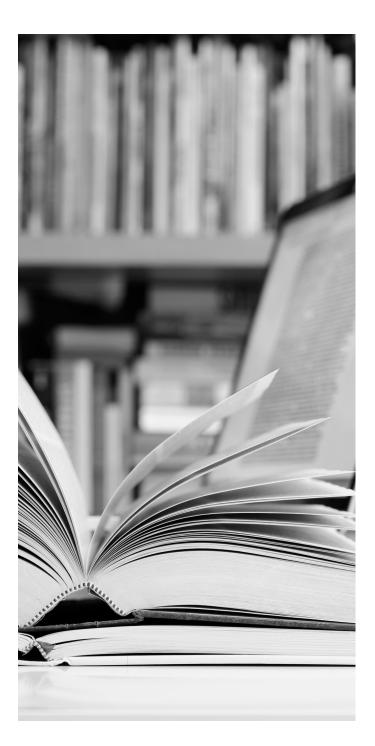
Rebecca Gifford Goldberg

IN THEIR OWN WORDS
PARTNERS FOR RURAL IMPACT

"Bellwether supported Partners for Rural Impact's launch as a national nonprofit in 2022 and facilitated the development of our 2030 Strategic Plan. Their steady partnership and deep expertise have helped us expand our reach and successfully navigate organizational growth and change. We value Bellwether as a trusted partner in advancing our mission to ensure more rural students are on the path to economic mobility."

-DREAMA GENTRY, FOUNDER AND CEO

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Executive Summary

We have an opportunity to reimagine what's possible for young people and the education system that serves them.

Young people, especially those furthest from opportunity, are struggling in profound and persistent ways. Academic achievement has declined, with national proficiency scores worse than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Students face uncertain futures, with resource constraints in schools and communities, an eroding social safety net, a shifting policy landscape, and new technology reshaping the traditional pathways to upward economic mobility. They are launching into careers and life in a world that is changing quickly — and their education has not prepared them for this new reality.

Amid these daunting challenges, bright spots in education — like big gains in reading and math achievement in several states and momentum around flexible learning models and postsecondary pathways — show that meaningful progress is possible.

With so much at stake, leaders, policymakers, and practitioners need partners who can help them make critical decisions. Bellwether is uniquely positioned to step into that role. Over the past 15 years, we've drawn from our extensive experiences in the field — as

teachers, school and district leaders, state education department staff, funders, and nonprofit executives — to expand educational opportunities for young people by:

Supporting Mission-Driven Partners

We're known for our outstanding client service across a broad range of issues, helping leaders — from school systems and public agencies to nonprofits and philanthropies — make and implement decisions that advance their goals.

Informing and Influencing the Field

We're widely respected as trusted experts with a range of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, providing trusted analyses, field-tested strategies, and new ideas.

Bringing Leaders Together

Our wide network allows us to convene leaders from across the education sector to learn about and discuss complex questions, real-time issues, and shared challenges and successes.

Supporting Mission-Driven Partners Informing and Influencing the Field Supporting MissionDriven Partners Bringing Leaders Together

These three paths to impact reinforce each other and are as important as ever. But this moment demands even more. Meeting the challenges facing our sector today requires new approaches — both in our work and in how we do it. Over the coming years, we plan to make two strategic shifts for our partners and the sector:

1. SHARPEN OUR STRATEGIC EDGE

We will meet the sector's highest areas of need through portfolios of work that rely on our deepest areas of expertise, including early childhood through career learning, sector systems and climate, and emerging approaches.

2. REIMAGINE HOW WE HELP

We will build *flexible offerings* and *delivery models*, making our services more accessible and responsive to the needs of the practitioners, leaders, and philanthropic partners we serve.

Both shifts include AI as a major focus. We will continue to approach AI proactively, exploring ethical ways to expand the impact of our work and amplify the strengths of our experts. And we will stay true to our name by helping school leaders, policymakers, and other partners make sense of rapid changes in AI technology and what those changes mean for their work, young people, and the education sector.

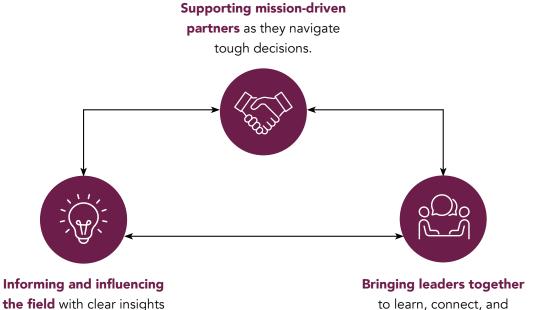
To support these shifts, we will improve knowledge sharing and professional development across our team, enhance our systems and structures, and nourish our internal culture.

Bellwether is committed to helping leaders navigate this critical time with clarity and agility, keeping young people at the forefront. Our mission is to transform education to ensure young people — especially those furthest from opportunity — achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities.

Who We Are

FORWARD THINKING.
FORWARD MOVING.

Our vision is that *all* young people have access to an excellent education and live lives filled with opportunity. In our everyday work, we aim to achieve that vision by:



and bold ideas.

drive change.

We partner with leaders and organizations across the education sector to deepen and accelerate their impact. Our work supports young people from early childhood through postsecondary and career pathways, and it aims to develop and amplify the insights, innovations, and ideas necessary to advance educational options nationwide. Across these areas, we help our partners and the sector tackle challenges from many angles to shape a brighter future for young people.

Our Experts

MISSION-DRIVEN AND VISIONARY

We're a passionate and viewpoint-diverse team with experience leading education organizations, advising teams across the public and private sectors, and publishing research that drives change. We're mission-driven and visionary. We've previously served as teachers and educators, school and district leaders, policymakers, government officials, funders, and nonprofit founders. And we bring a deep understanding of the critical and evolving issues that education practitioners face.

90+

full-time employees at Bellwether

25+

different states where Bellwarians live **50**+

Bellwarians were teachers

10+

Bellwarians were school leaders

30+

Bellwarians were district or charter leaders/staff

10+

Bellwarians were state education department leaders/staff

Our Track Record

We've partnered with more than 800 clients nationwide since our founding in 2010, in some of the nation's largest cities and most remote rural areas. Our partners include individual schools, charter networks, traditional school districts, state education leaders, region-based intermediaries, philanthropic funders, advocacy organizations, place-based partnerships, and nonprofits, among others.

We've also shaped critical conversations across the sector through publications, resources, events, and commentary. Our external work delivers timely insights on the most pressing issues of the day and helps leaders, practitioners, policymakers, news media reporters, and funders understand emerging issues and challenges around the corner. This work both informs and is informed by our work on the ground with partners — work that dramatically expands our reach and sets Bellwether apart.

2025 BY THE NUMBERS

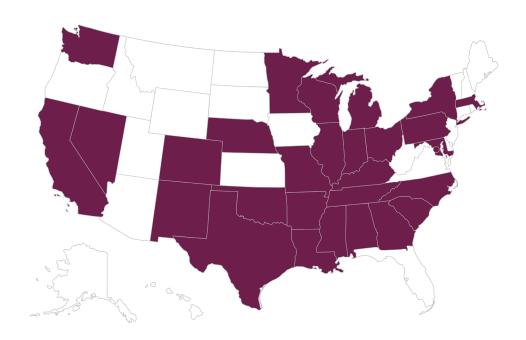
280+ direct engagements for **170+** organizations

More than **60** new reports, practical resources, commentary pieces, and blog posts authored by Bellwether experts

30+ virtual events

40+ speaking appearances by the Bellwether team at conferences, at webinars, and on podcasts

90,000+ people who've accessed our full library of insights



25+ STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SERVED



"Bellwether brought a remarkable level of expertise and empathy to help develop a plan that will set the trajectory of our work for the next five years. We couldn't have done the work without their skillful guidance."

-RUSS GREGG, CO-FOUNDER AND HEAD OF SCHOOL, HOPE ACADEMY

"I can't imagine covering this beat without relying on Bellwether's experts to sharpen the context of our reporting."

-NATIONAL EDUCATION EDITOR

Our Partners

At Bellwether, we choose to work with organizations and leaders who share our commitment to improving education for all young people — particularly those furthest from opportunity. Here are some of the many schools, districts, networks, state agencies, service providers, intermediaries, funders, and more that we've worked with over the past 15 years.

ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

















FUNDERS AND INVESTORS

















INTERMEDIARIES

















PLACE-BASED ECOSYSTEM















POSTSECONDARY PROVIDERS AND ASSOCIATIONS















PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND NETWORKS











PRODUCT AND SERVICE PROVIDERS



Curriculum Associates[®]











PUBLIC SCHOOLS, DISTRICTS, AND NETWORKS

















STATE AGENCIES















IN THEIR OWN WORDS CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"Leading innovation at scale for over 300,000 students and 600 schools requires thought partnership at scale. Bellwether was able to support our internal planning and bring unique perspectives from districts across the country."

-MEGAN HOUGARD, CHIEF, OFFICE OF COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS

"With Bellwether's support, we deepened collaboration across teams, clarified how our work connects, and built a stronger collective focus."

-MARIA BUCIO, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EARLY COLLEGE AND CAREER EDUCATION

"Working with Bellwether helped us situate ourselves in the national landscape — to see where we shine, where we lag, and where we can learn."

—HEIDI TRUAX, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF SCHOOL COUNSELING AND POSTSECONDARY ADVISING

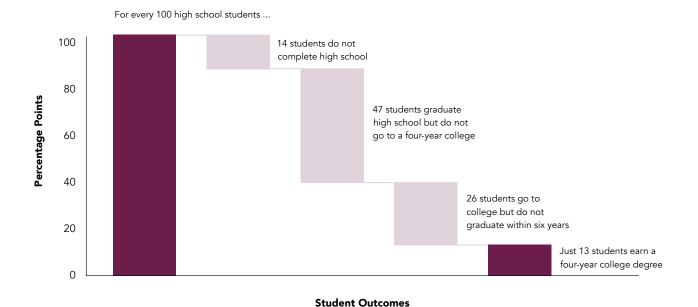
The Work Ahead

We're proud of Bellwether's track record and the impact we've had on the education sector over the past 15 years. But so much work remains to achieve our mission.

Challenges

Our education system is still not delivering on its promises to young people. Student achievement in reading and math was declining before the pandemic and has fallen more steeply in the years since. Gaps between higher-performing and lower-performing students are growing. More students are scoring Below Basic in fourth grade reading and eighth grade math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), indicating they are nowhere close to grade level — including more than half of students from low-income households. And at a time when economic mobility is steadily declining, just 13% of students who enter high school go on to earn a four-year college degree — one of the most reliable paths to economic mobility.

College Outcomes for U.S. High School Students, 2022



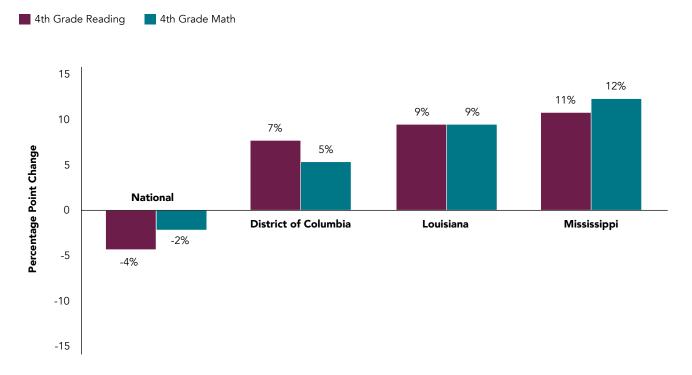
Sources: National Assessment Governing Board, "10 Takeaways From the 2024 NAEP Results"; National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, Tables 219.10, 302.20, 326.10, 2024.

Young people are entering a fast-changing world, where social ties are weakening, media literacy is more challenging than ever, and AI is reshaping the labor market. They need help to prepare for work and life in this new environment, yet education systems are not keeping pace.

Opportunities

Amid these challenges, bright spots in our sector — like 2024 NAEP improvements in reading and math in Mississippi — show that meaningful progress in education is possible when proven strategies are implemented with consistency and care. Alternatives to the traditional education system are also gaining momentum, including microschools and flexible learning models, career-connected pathways, and Al-enabled learning tools. The expansion of these approaches showcases the promise of fresh, bold thinking — and the importance of letting evidence guide the spread of innovative ideas.

U.S. Students' Proficiency Rate Changes on 4th Grade Reading and 4th Grade Math, 2013-2024



Source: The Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Data Explorer," 2024.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS **GREAT MN SCHOOLS**

"Our partnership with Bellwether has transformed how we work with schools — and how we pursue our mission to expand access to high-quality education in Minneapolis. What began as a way to bring consistency and rigor to school improvement has grown into a cornerstone of our strategy. Today, our schools are not just improving — they're building sustainable cultures of excellence."

-JENNIFER STERN, CEO

Our Strategic Plan

Bellwether is uniquely positioned to tackle the education sector's challenges.

We understand the stakes our partners are grappling with because we've been in their shoes, making decisions that have a direct impact on the experiences of young people and their communities. We bring candor and expertise to everything we do, tailoring our services to individual partners while remaining unwavering in our mission mindset. Our new strategic plan includes two bold shifts, both of which emphasize ethical, human-centered use of Al.

1. SHARPEN OUR STRATEGIC EDGE

We will meet the sector's greatest needs through portfolios of work that reflect our deepest areas of expertise.

2. REIMAGINE HOW WE HELP

We will make our service offerings more flexible, more accessible, and more responsive to the needs of our clients and philanthropic partners.

To support these bold shifts, Bellwether will improve the knowledge sharing and professional development of our experts, enhance our systems and structures, and spend time nourishing our internal culture — all in service of delivering on our mission more effectively.

Sharpen Our Strategic Edge

The education sector is under major academic, economic, and political strain. To meet our mission at such a volatile moment, Bellwether will focus our interdisciplinary expertise where it has the greatest potential to support clients, shape conversations, and benefit students.

LEGACY STRENGTH

In the past, Bellwether has:

Responded to a wide range of education issues.

Focused primarily on improving the existing public school system.

Been a thoughtful observer of emerging technology in the sector.

FUTURE EDGE

Moving forward, Bellwether will:

Concentrate our energy on strategic portfolios of work.

Expand our focus to include all places where learning happens.

Guide the education sector in navigating Al.

Our Portfolios of Expertise

We'll reorganize our work into portfolios that reflect our core skills and expertise — so that we can direct resources more strategically toward work that will have the greatest impact for young people.

PORTFOLIOS



EARLY CHILDHOOD TO CAREER LEARNING

With experience as practitioners and leaders in school districts, charter networks, and nonprofit organizations, our team knows what it takes to drive better outcomes for young people wherever they're learning.

- Academic and Program Design and Improvement
- District and Charter Systems and Governance
- **Early Childhood Education**
- **Educator and Instructional Supports**
- Higher Education and Career-Connected Learning ★
- **Special Populations**

SECTOR SYSTEMS AND CLIMATE

We have deep experience in leadership and implementation at every level, from school and organizational boards to state houses to the federal government — and know how to assess and shape the education ecosystem to work effectively for young people.

- Measurement and Continuous Improvement
- Organizational Sustainability (including Mergers and Acquisitions) +
- Rapid Field Analysis
- School Finance and Resource Allocation →
- State and Federal Systems +

EMERGING APPROACHES

We have our finger on the pulse of the forces reshaping education — and how the sector must adapt to give young people the opportunities they need to flourish in a rapidly changing world.

- Artificial Intelligence +
- **Effective Philanthropy**
- Nontraditional and Out-of-School Learning +
- Place-Based Approaches +

[🔶] Priority Area for 2026: We'll prioritize expanding our work in these portfolios, where we're especially well positioned to meet the sector's most pressing needs.



"Bellwether is a steadfast partner in our shared goal to understand what works to improve teaching and learning in America's schools. Through their AI Funder Collaborative, we're able to unlock key insights together that increase the field's understanding of AI's potential in education. We believe this work is critical and that Bellwether's rigorous, data-driven approach will help shape strategic decision-making for funders, educators, and developers."

—JOSH LOTSTEIN, SENIOR DIRECTOR, GRANTMAKING

Reimagine How We Help

Leaders across the sector need timely, flexible, and accessible support to navigate today's challenges and move quickly from ideas to action. That means Bellwether must adapt how we work, too — by adjusting our delivery model to meet a changing market and stay responsive to the needs of clients and philanthropic partners. These changes will help Bellwether deliver solutions more efficiently without compromising the tailored excellence that has been a hallmark of our work for 15 years.

LEGACY STRENGTH

In the past, Bellwether has:

Relied exclusively on deep, human-only research and synthesis.

Produced robust long-form work products for the client and field.

Engaged in high-touch, custom projects with standard structures and timelines.

FUTURE EDGE

Moving forward, Bellwether will:

Generate human-led, Al-supported research and synthesis.

Publish in fast, accessible, and diverse formats that communicate insights.

Expand service models and pricing strategies to broaden access.

Our Solutions

With flexible delivery models, our trusted solutions can solve more problems more efficiently and more accessibly across portfolio groups. Here are some of the ways we can help.

SERVICE OFFERINGS



STRATEGY

We help our partners make and execute decisions that advance their goals and expand their impact on behalf of young people.

- Strategic and Growth Planning
- **Financial Modeling and Analysis**
- New Organization Design, Planning, and Fiscal Sponsorship

IMPROVEMENT

We help our partners understand whether they're on track to meet goals, identify opportunities for growth, and build their capacity to implement changes that accelerate impact.

- **Developmental and Program Evaluation**
- Measurement and Continuous Improvement
- Capacity-Building, Implementation, and Change Support

CONDITIONS AND POSITION

We offer our partners rigorous analysis of how the education ecosystem — from politics to policy to market forces — affects their work, and concrete plans to shape those conditions to advance their mission.

- **Policy Development and Analysis**
- Ecosystem, Market, and Landscape Assessment
- **Facilitation**

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

STRANAHAN FOUNDATION

"Over the years, the Bellwether team has been a source of expert advising and hands-on support. The team has helped us extend our capacity, define our priorities, refine our core strategies, and build learning portfolios that helped level the playing field—especially in early childhood education. With their help, we've become more responsive to the field. We are much closer to truly strategic grantmaking now."

-BRETA COOPER, CEO, AND HILLARY BEUSCHEL, PROGRAM DIRECTOR

Measuring Our Impact

As part of this plan, we're committed to measuring Bellwether's reach and impact over both the short and the long term. We will look to a clear set of indicators that show whether we're equipping leaders to act, informing the sector, and strengthening conditions for change — within and across our portfolios — and make adjustments based on what we learn from the data.

SHORT-TERM MEASURES +



Track the immediate effectiveness of our work and the experiences of those we serve.

Impact for Partners

- Client satisfaction and Net Promoter Scores.
- Evidence that engagements met their stated goals.
- Early indicators of improved clarity, information, and organizational capacity.

Field Influence

- Reach and engagement with publications, events, and other touch points.
- Number of "quality interactions" with external stakeholders (e.g., briefings, speaking invitations, news media coverage).

Connection and Convening

- Participant satisfaction and Net Promoter Scores.
- Evidence that convenings met their stated goals and surfaced actionable insights.

LONG-TERM MEASURES +



Reflect the durable changes we aim to catalyze for clients, the sector, and the broader education ecosystem.

Impact for Partners

- Clients implement strategic, policy, or operational changes attributable to Bellwether support.
- Sustained changes during or after engagements.
- Long-term improvements in information, priorities, capacity, and/or operations.
- Qualitative feedback on implementation effectiveness one year post-engagement.

Field Influence

- Leaders cite and/or use Bellwether insights to shape decisions.
- Field-wide perceptions of Bellwether's influence and relevance (via periodic surveys).
- Feedback on how Bellwether's insights informed long-term actions (via periodic surveys).

Connection and Convening

- New relationships, partnerships, initiatives, and/or changes resulting from Bellwether convenings.
- Participant reflections on longer-term collaboration or impact.

Partner With Us

This isn't a time for status quo solutions.

Young people should be able to count on their education to prepare them for a fulfilling life and career. They need leaders who can promote the bold ideas and real change necessary to deliver on that promise at a tumultuous moment. At Bellwether, we help those leaders with expert and agile insights, flexible service models, and rapid analyses to meet the moment. We look forward to working with you and helping more young people lead fulfilling lives in 2026 and beyond. \leftarrow

ABOUT BELLWETHER

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that works to transform education to ensure young people — especially those furthest from opportunity — achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we help mission-driven partners accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and bring leaders together to drive change on education's most pressing challenges. For more, visit **bellwether.org**.



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