EdSolutions

What Do Markets Have to Do with Impact?

MARKET-INFORMED IMPACT®

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When the pieces fit

● WHEN THE PIECES FIT

Imagine a student learning fractions. Her classroom lessons introduce a concept in one way. Her tutoring builds on those lessons. Assessments help her teacher and tutor understand where she needs support. And the teacher's professional learning helps her respond to what they are seeing.

The pieces reinforce one another. That is the promise of instructional coherence.

○ WHEN THEY DON'T

Now imagine that the pieces don't fit. The tutor uses a different approach. An assessment measures something the class has not yet covered. The teacher spends time reconciling materials and interpreting disconnected information.

Why is the first picture so hard to achieve at scale?

I spend a lot of time talking with people across education about the work we do at EdSolutions. One question comes up regularly: What does it mean to think about education through the lens of markets? And what does that have to do with impact?

It's a good question. When our goals are better learning, stronger schools, and greater opportunity, the connection to markets may not be obvious.

For me, the connection starts with a practical concern: What has to be true for a promising idea to reach the people who need it, work well for them, and keep doing so over time?

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Someone has to develop it. Someone has to fund it. People need ways to judge whether it is any good. Someone has to choose it, and someone has to use it well. Policies, purchasing practices, information, and relationships influence every step.

EDUCATION MARKET

The system through which solutions are developed, funded, evaluated, selected, delivered, used, and improved. It includes companies and nonprofits, but also schools, educators, learners, families, governments, foundations, and researchers.

MARKET SHAPING

Deliberately changing the conditions in that system so that better outcomes become more achievable and sustainable.

At EdSolutions, we call our broader approach Market-Informed Impact®: understanding, navigating, and shaping education markets (supply, demand, and enabling conditions) so that effective solutions scale, sustain, and reach the students who need them most. Market shaping is the part that acts on those conditions.

Start with What We Want for Students

Suppose we wanted to help more schools move toward the first picture. How would a market perspective help?

We work through six questions. We call the stages Envision, Map, Diagnose, Hypothesize, Intervene, and Learn & Adapt. They give us a way to move from an ambition to a strategy we can test and improve.

1. **Envision:** What would we like to be true?
2. **Map:** How does this work today?
3. **Diagnose:** What might be getting in the way?
4. **Hypothesize:** What do we think would help, and why?
5. **Intervene:** How would we test it?
6. **Learn & Adapt:** What is actually changing?

1. Envision: What would we like to be true?

We would start with the student and teacher. We want students to receive instruction and support that fit together, and teachers to have tools that help them respond effectively to students' needs.

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Then we would ask what the market would need to provide: perhaps compatible materials, useful information about alignment, and support for putting the pieces into practice.

At this point, we would keep an open mind about the solution. A single provider's comprehensive offering might help. So might products from different providers that work well together. We should investigate those possibilities against the outcome we want.

2. Map: How does this work today?

Next, we would look at who makes the consequential decisions, across all three parts of the market: supply, demand, and the enabling conditions that shape both.

- Who selects the curriculum?
- Who purchases assessments or tutoring?
- Who shapes professional learning?
- What do suppliers know about those decisions?
- Where do educators, students, and families have a voice?

We would also follow the money, information, and rules. If different teams purchase different parts of the instructional system on different schedules, that could matter. If buyers have no practical way to judge whether products fit together, that could matter too.

Mapping helps us understand how the current arrangement produces the results we see.

3. Diagnose: What might be getting in the way?

This is where the questions get especially interesting.

A supplier might see the value of aligning its tutoring with several core curricula. But doing that could require reviewing content, adapting lesson sequences, training tutors, and maintaining those connections as curricula change.

Would that investment help the supplier win enough business to cover the cost? Would districts recognize the alignment and give it weight in purchasing? Or would they primarily choose on price or other features?

Meanwhile, district leaders might want coherence but lack the time, information, authority, or budget flexibility to buy differently.

These are possibilities we would investigate, rather than conclusions about why coherence falls short.

> *The point is to understand why people who want a better result may still find it difficult to produce one.*

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4. Hypothesize: What do we think would help, and why?

Suppose our investigation suggested that suppliers were uncertain whether buyers would reward meaningful alignment.

Before acting, we would make our expectations explicit. This step turns the diagnosis into a theory we can test:

> **If** districts establish credible demand for aligned offerings, and suppliers can reasonably expect to recover their investment, more suppliers will invest in alignment.
>
> **If** districts can identify and use those offerings well, students and teachers should experience a more coherent instructional system.

Each "if" matters. A statement of interest may be too weak to influence investment. An alignment label may not describe something instructionally useful. Schools may need more implementation support than we anticipated.

Making those assumptions visible gives us something to test.

5. Intervene: How would we test it?

One response might be to help a group of districts define what alignment should look like and make credible purchasing commitments for offerings that meet those requirements. A foundation or intermediary might help organize the effort, support a trusted review process, and help districts use the resulting information.

That could give suppliers a clearer reason to invest.

But if the main barrier were districts' ability to coordinate purchasing or implement the products, a demand commitment alone might accomplish little. The response would need to address those conditions as well.

The diagnosis should guide the intervention.

6. Learn & Adapt: What is actually changing?

We would look beyond how many districts joined or how many products were reviewed.

- Are districts changing their purchasing requirements?
- Are suppliers changing their offerings?
- Do teachers experience less friction?
- Are students receiving more connected support?

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- Are schools with fewer resources able to participate and benefit?

Those questions help us distinguish activity from progress. They also help us decide whether to continue, adjust, or rethink the strategy.

A Useful Way to Ask the Next Question

This example is a starting hypothesis, not a completed strategy for instructional coherence. Its purpose is to show the kinds of questions a market perspective opens up.

FROM OUR WORK

This is not an abstract exercise for us. EdSolutions works across high-quality curriculum, assessment, intervention, and tutoring, which lets us see how these pieces connect in classrooms, and where the market keeps them apart. That vantage point is what makes coherence a market question, not just an instructional one.

And those questions apply well beyond coherence. Consider a few different market challenges:

Make effective solutions affordable at scale

For example, high-impact tutoring may remain beyond a school system's budget even when leaders want it. Could coordinated, multiyear purchasing commitments help providers invest, spread shared costs, and use tutor time more efficiently, bringing down the cost per student while preserving results?

Create a path for innovations the market isn't ready to adopt

For example, a new learning tool may offer possibilities that schools don't yet know how to evaluate, purchase, or use. Could supported trials with early adopters help establish its value and clarify what wider adoption would require?

Help interdependent pieces get started together

For example, expanding speech and debate can present a chicken-and-egg problem: schools need coaches and nearby competition to participate, while coaches and competition networks need enough participating schools to sustain themselves. Could coordinated startup support help those pieces develop together?

Make specialized solutions viable in small, dispersed markets

For example, developing high-quality solutions for students who are deaf, blind, or deafblind can involve substantial costs, while buyers with similar needs may be scattered across many school systems. Could pooled demand or shared development funding make those distinct needs more viable to serve?

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These are starting points for investigation. Each takes us back to the same questions: What outcome do we want? Who would need to do what differently? What is getting in the way? And what could change those conditions?

For foundations, government agencies, and others seeking impact, a market-shaping lens creates additional options: improving information, making demand more credible, building shared capabilities, supporting coordination, or changing rules that hold back progress.

For the research and case examples behind this approach, see our white paper, *Market-Informed Impact® in Education* (2026 Edition), available at edsolutions.com.

I would be curious to hear where you see this in your own work. What promising education idea is struggling to reach the people who need it? And what would have to change around it for that promise to become reality?

Share your example at edsolutions.com/market-informed-impact. And if this piece was useful, forward it to a colleague working on these questions.

EdSolutions is an education-focused social impact consulting firm. We help philanthropies and mission-based organizations use the levers of the market to drive impact.

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