



Revolutionizing Education: The Promise of Microschools and Youth Entrepreneurship



The educational landscape is undergoing a significant transformation, with innovative models for K-12 education gaining momentum. The expanding school choice movement, which champions policies that empower parents to select the most fitting educational environments for their kids, is central to this shift. This movement, which saw a significant surge during the COVID-19 pandemic's educational upheaval, includes a diverse array of options—charter schools, vouchers, education savings accounts (ESAs), and more—designed to boost education outcomes through greater competition and innovation.

Among the many education models gaining traction, microschoools stand out as a particularly exciting and promising option. These intimate learning environments, typically serving between 10 to 15 students, and sometimes up to 150, are redefining what school can be.¹ Microschools are designed to operate with greater flexibility and autonomy than traditional public schools, boasting small class sizes, personalized learning plans, and a deep commitment to student-centered education. This setup not only cultivates a close-knit and nurturing learning environment but also sparks innovative teaching practices tailored to the unique needs of each student. The growing popularity of microschoools is creating a vibrant landscape for education entrepreneurs, who are seizing the opportunity to establish schools nationwide, eager to deliver distinctive and impactful educational experiences.

Microschools offer a dual opportunity: they not only provide fertile ground for entrepreneurial leaders to launch innovative educational ventures, but also present a chance to nurture the next generation of entrepreneurs. At the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE), we see the integration of entrepreneurship into microschoools as a powerful way to create dynamic learning environments. Entrepreneurship education equips students with essential skills and a mindset for starting and managing their own businesses, emphasizing creativity, problem-solving, leadership, and financial literacy. The small, personalized nature of microschoools makes them an ideal setting for developing these entrepreneurial skills, offering students a unique opportunity to thrive as they prepare for future success.

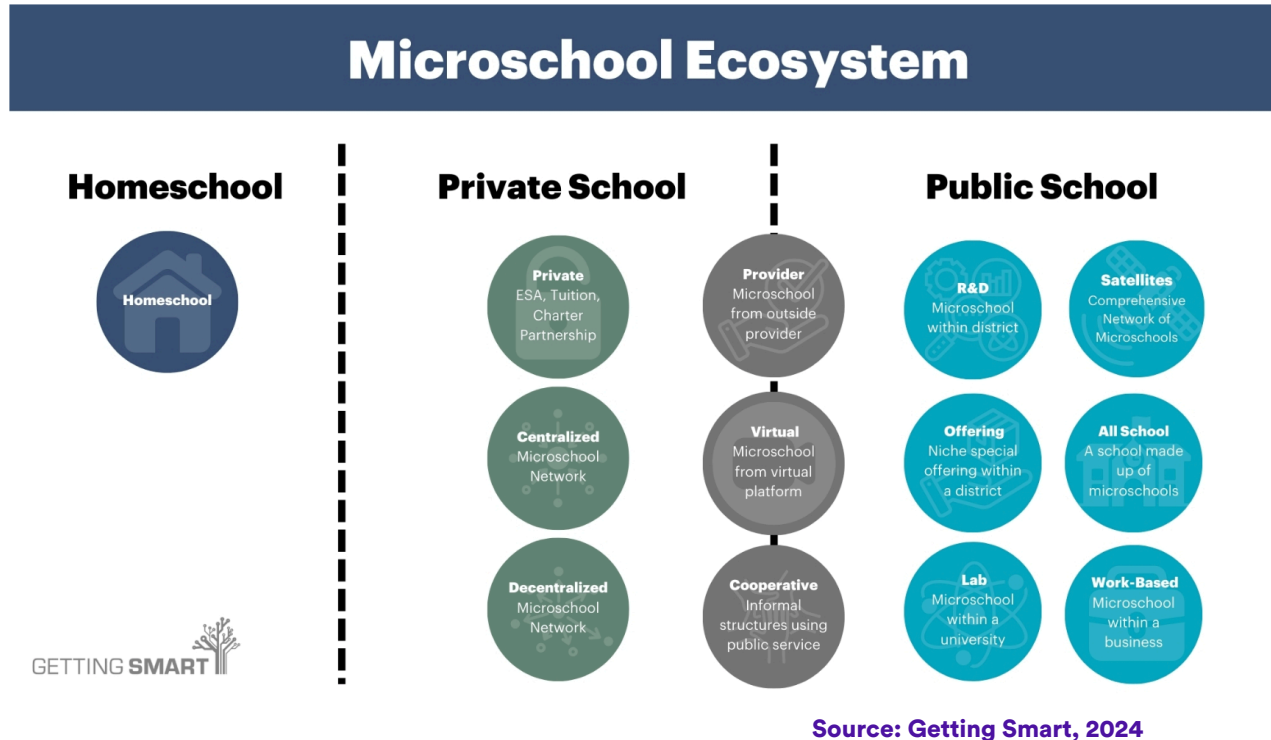
Microschools: A Response to Changing Educational Needs

While the U.S. has a rich history of small-scale educational settings, starting from one-room schoolhouses, there has been a notable surge in interest in microschoools since 2020. This rise can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted many parents to explore educational alternatives beyond traditional local schools.

¹ National Microschooling Center. (2023). American Microschools: A Sector Analysis. <https://microschoolingcenter.org/hubfs/22424203/American%20Microschools%20A%20Sector%20Analysis%20Final%20website-1.pdf?hsLang=en&submissionGuid=07203433-02cd-4bf0-9921-2e2acf281b80> (accessed on 7/02/24).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, public schools experienced a decline of over one million students between fall 2019 and fall 2020, with enrollment dropping from 50.8 million to 49.4 million.² Many of these students transitioned to private schools or homeschooling environments and continue to remain in these settings.³

Microschools have emerged as a compelling option for parents and students seeking alternative education settings. The National Microschooling Center reports that between 1.1 and 2.1 million students are currently using microschools as their primary education provider.⁴ Due to their small size and innovative implementation models (as shown in the chart from Getting Smart)⁵, microschools offer substantial transformative potential. Their emphasis on flexibility, personalized learning, and technology integration enables the creation of diverse microschool formats to meet the needs of their students.



Research by Getting Smart categorizes microschools into four types: operators, intermediaries, schools within schools or programs, and incubators, covering public, private, and homeschool environments.⁶ Entrepreneurial leaders may establish microschools to offer flexible learning environments with less oversight, implement unique educational models, and create parent or community-driven education solutions. A report by the National Microschooling Center highlights that the primary reasons entrepreneurs give for opening a microschool are to support students who are systemically underserved or marginalized and to help students thrive in ways they haven't in traditional learning environments.⁷ These efforts reflect a broader movement toward creating more equitable and effective educational systems that prioritize each student's individual needs and potential.

2 National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Public School Enrollment. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cga/public-school-enrollment> (accessed on 7/30/24).

3 National Microschooling Center. (2023). American Microschools: A Sector Analysis. <https://microschoolingcenter.org/hubfs/22424203/American%20Microschools%20A%20Sector%20Analysis%20Final%20website-1.pdf?hsLang=en&submissionGuid=07203433-02cd-4bf0-9921-2e2acf281b80> (accessed on 7/02/24).

4 Ibid.

5 McClennen, N. & Luster, J. (2024). Small Schools, Big Umbrella: Expanding, Defining and Scaling the Microschool Ecosystem. Getting Smart. <https://www.gettingsmart.com/2024/05/09/small-schools-big-umbrella-expanding-defining-and-scaling-the-microschool-ecosystem/> (accessed on 7/02/24).

6 Ibid.

7 National Microschooling Center. (2023). American Microschools: A Sector Analysis. <https://microschoolingcenter.org/hubfs/22424203/American%20Microschools%20A%20Sector%20Analysis%20Final%20website-1.pdf?hsLang=en&submissionGuid=07203433-02cd-4bf0-9921-2e2acf281b80> (accessed on 7/02/24).

While the influx of diverse microschool models is promising, there remains a lack of standardized criteria, policies, resources, and accountability measures to support this movement effectively. This gap presents significant challenges in ensuring the quality and consistency of education across different microschools. Developing educational programs that are both easy to use and innovative could be highly effective for microschools, providing them with the necessary tools to deliver high-quality education consistently. Implementing such programs can help bridge the resource gap, offering a structured yet flexible framework that supports the unique needs of microschools while maintaining high educational standards.

How Entrepreneurship Education Enhances Microschool Learning

Entrepreneurship education could meet these needs in microschools, serving as an excellent vehicle for all students to explore their interests, build skills, and create businesses. Programs like those offered by NFTE emphasize real-world learning and can be tailored to the needs of students in small learning environments. This hands-on approach not only fosters critical thinking and problem-solving abilities but also prepares students for future career opportunities. NFTE's programs range from semester- or year-long courses to 6-week BizCamps, with all programs culminating in the completion of a business plan. Students have the opportunity to showcase their work in business pitch competitions held regionally, nationally, and globally, allowing them to connect with industry volunteers and peers. The flexibility and opportunities provided by entrepreneurship education make it an ideal fit for all educational models, including microschools.

Integrating NFTE's BizCamp model in SEO Scholars' Fifth Week Curriculum

NFTE offers a variety of programs, but its most flexible model is its BizCamp model. With a duration of 20 to 40 hours, BizCamps can be tailored to fit a range of in-school and out-of-school instructional models, making it a strong fit for microschool models. SEO Scholars, an eight-year program that educates and mentors underserved public high school students in New York City, San Francisco, and North Carolina through college, has worked with the NFTE team for years, implementing various programs. In 2020,

the New York-based team at SEO Scholars which serves over 1,000 students annually, saw the opportunity to leverage the NFTE BizCamp model for a smaller number of students during its summer programs.

The five-week program focuses on academic skills through math, English, Language Arts, and identity empowerment courses during the first four weeks. The fifth week is devoted to career exploration, where scholars (as they are called in the SEO Scholars program) choose a career program to participate in. During this week, 75 rising tenth graders go through a week-long BizCamp, where they create a business plan, receive coaching and mentorship from NFTE staff and local professionals, and pitch their ideas to a panel of volunteer judges. For many scholars, NFTE's BizCamp serves as the culminating project in a smaller-group instructional dynamic, where scholars have access to robust, personalized entrepreneurship programming and coaching support from multiple caring adults.

The SEO Scholars team has noticed that entrepreneurship and business management are top interests for scholars, shares Tatiana Garcia, Assistant Director of High School Scholars. Many scholars are interested in social justice issues that impact their community, and through NFTE's BizCamp curriculum, they have the



Participants in the SEO Scholars summer program share their business plan with a local professional.

opportunity to think through and propose real-world solutions.

Students who participate in SEO Scholars programming are sometimes overlooked in their public-school environment. SEO and partnerships with programs like NFTE allow scholars to shine both in and outside the classroom, shares Nicole McCauley, Senior Director of High School in New York City. “NFTE’s programs help give our scholars both entrepreneurial skills, which they will need to be successful anywhere, and exposure to the possibilities of what they can do,” McCauley said. “It helps answer some key questions for scholars. What does it mean to be an entrepreneur? Who in my community is an entrepreneur and is someone I could reach out to and connect with? And how can I be a global citizen and contribute positively to society as I prepare for college and beyond?”

Here are some engaging ways to integrate entrepreneurship education into microschoools:

Taking a Place-Based Learning Approach:

Due to their small and flexible nature, many microschoools are deeply rooted in their communities and adopt a place-based learning approach, allowing students to explore and address local needs. These microschoools are often situated in community hubs such as libraries, museums, or, as seen with Teton Science Schools, even national parks. Place-based learning is particularly interesting for microschoools because it immerses students in their local environment, making education relevant and immediately impactful. By engaging with their surroundings, students develop a deeper understanding of and connection to their community.

Entrepreneurship education provides unique opportunities for place-based learning, as it encourages students to identify local problems and develop innovative solutions. This approach not only enhances students' entrepreneurial skills but also fosters a sense of civic responsibility and community engagement. Through entrepreneurship projects, students can collaborate with local businesses and organizations, further enriching their learning experience and contributing positively to their community.

Connecting teacher leaders to networks and professional development:

Many microschoools are established by educators or former educators who seek to create a more distinctive learning environment compared to traditional school settings. However, the rapid evolution of microschoooling, coupled with the current lack of policies and tracking measures, can make it challenging for leaders to connect with others in the field. Despite these challenges, other microschoooling models have successfully navigated this landscape. For example, Teacher-Powered Schools, a network of 300 schools across 27 states, empowers educators with collective autonomy to design and manage schools. This model focuses on capacity building and student-centered instruction, demonstrating an effective approach to fostering innovative educational environments.

Entrepreneurship education offers valuable support to teacher leaders by providing a structured yet flexible framework for innovation. It empowers both dispersed schools and teacher networks, such as Teacher-Powered Schools, by promoting a hands-on, real-world approach to learning that aligns with the unique needs of microschoools. Programs like NFTE’s not only supply a robust curriculum and resources for this approach but also connect educators to a dynamic Entrepreneurial Teacher Corps. This supportive community allows teachers to uplift one another, fostering growth both inside and outside the classroom and leading to significant personal and professional development.



Attendees at NFTE’s 2023 Entrepreneurial Education Summit

Embed Entrepreneurship Education in a School’s Education Philosophy and Culture

Microschoools are particularly intriguing because they are often created by entrepreneurs looking for innovative

ways to support and engage students. This entrepreneurial spirit can be harnessed to shape the educational philosophy and culture of these schools, focusing on entrepreneurship as a central component. By embedding entrepreneurship education into the microschool's core philosophy, educators can design learning experiences that are both innovative and practical, giving students the tools they need to understand and engage with the world of business and innovation.

There is a compelling opportunity to build microschools with a strong emphasis on entrepreneurship, allowing students to explore learning through the lens of innovation. Creating entrepreneurship-focused schools, or even NFTE schools, centers student learning around entrepreneurial concepts and practices. This approach not only aligns with the original vision of microschools but also offers students a dynamic and relevant educational experience. By integrating entrepreneurship into the school culture, microschools can foster a learning environment where students actively engage in problem-solving, creative thinking, and real-world application, preparing them for future success in an ever-evolving landscape.

Perkins School for the Blind: Pioneering Accessible Entrepreneurship Education

Perkins School for the Blind, based in Watertown, Massachusetts, is the oldest school for the blind in the United States, founded in 1829. Last year, Perkins helped more than 1.2 million children with disabilities around the globe find their place in the world. In early 2023, the NFTE team reached out to Perkins for guidance on making NFTE's curriculum more accessible for students with disabilities. During this project, the Perkins team reviewed and suggested changes to NFTE materials, including modifications such as large print and Braille.

The project culminated in a BizCamp tailored to Perkins' annual five-week World of Work program. During this summer 2023 program, nine public school students stayed on the Perkins campus, held an internship four days a week, and participated in BizCamp every Friday. The entrepreneurial skills and concepts taught in the BizCamp curriculum helped support students' work site placements.

The Perkins on-campus school year programs prepare children ages 3-22 with the academics and life skills they need to define their own success, when public schooling can't necessarily support them. For some Perkins students, they may be the only student with visual impairment or multiple disabilities in their district. A specialized education provided by Perkins is critical to helping them succeed.

At the end of the summer program, participating students were able to pitch their business ideas to a panel of judges. The first-place winner, Rachel Solomon, proposed her business Quick Change, which delivers wheels for walkers or wheelchairs directly to homes. As part of her first-place prize, Solomon received support with prototyping from a Hasbro consultant and participated in NFTE's National Youth Entrepreneurship Challenge in New York in October 2023.

"Because much of our world was not designed with accessibility in mind, people with disabilities have to real-life problem solve all the time, both in school and just in navigating society," said Alicia Smith, Director of Employment Services at Perkins. "Not everyone will be an entrepreneur, but the entrepreneurial mindset is important for any job or environment. It can help people with disabilities see problems as opportunities."



Participants in the Perkins World of Work summer program pose for a photo with NFTE's CEO J.D. LaRock after their BizCamp business pitches

Examples of Policies Enhancing Microschool Development and Innovation

While microschools aren't a new development, the recent surge in public interest necessitates policies that support their effective operation, sustainability, and growth, ensuring they meet educational standards and serve the best interests of students and their families. Despite some policies supporting school choice, there is often a lack of specific provisions for microschools, leading to barriers such as limited funding, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient resources for curriculum development. To address these challenges, several states have implemented policies to facilitate the expansion of microschools, generally focusing on creating a supportive regulatory environment, providing financial resources, and fostering innovative educational models. Below are some examples of policies that encourage both the development and growth of microschools and launch of innovative programs like entrepreneurship education:

Arizona: Laws that Support Charter Schools

Many states have enacted laws that allow for the creation of charter schools, which often operate with greater autonomy compared to traditional public schools. This autonomy can create an environment conducive to the establishment and operation of microschools. For example, policies enacted in Arizona allow for significant flexibility in curriculum design, staffing, and operational models.⁸ While these laws do allow for flexibility around the various charter school models, the state also employs measures that ensure greater accountability. The Arizona State Board for Charter Schools oversees the authorization and monitoring of charter schools, ensuring they meet performance and operational standards while maintaining the flexibility needed for innovation.⁹

Florida: Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) and Voucher Programs

Education Savings Accounts allow parents to use public funds allocated for their child's education to pay for various educational services, including tuition for microschools. Florida, for example, has robust ESA and voucher programs that offer significant financial support to parents seeking alternative educational options for their children. These programs, such as the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program¹⁰ and the Florida Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts Program,¹¹ allow families to use funds for private schooling, tutoring, and other educational services, including microschools. The Florida Department of Education oversees these programs, ensuring that participating schools meet specific standards and requirements, thereby maintaining a balance between innovation and educational quality.¹² This regulatory oversight helps foster a thriving ecosystem of microschools and other educational alternatives in Florida.

From NFTE Inspiration to Microschool Leadership: Careline Romain's Journey

Seven years ago, while implementing NFTE's programs as a program manager, Careline Romain was asked by a student, "Are you an entrepreneur? What's your business?" These questions marked a pivotal moment in her entrepreneurial journey, inspiring her to establish and lead Young Leaders Academy, a private microschool in North Miami Beach, Florida. Since its launch in 2017 with just three students, the school has grown to serve an average of 125 to 150 students annually. "Learning about the entrepreneurial mindset through NFTE's programs has really changed my life," Romain, who is now a Development Director in NFTE's Southeast region said. "It's necessary not just for anyone interested in launching a school or business, but for any human, including our students, to succeed."

When she's not raising funds and building relationships with donors for NFTE, Romain oversees the operations and manages a team of 20 employees at Young Leaders Academy. Coming from an immigrant family, she

8 Arizona Revised Statutes (A.R.S.) Title 15, Chapter 1, Article 8: A.R.S. § 15-181 to 15-189

9 Arizona State Board for Charter Schools. <https://asbcs.az.gov/> (accessed on 7/30/24)

10 Florida Department of Education. Florida Tax Credit Scholarships. <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/k-12-scholarship-programs/ftc/> (accessed on 7/30/24)

11 The Florida Senate. 1002.385 Florida personal learning scholarship accounts. <https://www.flsenate.gov/laws/statutes/2015/1002.385> (accessed on 7/30/24)

12 Florida Department of Education. Charter Schools: Statutes, Rules, & Model Forms. <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/charter-schools/charter-school-reference> (accessed on 7/30/24)

experienced a clear divide between her family life and her school and friends while growing up. Through Young Leaders Academy, she aimed to build a school culture where students and families could connect, and where administration and teachers could communicate in their languages. The school addresses student needs that were unmet by the public school system for her students.

Although Young Leaders Academy benefits from Florida’s robust voucher and ESA programs, these funds do not cover all student expenses, requiring the school to continuously seek additional sources of funding. Additionally, the school's administration frequently has to navigate complex city and state bureaucracies to maintain its operations and continue serving its students. Romain believes that additional policies are needed, particularly those that create partnerships between public schools, private institutions, charter schools, and microschools. “There is often this belief that microschools take away from public schooling, but they are often helping fill gaps for students,” Romain said. “We all do better when working together in this landscape of education.”



Careline Romain (pictured left) attends a graduation ceremony at Young Leaders Academy in Spring 2023.

Colorado: Innovation Zones in Public Schools

Colorado's Innovation Schools Act¹³ empowers public schools to seek innovation status, which provides them with waivers from certain state and district regulations. This autonomy extends to areas such as curriculum development, staffing, and operational management, giving schools the flexibility to create innovative educational programs. As a result, public schools can develop unique models, including microschools, that offer personalized learning experiences tailored to students' specific needs. This approach not only fosters a culture of experimentation and adaptation but also allows educators to design and implement solutions that address local educational challenges and capitalize on opportunities for improvement.

Conclusion

Innovative school models, such as microschools, supported by the school choice movement, offer more personalized education tailored to meet the diverse needs of all students. These smaller, flexible learning environments are often pioneered by education entrepreneurs committed to improving educational opportunities for students and families. Integrating youth entrepreneurship into the school choice and microschools movement provides a powerful opportunity to enhance student outcomes by cultivating critical skills and offering real-world learning experiences that prepare students for their futures. To maximize the potential of these innovative approaches, it is essential to ensure supportive policies, adequate funding, and professional development for educators. This comprehensive support is crucial for the successful formation of microschools and the effective implementation of programs like NFTE’s. Ultimately, fostering an environment where innovation can thrive will pave the way for more equitable and impactful educational opportunities for all students.

¹³ Colorado Department of Education. Innovation Schools. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/choice/innovationschools> (accessed on 07/30/24).

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