

AMERICAN MICROSCHOOLS: A SECTOR ANALYSIS

APRIL 2024

By Don Soifer and Ashley Soifer



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When looking to gain insights to help understand today's American microschoooling movement, what are the defining characteristics, trends and factors which best illuminate what this growing movement is all about? This new, original analysis by the National Microschooling Center discusses prominent aspects about both currently-operating and prospective, pre-launch microschoools, exploring traits, priorities and backgrounds relating to founders, families and microschoool models themselves.

Among the findings:

- The median number of children served in microschoools studied is 16.
- More than half, 55 percent, of microschoools offer full-time weekly schedules, defined here as at least four days per week and four hours per day, while 28 percent offer part-time/hybrid schedules, and 17 percent offer families to choose between these.
- For both currently-operating and prospective, pre-launch microschoools, Project-Based Learning was the most prevalent factor prioritized in their educational approach, followed by social-emotional learning and self-directed learning approaches.
- Founders identify more children attending microschoools as being from households at the average income for their area (48 percent) or below the average income (40 percent), than above the average income for their area (12 percent).

Data collected for 400 microschoools representing 41 states were utilized for this report. Details follow.



NATIONAL MICROSCHOOLING CENTER

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INTRODUCTION

This 2024 edition of *American Microschools: A Sector Analysis* from the National Microschooling Center contains a number of changes from the 2023 report format. It studies responses from a larger base of microschoools, 400 currently-operating and prospective, pre-launch microschoools located in 41 states. It delves deeper into numerous aspects of today's microschoooling movement.

Like those of the 2023 version, this set of findings depicts a highly diversified movement, across many dimensions including a pluralism of educational approaches, instructional models, and impact indicators.

But despite these differences, the findings also indicate certain common commitments, priorities and goals that provide a unifying effect within this growing movement. To point to one illuminating example, 63 percent microschoools report serving populations of children with neurodiversity, 53 percent with other special needs, 53 percent whose educational attainment upon arrival is two or more grades below their chronological 'grade level,' and 45 percent have experienced emotional trauma.

As with the 2023 report, the racial composition of prospective, pre-launch founders was found to include more leaders of color (37 percent) than founders of currently-operating microschoools (27 percent), an indication that the movement overall is becoming 'less white.'

Overall, most of the major trends and observations from the earlier report remain intact among the broader set of findings here. The analysis which follows lays out a profile of a diversified sector whose leaders work to build and evolve the innovative small learning environments they lead to be responsive to the specific needs of the individual learners and families they serve.

About America's Microschooling Sector

The most definitive projection to date, by EdChoice researchers Paul DiPerna and Michael McShane in 2022, estimated that between 1.1 and 2.1 million children attend microschoools as their main provider of schooling.* Subsequent analyses by EdChoice and others have consistently produced larger market share projections.

It should be noted that while official, government definitions of what constitute microschoools are rare, microschoools organize differently in different jurisdictions for a variety of reasons. As discussed in this report, entities self-identifying as microschoools are organized as small nonpublic schools, learning centers serving children observing their state's homeschool requirements, public charter schools and even school-district-operated public schools.

**"All children deserve a shot. They all deserve a chance to succeed."
-Microschool Founder, Indiana**

*McShane, Michael Q. and Paul DiPerna, Just How Many Kids Attend Microschools, EdChoice, September 12, 2022, available online at: <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/just-how-many-kids-attend-microschools>

National Microschooling Center



The National Microschooling Center is the nation's preeminent nonprofit resource hub and movement-builder for today's microschooling sector, committed to advancing the growth, health and evolution of this movement to live up to its greatest potential.

Headquartered in Las Vegas, NV and working nationally, the Center launched in August 2022 and has experienced tremendous growth in its first two years.

The Center serves microschools, both current and potential, offering a wide range of services, consultations and an extensive program of trainings. The diverse experience and accomplishments of its team members is part of what makes the Center the leading force in the microschooling movement. Every team member at the Center is a current or former microschooling founder, leader or educator, and most are microschooling parents as well.

Methodology

This new, original analysis by the National Microschooling Center examined 400 microschools (currently-operating and prospective, pre-launch) representing 41 states. All responses were collected through either online questionnaires or interviews by the Center's research team. Responses were collected between November 2, 2023 and January 3, 2024.

PART I: THE FOUNDERS & LEADERS

Microschool founders, both prospective and current, are dynamic leaders who are creating solutions for their communities. They have disrupted their lives, oftentimes leaving secure jobs, to create these innovative learning environments.



"We are a community of learners who really wants everybody to get to be themselves."

- Microschool Founder, Tennessee

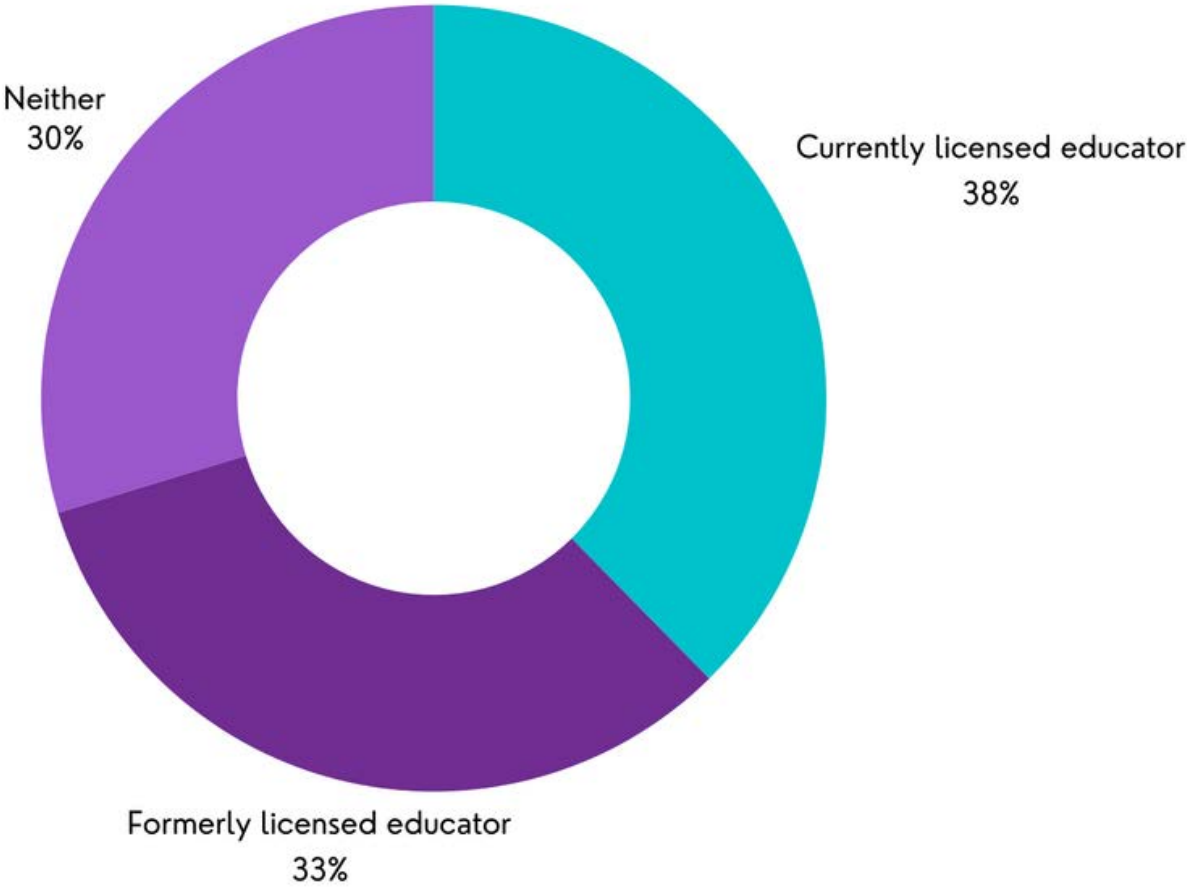
Founders' Professional Background

Among founders of currently-operating microschools surveyed, most identified as professional educators, with 38 percent currently-licensed and 33 percent holding educator's licenses which are not currently active.



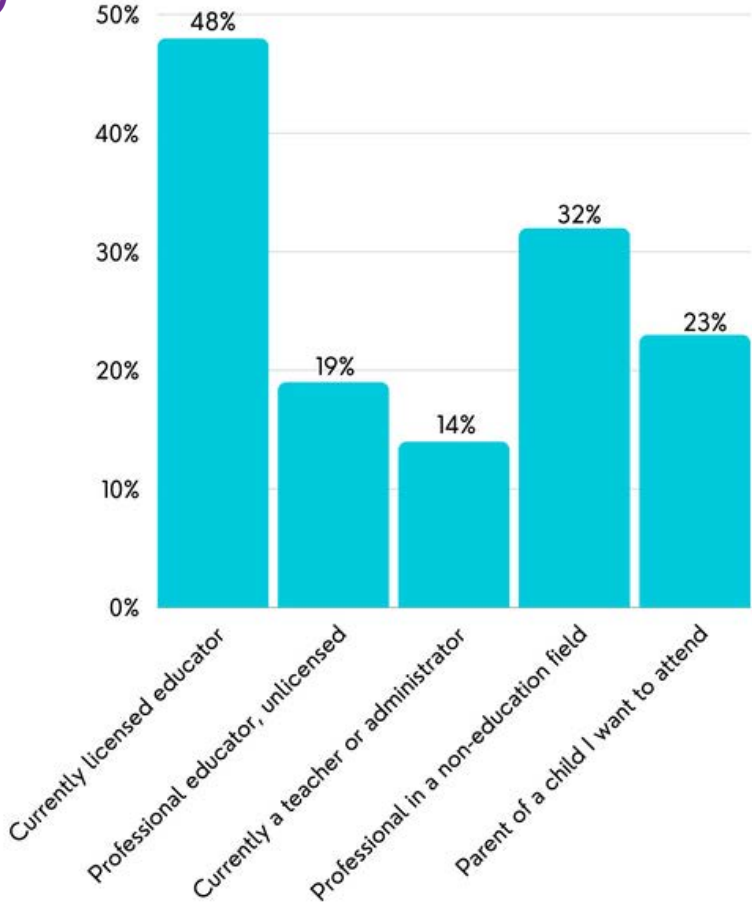
Prospective founders who have not yet launched their microschools are somewhat more likely to be professionals from non-education fields (32 percent). One in four (23 percent) are parents creating a schooling option where their own children will attend. Currently-licensed educators comprise 48 percent of this group, of whom 14 percent are currently working as teachers or administrators, and 19 percent are working educators without public-school educator licenses (such as Montessori or private school teachers).

What is the professional background of currently operating microschool founders?



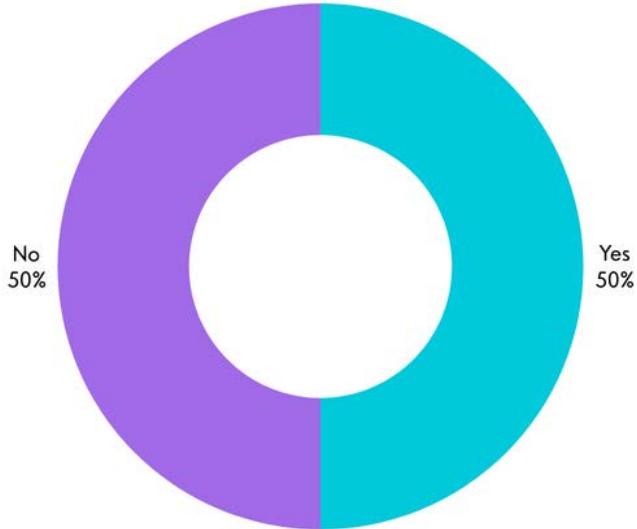
What is the professional background of prospective microschool founders?

(select all that apply)

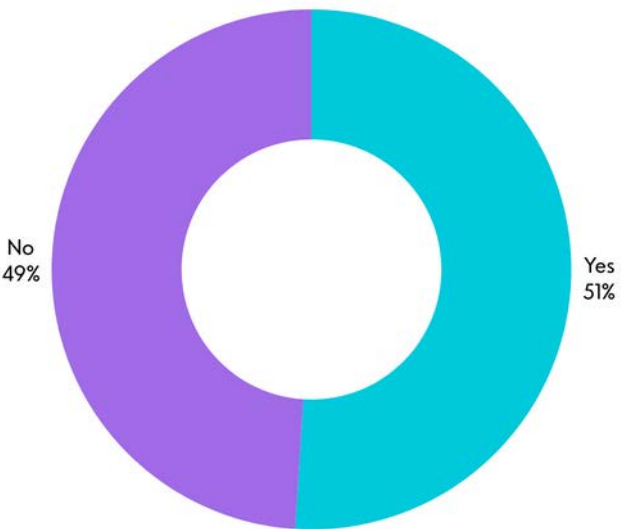


Is this the first business you've launched?

Current Founders



Prospective Founders



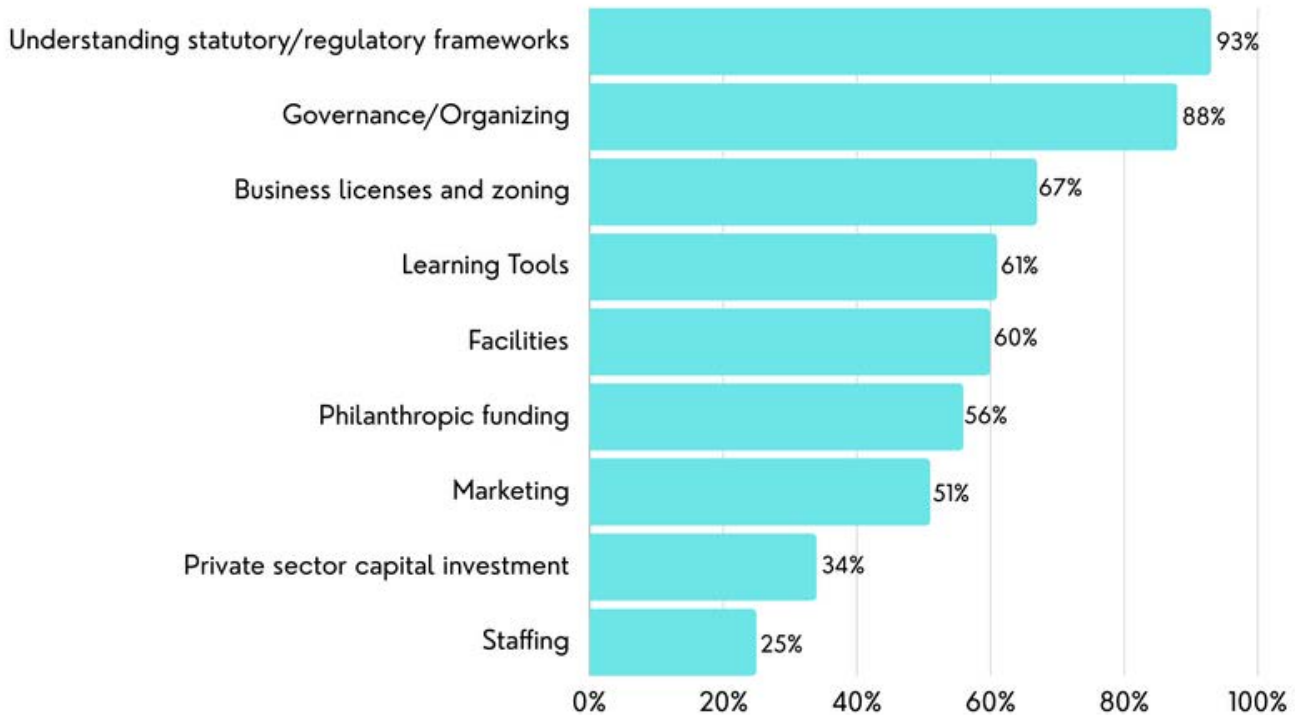
What do microschool leaders need?



Prospective microschool founders sought Center help understanding operating and regulatory frameworks (93 percent) and with managing governance and organizing (88 percent) most frequently, followed by help with business license and zoning (67 percent), learning tools (61 percent), facilities (60 percent), philanthropic funding (56 percent) and marketing (51 percent).

Currently-operating microschool founders asked the Center for help with revenue/funding sources (72 percent), marketing (55 percent), connecting with parents and/or other microschools (51 percent), understanding operating and regulatory frameworks (45 percent) followed by learning tools (37 percent), governance and organizing (32 percent), dedicated trainings (31 percent) and legal help (31 percent).

What are prospective microschools seeking help with? (select all that apply)



"I am just starting my journey, but feel there is so much to learn and I know it will be challenging."

-Prospective Microschool Founder, Ohio

What are current microschools seeking help with? (select all that apply)



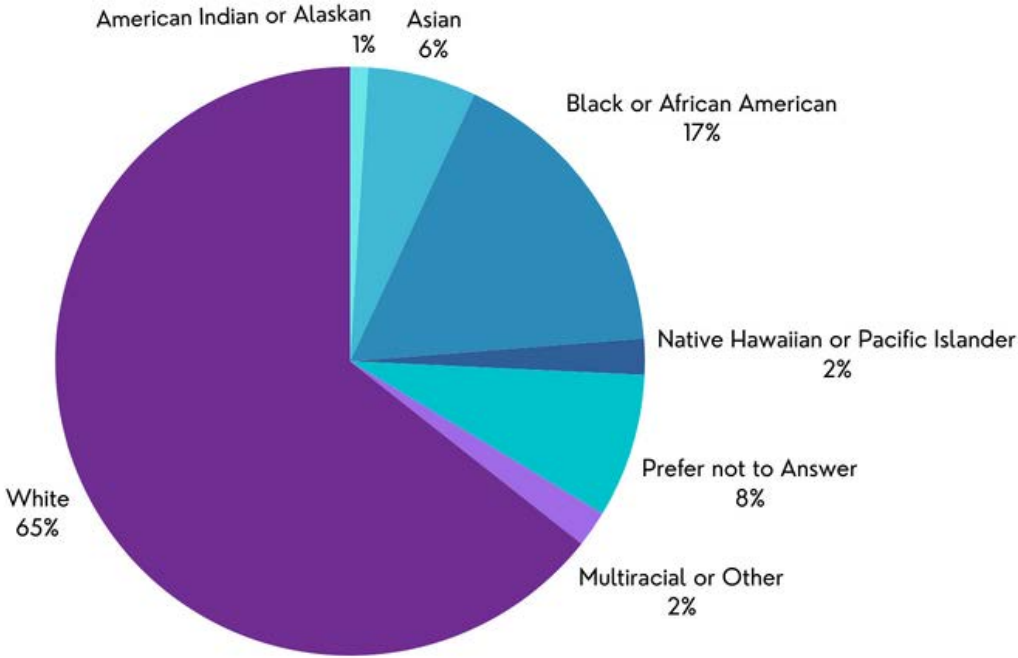
Diversity of Microschool Founders

This research found that 65 percent of current microschool founders are white, falling to 51 percent of prospective, pre-launch founders. 17 percent of current founders are black or African-American, while 30 percent of prospective founders are. 6 percent of current owners are Asian, while 5 percent of prospective founders are. 7 percent of current founders are Hispanic, Latino, or of Spanish origin, while 5 percent of prospective founders are.

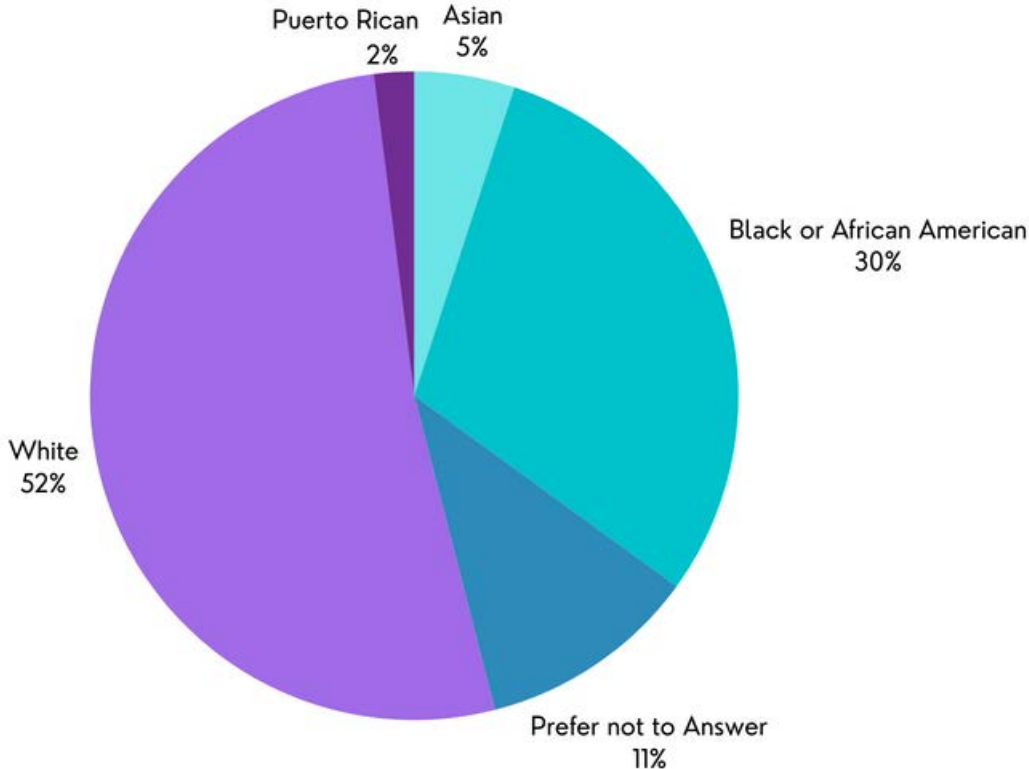


"We feel strongly that it's important for schools to be assets in the community and something that the community is asking for"
- Microschool Founder, Indiana

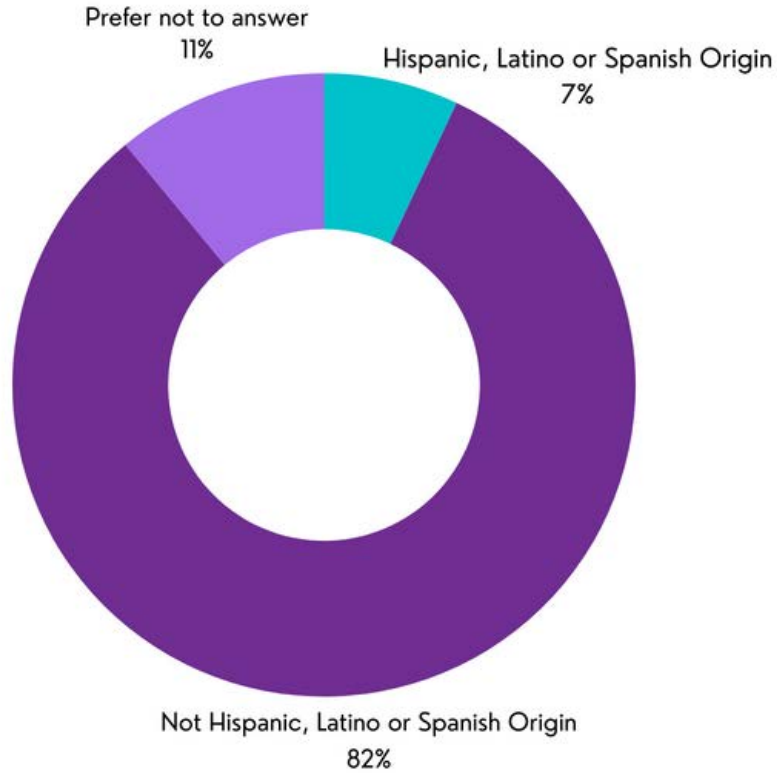
Current microschool founders' race



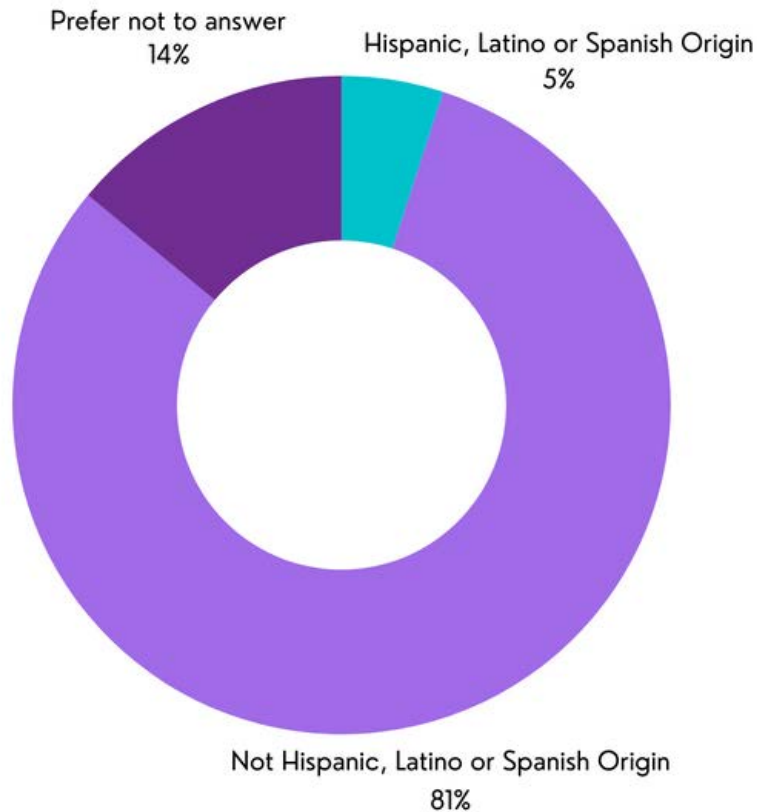
Prospective microschool founders' race



Current microschool founders' ethnicity



Prospective microschool founders' ethnicity



PART II: THE FAMILIES



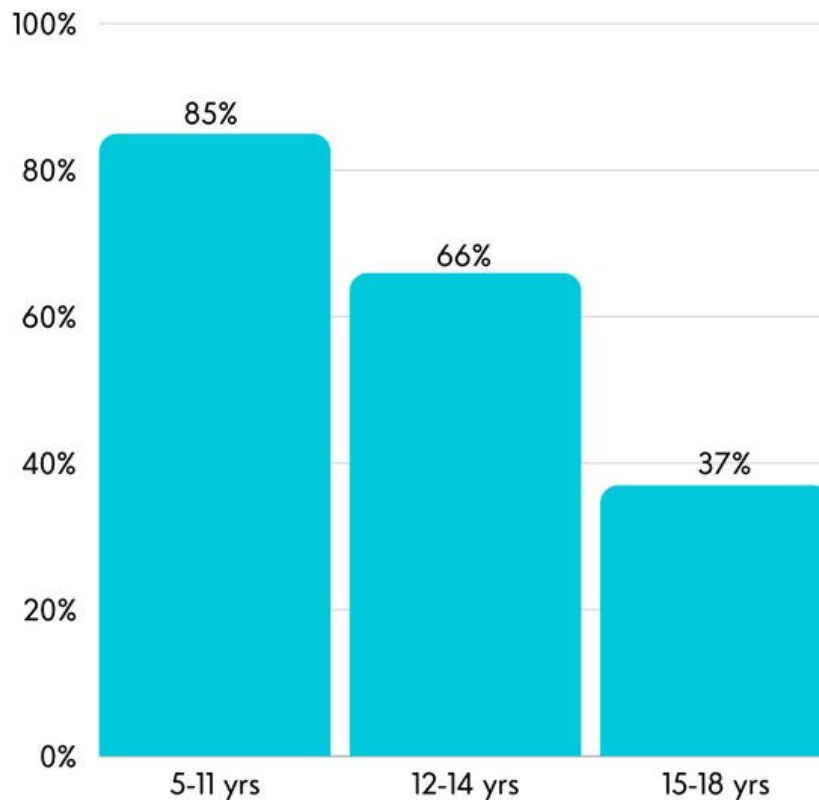
Microschooling families come from a variety of backgrounds, income levels, and differing needs. Many have not previously experienced nontraditional schooling.

**"As a father I often think about, by the time my kids are 18, what do I want them to know and be able to do?"
- Microschool Parent, Georgia**

Ages of Children Served

Today's American microschooling sector trends young, with 85 percent serving children age 5-11, 66 percent serving children age 12-14, and 36 percent serving ages 15-18.

What ages of children are microschools serving?

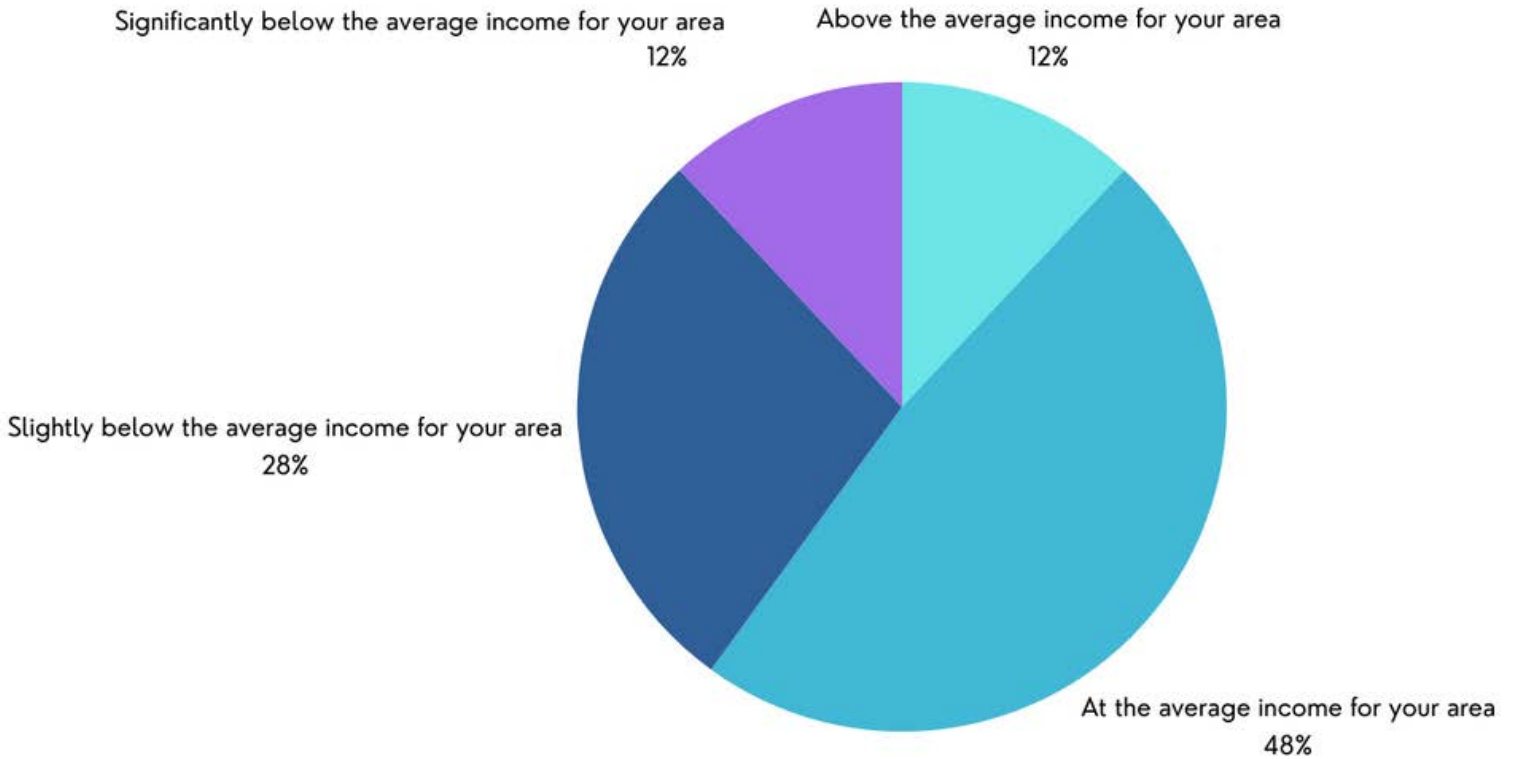


Income Level of Microschooling Families

Microschool founders report that 12 percent of the children they serve come from households with income above their area's average income, 48 percent represent the average income, 28 percent slightly below the average income for their area, and 12 percent significantly below.

While much early media coverage of microschools and learning pods emphasized examples from above-average incomes, this seems in contrast with current trends.

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

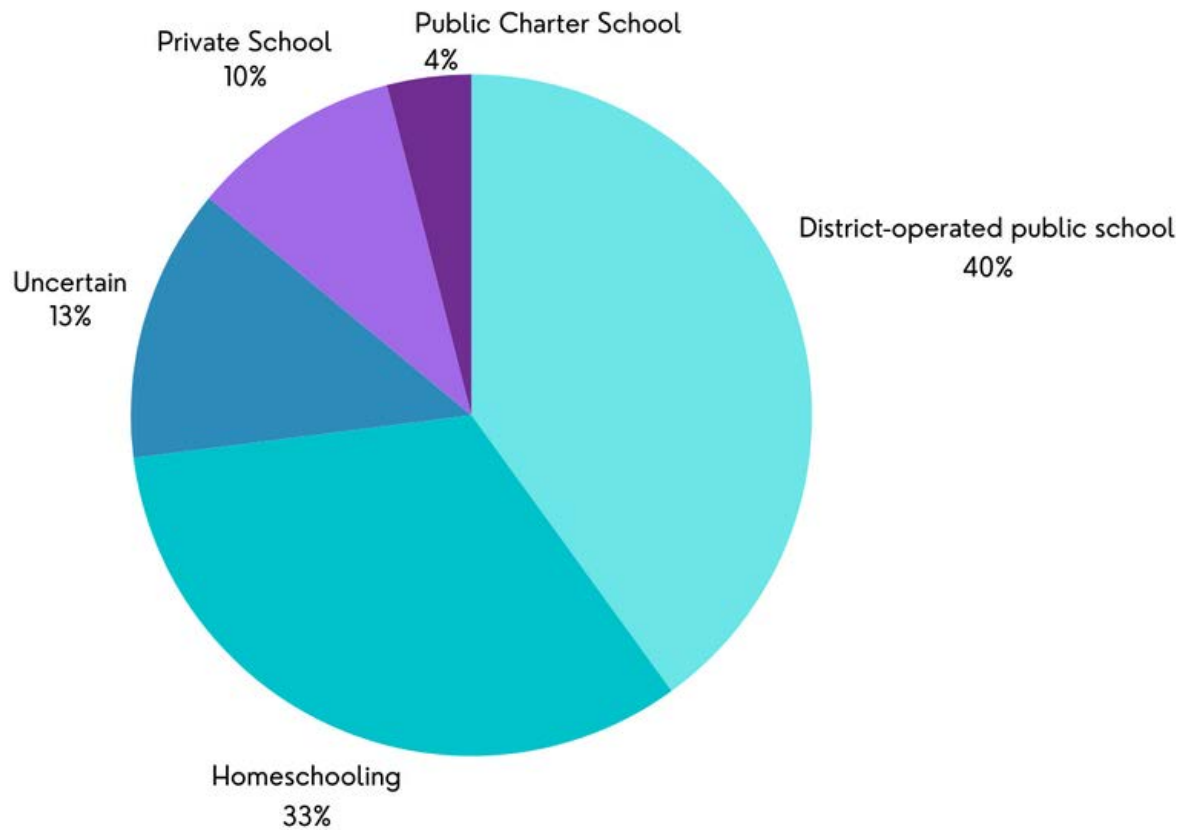


Learners' Background

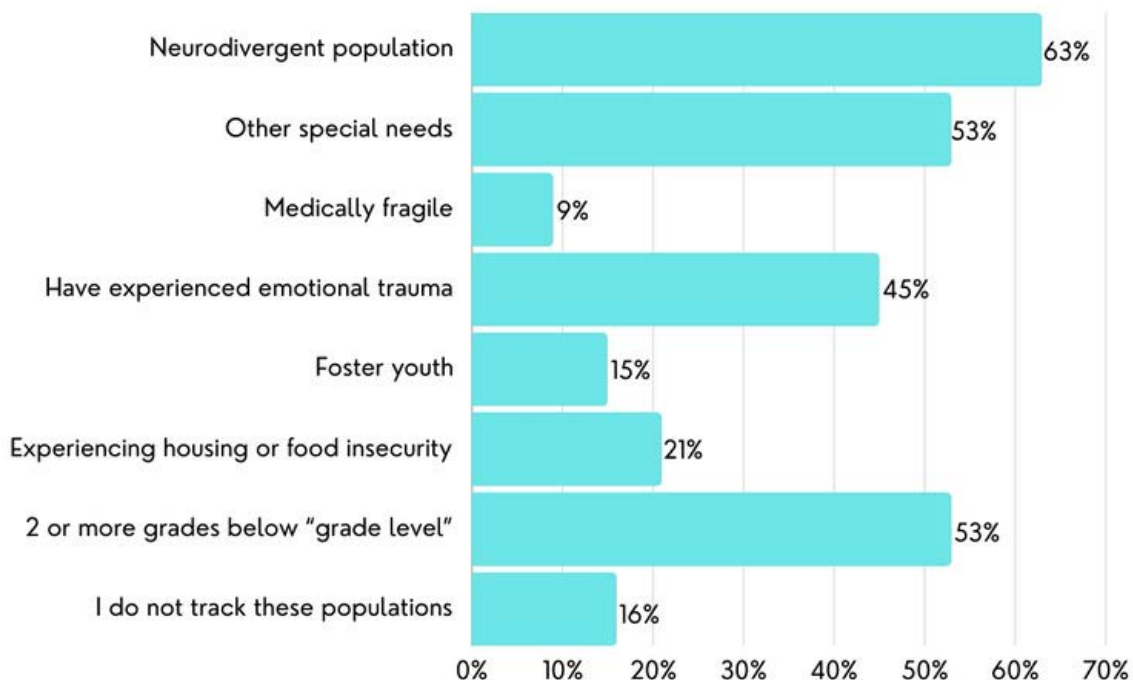
Microschools report that more of their current students came from traditional, district-operated public schools, 40 percent, than any other source. In response to the question, "Where did most of your students spend the majority of their educational career prior to joining your microschool," leaders surveyed indicated that homeschooling was the second most prevalent prior educational setting, at 33 percent. Ten percent reportedly came from private schools, while 4 percent attended public charter schools prior to enrolling in a microschool. "Uncertain" registered 13 percent of responses.



Where did most of your students spend the majority of their educational career prior to joining your microschool?



Do you currently serve children from the following populations? (select all that apply)

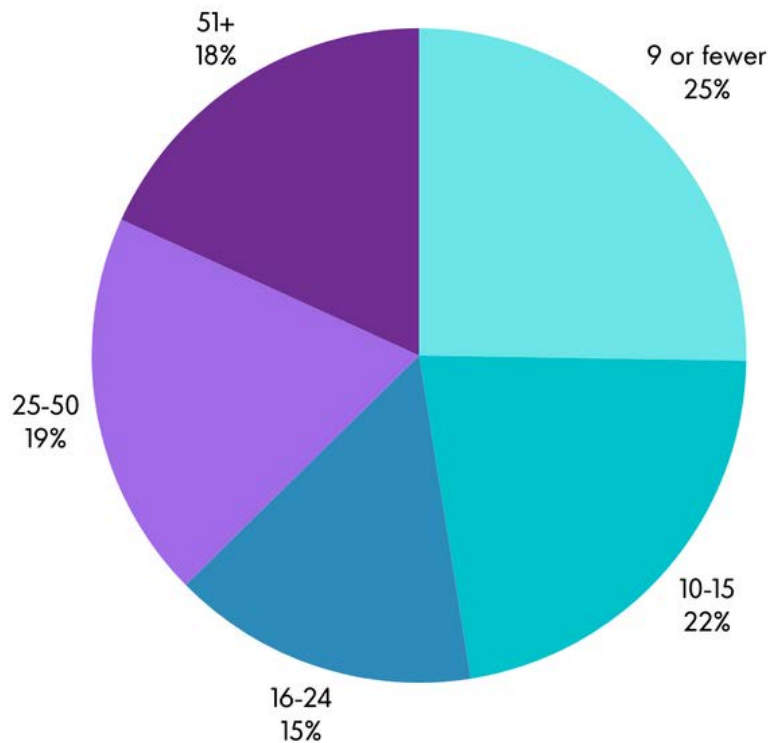


PART III: CURRENTLY OPERATING MICROSCHOOLS



These microschools are currently open and operational. Often, they are creating a transformative shift in teaching and learning. By being flexible and adaptable, they meet each child where they are in their learning trajectory. Microschool leaders foster close communities and culture.

How many children are you currently serving?



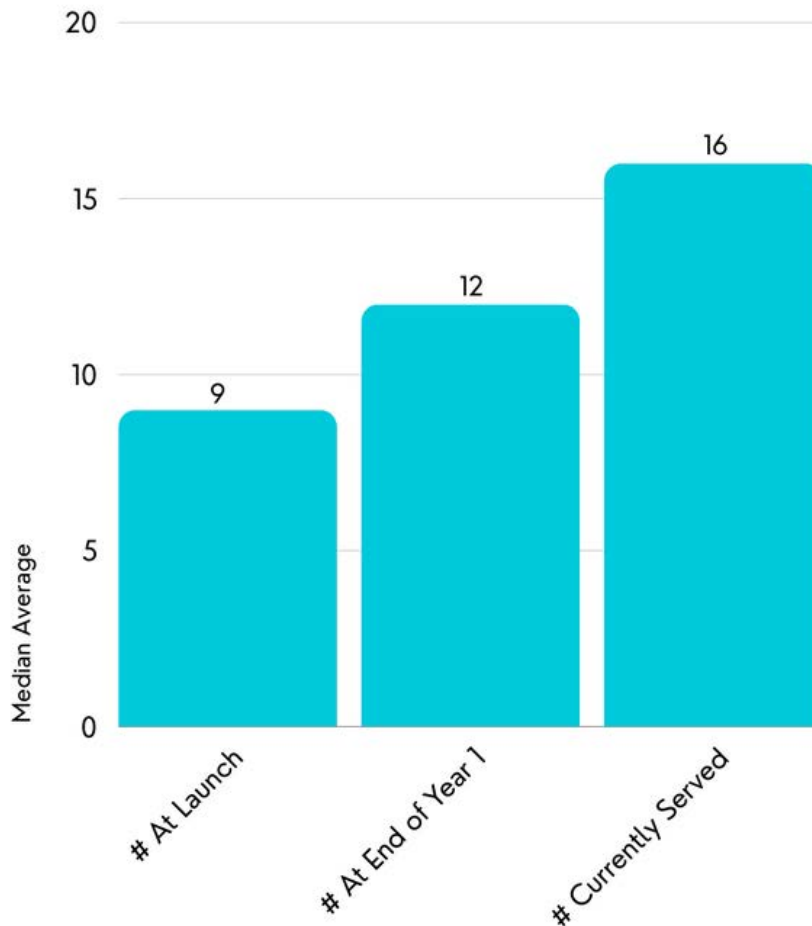
**"You don't have to be big to be sustainable.
You don't have to be big to be successful."
- Microschool Founder, Washington D.C.**

Microschool Growth

Microschools are small learning environments, and typically open even smaller and grow their student population gradually.

Microschools surveyed currently serve a median average of 16 children. Typically, microschools open smaller and grow over time. When they opened their doors at the beginning of their first year, the median number of children served was 9. This grew to 12 children served on average by the end of their first school year.

Number of children served:



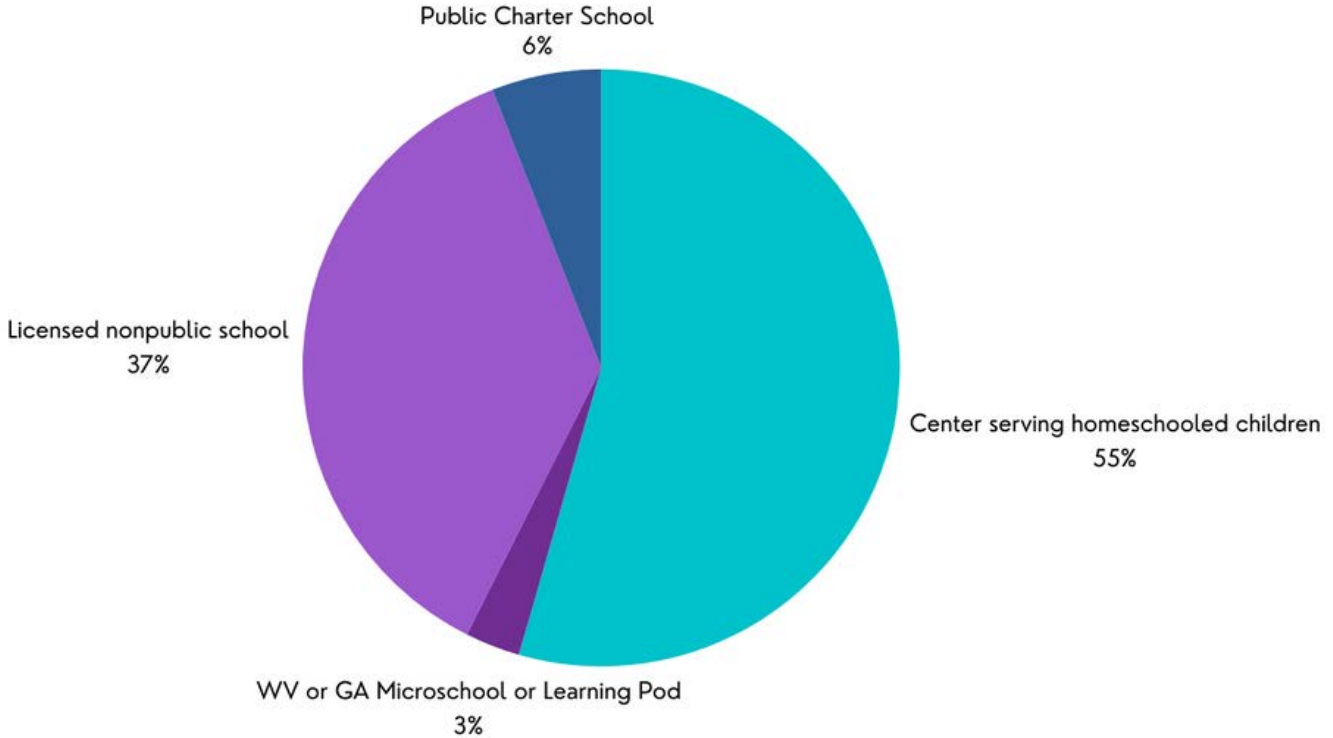
"I get to honor each of my children and their unique paths by making a choice that is best for them."

- Microschool Founder, Tennessee

Organization and Structure of Microschools

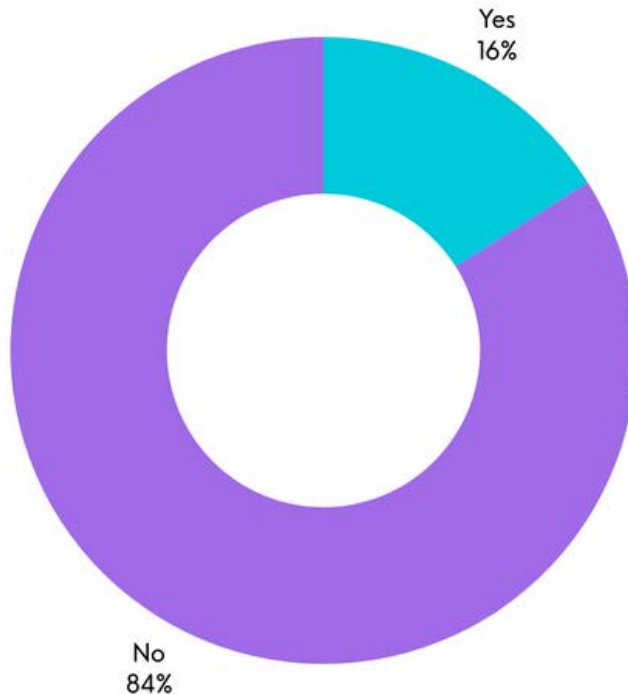
A majority of current microschoools, 55 percent, serve children following their state’s homeschooling framework. 37 operate as licensed private schools (accredited or unaccredited), 6 percent operate as public charter schools, and 3 percent fall within Georgia or West Virginia’s categorization as microschoools or learning pods.

How are you organized?



Additionally, 4 percent of respondent microschoools offer both nonpublic school and programs to support homeschooled children.

Are you currently accredited in your state?

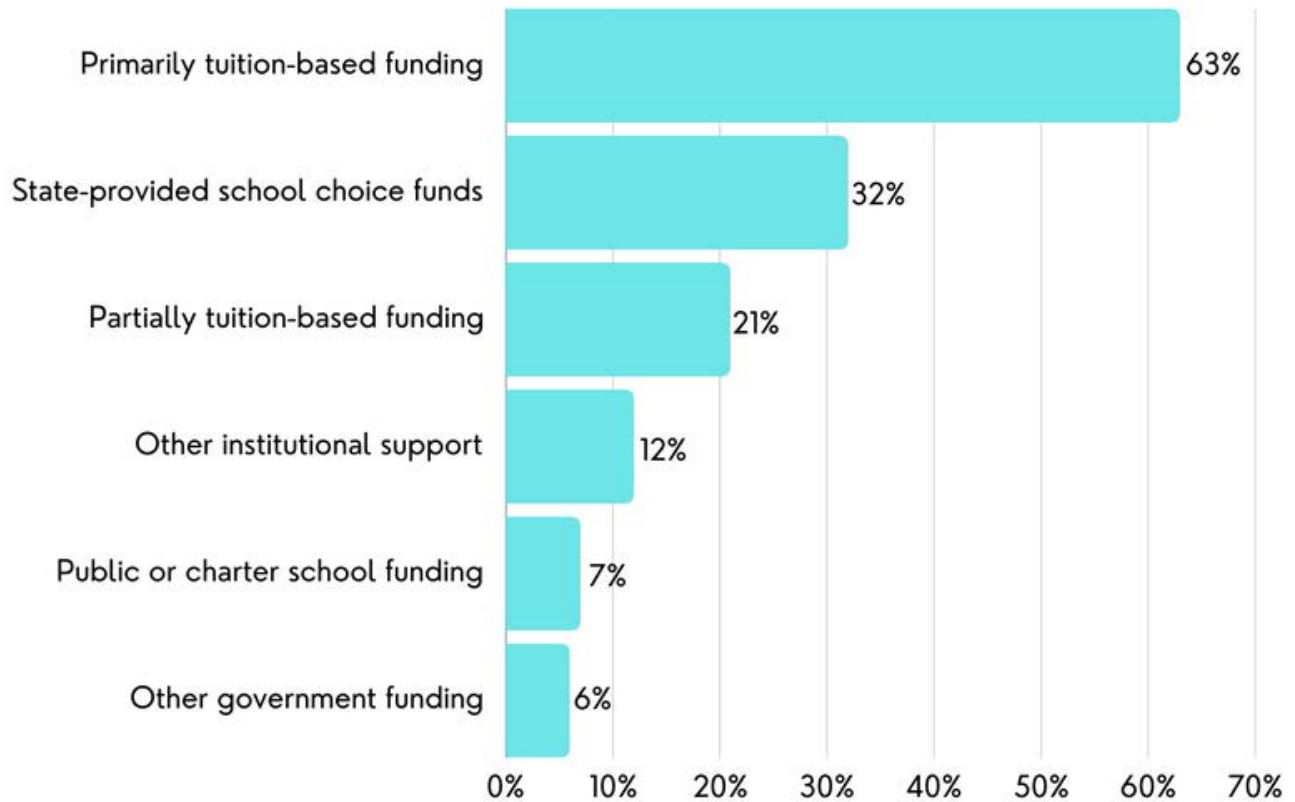


Funding Sources for Current Microschools

Most microschoools rely on primarily tuition- and fee-based funding for their operating revenue (63 percent). Of microschoools surveyed, 32 percent receive tuition funding from state school choice program. 21 percent describe partially relying on tuition-based funding, 12 percent on other institutional support. Public or public charter school funding provides operating funds for 7 percent of microschoool respondents, while 6 percent identified other government funding as an important revenue source.



What are your funding sources? (select all that apply)

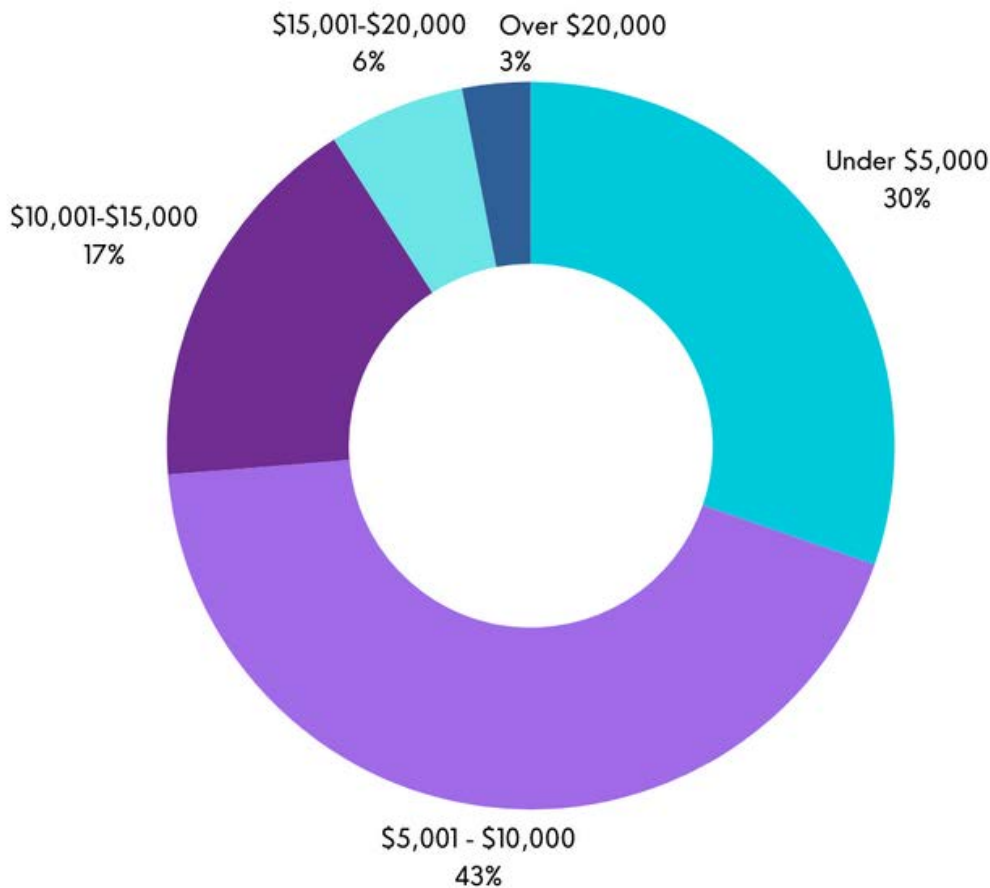


Costs/Tuition



The most common annual tuition/fees for microschool respondents is between \$5,000 and \$10,000 (43 percent), followed by under \$5,000 (30 percent), between \$10-15,000 (17 percent), between \$15-20,000 (15 percent), and 3 percent charge over \$20,000. It is important to note that respondents include microschools offering both full-time and part-time/hybrid weekly schedules.

What are the costs of your yearly tuition/fees?



**"It's what kids need to be doing, and I wish all kids had access to this, all the time, for free."
- Microschool Parent, Nevada**

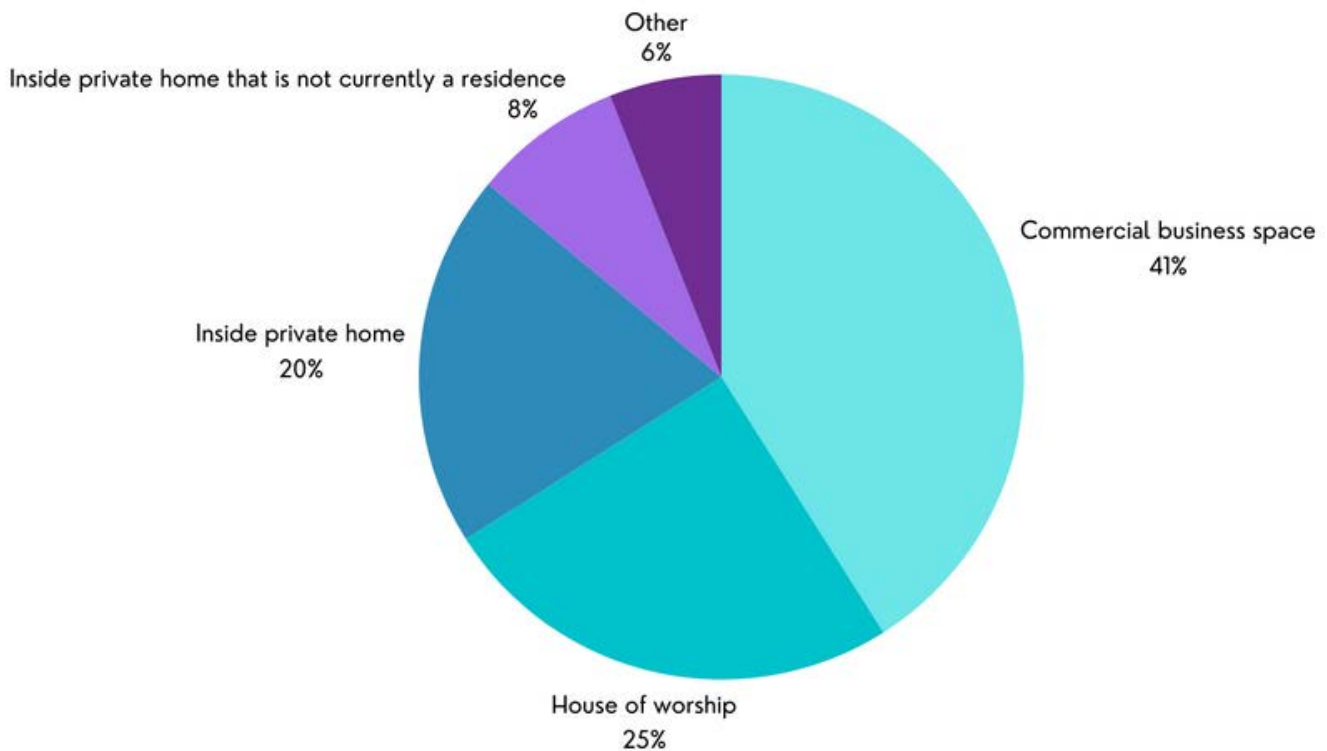
Schedules and Facilities

Microschools, with their small size, resourceful planning and desire to be accessible and functional for their communities, have a penchant for making savvy use of facilities space. They are most commonly (41 percent) housed in commercial building space, often in former retail or light industrial/warehouse locations.

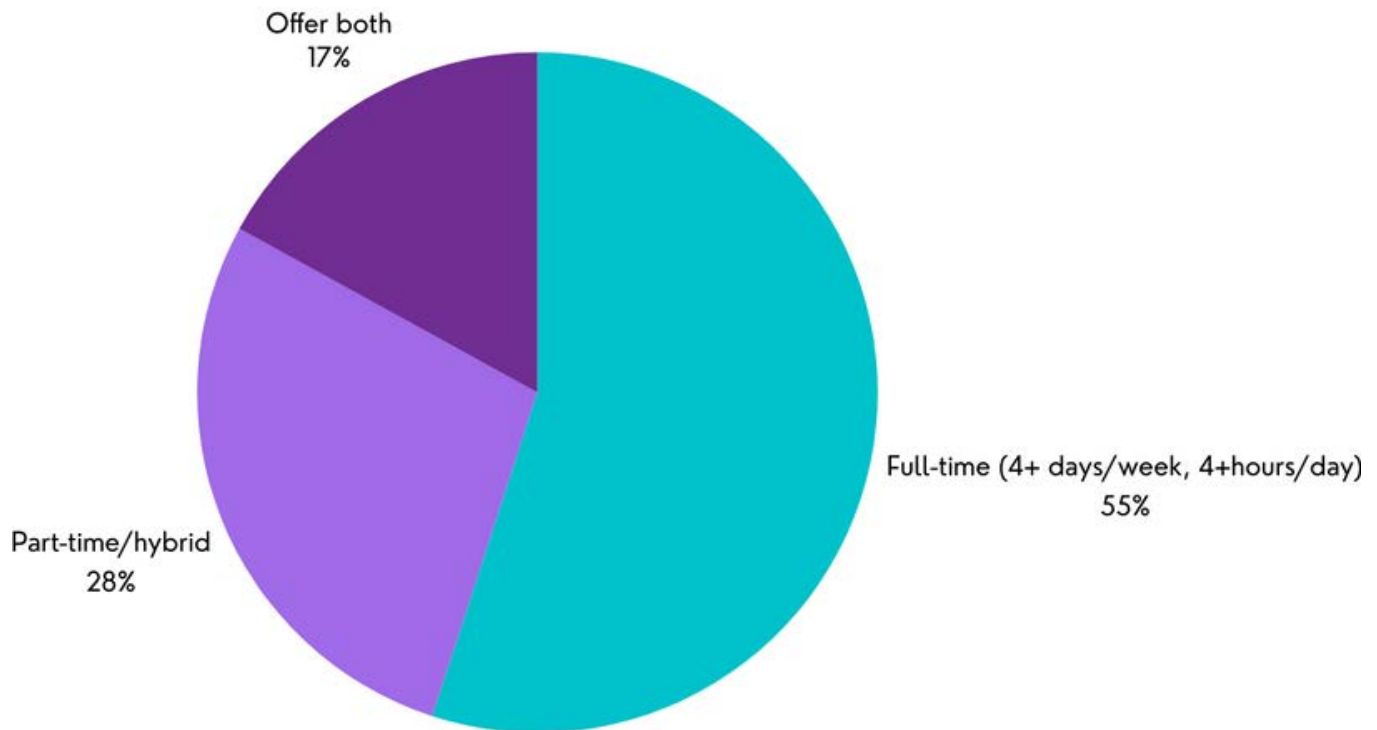
Houses of worship are the next most common location, 25 percent, whether the microschool is formally affiliated with the ministry or simply utilizing available space. Private residences house 20 percent of microschool respondents, while 8 percent are located in private homes not currently used as residences.



What facility do you currently operate in?



What is your weekly schedule?

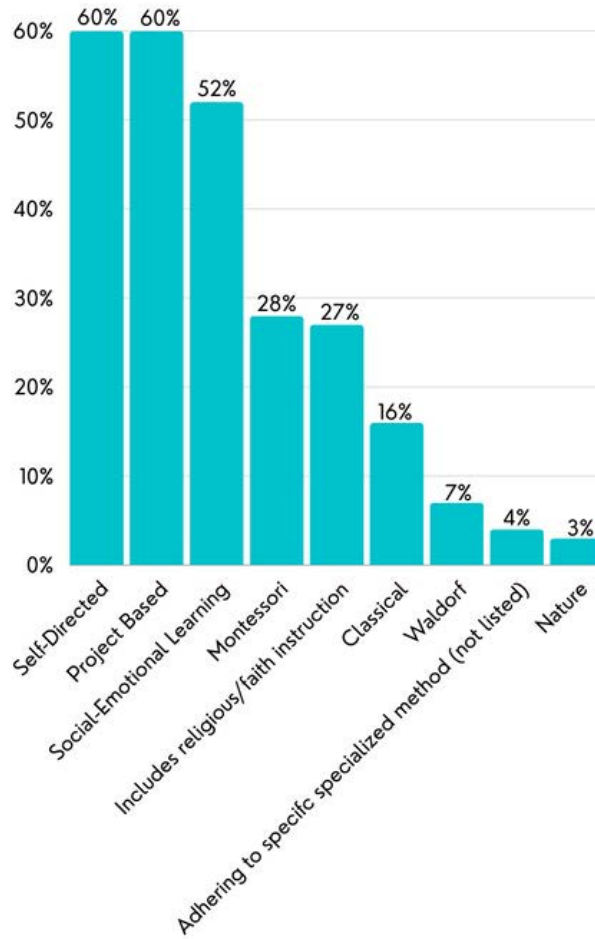


Teaching and Learning

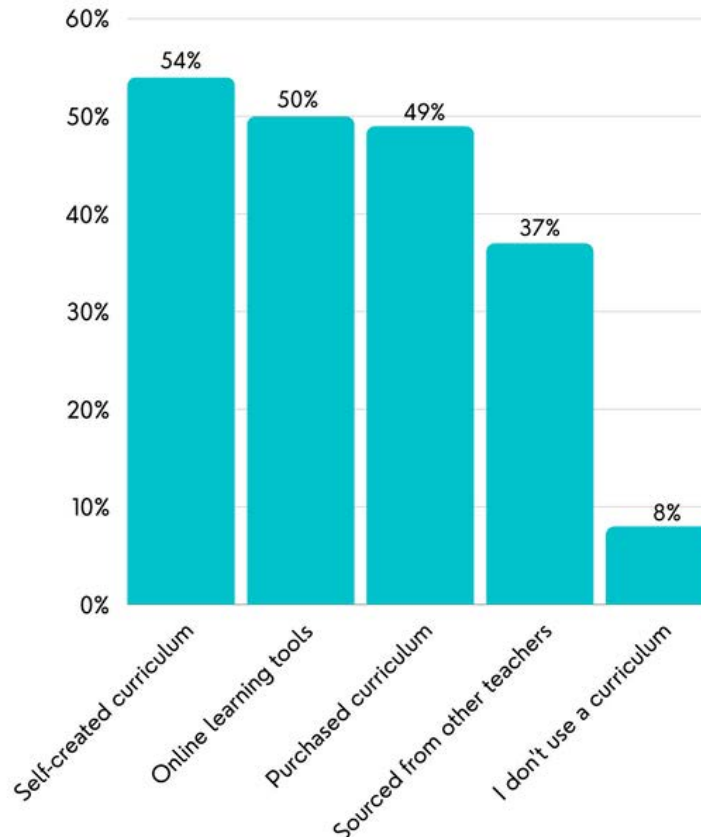
Currently-operating microschools, when asked to describe their educational approach by choosing all that apply, indicated in order of prevalence: Project-Based Learning (60 percent), self-directed learning (60 percent), Social-Emotional Learning foundations (52 percent), Montessori (28 percent), religious or faith-based instruction (27 percent), and classical education (16 percent), followed by other indicated approaches.



Does your educational approach include? (select all that apply)



What type of curriculum do you use? (select all that apply)



Measuring Impact

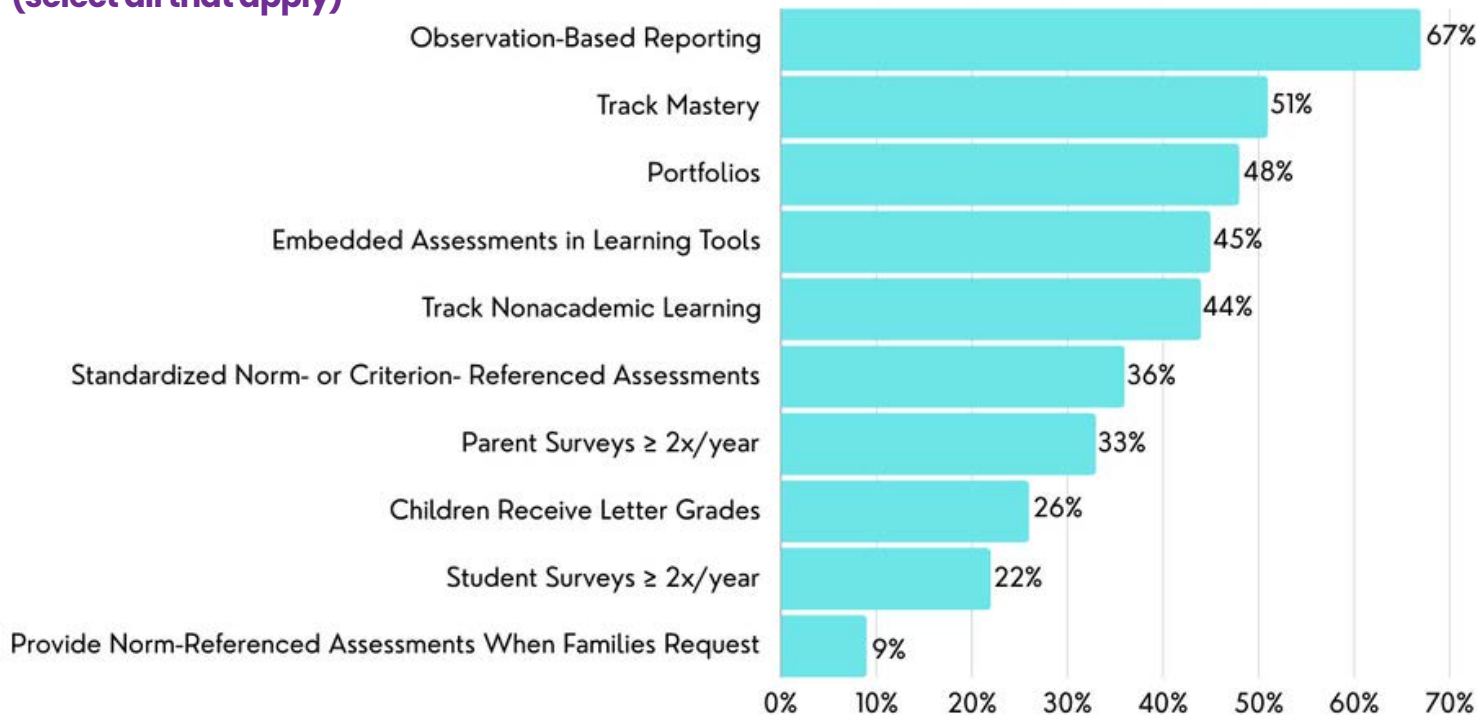


Microschools generally operate outside of public school performance frameworks and standardized testing regimes. This offers them valuable opportunities to show their impacts in meaningful ways to their families and crucial stakeholders – ways aligned with their often-unique missions and models.

Two-thirds of microschools utilize various observation-based reporting to show impact, 51 percent track mastery, 48 percent use portfolio assessment, 45 percent employ embedded assessments in digital learning tools, and 44 percent track nonacademic learning in a wide range of different ways. Just over a third, 36 percent, include standardized norm-referenced or criterion-referenced assessment in their programs.

Parent surveys are administered at least twice each year in one-third of microschools, 33 percent, and student surveys in about one-fifth, 22 percent. About one-fourth of microschools, 26 percent, assign letter grades. Norm-referenced assessments are made available to families who choose them in 9 percent of microschools.

How do you demonstrate impact? (select all that apply)



**"All the forms of progress need to be honored and respected."
- Microschool Founder, Arkansas**

PART IV: PROSPECTIVE MICROSCHOOLS

Prospective microschool founders regularly demonstrate a commitment to creating unique learning environments around the particular needs of the particular learners they serve. These microschools' small size makes this possible in ways larger, more systemically rigid schools cannot. Often, microschool founders bring a distinct spirit of innovation and intentionality to the learning environments they are building.

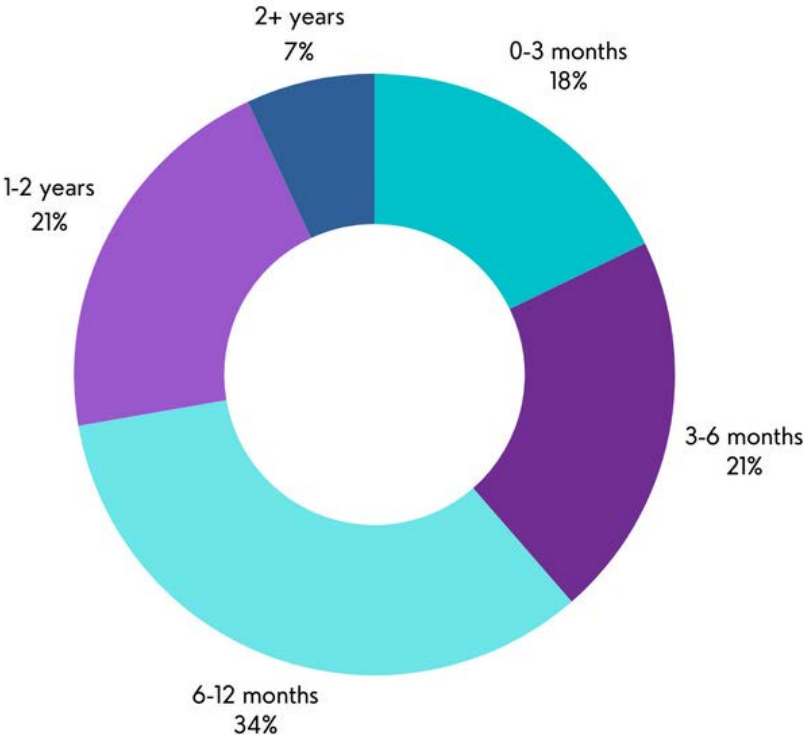


Planning Toward Opening

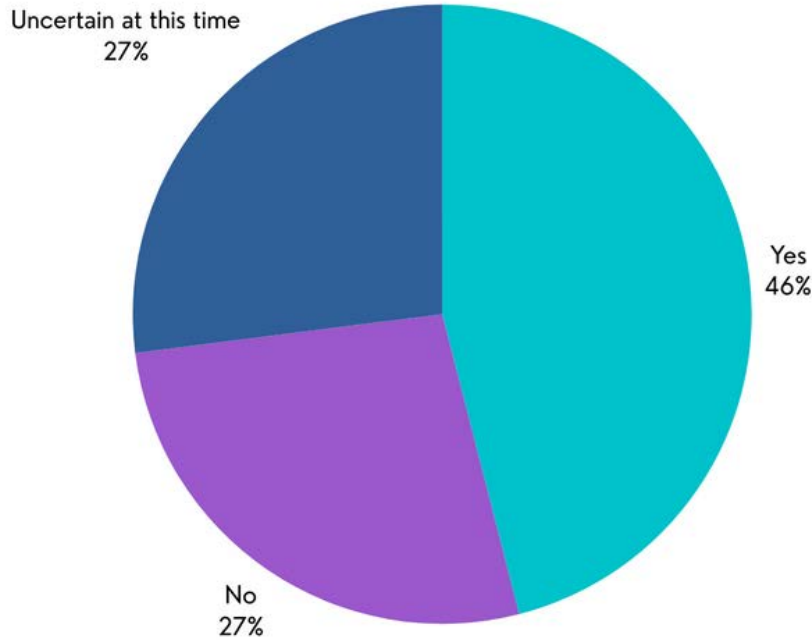
Among prospective microschool founders, 18 percent have been working for three months or less towards opening their microschool, 21 percent between 3 and 6 months, 34 percent have been working between 6-12 months, 21 percent for 12-24 months, and 7 percent for longer than that.

Nearly half of prospective founders (46 percent) plan to serve as the lead educator in their microschool, while 27 percent do not, and 27 percent are uncertain at this point.

How long have you been actively working towards opening a microschool?



Do you plan on being the lead educator in your microschool?



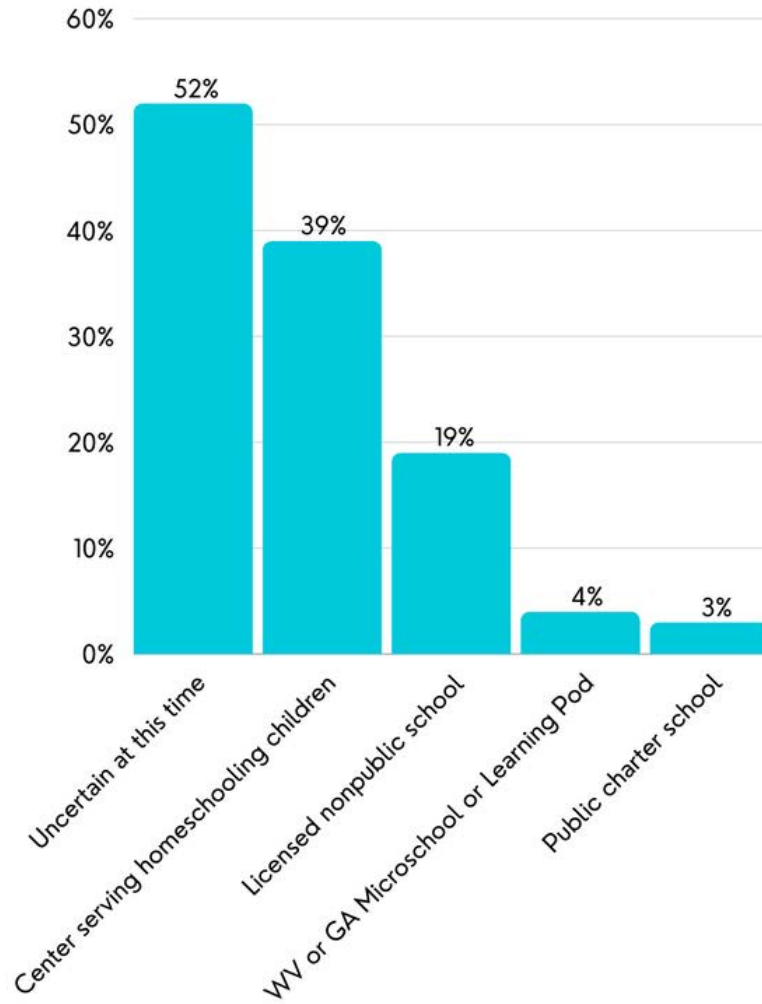
Choosing how to organize

Among prospective microschool founders, 39 percent plan to open as a learning center supporting homeschool children, 19 percent as a licensed nonpublic school, and 3 percent identified as prospective founders of a public charter microschool. Over half, 52 percent, reported being uncertain at the present time.

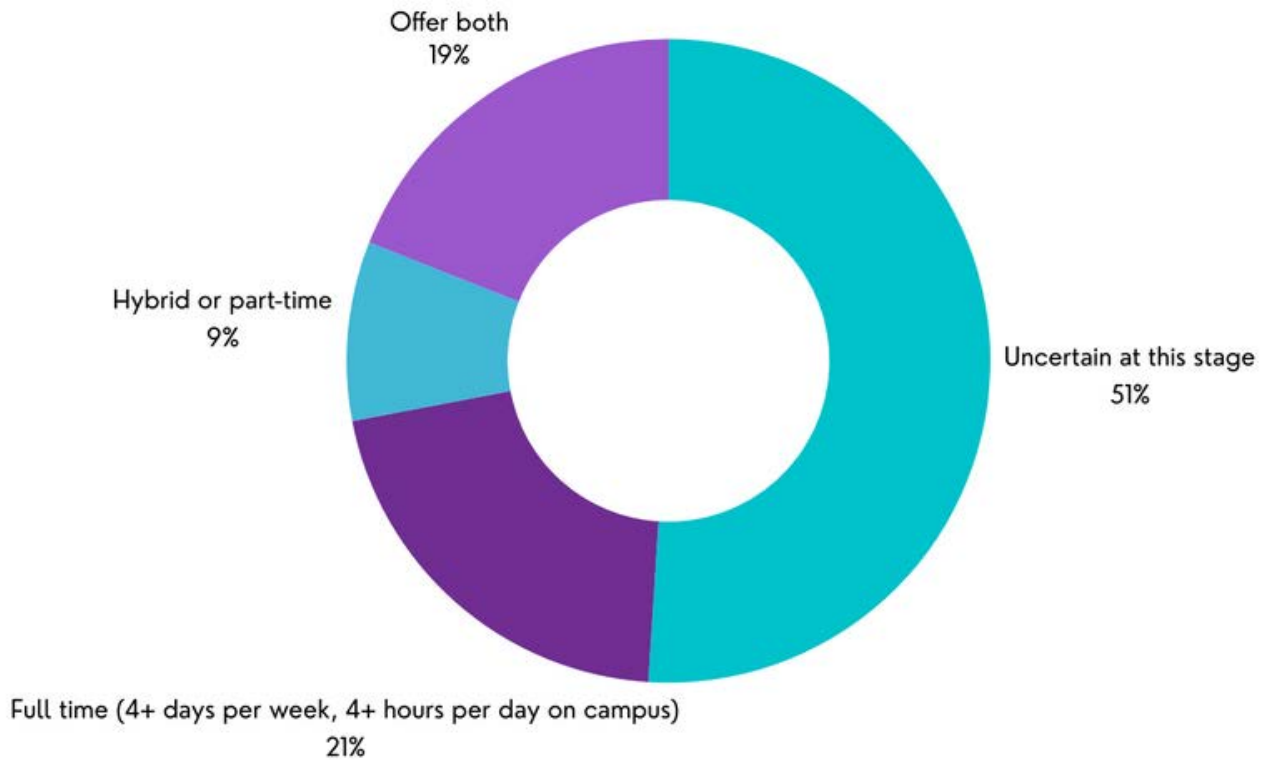
While half (51 percent) of prospective founders also expressed uncertainty about the weekly schedules their microschool would offer, 21 percent plan to offer full-time schedules, defined as four or more days per week and four or more hours per day, while 9 percent are planning on offering families a part-time or hybrid calendar, and 19 percent plan to offer a choice of either.



Do you plan to open as? (select all that apply)



Do you plan to open as?

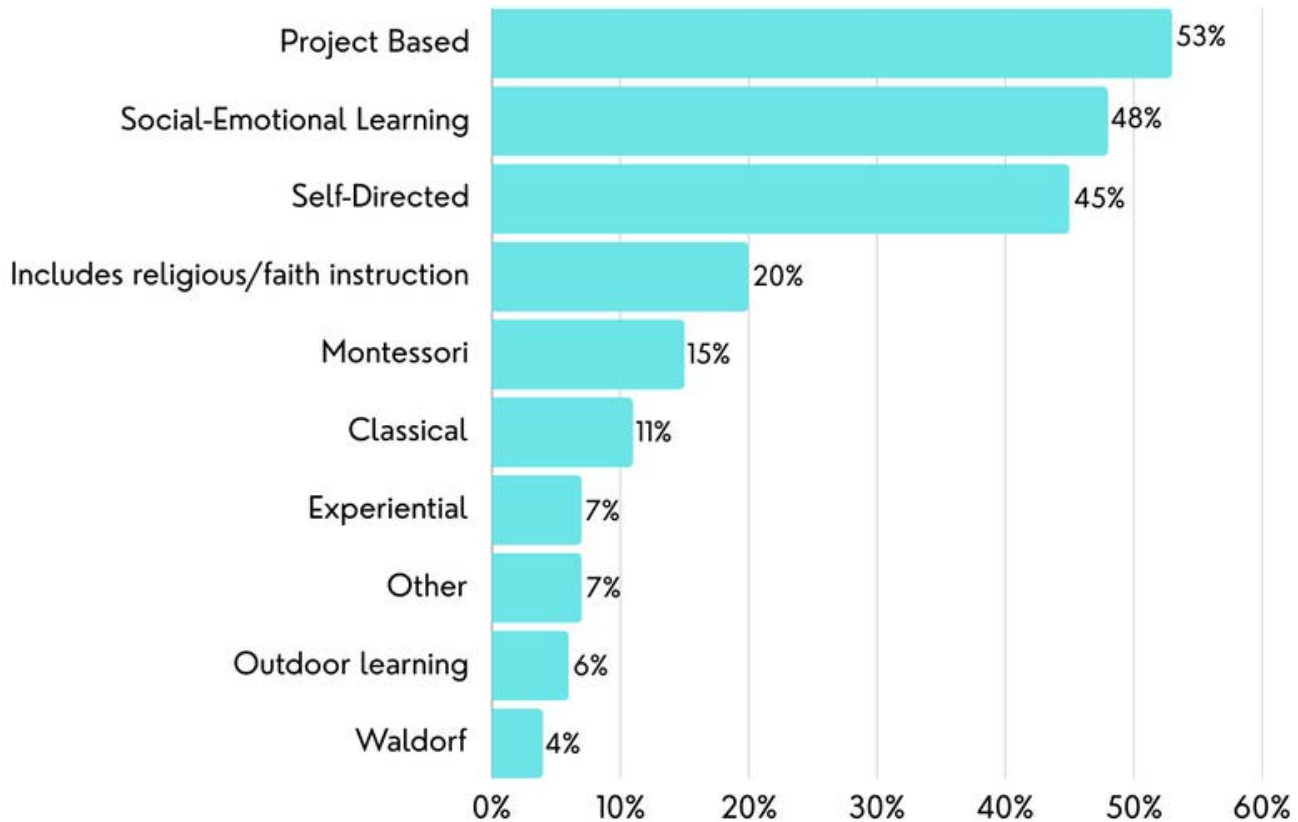


Teaching and Learning



As with current microschools, prospective founders named Project-Based Learning as the most prevalent element of their educational approach (53 percent). Social-emotional learning and self-directed learning approaches again followed, at 48 percent and 45 percent respectively. Religious and faith-based instruction (20 percent), Montessori (15 percent) and classical education (11 percent) followed.

Will your educational approach include ? (select all that apply)



"A microschool allows students the flexibility to learn in an environment that's best for them."

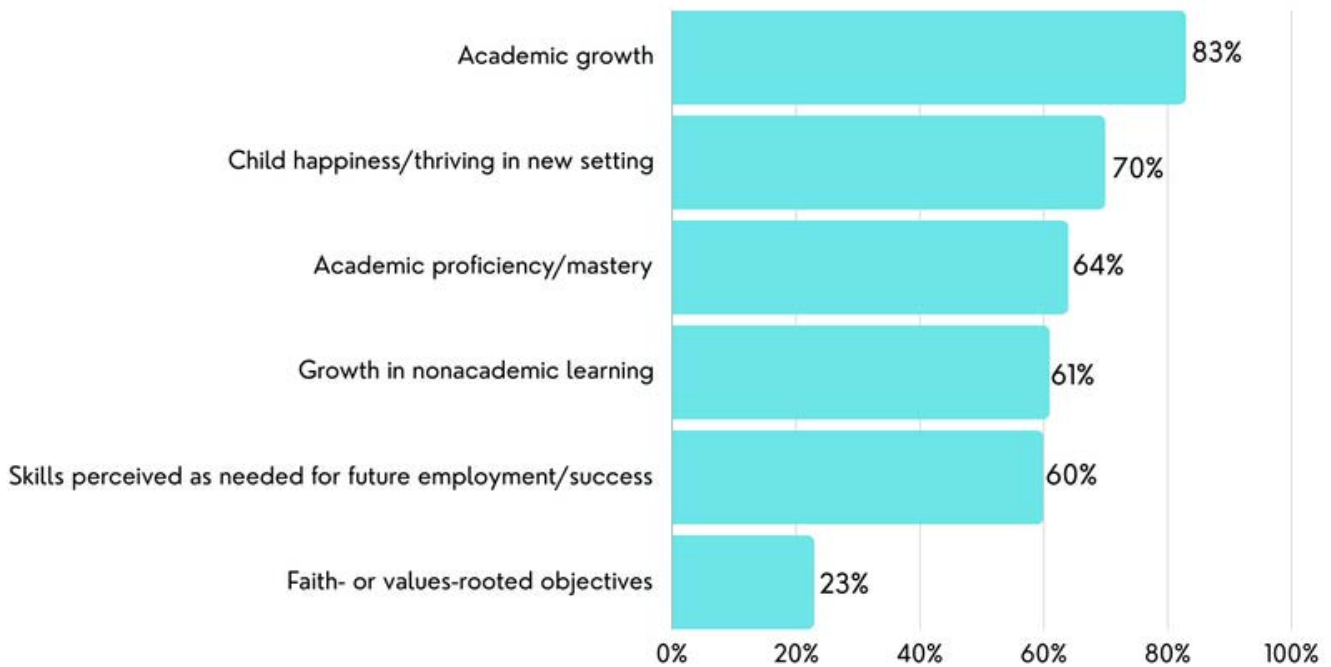
-Prospective Microschool Founder, Florida

Planned Outcomes

When asked to identify their most important educational outcome types, prospective founders resoundingly favored academic growth (83 percent), followed by children thriving and happy in their new schooling setting (70 percent), academic proficiency/mastery (64 percent), growth in nonacademic learning (61 percent) and skills perceived as needed for future employment and success (60 percent).



What is your most important outcome type? (select all that apply)



“For too long parents have been discouraged from holding schools accountable for outcomes for their students.”

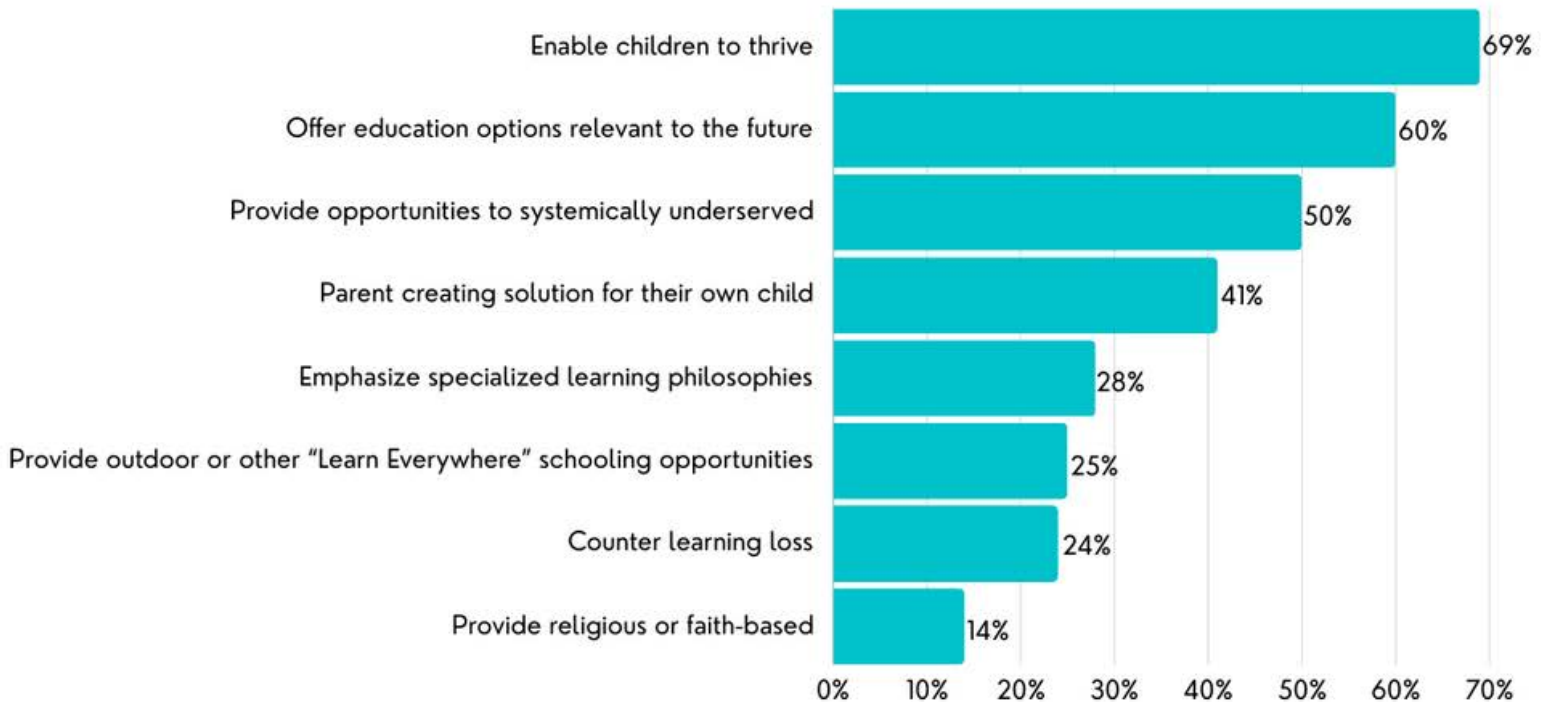
-Microschool Founder, Indiana

Main Motivations of Prospective Microschool Founders



What motivates microschool founders? While frequently characterized as entrepreneurial, financial gain is not one of their most-cited drivers. In fact, when asked to select all that apply as “main motivations,” prospective founders pointed to enabling children to thrive (69 percent), offering education options relevant to their learners’ future (60 percent), and providing opportunities for children representing groups systematically underserved by existing educational options (50 percent) were the top three identified motivations. Parents looking to create schooling solutions for their own children were also relatively common (41 percent).

What are your main motivations for creating a microschool? (select all that apply)



**"A microschool is a small learning environment where teachers get to build connections with students and truly help them on an individualized path of learning."
-Microschool Founder, Nevada**

CONCLUSION

Overall, findings contained in this sector analysis were indicative of both the sector's diversity and broad pluralism of models as well as founders' ongoing commitments to fostering active and informed partnerships with the families they serve to support their children's learning trajectories.

Among the latter, the major motivations identified by prospective microschool founders have evolved modestly, seeming to reflect a heightened focus on the future for which they are preparing children. "To enable children to thrive as they had not in prior settings," was the most popular response, shared by 69 percent of founders, an increase from 46.5 percent in our 2023 analysis. To "offer educational options more relevant to the future of learners served," was the second most popular motivation, selected by 60 percent of founders. "Provide opportunities to systemically underserved or marginalized communities," remained in the top three motivations selected, still by 50 percent of founders.

The different ways current microschools have selected to indicate their impact represent founders' commitments to the families who are their major stakeholders. The relatively strong prevalence of observation-based reporting (67 percent) gives founders opportunities to show progress in customized ways which align to each microschool's mission and model. The most common methods of showing impact, including tracking mastery, growth toward nonacademic goals and their use of portfolios represent additional methods to reach this goal.

Meanwhile, the wide range of microschools' different educational approaches, founders' professional backgrounds, and choices ranging from curriculum to innovative use of facilities space signify important examples of just how diversified many prominent facets of this movement have become.

Also informative toward building understanding of today's microschooling sector are the range of responses by both current and prospective new founders regarding help they are currently seeking. Supporting these requests is core work for the National Microschooling Center team's day-to-day work as a resource center.

Prospective, pre-launch founders are seeking the most help understanding statutory and regulatory frameworks, with governance and organizational questions, business registration and solving facilities needs and approvals, and help with learning tools. Currently-operating founders, meanwhile, are seeking the most help with funding sources, marketing, connecting with families and other microschools, understanding statutory and regulatory frameworks, learning tools, and with facilities questions.

As the Center research team collected the information included in this report, it became evident that several further aspects of the microschooling would benefit from deeper consideration than could be adequately examined here. These will be delved into in subsequent publications in the coming months.

Don Soifer serves as the National Microschooling Center's Chief Executive Officer. Ashley Soifer is the Center's Chief Innovation Officer. The authors wish to thank Kathryn Kret for her expert assistance throughout the research process.



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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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