

How Microschool Networks Are Activating Education Entrepreneurs

Kerry McDonald

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When Katelyn Shore opened the first Wildflower Montessori microschool in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2014, she hoped it would be the start of something big. The vision, introduced by Sep Kamvar at the MIT Media Lab, was to create an open-source network of intentionally small, storefront, neighborhood Montessori microschools that would offer the tools and technology to enable teacher-entrepreneurs across the country to launch their own microschools. Shore's school would be the prototype.

“When we began imagining what would be possible for opening the first Wildflower school, I was most inspired to create a small school where teachers were decision makers on what would be best for their school community (children and families), as we were the ones closest to the needs of our community,” said Shore. “At the time, we dreamed of what could be possible within a larger network of microschools, but to see it happen and grow as it has is just incredible.”

Today, the Wildflower Montessori network consists of more than 60 microschools across the U.S. and Puerto Rico, including public charter microschools in Minneapolis, New York City and Washington, D.C. Most of the network's microschools focus on early childhood education, but some serve elementary and secondary school children.

Wildflower Montessori supports entrepreneurial, Montessori-trained teachers who want to open their own affiliated microschools. The non-profit Wildflower Foundation offers grants and low-interest loans to these startup founders, and connects them with the vast network of Wildflower Montessori educators who share resources, offer encouragement and provide advice and insights.

Whitney Harrell launched her Wildflower affiliate school, Magnolia Blossom Montessori, in Louisville, Kentucky in 2017. A licensed educator who had taught previously in both public and private schools, Harrell was seeking to blend the challenge of entrepreneurship with the child-centered ideals of the Montessori educational philosophy. Wildflower provided that opportunity, and connected her with the community she needed to launch and grow. “I think one of the critical things about Wildflower is that no one is doing this alone,” said Harrell. “I could not have imagined starting a school without Wildflower's backing, especially the emotional and philosophical backing.”

While many microschool founders today launch their programs apart from any national network or affiliation, some find great value in aligning with a network. For Tobin Slaven, a longtime

entrepreneur who recently created Acton Academy Fort Lauderdale in Florida, being a part of the larger Acton Academy microschool network was enormously beneficial.

“When we first learned about Acton, my instinct as an entrepreneur was to think, we can figure it out. Why follow someone else’s lead?” said Slaven. “But what I didn’t realize until we were on the inside and accessing the Network multiple times each day, was the velocity of learning from shared experiments and optimization that is taking place behind the scenes.”

Acton Academy was founded in 2010 in Austin, Texas by Laura and Jeff Sandefer. It has become one of the most popular and fastest-growing K-12 microschool networks, and includes approximately 280 affiliated schools in more than 30 U.S. states and 25 countries. Like Wildflower Montessori, each Acton Academy is independently owned and operated, but founders are able to access the vibrant global network which allows them to gain a better understanding of key principles and best practices, as well as easily troubleshoot with others when issues arise.

“Knowing what we know now, we would never undertake this challenge if we were not plugged into the Network. It feels that essential, and has changed our perspective of what is possible,” said Slaven.

Wildflower Montessori and Acton Academy were among the earliest microschooled networks, emerging well before the education disruption caused by the pandemic response thrust microschooled into the spotlight. These small, mixed-age learning communities with hired educators and personalized, learner-centered curriculum have gained mass appeal since 2020, with some estimates suggesting that up to two million U.S. children are now attending a microschool full-time.

Recognizing the growing demand for microschooled, Amar Kumar decided to launch a new microschool network, KaiPod Learning, in 2021. Kumar, who worked at McKinsey and Pearson before creating KaiPod, spotted the opportunity to merge the best features of online learning within a small, co-learning community. At KaiPod, a dozen or so mixed-age students join an experienced educator to work through whichever online learning curriculum the family chooses within a supportive, in-person, microschool setting. Parents gain maximum autonomy over what their children learn, while their children benefit from daily social interactions with peers, along with academic support and enrichment from trained educators.

After participating in the prestigious Y Combinator startup accelerator program, KaiPod opened last fall in the Boston area with one microschool and two students. Today, the company supports microschooled in five states, serving over 180 students. Kumar now has his sights set on helping other entrepreneurial educators to launch their own microschooled using KaiPod’s resource-rich network. Last week, he announced KaiPod Catalyst, a startup accelerator program for new and aspiring microschool founders who want to connect with a recognized national network to gain community, inspiration, support and guidance.

“Starting a microschool is incredibly rewarding and hard work. We want to encourage more educators to do so,” said Kumar, who sees three key advantages to his company’s new

accelerator program. “First, we have learned the hard way what it takes to launch microschools and want to share that with everyone. The second advantage is access to the largest network of online schools and homeschool organizations. And finally, we commit to partnering with our Founders for the long-term, being alongside them for all the challenges they’ll face as they launch and scale. All of this is possible to do alone, but we believe we can help improve the chances of success.”

Today’s microschool founders, many of whom are former public school teachers, are well-positioned to thrive as education entrepreneurs. Not only is parent demand for small, low-cost, personalized learning options soaring, but the resources available for founders are increasingly diverse and abundant. They can align themselves with a national network that reflects their educational preferences and goals, or they can create their own independent microschool model. Regardless of a microschool founder’s chosen path, connecting with others, either formally or informally, will help to ensure entrepreneurial success and satisfaction.

“Look for an affiliation or a community of other like-minded schools or educators in whatever way you can,” urges Wildflower’s Harrell. “There’s no reason to reinvent the wheel over and over again.”

Kerry McDonald is an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom and a senior education fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education.