Let's Get Small: Microschools, Pandemic Pods, and the Future of Education in America

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Policymakers should assist families, especially low-income ones, who want to send their children to microschools by supporting education choice programs such as K–12 education savings accounts.

COVID-19 spurred a dramatic rise of microschools, or pandemic pods, as school districts remained closed and desperate parents explored alternative education options.

Microschools make it easier for parents to tailor individual learning needs of their children, and they are often less expensive than traditional private schools.

As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have conceived a sentiment or an idea that they want to produce in the world, they seek each other out; and when they have found each other, they unite. From then on, they are no longer isolated men, but a power one sees from afar, whose actions serve as an example; a power that speaks, and to which one listens.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*

COVID-19 Disruption

The COVID-19 pandemic upended American education, throwing schools first into an impromptu version of distance learning in the spring of 2020 followed by a summer beset by uncertainty then delayed and uneven reopenings in the fall.

Parents faced tough decisions about their children's education during the pandemic. In July, a poll found that more than 80 percent of parents of K–12 children were concerned about their children getting exposed to coronavirus at school, including 53 percent who were "very concerned."[1] Even those willing to send their children back to school had concerns about lack of recess or extra-curricular activities, social distancing in hallways, and students eating lunch alone at their desks.

Yet nearly seven in 10 parents expressed concern about their children falling behind academically—and for good reason.[2] Most schools struggled to provide students with a high-quality educational experience. According to researchers at Brown University and the University of Virginia, "students are likely to return in fall 2020 with approximately 63-68% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year and with 37-50% of the learning gains in math."[3] Researchers at McKinsey estimated that "black students may fall behind by 10.3 months, Hispanic students by 9.2 months, and low-income students by more than a year," thereby exacerbating existing achievement gaps.[4]

About half of parents reported that their children were more stressed, but about a third said they were less stressed.[5] Roughly equal numbers reported that their children were happier or less happy during the shut-down.[6] About seven in 10 parents also expressed concern that their children felt socially isolated.[7]

Additionally, many parents needed to get back to work. In a July survey, nearly two-thirds expressed concern about missing work if their children's schools were closed.[8] Those returning to a physical workplace could not leave younger children home alone, and many of those working from home found it difficult to simultaneously fulfill their job responsibilities and manage their children's distance learning—ensuring they make it to every Zoom class session, troubleshooting technical issues, answering questions about worksheets, providing lunch, and more. Half of parents surveyed listed "trying to keep a schedule or routine" as one of their top three challenges during the COVID-19 school shutdowns.[9]

Life Finds a Way: The Rise of Pandemic Pods

A significant portion of U.S. parents wanted their children to receive high-quality, in-person instruction but concluded that their local schools could not provide it. Faced with uncertainty about the fall of 2020, parents began spontaneously organizing themselves into microschools or "pandemic pods" (also called "parent pods" or "learning pods") during the summer of 2020.

Microschools and pods[10] are a 21st-century reimagining of the one-room schoolhouse. Although there are not yet universally accepted definitions of these terms, they generally refer to small clusters of families that pool resources and collaborate to educate their children.[11] Microschools tend to have about five to 15 students, although some self-declared microschools have as many as 150 students.[12] Microschools also tend to have an in-person instructor hired by the students' parents, and they are often affiliated with a larger network or organization, such as Acton Academy or Prenda School. Pods tend to be independently parent-led and even parent-taught, though many pods pool their resources together to hire instructors.[13]

Podding seems designed to meet the needs of families during the pandemic. Need the children out of the house during business hours? Pods have you covered. Want high-quality, in-person instruction? Pods can do that. Want your kids to have the opportunity to socialize while minimizing the risk of exposure to the coronavirus? Pods can do that, too.

Interest in microschooling and podding has skyrocketed in recent months. The "Pandemic Pods—Main" Facebook group grew to about 40,000 members over the summer and spawned countless local chapters and imitators. In Arizona, the Prenda microschool network more than tripled in size during the COVID-19 school shutdowns, adding more than 1,000 students in under three weeks toward the end of the summer.[14]

Pandemic pods make for a textbook case of spontaneous order. Friedrich Hayek noted that spontaneous order results from human actions, not from human design. No person, authority, or single organization created or is remotely in control of the pods. Pandemic pods came about through the voluntary actions and associations of people in a decentralized fashion. This trend seemed to appear from nowhere, but trailblazers had in fact been laying the groundwork for this trend for decades.

Microschooling Before the Age of COVID-19

Deliberately small schools were a growing trend even before the pandemic. The advent of homeschool co-ops made homeschooling more accessible to a broader group of families—in particular families in need of custodial care. Co-ops can be organized around academics, social time, the arts, activities, crafts, service work, projects, or some combination of these factors.[15] Over time, the line between a homeschool co-op and a small private school began to blur.

Wired magazine documented the rising popularity of homeschooling in Silicon Valley in a 2015 article that featured a Silicon Valley systems

engineer dad and a feminist blogger mom who created a network of "hacker-spaces" for children. "The world is changing. It's looking for people who are creative and entrepreneurial, and that's not going to happen in a system that tells kids what to do all day," Samantha Cook, the Silicon Valley homeschool mom, told *Wired*. "So how do you do that? Well if the system won't allow it, as the saying goes: If you want something done right, do it yourself."[16]

They were far from alone. "The one-room schoolhouse, that symbol of rural American education that dates back to the earliest days of the Colonial era, might be on the verge of making a comeback," *Education Week* wrote in 2016. They defined *microschools* as "150 students in grades K-12; multiple ages learn together in a single classroom; teachers act more as guides than lecturers; there's a heavy emphasis on digital and project-based learning; and small class sizes, combined with those other factors, make for a highly personalized education."[17]

Education analyst Justin C. Cohen observed in *Education Next*:

Education futurists have predicted the disintegration of the 19th-century model of American schooling for many years, but the barriers to that transformation have been limited by both the intransigence of the current system and a lack of imagination about what might replace it. Micro-schooling and its teacher-led, entrepreneurial spirit might solve both of these problems, by evading the old habits, sclerotic bureaucracies, cultural biases against experimentation, antiquated labor arrangements, and low tolerance for risk that prevail in traditional schools.[18]

A small but growing number of families have found "do it yourself" education very appealing. The families featured in the 2015 *Wired* article could have easily enrolled their children in district schools and supplemented their children's education with ample private enrichment activities—but they preferred the microschool approach to enrichment activities, which they were able to do not only because of their financial capacity but also because their time was freed from the scheduling constraints of a traditional school.

Examples of Microschooling

In their 1978 book *Education by Choice*, civil rights icons Jack Coons and Stephen Sugarman of the University of California-Berkley envisioned a radically different education system than the one-size-fits-all zip-code-assignment model:

> To us, a more attractive idea is matching up a child and a series of individual instructors who operate independently from one another. Studying reading in the morning at Ms. Kay's house, spending two afternoons a week learning a foreign language in Mr. Buxbaum's electronic laboratory, and going on nature walks and playing tennis the other afternoons under the direction of Mr. Phillips could be a rich package for a ten-year-old. Aside from the educational broker or clearing house which, for a small fee (payable out of the grant to the family), would link these teachers and children, Kay, Buxbaum, and Phillips need have no organizational ties with one another. Nor would all children studying with Kay need to spend time with Buxbaum and Phillips; instead some would do math with Mr. Feller or animal care with Mr. Vetter.[19]

Some microschool groups run microschool networks united by a common pedagogical approach. Acton Academies—which began in 2009 in Austin, Texas, and now operate over 180 microschools in the United States and abroad—blend technology-based learning with Socratic discussion and project-based learning with an emphasis on apprenticeships.[20] Acton Academies emphasize a "hero's journey" whereby each student is encouraged to think about problems to solve. Prenda microschools focus on student-directed learning organized around three "modes"—Conquer, Collaborate, and Create—during which students make progress in core academic subjects, learn to work together, and do projects related to STEM, history, the arts, and more.[21] Wildflower Schools provide a Montessori approach in small, teacher-led schools that combines elements of institutional and homeschooling.[22]

Other players in the do-it-yourself education space—such as Cottage-Class, Friendly Minds, Selected for Families, and SchoolHouse—operate more like the education brokers foreseen by Coons and Sugarman—an Airbnb for education. They provide platforms that connect families to verified instructors but leave it to them to work out the details. CottageClass allows parents to connect with a variety of tutors, camps, microschools, and other education service providers.[23] SchoolHouse has even facilitated the creation of microschools of varying religious affiliations.[24]

One of the Acton Academies operates of a larger (but still small) microschool called Workspace in rural Connecticut. Workspace occupies a red building in a rural Connecticut business park and has 130 K–12 courses taught mostly by parents. Workspace more closely resembles a one-stop education shop (also foreseen by Coons and Sugarman), housing not only lectures and workshops but also a co-working space and a business incubator. Workspace has a starting price of $3,500 per student and $1,500 per

family for additional students. Parents, meanwhile, run businesses from the co-working space in between having lunch with their kids (made in the Workspace kitchen) and possibly teaching classes. Workspace students work in a self-directed fashion to shape their own education, approaching education like building a playlist of classes and experiences.

These few examples barely scratch of the surface of the various micro-schooling configurations that currently exist and how they might operate in the future.

What Microschools Offer Students and Parents

Flexibility, Customization, and Academic Quality. Large schools with large class sizes tend to teach to the median student. That might work for some or even most students, but inevitably there will be some students who are struggling to keep up while other students are left under-challenged. This is especially true when schools are organized according to "Carnegie units," in which students are grouped primarily by age, not ability.

Microschools, by contrast, make it easier to tailor the pace of instruction to the individual learning needs of specific students. Instead of "seat time," the focus is on attaining competence or mastery of a given skill or content area before moving on to the next unit. Some children might speed ahead while others stay working on a concept or skill a while longer. Each student progresses at his or her own pace, eliminating the stress of falling behind or the boredom of being held back. And if one approach does not seem to be working for a student, the smaller class size makes it easier to change direction and try something else.

The competency-based approach recognizes not only that students tend not to move at the same pace as their peers across all subjects but also that their pace can vary within subjects. A student who is relatively behind her peers in language arts may be relatively advanced in math. Moreover, even within math, she may take a relatively long time to fully grasp one concept but later quickly and easily understands others. In each case, the smaller class size makes it easier for the instructor to adjust the pacing and peda-gogy to the needs of the child.

As noted above, the Prenda school day is typically organized around three categories of engagement: conquer, collaborate, and create. In con-quer mode, the learners set daily goals for mastery in basic skills, such as reading, writing, math, and other core subjects. The students use various online learning programs, including Khan Academy, No Red Ink, and Mys-tery Science to build competency, and the Prenda software helps to track

their progress against their personal goals. In create mode, the learners work on individual projects, while collaborate mode emphasizes group projects, Socratic group discussions, and critical thinking and reasoning skills in core subject areas. The Prenda software buttresses these activities by offering resources and a structured framework for the guides as well as tools and transparency for students and parents.[25]

Beyond the core academic subjects, microschools allow students to explore skills and subjects that are not found in most schools. Sometimes they even partner with local artists or other experts for specialized instruction, whether in the form of one-off experiences or extended training, such as painting, glassblowing, woodworking, botany, ballet, robotics, martial arts, and so much more.

The small class size also makes the microschool more mobile. Field trips are much easier when the entire school can pack into a minivan or two, so microschools can take greater advantage of art, history, and science museums; famous landmarks, war memorials, and historical sites; theaters and music halls; botanical gardens and state parks; and so on. Researchers have found that field trips such as these lead to higher levels of tolerance, empathy, content knowledge, and critical thinking.[26]

Affordability. As with their pedagogical approaches, microschools can vary significantly in terms of cost. At the high end are some of the pods highlighted by *The New York Times*, like Portfolio School, Hudson Lab School, and Red Bridge School, that cost $2,500 per month ($25,000 per 10-month academic year).[27] Although they offer financial aid and cost less per pupil than New York City's district schools ($28,928 in 2019[28]), these options are out of reach for most parents.

Most microschools, however, are much more affordable because they do not require expensive buildings and large staffs. Tuition at most Acton Academies ranges from about $4,000 to $10,000.[29] Microschools can operate in a variety of different environments. Many operate out of living rooms, but others operate in storefronts, empty church classrooms, libraries, offices, indoor playgrounds, outdoors at local parks, American Legion halls, and even empty classrooms at closed-down district schools. During the pandemic, some have opened in closed-down restaurants or play areas that might otherwise host children's birthday parties.

What Microschools Offer Educators

Increased Job Satisfaction. The greater freedom and flexibility afforded by the microschool model is attractive to educators as well as

families. In 2014, after 12 years of teaching in district schools, Ana Garcia left teaching in Miami's district over frustration with her professional treatment and with the education provided to her child who has special needs. Today she runs a microschool for children with disabilities, enabled in part by Florida's Gardiner Scholarship Education Savings Account program. Like many teachers, Garcia had lost her willingness to work in a bureaucratic system, but microschooling rekindled her love of teaching. "My favorite thing to hear," Garcia stated in an interview, "is, 'Wow miss, no one has ever taught me the way you have, or explained things the way you do.'"[30]

In 2019, an Arizona radio host interviewed a 44-year veteran of public school teaching about the problems with education. The main problem, the teacher explained, was not money but that "the *joy* has been *strangled* out of the profession."[31]

The most recent staffing survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that only 12 percent of district school teachers reported having a high degree of autonomy.[32] The 61 percent of teachers who felt they had a low level of autonomy reported being dissatisfied with their jobs at five times the rate of those who perceived a high level of autonomy. Nearly half of low-autonomy teachers said they would be "unlikely to choose teaching again" if given the chance, compared to about a quarter of high-autonomy teachers. It is no wonder the percentage of college freshmen interested in education dropped by more than 50 percent between 2006 and 2016.[33]

Teachers crave autonomy—the freedom to teach children the way they believe children should be taught. There is no data yet on the satisfaction of microschool instructors, but if the NCES data are any indication, then the high degree of autonomy afforded by the microschool model should produce high levels of teacher satisfaction as well.

More Money, Lower Barriers to Entry. Teachers are even finding that they can earn more money despite teaching fewer students. A microschool instructor charging $1,000 per month per child for 10 months with a class of 10 children would earn $100,000 a year—considerably above the national average of about $61,000.[34] A teacher from Broward County, Florida, reported that she was earning more money teaching a microschool with only four students than she had earned previously at a private school.[35]

Microschools also present lower barriers to entry for edu-preneurs looking to open one. Traditional private or charter schools often require millions of dollars to purchase a building of sufficient size, not to mention the small army of teaching and administrative staff, lawyers, cafeteria workers, nurses, bus drivers, and so on. Microschools often just require a single instructor, a small room with suitable furniture, and some laptops.

Accessibility

Private tutors and microschools do cost money—raising the question of inclusion for low-income and disadvantaged students. More than half of the schools surveyed by Bellwether reported that fewer than 25 percent of the students the schools served were students of color or students whose family income qualifies them for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program. "Similar to other private schools, microschools' goal to serve middle- and low-income families is in tension with financial sustainability," Bellwether reported.[36] However, parents creating pandemic pods have made efforts to include disadvantaged students—such as covering the costs for low-income students to participate.

Public policy can also address these concerns through mechanisms allowing students access to funding. Private choice programs focusing on disadvantaged student populations could help low-income students and students with special needs afford micro-schools.

For instance, Florida has two scholarship programs for students with special needs—the McKay Scholarship Program (a voucher program for students with disabilities) and the Gardiner Scholarship program (an education savings account program for children with specific disabilities). In addition, Florida has the nation's largest private choice program (the Florida Corporate Scholarship Tax Credit) for children in low-income families. In combination, these programs give more than 100,000 Florida students the opportunity to attend private schools.

The blog *RedefinED*, for instance, profiled a highly appealing microschool in Florida called the BB International School. Of the 50 students, 16 used private choice programs—tax credit scholarships, McKay vouchers, or Gardiner education savings accounts. "We could be a tony private school," said founder and head of school Julia Musella. "But we make a deliberate effort to keep it affordable. This is a community school."[37]

Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account program likewise makes eligible children with disabilities, as well as children attending low-performing public schools, Native American children living on tribal lands, the children of active-duty military personnel, and children in or adopted through foster care. Private school choice programs in these and more than two dozen other states could allow disadvantaged families to access private microschools.

Alternatively, district-school distance learning statutes can eliminate costs for families. In Arizona, Prenda operates schools through district, charter, and private choice mechanisms. Some Prenda students enroll in a charter or district school, which subcontracts to Prenda. These students pay no tuition—their microschool education is entirely covered by public funds.

Public schools that receive public funding for students to engage in distance learning could enroll students participating in pandemic pods. These funds could be used to cover the cost of the in-person teacher and the costs for computer and Internet access devices. New York's Success Academies during the spring of 2020 combined live broadcast lectures, digital small group discussions led by teachers, and remote tutoring efforts.[38] If the small group and tutoring efforts were assumed by the in-person pod teacher/guide, a new path to scaling high-demand schools could be created. This new model would not require costly facility debt or construction. Moreover, for oversubscribed charter schools that are required to hold enrollment lotteries, the pod option could be offered to both enrollment lottery winners and losers. In other words, high-demand schools need no longer be limited by their physical buildings.[39] Indeed, some school districts in Massachusetts are already heading down this path:

> Boston City Councilor Julia Mejia hopes the pod she's helping create for her fifth-grade daughter and other children of color will challenge Boston Public Schools to better serve families.
>
> The learning pod, which will be run by the nonprofit Collaborative Parent Leadership Action Network and be free for participants, received $235,000 from The Shlomo Fund, a local charitable donor group, to hire five staffers to instruct and support 20 students in grades two through eight, Mejia said. The students, all Black and Latino, will meet every day at the Lena Park Community Center in Dorchester, but remain enrolled in their public schools through the schools' all-remote learning plan. They will follow along with support from the pod, which will also provide before-school and after-school programs....
>
> "We've never had an opportunity to do something for ourselves," Mejia said. "It's empowering."[40]

The *Boston Globe* reports that Meija is helping parents start similar pods for low-income families in other Boston neighborhoods.

Likewise, the City of North Las Vegas recently launched Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy, which provides children in grades K–8 "online homeschooling lessons blended with live in-room support from a trained guide or learning assistant, along with enrichment and extracurricular activities during a highly-structured instructional day."[41] The learning pods each contain up to 18 students in grades K–8 and cost only $2 a day. Plus, needs-based scholarships are available.

Civil society is also rallying to make microschooling more equitable. Here are just a few examples of organizations working to provide access to microschools or online learning options:

- **Community Learning Sites by the Mind Trust (Indianapolis, Indiana)** provide "e-learning support and supervision for students of working families at ten locations across Central Indianapolis" during weekdays at no charge to families.[42]

- **Homeschool Pod Grants from the National Parents Union** are offered to "parents, families, parent-led parent advocacy organizations and community organizations serving parents and families in amounts ranging from $5,000–$25,000" to provide learning environments for low-income and other disadvantaged kids during the pandemic.[43]

- **Learning Pods (New York and San Francisco)**, in addition to serving as a hub for forming pods, provide scholarships and partners with foundations and schools to make the pods as accessible as possible.[44]

- **Oakland REACH City-Wide Virtual Hub** provides families a variety of "research-based, effective instruction and learning resources" at no charge via its Literacy Liberation Center and the National Summer School Initiative.[45]

- **Stronger Together ATX (Austin, Texas)** connects low-income families with pods that are willing to accept students at little or no charge.[46] It is also raising money to support disadvantaged podding families and working with local businesses to provide free space for pods or to offset childcare costs for their employees.

- **Umi-verse (New Jersey)** connects families looking for microschool instructors/tutors with individuals willing to provide online or in-person instruction or tutoring.

Equity is a concern, but it is not insurmountable. Policymakers can ensure that low-income families can also access microschools and learning pods via their local district schools, charter schools, or education savings accounts.

Conclusion: Microschools as Permissionless Innovation

American K–12 education has seen decades of increasing per pupil costs but relatively little in the way of improved academic outcomes. Politics has played a large role in this precipitous decline in the productivity of spending in education, but not even a politically induced stasis lasts forever.

Microschools arose through "permissionless innovation"—families did not ask anyone's permission to create small schools.[47] They just did it. Likewise, when faced with the prospect of another lost semester of impromptu distance learning, families responded spontaneously, organizing to form pods. As detailed above, this has the potential to be greatly beneficial to teachers, students, and families, but that will not likely stop politically powerful forces from attempting to outlaw them. Many of the same people who raise equity concerns regarding pandemic pods will likely oppose efforts to empower low-income families to access microschools.

There is simply too much for both teachers and families to lose to allow such efforts to succeed. Children have diverse educational needs, aptitudes, and interests, so families want a variety of schooling options—including a focus on STEM, drama and the arts, classical education, self-directed education, and more. Likewise, educators desire more freedom and flexibility to teach children the way they believe students should be taught. Microschools provide fertile soil for these diverse and innovative education options to blossom and flourish—so long as policymakers do not get in the way. Indeed, policymakers should help low-income and disadvantaged families gain access to microschools via their local district schools, charter schools, and education savings accounts.

Microschooling could revolutionize the nation's K–12 education system, providing a wide array of high-quality, affordable learning options that can meet the individual learning needs of each child. This form of education should not be the exclusive privilege of the few but an option for all families.

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Endnotes

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