

Strategic Collaborations in Education

2026

What We Learned from 200+ Education Nonprofits—
and What It Means for Funders





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Strategic Collaborations in Education

What We Learned from 200+ Education Nonprofits—and What It Means for Funders

Something fundamental is changing across the education sector.

Over the last few years, education nonprofits have faced a convergence of pressures—from federal funding cuts and rapidly shifting philanthropic priorities to a more contentious political environment that has put organizations working to expand opportunity at particular risk. The sector has faced difficult moments before. During the pandemic, many funders stepped up with flexible support and a shared commitment to helping organizations weather the crisis. Today, the challenges are different, but so is the response. Many leaders are still confronting extraordinary uncertainty, but **with fewer resources and less coordinated support**. At the same time, they're thinking more strategically about how to build organizations that are resilient enough to weather future challenges while also reaching more students and communities.

Strategic collaboration—the intentional decision by two or more organizations to combine strengths, resources, or structures in pursuit of greater impact and resilience—is emerging as **one of the most promising pathways to build stronger organizations that can scale what works, serve more communities, and stand the test of time**.

This report reflects a shared commitment between NewSchools Venture Fund and Monitor Institute by Deloitte to better understand **how education organizations can strengthen their impact in a changing environment**. NewSchools brings decades of experience supporting education innovators and connecting philanthropy with organizations working to improve outcomes for students. Monitor Institute by Deloitte brings deep experience helping mission-driven organizations navigate strategic collaboration, organizational transformation, and systems change. Together, we conducted this **first-of-its-kind landscape analysis** to gauge how education leaders are responding to today's challenges and identify where additional support is needed.

What we found was both encouraging and instructive. **Education leaders have a growing appetite to work together to better serve students and advance their missions**, but many also feel they lack the time, trust, expertise, and resources needed to pursue strategic collaboration well. They may have experience with partnerships or coalitions, but are less familiar with what deeper forms of collaboration could look like.

For many leaders, the words [merger or acquisition](#) still carry a stigma, signaling distress or an admission that an organization couldn't make it on its own. Our research shows there is some truth behind that perception: nonprofits considering more integrated forms of collaboration—including mergers, acquisitions, and strategic closures—were more likely to cite financial pressure and shifts in the funding environment as factors driving their interest. But even among these organizations, [increasing impact was a more common motivation than financial pressure](#). Financial challenges may create urgency, but these decisions aren't only survival; they can also be proactive choices about how an organization can better deliver on its mission.

For philanthropy, [this research points to an opportunity and a responsibility](#). Leaders willing to put mission ahead of organizational ego shouldn't have to navigate these decisions alone. Funders can serve as trusted partners, providing flexible capital, technical expertise, and the time and space to explore possibilities without pressure. When we make it easier for great organizations to come together, we make it possible for more students and communities to benefit from their best ideas.

The insights that follow are drawn from a [March 2026 survey of 251 education organizations, 206 of which were nonprofits](#). Our hope is that these findings help elevate strategic collaboration as a proactive, intentional part of how organizations plan for the future—and inspire funders, nonprofit leaders, and partners to invest in the relationships, infrastructure, and support that make this work possible.

Sincerely,

Frances Messano

Chief Executive Officer,
NewSchools Venture Fund

Natalie Wilson

Senior Partner,
NewSchools Venture Fund

Joanna Burleson

Managing Director & Practice Leader,
Monitor Institute by Deloitte

Acknowledgments

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Current Landscape:

01

The State of Strategic Collaborations in Education



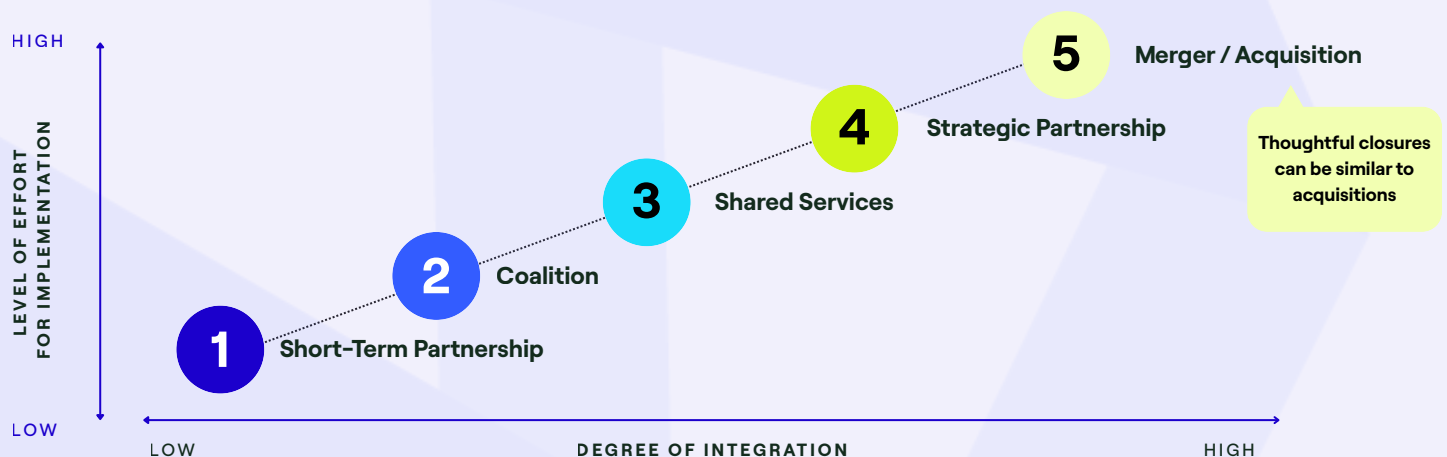
A First-of-Its-Kind Look at the Field

Throughout this report, **strategic collaboration** refers to the intentional ways nonprofits work together to advance a shared mission. Our research revealed a wide range of definitions and interpretations of what different forms of collaboration entail, showing a clear need for a shared vocabulary for strategic collaboration. To provide a common language, we use a spectrum that ranges from lighter-touch partnerships to more integrated structures that enable organizations to align resources, capabilities, and leadership in pursuit of greater impact.

Each approach requires different levels of coordination, investment, governance, and trust. No single collaboration type is inherently better than another. The right path depends on an organization's goals, capabilities, and circumstances. The framework below illustrates this continuum.

The Strategic Collaboration Spectrum

Deloitte's matrix shows the range of strategic collaboration forms and plots them on an axis from "level of effort for implementation" to "degree of integration."



Source: Deloitte Consulting LLP

*Not inclusive of all potential collaboration structures

Nonprofits pursue strategic collaboration for different reasons, and the right pathway depends on the problem they are trying to solve. Some collaborations are designed to expand reach, while others strengthen operations, build new capabilities, or ensure that successful work continues through another organization.

Different strategic goals lead to different forms of collaboration.

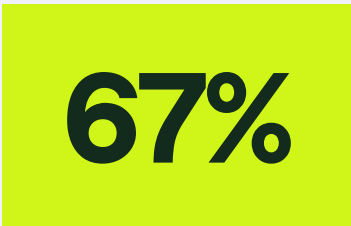
Strategic Goal	Potential Pathway	Example
Expand reach without changing organizational structure	Strategic Alliance or Jointly Run Program	Two math organizations jointly develop and deliver a statewide tutoring initiative, combining curriculum, implementation expertise, and district relationships to serve more students than either could alone.
Increase operational efficiency	Shared Services	Several nonprofits work with a Shared Services Provider to access shared finance, HR, and IT functions, reducing administrative costs so they can invest more in programs and students.
Combine complementary strengths	Merger or Acquisition	An organization with a proven instructional model joins with another that has aligned services, as well as national distribution and implementation capacity, allowing both to reach more schools and students while strengthening long-term sustainability.
Ensure proven work continues	Strategic Closure	A nonprofit intentionally winds down operations while transferring its assets and/or intellectual property, and key staff to other organizations, allowing its work and expertise to continue benefiting students.

Interest in Strategic Collaborations is Growing

In the current moment, education leaders are increasingly interested in exploring different ways of working together to achieve their strategic goals. [They aren't treating collaboration as a someday strategy.](#) Many organizations are already taking the first steps and looking to move quickly, suggesting that strategic collaboration is a critical part of the decisions leaders are making right now.



report greater interest in collaboration than 12 months ago



are in the early phases of a collaboration



want to begin executing within 6 months

Nonprofits Are Already Collaborating, but Lighter Forms of Collaboration Are the Norm

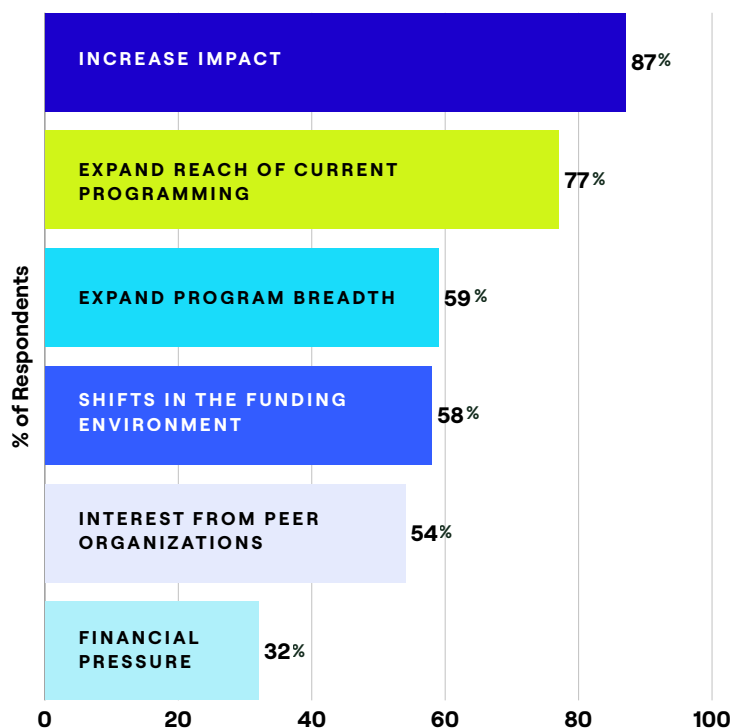
A majority of education organizations have experience working with aligned partners. 91% of nonprofits surveyed have prior experience with strategic collaborations, and of those, 94% say those partnerships achieved their intended outcomes. But that experience has largely been concentrated in lighter-touch partnerships, coalitions, and strategic alliances.

Far fewer leaders have experience with deeper forms of collaboration—such as shared services, joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, or strategic closures—even as many express interest in exploring these approaches.

The findings suggest that while leaders increasingly see these more integrated strategic pathways as a way to strengthen their organizations and reach more students, most have not been able to explore them.

There are still too few examples across the field, technical assistance remains limited, and organizations have few sources of flexible funding to explore this work before the path forward is clear.

Top Drivers of Future Strategic Collaborations



3x

more organizations want to explore M&A than have done it.

"The strongest collaborations are not using this path as a Band-Aid for financial challenges; they're thinking long term about how to join forces around a shared strategy and a shared vision for achieving more for kids."

— Joanna Burleson, Managing Director & Practice Leader, Monitor Institute by Deloitte

The most common reason organizations are interested in strategic collaboration is to **increase their impact**. Leaders are looking for ways to extend the reach of their programs, expand what they offer, and accomplish more together than they could alone. While financial pressure is part of the picture, the data suggests that strategic collaboration is much more than a response to financial distress.

For organizations facing financial pressure, however, collaboration often looks different. Nearly one-third of respondents cited financial pressure as a driver, and these organizations are more likely to consider deeper, more complex forms of collaboration—including joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, and strategic closures. They also feel greater urgency to act, even as they report having less staff capacity to navigate the work.

Organizations citing financial pressure were:

- **50% more likely** to explore joint ventures
- **72% more likely** to explore mergers & acquisitions
- **More than twice as likely** to explore strategic closures
- **More likely** to anticipate a collaboration timeline of **six months or longer**, reflecting the additional planning and organizational capacity these more complex decisions require.

How Mission-Driven For-Profit Organizations Approach Collaboration

1. They are moving on a faster timeline:

91% want to begin a collaboration within six months, **compared with 60%** of nonprofits. **More than half** want to move within just three months.

2. They prefer different types of collaboration:

Compared with nonprofits, for-profits show **greater interest** in joint ventures and jointly run programs, while nonprofits are **more likely** to pursue coalitions and shared services.

3. They're driven more by growth than funding pressures:

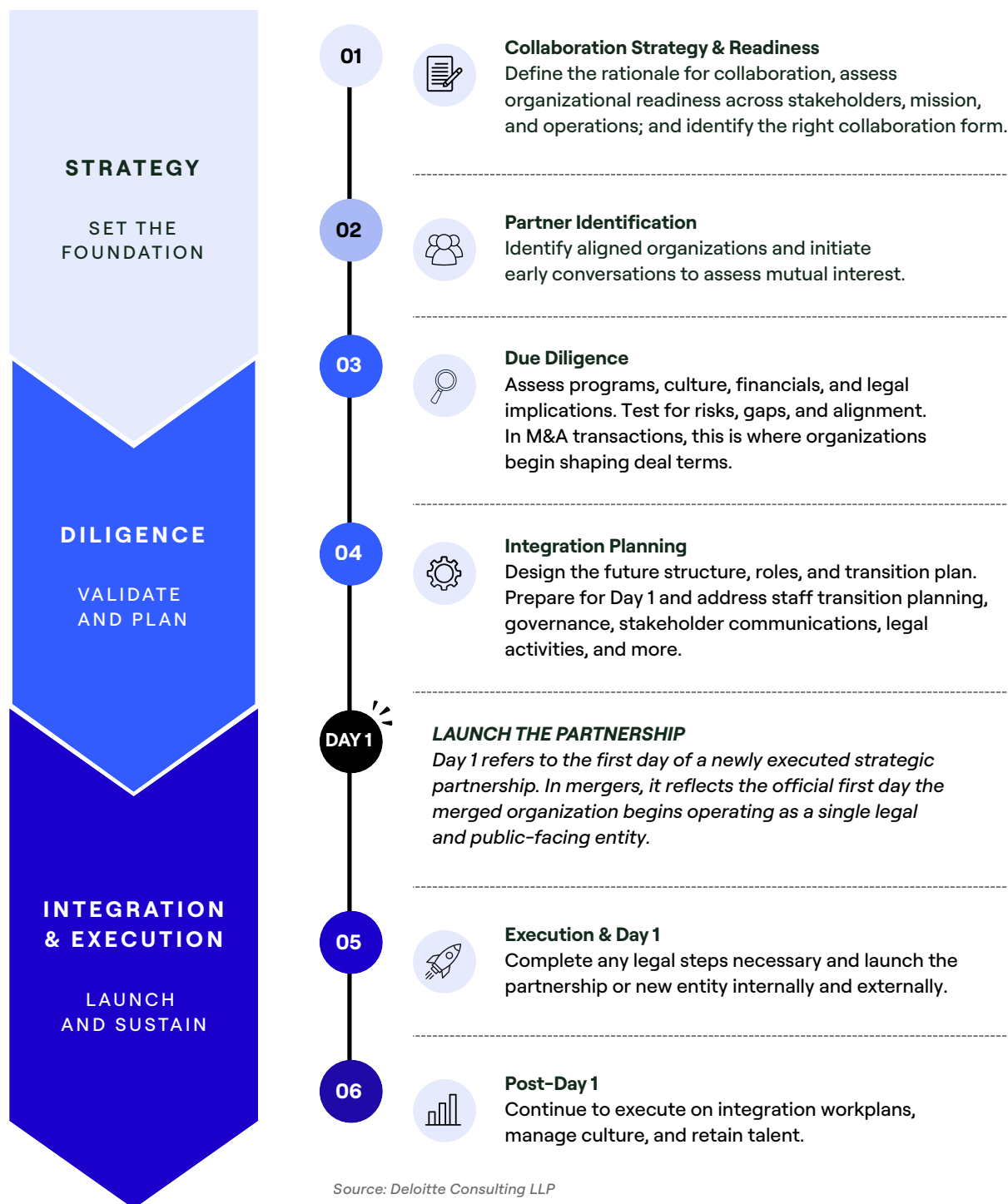
For-profits are **more likely** to collaborate to expand geographically (**71% vs. 46%**) and **less likely** to collaborate because of funding pressures (**38% vs. 58%**) or operational efficiency (**26% vs. 42%**).

Exploring Strategic Collaborations

02



The Strategic Collaboration Lifecycle



Deloitte's Strategic Collaboration Lifecycle offers a practical framework for understanding the decisions leaders face as they pursue more integrated forms of collaboration. Throughout the remainder of this report, we use the lifecycle to share insights from our survey, highlight where nonprofits are most likely to encounter barriers and surface how philanthropy can help them move forward with greater confidence.

Stage I : Strategy

Collaboration Strategy & Readiness

The first stage of this work is about getting clear on **what the organization is trying to achieve and whether collaboration is the right strategy to help get there.**

- **Clarify the organization's strategy.** Strategic objectives should be the North Star for any potential collaboration. Leaders should first make sure those objectives are still relevant and then ask: Can we achieve them on our own? Could working with another organization help us get there more effectively or efficiently?
- **Determine the right collaboration approach.** If collaboration could help advance those objectives, leaders can then consider what form makes the most sense—from a strategic partnership or shared services to a more integrated approach such as a joint venture, merger or acquisition, or strategic closure. **The collaboration model should follow the strategy, not the other way around.**

Organizations may have different reasons for exploring strategic collaboration, but many leaders share the same challenge: figuring out how to start the conversation. **Nonprofit leaders may worry that expressing interest in collaboration will be interpreted as a sign of financial weakness.** Funders, meanwhile, may see opportunities for organizations to work together but hesitate to raise them, concerned that doing so could feel like pressure rather than an invitation to explore. As a result, promising opportunities may never make it past the starting line.

For collaboration to take root, leaders need space to have honest conversations about their long-term strategies without fearing they'll jeopardize funding. Intermediaries can help by facilitating introductions, guiding early exploration, and building the trust needed for collaboration to develop organically.

"These are some of the biggest decisions nonprofit leaders will ever make. They're opening up their organizations to scrutiny and making choices that affect their staff, their boards, and the communities they serve. They need trusted partners who can help them step back, see the bigger picture, and make decisions they'll still feel good about 10 years from now."

— Natalie Wilson, Senior Partner, NewSchools Venture Fund

Magpie Literacy x Great Minds: Scaling Literacy Impact Through Strategic Partnership

When Magpie Literacy began exploring strategic collaboration, the organization had developed a high-quality literacy tool grounded in the science of reading and was seeing promising results in schools. Leadership recognized an opportunity to bring those benefits to many more students, but knew that doing so would require three things: **quality, scale, and coherence**. They set out to find a partner that could help expand the tool's reach, integrate it into high-quality instructional materials, and preserve the quality that had made it successful in the first place.

Those priorities ultimately led Magpie to Great Minds. Rather than rushing into a formal partnership, the organizations started with a series of smaller collaborations that allowed them to build trust, test how they worked together, and confirm their strategic alignment. As the relationship deepened, they moved toward an innovative licensing agreement, with Magpie's fiscal sponsor, Cambiar Education, playing a critical role in bringing the deal together. The agreement enabled Great Minds to integrate Magpie's literacy tools into its curriculum while Magpie retained ownership of its intellectual property.

The result was a collaboration designed not to solve an immediate challenge, but to accelerate Magpie's mission and expand its impact.



"Quality, scale, and coherence were the North Stars. Every time we hit a hard decision, we came back to those North Stars."

—Leo Bialis-White, former Chief Strategy Officer, Magpie Literacy; now Chief of Staff, Product, Great Minds

Partner Identification

Once leaders determine that collaboration is the right strategic direction and align on the best pathway, the next challenge is identifying the right partner. This stage is about finding organizations with aligned missions, complementary strengths, and a shared vision for what they hope to achieve together.

Organizations are looking for partners.

83%

of nonprofit survey respondents opted into the partner-matching tool.

"Finding the right strategic partner is a lot like finding the right life partner. You don't skip straight to making a lifelong commitment. It takes time to get to know each other, build trust, and make sure you're aligned on your future direction."

—Frances Messano, CEO,
NewSchools Venture Fund

After completing the survey, respondents were invited to join a partner-matching resource by sharing select information about their organizations. The vast majority of respondents opted in, reinforcing one of the survey's primary findings: [education leaders are eager to pursue strategic collaboration but need help identifying the right potential partners.](#)

Constraints Organizations Identified as “High Barriers”

56%

Can't find the right partner

42%

Worried about mission/vision alignment

Nonprofit leaders can start by leveraging their networks as well as scanning the landscape to identify all potential opportunities before committing to one. [Funders can also be instrumental in helping their grantees connect to a broader pool of mission-aligned potential partners.](#)

After organizations have identified potential partners, the question they often are grappling with is, "which of these opportunities are worth the time, trust, and resources it takes to pursue well?" Without a structured way to answer that, organizations can end up spread thin across too many exploratory conversations, default to whichever partner is easiest to reach, or the one that their funder seems to prefer, rather than the one that's the strongest fit.

To avoid this, [organizations should develop clear criteria for what they're looking for in a viable partner](#) (e.g., mission fit, program alignment, financial health, reputation, etc.), determine which of those criteria are non-negotiable, and then apply that same set of criteria consistently across every potential partner. Even organizations that ultimately want the same thing from a collaboration still need to confirm, deliberately, that they bring complementary capabilities to each other, share real values alignment, and are being realistic about what each can take on given their existing resources and capacity.

Once a promising partner has been identified, leaders often face a related hurdle: how to make the first approach, particularly with an organization they don't already have a relationship with. Cold outreach can feel higher-stakes than reaching out to an existing contact, but it doesn't need to start as a formal pitch. Leaders may be able to [leverage funder relationships to facilitate a connection, and can open with a lower-stakes, exploratory conversation—sharing what's prompting](#)

How Funders Can Support the Strategy Stage



Lead with trust:

Create an environment where nonprofit leaders feel comfortable discussing uncertainty and exploring strategic collaboration without fear that it will be interpreted as a sign of weakness.



Engage in two-way strategic conversations:

Ask leaders about their long-term goals, challenges, and opportunities. Help them think strategically about the full range of pathways available to advance their mission.



Fund early exploration:

Provide flexible planning capital that gives organizations the time and capacity to explore collaboration.

their interest and testing timing and mutual value—as a first check on alignment before going further.

Funders are uniquely positioned to be that source of guidance for nonprofits navigating this process. By investing in trusted intermediaries, identifying potential collaborators, and providing the early, flexible funding organizations need to evaluate opportunities, funders can help more promising collaborations get off the ground.



How Funders Can Support the Strategy Stage



Open doors to potential partners:

Use funders' networks and relationships to help leaders identify and connect with organizations that could be strong strategic collaborators. Invest in intermediaries, convenings, and other opportunities that make those connections easier to find and explore.



Share what others have learned:

Invest in case studies, peer learning, and practical resources that help leaders understand what has—and hasn't—worked in previous collaborations, giving them greater confidence as they evaluate their own options.

Stage II : Diligence

The second stage in the Strategic Collaboration Lifecycle is the Diligence Stage, where organizations begin determining whether the collaboration can work in practice. Leaders examine the finances, legal considerations, and long-term viability of working together. **They also assess the human side of the partnership:** whether leaders work well together, whether the board and staff have the necessary capacity and expertise, and whether the organizations can operate effectively together.

72%

of survey respondents
requested support during
the diligence stage

Relatively few organizations surveyed are currently in the diligence stage, but it's also one of the points where leaders are asking for the most help. Diligence requires organizations to take a hard look at the financial, legal, operational, and human realities of working together before deciding whether to move forward.

How Funders Can Support During the Diligence Stage



Fund strategic planning and exploration:

Provide early, flexible funding for the legal, financial, governance, and operational due diligence organizations need to determine whether collaboration is the right path.



Strengthen organizational readiness:

Help organizations build internal alignment, engage boards early, and ensure leaders have the capacity to effectively evaluate strategic options.



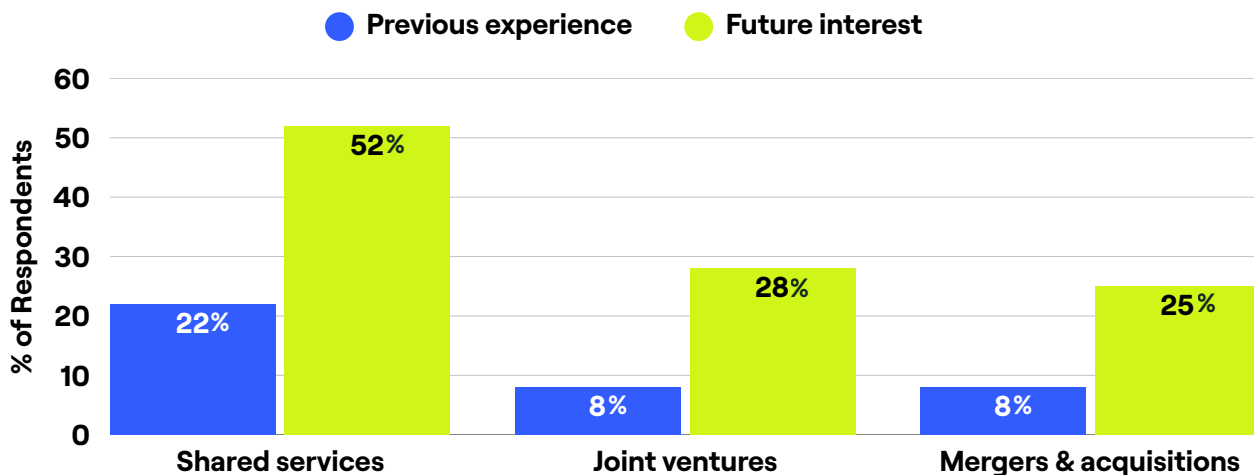
Provide access to experienced advisors:

Connect organizations with governance, legal, financial, and operational experts who can guide the evaluation process.

Stage III : Integration & Execution

The final stage of the Strategic Collaboration Lifecycle is Integration & Execution, when [organizations turn a shared vision into day-to-day reality](#). Partners must develop a clear plan for how people, programs, operations, governance, and organizational cultures will come together—and then carry out those changes.

Interest Is Outpacing Experience



While nonprofits have significant experience with traditional partnerships and coalitions, far fewer have firsthand experience with more integrated approaches. Many organizations are considering these pathways for the first time—and the more integrated the collaboration, the more complex the work becomes.

Integration involves a long list of difficult decisions: who stays in which roles, which programs and systems continue, how teams will work together, who has decision-making authority, and how different organizational cultures come together. These decisions affect people's jobs and the future of programs and communities, and they don't get resolved overnight. [Integration can continue for 18 to 24 months—or longer, requiring sustained guidance and patient capital well beyond the initial agreement.](#)

64%

of survey respondents
requested support during the
integration & execution stage

Building the Infrastructure for Collaboration

A Call to Action for Funders

The findings point to a clear role for philanthropy in making strategic collaboration easier to explore and execute. Based on this research, funders can strengthen the conditions for strategic collaboration by:



Creating space for honest conversations.

Encourage nonprofit leaders to discuss long-term strategy and collaboration without fear that doing so will jeopardize funding.



Funding exploration, not just execution.

Provide flexible planning capital so organizations can assess opportunities before committing to a specific path.



Helping organizations find the right partners.

Invest in matchmaking, trusted intermediaries, convenings, and relationship-building across the field.



Supporting rigorous diligence.

Make it possible for organizations to conduct the legal, financial, governance, and operational planning needed to make informed decisions.



Investing in implementation.

Provide flexible, multi-year funding so organizations can successfully integrate teams, programs, and operations.



Building the field's knowledge base.

Support peer learning, case studies, and practical tools so future collaborations become easier to navigate.

Education nonprofits see joining forces as an opportunity to extend the reach of promising tools, programs, and ideas to more states, more classrooms, and more students.

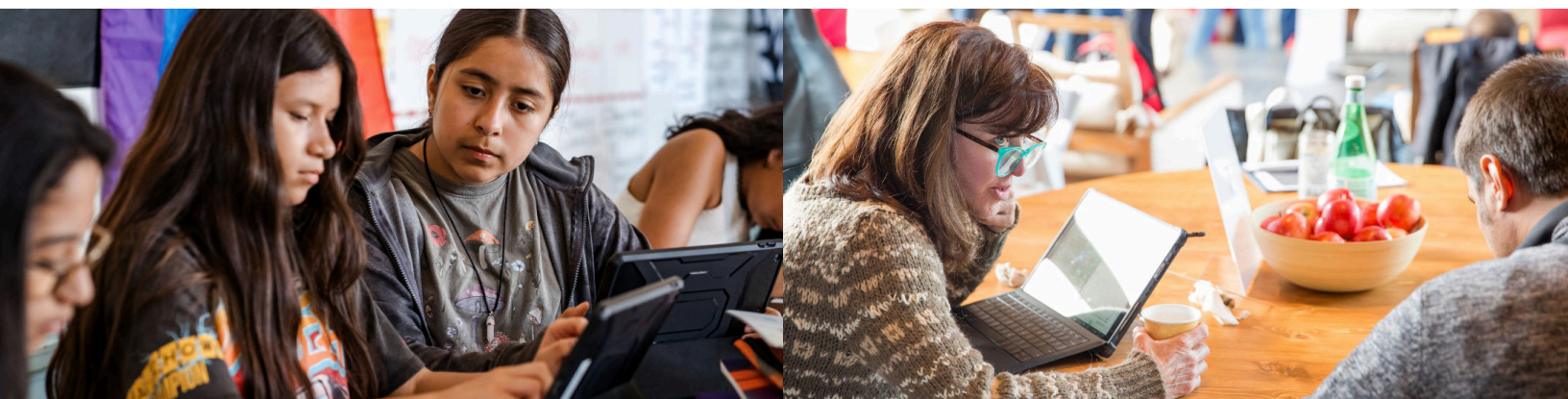
They need, however, support to explore deeper, more creative ways of working together. We can help great leaders find each other, give them room to imagine what they could do together, and put resources behind the strongest ideas. The education sector already has extraordinary people doing extraordinary work. [Our job is to help more of them build the future together.](#)

What We've Built

NewSchools Venture Fund and Monitor Institute by Deloitte launched the Strategic Collaborations Initiative to help build the infrastructure organizations need to explore relevant future pathways. We have begun developing practical resources that organizations, funders, and intermediaries can use to support strategic collaboration across the sector.

- [Landscape Analysis](#): Through a survey of 200+ education nonprofits, we set out to better understand how the sector is approaching strategic collaboration, what's driving interest, what's standing in the way, and what support leaders need to move forward.
- [Webinar Recordings](#): Ran a series of webinars with nonprofit leaders and collaboration experts using real-world case studies and practical guidance.
 - [Strategic Collaborations 101: Pathways, Tradeoffs, and Readiness](#)
 - [Strategic Collaborations 201: From Interest to Exploration, and Lessons from the Field](#)
- [Partner Matching Tool](#): Created a shared directory connecting organizations interested in exploring strategic collaboration, with 83% of nonprofits opting in.
- [Strategic Collaborations Cohort](#): Launched a cohort to support 15 organizations through strategic planning, peer learning, and partner identification to test the best way to support exploration.

[Explore the full Strategic Collaborations Resource Hub →](#)

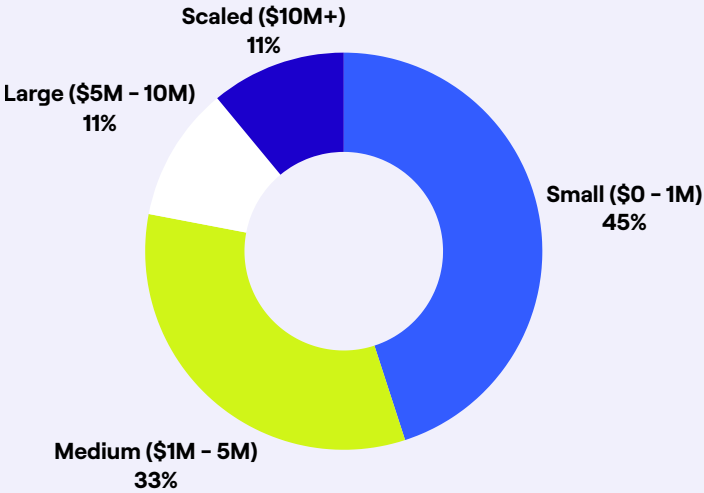


Appendix: Survey Respondent Profile & Methodology—Nonprofits

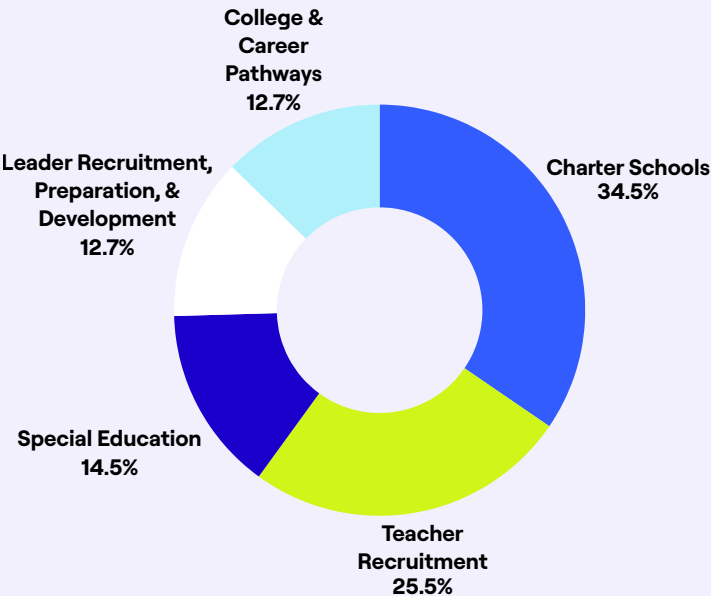
Total respondents:



Annual operating budget



Top issue areas



Geographic reach

Respondents represented organizations across all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and nine international organizations.

Methodology

This landscape analysis is based on a survey of 251 education organizations conducted in March 2026. The survey was distributed to leaders across NewSchools Venture Fund's network, including but not limited to NewSchools grantees, and included both nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Respondents were asked about their experience with and interest in a range of strategic collaboration models, including partnerships, coalitions, shared services, strategic alliances, joint ventures, mergers and acquisitions, and strategic closures. The survey explored organizations' prior collaboration experience, future interest, motivations, barriers, and the types of support leaders believe are needed to pursue strategic collaboration successfully.

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