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## The “Microschooling” Experiment in American Education: Will it Succeed?

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### Abstract

*The United States is experiencing a boom in microschools, prompted by school closures due to COVID-19 pandemic (Zviedrite et al., 2024). These small, community-based learning environments have become increasingly popular as families sought alternatives to traditional schooling during widespread school closures. Although it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of microschools in the nation as there is no regulatory body to track them, the National Microschooling Network estimates about 95,000 microschools with median enrollment of 16 students. Some researchers drew parallel between microschool movements and the free schools and experimental learning models of the 1960s that short lived, and others were optimistic about their success. This article examines advantages, opportunities, and challenges related to the success of microschools and emphasizes that in long run their success depends on such outcome measures of students' progression from microschools to college entrance to eventual graduation and employment with high occupational earnings.*

**Keywords:** *Microschools, COVID-19, alternative learning models, Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA), school vouchers, school choice programs.*

### Introduction

The typical one-room “microschooling” experiment, outside traditional education systems in the U.S., has gained popularity, especially during the COVID-19 (being called pandemic pods), for its personalized instruction, flexibility, and relatively lower cost than private schools. It is believed to serve as a mid-point between traditional schooling and home schooling. Although it is unclear as to how many students actually attend the microschools, McShane and Diperna (2022) of EdChoice estimated that somewhere

between 1.1 to 2.2 million children (i.e., between 2 to 4% of school children in the nation) attended microschooling full time in the 2022-23 school year. Microschools are those with “no more than 150 students in grade K-12; [where] multiple ages learn together in a single classroom; [and] teachers act more as guides than lecturers; [where] a heavy emphasis [is placed] on digital and project-based learning; and small class sizes, combined with those other factors, [to] make for a highly personalized education”

(Prothero 2016, para 5). Their median student body size is about 16 learners. Don Soifer, the CEO of the National Microschooling Center told that about 95,000 microschools are now in operation in the United States (Berlie 2014). Some of them are parent-led and others are affiliated with microschool networks; some are licensed private schools and others are unaccredited nonpublic schools. The National Microschooling Center (2023) reported, based on its survey of founders of 100 current microschools around the country, that: (1) 64.4 percent of the current leaders/founders were white, 12.9 percent were black, and five percent were Latino and other races; (2) two-thirds of lead instructors were currently or formerly licensed educators; (3) 39 percent of schools use business space, 25 percent use house of worship, 13.9 percent use private homes, and the remaining use a home not currently occupied nor serving as a residence, while only one percent use employer-owned facility; (4) one-half (54.2%) of microschools operate on a full-time calendar (similar to public schools), one in five (21.9%) run a hybrid or part-time school week, one in four (24%) offer families' choices of these schedule options; (5) 45 percent of microschools comply with their state's homeschool rules and 36 percent of microschools are recognized by their states as private schools; (6) 88 percent of microschools are tuition-based, 17.8 percent accept state-provided school choice funds, 11.9 percent seek other support, e.g., fundraising, institutional support, etc.; (7) one-half (49.5%) emphasize specialized learning philosophies (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, or child-centered learning), 26.7 percent use faith-based instruction, and 23.8 percent use neither approach; and (8) 47 percent measure student learning outcomes via standardized norm-referenced assessments, 34 percent utilize letter grade or comparable evaluations, and 29 percent utilize performance or embedded assessments in digital learning content. Thus, microschools vary considerably in their organization, operational schedules, curriculum, learning styles, and evaluation methods.

### Growing support

The support for microschools via choice scholarship programs, especially by the universal expansion of the Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program, is setting a new trend (Riley 2023). Georgia, Missouri, and Nebraska joined other states recently in this education freedom initiative. Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp signed SB 233 into law in April 2024 that would create an ESA program for students in the lowest performing 25 percent of public schools. Louisiana's GATOR (giving all true opportunity to rise) Scholarship Program, as created by HB 745, a universal ESA also passed in April 2024 and referred to the Committee on Education. Missouri's SB 727 to expand its Empowerment Scholarship Account was signed by Gov. Mike Parson into law in May 2024. It not only increases the cap on tax credits to individuals and businesses that donate to nonprofit education assistance organization but also expand eligibility for student participation in ESAs (Campbell 2024; Tarnowski 2024). In the preceding year (2023) Iowa, Utah, Arkansas, Florida, Oklahoma, and Indiana passed universal or near-universal school choice programs, making it "the universal year" (Stanford 2023). Arizona passed universal school choice bill in 2022, and West Virginia did so in 2021. Thus, in a span of just three years, "the number of states with universal or near-universal private school choice programs has grown from zero to 10 and the number of students eligible for these programs has increased by 60 percent" (The Georgia Virtue 2023, para 4).

### The Appeal

The appeal for microschools was evident even before the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, QuantumCamp and Action Academy, which represent early microschool programs, were founded in 2009; Outschool, which offers small group, live online classes for K-12 students, was established in 2015; and, Prenda started as microschool in Arizona in 2018 (School Choice Week 2021). These pre-pandemic microschool models have seen substantial growth in pandemic years and beyond because of their appeal to parents (Goldstein and Melton 2024) and students over the traditional public schools in following aspects:

1. **Personalized Learning:** Microschools have small class sizes, allowing teachers to tailor instruction to individual students. This personalized approach helps address diverse learning needs and fosters deeper understanding (Bauld 2022; Jain 2023; Singh 2023; McShane 2024).
2. **Flexibility:** Microschools often have flexible schedules, allowing families to adapt schooling to their lifestyle. This can be especially beneficial for parents who work irregular hours or travel frequently (Bauld 2022; Dixon 2024; Smarick 2022).
3. **Community and Relationships:** The close-knit environment of microschools promotes strong relationships among students, teachers, and families. Students often feel more connected and supported (Dixon 2024; Miller 2020).
4. **Innovative Approaches:** Microschools can experiment with innovative teaching methods, curriculum design, and assessment techniques. This flexibility encourages creativity and adaptability (Singh 2023).
5. **Cost-Effectiveness:** Some microschools operate with lower costs than traditional private schools. This affordability makes them accessible to a wider range of families (Tarnowski 2022).

### Social Interaction

Social interaction in microschools may occur at school, local community and business levels, perhaps in a smaller scale compared to public schools:

- A. School Level:
  1. **Small Community:** Microschools have tight-knit communities, fostering strong relationships among students, teachers, and families—thereby creating a sense of belongingness (Schwalbach 2023; Suemo 2023).
  2. **Mixed-Age Groups:** Microschools often group students of different ages together, to facilitate opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and socialization across grade levels (Suemo 2023; Tarnowski 2022).
  3. **Field Trips and Activities:** Microschools organize outings, workshops, and extracurricular activities, which expand the horizons for social interaction beyond the classroom (Jain 2023; Singh 2023).
  4. **Community Service:** Microschools emphasize community service projects, wherein students work together on initiatives that promote teamwork and empathy (Bauld 2022; Jain 2023).

5. **Parent Involvement:** Parents play an active role in microschoools, far more regularly than in public schools. Their involvement in school events and decision-making contributes to a strong social fabric (Bauld 2022; Jain 2023).

#### B. Local Community & Business Levels

1. **Guest Speakers:** Microschoools invite professionals from local businesses to speak to students to share insights, career paths, and industry knowledge, that enrich students' understanding of various fields (Jain 2023).
2. **Field Trips:** Microschoools organize field trips to local businesses, factories, museums, or research centers, which provide students with firsthand experience to learn about different industries and work environments (Jain 2023).
3. **Service-Learning Projects:** Collaborating with local businesses, microschoools design service projects to enable them to work on real-world challenges, such as environmental conservation, community development, or social justice initiatives (Jain 2023).
4. **Internships:** Microschoools establish internship programs with local businesses to facilitate practical skills and networking opportunities, while exposing them to professional settings (Jain 2023).

**Mentorship Programs:** Microschoools connect students with mentors from local businesses, who may be instrumental in providing guidance, career advice, and support to pursue their interests and goals (Jain 2023).

#### Collaboration with Universities or Colleges

Microschoools can collaborate with universities and colleges in several ways to enhance students' learning experiences:

1. **Early College Connections:** Some microschoools partner with universities to offer early-college experiences. For example, Arizona State University Prep Academy allows students at Arizona microschoools to complete courses with a project-based learning approach by interacting with university faculty via ASU Prep Digital Platform (McClennen 2022).
2. **Collaborative Models:** Microschoools can collaborate with universities through shared spaces, instructional expertise, and curriculum. This type of collaboration, often called a partnership microschoool, allows microschoools to reinforce their work with university support (Buck 2023).

#### Early Success

Although it is too early to gain a clear understanding of how successful microschoools are in preparing students for their future success, there seem to be potential benefits of their personalized learning approaches. For example, in a case study of the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy (SNUMA), it was found that although students started below grade level at the beginning of the year, they made substantial progress toward accessing grade level by the end of the year, as measured by the personalized learning platform metrics (Doss and Steiner 2022; Gilliam and Barrett 2022). However, the authors did note the difficulty in interpreting these results because it was unknown that: (1) if the amount of time spent on the platform was more effective/less effective for student

learning than other educational approaches; (2) what activities students might have missed while using the platforms; or (3) how the instructional approach SNUMA took in its first year influenced non-academic student outcomes (Doss and Steiner 2022).

#### Potential Challenges

Microschoools face potential challenges as years go by, including but not limited to:

1. **Financial Sustainability:** Microschoools often rely on tuition fees or donations. Ensuring long-term financial stability can be difficult (Pillow and Daramola 2023; Smarick 2022; Valley 2023).
2. **Regulatory Compliance:** Navigating state and local regulations can be complex. Microschoools must meet legal requirements while maintaining their innovative approach (Bauld 2022; Pillow and Daramola 2023; Smarick 2022).
3. **Equity:** Access to microschoools may be limited due to location or cost. Ensuring inclusivity and diversity remains a challenge (Dixon 2024; Valley 2023).
4. **Accountability:** Teachers may not need to be certified or even hold college degrees. Facilities may not be inspected. They may not be complied with federal disability law. The schools may teach whatever they like (Goldstein 2024; Pillow and Daramola 2023; Solochek 2023; Thayn 2023).
5. **Assessment:** RAND corporation research on microschoool academic growth and validity of measurements fell short of being able to compare the academic progress between children at microschoools and those at traditional schools. Don Soifer, president of Nevada Action for School Options, commented that "the dynamism that helps define the fast-growing microschoool sector may pose its own challenges to pure quantitative analysis of their academic performance in comparison with more traditional learning models" (Soifer 2022).
6. **Scaling:** Expanding without compromising quality is a delicate balance. Scaling up while maintaining the microschoool ethos is a challenge (Buck 2023; Dixon 2024; Smarick 2022).
7. **Parental Involvement:** High parental involvement is essential, but it can also lead to conflicts or unrealistic expectations (Dixon 2024; Jain 2023).
8. **Isolation:** Microschoools may lack extracurricular activities or social interactions found in larger schools (Veno 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires oversight, accreditation, scalability, safety, adaptability and community support. Koteskey's (2018, 33) illustration in this context may remind the risk of poor implementation and lack of community support, wherein former Googler Max Ventilla's AltSchool, founded in 2013 after raising more than \$173 million in venture capital, had to shut down two of its four locations (in the San Francisco Bay Area and New York city) due to financial troubles and parental concerns about overemphasis on testing proprietary software on students rather than teaching them, thereby failing promises about personalized learning.



## Conclusion

The National Microschooling Center (2023) reported that 55 percent of the prospective microschool founders were white, while 27 percent were black, and five percent were Latino/Hispanic. These patterns suggest not only potential diversity among students that microschools attract, but also growing entrepreneurial spirit among blacks and other minorities. In fact, the Whitney M. Young Academy (WMYA), a microschool model at the Central Florida Urban League (CFLU) boasts that it is designed to uplift black communities (Kim and Barrett 2022). While this prospect of diversity may be an encouraging element, a large percentage of microschools continue to depend on tuition, which may be a challenge for minority students to afford. Although state-funded school options have expanded over the last few years, mainly from ESA vouchers during the pandemic-era public school closures, they only increased from 17.8 to 19.8 percent between current and prospective leaders of microschools (Wagner 2024). Therefore, many microschools have to rely on other funding sources, e.g., an employer or house of worship or other institutional sources. Moreover, states are beginning to realize that school choice voucher programs could become expensive. For example, Arizona's ESA expansion in 2022 increased its cost projections from \$376 million in January 2023 to \$950 million by the end of the year, threatening a deficit of \$320 million in the state's budget (Fox 2023). And Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs said that ESA program is unsustainable (Gray 2023). Other states may face similar situations if they simply embrace universal expansion of voucher programs, without any criteria of eligibility and thorough knowledge of how much those programs cost in long run.

Microschools, by their very nature of small class size and flexibility in curriculum, have potential to help struggling children to thrive for success. Many of these students may do well when exposed to different learning styles, e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, or child-centered learning than in traditional public schools. Despite these theoretical justifications, research on traditional vouchers over the last decade show a decline in academic achievement. For example, Abdulkadiroglu, Pathak, and Walters (2018) found that participation in Louisiana Scholarship Program (LSP), a voucher plan that provides public funds for disadvantaged students to attend private schools, lowered math scores by 0.4 standard deviations and also reduced achievement in reading, science, and social studies. Likewise, Waddington and Berends (2018) found from their longitudinal study of statewide standardized assessment in public and private schools of Indiana that voucher students' achievement on average lowered by 0.15 standard deviations in mathematics during their first year of attending private school compared to those remained in a public school. Researchers argued that it is partly due to selection of low-quality private schools. Daniel Buck (2023) noted a troubling "ideological undercurrent" of infatuation with progressive and student-led pedagogies in microschooling. However, it is too early to know which Microschools may prove to be of high quality or otherwise and what impact they may have on student achievement. It is true that parents may like microschools for size, safety, flexibility, and distance from home, but academic performance will be the determining factor of their success in coming years. Kerry McDonald, senior fellow and leader of Education Entrepreneurship Lab, recalls how most of the free schools and experimental learning models of the 1960s disappeared, but is optimistic that the current microschool movement will succeed due to a crucial combination of their broad range of educational diversity and state-

level school choice polices that "decentralize education funding and allow more families greater access to a variety of learning options" (McDonald 2022, para 13).

The school choice programs, despite facing their own challenges, may cause challenges to traditional public schools—i.e., by impacting their funding levels, enrollment sizes, infrastructural support and even teacher layoffs (Burtis and Goulas 2023; Goldstein 2024). One may argue very well that competition between traditional public schools and their private choice program rivalries help raising the academic quality. Travis Pillow (2023) argued that there may not be a consensus on some fundamental beliefs about what education ought to look like. Nevertheless, the success of the current education experiment of microschools and other private school choices will only become evident in long run through such outcome measures of progression from college entrance and graduation to employment success and high occupational earnings. In the same vein, McShane wrote, "we will probably know sooner rather than later if this new world of alternative education environments is truly different from the panoply of promising innovations that have come before. There are reasons to believe ... Many passionate educators and parents are highly motivated to make them work for students. It's hard to think of a better first step" (McShane 2024, 13).

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