

A woman's profile is shown in silhouette, looking towards the left. The background is a colorful, abstract painting with shades of blue, orange, and yellow. The entire image is overlaid with a grid of interlocking puzzle pieces.

Deloitte.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Stories of purpose and lasting impact

UnboundEd becomes more than the sum of its parts

A strategic merger between two nonprofits acted as an impact multiplier for educational equity

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES CAN'T BE SOLVED ALONE. BUT WITH STRONG COLLABORATORS?

THE SITUATION

A word problem: Two nonprofits focused on improving instruction in school districts, especially for historically marginalized students, join forces. What is the magnitude of the impact they can have? Assume that the standard rules of addition ($1 + 1 = 2$) do not apply.

UnboundEd had advocated for and catalyzed meaningful progress toward educational justice for years, particularly through its Standards Institute, an annual conference convening educators and school leaders from across the country to cultivate the skill sets for delivering grade-level, engaging, affirming, and meaningful (GLEAM) instruction. But there was a problem—the good kind. The event generated more demand to help school districts implement the methodology they learned than UnboundEd could keep up with. That demand was *partially* met with the help of Pivot Learning, an educational nonprofit with a similar mission that often collaborated with UnboundEd to provide a more comprehensive suite of services to school districts than either nonprofit could offer on its own.

In 2021, UnboundEd received a transformational donation. UnboundEd CEO Lacey Robinson decided it was time to think bigger on multiple fronts. One of her first calls was to Pivot Learning CEO Arun Ramanathan to ask if he'd be open to a merger. Both had ambitious aspirations for growth. Could that growth be achieved by formalizing their yearslong collaboration? A merger might be just the tool to make the most of this moment of potential and position of strength.

Would an integrated organization be better able to serve students, educators, and their communities? Or, despite the level of respect and familiarity between the two organizations, could the differences in leadership, revenue models, and cultures drag them both down?



THE SOLVE

As Pivot Learning's CEO ruminated on these questions, he turned to Pivot's board chair, Sarah Brayton, for her advice as a senior manager in the [Monitor Institute by Deloitte](#) (MIbD), a team that works with social impact-focused organizations. He asked if Deloitte could lend its strong M&A capabilities to help strategically think through the risks and benefits of the potential merger. MIbD and Deloitte's commercial M&A practice combined forces to support UnboundEd and Pivot Learning on a pro bono basis as part of a [10-year, \\$1.5 billion social impact investment to drive equity and inclusive prosperity](#).

Drawing on MIbD's deep understanding of the social sector, the M&A team tailored its commercial due diligence process to resonate with the two nonprofits: interviewing executives and board members; evaluating financial projections; reviewing the landscape of the professional learning market; and assessing the cultures of each organization. They gathered the due diligence findings and presented them to both boards to decide: go or no go?

Ultimately, the leadership of both nonprofits had the vision to see past the differences in organizational cultures and services that needed to be thoughtfully addressed and recognized that their shared values and potential for impact outweighed these

differences. The years of collaboration between the two organizations made them confident that they could better serve their shared mission through the strategic merger. They decided to proceed, unifying together under the UnboundEd name.

"The Pivot Learning board was all in on the potential impact of the two organizations coming together," Brayton, now board chair of the integrated UnboundEd organization, said. "Nevertheless, it was a bit bittersweet to sign the dissolution papers for Pivot Learning. In the end, we are glad we proceeded with the merger as we wouldn't have been able to achieve the success we've already seen since the merger."

The Deloitte team helped develop a roadmap and timeline for integration—addressing everything from determining a new leadership structure to managing rebranding of marketing assets to transferring employee email addresses. "Throughout the change management and communications process, the guiding principle was rolling out changes in a way that honored all employees and promoted empowerment and belonging within the new combined organization," Annie Adams, managing director, Deloitte Consulting LLP, said. "Leadership and employees took this unique juncture to redefine a joint culture together—a rare, powerful opportunity."

ON PAPER, THE MERGER LOOKED PROMISING.
IN ACTION, IT EXCEEDED EXPECTATIONS.

THE IMPACT

As a result of the merger, the new integrated UnboundEd is now the largest K-12 educator development organization in the United States with an explicit focus on improving teaching and learning for underserved students. This new size allows it to compete with for-profit publishers in the professional learning space like never before—gaining more ground toward making an equity-centered approach one of the strongest forces in the industry.

The organization's reach has expanded both geographically—now helping 400 school districts accelerate student learning and close educational gaps—and along the spectrum from district leadership decisions to daily classroom habits. UnboundEd is even better positioned than before to continue the shared mission of supporting schools in changing the fundamental dynamics of education and combating systemic injustices.

The merger of UnboundEd and Pivot Learning offers a potential blueprint for how nonprofits can and should consider M&A not just as a last resort in times of financial distress, but as a strategic tool for achieving transformational growth.

“Our main priority has always been serving our mission and our communities,” Robinson said. “This merger, supported by Deloitte’s unique Social Impact Group and M&A experience, has catapulted us to a level of reach and strength we wouldn’t have been able to achieve any other way. We feel an incredible sense of optimism about the progress we’ll be able to make toward educational equity for more students than ever before.”



FROM WORD PROBLEMS TO REAL WORLD
CHALLENGES—A STRATEGIC MERGER MIGHT BE
KEY TO THE SOLUTION.

LET'S CONNECT.

Do these challenges sound familiar?



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