

# The Rising Trend in Private Education: Teeny, Tiny Schools; Families reacting to an influx of voucher funds and postpandemic woes are increasingly choosing so-called microschoools

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## FULL TEXT

Amanda Ray's son attended public school from prekindergarten to fifth grade. But when he qualified for West Virginia's school voucher program for the 2023-24 school year, Ray jumped at the opportunity to enroll her son in Eyes and Brains STEM Center, a small private school serving a total of six students in kindergarten to seventh grade.

Ray's son had struggled with reading and writing, but the smaller setting allows him to develop a close relationship with his teacher, who is able to tailor lessons to his interests, such as a writing assignment about his favorite characters in the game Dungeons & Dragons.

"It's the perfect fit for him," Ray said.

Eyes and Brains STEM Center is one of a fast-growing number of so-called microschoools in the U.S., which often serve between five and 25 students and operate as tuition-based private schools or learning centers for home-schoolers. Currently approximately 125,000 microschoools exist across the country, reflecting an increase since the pandemic, according to Don Soifer, chief executive of the National Microschooling Center.

Across the U.S., microschoools likely serve between one to two million students, said Michael McShane, director of national research at EdChoice, an organization advocating for school choice policies.

In some states, new voucher laws that provide more families with state funds for private-school tuition or home schooling and other academic expenses are helping to finance the growth in microschool enrollment. Those opposed to vouchers say the funding siphons money from traditional public schools to private schools that aren't accountable to rigorous state oversight.

Eric Eisenbrey left his 10-year job teaching math and science at a West Virginia public school to open the Eyes and Brains STEM Center in July. He credits the state's voucher program for his school's successful opening, adding that not enough families would have joined the microschool if they had to pay \$6,600 out-of-pocket for tuition.

Microschoools' popularity grew during the pandemic as parents searched for small, in-person learning opportunities that served as alternatives to online instruction, said Kerry McDonald, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education, a nonprofit educational organization supporting free-market principles.

"I really think we're at the beginning of what will be an ongoing movement toward personalized, learner-centered, unconventional education models," McDonald said.

Prenda, a company that provides curricula and logistical support to new microschoools, served around 80 schools before the pandemic, said founder and CEO Kelly Smith. The company now serves around 200 microschoools and hopes to expand in states with public funding available for school choice models.

Barnett Berry, a research professor at the University of South Carolina and a senior research fellow at the Learning Policy Institute, described microschoools as an "updated version of the one-room schoolhouse." While microschoools' setups widely vary, they often employ a few teachers who serve students across several grades housed in a common learning space.

The model can foster a close-knit community among students and teachers, but families may also worry about the lack of diverse perspectives or extracurriculars available in smaller school settings, said Ashley Jochim, a researcher at the Center on Reinventing Public Education.

Voucher programs have long faced pushback from teachers unions and public-school advocates who fight to prevent taxpayer funds from being funneled to private schools.

When executed well, microschoools can be a viable option for families, said Dale Lee, president of the West Virginia Education Association, a statewide organization for public-school teachers. But state funds should remain in the public school system, where there are more regulations and safeguards monitoring the quality of schools, he said.

"If you do it correctly, that's your right," Lee said of voucher programs. "For the large majority of students, the public school is the greatest equalizer."

In Arizona, which runs one of the most generous voucher programs in the country because of a law passed last year, Mindful Hearts K-4 Learning Academy in Queen Creek serves 10 students. CEO and founder Amanda Comage-Trower said the microschoool gives priority to mental health and hands-on learning, adding that the shortened school week running from Tuesday to Friday aims to reduce families' stress and allow them to spend more time together.

The school charges \$6,000 a year in tuition, Comage-Trower said, but all 10 of her students are voucher recipients. Because voucher amounts vary by students' needs and ages, out-of-pocket costs are different for each family, Comage-Trower added.

Since making the switch to Mindful Hearts this year, Gina Caccavella said her 8-year-old son has gone from having breakdowns after school to asking if he can attend class even on the weekends. His previous classes in the local public school served up to 30 students, which created learning environments that distracted and overwhelmed her son, Caccavella said.

"I have seen so much less stress from my son, so much less tears, so much more happy drop-offs and pickups," Caccavella said.

Microschoool regulations and oversight vary by state. In Arizona, microschoools receiving state funds through vouchers don't need to follow state academic standards or issue standardized tests to track student learning, said Beth Lewis, director and co-founder of Save Our Schools Arizona, an organization that advocates for public education funding and fought the voucher movement.

When families lack the time or resources to closely monitor their children's learning, they may end up pursuing low-quality school options, Lewis added.

"Choice is great, but if you're being offered a host of subpar choices, choice isn't so great," Lewis said.

In Florida, microschoool accountability is market-driven, said Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that helps administer Florida's voucher program. The state expanded school choice earlier this year in a law making vouchers available to all students, regardless of their families' income. Voucher recipients need to take standardized tests to track their academic progress, but the state can't shut down a microschoool solely based on poor test scores, Tuthill added.

In New York City, The Beekman School is in a five-story brownstone, and enrolls approximately 70 students in grades nine through 12 who pay about \$49,000 a year. In some ways, the school follows a traditional education, said head of school Maren Holmen, citing Beekman's accreditation and adherence to state learning standards. But, she added, the high school has an average class size of seven students and provides individuals with greater flexibility in their coursework and schedules.

New York doesn't have a voucher program, but, since the pandemic, Holmen said she has seen more families transitioning from the public school system to Beekman.

"If there's been anything that's been highlighted in a postpandemic world, it's how necessary being attuned to the individual needs of the student is," Holmen said.

Isabella Falls, age 17, transferred to Beekman for her final year of high school. After struggling with academic burnout, Falls said she sought out Beekman for more personalized attention from her teachers and a unique

schedule that allowed her to finish her junior and senior year coursework in one school year.

"I think a lot of people are really struggling with being overstimulated, especially a lot of teens, and only were able to recognize that post-Covid," Falls said. "So having institutions like this that are already small and more mundane, I think, really changed the game."

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