

# So, You Want to Open a Microschool

*For aspiring founders who have the will but lack the way to launch their schools, startup partners are there to help*

By **KERRY McDONALD**



COURTESY OF PRENDA

*Most logistical and administrative barriers to starting a microschool can be overcome by finding an established network to partner with. Prenda is one such network, helping startup microschools like this one in Arkansas.*

**W**HEN MAGGIE VAN CAMP decided to open a microschool, she wasn't sure if she had the necessary skills to make it work. A former kindergarten teacher in the Boston Public Schools who later earned a doctorate in education and became a community college professor, Van Camp felt confident about the pedagogical aspects of running a school. She knew she wanted to create a Reggio Emilia-inspired K-5 microschool for homeschoolers on her 11-acre homestead in a small New Hampshire town where students could attend tuition-free using the state's now-universal school choice program. But what about the operational side of running a small business? Did she have the necessary knowledge to launch and grow a successful school?

Many aspiring microschool founders discover that their biggest challenges don't lie in teaching children and overseeing instruction. They usually enjoy that part of running a school. What they find difficult and

often frustrating are tasks such as navigating zoning laws, finding a suitable location, complying with local and state education regulations, securing startup funding, and learning the basics of owning a business. These barriers can delay or derail promising school startups before they begin. That's why an increasing number of founders are turning to established school networks and startup accelerators—programs that assist aspiring school leaders with mentorship, funding, and know-how—for guidance and support.

In recent years, microschools—small, highly individualized, flexible learning models—have become a popular education option, now serving at least 750,000 U.S. schoolchildren. More than half of microschools nationwide operate as homeschooling centers, while 30 percent function as private schools, 5 percent are public charters, and the rest fit into unique, often overlapping categories, according to a 2025 sector analysis by the National Microschooling Center. While many founders achieve success on their own, joining an accelerator or network can offer the business coaching and community connection that make the inevitable challenges of entrepreneurship more manageable. Van Camp decided to join KaiPod Catalyst, a microschool accelerator program from KaiPod Learning.

I feature six of these microschool accelerators and networks in my new book, *Joyful Learning: How to Find Freedom, Happiness, and Success Beyond Conventional Schooling*. Some of them have been around for years, but they have attracted rising interest since 2020 as more parents and teachers consider starting schools. These programs vary widely in the startup services and supports they offer, but they share a commitment to building relationships among founders and facilitating the ongoing success of today's creative schooling options.

#### KaiPod Catalyst

- **Program type:** Accelerator and network
- **Support level:** Cohort-style accelerator; ongoing coaching, operational, and marketing support; resource library; access to microschool management software
- **Education philosophy:** Model-agnostic; founders choose their own education missions
- **Financial commitment:** 10 percent revenue sharing for two years, or a flat fee of \$15,000

Van Camp opened her microschool, Maggie's Happy Hens Farm and Forest School, in 2025, soon after participating in KaiPod Catalyst. While the accelerator program offers weekly, live meetings over Zoom for each cohort of about 30 founders, Van Camp opted for the asynchronous version, choosing the tutorials and templates that she found most useful. KaiPod receives hundreds of applications from interested founders for each cohort, and accepts those who seem most committed to moving quickly from idea to launch.

Founders who are selected pay \$249 to secure their seat in the accelerator program. If they move forward with a microschool launch, they agree to a two-year 10 percent revenue-share agreement with KaiPod. During that time, they enjoy ongoing business coaching, marketing support, access to a comprehensive library of founder resources, and use of a proprietary microschool management software.



*Secondary microschool students work through a geography lesson at a KaiPod learning center in Gilbert, Arizona.*

“Partnering with KaiPod gave me the confidence to launch my idea and bring it to life,” said Van Camp, whose microschool now serves 29 learners. “I didn’t realize I had all the skills and knowledge already, so it was a gift to confirm I’m capable and ready to do this.”

KaiPod Learning opened its first branded microschool in 2021, after founder Amar Kumar went through his own accelerator experience as a participant in Y Combinator, the prestigious Silicon Valley startup program. Kumar hatched the idea for Catalyst a couple of years later, as he wanted to help new founders open their own microschools, based on their own distinct education visions and values. After seeing some entrepreneurial educators unable to turn their school visions into reality—often due to a lack of business expertise and mentoring—Kumar committed to easing the idea-to-launch pipeline. KaiPod’s templates and coaching help founders avoid common startup pitfalls and gain confidence as a business owner.

### Liberated Learners

- **Program type:** Accelerator and network
- **Support level:** Information and advice for prospective founders; ongoing network affiliation with additional coaching and community resources
- **Education philosophy:** Non-coercive, self-directed education for homeschoolers, with learners fully in charge of their own education
- **Financial commitment:** Free informational webinars; eight-session “starters” program for \$1,800; \$120 annual network membership fee

More than a decade before KaiPod began coaching aspiring founders, a Massachusetts-based microschool accelerator program—Liberated Learners—followed a similar path. Launched in 2013, Liberated Learners was designed to help founders open non-coercive, self-directed learning centers for home-schooled tweens and teens similar to North Star, a microschool in Western Massachusetts that has been operating successfully since 1996. Kenneth Danford, a former public school teacher, created North Star as an alternative to conventional schooling that empowers adolescents to take charge of their own education.



Learners can attend the center up to four days a week, participating in optional classes that interest them and benefiting from ongoing mentoring from adult facilitators.

Danford began hearing from other educators interested in opening a North Star–model center in their own communities. These educators often weren’t sure how to legally structure their programs, secure a location, and spread the word about the benefits of self-directed education to potential students and their families. Danford and a colleague, Joel Hammon—another former public school teacher, who runs Princeton Learning Cooperative in New Jersey—created Liberated Learners to provide startup coaching and a supportive founder community.

Prospective education entrepreneurs interested in running in-person, self-directed learning centers for homeschoolers can participate in one of the network’s free informational webinars to learn more about this unique education model. They can then choose to pay \$1,800 for the eight-session “starters” program and pay an annual membership fee of \$120 to become part of the global Liberated Learners community for continued peer connection and resources.

### Wildflower Schools

- **Program type:** Network
- **Support level:** Startup and ongoing operational support; individualized and cohort-style coaching; national founder community; access to startup capital and funding opportunities
- **Education philosophy:** Learner-centered Montessori education with an emphasis on equity and access
- **Financial commitment:** No-cost “School Startup Journey” incubator program; upon launch, founders commit to a membership agreement, including about 3 percent in annual revenue sharing

A year after Liberated Learners began helping more founders launch self-directed microschools, Wildflower opened its first teacher-led Montessori microschool in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Since then, dozens of teacher-entrepreneurs have joined the Wildflower network, opening personalized Montessori microschools centered around a mission of expanding education equity and access. Interest continues to grow. In 2023, the Wildflower network received an average of 26 teacher inquiries per month from educators who were exploring the idea of launching a school. This year, that number has risen to an average of 40 inquiries a month, and more than 50 founding teams are currently participating in Wildflower’s extensive “School Startup Journey” incubator program.

When Imani Jackson learned about Wildflower’s mission and supportive network, she was hooked. A former public school teacher who also taught in an independent private school, Jackson first heard about Wildflower during the Covid pandemic when the school where she taught was closed for in-person learning and she was trying to find education resources for her young daughter, whose school was also closed. The robust one-on-one coaching and ongoing support from the Wildflower team and peer mentors, as well as access to grants and low-interest loans from the Wildflower Foundation, helped her to successfully

launch her elementary microschool, Poinciana Montessori, in 2024. “Being part of the Wildflower network means having the initial financial resources, operational guidance, and heartfelt support needed to confidently start up our school,” said Jackson.

Wildflower particularly wants to help teachers open their microschools in low-income and underserved communities, where accessing startup funding can be difficult. Receiving a low-interest loan helped Jackson open her private school in Philadelphia’s Germantown neighborhood. It also provides a financial cushion as she builds her enrollment. Wildflower’s average loan amount ranges between \$100,000 and \$200,000, and the organization has provided more than \$5 million in loans to founders. To receive her loan, Jackson had to demonstrate a clear pathway to profitability and loan pay-off over several years, as well as personally contribute at least 10 percent of the startup costs. A financial partner, as well as a supportive community of peers and mentors, Wildflower helps founders launch and grow successful, sustainable schools.

### Acton Academy

- **Program type:** Network
- **Support level:** Active founder community; knowledge-sharing platform; education tools and resources
- **Education philosophy:** Learner-driven education emphasizing Socratic discussions, student collaboration, project-based learning, individual goal setting, and community responsibility
- **Financial commitment:** One-time \$20,000 licensing fee, plus 3 percent of annual revenue

Acton Academy has become one of the fastest-growing emerging school networks in recent years. This global community consisting of hundreds of independently operated, learner-driven schools began in Austin, Texas, in 2009, when founders Jeff and Laura Sandefer realized they weren’t satisfied with the existing education options available for their young children. Today, families and founders are increasingly attracted to Acton Academy’s focus on self-directed, project-based learning, Socratic discussion, shared decision-making, and emphasis on helping students embark on their own “hero’s journey” of personal and professional discovery.

Prospective founders complete a thorough application process to join the Acton Academy Network. If accepted, they pay a one-time \$20,000 licensing fee and agree to 3 percent in annual revenue sharing. They also agree to stay committed to Acton Academy’s model, with learners at the helm of their own education.

Acton Academy’s vast knowledge-sharing platform for founders and distinct education philosophy appeal to the hundreds of individuals who apply to open an Acton Academy in their own communities.

“Acton isn’t ‘school in a box’—it’s a living network where one week’s experiment becomes next week’s best practice across dozens of studios,” said Tobin Slaven, founder of Acton Academy Fort Lauderdale. “The experiments scale fast, resources run deep, and growth is personal for families, guides, and owners. We wouldn’t undertake this journey without it,” said Slaven of both the tangible and intangible benefits of membership in the Acton Academy Network.



COURTESY OF SLOPE SCHOOL / ACTON ACADEMY

*Like all Acton Academy schools, Slope School in Provo, Utah, sees its learners as “Heroes on a Hero’s Journey.”*

### Prenda

- **Program type:** Network
- **Support level:** Startup support for easy launch; access to and training on Prenda’s proprietary learning platform; ongoing support for students and guides
- **Education philosophy:** Self-paced, student-centered learning within small, mixed-age learning environments
- **Financial commitment:** \$2,200 per year per enrolled student

Like Acton Academy, Prenda also saw surging interest in its learner-focused microschool model before the pandemic, and the network has continued to grow steadily over the past five years. Kelly Smith founded Prenda in 2018 as a home-based microschool for his son and some of his neighbors’ kids just outside of Phoenix, Arizona. It worked so well that other local parents wanted to open a Prenda microschool in their homes, using the customized learning software that Smith, a tech entrepreneur, created. Since then, Prenda has helped more than 1,000 founders launch their own, independently run K–8 microschools. “For decades, I have met frustrated parents and teachers who want something different but have been stifled by the system,” said Smith. “What’s rewarding about this moment is that parents and

educators can solve their own problems by creating the learning environment of their dreams.”

Smith recognized that many parents and teachers wanted to run home-based learning pods or community microschools, but they lacked the operational and curricular support to get started quickly and effectively. Prenda offers a practical solution. Prenda microschool founders, known as “guides,” leverage startup support and ongoing access to training and curriculum tools to open their programs swiftly and successfully. Guides set their own tuition, with most charging about \$6,800 annually per student. Prenda charges guides \$2,200 for each enrolled learner, providing access to the curriculum software platform, as well as continuous support for them and their students. Most Prenda microschoolers participate in a state’s school choice programs, helping to defray tuition costs for families. Prenda helps founders understand and navigate these choice programs to make microschools more accessible.

### Launch Your Kind

- **Program type:** Accelerator and network
- **Support level:** Cohort-style accelerator; ongoing business mentoring and founder community
- **Education philosophy:** Model-agnostic; founders must be committed to diversity, kindness, and authenticity
- **Financial commitment:** One-time fee of \$4,000, or \$400 per month for 12 months

Iman Alleyne’s success as the founder of Kind Academy, an award-winning microschool in Coral Springs, Florida, inspired her to create an accelerator program for future education entrepreneurs. She recalled how lonely she felt in the early days of launching her school and the challenges she faced in shifting from her role as public school teacher to that of education entrepreneur. Alleyne created Launch Your Kind to help new founders find community while gaining confidence in how to run a financially sustainable small business. “Launch Your Kind helps teachers think like entrepreneurs,” said Alleyne. “Many educators have never been taught to view their school as a business, and shifting into that entrepreneurial perspective is what ensures their vision lasts.”

In 2022, Alleyne welcomed her first cohort of aspiring founders, most of whom were former teachers. Launch Your Kind consists of a year-long, cohort-style accelerator program for founders committed to fostering learning spaces that embrace diversity, kindness, and authenticity. It offers the guidance, tools, and encouragement founders need to get started, along with continuous coaching and an annual founder retreat.

While initially focused on Florida school founders, Launch Your Kind now welcomes education entrepreneurs from across the United States, who pay a \$4,000 one-time fee, or \$400 a month for 12 months, to participate in the program.

“Launch Your Kind was a template for every little step that was needed to form and shape my microschool,” said Yorelle Haroush, who opened Trailblazers Microschool in Port Saint Lucie, Florida, earlier





ALIE SKOWRONSKI / MIAMI HERALD VIA ZUMA PRESS WIRE

***K-2 students at a microschool in Miami's Liberty City neighborhood act out a story during a reading lesson.***

this fall. "It painted a clear picture for the process of starting a microschool and showed me things I would have missed on my own."

With an abundance of resources and an assortment of entrepreneur communities, such as VELA and the National Microschooling Center, it's never been easier to launch a new school.

Partnering with a school accelerator or network is not always necessary for startup success, but it can offer a customized, community-filled experience for aspiring founders. As more families seek more-personalized, flexible education options for their children—and as these options become more financially accessible through school choice programs—more entrepreneurial parents and teachers are needed to build the innovative schools today's children deserve. Whether these founders go it alone or team up with others on their launch journey, they form the crux of an expansive, bottom-up movement that is widening education options for all. **E**

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