



Introduction to Micro-schools

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What is a micro school? A new wave of tiny schools is sweeping the country offering new options for parents, teachers, and students. Although there is no common definition that covers all micro schools, the understanding that students benefit from personalized learning with close access to teachers is creating an interest in reinventing the one-room schoolhouse where the emphasis is on individual student growth. Micro schools vary in size, approach and governance, and these schools “model a combination of one-room schoolhouse, blended learning, home schooling and private schooling” (Horn, 2015, para. 2).

What is unique about a micro school? Learning environments vary considerably among micro schools. Students may attend school only a few days each week, or they may attend in a more traditional, five days each week, schedule. What these schools have in common is that they offer personalized learning, access to teachers at a very low ratio, innovative approaches to pedagogy, and “a fidelity to personalization and success for all in small communities” (Horn, 2015).

In most micro schools, class size is limited to fifteen students or less, and many schools encourage mixed age level groupings. Classes meet less frequently and can be taught through a flipped classroom or blended learning approach. Class time usually involves hands-on, activity based learning that often pairs students with experts in their fields. Lectures, worksheets and book work are replaced with carefully constructed activities that foster the individual growth of students. These schools often develop content and curriculum that inspire passion for learning through real world application.

Opportunities provided by micro schools:

- Multi-age classrooms – small classrooms will inspire personalized learning that relies on dynamic grouping. Students of different ages can work together to support each other as in the Montessori model.
- The ability to identify challenges and implement new ideas – small schools allow adjustments to be made according to student need. For example, scheduling can be changed relatively easily as compared to a school with 500 students.
- Lower organizational complexity – running a small organization reduces the complexity of operation.
- Teacher empowerment – micro schools may attract teachers looking for more autonomy in the classroom.
- Enhanced community – research suggests that relationships matter for students. Smaller school environments will enhance connections between students, families and teachers.
- Fewer facilities challenges – micro schools may require only a single open room; therefore, finding space in the community should not be a barrier.
- Replication – effective micro schools can be easily replicated. Additionally, the flexibility inherent in a micro school will allow adaptation according to student need.
- Teacher Ownership – Many micro-schools are owned by the very teachers who lead them. This model of school not only provides autonomy, but allows maximum flexibility in leadership and decision-making.

To be fair, there are challenges inherent in developing a micro school. These challenges include the impact of teacher turnover in small communities, the ability to attract (and retain) quality teachers, enhanced workload for teachers, and potential lack of funding for special services. Children with special needs may have difficulty receiving services that enhance their success. Founders of micro schools may be able to mitigate some of these potential challenges through external partnerships with service providers in the community.

What is the potential impact of micro schools? According to a recent article published in Business Insider, “micro schools could create serious competition in the private school

world” (Robinson, 2016, para. 2). The emphasis on personalized learning, teacher empowerment, integration of technology, and creation of learning communities at a cost well below the cost of private education will continue to attract parents, students, and teachers searching for options that meet their individual needs. Additionally, individualized education that stirs student passion and motivation has the potential to profoundly impact student success and highlight hidden potential.

Why start a micro school? Micro schools are gaining traction among families who are looking for alternatives to their local public schools and do not want to or cannot pay for a traditional or religiously affiliated private school education. These families want a personalized education for their children, and they are looking for options other than home schooling. While home school families have, for some time, created cooperatives for socialization of children and flexibility for parents, the micro-schooling phenomenon is more formal with structured networks available.

Read next – [Designing a Micro-school](#).

[Link to Micro-school Sample Models and Budgets](#)

References

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