ERN EDUCATION *Reform* NOW

AN INTRODUCTION TO MICROSCHOOLS

Promise, Practice, and Policy

Imagine a school where a cooking lesson turns into a deep dive on history, geography, and culture and then sparks the creation of a student-run farm. That's everyday learning at Colossal Academy, a microschool tucked into a Fort Lauderdale neighborhood. Founded by Shiren Rattigan, a former public school teacher disillusioned with the one-size-fits-all model, Colossal challenges a familiar criticism of schools that adopt this approach: that hands-on projects come at the expense of academic rigor. Instead, the school's model is built on the opposite premise. By personalizing core academics and allowing students to move through material more efficiently, microschools like Colossal create additional time in the school day—time that can be used for enrichment experiences that deepen students' understanding of academic content rather than replace it.

As journalist Ron Matus writes, Rattigan's students don't just study food, they grow it—leasing land, building compostable toilets, and discovering that education can be hands-on, inspiring and still focus on academic achievement. Colossal Academy is part of a growing movement. Microschools like this are sprouting up across the country, serving an estimated 1 to 2 million students as their primary mode of education.[1]

What are Microschools?

Microschools are small, innovative, community-based learning environments that serve a limited number of students—often anywhere from 5 to 100. They are designed to be more flexible, personalized, and innovative than traditional schools, often blending elements of homeschooling, private schooling, and modern educational approaches found in well-funded, high-quality traditional public schools.

Some key characteristics of microschools:

- **Small Size:** Classrooms and overall enrollment are intentionally kept small to allow for individualized attention.
- **Personalized Learning:** Instruction is tailored to each student's needs, interests, and pace.

- **Flexible Structure:** Microschools often mix age groups and adopt alternative, flexible schedules, and some use project-based learning, while others center AI in their programming.
- **Community Focus:** Many microschools are typically organized by licensed or formerly licensed educators, as well as parents, and local organizations, sometimes operating out of community centers, shared spaces, or homes.
- **Diverse Models:** Some are fully private schools, while others operate as homeschool co-ops, learning pods, or hybrid programs (mixing in-person and online instruction) and public schools.

Microschools recognize that learning and development can occur in diverse settings, reimagining the one-room schoolhouse while centering community assets such as local businesses, public institutions, and the natural environment to create learning models that leverage existing community strengths. While microschools vary in design, many function as learning hubs, providing core instruction while partnering with community organizations, other educational providers (e.g., tutoring services), and out-of-school-time program providers to extend learning experiences beyond the traditional classroom.

Who Runs Microschools?

Microschools are most often run by experienced educators, but many are also led by parents, education entrepreneurs, and community groups led by non-traditional educators with an interest in providing greater choice and opportunity to young people in their communities. While estimates vary slightly, a recent report released from the National Microschool Center indicates that approximately 54% of leaders were either currently or formerly licensed educators (35% currently licensed) and another 32% were unlicensed professional educators (such as Montessori educators). Microschool operators are also diverse. BIPOC operators comprise over 30% of microschool operators and are likely to grow in number.[2]

How are Microschools Classified?

A 2025 survey of 800 microschool operators conducted by the National Microschooling Center found that **53 percent** of microschools operate as learning centers serving children whose families follow their state's **homeschool requirements**. Approximately **30 percent** are classified as **nonpublic (private) schools** within their state's frameworks. The remaining schools are classified as public charter schools (5%), specific state-defined microschool categories (5%), or other hybrid models.

Microschools in the Public School System

In some states, districts have responded to parents' interest in microschools by creating some within the public school system.

One example of this is the Indiana Microschool Collaborative. It was started by the East Hancock school district, located about 30 miles outside of Indianapolis in rural Indiana. The collaborative was started in response to parents' demands for a more personalized education environment for their children. The school district applied to start the Collaborative through the Indiana Charter School Board and was granted a charter in 2025. The first three microschools are open for

the 2025-2026 school year. The Collaborative isn't the only public microschool network in the nation.

In Washington State, the Issaquah School District has implemented a district-led model by establishing microschools within existing school buildings. These microschools feature unique schedules, instructional approaches, and small student cohorts, while still enabling students to take part in courses and activities offered by the larger school. In 2022, a bill was proposed to advance the microschool sector in Washington. Though it ultimately did not pass, this bill may serve as a model for other states looking to expand public, small school options for students.

In Texas, the San Antonio School District is experimenting with microschools in low-income neighborhoods. In New Mexico, Altura Charter Schools function like microschools, even though they are legally considered a charter school. A microschooling company called Prenda, is working with school districts and charter school networks in multiple states to offer microschool-like environments for their students. As the microschool movement continues to gain momentum, we expect to see continued growth of these schools in local public education agencies.

Who Attends Microschools?

While comprehensive national data on microschool students is currently limited, existing reports indicate that these students come from diverse educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to a survey by the National Microschooling Center, microschools attract students from a variety of prior educational settings. Forty-three percent of current microschool students attended traditional, district-operated public schools for the majority of their educational career before joining a microschool. Homeschooling accounted for the second-largest group at 30 percent, while private schools and charter schools each represented 9 percent of students.[3] When looking at the socioeconomic background of microschool students, **a total of 39 percent of households are below the average income, with founders reporting that 63% of students entered their school two or more grades below proficiency.**

How Do Microschools Measure Impact?

To date, rigorous studies of microschool outcomes on student achievement and non-academic skills remain limited, in part because of the wide variation in state accountability policies regarding data collection and reporting. This gap presents an opportunity: microschools could help expand how we define and measure success, capturing a broader range of skills such as collaboration, critical-thinking, and resilience that young people need to thrive in adulthood.

Microschool operators typically assess student impact using a combination of approaches. The most common methods are observation-based reports, portfolios, and mastery-based assessments. Other measures include embedded assessments in learning tools and evaluation of non-academic or durable skills such as collaboration, communication, and empathy. Parent and student surveys administered at least twice per year, standardized assessments, and letter grades are also used, though less frequently.[4]

When it comes to academic outcomes, according to the 2025 report from the National Microschooling Center, one-third of microschool leaders monitor student performance using standardized norm-referenced or criterion-referenced assessments. Of the microschool leaders who track academic growth leaders report that 81 percent of students experience between one and two years of growth during one school year, with 16 percent experiencing between two and three years of growth, 2 percent experiencing less than one year of academic growth and 1 percent experiencing 3 or more years of growth.

Microschools *Centering Equity*

One of the organizing principles of many microschools is that traditional public schools in historically marginalized communities have consistently failed to provide students with high-quality educational opportunities, necessitating new approaches to organizing. These schools and networks aim to deliver relevant, engaging learning experiences for students who have long been underserved. Examples of these operators include Black Mothers Forum Microschools and For the Culture Homeschool. Some microschools also emerged in response to pandemic-related learning loss, combining recovery efforts with culturally relevant approaches that have successfully engaged diverse student populations.

Microschools *Policy*

Microschool operators sit in a unique space between homeschooling, private schooling, and charter schooling, so policy shapes how they can operate and grow. Based on recent reports and surveys of microschool founders, here are the most important policy areas to consider:

Regulatory Classification & Oversight

- Microschools often fall into a gray area. Some states classify them as private schools, others as homeschooling cooperatives, and a few as unregulated learning pods. Increasingly, districts are opening public microschools. How they are defined under state law will either constrain or enable their ability to grow.
- Licensing & Accreditation: Too much regulation can create barriers, while too little can limit access to public funding. Clear definitions help operators know where they stand.

Facilities & Zoning

- Microschools most often operate in non-traditional spaces: community centers, churches, homes, redesigned stores in strip malls or shared workspaces. Policies on zoning, occupancy, and building codes matter. States should pass flexible, size-appropriate rules that allow for microschools to exist in a variety of facilities and locations within communities.
- Health and Safety Rules: Fire codes, background checks, and child welfare compliance are important, but flexible application to small programs is often key to reducing administrative burden.

A prime example of a law that addressed these issues is Utah's Senate Bill 13. It defines both a home-based microschool and micro-education entity, allows them to operate in any zoning district, and regulates

them like tutoring centers rather than private schools.[5] Another example of a law that promotes education innovation and the expansion of microschools is Florida's HB1285. Signed into law in 2024, it allows microschools to work with religious organizations, community service organizations, museums, performing arts venues, theaters, cinemas and related organizations to use their facilities. The bill resulted in creating about 50,000 potential new locations in Florida where microschools can now operate.[6] On the public side, Getting Smart, an education innovation advocacy organization and technical assistance provider developed a public microschools playbook that discusses many of the policy challenges and opportunities regarding the establishment of public microschools across various policy contexts.

Building on these state-level innovations, federal policy through the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC) will offer an additional mechanism to support and scale these models by connecting funding directly to students. With the passing of the FSTC, new opportunities will exist for states that opt into the program by ensuring dollars can follow students to the learning environment that may better meet their needs. This means youth interested in attending private microschools will have access to public support, expanding options while ideally fueling innovation among providers. By lowering financial barriers and empowering families, FSTC may create the conditions for high-quality, student-centered models to flourish. States that embrace this approach will expand education options that may better address variation in student interests, learning styles, and support needs.

The Future of Microschools

There is no reason to believe that the demand for microschools will slow anytime soon. Data indicates that interest in them is on the rise, not only with parents who want a more-personalized learning environment for their children, but also with public school teachers who want to create a learning environment that is more aligned with their personal and professional goals. How impactful they are will be a function of federal, state, and local policy. Public officials will need to strike a balance between encouraging their growth and ensuring that all students receive a high-quality education.

References

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