



Literacy for All Students: LFAS Implementation and Key Levers of Success

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JANUARY 2026

Series Overview: The LFAS report series documents the design, partnership development, and initial implementation of a citywide literacy initiative led by SchoolSmartKC. Each report focuses on a different aspect of the initiative, from its origins and design philosophy to its collaboration structure and lessons learned during rollout — offering a thorough view of how Kansas City stakeholders are working together to improve literacy outcomes. The series offers insight to practitioners, funders, and policymakers seeking to understand and replicate evidence-based, locally driven approaches to literacy improvement. [Learn more by reading Bellwether’s Literacy for All Students series.](#)

A Case Study on Implementation

“It is impressive that [SchoolSmartKC] has gotten so much input from parents and teachers. At first it seemed like they were offering stuff they thought we needed, and now they are offering stuff based on what we said in feedback.” —SchoolSmartKC School Leader¹

Introduction

Literacy shapes how children learn, think, and engage with the world, and it significantly influences their future success far beyond school. However, 77% of third graders² in Kansas City, Missouri, are not proficient in English language arts (ELA), and at least 290,000 adults in the Greater Kansas City region currently struggle with basic literacy skills.³ These numbers represent more than a learning gap; they signal systemic inequity that limits access to higher education, career opportunities, and economic mobility.⁴

SchoolSmart Kansas City (SchoolSmartKC), a nonprofit dedicated to accelerating student growth and proficiency for Kansas City students, recognized that improving literacy could not be treated as an isolated school-by-school issue or solved by short-term interventions. In 2024, the organization launched LFAS, an ambitious, citywide initiative aimed at unifying Kansas City’s fragmented education landscape under a shared, evidence-based literacy vision. LFAS is not a new curriculum or mandate. It is a coordinated initiative that brings together families, educators, funders, and community partners to ensure every child in Kansas City is proficient in ELA by third grade.

The LFAS initiative reflects SchoolSmartKC’s belief that lasting change comes through community investment and collaboration. Inspired by literacy reform success in Mississippi, the LFAS model’s design intentionally blends research-backed practices with local innovation, anchoring instruction in the Science of Reading, building leadership capacity through coaching and professional learning, and engaging families and communities as true partners in student success (Sidebar).

1 **Literacy for All Students: LFAS Implementation and Key Levers of Success** — A Case Study on Implementation

In the 2024-25 school year (SY), SchoolSmartKC implemented LFAS in nine schools with the promise of four years of funding, setting the course for sustained impact. SchoolSmartKC used strong guiding principles with room for adaptability at the school level.⁵ At the end of the first year of implementation, LFAS supported 1,600 students in nine schools, providing coaching to nine principals and two coaches that supported 84 teachers with a goal of improved literacy outcomes and instruction. This case study explores key drivers of LFAS implementation.

LFAS Intentionally Launched Fast

The launch of the LFAS initiative was intentionally fast paced, reflecting the shared sense of urgency among schools, funders, and community partners to confront Kansas City's literacy crisis head on. As one funder explained, "Even though it wasn't fully implemented [in Year 1], more students got tutoring, some schools got instructional coaches, principals joined a literacy-focused fellowship — and planning was happening at the same time."⁶ The goal was clear: Take immediate action while simultaneously building systems for long-term improvement.

Leaders recognized that a rapid rollout of LFAS would come with growing pains, but they designed the initiative as a living model that could learn, adapt, and strengthen in real time. Structures for feedback and reflection were embedded from the start, allowing partners to identify challenges quickly and make mid-course adjustments.⁷ Still, the quick start drew mixed reactions. Some stakeholders described the LFAS initiative's rollout as "rushed" and wished for a longer planning runway to better integrate new roles, such as literacy coaches, and acclimate staff to new expectations. Others defended the approach, arguing that the need was too urgent to delay. As one partner put it, "Change takes time, but waiting another year would have meant lost learning for a lot of students."⁸

SIDEBAR

The Mississippi Model

In 2013, Mississippi passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act,⁹ focusing on early literacy through policy, funding, professional development, coaching, and accountability, leading to a rise in its National Assessment of Educational Progress fourth-grade reading rank from 49th in the country to ninth by 2024.¹⁰ While Mississippi's statewide approach inspired Kansas City, LFAS adapted evidence-based practices into a locally led, partnership-driven model, supplementing recent Missouri legislation instead of relying primarily on legislative mandates.¹¹

Ultimately, the first year of LFAS served as proof of concept. While implementation was uneven, the initial work built momentum, revealed system gaps, and laid the groundwork for a stronger, more coordinated effort in Year 2.

Realizing the LFAS Model in Practice: Successes and Challenges

LFAS launched across nine schools, all of which were already participants in the Royals Literacy League and committed to improving literacy, representing a demographically diverse mix of students in both district and charter systems. During the pilot year, LFAS experienced early success and confronted several challenges, learning important lessons for future cohorts.

Evidence-Based Instructional Support

Schools participating in LFAS incorporated high-dosage tutoring for students, a literacy coach to support teachers' instructional practice, and instructional support through coaching for school leaders and literacy coaches

on how to use Science of Reading evidence-based instructional materials and strategies. Those who are closest to the data suggest students in LFAS schools are showing signs of growth and improvement. While more formal data evaluations are needed to confirm, one funder saw this as early evidence of the LFAS model's potential.



High-Dosage Tutoring for Students: The LFAS model calls for schools to provide all K-3 students in the first two years with an annual 28 weeks of at least 20 minutes of tutoring, a minimum of three days a week. By spring 2025, all LFAS pilot schools had launched tutoring supports either in-person, online, or hybrid. SchoolSmart Chief Program Officer Robin Henderson, Ph.D., notes they have encouraged schools to use MindPlay Reading Studio,¹² describing it as a “high-quality online tutoring vendor.”¹³ MindPlay Reading Studio was previously tested by one of the participating literacy coaches, who found it to be an effective tool for individualized tutoring. As one student from an LFAS-participating school said, “Reading used to be really hard, but now I can just pick up a book and start reading.”¹⁴

A funder who was skeptical of using online tutoring conceded that “online platforms have proven successful and schools like them.”¹⁵ By the end of SY24-25, four schools offered online tutoring, reaching 69% of all students; five schools were using at least one form of tutoring, reaching 100% of students. At the same time, evidence from data collected showed that frequency, duration, and intensity varied widely across schools.¹⁶

Literacy Coach to Support Instructional Practice: Another core component of LFAS is that each school staff has an embedded full-time literacy coach. The quick start-up of LFAS in the summer of 2024 made staffing the literacy coach positions for SY24-25 difficult as educators typically seek and accept new positions well before summer. One school hired a new literacy coach, and one school had a qualified individual who could transition into the literacy coach position. Seven of the Year 1 cohort schools were unable to find a qualified applicant on such short notice.

“Missouri has been paying for LETRS training for teachers for years; that training has been helpful for our teachers to go through, and it is important context to improve this program. The literacy coach can train around LETRS pillars [the teachers have learned].”

—School Leader¹⁷

Educators in Year 1 (SY24-25) at LFAS schools with coaches emphasized the value of this role, particularly in helping them apply the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training in their classrooms and translate new strategies into practice. All of the nine teachers in LFAS Cohort 1 schools who responded to the survey question in spring 2025 agreed or strongly agreed that the literacy coach was “knowledgeable in evidence-based practices” (Table).¹⁸ At the same time, because these positions were newly created, schools and coaches experienced some early growing pains around roles and responsibilities. Moving forward, SchoolSmartKC and school leaders are working to clarify the roles of coaches and strengthen communication about their responsibilities, ensuring that coaches are seen as collaborative partners in instructional growth.

After a rushed Year 1 recruitment process, SchoolSmartKC fully implemented its planned approach in Year 2 (SY25-26). The organization used a standardized job description, handled applicant pre-screening, and provided schools with access to a highly qualified and diverse candidate pool. The SY25-26 recruitment cycle attracted more than 60 applicants for positions in 10 schools, with 15 finalists moving forward to interviews with school leaders. Among these applicants, 40% identified as people of color, and 80% had at least 10 years of teaching or coaching experience, reflecting SchoolSmartKC’s commitment to quality, equity, and representation.¹⁹ Because of process shifts made after the pilot year, in SY25-26, all 12 participating schools have a literacy coach. Sustaining this growth will require ongoing iteration of the recruitment process and teacher engagement to ensure a good fit for each classroom.

TABLE: LFAS PARTICIPATING TEACHERS’ CONFIDENCE IN PROVIDING SCIENCE OF READING-BACKED INSTRUCTION

Area of Confidence	Fall 2024	Spring 2025	Change
Phonemic Awareness	82%	87%	+5 percentage points
Phonics	57%	81%	+24 percentage points
Fluency	68%	76%	+8 percentage points
Vocabulary	79%	92%	+13 percentage points
Comprehension	84%	92%	+8 percentage points
Supporting Struggling Readers	60%	73%	+13 percentage points
Supporting Struggling Writers	35%	53%	+18 percentage points

Note: 50 teachers completed fall and spring surveys. Teacher confidence refers to survey respondents who felt confident or very confident. **Source:** Urban Education Research Center (UERC), “2024-2025 Literacy for All Students Evaluation Report,” Internal report.

Leadership and Capacity Building: In partnership with New Leaders, a national school leadership training organization, and the Institute for Urban Education (IUE) at the University of Missouri-Kansas City,²⁰ SchoolSmartKC launched the LFAS Leadership Fellowship for principals and literacy coaches. In Year 1, a school leader from each of the nine participating schools participated in the cohort and received coaching to enhance their instructional leadership skills, and two Year 1 literacy coaches received coaching through IUE.

“For the first time, we had charter and district leaders in the same room learning from each other.”

—School Leader²¹

Participation in the cohorts enhanced collaboration between charter and district leaders, promoted shared ownership, and helped remove long-standing barriers. School leaders reported increased confidence in observing instruction, giving feedback, and supporting teacher development. As one school leader noted, “The opportunity to engage with other principals, receiving high-quality professional development while collaborating with peers in the same role, has been invaluable.”²²

Participants also identified ways to improve their experience. Both principals and coaches expressed a desire for more consistent communication and advanced scheduling to enable deeper reflection and greater participation. In response, by mid-2025, SchoolSmartKC began planning Cohort 2, with enhanced collaboration structures, clearer communication, and continued emphasis on leadership coherence across schools.

Parent and Community Engagement

SchoolSmartKC established the LFAS Citywide Literacy Advisory Council (Advisory Council) to create new opportunities for collaboration and shared decision-making during implementation. This council invited families, educators, school leaders, funders, and



community partners to move from passive participants to active co-designers of the LFAS model.

Engagement levels varied across schools, and maintaining momentum remains a challenge. Four parents are members of the Advisory Council, and three of these have children in LFAS schools, including one whose student is in the grade levels receiving direct LFAS instructional support. These parents expressed both enthusiasm and a need for clearer understanding. While parents were highly supportive of the initiative, some expressed a lack of clarity about its components and what feels new or different for their children’s literacy instruction.

One school leader identified family engagement as a “growth area” due to difficulties balancing family engagement with other priorities and finding a better way to communicate what “on grade level” means. The parent survey at the end of SY24-25 reflected that more than one-third of parent respondents (38%) did not understand the literacy interventions provided for their child(ren).²³ In response, SchoolSmartKC and its partners are working to improve communication, clarify program details, and develop more culturally responsive strategies that make participation easier and more meaningful for families across Kansas City.

Continuous Data Collection and Evaluation

Data collection and accountability are built into the LFAS model’s design to monitor progress and ensure transparency. The UERC acts as the LFAS evaluation partner, making sure that each component is continually improved through evidence. In Year 1, baseline literacy data were gathered across all participating schools, and regular progress monitoring cycles were put into place. Data gathering is ongoing. A review of SY24-25 student formative assessments indicates that 40% of students in the nine LFAS schools met their spring growth target, and 42% of students in schools with full implementation of LFAS met their growth target.²⁴ While these early data cannot be directly attributed to the LFAS initiative, they provide a starting point that can be used to help demonstrate progress toward improvement in years to come.

Foundational Conditions for Implementation

The implementation of the LFAS model’s design components was supported by a strong shared vision, school flexibility and autonomy, and open communication.

The Power of a Strong Vision and Collective Buy-In

The early success of LFAS was driven by the strength of its vision, the level of collective buy-in inspired by it, and the school leaders and educators who implemented it. That vision was championed by SchoolSmartKC’s chief program officer Henderson as well as President and CEO Angelique Nedved, Ed.D. — two leaders whose authenticity, experience, and collaborative spirit became the foundation of LFAS. Both had previously been school leaders, giving them credibility with educators and a deep understanding of the daily realities of implementation. Their strong leadership combined clear direction with humility, setting a bold course while making space for others to lead.

“SchoolSmartKC leaders are endearing — and people really care about them and how they show up in the community — they can be collaborative because of how they center themselves with communities and nonprofits. People leading this effort are important — and how they operate within communities is key to success.”

—SchoolSmartKC Community Partner²⁵

School Flexibility and Autonomy

SchoolSmartKC was focused on implementing a literacy initiative based on the Science of Reading, which aligned with the policy direction of the state. Because of Missouri’s policy support for evidence-based instruction and optional, state-funded LETRS educator training, participating schools were on a continuum of adopting instructional approaches aligned with the Science of Reading. Each school needed to be met where it was while still aligning with the nonnegotiables:

enacting Science of Reading approaches, hiring a literacy coach in each school, cohort participation for school leaders and literacy coaches, and tutoring for all students. At the same time, schools could tailor how they engaged in several areas, including tutoring format, the approach to parent engagement, and the approach to building joy and inspiration for reading. This built a sense of school-level ownership and created a generally positive implementation experience.

Open and Clear Communication

SchoolSmartKC consistently emphasized the “why” behind the LFAS initiative — addressing the urgent need to strengthen literacy across Kansas City — though some stakeholders suggested this message could be sharpened, particularly as the work scales. Prior to implementation, SchoolSmartKC facilitated co-design sessions and established ongoing feedback cycles with diverse stakeholder groups. While this collaborative approach was widely valued, one school leader cautioned that messaging should be carefully framed: Schools welcome partnership and resources but may resist narratives that imply an external effort is needed to “fix” them. Instead, they view LFAS building upon and enhancing the strong instructional practices already in place. Future co-design sessions can help identify strategies to reinforce this framing and further support school autonomy and flexibility.



Implementation: Challenges and Lessons Learned

The implementation process surfaced both successes and challenges, providing SchoolSmartKC, school leaders, funders, and community partners with valuable lessons to enhance the next phase of LFAS implementation.

Launch fast, but build structures and routines to navigate differences.

Under its leaders’ guidance, SchoolSmartKC became the trusted convener and backbone organization of LFAS. During implementation, Nedved and Henderson often served as interpreters between funders, educators, and families, making sure each group’s priorities and perspectives were heard and reconciled. While all partners shared the same goal of every child reading on level by third grade, they often spoke different “languages.” A clear example appeared during early implementation of high-dosage tutoring. Funders wanted to launch tutoring right away, while school leaders preferred time to thoughtfully incorporate it into existing schedules and supports. Instead of forcing a decision, SchoolSmartKC facilitated dialogue between the groups to find a tailored solution for each school that balanced urgency with practicality and maintained trust on all sides. These strategies have been successful, but going forward, SchoolSmartKC will need to strengthen succession planning and shared leadership structures, ensuring that these strategies are codified and resilient enough to sustain the LFAS initiative over time.

Protect flexibility, but define the floor.

School leaders appreciate a strong initiative but require room to shape it to their specific needs. Most school leaders appreciated the back-and-forth dialogue with SchoolSmartKC as they worked out details, including its openness to feedback. And most school leaders liked the flexibility of LFAS. SchoolSmartKC’s interest in meeting the needs of the whole community, teachers,

families, and students, is central to this piece of the model. As one school leader commented, “It is impressive that [SchoolSmartKC] has gotten so much input from parents and teachers. At first it seemed like they were offering stuff they thought we needed, and now they are offering stuff based on what we said in feedback.”²⁶ Others experienced negotiating some components of the initiative as difficult or disruptive, such as school leaders who felt it complicated their previous Science of Reading instructional practices or disrupted the school day with cohort meetings.

Communicate consistently and clearly, but listen regularly, with a willingness to adjust.

During implementation of the LFAS initiative, SchoolSmartKC worked to build on the consistency, clarity, and cadence of communications used in the design and buy-in process. Information about LFAS is shared through monthly emails, meetings, data summits, and strategic touchpoints with school leaders, funders, and parents. While some stakeholders commented on the consistent, reliable communication shared by SchoolSmartKC, others noted clarity and frequency as areas for improvement. In the area of clarity, some stakeholders expressed a lack of understanding for certain components or goals of the initiative. For example, the cohort model requires school leaders and literacy coaches to be out of the building once a month for their group meetings. In some cases, this came as a surprise either to participants or to the other leaders within their school buildings. And some Advisory Council members noted they did not always know when the upcoming meetings would be held until an email was sent. Communication cadence is also important, and SchoolSmartKC is working to hit the right level of clear, regular communications that are not disruptive to stakeholders.

Conclusion

The first year of the LFAS initiative demonstrated how adaptation under real-world conditions can strengthen both systems and relationships when guided by shared purpose and trust. SchoolSmartKC’s leadership created the conditions for real-time learning that highlighted the importance of family involvement and enabled schools to make rapid decisions, funders and educators to negotiate priorities, and partners to adjust course without losing momentum. Rather than viewing implementation challenges as setbacks, all partners, from school leaders to funders, used them as evidence to refine practice and deepen alignment.

LFAS partners demonstrated this adaptive capacity. When literacy coach positions were difficult to fill, SchoolSmartKC revised its recruitment approach, resulting in a stronger, more diverse candidate pool for Year 2. When funders and school leaders differed on tutoring expectations, SchoolSmartKC mediated a path that prioritized transparent dialogue, practicality, and flexibility. When communication challenges emerged, whether around cohort scheduling or family engagement, SchoolSmartKC responded by improving cadence and clarity. These moments illustrate how a collaborative model can evolve responsibly without losing focus on what matters most: students’ literacy outcomes.

Looking forward, LFAS offers an emerging model for other communities seeking to close literacy gaps through collective action and effective implementation. Its strength lies not only in the strategies deployed, but also with the trusting relationships cultivated among schools and families, funders, and educators, and across systems that too often operate in isolation. With continued alignment, thoughtful scaling, and unwavering attention to the needs of Kansas City’s children, LFAS has the foundation to provide many years of lasting, citywide impact. ✨

Endnotes

- 1 Interview with LFAS school leader, September 2025.
- 2 Based on 2024 KCPES (combining KCPES and charters) data with 15% proficient and 8% advanced. “Data for Action Summit: Kansas City Public Education System,” SchoolSmartKC et al., presentation, June 2025, slide 35, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1q2SYRNVXeFEiULWx1YfXO44oyG8sFkuL/view?usp=drive_link.
- 3 The authors estimated the number of adults with low literacy in the Kansas City bi-state region using federal survey data and census population counts. First, authors defined the region as 15 counties identified by the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce (“About,” Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, <https://www.kcchamber.com/about/>): the Missouri counties of Bates, Caldwell, Cass, Clay, Jackson, Lafayette, Platte, and Ray, and the Kansas counties of Douglas, Franklin, Johnson, Leavenworth, Linn, Miami, and Wyandotte. For each county, authors used the National Center for Education Statistics’ Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) Skills Map (*Comparison Charts of State and County Estimates: Missouri* [Institute of Education Sciences], <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/Missouri.pdf>, pages 8–10, and *Comparison Charts of State and County Estimates: Kansas* [Institute of Education Sciences], <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/Kansas.pdf>, pages 7–8) to find the percentage of adults ages 16–74 with very low literacy (at or below “Level 1”). Authors then used the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (“Census Reporter Profile Page for Kansas City, MO-KS Metro Area,” *American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates*, U.S. Census Bureau, 2023, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US28140-kansas-city-mo-ks-metro-area/>) to obtain the number of residents ages 18 and over in each county. To estimate how many adults have low literacy in each county, authors multiplied the PIAAC percentage by the county’s adult population. Finally, authors added the county estimates together to get a total for the 15-county region and divided by the total adult population to calculate a metro-wide percentage. Note that the PIAAC data are 2012–2017, and the ACS data are 2023, and the age groups do not perfectly align. Because these estimates are based on survey data and statistical modeling rather than a full head count, the results should be interpreted as approximate (a best estimate and order of magnitude), not as an exact number of individuals.
- 4 See, for example: Kelly Robson Foster et al., *On the Same Page: A Primer on the Science of Reading and Its Future for Policymakers, School Leaders, and Advocates* (Bellwether, January 2024), slide 7, <https://bellwether.org/publications/on-the-same-page/>; “Examining the Link Between Poor Literacy Skills and Dropout,” Lexia Learning, July 17, 2019, <https://www.lexialearning.com/blog/examining-link-between-poor-literacy-skills-and-dropout/>; Mark Vineis, “Future of Work: Building a Stronger Workforce Through Literacy,” ProLiteracy, June 26, 2024, para. 3, <https://www.proliteracy.org/news/future-of-work-building-a-stronger-workforce-through-literacy/>; Anita Sands, Sarah Cacicio, and Cheryl Lavigne, “Building a Resilient Workforce: The Critical Role of Foundational Literacy Skills,” All In: The Adult Literacy & Learning Impact Network, <https://allinliteracy.org/building-a-resilient-workforce-the-critical-role-of-foundational-literacy-skills/>.
- 5 See the Design case study for a full description of the LFAS design process. Lynne Wells Graziano, Jessica Slaton, Daniela Torre Gibney, and Titilayo Tinubu Ali, *Literacy for All Students: Design Philosophy and Key Design Elements*, (Bellwether, January 2026), <https://bellwether.org/publications/literacy-for-all-students/>.
- 6 Interview with LFAS funder, September 2025.
- 7 Graziano, Slaton, Gibney, and Ali, *Literacy for All Students: Design Philosophy and Key Design Elements*.
- 8 Interview with LFAS community partner, September 2025.
- 9 “Literacy-Based Promotion Act,” Mississippi Department of Education, <https://mdek12.org/literacy/lbpa/>.
- 10 Trudy Hensley, Sheryl Turner, and Joshua A. Melton, *Mississippi’s Literacy-Based Promotion Act: An Inside Look* (ExcellinEd, 2019), 1, https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ExcellinEd_MSGatewaytoSuccess.March2019.pdf; *Mississippi’s 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Mississippi Department of Education, 2025), <https://mdek12.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2025/01/NAEPRankings-OnePager-2025-0115-JC-v02.pdf>.
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- 12 MindPlay website, <https://mindplay.com/>.
- 13 Interview with Robin Henderson, SchoolSmartKC, September 2025.
- 14 UERC. *2024-2025 Literacy for All Students Evaluation Report*. Internal report.
- 15 Interview with LFAS funder, August 2025.
- 16 UERC. *2024-2025 Literacy for All Students Evaluation Report*. Internal report.
- 17 Interview with LFAS participating school leader, August 2025.
- 18 UERC. *2024-2025 Literacy for All Students Evaluation Report*.
- 19 *2025-2026 Literacy Coach Candidate Statistics* (SchoolSmart Kansas City, 2025), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1p-GRN945-cpxXAI3FXSgTslCiP75pHjR/view>.
- 20 New Leaders website, <https://www.newleaders.org/>; Institute for Urban Education website, <https://info.umkc.edu/iue/>.
- 21 Interview with LFAS participating school leader, August 2025.
- 22 Interview with LFAS participating school leader, August 2025.
- 23 UERC. *2024-2025 Literacy for All Students Evaluation Report*. Internal report.
- 24 Ibid. The nine schools use different assessments: Five schools use i-Ready, three schools use NWEA MAP, and one uses Renaissance STAR.
- 25 Interview with SchoolSmartKC community partner, August 2025.
- 26 Interview with LFAS participating school leader, September 2025.

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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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the many experts who gave their time and shared their knowledge with us to inform our work. Thank you also to SchoolSmartKC for its financial support of this project.

We would also like to thank our Bellwether colleagues Brian Robinson for his input and Alexis Richardson for her support. Thank you to Amy Ribock, Kate Stein, Andy Jacob, McKenzie Maxson, Temim Fruchter, Julie Nguyen, and Amber Walker for shepherding and disseminating this work, and to Super Copy Editors.

The contributions of these individuals and entities significantly enhanced our work; however, any errors in fact or analysis remain the responsibility of the authors.

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