



## Coronavirus could be an opportunity to an experiment in ‘mass homeschooling’

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As fears of coronavirus mount around the globe, cities and countries are taking action to prevent the new respiratory virus strain from spreading. While the virus has not yet hit hard in the United States, government officials and health agencies have enacted response plans, corporations are halting travel abroad, and education leaders are grappling with what a widespread domestic outbreak of the virus could mean for schoolchildren.

In countries where the virus is active, schools have been shut down and children are at home, learning alongside their parents or through online education portals. *The New York Times* reports that US schools have been prompted this week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to prepare for a coronavirus epidemic that could shutter schools and require alternate forms of teaching and learning outside the conventional classroom. According to Kevin Carey of the New America think tank, who spoke to the *Times*, coronavirus in the US could lead to “a vast unplanned experiment in mass home-schooling.”

It’s unfortunate that it takes a viral epidemic to spotlight the many alternatives to conventional K-12 schooling.

Indeed, in Hong Kong this is already occurring. The coronavirus outbreak led to orders for schools to be shut down in the city for two months, affecting 800,000 students. An article this week in *The Wall Street Journal* declares that “coronavirus prompts a whole city to try home schooling,” noting that in Hong Kong many children are completing lessons virtually through online learning platforms or receiving live instruction from teachers through Google Hangouts or similar digital tools.

It’s unfortunate that it takes a viral epidemic to spotlight the many alternatives to conventional K-12 schooling. Not only is homeschooling widely popular in the US, educating approximately two million children nationwide, but other schooling alternatives, such as virtual learning, microschooled, and hybrid homeschooling continue to sprout.

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Virtual learning programs such as the Florida Virtual School, founded in 1997 as the nation’s first fully online public high school, and K12, Inc., one of the largest providers of virtual schooling, enable young people to take a complete course load and earn a high school diploma without sitting in a traditional classroom environment. Supplementary online programs, such as Khan Academy and Outschool, expand learning options and allow young people to dig deeper into topics that interest them or those in which they may need some additional help.

Interest in online learning options is sure to increase as the coronavirus spreads, but other in-person schooling alternatives are also likely to gain notoriety. Microschools, for example, are small, home-based, multi-age learning environments that act like a one-room schoolhouse, typically with no more than 8 to 12 students at a time. Prenda is a fast-growing network of these branded, in-home microschoools, with more than 80 schools in Arizona alone serving some 550 students, and plans to expand out-of-state.

Like microschoools, hybrid homeschooling programs and small, community-based classes for homeschoolers are also gaining popularity and may be swept into the limelight if conventional schools are forced to temporarily close. Operating with small, age-mixed groups of children, these hybrid models and classes offer an alternative to institutional schooling, avoiding large classrooms and crowded buildings. I have recently launched a marketplace platform, Unschool.school, that connects educators, parents, and learners to these homeschooling models and out-of-school learning experiences, fostering small group, in-person interactions in local community spaces, such as art studios, makerspaces, and spare dining rooms.

These emerging learning options outside of traditional schooling show not only that “mass homeschooling” is possible but also that it may be highly desirable. Personalized learning, small group interactions that build community and connection, and education without the coercion inherent in standard schooling are beneficial whether or not a pending epidemic is what exposes families to these education possibilities. Mass homeschooling may be just the cure we need.

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