

FEE Stories

Teacher and Mom of Four Launches Mask-Free Learning Center in Response to Parent Demand

Kerry McDonald

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The coronavirus response over the past two years has transformed education, putting parents back in the driver's seat and inspiring education entrepreneurs to create new K-12 learning models. There are signs that entrepreneurship flourished during the pandemic response, as employment disruptions prompted individuals to launch new businesses. A new Brookings Institution report, for example, shows that the number of individuals who founded online "microbusinesses" ballooned in 2020.

In the education sector, more teachers are leaving district schools to create microschools, run tutoring programs, and imagine other exciting learning options. Homeschooling has skyrocketed and many parents are forming learning pods and co-ops, often hiring outside facilitators to lead various programs. Education-focused "private membership organizations" that offer maximum autonomy are also sprouting across the country.

Jill Perez is one of many US educators who recognizes mounting parent demand for freer and more flexible learning options for children. Perez has been a certified middle school math and social studies teacher for over 20 years and has also taught education courses at Rutgers University. She now supervises college student-teachers at Seton Hall University. Perez is also a mother of four children, ranging in age from six to fourteen. She pulled her two older children

out of school for the 2020/2021 academic year for homeschooling due to mask mandates and related coronavirus policies, while the younger two attended a Montessori school that offered mask flexibility. She and some other parents gathered together to form a small learning pod community, where they purchased a curriculum and met regularly at their homes for academic and enrichment activities.

In the fall of 2021, mask mandates were still in place in her local district schools, and the Montessori school that her younger children attended grew stricter with its mask policy, so Perez decided to homeschool all of her children and turn her learning pod into an established schooling alternative. She founded Tranquil Teachings, a learning center in Monmouth County, New Jersey that operates on a private membership model where parents can choose to send their children part-time or full-time each week to engage in academic and/or enrichment activities. She currently has 40 students enrolled.

Listen to my full interview with Jill Perez on the first episode of my new LiberatED Podcast, available on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts! While you're there, please subscribe to the show. We have some great episodes coming up, including next week's about a homeschooling family that recently left California for a freer state.

“The fact that we were fearing people was also very problematic to me,” said Perez of her decision to launch Tranquil Teachings. “The schools were encouraging our children to keep six feet apart and to not be near someone while they were having lunch. That was so contrary to the message that I felt as a parent I wanted to share with my own kids,” she said. Bringing people together was a key catalyst for Perez in building the Tranquil Teachings community.

This sense of community-building with like-minded people was what prompted Stacy Joyce to enroll her eight-year-old son, Dash, part-time at Tranquil Teachings. When the schools shut down in the spring of 2020 and switched to remote learning, Dash voiced how much he hated school. In response, his parents un-enrolled him from the local school and embraced

homeschooling instead. “We wanted to provide the most normal environment possible. We go about our lives, we don’t have our child wear a mask unless in a medical office,” said Joyce.

Dash spent much of last year in homeschooling-related enrichment activities that were held outside, in addition to working on his home-based academic curriculum. “It was great to be outside all day, but sometimes it’s cold and I don’t want to spend the day out in the woods,” said Joyce, who works as a yoga instructor. “I really appreciate that Jill has been able to create this community. The more we stay away from school, the less and less that seems like an option to return to,” she added.

Perez has also been able to create a community for teachers who no longer want to comply with their schools’ COVID policies in the greater New York and New Jersey area. “These are our thinking teachers,” said Perez. “I was able to take some of these teachers and bring them here and they’re wonderful. They have a lot of skills, they’re questioning things. And they are loving what they are doing in a way that they haven’t in years,” she said.

As an education entrepreneur, Perez encourages other parents and educators to use this transformational moment to create new learning communities. “Get out of your comfort zone,” she suggests. “Understand that connection is our way out of this. It’s the opposite of everything we’ve been told,” she adds.

I really enjoyed my in-depth conversation with Jill Perez on my new LiberatED Podcast—and I think you will too! Listen to the whole thing [here](#) or wherever you get your podcasts. And please join our podcast Facebook [community](#) as well!

Kerry McDonald is a Senior Education Fellow at FEE and author of Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom (Chicago Review Press, 2019). She is also an adjunct scholar at The Cato Institute and a regular Forbes contributor. Kerry has a B.A. in economics from Bowdoin College and an M.Ed. in education policy from

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