Education Next

FEATURE

Six Lessons Microschools Can Learn from the Charter Sector

Excitement over the new school model elicits memories of charters in their prime and a chance to reflect on what they got right and wrong

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ALIE SKOWRONSKI / MIAMI HERALD VIA ZUMA PRESS WIRE

Teacher Apryl Shackelford reviews letter sounds with a group of K–2 students at a Primer microschool in the Liberty City neighborhood of Miami last year. Primer is one of many new microschool networks in the country.

AN OLD MAXIM SAYS, "The main thing we learn from history is that we don't learn much from history." Perhaps appropriately, few agree on the origin of that statement. Some say it's from Hegel, others George Bernard Shaw, others Aldous Huxley.

Education innovators are particularly susceptible to this pitfall. With so many new people entering the school start-up fray in the wake of massive expansions of school choice programs, education entrepreneurs risk stumbling into the same briar patches that have ensnared others before them, when an understanding of history might help them stay on course.

Probably no sector in education today is attracting more new people than microschooling. Microschools are small learning environments where children from multiple families learn together. They can

be public, private, or charter schools or a pooled opportunity for homeschooled students. This form of schooling, at once innovative and as old as the one-room schoolhouse, had a negligible presence in American education as recently as a decade ago. Today, the RAND Corporation estimates between 750,000 and 2.1 million students currently attend a microschool.

The last sector to grow so much, so fast, started more than 30 years ago: charter schooling. After Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law in 1991, the concept quickly caught on nationwide, with the sector growing to more than 1.8 million students by 2010 and 3.7 million by 2021.

Several parallels are beginning to emerge between these two sectors. Both were turbocharged by changes in public policy—state charter laws in the case of charter schooling and expanded private-school choice laws in the case of microschooling. Both birthed brand-name networks that have come to play an outsized role in defining the sector. Charter schooling produced networks such as KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools. Microschooling has already given rise to Acton, Prenda, Primer, Wildflower, and more. And, both charter schooling and microschooling emerged from changes in education-management philosophy. Charter schools arose from a belief that schools had become long on rules and regulations and short on effective results. Microschooling was born from the idea that schools had become too large, too standardized, and too bureaucratized.

Charter schooling has racked up some tremendous successes and some pretty prominent failures. The microschooling sector can learn much from both—and would benefit from following some *do's* and *don'ts*. Let's start with the *do's*.

_Do_ widen your human capital pipeline.

Great schools, whether traditional, charter, micro-, or otherwise, need great teachers. If schools want to do something different, the teachers must deliver it. Most teacher education programs today gear their curriculum toward traditional public schools, with the vast majority of graduates taking jobs in that sector. Nothing nefarious is going on there; traditional public schools constitute the biggest sector of the American education system by far, and teacher training programs want to place graduates in jobs. Tailoring their preparation to the largest employment source makes sense.

In fall 2023, I published a paper titled "Surfing the Pipeline" that looked at the state of teacher preparation for alternative education models. When polled, 87 percent of teachers felt prepared to teach in a traditional public school, while 74 percent felt prepared to teach in a private school and 67 percent felt prepared to teach in a charter school. Only 34 percent felt prepared to teach in a microschool.

In that paper I also looked at traditional teacher- and leader-preparation programs in four choice-rich states: Arizona, Florida, Vermont, and Wisconsin. I found zero degrees, programs, or courses related to microschooling at any university in Florida, Vermont, or Wisconsin. In Arizona I identified one degree-granting program, two non-degree-granting programs, and two courses related to microschooling.

Leaders in the charter school sector realized that if they wanted to do something different, they would need different teachers, or at least teachers with different preparation. To address this challenge, the sector created new institutions of teacher preparation geared toward the needs of charter schooling.

KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools collaborated to found Teacher U at Hunter College in New York City. In 2011, Teacher U spun off into a standalone school, the Relay Graduate School of Education. Founders of both Teacher U and Relay wanted to prepare teachers for the real world of teaching in a way that they believed traditional preparation programs did not. Current students now number more than 4,000 teachers and 1,200 school leaders.

Other training programs have emerged in various locations. The Aspire charter school network in California created a residency-model teacher-preparation program that now, through a partnership with Alder Graduate School of Education, grants master's degrees to prospective teachers. Match Charter Schools in Massachusetts created the Match Associate Teacher Program, a one-year apprenticeship for new teachers. And the YES Prep schools in Texas offer the Teaching Excellence in-house program for alternative certification.

Charter schooling also leaned heavily on Teach for America for staffing. TFA's founding ethos was disruption of the status quo, a philosophy it shared with the charter movement. Wendy Kopp and TFA's other early leaders believed that existing preparation pathways were not fit for purpose and that a more streamlined, focused approach could deliver teachers of equal or better quality. Many TFA corps members served in charter schools. Microschooling could follow in charter schooling's footsteps and create teacher- and leader-preparation programs specifically tailored to microschools. It could also work with the few existing pathways that align philosophically with the microschooling approach, such as the Prep Microschool

COURTESY OF RELAY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Students at Relay Graduate School of Education are specifically trained to teach and lead in the charter sector.

Entrepreneur Fellowship at Arizona State University, which helps prospective microschool leaders launch new schools.

***Do* disseminate effective pedagogical strategies.**

Effective schooling is not just about the *who.* It's also about the *what*. Great teachers need tools, techniques, and resources aligned to their school's goals. A talented teacher with poor instructional materials or insufficient preparation has been set up for failure. If schools want their students to do better, they need to equip and develop teachers to deliver high-quality instruction.

Probably no single educator is more associated with charter-born teacher methods than Doug Lemov. Lemov served as a teacher and school leader in the charter sector before publishing in 2010 *Teach Like a Champion*, a volume that emerged from a pamphlet he drafted for his teacher colleagues. According to Teach Like a Champion's website, "the 20-page document was passed around from teacher to teacher, school leader to school leader, like *samizdat*" before being formalized into the now widely selling book.

Lemov developed the resource while working with Uncommon Schools, which later adopted the book as part of its teacher professional development and integrated it into its instructional model. So did other large charter school networks, including Achievement First and KIPP Schools. Many techniques from the book, like call and response, cold calling, and exit tickets, have become associated with charter schooling (even though not all charter schools use the techniques).

Teach Like a Champion's methods exemplify what charter schools were hoping to do differently. Early charter educators believed too many schools had devolved into chaos, with too much wasted time and too many students slipping through the cracks. Developing classroom management techniques that set expectations for student behavior ensured that all students were included, and frequent checking for understanding confirmed that students were actually learning.

Microschooling could benefit from its own *Teach Like a Champion*. Even better would be multiple guides to effective practice, each grounded in cognitive science but tailored to fit the varying pedagogical models that have already emerged in the sector. Though microschools vary in philosophy and approach almost by definition, the sector does need to grapple with the fact that the education community has learned some things in recent years, particularly about how to teach children to read. Microschools should implement these new concepts. This change need not come from some top-down mandate from a state or district, but rather from the bottom-up recognition that elements such as a structured phonics program and a commitment to developing student background knowledge will maximize the likelihood that children will be able to read competently.

If educators spread this knowledge like *samizdat*, that is all for the better. When ideas come from the bottom up, with the real investment of those tasked with implementing them, they have the potential to be durably and faithfully executed in ways that external mandates typically are not.

***Do* create networks.**

All of the above becomes easier to accomplish when schools are networked together.

Networks can take different forms. For instance, schools can be subsidiaries of an overarching organization. I've mentioned Achievement First, KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Aspire, but there are dozens of others. These school networks usually started with a single school and grew into a large network of schools managed by a central set of leaders that replicated the ethos, methods, and philosophy of the school over and over again.

But networks can also be collections of independently operated schools united by a common cause. Hillsdale College has created the Barney Charter School Initiative, a network of more than 30 charter schools across the country dedicated to classical education. Hillsdale provides curricular resources and learning materials aligned to a classical liberal arts philosophy. It also provides teacher and leader preparation as well as administrative guidance. The schools operate independently but are networked together and supported by Hillsdale.

COURTESY OF KAIPOD LEARNING

With 12 microschool learning centers across the U.S., KaiPod brings students together into "pods" to learn traditional and non-traditional subjects alike. Here, two students at the KaiPod Learning center in Gilbert, Arizona, study dental hygiene.

Kaipod Learning has curated a network of microschools across the country and supports both microschool founders trying to get their school up and running as well as families looking for a microschool. Wildflower Schools supports more than 70 Montessori microschools nationwide. Other established networks include Acton Academies, Great Hearts, Prenda, and Primer. (Great Hearts and Prenda also have experience in the charter sector.)

The National Microschooling Center is a central node of a large network of microschools around the country. It publishes research on microschools, convenes microschool leaders, advocates for microschools, and more. It also works to disseminate effective pedagogical practices for the microschool context, with a recent blog post specifically discussing the science of reading in microschools.

The experience of the charter sector demonstrates that many school founders, while brilliant educators, lack preparation in the business side of school management. Traditional preparation paths don't teach school administrators how to find facilities, negotiate rents, structure debt, deal with zoning, project revenue, manage cash flow, or perform the umpteen other tasks required of a leader of a small independent school. Networks that can provide templates, answer questions, and link leaders to each other to act as sounding boards can help prevent leaders from making the same mistakes over and over again.

Networks can be informal, ad hoc, and voluntary. They can be made up of independent schools and

educators united by a common cause, rather than a formal structure that manages schools centrally. This might satisfy microschool leaders' independent streak while still supporting them.

Now it's time to learn from the charter sector's failings. Here are three *don'ts*.

Don't let regulations boil the frog.

The founding philosophy of charter schooling was based on flexibility. Early charter school luminaries believed that schools had become too bureaucratic and that educators needed freedom to try new things, rearrange established routines, and organize schools in new and different ways. Over time, however, the authorizing process has become lengthy and complicated, and a slow accretion of state laws and regulations has weighed down many states' charter sectors.

Don't take my word for it. In a 2023 piece in *The 74*, Karega Rausch and David Greenberg of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers wrote, "In many places the application process is too bureaucratic and onerous, and privileges particular kinds of models and operators. That has prevented some excellent potential school founders from bringing better and more creative opportunities that families are seeking."

How we got here is a long story, but in short, authorizers gradually imposed requirement after requirement, and each one probably seemed reasonable at the time. Larger, established school networks had the resources to attend to ever-expanding application and reporting requirements, while smaller independent schools did not. Some leaders thought negative headlines were the *summum malum* of the sector and thus believed in crafting regulations to try to prevent anything bad from ever happening. That was not without costs, and Rausch and Greenberg summarized several succinctly.

The microschool sector can learn three lessons from this.

First, leaders can remember that no raindrop thinks it is responsible for the flood. Every new requirement on the sector should face intense scrutiny, however sensible it sounds. Reasonable regulations and requirements should absolutely be placed on any institution serving children, and necessary safeguards should be implemented when public dollars get thrown into the mix, but neither of those requisites give regulators a blank check to ask anything and everything of school leaders. We have learned from charter schooling that some regulators simply do not consider the costs of the requirements they impose. Microschool leaders need to.

Second, they can remember that different sized actors have different capacities and intentions. The charter schooling sector has created several large, successful, and admirable networks. But the charter sector extends beyond those networks. If the networks are allowed to set the rules, we shouldn't be surprised to see the playing field tilted in their favor. A national network with full-time staff dedicated to completing applications can easily handle a few extra pages of documentation, but that process could be prohibitive for the operator of a small single school. The microschooling sector should support the creation of school networks but never allow the balance of power to tilt too far in favor of them when it comes to drafting regulations, negotiating funding levels, or altering zoning or land use policies.

Third, they can realize that bad headlines are not the problem; a lack of a constituency is. Charter schools, even with all of their regulations, have suffered dozens of scandals over the course of the sector's three decades. Nevertheless, charter schools have persisted—but they have gotten into trouble when they have not had the political heft to either rebut encroachments or expand the field. In Massachusetts, New York, and other states where charters have been capped and relegated to a small sector of the schooling landscape, they simply haven't had the numbers to prevent politicians from jerking them around. Microschoolers should learn that opponents will fight them tooth and nail even without negative stories, so the smarter play is to err on the side of expanding their coalition rather than trying to limit participation only to those who are virtually assured of success.

***Don't* forget that education policy is political.**

That third lesson is a sub-insight of the larger point that education policy is always political. And, at the end of the day, politics is about getting more people to pull a lever or punch a card or tick a box in your favor rather than against you. It is not clear that those in the charter school movement have always internalized this.

Charter schooling became associated with a particular center-left political ideology whose apotheosis was the Obama administration, which was liberal and committed to public schools yet skeptical of teachers unions and pro-education reform. For a time, this seemed like smart politics. In *American Carnage*, Tim Alberta quotes Republican congressman Patrick McHenry, who was sitting on the dais behind Obama at his inauguration in January 2009. Looking out at the massive crowds and stewing about Obama's high approval ratings, McHenry reflected, "I thought we were completely, permanently screwed."

But American politics doesn't work like that. In two short years the Tea Party movement swept into Congress, and eight years later Donald Trump became president. This offers a lesson: Becoming too aligned with one side of the aisle, or even with a single faction within one side, is politically perilous.

Charter schools, after alienating the teachers unions, the heavyweights of the left, did their best to alienate the right. In 2020, the top brass of KIPP, perhaps the most widely lauded charter network, decided to ditch their slogan, "Work Hard. Be Nice.", because they believed "it ignores the significant effort to dismantle systemic racism, places value on being compliant and submissive, supports the illusion of meritocracy, and does not align with our vision of students being free to create the future they want," according to a statement from CEO Richard Barth. *The Wall Street Journal*'s pro-charter editorial page blasted the move as "woke nonsense." KIPP was the most prominent network to drift socially leftward in the past decade, but it was not alone.

Microschools should avoid this mistake. The sector's leaders should not align themselves with any one political ideology nor engage in factional intra-right or intra-left battles. Insofar as private-education choice has become right-coded, microschools risk making the mirror image mistakes of charter schooling. After alienating the left, they could become collateral damage in the post-Trump breakup of the right that is pretty obviously coming down the tracks right now.

Perhaps microschooling can best navigate roiling political waters by following the slogan KIPP abandoned: Work hard. Be nice.

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KIPP charter schools like this one in Houston in 2007 once promoted an ethos of rigorous expectations. They abandoned their "Work hard. Be Nice." philosophy in 2020 out of concerns for equity and inclusion.

Don't forget who your friends are.

Back in 2017, 50CAN President Derrell Bradford used an old Gary Larson cartoon to illustrate the charter movement's posture toward private-school choice. The cartoon depicts two bears in a hunter's crosshairs, with the bear in the most direct line of fire edgily pointing to the other one. Whenever charter school advocates felt themselves targeted by anti-choice forces, they would try to deflect fire toward vouchers.

This was a very bad strategy. Perhaps most importantly, it didn't accomplish the basic goal of shifting fire away from charter schools. In the runup to the election in 2020, President Biden stated directly, "I am not a charter school fan." His administration proposed cuts to the federal Charter Schools Program and proposed new regulations that would have given local districts an effective veto over new charter schools. Years of decrying Betsy DeVos did nothing to help charter schools stay in the good graces of the next Democratic administration.

Second, when the spotlight stayed on charter schools, they had fewer friends willing to stand up and support them. Republicans did not rally to support charter schools in the ways they had in years past. In the post-pandemic era, private-school choice ascended. States across the country passed new, universal or

near-universal voucher and education savings account laws. Rather than a rising tide lifting all choice boats, charters remained tied to the dock while private-school choice headed out of the harbor.

Microschoolers would be wise to sidestep this problem. In the broader world of education options outside of the traditional system, there have been long-running fissures between traditionalist homeschoolers and school choice supporters. Also threatening progress are other potential fault lines—between schoolers and unschoolers, between those who value measurement and those who abhor it, between religious and nonreligious schools, between "woke" and "anti-woke" schools. The charter movement demonstrates that anyone who tries to build something outside of the mainstream is much more your friend than your enemy. And as pertains to any wildly outnumbered insurgent movement, now is not the time for purity spirals.

That is not to say that everyone in microschooling should agree with one another—far from it. But, borrowing from Washington University law professor John Inazu's idea of "confident pluralism," those in the sector should agree on a few key areas (for example, that microschooling provides a legitimate form of education, that those outside of the traditional system should have access to public support if they want it, and perhaps one or two other foundational points), but then allow for a rich diversity thereafter. Microschools should not all have to follow the same pedagogical practices, and the sector's educators and advocates would do well to emphasize that different schools use different tools, methods, and practices.

COURTESY OF PRENDA

If microschool advocates learn the "do" and "don't" lessons from charter schools and the model can become more accessible to more families, scenes like this from a Prenda microschool in Utah could be more common.

Disagreeing with what people do but defending their right to do it has worked for liberalizing causes the world over. It is not clear why it wouldn't also work here.

Microschoolers, and anyone looking to do something new in education, owe the charter sector a debt of gratitude. Thousands of passionate educators have taken incredible leaps to start new schools, expand existing schools, and challenge entrenched incumbents. They have suffered the slings and arrows that come along with that.

Perhaps the best tribute to those who have come before is to learn from their experiences, replicate their successes, and avoid their mistakes. There are plenty of new mistakes to make, and microschools will likely make them. But anything they can do to make their path easier is worth doing.

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