



Little Schools with a Big Impact

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Technology has changed the world dramatically in just a few decades. Things that were science fiction when we were kids — like watches that could make calls or phones that are mini-computers — are commonplace today.

But before COVID, education remained largely the same year to year. Children were assigned to schools based on where they lived and to classes based on their birthdays. Teachers stood at the front of the room and lectured while students sat at desks and, it was hoped, paid attention. It was remarkably similar to education 100 years ago.

These days, though, education is rapidly changing. While flexible and innovative learning options existed before COVID, they've become increasingly popular recently. Many factors are fueling the increased demand for new educational options. Remote instruction gave parents a front-row seat into what their children were — and sometimes were not — learning in school. They've also tasted education outside of the conventional system, and many liked what they experienced. Thanks to growing education choice programs, which allow parents to use state education funds for various learning options, more parents can now afford these unconventional models.

With increased interest in new education options, there is concern about whether supply will meet the demand. Education entrepreneurs are stepping up to create and scale new learning entities.

Microschools, in particular, are at the heart of this rise in education entrepreneurship. These intentionally small schools have the freedom to be highly personalized and serve the needs of each learner. Students at microschools are often in multi-age groups and work at their ability rather than at a pre-determined pace based on age.

There is enormous flexibility with microschools. Some are full-time, while others are part-time and may allow families to choose the schedule that works best for them. They can be secular or religious and follow education philosophies like unschooling, classical, Charlotte Mason, and Waldorf. Some even combine two or more philosophies, drawing on the pieces school founders like the best.

Despite increased education entrepreneurship, there still aren't enough high-quality microschools. But innovators are working to solve that problem with grant opportunities like the VELA Education Fund and the Yass Prize, and microschool accelerator programs like KaiPod Catalyst.

KaiPod Learning, born during the pandemic, provides academic support, childcare and social opportunities for homeschooled children or learning online. At KaiPod locations, kids work independently on their core subjects while joining together for enrichment activities, all under the supervision of an experienced learning coach.

Last year, KaiPod launched its Catalyst program to encourage more education entrepreneurs to take the leap into a career where they can teach on their terms while earning a sustainable income. Catalyst Founders receive support in all phases of creating a microschool, including marketing, raising capital, site selection, navigating regulatory hurdles, operations, hiring and academic programming. In states that offer education savings accounts, KaiPod can help founders connect with scholarship organizations or state agencies to learn how to participate. After the 28-week Catalyst accelerator, KaiPod stays committed to the microschool's success for the long haul, helping founders anticipate and avoid challenges that most microschools face.

While still in the early stages, KaiPod Catalyst is bearing fruit. In the first cohort, the program supported 16 founders launching new microschools in 12 states.

It's hard to predict what education will look like by the time we're grandparents. But with student-focused models like microschools on the rise and more states adopting universal education choice programs, education is finally being pushed into the 21st century. We're hopeful that the era of pretending one size fits all in education is ending, and the emphasis will now be on finding the best fit for each child.

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