

The Rise of Micro-schools

Combinations of private, blended, and at-home schooling meet needs of individual students

by MICHAEL B. HORN

FROM SAN FRANCISCO TO AUSTIN, TEXAS, TO NEW YORK, new forms of schooling termed micro-schools are popping up.

As of yet, there is no common definition that covers all these schools, which vary not only by size and cost but also in their education philosophies and operating models. Think one-room schoolhouse meets blended learning and home schooling meets private schooling.

As Matt Candler, founder of 4.0 Schools, writes, “What makes a modern micro-school different from a 19th century, one-room schoolhouse is that old school schools only had a few ways to teach—certainly no software, no tutors, and probably less structure around student to student learning. In a modern micro-school, there are ways to get good data from each of these venues. And the great micro-school of the future will lean on well-designed software to help adults evaluate where each kid is learning.”

Several factors are driving their emergence. Micro-schools are gaining traction among families who are dissatisfied with the quality of public schooling options and cannot afford or do not want to pay for a traditional private-school education. These families want an option other than home schooling that will personalize instruction for their child’s needs. A school in which students attend a couple days a week or a small school with like-minded parents can fit the bill.

Some trace the micro-school’s origins to the United Kingdom, where over the past decade people began applying the term micro-schools to small independent and privately funded schools that met at most two days a week. As in the United States, the impetus for their formation was dissatisfaction with local schooling options. Although home-schooling families have for some time created cooperatives to gain some flexibility for the adults and socialization for the children, the micro-schooling phenomenon is more formal.

QuantumCamp

One of the early U.S. micro-schools, QuantumCamp was founded in the winter of 2009 in Berkeley, California, out of a dare that one couldn’t teach quantum physics in a simple way. The result was the development of a course that would be accessible to children as young as 12. The school now offers a

complete hands-on math and science curriculum for students in 1st through 8th grade, and serves about 150 home schoolers during the school year; double that number attend the summer program. Tuition ranges from \$600 to \$2,400 depending on the program and enrollment period. In 2013 QuantumCamp introduced language arts courses. Each academic class meets once a week for an activity-based exploration of big ideas and then offers out-of-class content that includes videos, readings,



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problem sets, podcasts, and other activities to enable students to continue exploring concepts at their own pace.

Acton Academy

At roughly the same time as QuantumCamp’s founding, in Austin, Texas, Jeff Sandefer, founder of the nationally acclaimed Acton School of Business, and his wife Laura, who has a master’s degree in education, launched Acton Academy. In creating the five-day-a-week, all-day school, the couple sought to ensure that their own children wouldn’t be “talked at all day long” in a traditional classroom. The Acton Academy’s mission is “to inspire each child and parent who enters [its] doors to find a calling that will change the world.” The school promises that students will embark on a “hero’s journey” to discover the unique contributions that they can make toward living a life of meaning and purpose.

With tuition of \$9,515 per year, Acton Academy initially enrolled 12 students and has since 2009 grown to serve 75 students in grades 1 to 9. The school has learning guides—they aren’t called teachers—whose role is to push students to own their learning. The model enables the academy to have far fewer

on-site adults per student than a traditional independent school and to operate at a cost of roughly \$4,000 per student per year.

Acton compresses students' core learning into a two-and-a-half-hour personalized-learning period each day during which students learn mostly online. This affords time for three two-hour project-based learning blocks each week, a Socratic seminar each day, game play on Fridays, ample art and physical education offerings, and many social experiences. The Socratic discussions teach students to talk, listen, and challenge ideas in a face-to-face circle of peers and guides. The projects require the students to work in teams to apply the knowledge they have learned. They also foster a "need to know" mind-set to motivate the online learning and provide a public, portfolio-based means for students to demonstrate achievement.

Early results appear impressive, as the first group of students gained 2.5 grade levels of learning in their first 10 months. Now the school is spreading. There are currently eight Acton Academies operating—seven of them in the United States. Twenty-five are slated to be open by 2015. The Sandefers are not operating them, however; they provide communities that want to open an Acton clone a do-it-yourself kit plus limited consulting and access to wiki discussion groups. They are developing a game-based learning tool to help prepare Acton Academy owners and the learning guides in the schools. Tuition at the academies ranges from \$4,000 per year to \$9,900.

AltSchool

Another micro-school network in the Bay Area turned heads this past March, and placed the micro-school trend firmly on the map, when it raised a whopping \$33 million in venture capital financing from prominent venture capital firms Andreessen Horowitz and Founders Fund. AltSchool, a five-day-a-week, all-day school founded by serial entrepreneur Max Ventilla, promises to prepare children for the world of 2030 by offering personalized learning, access to teachers at a very low ratio—currently 8-to-1—and a micro-school network "that offers the warmth of a tight community while benefiting from the extensive, continuous research and analysis of in-house education architects."

Key to the development of the AltSchool model is a proprietary, integrated software backbone that will handle everything from student learning in its schools to the operations of a network of private micro-schools. As at Acton Academy, students are grouped only loosely by age. Students spend about half their time on core subjects and work through personalized playlists built around third-party curricular materials. The rest of the day is spent on longer-term projects that can span as many as six weeks, according to a profile of the school in *Fast Company*.

Four AltSchools are open in San Francisco, with a combined 150 students enrolled, and more locations are coming, including

schools in Palo Alto and Brooklyn Heights, New York, in the fall of 2015. Tuition ranges from \$20,875 for elementary school in San Francisco to \$28,250 for the Brooklyn middle school. For additional fees, each individual AltSchool will bring in specialists outside of the core school day to teach extracurricular classes based on the interests of the school's families. AltSchool plans to drop its price tag significantly in the years ahead as the software improves, the school network scales, and it can bring down the internal cost each year.

Will it work? We'll see, but notably, Ventilla told *Fast Company* that the traditional randomized-control trial approach to research is meaningless in a "personalization first" context. "You're not thinking about the global population as one unit that gets this experience or that experience," he told the magazine. "Something that's better for 70% of the kids and worse for 30% of the kids—that's an unacceptable outcome for us. AltSchool isn't a particular approach."

Echoing the sentiment, Azra Mehdi, a parent at AltSchool, said, "One of the reasons we looked to AltSchool was because of the personalized aspect of the learning... [We] didn't want him to be one of 35 kids with one teacher, to get lost in the cracks. Parochial schools were too rigid, and would dampen his spirit and personality."

That sums up much of the ethos of the micro-schools: a fidelity to personalization and success for all in small communities. And the trend looks likely to grow.

Inspired in part by the micro-schools like Acton Academy that use his software, the prince of online and personalized learning himself, Sal Khan, launched his own micro-school in the fall of 2014 in Mountain View, California. The Khan Lab School, which charges \$22,000, opened with roughly 35 students and intends "to research blended learning and education innovation by creating a working model of Khan Academy's philosophy of learning in a physical school environment and sharing the learnings garnered with schools and networks around the world." As Isabella, an 11-year-old student who previously attended a nearby public school, said, "Here it's different from my old school because you're doing your own playlist and you have more projects."

Mandeep Dhillon, a parent with two children enrolled at Khan Lab School, amplified the differences. "After a while we realized, public, private school didn't matter. Kids were being programmed in chunks," he said. "I hate the term home schooling because it's based on location. It's not really about having them at home. What we're trying to do is build an independent path. It's not about the schooling, it's about experiences."

As these small schools proliferate, their impact on the wider world of schooling—public and private—is potentially large, but still anything but certain.

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