

Micro-Schools Offer Kids A Customized, Hands-On Education

There's a world of difference between telling kids what they are supposed to know and teaching them how to learn.

As parents look for more and better education options, the up-and-coming phenomenon of micro-schooling aims to bridge the gap between facts and experience with project-based learning.

Although the micro-school movement launched in the U.S. and United Kingdom in just the past decade, aspects of it are much older. Homeschooling families may recognize traits in common with the co-ops they've been forming since the 1990s.

Each school is independent, so no two are just alike in emphasis, class structure, or curriculum. One might be K-12, another might only serve students through 5th grade, or offer only junior high and high school classes. The common trait, a population of fewer than 150 students, is what gives them their name.

The founders of one prominent micro-school, Acton Academy, hearkens back further than homeschool co-ops, to the [one-room schoolhouse](#) à la Laura Ingalls Wilder. But far from regimented memorization and recitation, micro-schooling uses forward-thinking, innovative methods to feed children's voracious appetite for new experiences and ideas.

Jeff and Laura Sandefer started [Acton Academy](#) when they realized that their sons' experience in a Montessori school promised a difficult transition into traditional school.

So, they built their own school model around ideas of character growth and independent learning. Faculty members act

as “guardrails” for the students’ own curiosity, [one student explains](#), helping the students to structure their time and set goals that are both realistic and challenging.

At the Austin, Texas, campus, the Sandefers bring their entrepreneurial spirit into every class, encouraging their students to make lots of mistakes—so that they can learn a lot from them.

Merit badges serve in place of high school transcripts, signifying achievements in trigonometry, an apprenticeship, or a topic in literature or history, for example.

Another micro-school, [Brightworks](#) in San Francisco, forms its K-12 students into groups (called “bands”) that explore a single topic with research, experiments, field trips, and personal projects.

For one band, the topic of “cloth” inspires projects from fashion design to engineering. A kayak camping trip investigates the role of cloth as shelter, and a garment-construction challenge teaches students to use sewing machines.

Integration and immersion are the key practices at [BB International School](#) in Pompano Beach, Florida, which features four hours of second-language training every day for its age-integrated elementary classes.

The new language is integrated into the day’s scheduled activities—which may include filming an opera adaptation or preparing a meal. The students absorb the second language informally, in the same way they absorb English.

Some micro-schools are designed to support families already in nontraditional schooling. [Brooklyn Apple Academy](#) in New York, which prefers the title of “home-school resource and community center” to “school,” features a full wood shop and daily “tinkering school” hours.

Wednesdays are for field trips, and Fridays are for the outdoors. Families can sign up for weekly morning or afternoon sessions, for full days of the week, or for particular classes, such as radio broadcasting, ecology, or game design.

As with traditional private schools, micro-schools can be surprisingly affordable. BB International School costs just [10 percent more](#) than the Florida public school average per student.

Along with private scholarships, the state's tax-credit scholarship program helps BB International's parents cover that cost. Tax-credit scholarships currently help more than 270,000 students in 18 states attend the school that is the right fit for them.

Education savings accounts and school voucher options greatly expand education choice for families. Education savings accounts move education funds allocated to a student onto a prepaid bank card. Parents can then use the funds for their child's educational costs, such as tuition at one of these micro-schools.

More than 15,000 students use education savings accounts in the five states that offer them, and about 180,000 students across the United States use school vouchers to pay for private school tuition.

Micro-schools are one answer to many students' needs. They are not the only answer, and they are not the answer for everyone. But their innovation points to a broader movement in which students and their parents are taking control of their education, and building a better life for themselves.

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