



DESIGNING MICROSCHOOLS

Why Launching Small
Learning Environments
Is a Big Idea



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INTRODUCTION

New learning models, tools and strategies have made it easier to open very small schools of 15 to 150 students. These schools, often called microschoools, are small, innovative and nimble educational spaces and models that provide a more connected, personalized and relevant learning experience.

Microschoools may be full or part-time learning experiences for P-12 students. They can be organized as a school or as an academy or program within an existing school. They can be formed as a valuable and sustainable learning option, often meeting an unmet need or leveraging a community asset, or created as a short-term pilot prototyping a learning design for a larger system.

From the one room rural schoolhouses to urban experiments, there is a long history of very small schools. New digital learning tools made it easier to form microschoools that blend onsite and online learning in innovative ways. During the pandemic there was a surge in nanoschoools of 5-15 students organized around a learning service and the organization of private learning pods, often with 3-5 students and a tutor. This paper mentions these new developments but focuses on the larger, longer term trend of forming microschoools as valuable learning options and/or as a leadership strategy to initiate a change process.

Opening microschoools introduces new options into an ecosystem and with it comes the risk of inequity. How a microschoool is formed, the learners it seeks to serve and plans for scale all have implications for equity.

The opportunity to quickly create innovative new learning models in existing or overlooked places make microschoools an idea worth considering.

Why Start a Microschool?

There are two primary reasons to launch a microschoool. The first is the opportunity to create an innovative and valuable learning option. It could be for a group of students not well served by traditional schools (e.g., preschool, dropout recovery or career education). It could also be a new option leveraging a community asset such as a park, museum, business, or college. Given their small size, microschoools can be opened quickly in nontraditional spaces.

Microschools make learning personal. With unique themes, links to community and porous walls, they can ignite learning for students and innovation for districts. Psychologist Robin Dunbar's research suggests that most humans can manage about 150 friendships. When a school gets beyond that number, it becomes difficult for adults to keep track of the needs of individual students. Microschools embrace this constraint and stay small. Microschools typically rely on multi-age groupings and promote powerful sustained teacher-student relationships.

The smallness of microschools makes them more receptive to change. There is a shorter loop from idea to feedback to iteration. Teachers and students can try more things more often with lower stakes. By design, microschools also often require a thinner layer of administration. Teachers have more room to lead inside and outside their classroom. Wildflower Schools are 1-2 room (preschool and elementary) schools with the faculty both teaching and administering the school. By preserving a small scale, teacher-leaders are able to make day-to-day decisions that respond to the needs of the children and school-wide decisions that express their own vision in the context of the needs of children, families and themselves.

Creativity loves constraints – and the most innovative microschool teachers leverage a mix of learning sources beyond themselves – other students, parents, mentors, tutors and of course software. This provides teachers with richer data on student progress that they can realistically process given the number of students they teach.

Khan Lab School structures their model with mixed-age settings to foster collaboration and authentic relationships rather than competition. Students remain in these cohort groups for multiple years and academic progression is decoupled from age.

Microschools like NOLA Micro Schools can be housed in creative spaces that are embedded in the community – museums, maker spaces, etc. This affords students an opportunity to connect with a wider range of experts in all fields. Students can more easily take on real-world projects and build relationships that can turn into internships. Microschools have the agility to connect with the community and leverage the power of place. Through authentic community-connected experiences, students learn to collaborate, think critically and solve complex challenges. Learners become invested in their communities and ready for further education and entrepreneurship.

Place-based learning takes advantage of geography to make learning authentic, meaningful, and engaging for learners. Place-based microschools like those supported by Teton Science Schools' Place Network provide an immersive learning experience that connects students to local heritage, cultures and landscapes. They suggest that thousands of rural towns across America could open (or reopen) microschools in an effort to create new vitality.

There are 167 autonomous Teacher-Powered Schools that are intentionally small and operated by teachers often acting in a cooperative model. Two-thirds operate in districts or networks while a third are independent charters. They illustrate the potential for a very small school to operate without traditional administrative staffing models.

When Big Picture Learning was getting started, the Rhode Island commissioners opened a microschool on the first floor of the education department's office (see feature). Microschools can also take advantage of community spaces including libraries, museums, zoos, or corporate partners. Portal, a new Los Angeles microschool network will be housed in business locations.

Microschools as Change Levers

The second reason to launch very small learning environments is to accelerate a change initiative. Microschools and learning pilots are a research and development strategy that can quickly investigate new possibilities, illustrate new learning experiences, and distribute change leadership roles across the organization.

Microschools can be used to leverage teacher leadership. For districts, microschools can be the key part of district transformation. These agile structures can invite teachers that are ready to move quickly and create valuable learning options and pictures of the future for a school district.

Microschools can be developed within existing schools to jumpstart innovation. In Kettle Moraine School District (KMSD), three new microschools were formed within a comprehensive high school to create options, leverage teacher leadership and kickstart transformation. They featured interdisciplinary studies with five or six deep dive inquiries each year. They started with 25-60 learners in a few classrooms and six years later served 40% of the student population (see podcast). KMSD also split an elementary school in half to create KM Explore, a project- and place-based pilot program.



Acton Academy, Austin Texas

BEGINNING WITH VISION & PURPOSE

As you prepare to create and design a microschool, a shared vision is a critical step, whether this is done within a team or with a larger stakeholder group. A vision will guide the communication, the design challenges and learning model, it may even identify factors that could impact the implementation. The vision also translates community needs into a clear path forward.

The communication of the vision will be the introduction to your community and ultimately support and sustain the enthusiasm for the work ahead. It is vital to be clear and intentional about how this work is communicated.

Community Support and Awareness

When planning to engage community stakeholders and partners, know the landscape before you start the communication campaign. It may also be helpful for leadership and staff to personalize an elevator speech to promote the vision of the microschool. Ask about needs and challenges in the community. Listen widely before sharing a vision. Plan stakeholder nights that invite learners, families and community members to learn about the microschool and encourage honest conversations to build understanding. Invite, gather and respond to stakeholder feedback. When sharing about the learning model of the microschool, use common language and provide examples.

To gather community feedback, consider guiding constituents through questions such as:

- What challenges and opportunities will our young people face as adults?
- What skills, knowledge and dispositions might be needed to face these challenges?
- What might a learning environment look like that can effectively help young people develop proficiency in these areas?
- When a young person graduates from your microschool, who will they be? What about ten years after they graduate?

Microschools may also elicit many questions around specific logistics and experiences. Preparing answers to these questions ahead of time will help with clarity of vision.

- Why a microschool and why now?
- What will the process look like?
- How long will it take, when will it open?
- Who will be involved in the design, the delivery and learning community?
- How will students be involved in the process?
- How will the community be informed and involved?
- What does the typical day of your students/teachers/parents look like?
- Where can more information be shared?
- Will there be more opportunities for enrollment? Other schools?



LENS, Kearney SD

In building momentum for a microschool, harnessing the power of stakeholders to support a thriving community will lead to successful development. Including guardians as engaged members of their child's school, in whatever way fits their time and abilities, is also a way to keep the support alive and truly reflect the community the microschool serves.

Defining Purpose

Identifying the why or defining what problem you are trying to solve should be the guiding purpose that supports the vision for the microschool. Start with questions that get at the heart of the design.

- What is the problem trying to be solved and how does it support learning goals?
- Who is intended to be served and how will this structure occur?
- Where will equitable practices be supported?

LEADING FOR INNOVATION

Very small schools often can't support a traditional leadership structure. They can use a combination of strategies to support teachers in an administratively efficient model. Staffing for School Within a School (SWS) structure allows for families to still be able to engage in choice electives that can be for 1-2 classes. This also allows for MS teachers to have a common prep for planning. Another option can be setting aside a portion of the day or the full day for the microschool experience. These options impact prep time and alignment of teachers schedules.

Leadership Structures & Operations

Different approaches with implied staffing can include the following:

- **Teacher-led schools** distribute leadership across a partnership (see teacherpowered.org)
- **Shared leadership** between several schools; 2-3 schools that share an administrator
- **Student-centered schools** encourage self-directed learning with personalized and competency-based learning progressions.

School districts and networks operating large schools often have standard staffing models which include several leaders and a complement of administrative and support staff. These models are not relevant for microschools which require lean staffing for sustainability. Systems implementing a microschool as an option or part of a change strategy may require an exemption or waiver from one or more employee groups to utilize a lean staffing model.

Three unique features of microschool staffing include:

- **Generalists:** microschool staff members often play multiple roles. Leadership and administrative roles are often shared among several staff members with a head teacher on partial release.
- **Partners:** some learning and administrative support services — including special education, extracurricular activities, back office and tech support services — are provided by partners or by a network. Some microschools share a principal with another campus.
- **Multiage:** very small schools make extensive use of multiage grouping and have few if any dedicated grade level teachers.

As the learning model and staffing model are developed they should be codified as shared commitments among the team. Early transparency of these agreements set the foundation for the design and implementation work to follow.

Policy & Practice

Public microschoools that are set up within a school (SWS) can often be more of an approach to education than a specific governance model. School practice may qualify for the 8th grade choice of academies that are currently in practice. If there will be several microschoools, a board policy is likely needed for an initial start-up to align to the high school career academies.

Policy can support innovation and growth as well as a priority to focus on ways to ensure growth in microschoools and encourage equitable access. These policies can involve changes to budgeting, releasing hours of in school learning, some curricular flexibility and non-grade/age- based cohorts.

Public microschoool policies that support equitable practice may have language like “does not establish undue barriers to students applying for enrollment ... that have the effect of excluding students based on socioeconomic, family, or language background, prior academic performance, special education status or parental involvement.” If working to ensure an inclusive and diverse learning community, microschoools policy can contain language similar to “Must be open to any child who resides within the school district” to “Enrollment decisions shall be made in a nondiscriminatory manner.” More examples of [federal guidelines](#) are shown below.

NON-DISCRIMINATION

“...responsibility and commitment of the school to adhere to essential public education obligations, including admitting and serving all eligible students so long as space is available, and not expelling or counseling out students except as pursuant to a legal discipline policy approved by the authorizer”

PROTECTIONS FOR STUDENT RIGHTS

“Ensuring that schools provide access and services to students with disabilities as required by federal and state law”

“Ensuring that schools provide access to and appropriately serve other special populations of students, including English learners, homeless students and gifted students, as required by federal and state law”

Building a Team

Aligning teacher recruitment to the vision of the school and learning goals (sometimes called a Portrait of a Graduate, discussed below) can also help with the public facing messaging. A small Los Angeles school, [Odyssey STEM Academy](#), uses a multi-layered approach with a sample unit, teacher peer activity and a panel where half the questions are known ahead of time.

Microschools may also include an intentional approach toward beliefs like social justice or a learner profile, this can also lead to educator profiles. Thoughtful structures for professional learning like the [Summit Learning Onboarding Experience](#) may also be relevant depending on the school design (the Summit Learning platform is often adopted in a pilot or microschool environment).

Educator Competencies

As a microschool begins to take shape, finding teachers (or coaches and guides) that have the skill and mindset to be part of the team is critical. While building the learning model (see next section) keep in mind the parallel construction of competencies needed by adults in order to deliver on the promise.

The [Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Environments](#), created by KnowledgeWorks in partnership with the [Council of Chief State School Officers](#), is an educator development resource that is part of the [Students at the Center](#) resource library.

A Race to the Top recipient, [Lindsay Unified School District](#) partnered with Summit Learning to produce a series of resources, one of which is the [Educator Mindsets & Site Leader Mindsets](#) which includes an appendix and example exercises.

Assembling competencies into Profiles of an Educator or Educator Profiles can define, help identify and then train teachers in a holistic manner. These developed profiles can also invite transparency of expectations for microschool teachers that potentially align with a district learner profile or Graduate Profile. A two-part series, [Creating a Vision for Great Teachers](#), explores this concept.

Examples of district Educator Profiles from Texas include: [San Angelo ISD](#), [Glenbard 87](#), [Northwest Independent SD](#), [Red Oak Independent SD](#), and [College Station ISD](#).

DESIGNING PURPOSEFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

The flexibility that microschoools provide allows for innovation in the learning model to build purposeful learning experiences. When deciding on a learning model, this should align to the district graduate profiles or the vision of what you want learners to be able to do when they transition out.

What is purposeful learning? It is learning that allows every young person to reach their full potential in a manner that is relevant to them and draws out the agency for them to make a difference.

Some microschoools may focus on project-based learning, or a blended model of online curriculum and in-class activities, or a competency based personalized learning model. Almost universally, modern microschoools are personalized in some manner. Increasingly, student voice and choice has become important with some microschoools building co-authored learning opportunities.

Portrait of a Graduate

Student learning goals, often called a Portrait of a Graduate, guide the instructional framework and the learning model. All tools and structures should be chosen carefully to support student growth towards the graduate profile. Numerous examples exist to support this work, however, the key is to ensure that it remains an active presence in the learner experience.

Learning Model

A Portrait of a Graduate helps guide the articulation of Design Principles (core philosophy of the program) and Learning Model (the tools and processes that support the Design Principles). Design Principles guide the Instructional Framework. The Design Principles from EL Education schools and XQ Superschoools offer examples. A new book offers a blueprint for elementary and secondary education. Design Principles for Schoools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action was published by Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children in partnership with the Forum for Youth Investment and in association with the SoLD Alliance.

Learning models provide specific guidance on how the Design Principles should be implemented. They often include approaches such as social-emotional learning, competency-based assessment, project-based learning, inquiry, design-thinking, place-based learning and personalized learning. [Every school has a learning model](#) and microschools are uniquely positioned to assemble a learning model that is nimble, responsive, learning-science based and relevant to their community.

Instructional Framework

One of the benefits of a microschool is the nimble adaptation of curriculum to meet the needs of all learners. Setting some parameters around adaptation and assessment expectations will be important to know up front and in some cases an instructional model may be appropriate and may allow for some flexibility with district curricular support as well as instruction and assessment.

This innovative work can also involve a full instructional framework that is similar to the [5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning](#), from the Center for Educational Leadership, University of Washington. The collaboration of Lindsay Unified School District and Summit Schools resulted in the [Instructional Look Fors](#) resource. The microschool may follow the district learning model but have supplemental design focus, such as Socratic Structures, Maker Spaces or The Tinkering Studio's [Learning Dimensions of Making and Tinkering](#).

Learning Platforms & Resources

The consideration of a learning platform can help lay a foundation for personalized learning but it must align with the instructional pedagogy of the microschool or be customizable as needs change. Learning platforms can also extend the learning community outside of the microschool for learners to work together and access needed support. An example of a private microschool on a learning platform from Wonderschool is [Little Elm STEAM Academy](#). Some learning platforms, such as [HeadRush](#), allow teachers to develop engaging online content and for learners to be able to follow their learning progress toward personalized learning goals.

Technology can make it easier than ever to access quality learning materials. The inclusion of such materials can provide a low-cost or no-cost alternative to high-priced resource sets or packaged materials. Educators are contributing to the wealth of open education resources available online. The [Texas Learning Exchange](#) has recently released a library of open educational resources that are searchable by content and level. [Khan Academy](#) is another example of an open education resource. Open educational resources often allow for anytime learning and can either be used to complement classroom instruction or combined into an engaging, open 'textbook' for a course.

BUILDING HIGH-IMPACT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Once a purposeful set of learning experiences have been developed, it is important to match the learning environment with the learning experiences. While in-district microschoools can be constrained by regulation, space, etc., significant advances in structures and operations support innovation in building high-impact learning environments.

In starting a microschoool within a district, schools can be granted policy and contract waivers for unique curriculum, staffing, schedule and calendar plans. They may be able to, but not required to, use district tools and resources. For more flexibility from state regulations, microschoools can apply for charter status (as they did in Kettle Moraine) where startup funding is available. A new or existing nonprofit organization could also offer support across a series of microschoools.

School Design

Microschoools are small by design. They typically enroll less than 150 students and can be created in shared spaces. When considering space, it is important to keep in mind what the students will be doing during the school day and when they will be doing it. Considerations include:

- **Blended** personalized and self-directed learning with competency-based progressions organized in grade span groups. Each of these features can stretch staffing ratios and encourage learner agency.
- **Tech support**: Common learning platform, adaptive learning applications, mobile access devices and support services.
- **Professional learning**: Learning model specific asynchronous learning opportunities resulting in microcredentials, weekly job-like video calls and periodic network learning events.
- **Administrative services**: Marketing, enrollment, purchasing and accounting.
- **Connections and networks** to mental health services, family services (food, clothing, housing employment).

The next two sections will show examples of the two reasons for creating microschoools — valuable learning options and as a change leadership strategy

Valuable Learning Options

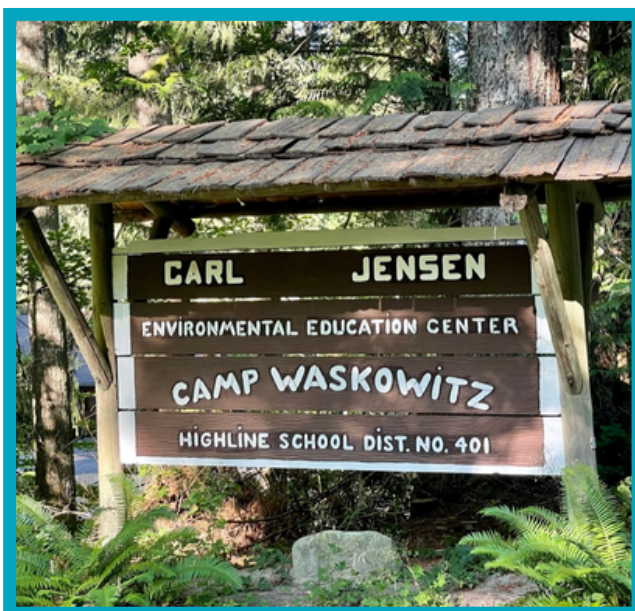
There are several structures and governance models that make Microschools a valuable and sustainable option.

Networks of small public schools: A successful microschool could serve as an anchor for a network of schools across the district for neighborhood options. Examples of microschool networks that serve more students at scale:

- [Big Picture Learning](#) is a network of 65 small US schools that focus on internships.
- [Place Network](#) is a collaborative of a dozen place-based public rural microschools supported by [Teton Science Schools](#) (see [feature](#) and [podcast](#)).
- [Teacher-Powered Schools](#) consists of 167 schools in 19 states (with state networks in Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Wisconsin).

Schools within schools: Academy models of small groups of learners grouped by a vision, set of design principles and learning model existing within a larger school:

- [P-Tech](#) and [early college](#) academies in Dallas ISD are microschool pathways to college credit (up to an AA degree) while in high school.
- [EPiCC Academy](#) at East Hall High in Gainesville, Georgia, is a student-centered alternative for ninth and tenth graders (see [feature](#)).
- Learning and Exploring through Nature and Science ([LENS](#)) in the [Kearney School District](#) north of Kansas City is a grade 3-5 school located in a junior high and focused on active paleontology. (see [podcast](#))



Camp Waskowitz

Alternative schools: many districts operate small or microschools serving students not successful in traditional environments.

[Waskowitz Environmental Leadership and Service \(WELS\)](#) is an environmentally-focused alternative school operated by [Highline Public Schools](#) located at a mountain camp east of Seattle. Students learn leadership skills and environmental science while supporting the operation of outdoor education program at Camp Waskowitz.

Public charter schools: Some charter schools are intentionally small or micro. [Koshkonong Trails School](#) in Wisconsin and [Pinnacles Prep](#) in Washington provide examples of charter microschoools. [Prenda](#) is a virtual charter school network in Arizona that supports family organized pods.

Independent schools: Dozens of intentionally small independent schools use a variety of strategies for scaled impact. Examples include:

- [One Stone](#) is a student-centered design-focused school in Boise, Idaho (see [feature](#), [podcast](#), [conference](#), and [movie](#)).
- [NuVu Studio](#) is a design-focused school in Cambridge, Massachusetts (see [feature](#)).
- [LEADPrep](#) is two secondary microschoools in the Seattle area where young people develop the confidence and ability to lead.

Some Independent microschoools operate in networks. Examples include:

- [Acton Academy](#) is a global network of 200+ private microschoools (see [feature](#)). Members include The Forest School in Fayetteville, Georgia and NOLA Micro Schools.
- [Wildflower](#) is a network of montessori schools.
- [Fusion Academy](#) is a national network of small private schools that feature 1:1 tutorials.
- [StreetSchool Network](#) helps faith-based communities give students a second chance at educational success.

Private homeschoools: service providers such as [SchoolHouse](#) and [Microschool Revolution](#) provide business support for these learning pods.

Change Leadership Examples

Strategies tested and exhibited by a good microschoool launched within another school could be adopted by the host school. Examples include:

- [Kettle Moraine High School](#) in suburban Milwaukee is home to three small schools launched to kickstart high school transformation (see [blog](#) and [podcast](#)).
- [Huntley High](#) in suburban Chicago launched Vanguard Vision, a 200-student, competency-based academy as part of a state pilot program and an iterative approach to personalize learning in the large school. The academy will grow to 400 students and some of the practices will be incorporated schoolwide (see [blog](#)).

Most of the 400 schools using the [Summit Learning](#) platform are using a microschool or academy structure to pilot the personalized learning platform (see [feature](#)). Examples include:

- [Synergy](#) is a student-centered academy at [Kuna Middle School](#) in a southwestern suburb of Boise. It's one of the 32 schools in the [Idaho Mastery Education Network](#) (IMEN). A team of four teachers supports just over 100 students using the [Summit Learning](#) platform.
- [Meadows Valley School District](#) in Idaho is part of the IMEN and uses Summit Learning and the [Place Network](#) supported by Teton Science Schools.

Quest microschool at [Singapore American School](#) is an interdisciplinary project-based high school that strives to illustrate the future. [Pathfinder Spaces](#) enabled teacher teams to illustrate and integrate the use of new flexible learning spaces and progressive teaching strategies (see [SAS case study](#)).

[Futures Academy](#) at the International School of Beijing is another example of a middle school microschool used to kickstart a transformation process.

Calendars and Scheduling

The flexibility that microschools provide allows for innovation in scheduling. Most microschools run five days a week but may do so for only a few hours a day to a full day. Part of designing a microschool is deciding:

- When school will be in session
- What time(s) of the day will be structured
- When will students control their own time
- Will students select from electives that provided by the comprehensive school
- When and how teachers support the students

Many of these decisions come from microschool's learning model.

Launching the Microschool

An overview of enrollment practices starts with equitable practices to support school choice for all learners. This focus is incorporated into the role of the neighborhood school, the feeder patterns and open enrollment.

An example of a comprehensive district approach is [Denver Public Schools](#) and their 'choice' practice as laid out in their website, with a [deep dive](#) into the process and section for [FAQ](#), [rounds](#) and [agreements](#).

A national network of magnet/charter schools, [Summit Public Schools](#), shares their tuition-free structures and answers [enrollment FAQs](#). At the bottom of their online resource they also share a [commitment](#) to equal access.

Application and Lottery Protocols

The selection process should align with application and lottery structures currently in place for options like Career Academies, pathways and charters. An intentional choice for lotteries can be to have structure and protocols that may not be random and instead have weighted preferences. Applications can vary in terms of recommendations, requirements and family agreements but the practice of ensuring equitable access for all learners is the primary driver.

A summary of lottery practices and the inclusion of weighted priorities can be found in the [Executive Summary of State Laws and Enrollment Practices](#). Kettle Moraine School District, known for several microschoools, shares their [online application](#) for the KM Perform Program. More examples can be found at Norwalk Public Schools, [K8 Magnet Schools application & lottery process](#), as well as [Open Enrollment procedures](#) for pathways, sample slide decks and descriptions. A microschool that is not a stand-alone high school and not a school within a school is part of the Microschool Coalition, [Their Place](#).

Student & Family Recruitment

Defining recruitment procedures will ensure an inclusive process with a diverse pool of candidates (within district or out). This will also attract educators who understand and embrace the vision of the microschool facilitating a successful start. Consider the representation of class to reflect diversity of the age cohort across the district or community.

Odyssey STEM Academy targets feeder schools to build a more inclusive class. Doing the pre-work with families through hands-on activities and workshops can also provide a better understanding of the unique learning model of the microschoools. See more at [Odyssey STEM Family Engagement](#).

Helping potential new families understand the learning model is important to the success of the microschool. Liberty Public Schools in north Kansas City built an [overview of their two microschoools](#) as well as an informational video for parents and students to review.

Additional resources:

National Review: [Executive Summary of State Laws and Enrollment Practices](#)

Slide Deck on Lotteries: [National Charter School Resource Center](#)

SCALING INNOVATION IN A SYSTEM

Microschools are small and nimble enough to think more easily about replication - either within a district or the private sector. In large districts, microschool models can be effective ways to promote innovation among different schools. In the private sector, replication can benefit new schools who need a model or existing microschools who would like to iterate more quickly. Networks exist across the education ecosystem and have significant benefits - and add complexity to microschool initiatives.

Network Benefit

1. **Capacity building.** PLCs and leadership networks build educator capacity.
2. **Innovation bundle.** Platform networks and most charter management organizations bundle a group of features and tools. They leverage a research and development agenda across a large network of schools. Strong networks like IDEA Public Schools in Texas keep tinkering with the components to make the bundle better. Summit Learning, a free platform from Summit Public Schools, is a bundle of innovations that keeps getting better.
3. **Space and support to innovate.** The Kettle Moraine School District piloted personalized learning in four microschools. Critical elements including permission, inspiration, support, budget and technical assistance. Microschools that participate with a network can both benefit from and contribute to accelerated quality for learners.
4. **Expanded learning options.** Microschools that partner with a network may benefit from learning resources (primarily online) that are available only within the network.
5. **School improvement.** Microschools can emerge as school improvement networks. Denver sponsored Beacon Schools, an internal improvement network.

Foundations for Scaling

Key to scaling a microschool is codification of design principles, the learning model and associated tools and artifacts. The more that is documented early, the easier it is to scale the microschool. Using simple strategies like building an internal facing playbook (website or document for easy reference), scheduling regular design and reflection meetings and following a rolling strategy that intentionally builds iteration structures are helpful tools.

Articulating conditions for success also contribute to a scaling strategy. Conditions can include areas such as:

- **Culture and climate within the founding group.** Do they have a growth mindset? Are they innovation focused? Do they play well together?
- **Understanding of the learning model.** How well-versed in the learning model is the new team?
- **Community support.** Does the area within which the new microschool will be launched have a supportive constituent group?
- **Time.** Can the leader of the existing school allocate time to replication? Can teachers within the first school allocate time to supporting new teachers in other schools?

Scaling Innovation Across a Network

Once a commitment to scale a microschool model into a network is made, intentional structures should be built to support distributed innovation. Design sprints, action research and social sharing platforms (like Mighty Network) can support organized scaling of innovation.

- **Design Sprints:** Organized, network-wide design sprints around specific areas of the learning model can help accelerate improvement and innovation related to the design principles. Design sprints are informed by user feedback (typically students) and should start with understanding bias.
- **Action Research:** Short, informal action research projects on specific practices with follow up data sharing can be helpful. When teachers begin to look at cause and effect (I implemented this strategy and here are the effects on student learning...) and share the results, all teachers within the microschool network benefit. It is important that action research focuses on impacts around student learning.
- **Social Platforms:** Building a strong community in the microschool network can support rapid iteration and high quality. Platforms such as Mighty Networks provide affordable, white-labeled social spaces to share and collaborate as the network grows.

Innovation with Equity

As with any innovation in education, microschools as a new learning option and as a change initiator must put equity at the forefront. This specifically means ensuring that the voices of the most marginalized identities are amplified as leaders and are as well-served as any other student in the microschool. Liberatory design tools help designers to amplify voices, notice bias, and continually self-reflect. Tools such as the Equity Pause, when embedded into the culture of the microschool and network, can help support equity as an important lever for long term student success.

EFFICACY & RESEARCH

Because microschoools are a relatively new phenomenon, there is little research on their effectiveness. Microschoools are more of an organizational construct than a pedagogical approach. As a result, aspects of proposed learning models including blended learning, project-based learning, and competency-based progressions can be studied. Actual results are a combination of a learning model and the quality of execution.

For those interested in a progressive approach to learning, there is a body of literature summarizing the work done in the 1980s and 1990s by groups including the [Coalition of Essential Schools](#). Researcher [Kathleen Cotton](#) compiled research on small schools and small learning environments and found the potential for “enhancing collegiality among teachers and personalized relationships between teachers and students.” She noted other benefits of well-run small schools including “increased order and safety, higher school attendance and graduation rates, higher levels of extracurricular participation, greater parent participation and satisfaction, more positive teacher attitudes and satisfaction with their work, high-quality curricula that are well-aligned with national goals, and greater cost-effectiveness compared to larger schools.”

Studies of specific learning models can also yield useful information. A longitudinal study of Big Picture Learning showed success in the areas the model focuses on — relationships and real world relevance. Studies of [NAF career academies](#) show high participation in work-based learning as well as strong graduation postsecondary participation rates.

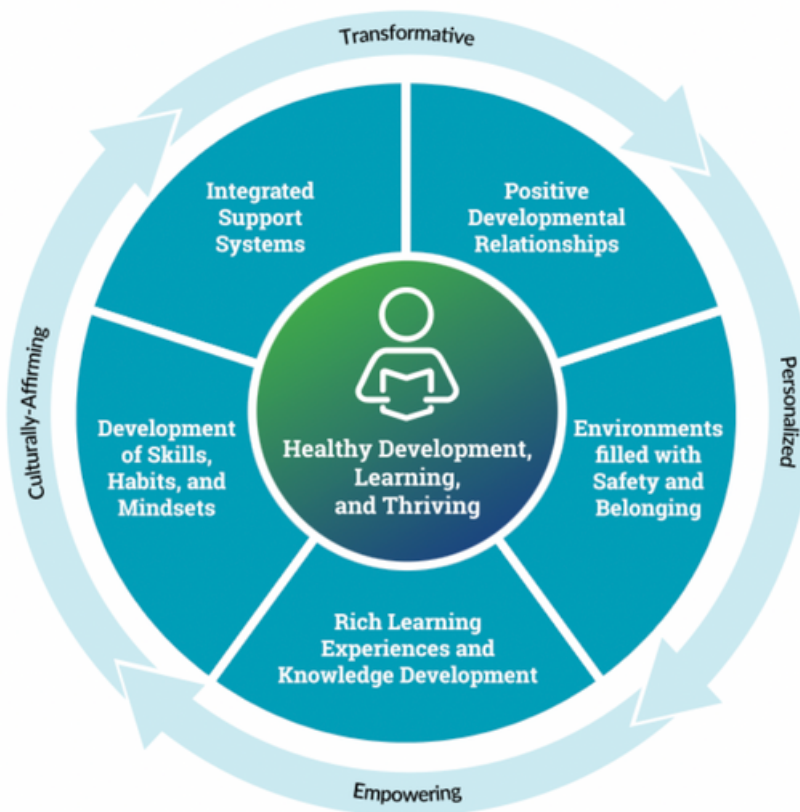


As with any innovation in education, microschoools as a new learning option and as a change initiator must put equity at the forefront. This specifically means ensuring that students with the most marginalized identities are amplified as leaders and are as well-served as any other student in the microschoool.

In addition to studying specific models and approaches, lessons from learning science can be distilled into design principles that guide new school formation. [The Design Principles](#) is a collaborative project led by the Forum for Youth Investment, Learning Policy Institute, and Turnaround for Children. It synthesized the science into the Essential Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole-Child Design. The five elements that promote healthy development, learning, and thriving include:

- Positive developmental relationships
- Environments filled with safety and belonging
- Rich learning experiences and knowledge development
- Development of skills, habits and mindsets.
- Integrated support systems

One of the benefits of microschoools is that it may be easier to combine these elements into new small learning environments and in doing so create valuable options as well as initiating larger transformation efforts.



Turnaround for Children, Design Principles

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

With thoughtful planning and significant community input and leadership, a microschool can provide both more options for your learning community and provide an innovative new option for the beginning of a big school transformation. The sooner a microschool opens, the sooner learners will be able to enjoy the enriching educational option. Many decisions will go into running a successful microschool and these specifics will be unique and provide opportunities to make modifications along the way. The focus will be on matching the learning experience to the needs of the learners.

As creators, founders, innovators, demanders, teachers, leaders and disruptors all see the possibility of something different, we recommend the following considerations:

1. **Start small.** Just like innovation in the for-profit sector, we need to build and test the smallest viable option to get feedback, to iterate and to learn.
2. **Start simple.** Think about the biggest levers with the smallest effort. Will the lever allow for more learners to succeed? If so, pull it.
3. **Use technology to enable, but not as the core solution.** We believe that technology is a huge leap in education, but too many schools rely on it as the only solution. Technology that better helps students show proficiency, while simultaneously freeing up time for relationship building, purposeful learning and student agency, is the path.
4. **Find your allies.** Disrupting can be tiring. Build in partnership with other disruptors - private and public. Learn from one another. Build within a system or at least partnered with a system. We will not succeed at meeting the goal of an extraordinary and effective learning system for all if all choices are privatized.
5. **Don't reinvent the wheel.** Incredible learning models are emerging around the world. Find what works for your community and re-construct with existing solutions. You will have more impact faster.

While microschools have emerged post-Covid as a private sector solution, microschools are a great strategy to transform big public schools using a school-within-a-school strategy. They can also provide an opportunity for a learning system to design unique educational experiences that enhance the learning experience for all learners.



EDGE at Liberty High, Missouri

These personalized flexible microschoools can open fast, model personalized learning and allow early adopters to move quickly. Because of their size, microschoools can also adapt to enrollment of students providing a personalized learning environment.

The Covid Pandemic saw large numbers of students and families choosing different options for learning away from the public sector. This wide-spread emergence should be a harbinger for the potential to innovate across public and private sectors to create more relevant, more personalized and more equitable learning systems.

The Getting Smart team collaborates with and advocates for impact-oriented partners who are committed to doing work that accelerates the future of teaching, leading and learning. If you're interested in further exploring microschoools, our strategic solutions and school design projects are tailored to support you from ideation to scaling. Email Jessica@GettingSmart.com if you're interested in learning more about how we might work together.



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