



# MICROSCHOOL TRENDS IN ESA STATES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's American microschoooling movement continues to receive high-profile coverage across national and local news media and education policy publications. Much of this coverage has focused on microschoools in states with active Education Savings Account (ESA) school choice programs. While innovative small learning environments represent a popular choice in these states, they can also be found widely in all regions of the country, including states without school choice programs.

Have microschoooling sectors in ESA states evolved differently than those without them? This analysis considers a number of defining microschoool characteristics, trends and factors to seek clarity to this question. Its findings regarding the educational approaches, types of facilities, size, founders' professional backgrounds and other important details show many shared traits, and some noteworthy differences, between the microschoooling sectors in ESA states and those that do not have these school choice programs in place. Details follow.



**"We believe, as families, that we should have the right to choose what kinds of schools work best for our kids."**

**-Microschool Network Leader, Florida**

# INTRODUCTION

Microschooling founders and families are not willing to continue waiting patiently for government schooling opportunities to improve when they can provide better, often nontraditional opportunities now. This includes waiting for state school choice programs to be passed and implemented. In fact, microschooling ecosystems can be just as robust and dynamic in other states which seem far less likely to see ESA programs passed and implemented anytime soon, while families feel their children are in need of school options now.

Today's American microschooling is a far-reaching, highly diversified movement in every way, particularly when it comes to the seemingly unending array of different microschool models operating around the country. Because very little happens meaningfully in education in a vacuum, these emerge in response to factors within the communities, and states, around them.

These driving factors can include the specific needs of the particular children and families they serve, distinct policy and regulatory frameworks within each state, and the strengths and background of their founders. For these reasons and more, microschools are almost as unique as the children they serve.

Education Savings Account programs (ESAs) in states where microschools are able to participate can certainly represent significant policy developments likely to influence the sector's growth and development. Families seeking new education options they see as a better fit for their children's schooling needs than their current choices are able to utilize ESAs to join, and often launch, innovative, nontraditional small learning environments of their own.

This analysis examines microschools in Arizona, Florida, Tennessee and West Virginia, in comparison with microschools in the United States overall, as surveyed by the National Microschooling Center during the 2023–2024 school year.

These four states represent those with operating ESA programs which allow microschool participation broadly. It should be noted that several states with ESA programs currently are not included in this analysis. Two factors contributed to this decision:

Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina and Utah currently have statewide ESA programs, but these became law too recently and had not been implemented at the time this research was conducted. New Hampshire also has a limited ESA program with some participating microschools.

The ESA programs operating in Indiana and Iowa include program restrictions which effectively exclude microschools from participating for most students. Prominent among these are an Iowa accreditation requirement combined with approved accrediting bodies limited to those designed for larger, traditional schools) and student eligibility requirements in the Indiana program which limit participation to students with special needs.

## About Microschools

Microschools are innovative small learning environments, generally organized nontraditionally and outside of established education systems. Depending on a range of factors including the policy and regulatory frameworks of the states in which they reside, microschools can operate as private schools, learning centers serving children following their state's homeschool rules, and in some cases as charter schools or even district-operated public schools.

Today's microschooled movement operates outside the panoply of definitions prevalent across American elementary and secondary education. While this generally presents a challenge to researchers seeking to count and compare microschools, experts who are familiar with the sector estimate that there are close to 100,000 operating today, serving as the primary source of schooling for between one and two million children.

As discussed above, in a small, growing number of states, families are able to utilize school choice program funds to pay for the costs of attending a microschool. In other states, microschools are tuition-based, although in some cases private (or occasionally public) partners contribute resources to help microschools provide equitable opportunities.

How do microschools operating in ESA states compare with microschools nationally? This analysis offers some insights.

## Overview of Findings

The prevailing trends for microschools in ESA states studied have strong parallels to those of microschools studied around the country, as well as several distinct variations in certain areas. These variations may to some extent be attributable to effects produced in response to certain specific policies, as will be discussed. It is also important to consider, however, the presence of other factors which may have contributed. Because microschools can be, and often are, created in response to the specific needs of the particular children and families they serve, it can be expected that these will vary between communities, and therefore between states.

The median average for number of students served per microschool, 15 for ESA states and 16 for microschools nationally, presents an example of how microschooled remained consistent. Microschools' small size is, after all, a strong attractor for families and educators alike.

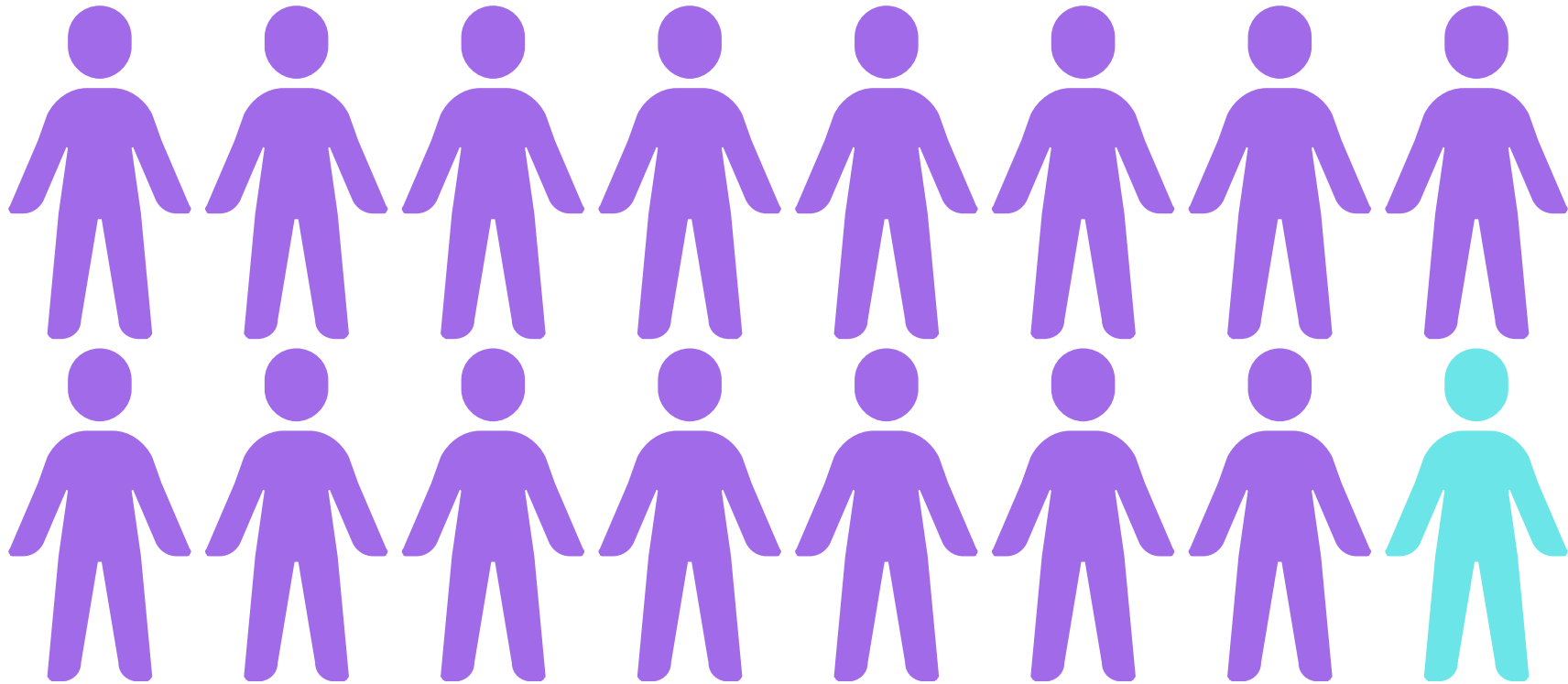
On the other hand, microschools generally report serving children representing certain populations frequently associated with higher risk educationally (i.e., children with neurodiversity, other special needs, or those whose educational mastery is at 2 or more grades below grade level performance as defined by their state), at substantially higher rates than public schools do. Some of these populations are represented at significantly higher rates in both ESA state microschools and those nationally. Many of these categories of students, however, are somewhat more prevalent at microschools nationally than in ESA states. The reasons are likely the result of a combination of interrelated factors, which may include but are not limited to specific details of their states' ESA program and implementation.

Data collected for 400 microschools representing 41 states were analyzed for this report.

# NUMBER OF STUDENTS

The median number of students served in microschoools studied nationally, 16, is only slightly larger than the median in ESA states, 15 students.

**How many children are you currently serving?**

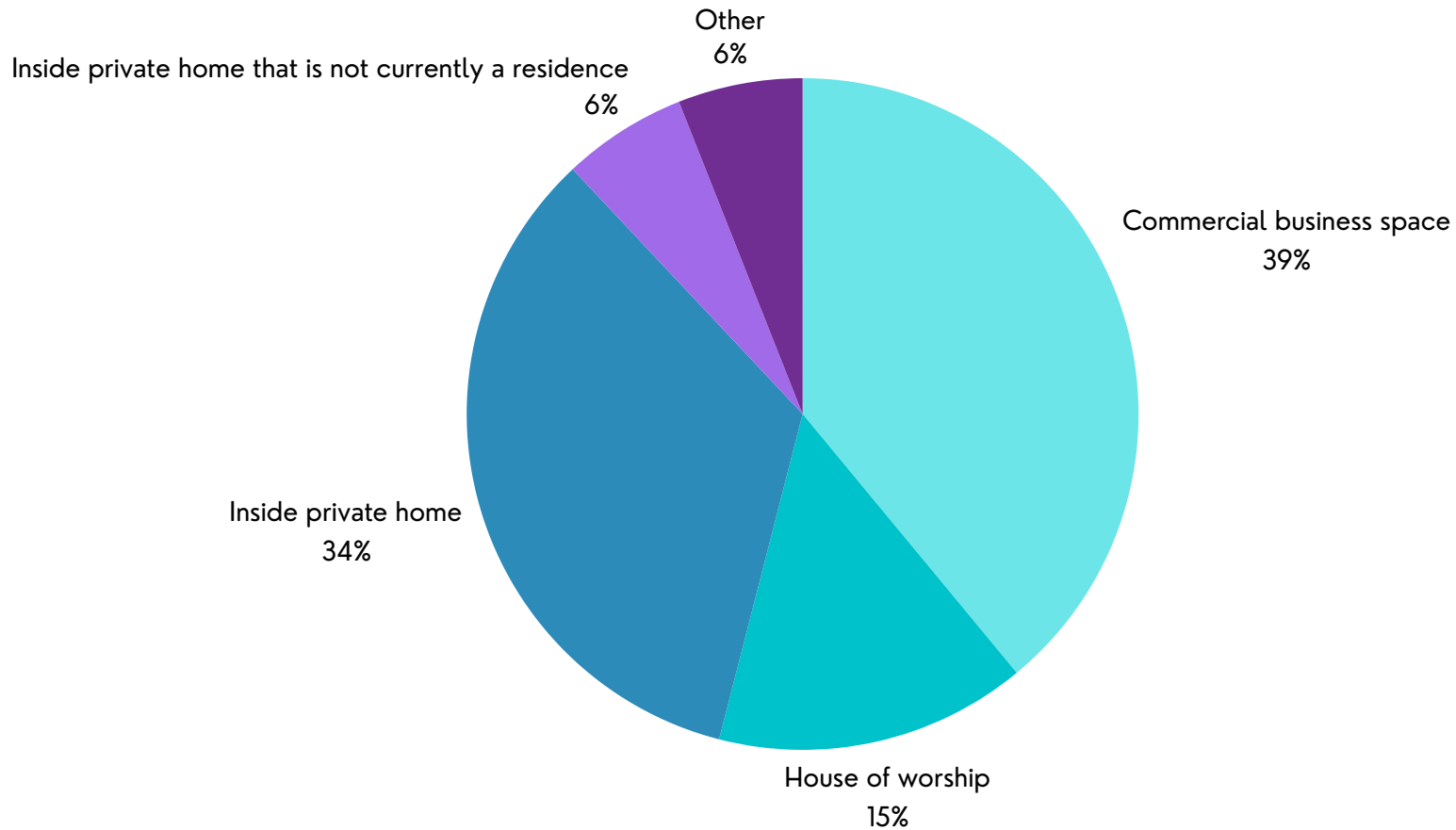


**"We are a community of learners who really wants everybody to get to be themselves."  
- Microschool Founder, Tennessee**

# FACILITIES

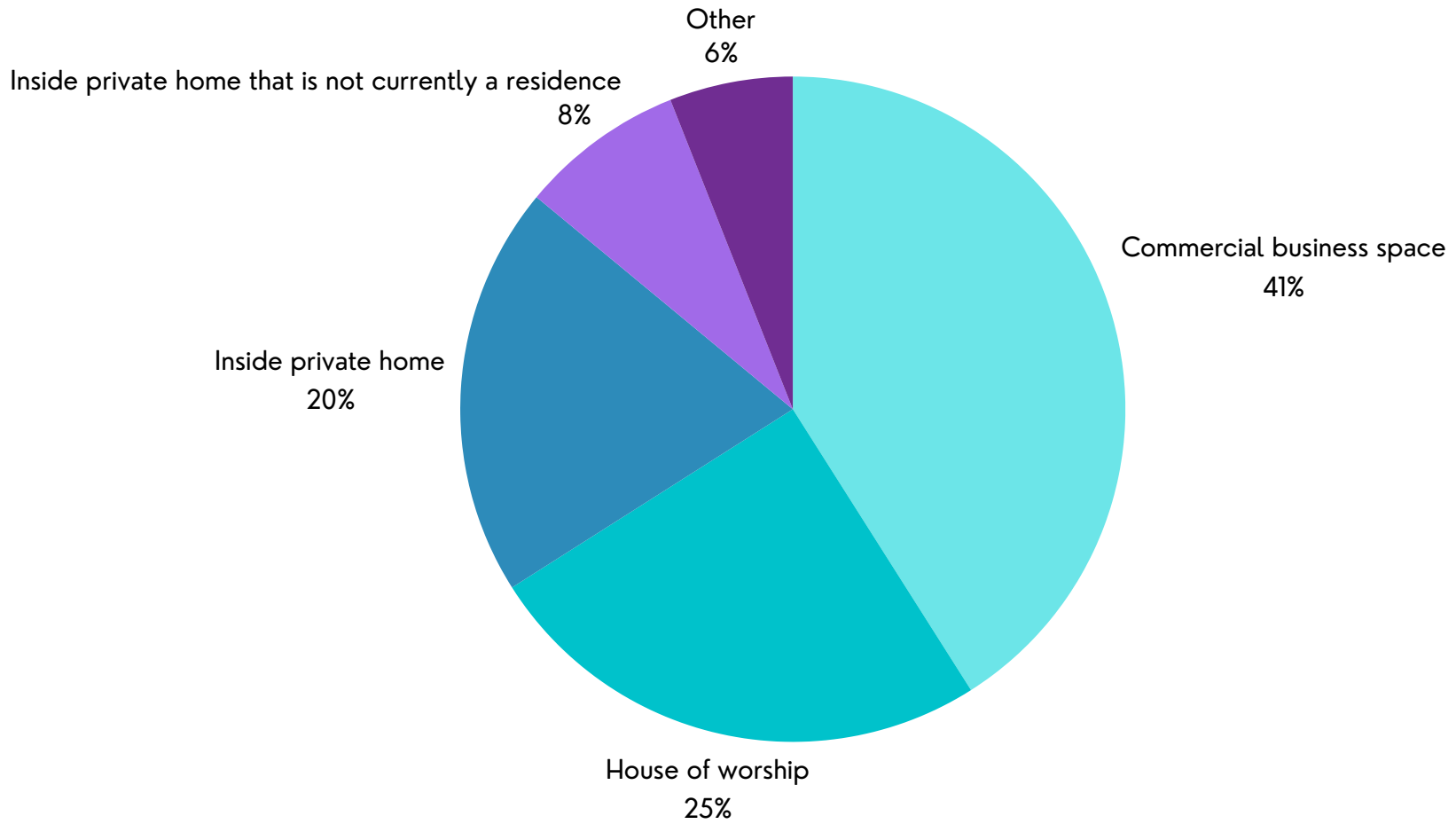
Commercial business space was the most common facility location for microschoools both in ESA states and nationally. Inside private homes was the location of 34% of ESA state microschoools, compared with 20% nationally. Houses of worship housed 15% of microschoools in ESA states, 24% nationally. Microschoools convened in various other space, including government-controlled spaces (i.e., libraries or community recreation centers) were more common in ESA states (6%).

## ESA States: What facility do you currently operate in?



# FACILITIES CONT...

## National: What facility do you currently operate in?

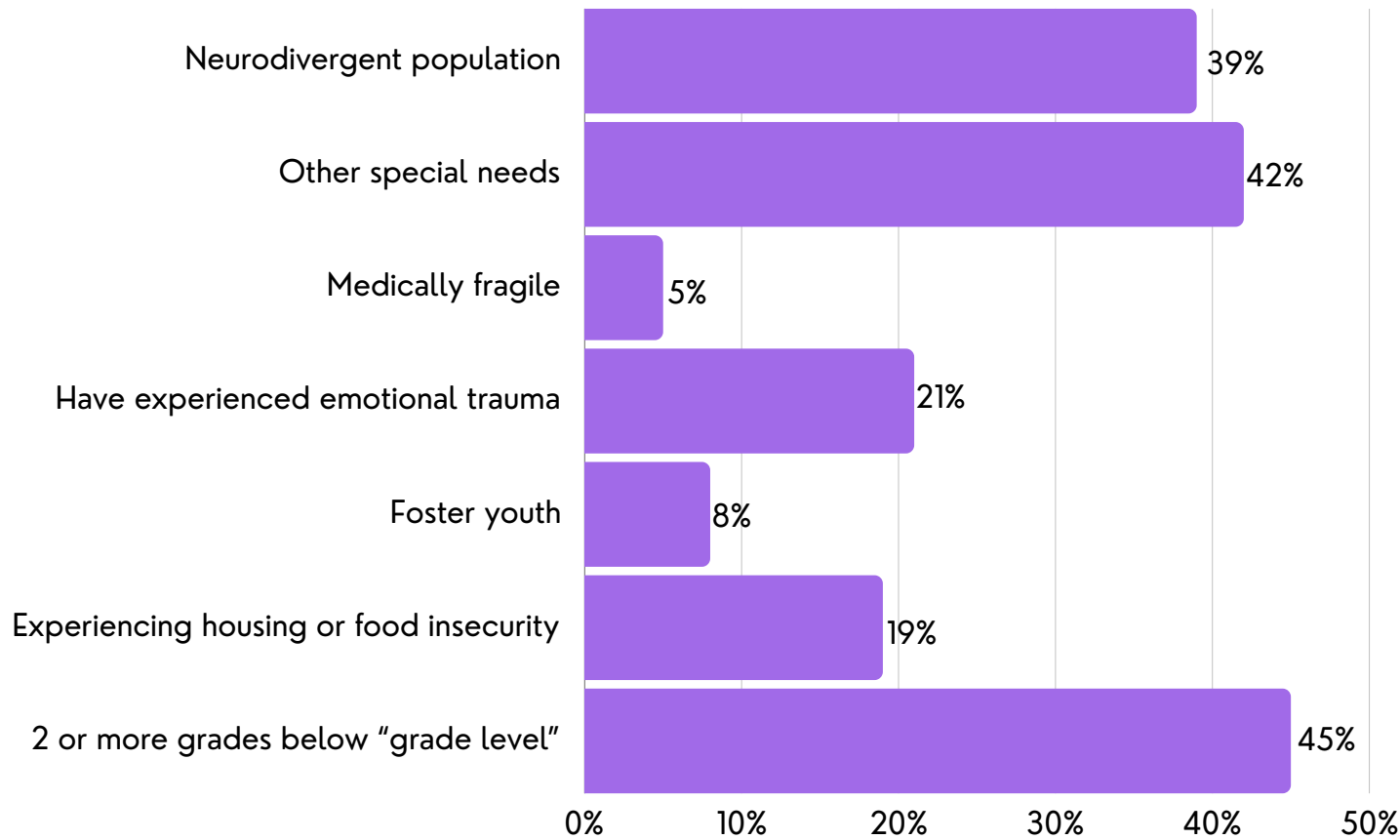


# POPULATIONS SERVED

Microschool founders seek out children who are not thriving in their previous schooling environments, so it is to be expected that they will serve a higher proportion of students who represent communities generally perceived to be at higher risk educationally. Microschools in ESA states report serving children performing at two or more grade levels below “grade level performance” as defined in their state (45%), children demonstrating neurodiversity (39%), and other special needs (42%). Approximately one in five ESA state microschools serve children who have experienced emotional trauma or are currently experiencing food or housing insecurity.

These patterns of serving children representing populations at higher educational risk are generally congruous with microschools studied nationally, although representation of these groups is somewhat more prevalent in the national sample.

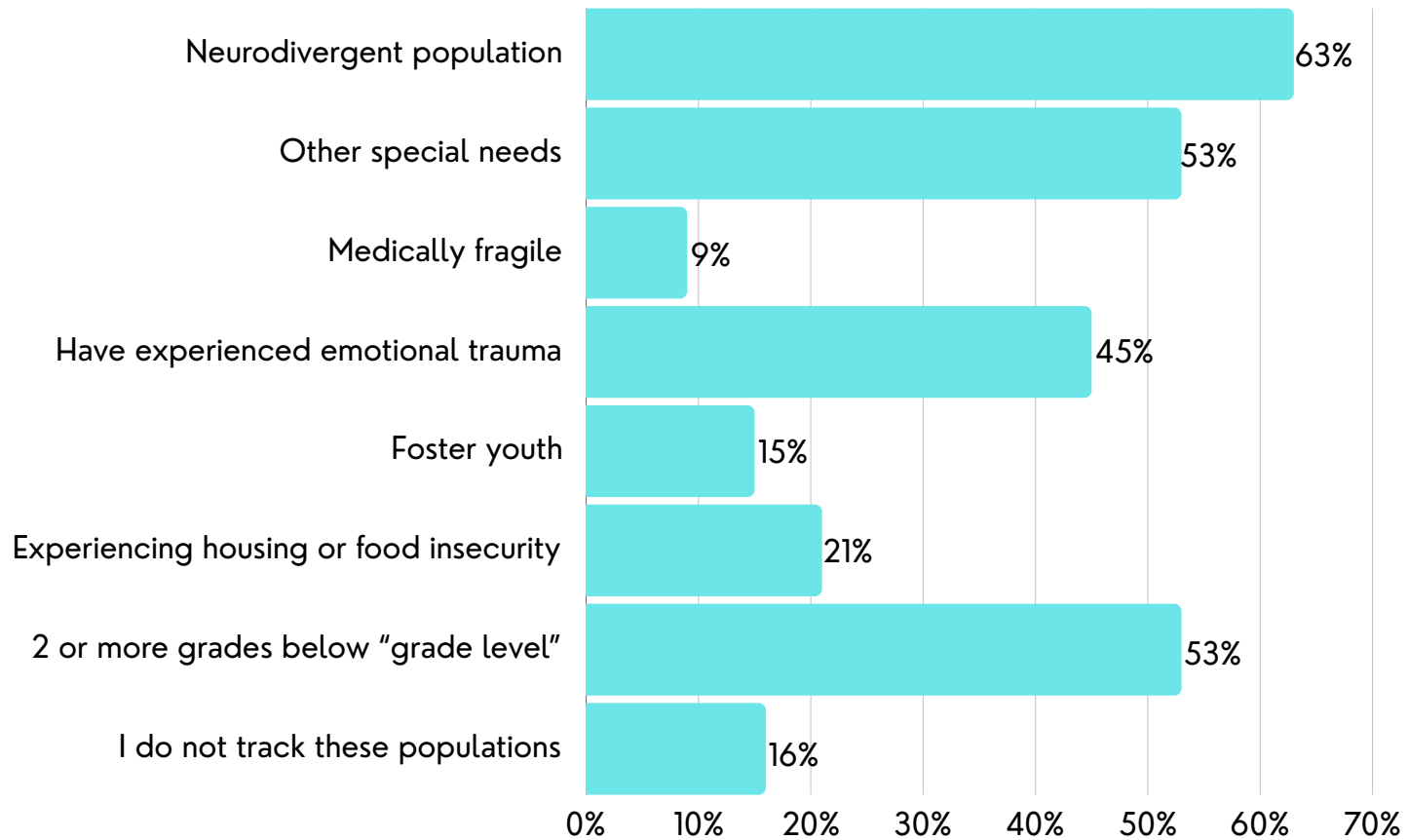
## ESA States: Do you currently serve children from the following populations? (Select all that apply)





# POPULATIONS SERVED CONT...

**National: Do you currently serve children from the following populations?  
(Select all that apply)**



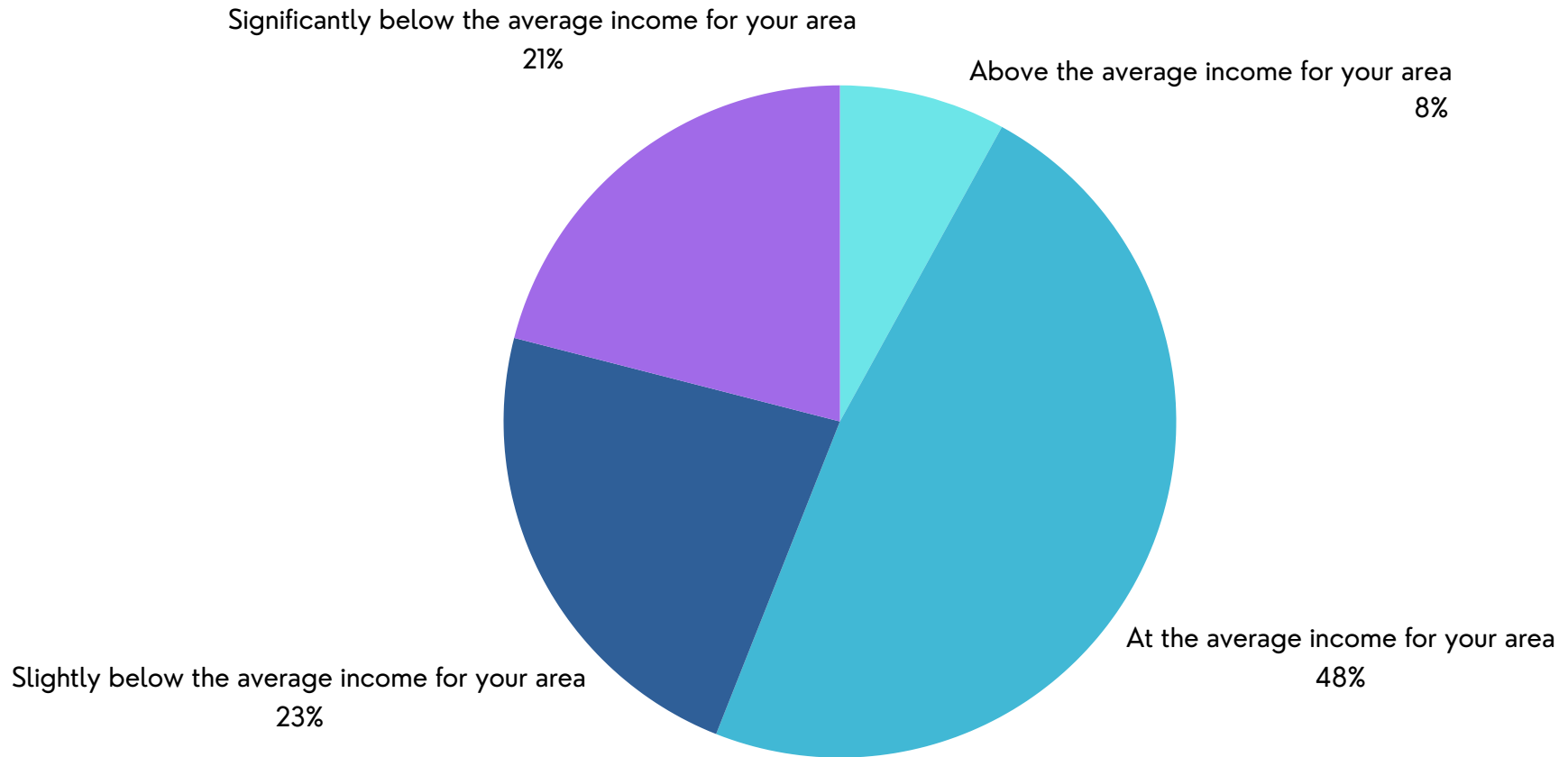
**"Microschools allow students the flexibility to learn in an environment that's best for them."  
-Microschool Founder, Florida**

# RELATIVE HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF CHILDREN SERVED

Microschool leaders report that 8% of microschoools serve children from households whose income is above the average for their area in ESA states, compared with 12% nationally. In ESA states, 23% of microschoools report serving children with household income slightly below the average for their area, and 21% with household income significantly below.

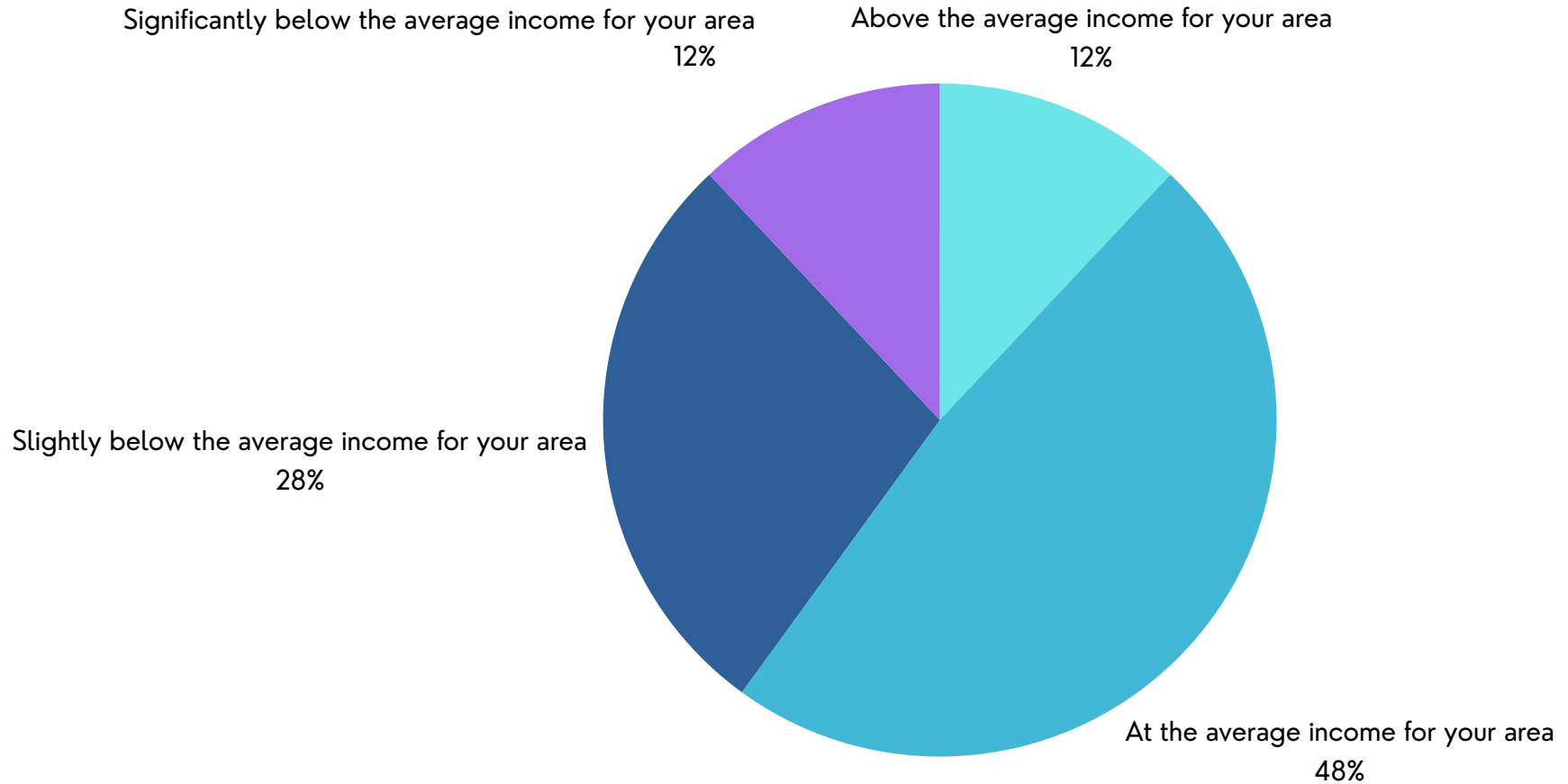
In comparison, microschoools nationally reported serving children from these below-average-income households at rates of 28% and 12% respectively.

## ESA: To the best of your knowledge, are your families on average:



# RELATIVE HOUSEHOLD INCOME OF CHILDREN SERVED CONT...

**National: To the best of your knowledge, are your families on average:**

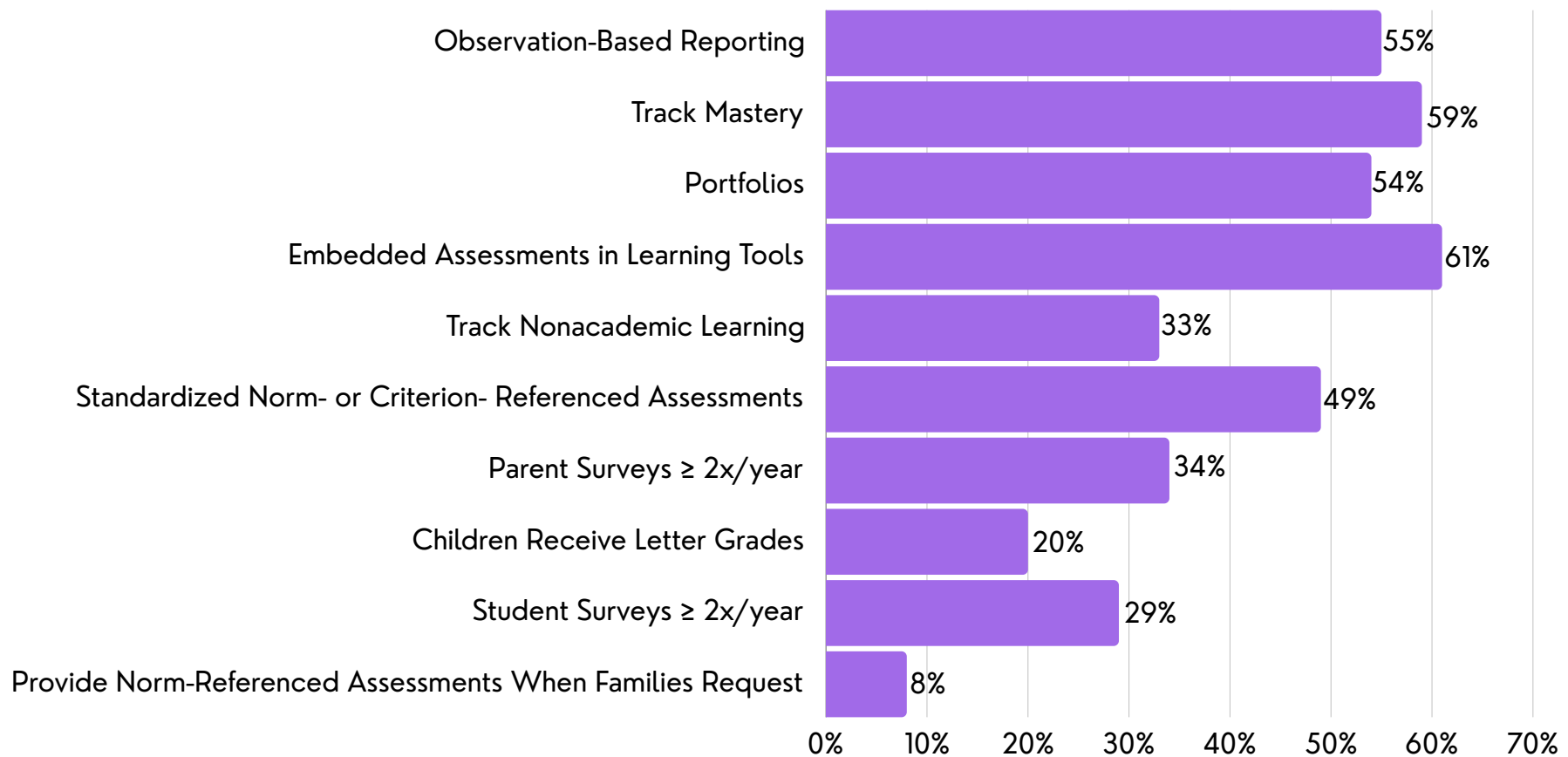


# WAYS OF MEASURING IMPACT

Microschools generally operate outside of public school performance frameworks and standardized testing regimes. Subsequently, they rely on other mechanisms for demonstrating their impact, selected for their alignment with their particular missions and models.

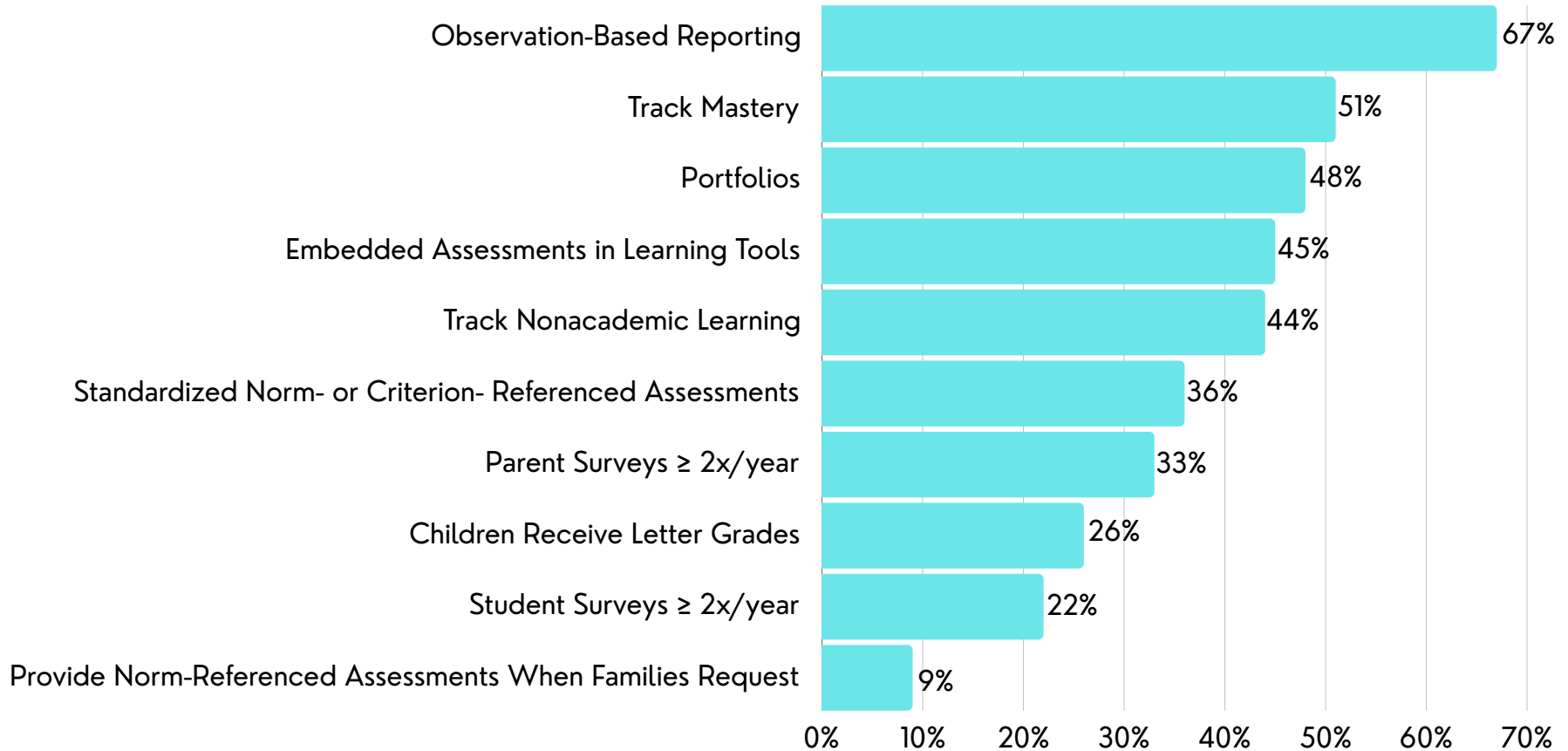
The four most prevalent methods microschools in ESA states report for measuring and demonstrating their impact are through embedded assessments in digital learning tools (61%), tracking mastery across specific domains (59%), observation-based reporting (55%) and evaluation of portfolios of student work (54%). Microschools nationally reported the same four methods as being their most prevalent, with similar parallels across other reported mechanisms.

## ESA States: How do you demonstrate impact? (Select all that apply)



# WAYS OF MEASURING IMPACT CONT...

## National: How do you demonstrate impact? (Select all that apply)



**"A microschool is an incubator, bringing together the very best of what we know about the way people learn."  
-Microschool Founder, Tennessee**

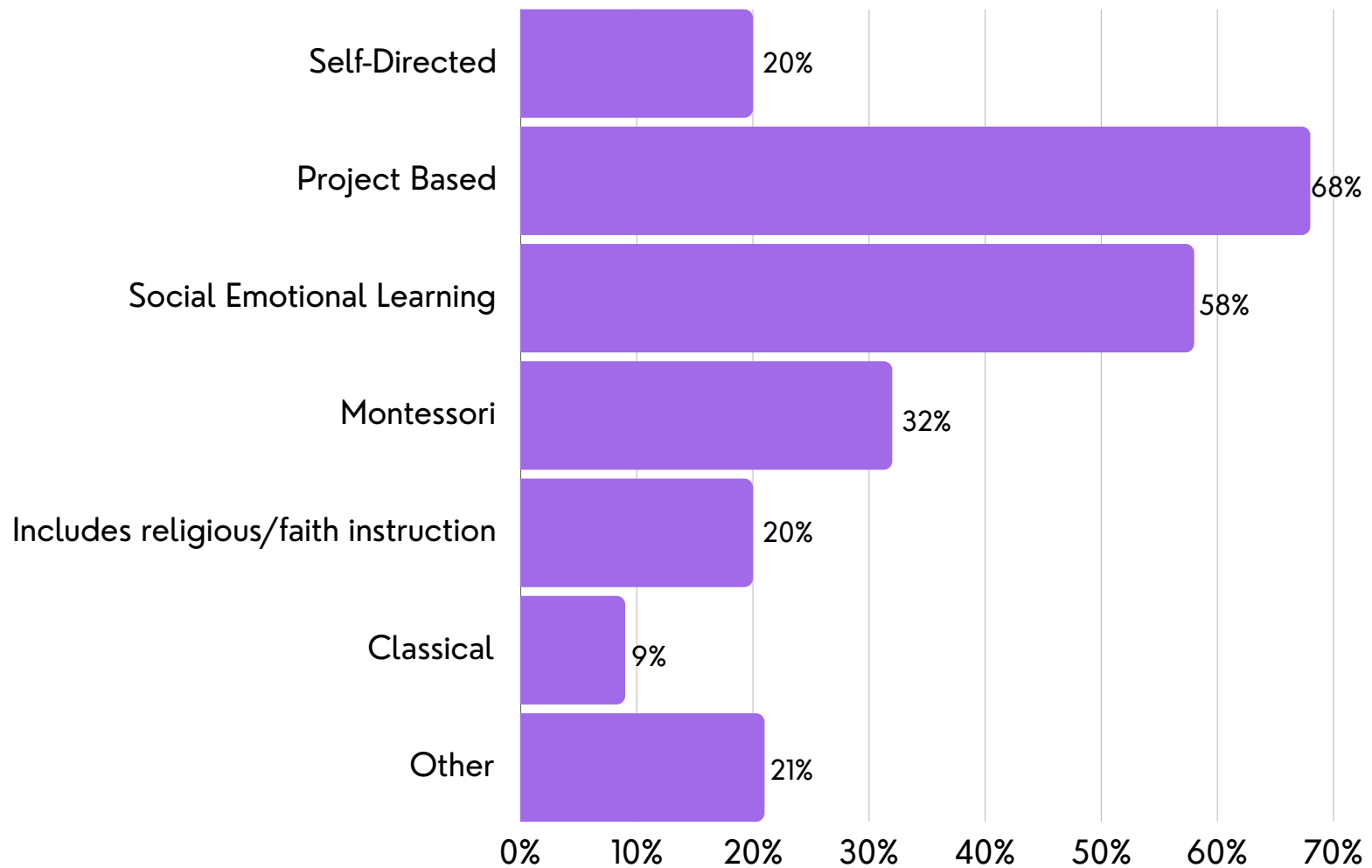


# EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

Microschools' small size and instructional flexibility allow their leaders to employ educational models designed around the particular educational needs of the learners they serve. It is therefore not surprising to those familiar with the sector that project-based learning and social-emotional learning models, both widely popular with families and educators alike, represent two of the top three educational approaches used in microschoools both nationally and in ESA states (respondents were permitted to select multiple approaches used).

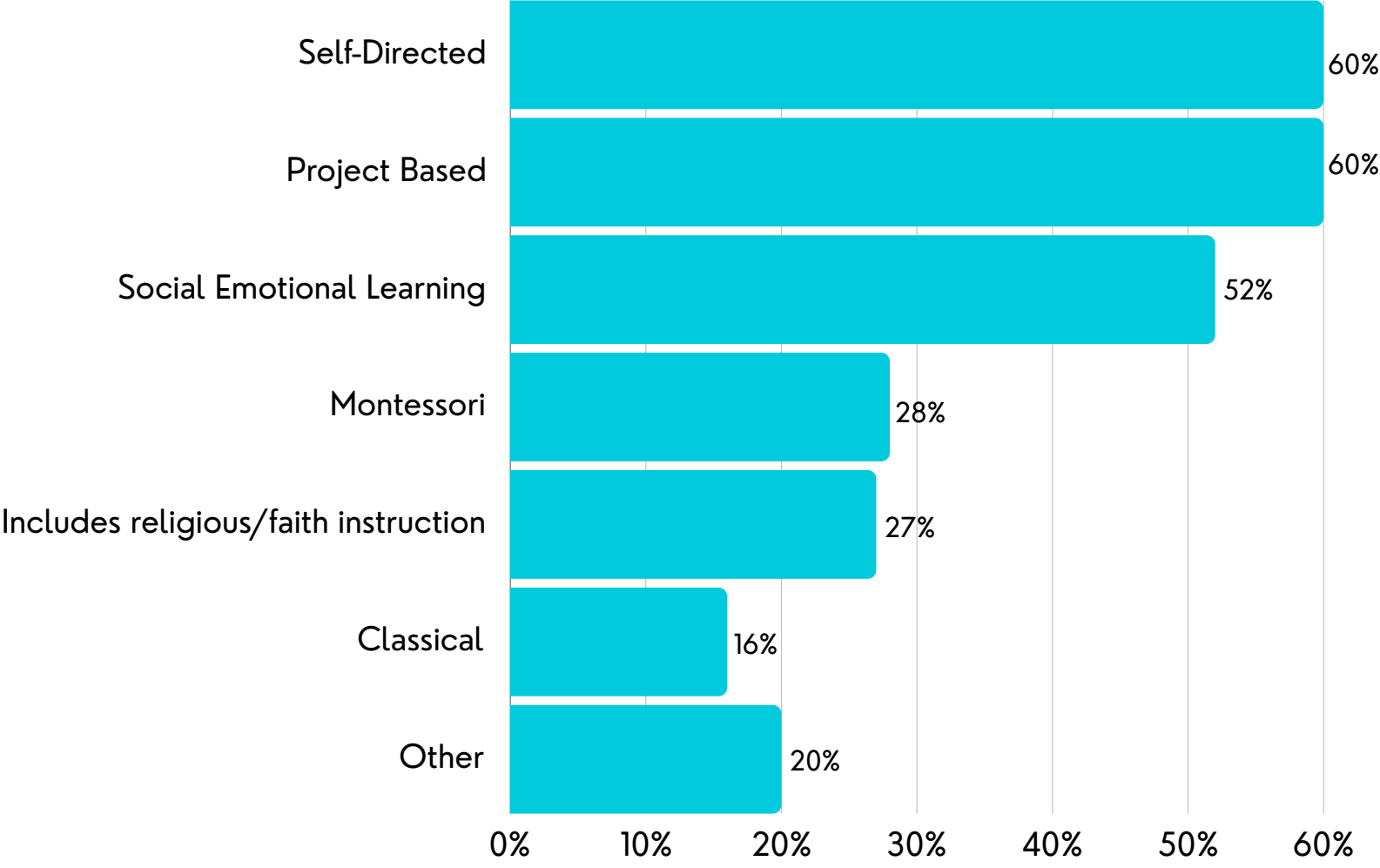
Meanwhile, self-directed learning models, utilized by 60% of microschoools nationally, were found in only 20% of microschoools in ESA states.

## ESA States: Does your educational approach include? (Select all that apply)



# EDUCATIONAL APPROACH CONT...

National: Does your educational approach include? (Select all that apply)

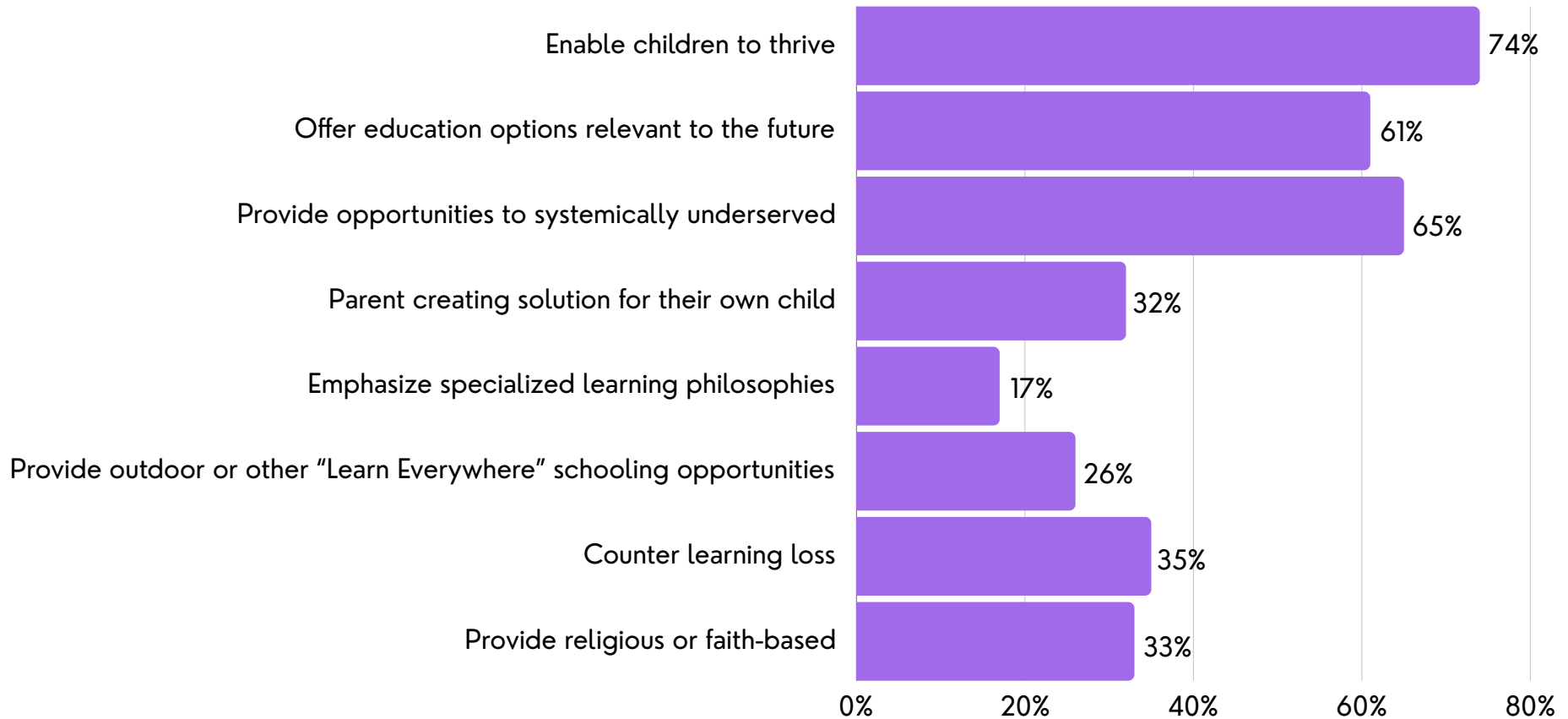


# FOUNDERS' MOTIVATIONS

When prospective, pre-launch founders were asked their main motivations for creating their microschool, the top three reasons were identified by leaders in ESA states and nationally: enabling children to thrive in their schooling setting, offering educational options relevant to their future, and providing opportunities for children representing groups that have been systemically underserved by existing educational options.

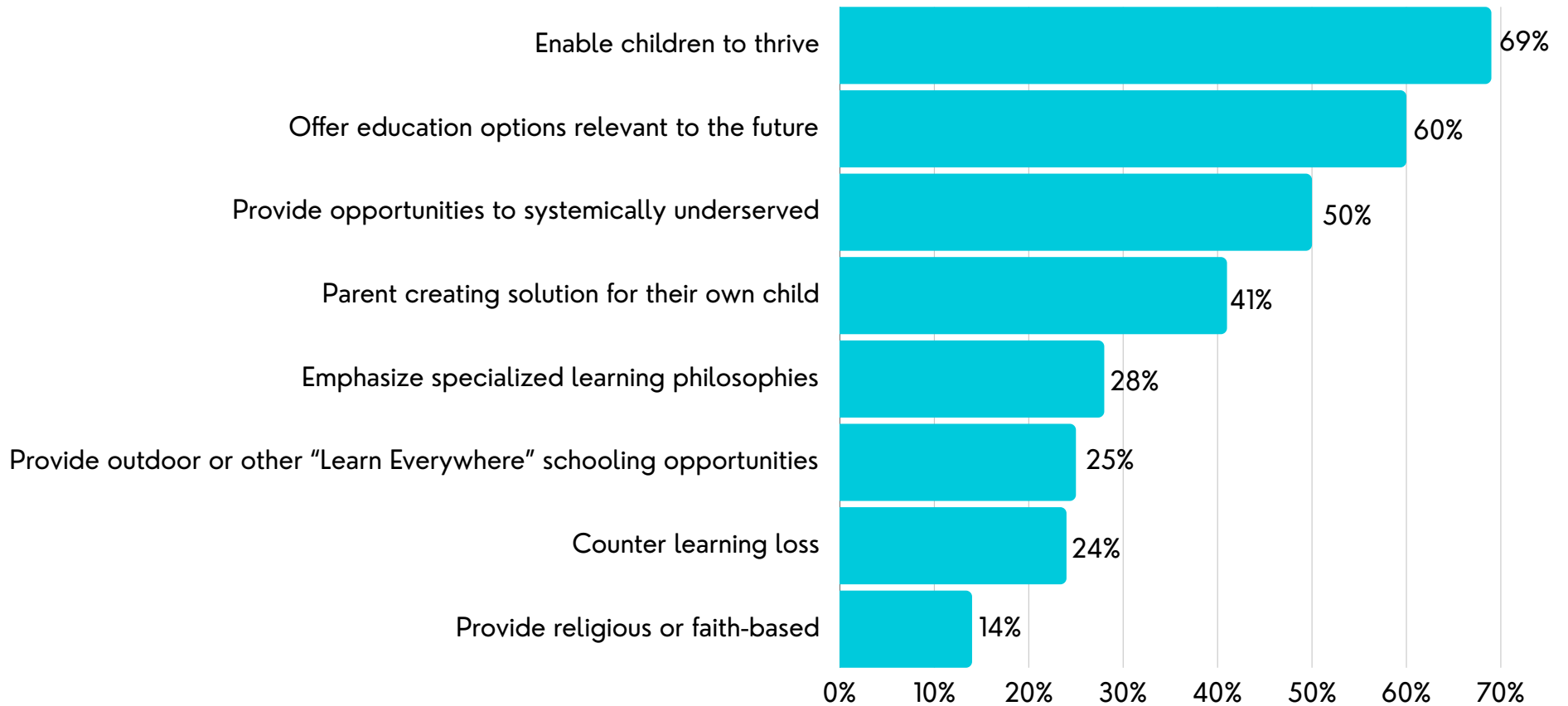
In both sets of responses, more than one-third of founders cited creating educational solutions for their own children as a main motivation for creating their microschool.

## ESA States: What are Prospective Founders' main motivations? (Select all that apply)



# FOUNDERS' MOTIVATIONS CONT...

**National: What are Prospective Founders' main motivations?  
(Select all that apply)**



# CONCLUSION

As these findings have demonstrated, microschools located in states with active ESA programs in which they participate have a great deal in common with those in states without them. Many of the characteristics which define a microschooling experience for the children attending them: their small size, the prevalence of certain popular education approaches, the types of facilities they utilize, and the ways in which microschools demonstrate their impact – are generally quite similar regardless of where they operate.

Likewise, the professional backgrounds of microschool founders follow similar profiles, with slightly more than two-thirds likely to be currently or formerly-licensed professional educators, differ little between the two groups. And the tools microschools rely on to measure their impact to families and other stakeholders generally share a marked departure from those found in traditional public schools: children in microschools receive letter grades, for instance, in only one-fourth of microschools nationally and only one-fifth of those in ESA states.

Yet certain differences can also be seen. Self-directed learning models, for example, were found to be far less common in ESA states (60%) than in microschools nationally (20%). Microschools were more likely to be operated in private homes (34%), and less likely to be convened in houses of worship (15%), in the ESA states studied than in the nation's microschooling sector overall (20% and 25% respectively).

To what extent can such differences in microschool characteristics be attributed to aspects of particular state ESA program policies?

It should be noted that while specific policy provisions in the ESA programs in Arizona, Florida, Tennessee and West Virginia are fairly similar, other policy and regulatory frameworks both within education policy and elsewhere, such as zoning and land use regulations, can be limiting requirements for microschools.

Given that the evolution of microschooling movements in different states and communities represents a response to many contributing factors, we should not look solely to specific ESA policies to explain all of these differences. Yet, where policy and regulatory frameworks designed for larger, traditional school models may be limiting microschooling's pluralism of different models families seek, the impacts of these should be understood.



For instance, can a combination of accreditation requirements for ESA participation combined with a limited number of accreditation processes, designed for larger, traditional schools and effectively prohibitive for microschools, be expected to limit available choices of school models? Or can excessive state requirements governing private schools or homeschool options prevent founders from offering the full range of innovative microschooling options families would seek for their own children?

As more state ESA programs come online during the 2024-25 school year and beyond, we will have more opportunities to study these potential impacts on the choices families are offered. Meanwhile, this analysis offers a number of substantive insights into the nation's growing microschool movement and the ways its evolution differs from more traditional education options.

*To view the full 2024 American Microschools: A Sector Analysis report please visit  
[microschoolingcenter.org/sectoranalysis2024](https://microschoolingcenter.org/sectoranalysis2024)*

**"I really do believe that it takes a village to raise children & that all of us should be invested in educating our children because they are the future."  
-Microschool Founder, Arizona**





## National Microschooling Center

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**The National Microschooling Center is a nonprofit resource hub and movement-builder committed to advancing the growth, health and evolution of the microschooling movement to live up to its fullest potential.**

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