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Burned Out Teachers Are Launching Their Own Schools Instead of Abandoning Their Passion—And Succeeding

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Teachers across the country are feeling burned out and depleted, particularly as school coronavirus policies and staffing shortages make their jobs more difficult.

According to a survey by the RAND Corporation, almost one-quarter of teachers planned to leave the profession in 2021, and teachers experienced higher rates of work-related stress and depression than other adults.

A recent letter from teachers and staff at a small Vermont public elementary school to their superintendent and school board members echoes the feelings of many public school personnel. “Everybody is stepping up to try to do what is asked of them; everybody is feeling inadequate, exhausted, and defeated much of the time,” wrote educators at the Ottauquechee School in Hartford. “Colleagues are questioning whether changing professions is in their best interest.” Rather than abandoning their passion for teaching, some educators are discovering that they can do what they love and avoid the bureaucracy and stress of a conventional classroom by starting their own microschools.

Microschools are modern twists on the quaint, one-room schoolhouse model, where small, multi-age groups of students learn together in more intimate educational settings, such as private homes, with individualized attention from adult educators and facilitators. Interest in microschools accelerated over the past year, as school shutdowns led parents to consider home-based “pandemic pods” to help their children learn in small, safe groups.

Some teachers were recruited to lead pods, while others set out to create their own learning communities and microschool models. These entrepreneurial educators are finding that they have many resources available to them to launch their own innovative schools.

A Platform for Entrepreneurship

“There are a lot of good teachers stuck in the broken system,” says Kirk Umbehr, cofounder of a.school, a learning management platform for teachers who are creating microschools.

“Instead of them leaving the profession altogether due to burnout, teachers can create a learning environment where they can thrive and have better outcomes with maximum autonomy and sustainability,” he says. Umbehr explains that a teacher can leave a public school and create a microschool with 10 to 15 students, earning the same or more money with less stress and more satisfaction.

The a.school software is free to use and helps educators to initiate and manage their microschool’s website, enrollment, communication and reporting systems, while enabling them to customize their own curriculum and policies. The edtech startup takes a percentage of the credit card billing fees.

Umbehr founded a.school earlier this year with his brother Dr. Josh Umbehr, a family physician in Kansas, who realized the parallels between healthcare and education. High levels of burnout, more paperwork and less time for personalized attention plague both doctors and teachers.

Several years earlier, the brothers built [Atlas.md](#), a practice management portal to help physicians strike out on their own with direct primary care practices that offer high-touch, membership-based healthcare services without insurance and related organizational hassles. Physicians are able to serve fewer patients with higher quality medical care while earning the same or more than they did in larger, red tape-laden medical practices.

“As our own kids grew, it became clear to us that teachers are suffering from almost the identical problem we are helping doctors with, to an eerie degree,” says Dr. Umbehr. “With physicians, there is high burnout from administratively bloated systems, more paperwork, less patient care and less pay. You can make those same correlations to teachers who are seeing more kids, spending less time with each kid, doing more paperwork, dealing with more bureaucracy and teaching to the test rather than being able to be creative,” he says.

Like doctors creating direct primary care practices, teachers creating microschools helps them to avoid burnout, earn a good living and do fulfilling work with optimal freedom and flexibility.

More Microschool Momentum

Microschools were gaining traction prior to the pandemic, with microschool networks such as Arizona-based [Prenda](#) leading the way. When I [profiled](#) Prenda in this column in October 2019, the company had 80 microschool locations throughout Arizona, mostly in private homes, serving approximately 550 students. Now, Prenda enrolls nearly 3,000 learners across Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, and New Hampshire.

“Between teacher strikes, Covid, and the school board wars, there has been a lot of energy spent in fights between adults, at the expense of kids learning,” says Kelly Smith, Prenda’s founder.

“Many educators, parents, and policy-makers are starting to see microschools as a format that balances small groups, flexibility and academics,” he adds.

Arizona students attend Prenda microschools tuition-free through the state’s extensive school choice policies that encourage education innovation, including supporting virtual charter school providers such as EdKey, Inc., with which Prenda partners.

An affiliation with EdKey is what enabled Tamara Becker to quickly launch her microschool this year in Fountain Hills, Arizona. An educator for over 25 years, Becker has worked in both district and virtual schools as a teacher, administrator, special education director, assistant superintendent, and most recently, as the superintendent of Primavera, Arizona's largest online school.

In August 2021, Becker launched the Adamo microschool with 12 students in kindergarten through seventh grade. Today, the school has 20 students and continues to expand, particularly as parents of children in the local district schools grow increasingly frustrated over mask and classroom quarantine policies. She plans to open additional Adamo microschools in the coming months.

Adamo uses a blend of hands-on, project-based learning, as well as the digital learning platform, Bright Thinker. The microschool employs only certified teachers, something Becker says separates her school from other microschool networks. She works hard to create a family-centered learning environment that prioritizes parents and customizes learning to each student's distinct needs. For instance, Adamo currently has two autistic children in the program who Becker says have flourished both socially and academically within the microschool setting.

"It's really re-energized me," says Becker. "As you move up in administrative roles, you get less connected to students so it's been nice to re-connect, get back to my teaching roots and do something different," she says.

Becker believes the pandemic has created the necessary conditions to spark education entrepreneurship and change, as more parents demand more learning choices for their children. "The way we've always structured education is not the way all students learn and thrive," says Becker, who encourages other educators to launch their own microschools.

"Take the leap," she urges. "We need people to take the risk, to think outside the box and to walk outside of their comfort zone because if we don't we're going to continue to fail a large percentage of our student population. Students need to be ignited and engaged and to love what it is they do every day when they come to school," says Becker.

Teachers should feel similarly ignited and engaged, and to love what they do every day 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 Harvard University.