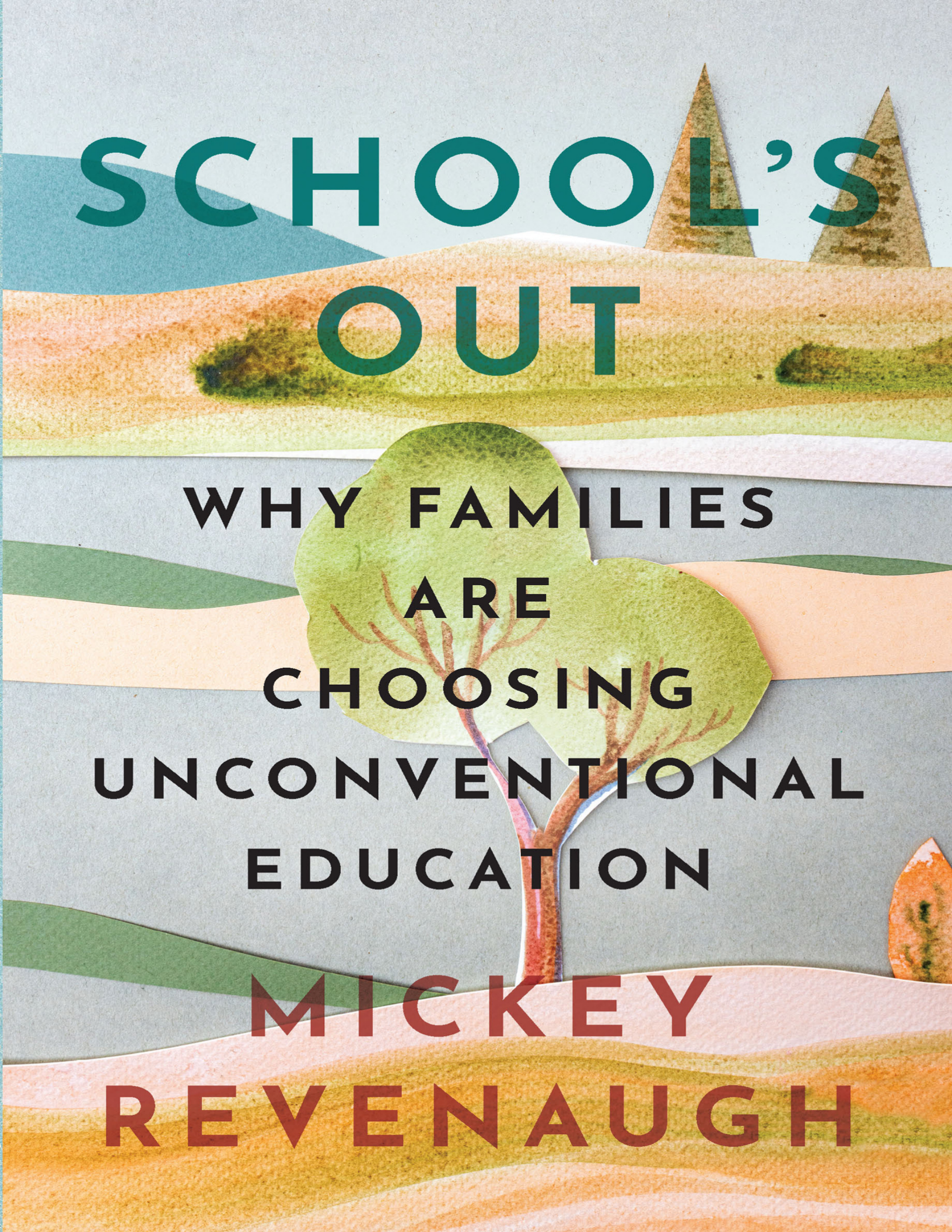
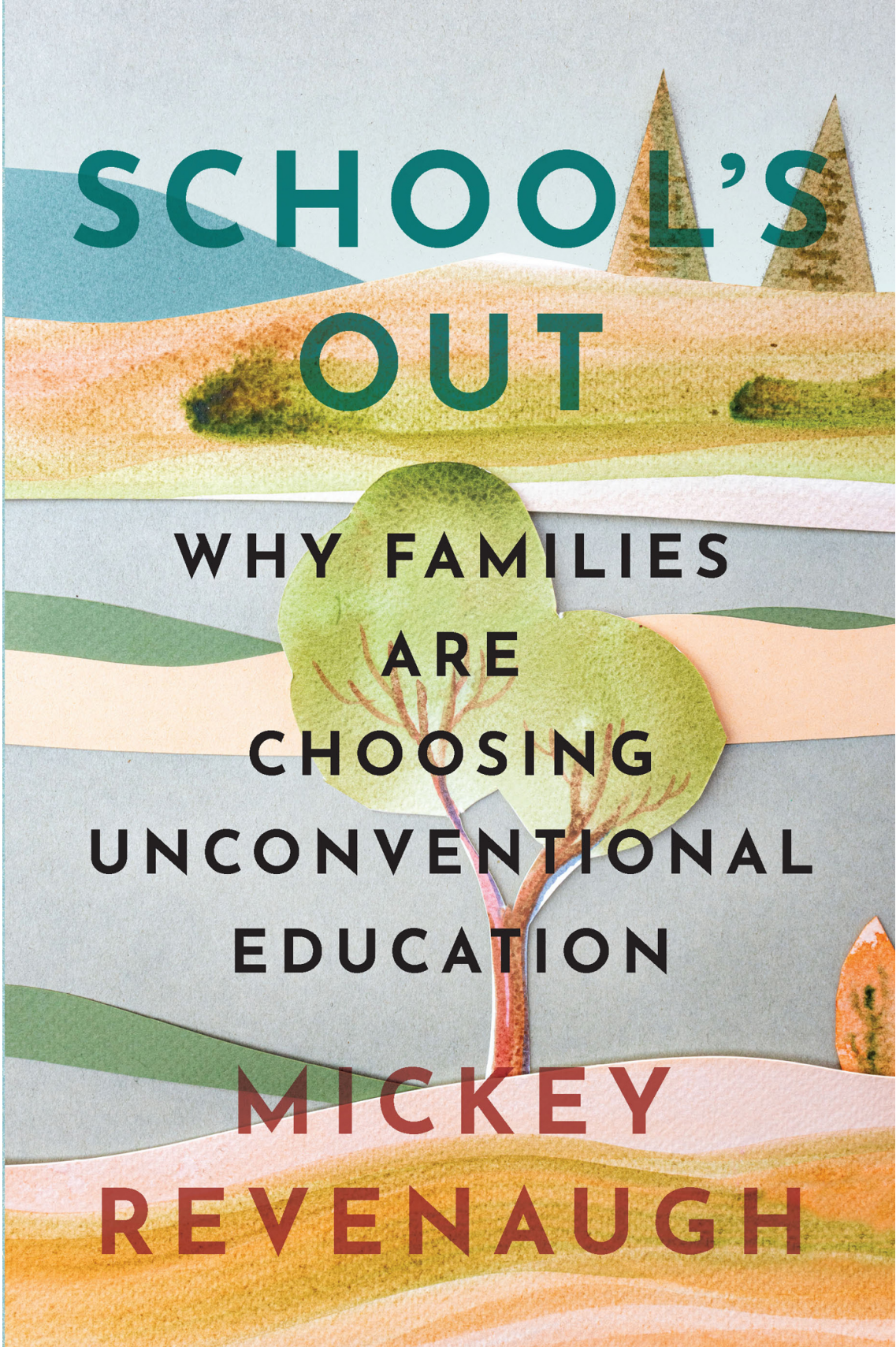




SCHOOL'S OUT

WHY FAMILIES
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*Why Families Are Choosing Unconventional
Education*

Mickey Revenaugh



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School's Out

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Beyond the Schoolhouse Door

Something profound is changing in American education.

You can see it in the big data swings from 2019 to today, from pre- to post-pandemic: two million fewer students in our public schools,¹ a 30 percent increase in kids homeschooling,² niche arrangements like virtual schools³ and microschools,⁴ each nearing the estimated million-learner mark. Add to that the jangling press coverage of stagnant test scores, phone-addicted teenagers, an echo-pandemic of anxiety and depression, and the looming specter of AI (artificial intelligence).

But you can also see the changes on the ground in any given community, in who's showing up at this unschooling center and that online school field trip. What were once fringe crowds have lots of normies now. Consultant dads adding teaching the kids in their work-from-home routines. Black moms with master's degrees organizing co-op afternoons at the park. That back-to-school-night stalwart family down the street or down the hall that's doing *something different* this year.

What is happening? I wrote *School's Out* to find out.

In America, (almost) everyone went to school, so (absolutely) everyone feels they know a thing or two about education. The vast majority of these citizen-experts, about 90 percent, went to public school, reporting every weekday roughly from September through June to a building with hundreds of kids their age from their neighborhood. If they were in a charter or magnet public school, the catchment area may have included the whole town, with families trading proximity to gain something extra for their kids—or to escape something harmful, like low scores or high violence. Americans who went to private school might be gathered in from across a city or even across the country based on interest, performance, and ability to pay. But, going back at least 125 years, learning in school for almost all of us has meant sitting in rooms with age peers, being led through lessons by a teacher standing at the front of the room. It has meant bells between subjects, rules for moving from place to place, maybe a uniform or dress code. It has meant being at the place called school, away from your family,

from early in the morning until at least the middle of the afternoon. And sadly, lately, it has meant learning how to stay alive if someone enters that building with a gun.

Given this massive common experience of school, it's not surprising that alarm bells—or at least pings of curiosity—go off for your average American when they encounter children outside the school building during the school day. The mom with three kids above knee-height at the grocery store at 1 p.m. on a Wednesday. The multiage cluster moving through the science museum at lunchtime on a different path from all the school groups. The bird-line of teenagers focused on their laptops at the public library at 10 a.m. Who are these people, and why aren't they “in school”? And what does it have to do with those scary headlines and stats?

The American education system has been in incremental flux for more than three decades, since the emergence of legal homeschooling, education vouchers, charter schools, and online learning. But it took a global pandemic to accelerate things. Thanks to COVID, more than 30 million American families with school-aged children got a glimpse at what fewer than 10 percent of them already knew: that some kids actually do better in settings that look nothing like the traditional classroom. And now many of these families are demanding access to virtual public schools, home education, global cyber-schools, hybrid schools, microschools, community learning programs, and more—a dizzying array of options that together make up what we might call “unconventional education.”

I come to this work with 40 years of expertise as an education journalist and cofounder of one of the nation's leading online learning companies, which began serving students back in 2002. Along my pathway as a pioneer in the field, I have seen firsthand every education variation imaginable outside the conventional classroom, heard the searching voices of students and families, and met the sharpest thinkers on all sides of the question. I retired from what by then had become a corporate day job at the end of 2022 with an overwhelming itch to understand the changes I could see happening in American education. *School's Out* gave me a reason to dig in deep—with invaluable help from my educator friends, my writing family, and a few who are both.

Through more than 100 interviews, 100,000 miles of travel, and innumerable hours spent crouched down for a kid's-eye-view of learning as it happens, I've come to believe that this phenomenon of unconventional

education will have—already is having—a significant impact on our education system. Driven in large part by a grassroots army of recovering classroom teachers, entrepreneurs, and especially parents and their kids, this multiplication of options outside the traditional classroom is changing what we expect our local school districts to offer and how we remix our time from a strict separation of school and home and community into an everything DIY (do it yourself) blend.

We start our *School's Out* journey where all these unconventional education trends come together under one celebratory roof: at a pod prom. For this [chapter 1](#) sampler, we spend the day at a “bring your own program” microschool for grades 3–12 outside of Boston, where the dozen or so young learners include homeschoolers of various flavors, virtual school students both public and private, one worldschooler, and enough neurodiversity to be a microcosm of today's school-age population. It's the end of the academic year, and they're having a party that marks how they've come together as a community and what that might mean for the rest of us.

From there we take a wonky but essential dive into the funding mechanisms, from Education Savings Accounts, or ESAs, to microgrants and a new federal tax credit scholarship program, which are now allowing an ever-broader array of American families to tap into learning apart from public school. [Chapter 2](#) shows the dynamic interaction between parent desires and policy shifts, with each fueling the other.

Next, we journey deep in [chapter 3](#) into homeschooling as it has evolved from its “old-school” reality—mostly white, heavily Christian, and hardened against the public system, with roots in a knotty fight for “parents' rights”—to the much more diverse and eclectic mix that it is today. We then pivot in [chapter 4](#) to “unschooling,” a parallel universe of kid-driven, self-directed learning that's gaining steam as ideal preparation for an ambiguous world. For [chapter 5](#) we crash a meetup of roadschoolers, those practicing unconventional education on the move in an RV (recreational vehicle) or a sailboat. For [chapter 6](#), we take a tour of microschools, the “teeny, tiny” modern incarnations of the one-room schoolhouse that are blooming like a thousand flowers across Arizona and beyond. In [chapter 7](#), we explore the virtual school world that is so dear to my heart, and for [chapter 8](#) we start with mariachi and end in the forest school mud to see that “learning happens everywhere.”

Throughout the next few chapters, we explore the crosscurrents affecting all these forms of unconventional education. In [chapter 9](#), we learn why and how increasing numbers of Black and brown families are turning to homeschooling, virtual schooling, microschools, and more to imbue their children's education with cultural relevance and self-determination. In [chapter 10](#), we meet students with autism, ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), cerebral palsy, and a range of other disabilities whose parents are finding the unconventional education environment a better fit for the different ways their kids learn. In [chapter 11](#), we catch up with a parade of alumni from the various forms of unconventional education to see how their adult lives are taking shape.

And finally, [chapter 12](#) is where we pull together everything we've seen on the *School's Out* journey into a unified, somewhat anxious but, in the end, mostly hopeful look at what lies ahead.

By the journey's end, we'll see how the flowering of new education choices is offering families unprecedented opportunity to personalize their children's learning and how that personalization must be coupled with a broad connection to community to stave off isolation and despair. We'll grapple with nagging concerns about equity—including how funding can limit or expand families' options—as well as how to measure education quality in a world of multiplying choices, including many funded by taxpayer dollars. We'll examine the danger of increased polarization when families depart from the (possibly illusory) common ground of the public school. We'll also see that the embrace of these new choices by an ever larger and more diverse segment of the population, led by an eclectic army of formidable mamas, is driving positive change, along with nerve-racking disruption, in the conventional education system itself.

Whether you are a parent, a policymaker, or a citizen concerned about where American education (and therefore society) might be heading, I hope *School's Out* will open your eyes, as writing it did mine, to the many complicated facets of the transformation currently underway. For that, we can collectively thank the scores of families we meet in these pages, along with the millions more we can glimpse through their stories. To them we say, with gratitude: ever onward.

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The Pod Prom

It's Prom Day 2023, and Kennedy,¹ hyper-focused as only a DIY tween can be, is intent on finishing the photo backdrop laid out in front of her. Her knees hold down the paper's margins while a wave of her chestnut hair sways inches above the floor, framing the task as Kennedy has defined it: blowing up just the right number of balloons (in the range of 30), in just the right colors (a rainbow of six), to the perfect spherical sizes (small or medium and ready-to-pop). Arranged around the border of her creation, they will transform the amalgam of white sticky-backed paper and colored markers into something more.

Like Kennedy's backdrop, her school is something more than an amalgam of a dozen Boston-area kids of various ages all engaged in different unconventional learning programs side by side in a repurposed law office. Outside, Subarus and Teslas nose into the 30-minute parking slots along Lincoln Street, Newton Highlands' quaintish business strip, just long enough to drop off the dry cleaning then grab a matcha and croissant. Upstairs, Kennedy and her crew are changing the trajectory of American education.

Kennedy's "school" is actually not a school as we know it but is rather the first outpost of KaiPod, a unique network of learning centers that some compare to a WeWork for education (but without the hubris).² KaiPod is part of a flourishing of new, unconventional education choices for American families that has emerged since the 2020 pandemic to meet a clamoring around the country for something different for their kids.

Almost two million American students have left the traditional education system since 2020, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.³ Data tracked by the Johns Hopkins University Homeschool Hub shows that the pandemic nearly doubled the number of students considered to be homeschooled (which does not count those enrolled in their district's emergency remote schooling programs), from 2.6 million in 2019 to more than 5 million in 2021, before settling at over 3.2 million in 2023, with ongoing growth of as much as 8 percent a year.⁴ Purpose-built public

(tuition-free) and private (tuition-based) virtual schools, many of them now in their second decade of operation, are growing by 10 percent annually, collectively nearing the one-million-student mark.⁵ And microschools serving just handfuls of students each are all the rage, capturing headlines from the likes of the *New York Times* (“A School with 7 Students”)⁶ and the *Wall Street Journal* (“The Rising Trend in Private Education: Teeny, Tiny Schools”).⁷

At Kennedy’s KaiPod, a little bit of each of those new American education options is fully on display under one roof, making it the ideal microcosm for beginning our exploration of why “school’s out” for an increasing number of American families today.

The KaiPod network has grown from one location (this very Newton pod) in 2021 to more than 80 by 2025. Each center enrolls about a dozen students, ages 8–16. Learners bring their preexisting education modalities with them: homeschool, virtual school, unschool, whatever they and their parents have chosen.

The KaiPod center staff is typically made up of two “coaches,” often former classroom teachers who are quick to point out that they are not serving as teachers at KaiPod. Instead, their job at the pod is to supervise and encourage, keep kids on track with their varied academic work, do a bit of spot-tutoring when necessary, and facilitate group activities for fun and enrichment. You won’t see a KaiPod coach standing at a front-of-room whiteboard lecturing about noun-verb agreement or westward expansion in US history, though you might see their riddle of the day posted there for kids to solve as they pass by on their way through the eclectic, not-like-a-classroom space.

Most of the students attend KaiPod daily from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., with others coming just a few days a week. Tuition varies according to time on-site, from around \$470 per month in 2025 for a two-day program to just under \$1,000 per month for every day. For parents who have chosen not to send their offspring to a traditional school on a traditional schedule, KaiPod is a source of childcare, learning support, and social-emotional backup. For kids, it’s an instant multi-age community.

The KaiPod network has particularly flourished in states where public funding, in the form of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) and other voucher-like options that we explore in the next chapter, is available for parents who choose unconventional options. Many of these KaiPod

outposts are “company pods,” microschools that use the KaiPod name and have a familiar look and feel. But KaiPod now also helps teacher-founders go their own way through the Catalyst program, which provides intensive, incubator-style business coaching, program-design expertise, and help with things like marketing and hiring. Scores of Catalyst-supported microschools now dot the education landscape in places like Arizona and Florida, as we see in [chapter 6](#). In honor of the network’s first location, KaiPod has also created a technology platform called Newton to support the sustainability of microschools of all flavors.

On any other Monday here at KaiPod Newton, Kennedy would be working on her independent homeschooling program: core academics assembled by her parents—a chemist and a software developer—with help from the internet, during the three academic blocks on the pod schedule. Kennedy and her older sisters, Karinna and Ainsley, have been daily fixtures here since last September. “We’ve done public school, home-homeschool, private school, co-ops,” dad Jeremy Fairbanks says when he drops the trio off, “but this is the one place they get to be their unique selves and still keep stretching.” The family chuckles about a video they took early one morning last fall of all three girls leaping out of the minivan as it pulled up early in front of KaiPod, then wedging together in the vestibule with their faces pressed side by side against the glass, waiting for their coach to come open the door. It was quite the difference, mom Angela Fairbanks notes, from prior school years when Kennedy regularly skipped class out of boredom, Ainsley missed whole weeks due to health issues, and Karinna stewed because she’d already blown through all the high school’s math offerings as an underage freshman.

Now it’s June of their second year at KaiPod, and all three of them have already finished their entire curricula. So today Karinna, 15 and graduating high school early, is detailing her 20 college acceptances on a spreadsheet with links to PDFs of all the “We’d like to invite you to join our class of 2027” letters, plus columns for pluses and minuses of each option.

Karinna will shortly submit the whole file as part of her family’s annual homeschool documentation required by the Education Committee of the Town of Framingham. All K–12 education in Massachusetts is highly localized, and homeschooling is no different. While the Home School Legal Defense Association has designated Massachusetts a bright red “High

Regulation” state, the Fairbanks say they haven’t found it to be so.⁸ Karinna’s college acceptance cornucopia is more about pride than compliance, in their view.

Karinna’s memories of briefly attending her local public high school are not happy ones. She was bullied by the other kids for her age (then barely 13), perceived sexual orientation (gay), and fashion choices (multicolor hair and piercings), but it was the teachers’ disregard for her academic ambitions that really stung. You have to do Algebra 1 before you can tackle Geometry, she explained, and wait your turn for that upper-level literature course. Since returning to homeschooling, Karinna has completed not just her high school requirements but a handful of intro-level university courses at the local community college. Her college acceptance cornucopia will land at the town education office with a mild but unmistakable “eff you” subtext.

Karinna’s sister Ainsley, age 13, is tucked into her beanbag corner with noise-canceling headphones on and an animation program pulled up on her laptop. As a confirmed introvert and the holder of a public school Individualized Education Plan listing a diagnosis of mild autism and speech delays, Ainsley is most comfortable on this cozy island she’s created apart from the KaiPod swim of things. And as a kid afflicted with lifelong autoimmune issues, she makes sure the IV stand and tube connected to her stomach feeding port, which will deliver pureed fruit and veggies with a side of flavored water when lunch break comes, is set up inconspicuously between her body and the wall. Karinna glances Ainsley’s way every 15 minutes or so, and Ainsley responds with a subtle thumbs-up in between replays of the animated monster movie she’s creating on-screen. None of the other kids seem to notice either the IV or the sib-to-sib signaling.

Meanwhile, Kennedy is in full art director mode.

With three hours to go until showtime, Kennedy uses the half-hour break between academic slots to put the pod’s boys under age 12 to work. Jimi the violinist, Carlos the soccer fanatic, and Kayden-from-England take a pause from cracking each other up just long enough to inflate a total of 10 balloons, pop 2, and spar over which blue is the bluest. Kennedy dispenses tape and directs the boys to fill in the gaps of her design, which undulates like a multicolored python around the block-lettered “KaiPod Prom 2023.”

Learning Coach Jasmine Caamano, a young theater educator known to the KaiPod kids as Miss Jasmine, keeps a supportive eye on Kennedy as she wrangles Kayden back to his workbooks. She’s already reminded a visitor

(and possibly herself) that her role is not to be a traditional teacher but rather to provide personalized doses of encouragement and structure in whatever form that takes for each student. For Kayden, it's all about time management.

Kayden's dad is a Black American professor of politics on the faculty at a leading university in London, and he is back in Boston for a year on book sabbatical, so Kayden, the youngest KaiPodder here at nine, is working through the materials his traditional British school sent with him for the year. A combination of textbooks, workbooks (today, it's *Scholastic Success with Reading Comprehension*), and online courses for math, it will take Kayden through Year 4 of his UK schooling, if only he can concentrate long enough to finish his daily assignments. It's a constant struggle helped by dual electronic timers (one for twenty minutes of work, one for five minutes of break) and color coding, but undercut by the constant temptations of online games, in-person buddies, and a cardboard recycling bin full of potential construction projects.

The other KaiPod kids have learned to work around Kayden's chair-rolling, chopstick drum solos, yelps of victory when he finishes a workbook page, and challenges to everyone to keep aloft the red balloon he has launched like a beach ball at a '90s music festival. The students comfortably spaced around the U-shaped worktable are all angled just slightly away from him, with headphones to don as needed, and there's a quiet room with a door that shuts for serious concentration. Besides, they love Kayden like a little brother, this boy who's taught them that "gutted" means sad, not stabbed, in British English.

It's hard to imagine the same level of affectionate tolerance in the traditional London primary Kayden was in last year, much less the boarding school he will attend next. Though "elective home education" is legal in the United Kingdom, engaging some 80,000 students, the multiplication of options for students outside the regular school structure is an American phenomenon. There are no KaiPods in England, no public virtual schools, no recognized microschools, nor anything yet quite like the organized congregation of students in a "third place" other than school or home. Outside the United States, innovations like these have faltered in the face of strict regulations (or outright bans) regarding homeschooling, national education systems that allow little variation among communities, and

cultural traditions that clearly demarcate education as the province of professionals and the state.

Back at KaiPod, diagonally across the smile-shaped table from Kayden and on the other side of Karinna with her pile of college paperwork, Michael is helping Boris complete his last portfolio assignment in his online US history course. Boris is a ninth grader at Pearson Online Academy, a private virtual school serving students around the globe as part of the otherwise public virtual Connections Academy network.⁹ His brother Michael is two years ahead of him at the same school. At this point in June, Michael is basically done with his coursework for the year, a week ahead of schedule, but Boris has been puzzling over this summative assignment, a combination of quiz questions and short-essay prompts focusing on the post-World War II period. Boris has attended all of this course's LiveLesson sessions—real-time Zoom classes in which his teacher provides direct instruction on a key topic in the course, and for which he and his brother and their Pearson Online Academy classmates prepare by working through the self-paced online curriculum on the topic. He's read all the online textbook material and checked out the recommended videos and websites about the Cold War, the civil rights movement, and Vietnam, but the nuances have him baffled. He's a science guy, preferring the clarity of the periodic table to the fog of geopolitics.

Michael, on the other hand, is a social studies maven. He watches miniseries about the Cuban Missile Crisis for fun, speaks of Lyndon Johnson like he's a favorite uncle, and can cite chapter and verse from the Freedom Rides and the March on Washington.

"What if you were learning how to box, and you found out your worst enemy was learning how to box too," he asks Boris. "What would you do?"

Boris doesn't have enemies—Miss Jasmine has already told me he's the most universally loved kid in the pod—but he plays along. "I'd add some karate moves," he tells his brother.

"Okay," Michael answers. "Then what would your enemy do?"

"Add karate moves of their own?" Boris offers.

"Exactly. You'd have yourself an arms race." Michael taps the computer screen where Boris is meant to write a five-sentence mini-essay. "Think of yourself as America and your enemy as Russia, and write about it."

Boris bends his mop of curly black hair toward the keyboard and begins tapping.

“And when you’re done with that, imagine you and your enemy each send some other kid into the ring to fight for you,” Michael says. “What you’d have then is a—”

“Proxy war,” Boris says, raising his hand for a high five without looking away from the screen.

Michael taps his brother’s palm and packs up his backpack. “Mission accomplished,” he says in Miss Jasmine’s direction. “I’m going out for lunch.” (Later, his mom calls to let the KaiPod coaches know Michael’s not coming back for the pod prom after all. “He’s got the 16s,” she sighs. “He just wants to play a video game and be quiet.”)

On his way down the stairs one floor to Lincoln Street, Michael passes Sabine and Charlee on their way back up. Sabine is a sophomore at TECCA, a Massachusetts public virtual school launched a decade ago by a consortium of suburban Boston school districts with the goal of providing students across the state with access to a free, quality online program.^{[10](#)} Sabine arrived at KaiPod early this morning with her prom outfit on a hanger and her all-time-favorite-hits playlist ready to share from her phone. She was the first kid in the door, which meant she got to pick the tunes her fellow podders would hear upon arrival and during breaks in the day—and maybe, just maybe, during the party itself.

In the Monday morning quiet before the other kids arrived, Sabine had parked herself on the couch, headphones firmly in place and laptop open. She needed to finish two more online lessons today to stay on pace for completion of geometry, her last course credit of the school year, by the end of the week. As the other students clamored in, she looked up with a quick grin and then back down again. Sabine was in the zone, everyone knew.

By 10 a.m., though, the tween energy around Kennedy’s prom prep and Kayden’s balloon antics out-notched Sabine’s concentration skills. She uncurled herself from the couch and headed for the quiet room on the other side of the KaiPod space, where her friend Charlee had already staked out a spot in the twin armchairs with the narrow rolling desk they could share in between.

Charlee and Sabine met online at TECCA their freshman year, catching glimpses of each other via their computer screens in English 9 LiveLessons and Art Club. While neither of them missed the cliquey chaos they’d sampled at their local brick-and-mortar schools, and while they each have plenty of friend time outside of school through dance classes and church

activities, both girls found themselves feeling isolated doing freshman year in their Waltham and Needham bedrooms, respectively. So when Charlee's mom signed her up for KaiPod—or was it Sabine's family that found it first? No one can remember—they launched into 10th grade with a built-in study buddy and lunch partner. Getting to know other high schoolers like Michael and Karinna, and serving as surrogate big siblings to the likes of Kennedy and Kayden, has been an unexpected bonus.

And also an incentive to make the most of concentrated work time side by side, headphones on, in the quiet room. Their muted cries of “Yes!” and “No way!” through the glass wall sound like two sides of the same conversation, but Sabine has spent the morning manipulating an onscreen geoboard to plot out equations while Charlee mixed simulated beakers of chemicals like nitric acid and benzene, chemicals that should never go together in the real world.

Now, post-lunch break, after urging Michael to hurry back for the party, Charlee and Sabine head into the bathroom behind the kitchenette to put on prom makeup side by side in the wall-length mirror.

Meanwhile, Miss Jasmine and Boris have hefted the photo backdrop into place under Kennedy's direction. Karinna has strapped on science goggles to hang curly foil streamers from the panels of the drop ceiling (“Nasty dust when you pop those things up,” she explains). Kayden has changed into a powder blue suit and matching necktie. Jimi is sporting a leprechaun hat and magic staff from Miss Jasmine's theater closet. Lead learning coach Kimberly Brown—Miss Kim to the kids—has hustled in with gift baggies of cookies and mango strips as well as a coleus cutting for each student in a mason jar marked “Grow! Love KaiPod.” Kennedy emerges in a spangled dance dress and sits Charlee in front of her to French braid her hair. Sabine turns up the volume on her playlist, and she and Miss Jasmine lead a multiage crew in a spirited Cupid Shuffle. (“You can see why this is my dream job,” Miss Jasmine quips on one turn around the floor.)

Prom has officially begun.

Soon there's a six-kid game of Uno underway in a circle on the carpet, followed by a chess lightning round on the couch. Carlos, who is homeschooled with an eclectic mix of online curricula, challenges Jimi—whose homeschooling is very intentionally print only (“I think learning on computers is bad for kids,” his mom says)—to a mostly careful indoor soccer dribble-off. Kennedy demonstrates the rubber-ducky-super-bubble-

blower that Jimi and Carlos, who may or may not share a crush on her, have presented as a prom/end-of-school/whenever-your-birthday-might-be gift. The bubbles fly out across the space like a shower of stars, catching the twinkle of the fairy lights hung all around. KaiPodders cluster in twos and threes in front of the photo background as Miss Kim shoots away: Karinna and Ainsley, Boris flanked by Charlee and Sabine, Kayden with arms crossed and head cocked in a classic rapper pose.

“Never in all my years as a high school English teacher would I have guessed this is where I would end up,” Miss Kim says while she snaps the prom portraits. “And I could not be happier.”

Then Kayden’s father and aunt appear at the door, and it’s time to go. Kayden is suddenly quiet, almost subdued, breaking into his signature grin only when his dad places his hand on the top of Kayden’s head. “The pod has been good for Kayden this year,” he says. “Too bad there’s nothing like this in London, but it’s getting time to move on.” Kayden’s smile fades then, and he turns to throw himself into a group hug with his pod mates, everyone bobbing and bouncing in a clump toward the door.

“Another prom in the books!” Miss Jasmine calls out.

Miss Kim *whoop-whoops* as she hugs the last kid out the door and shuts off the lights.

Places like KaiPod distill the panoply of what’s happening around the edges of American education in this post-pandemic moment. In addition to the growing number of families choosing to homeschool their kids, or enroll them in virtual school, or provide a globally mobile experience, or at the very least arrange a gap year between dislocations, there’s an urge to connect and combine unconventional options in very personalized ways. Students yearn to be with other students but are not quite back to where they need to be, social skill-wise. In a 2023 survey by *Education Week*, 70 percent of teachers reported persistent upticks in classroom misbehavior compared not just to pre-pandemic times but to the 2021–22 post-COVID return period.^{[11](#)} Parents in a variety of school settings, including homeschool, say they want to get their kids out of the house and out of “goblin mode,” with the anxiety and depression that too often accompany it.

Whether traditional schools are prepared to provide a “new normal” level of support for students and staff is an open question, even several years out from the pandemic. For example, a pair of National Center for

Education Statistics Pulse Surveys in spring 2024 reported by *Education Week* found that four in ten school leaders were “moderately” or “extremely” concerned about their students’ mental health, while just 48 percent of public schools believed they could effectively provide mental health services to all students who need them—a nearly ten percentage point decline from 2021 to 2022.^{[12](#)}

And then there’s anxiety of a different kind, about what the future economy holds for today’s learners, and how best to prepare them for it. Does the past century’s assembly line of secondary and tertiary education, fueled by standardized tests and performative extracurriculars, still make sense when the dawning era of AI-driven disruption might favor those with skills like self-direction, self-management, and intrinsic motivation? In a cultural moment when a college degree no longer appears to be the ironclad guarantee of a middle-class-or-better life that it once may have seemed, many parents find themselves open to considering less conventional paths, shifting from an insistence on the school-college-career lockstep sequence to something that looks more like learning-passion-purpose. Couple that with the sense so many parents have that their child is a unique learner—reinforced by the front-row seat they had during lockdown—and it’s no wonder a growing number of families of all kinds are drawn to the promise of highly personalized development that unconventional schooling options seem to offer.

In response, as we see in the next chapter, federal policymakers and those in the redder states are shaking funding loose through things like tax credits and ESAs to democratize new choices. Such policy moves are very often accompanied by the search for more nuanced ways to measure learning performance beyond the standardized test.

Meanwhile, lifelong educators who emerged emotionally drained from the pandemic slog of Zoom school now face new crises of checked-out kids, learning loss, and the looming presence of AI. These dynamics driving today’s unconventional school choices provide as much of a backdrop for the pod prom as Kennedy’s wall creation.

KaiPod founder Amar Kumar, whose education philosophy is colored by his family’s roots in India and a postgraduate stint running a school in Bangalore before returning to US corporate work, sees hints of a profound shift ahead for schooling in America. Through a decade of service at the global educational publishing giant Pearson, Kumar couldn’t shake the idea

that there might be hidden power in parent choice when combined with intimate social-emotional support for every learner. KaiPod—whose name is derived from the Greek word *kairos*, meaning “the right time to act”—was inspired in part by the pandemic pods featured in 2020 news reports from places like Santa Monica and Greenwich, where affluent parents pooled funds to buy IKEA desks and hire a tutor to “do school” in someone’s guesthouse. But KaiPod equally takes its cues from the affordable private school movement transforming education for the rising middle class in places like India and South Africa. There, where “government schools” (which typically charge modest fees to supplement public funding) have not been able to keep up with rising demands for quality and variety, entrepreneurs have developed entire alternate universes of private schools costing families just a bit more.

Here in America, the economic realities of scaling learning options outside the traditional system mean that, in many states, new models are by their very nature powered by little more than sweat equity and high ideals. It makes for a dynamic yet still quite delicate ecosystem. For example, at the end of the 2023–24 school year, despite the much-heralded microschool boom and a thriving network elsewhere around the country, the Newton KaiPod held its last prom and closed its doors for good. Kayden went back to England; Sabine switched from TECCA to a brick-and-mortar school; Karinna graduated and enrolled at Worcester State College (“our third generation there!” her mom exults) with a supersized schedule of math, chemistry, and biotech classes; and not enough new students came in to replace them. Without a public funding stream to offset significant labor and infrastructure costs, small learning communities are difficult to sustain in places like the Northeast, and many other regions of the country.

And yet: at least one Newton KaiPod family isn’t ready to give up the unconventional path. Karinna, Kennedy, and Ainsley’s mom, Angela Fairbanks, considered her 2024 layoff from her Big Pharma job and early recovery from breast cancer shortly thereafter as signs from the universe that she should start her own microschool once the Newton center closed. Fairbanks’s determination was fueled by the fact that Ainsley, at age 14, recently tested at the 12th-grade level in reading and the 86th percentile in math for her age, despite being years behind when the trio started at KaiPod. Kennedy, a former “school eloper” with the grades to prove it, now clocks in at the 90th percentile on everything, and may soon, like her sister

Karinna, have run through all a typical high school math curriculum might offer. While Fairbanks notes that her kids think they're spending just a few hours a day on academics because that was the allotted study time at KaiPod, she says the microschool model makes education "so smooth and natural" that they're actually engaged in deep learning all day, every day—and have the results to prove it.

So Kennedy and Ainsley are now the first of a handful of students at the new learning center Fairbanks has launched in their hometown of Framingham. She's proud to have designed the space to feature a neurodiverse-friendly layout furnished with top-quality commercial furniture donated by corporate friends, plus a few sentimental KaiPod hand-me-downs like Ainsley's beanbag and the couch she later occupied daily. The new school is called Kalexedy Learning Center.¹³ Karinna is the head librarian, when she isn't speed-learning her way to a bachelor's by age 18.

The message that Fairbanks and Kumar and other "edupreneurs" want to convey about the new kinds of learning choices they are making available to American families hungry for something different is that the collision of innovation, policy enablement, and consumer desire has the power to significantly alter American education as we know it. And they believe the change will be for the better, for learners, families, and the nation's future, even if it leaves some disruption in its wake.

Most days, I am right there with them.

I started paying attention to tectonic trends in American education in the mid-1980s, when personal computers were first introduced and began finding their way into classrooms, which were then networked together, and then connected to the world via this mysterious phenomenon called the internet. I was editing several magazines for educators back then, and my stance quickly evolved into that of a pragmatic optimist. I could see the potential for education technology to make learning much more personal, more engaging, than the conventional sit-still-face-front-and-listen-to-the-teacher schooling I had grown up with. Sure, there were worries about equity—what we called the Digital Divide then, and still do—and about the unknown effects of ever-increasing screentime. But on balance, I saw technology as a constructive tool in the hands of learners barreling down on a new century.

When the opportunity arose in 2001 to harness the internet for a fully virtual public school, designed to bring together the best thinking about pedagogy with the technologies transforming our world, I was all in. As a cofounder of Connections Academy, one of the leading online learning providers for K–12 education, I witnessed with my own eyes what I tried my best to convey for the next two decades to anxious parents, skeptical educators, and sometimes hostile policymakers: Virtual school, whether public or private, isn't for every kid, but for those it's a fit for, it is often the only thing that works.¹⁴ Going to school from home doesn't have to be lonely, if your school and your family focus on building community as well as mastering academics. And if you're worried about diversity, compare the ever-more-homogenous classrooms in your zip code–based neighborhood school with the classmates a virtual school student has when their school draws from an entire state, or even the globe.

And what could be more American than providing every family the opportunity to choose the education setting that's right for their kid, the way wealthy families always have? And what could be better for American public education than finding ever-new ways to accommodate the desire for choice within the formerly one-size-fits-all system?

That's what kept me excited about new forms of schooling (career-focused virtual academies, international online learning, small blended high schools, among others) as they emerged in my own daily work. That's why I provided a tiny, very early bit of personal seed funding to start-ups like KaiPod, Prenda, Modulo, and others: to claim a front-row seat to the next wave of innovation as it rolls out.

Pragmatic optimism is still my m.o., with occasional zaps of concern about polarization, isolation, even abuse—the nightmare scenarios, thankfully rare in real life, that one can imagine if parental choice goes to a logical extreme. What worries me more, frankly, is that these emerging forms of schooling will remain such a small niche that they'll never have any real impact on education for the majority.

A day at a learning space like KaiPod Newton is a good optimism refresher, though. If an iconoclastic handful of kids from very different backgrounds can love their school enough to handcraft and enjoy together an all-ages daytime prom, there is hope for us all.

In the following chapters, we'll explore each of the unconventional education options on display at the pod prom, and even a few not yet

present there, to better understand where this learning road might be heading. But first, we'll take a dive into new funding mechanisms that promise to put such options within reach of any family who sees them as a fit.

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First, Show Me the Money

Emmy Henley may have gotten more than she bargained for.

As a young mother living north of Little Rock, Henley leads The Reform Alliance, an education advocacy group whose troops she rallied to help pass the Arkansas LEARNS (Literacy, Empowerment, Accountability, Readiness, Networking, School Safety) Act in 2023.¹ This signature education package from Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders included funding for teacher pay hikes, career-tech pathways, and school infrastructure. It also gave birth to the Education Freedom Account, through which Arkansas parents outside the public school system can access funds for private instruction, curriculum materials, technology tools, and more. It's Arkansas's first foray into the burgeoning world of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs).

Not to be confused with Coverdell or 529 tax-advantaged personal savings accounts, which have helped a generation of families sock away dollars for a child's college (or more recently, K–12) education, ESAs are a very different breed. They're hailed as an "education freedom" breakthrough by policy wonks closely tracking their rollout in red state after red state in the post-pandemic era.² They're also favored (and in some cases feared) by parents gravitating toward the whole array of unconventional education options we're exploring in this book.

Now Henley and her alliance are smack in the middle of nudging forward the implementation of Arkansas's ESA, whose somewhat rocky start has opened Henley's eyes to the urgent needs of a broad range of Arkansas families. From the single mom homeschooling multiple kids with disabilities in Fort Smith to the grandmother searching for a tutor she can afford in her tiny Delta town, Henley has seen how far off the conventional road Arkansans will go for the right learning option, and how much even a modest sum of support can help. It's even got Henley thinking differently about her own toddler son's future education.

The advent of the ESA in Arkansas echoes similar efforts in more than a third of states around the country as well as at the federal level. It's a trend

that is both fueling the boom in unconventional education and being fueled by it, as more families of different socioeconomic backgrounds find themselves drawn to options outside the traditional public school sphere. As one national advocate puts it, “Education freedom without funding is fantasy for most families.”

While I was completing research for *School’s Out*, Texas passed that state’s first ESA after more than a decade of trying.³ With the eligibility of Texas’s more than five million K–12 students, this meant that nearly half of all kids in America would live in a state that funds some sort of learning outside of conventional public school.⁴ Shortly thereafter, the 119th Congress included a tax credit scholarship as part of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, potentially extending that reach to students in any other state that opts in once the program takes effect in 2027.⁵ The burgeoning combination of new funding options has been spotlighted on the pages of the *New York Times* as a driver of both enrollment declines in traditional public school districts and new efforts by those districts to woo families back with special programs and support services.⁶

These emerging funding mechanisms are actually just the latest generation in the long evolution of public funding for private education choices. If we look back at American school choice history, we can see that Greatest Generationer Milton Friedman’s classic voucher concept got what we might call the Boomer treatment in the 1980s and 1990s: top-down, monolithic reforms focused on a binary choice between conventional public and private schools. Academics like Harvard’s Paul E. Peterson and funders like the DeVoses and Kochs put this private school voucher approach on the map with experiments in Wisconsin, Ohio, even Washington, DC.⁷ Later iterations of school choice beginning in the mid-1990s, like open enrollment and charter schools—which some saw as voucher alternatives—bear the Gen X hallmarks of grin-and-bear-it adaptation to harsh political and economic realities.⁸ The rebranding of school choice as “education freedom” in the 2000s has a pure Millennial / elder Gen Z vibe, driven by a magnetic focus on children’s well-being, mental health, and personalized preparation for an unknowable economic future.⁹ And then in 2011, officially the demarcation line of the Alpha Generation, the ultimate vehicle for this new way of thinking about education options was born in Arizona: the ESA.

At their simplest, ESAs put some portion of the state's per-pupil public education funding into the hands of parents to spend on their kids' learning however they see fit. While previous choice mechanisms were about *school*—either public or private—most ESAs resist that pigeonhole. One family might use their ESA for three days a week at a microschool, but another might hire a tutor, buy books for the RV, enroll in online classes, or join an adventure squad. (All of these unconventional education options are covered in the chapters that follow.) ESAs are highly individualized, fluidly flexible, and explicitly not either-or. They're the Gen Alpha of the voucher lineage.

The rise of the ESA tracks directly with the post-pandemic interest on the part of American parents, as documented throughout this book, in education options they might never have considered if not for COVID's disruptive effects. In a 2022 poll by research firm Tyton Partners (with support from the Walton Family Foundation and Stand Together, a funder of choice advocacy), 60 percent of parents reported that the pandemic had altered their "educational preferences and expectations," with nearly 80 percent agreeing that their child's learning could and should happen anywhere, not exclusively in school.¹⁰ This research revealed a new phenomenon Tyton calls "Open-Minded Parents," who are primed to supplement their child's education with out-of-school enrichment, to switch schools, or to step off the school path altogether to "customize" their child's education.¹¹ ESAs are tailor-made for the Open-Minded.

Emerging from the pandemic, Arkansas and more than a dozen other states created ESA programs from 2022 to 2024, joining pioneer Arizona and fast-follower Florida.¹² The pace of adoption has continued, along with an almost-bewildering variation among states in eligibility requirements and funding levels. That means that as of 2026, when Texas's newly created ESA kicks in, nearly one in two American kids will live in a state that funds some sort of learning outside of conventional public school.¹³

The other half live in states blue enough that even the most optimistic advocates can't imagine ESAs taking root. As the politics of choice have become increasingly polarized, the notion of any tax dollars following families who have exited the public school system, or might be tempted to, is now seen in many blue states as a direct assault on public education.

Instead, some progressive innovators have begun focusing on non-ESA alternatives for the broader category of "direct assistance to families,"

education funds that parents can spend as they see fit. For example, RESCHOOL Colorado and [Outschool.org](https://outschool.org) have advocated for “microgrants” that families can spend on supplementary learning and enrichment programs without having to leave the public school system. Such microgrants might be funded by philanthropy; by public funds of the federal, state, or local variety; or some combination thereof.¹⁴

Ironically, some on the D-side are hoping that’s what will emerge from the federal tax credit scholarship program that passed Congress as part of President Donald Trump’s One Big Beautiful Bill. Under this new program, which will take effect in 2027, individuals can contribute up to \$1,700 per year to a nonprofit scholarship granting organization, or SGO, and receive a dollar-for-dollar federal income tax credit. In states that opt in to the program, SGOs will then vet families for K–12 education grants for anything from private school tuition to tutoring to specialized courses in the community. As the *Hechinger Report* notes, to qualify for a scholarship, a student must live in a state that has opted in to the program, be eligible to attend (but need not actually attend) public school there, and be in a family that makes no more than three times the median area income.¹⁵ Because of the expansiveness of eligibility and possible end uses, the center-left Brookings Institution think tank suggests that, even while red states blend the federal program in with their existing ESAs, true-blue “never-ESA” states might consider opting in as a way to fund supplementary programming for public school students.¹⁶

[Outschool.org](https://outschool.org)’s Justin Dent agrees. “For decades, affluent families have quietly exercised their own form of educational choice, not by switching schools, but by supplementing public education with tutoring, enrichment, and support services. Lower-income families, regardless of their commitment or creativity, have been excluded from this parallel system,” he wrote just after the program’s passage.¹⁷ “This bill isn’t just about vouchers. It’s a first-of-its-kind federal effort to close the ‘enrichment gap.’”

Indeed, the income eligibility and end-use criteria for the federal tax credit scholarship sidle near what education choice true believers consider the holy grail: universal access. That’s in contrast to some thinking about direct funding to families, which on the eligibility side emphasizes supporting those in greatest financial need—those “furthest from opportunity.”¹⁸ Many choice experiments around the country have in fact

begun with a focus on specific populations, such as low-income kids or students with special needs. On the end-use front, some recent ESA programs have launched with restrictions on what families can buy, either functioning as a private school voucher with another name or offering a very short list of preapproved materials. But for those with a universal vision of ESAs, tax credit scholarships, and other forms of direct funding, the goal is money for every child, to be used for anything they need for learning.¹⁹

In the Arkansas ESA program that Emmy Henley is tracking, universality is phasing in. Each Education Freedom Account is funded at up to 90 percent of the prior year's per-student state funding, which equaled \$6,856 in 2024.²⁰ Initially, the funds could be used only for private school tuition and expenses (subsuming the state's previous small voucher program, the Success Scholarship), and only for certain categories of learners: students with a disability, current or former foster care kids, students experiencing homelessness, children of military service members and first responders, and students attending low-performing public schools. In its second year, the EFA program began covering for those eligible students the kinds of expenses that homeschoolers might choose, including curriculum materials, laptops, music lessons, speech therapy, microschool "instructional services," and individual courses delivered online or in person (including those from any Arkansas public school that might choose to offer such a thing to non-enrolled students). While this second-year iteration of the program had a quickly reached cap of 14,000 participating students, or 3 percent of school-age Arkansans, beginning with the 2025–26 school year, Education Freedom Accounts will be available to all Arkansas students not enrolled full-time in public school, "subject to available funding as determined by the State Board of Education."²¹

Since that funding gets set year by year, Henley says, it's conceivable that the waiting list for Education Freedom Accounts could grow longer once the program goes universal, but she knows the families she is hearing from daily won't give up without a fight. "We were so ready for this here in Arkansas," she says. "We have a lot of rural areas, a lot of low-income families, and we're continuing with these generations of students who don't get the proper education. This program can really help."

So how exactly does a state like Arkansas pivot from either-or funding, with a choice of public or private school and maybe a thousand kids

crossing over through an early voucher program, to a universal, parent-driven system of funding for unconventional learning options? Especially one that might engage the 25,000 homeschoolers across the state previously connected only through annual notice of intent to their local district?²² And with no “à la carte” or microschooling ecosystem to speak of, save for a few Prenda pods (see [chapter 6](#)) that The Reform Alliance helped spin up during the pandemic?

Not without a few bumps along the way, as Henley can attest.

Because it turns out it takes a lot of infrastructure to fund unconventional learning. Any economist will tell you that a functioning marketplace, which is what an ESA program boils down to, requires demand, supply, and a way for the two to connect. The marketplace-building lessons learned in Arkansas resonate across other ESA states, new and seasoned.

First, on the demand side, parents need to be aware that ESAs exist and understand how their kids might qualify. In Arkansas, the state education department is the official source of information about Education Freedom Accounts, as well as the overall administrator of the program.²³ (As discussed later in the chapter, other states like Florida and Utah have added third-party nonprofits as program administrators, leaving the state education department in more of a rule-setting and compliance role.) But for a large segment of the Arkansas homeschool and private school population, state government has traditionally been seen as adversarial, so grassroots advocacy organizations like The Reform Alliance have stepped into the outreach breach. Through dozens of webinars and community meetings, Henley and her small team have walked families through program nuts and bolts, often having to end with the equivalent of “hold that thought till next year,” pending universal access.²⁴

ESA advocates in other states have also ramped up parent mobilization efforts. For example, Arizona has Love Your School, a “boots on the ground” brigade of ESA moms that seeks out parents where they are: at the library, at the park, in the mall, or online. Love Your School then helps families think through the learning options that might work best for their kids and guides them through the ESA application process.²⁵ The Love Your School approach has also been exported to West Virginia to support the Hope Scholarship ESA there, and to Alabama to help the CHOOSE program connect with parents.²⁶ In Utah, the nonprofit advocacy group Utah Education Fits All (UEFA) has been instrumental in mobilizing

parents to first press for passage of and then access to that state’s Utah Fits All ESA.²⁷ The Georgia Black Home Educators Network has been working to bridge various divides in that state around the Promise Scholarship, including skepticism—as discussed later in the chapter—among homeschoolers of all persuasions.²⁸

That’s all on the demand side of the emerging new education marketplace powered by ESAs.

But it’s equally early days on the supply side, to which a universe of high-quality providers must be attracted to make ESAs worthwhile. In Arkansas, many accredited, traditional private schools were already somewhat familiar with the voucher idea, but many more had to be persuaded to jump in with a much larger potential audience through Education Freedom Accounts. Microschools also emerged from the woodwork, almost 100 as of fall 2025, with the encouragement of The Reform Alliance as well as support from organizations like the National Microschooling Center, which we’ll meet in [chapter 6](#).²⁹ Some of these are iterations of homeschool co-ops and informal tutoring centers in both the hopping neighborhoods of Little Rock and the far reaches of Calhoun County. Special education therapy providers, arts programs, and school supply stores, many of them sole proprietors or family businesses, all got into the act. As of early 2025, more than 100 Arkansas schools and 600-plus other providers had been approved to receive funds from families’ Education Freedom Accounts.³⁰

States with existing ESA programs facilitate marketplaces of such providers in a variety of ways. The Tyton Partners 2024 *Paying for Choice* report notes that, in keeping with its “Wild West of Education” vibe, Arizona takes a rather light-touch regulatory approach, opening ESA eligibility to a wide array of providers, nearly 4,000 at last count—including many of the microschoools and community-based resources we explore in later chapters.³¹ Florida’s Step Up for Students takes a more active curation role as part of its administration of the Personalized Education Program (PEP) and other ESAs on behalf of the state,³² on the one hand approving a narrower band of providers (still numbering in the thousands) for its Education Market Assistant platform, and on the other highlighting a wide array of à la carte providers like the Living School, a field trip–focused school on wheels, and Project Flourish, a chef-led program focusing on food and nutrition.³³

Perhaps unsurprisingly, providers of ESA-eligible education services are among the fiercest promoters of the ESA, and often the most adept guides for families. Some, like Reverend Janelle Wood’s Black Mothers Forum in Arizona, which we meet in [chapter 6](#), started out as advocates and then pivoted to the supply side—evolving from protesting police killings of Black Arizonans to speaking out at school board meetings to launching the School to Purpose microschools, where staff have become expert at assisting parents in accessing the Arizona ESA. In Utah, UEFA sponsors vendor fairs (one of which we visit in [chapter 8](#)) to better connect parents and providers, both of which UEFA considers as constituent communities. Two South Florida ESA providers, Shiren Rattigan of Colossal Academy and Toni Frallicciardi of Surf Skate Science, came together in 2021 to form what is now the Innovative Educators Network, “uniting over 120 passionate educators who convene regularly to share insights, inspire one another, and collectively shape the future of education in our community.”

The emergence of edupreneurs like these on the supply side of the unconventional education marketplace has been nurtured by a pair of unique funding organizations. The VELA Education Fund³⁴ was established in 2019 with support from the Walton Family Foundation and the Charles Koch Institute³⁵ to “catalyze community-driven innovation happening outside of the traditional K–12 education system.” When the pandemic hit in 2020, VELA (whose name means both “light” and “sail” in Spanish) was well positioned to begin providing seed funding and networking support for founders of everything from microschools to homeschool networks to neighborhood science kit makers. As of 2025, VELA says it has invested more than \$41 million in some 4,000 founders representing every US state and territory, with grants averaging \$10,000 per founder. VELA also conducts research within its network, producing reports on everything from how edupreneurs measure impact to how they think about scale.³⁶

While VELA tends to the thousands of blooming flowers, the Yass Prize shines a klieg light on a handful of standouts.³⁷ Launched in 2021 by billionaire school choice philanthropists Jeff and Janine Yass,³⁸ in collaboration with the Center for Education Reform,³⁹ this “Pulitzer of Education Innovation” had by 2025 made over 225 awards in excess of \$75 million to microschool networks, charter organizations, and others. Top prize winners receive \$1 million, semifinalists and runners-up win six-

figure awards, and all are featured in convenings and accelerator events around the country.

In 2023, Yass initiated an additional Award for Education Freedom to honor states pushing the ESA frontier. Arkansas was one of the three original winners, with Governor Sanders distributing several million in prize money among five providers in the Education Freedom Accounts program.^{[40](#)} Many of the others are VELA recipients.^{[41](#)}

Meanwhile, on the ground in the Natural State, Emmy Henley and her compatriots tackle the next ESA challenge: How to connect those hundreds of providers of educational goods and services—some engaged locally face-to-face, others accessed online, and still others dropped on the doorstep—with multiple thousands of Arkansas families seeking the best customized fit for their children? How to help families turn their Education Freedom Account grant of more than \$6,800 into actual purchases, through direct payments to vendors where possible, and through reimbursement to parents where not? In Arkansas and elsewhere, solving this puzzle has given rise to a whole new category of middleware, a unique combination education marketplace, digital wallet, and benefit management platform that has come to define the ESA.^{[42](#)}

ClassWallet is perhaps the best-known provider of this ESA middleware.^{[43](#)} Founded in Florida in 2014 to facilitate teachers' classroom purchases, ClassWallet has since evolved into the leading third-party platform for various choice programs around the country. Arizona's well-established and booming ESA ecosystem has ClassWallet at its foundation, serving nearly 80,000 parents and multiple thousands of vendors. Arkansas had already used ClassWallet for its Success Scholarship program and grandfathered the company in for Year 1 of the ESA program. But then in Spring 2024, after a tough competitive bidding process, the Education Freedom Account was switched for Year 2 and beyond to another middleware provider, Student First, that underbid ClassWallet on two fronts: overall cost to the state for providing the payment portal and per-transaction costs to be borne by participating vendors.^{[44](#)} According to an *Arkansas Times* analysis of the procurement documents, ClassWallet initially demanded \$18.6 million over seven years for its portal contract and a 2.5 percent fee per transaction, while Student First—an Indiana-based firm that cut its teeth on voucher programming there—came in at \$15.2 million and 2 percent per transaction with the promise to “return more

funds to parents and prioritize local spending” while integrating AI into its payment approval and processing.⁴⁵

Within six months, though, software glitches and delayed payments in the Student First portal compounded parent frustration over the program’s narrow eligibility rules. “That’s been a bit of a mess here,” Henley says mildly. Arkansas canceled its Student First contract and levied more than half a million dollars in fines on the company for missed deadlines and botched implementation. The Education Freedom Account program was switched back to ClassWallet in December 2024 but with a reduced seven-year contract estimate of just under \$14 million and a per-transaction settlement fee of 1.85 percent.⁴⁶

Despite this whipsawing in the background, with the broadening of education goods and services beyond private school tuition that the Education Freedom Account could be used for, tens of thousands of eligible Arkansas families applied for the program, quickly hoovering up the 14,000 available grants for school year 2024–25. The program closed enrollment, compiled a waiting list, and announced reopening of the process for 2025–26, with ClassWallet running the portal, early in 2025. Meanwhile, as designated hand-holders for parents across the state, Henley and The Reform Alliance got an especially intimate view of the needs of Arkansas families seeking alternative options for their kids, even going so far as volunteering to purchase materials up front or covering reimbursements for those who could not afford to wait for the Education Freedom Account wheels to turn.

“There was one mom with five students, all with different learning disabilities,” Henley recalls. “She’s a stay-at-home mom and her husband is a disabled veteran. She called me and said, ‘You know, I did not pick up any school supplies at homeschooling events like I normally do because I knew I would have this program. So now we’re waiting for reimbursement and have about \$200 left to our names to get through the rest of this month.’ This was like on the 5th! And I said, don’t worry, we’ll fix this. And we just kind of rolled into covering the cost for her and others in similar situations.”

Once the program reimbursement kinks got ironed out, the Education Freedom Account meant more than textbooks and worksheets for this family, Henley notes. “One of her sons only has the ability to work with one hand, so we were able to get a specialized keyboard for his computer, which they’ve never had before,” Henley says. “What a difference this will make!

The Education Freedom Account can really change the trajectory of kids' lives."

For this Arkansas family and others, The Reform Alliance is informally serving as a "navigator," a role that program designers are beginning to recognize as essential to the success of ESAs, microgrants, and future tax credit scholarships. The Love Your School organization in Arizona and UEFA in Utah more formally occupy this niche, sometimes with a nod from the state and sometimes purely through grassroots outreach. In the "Choose to Learn" section of their 2024 study, Tyton Partners defines navigators as organizations (often local and nonprofit) or individuals (typically certified as counselors or tutors) that help ESA-curious parents "gain knowledge, make decisions, and overcome barriers to access" while "identifying, evaluating, and planning a new educational route for their children."⁴⁷ While the marketplaces built into platforms like ClassWallet and Student First can quickly serve up information about ESA-eligible programming options, even experienced unconventional-schoolers may find the plethora of choices a bit overwhelming, especially when trying to assemble workable à la carte programs tailored to their children's specific needs and interests. Tyton's research suggests families might willingly spend \$400 per year for consultation with a navigator, an expense that Florida's ESA already covers and other ESA programs are beginning to consider for eligibility.⁴⁸

This rapidly evolving template for what makes an effective ESA has arrived as advocates are gearing up for ESA pushes in additional states over the next several years. With substantial annual per-pupil sums now available—ranging from just over \$4,000 in West Virginia to \$6,800-plus in Arkansas to over \$9,000 for Arizona families that include children with special needs—for an ever-broadening swath of families, the proliferation of such programs raises a multiheaded specter of concerns for some observers. These range from the philosophical to the minutely practical.

Among national thinkers about school choice, there are misgivings about the very concept of making ESAs universally available to all families in a state, regardless of income or other circumstance. "As a parent, of course I'd be thrilled to offset my kids' private school tuition," says Michael Petrilli, president of the Fordham Institute, an education reform think tank. "But as a policy guy, I'm deeply uncomfortable with taxpayer money going

to subsidize families like mine. That's bound to backfire with the public once people clue in."

Indeed, concerns over the budget impact of universal ESAs have made media waves in mature ESA states like Arizona. A *Politico* piece in late November 2024 put it this way: Following Arizona's move to make its Empowerment Scholarship Accounts universal, "ESAs have morphed over the last two years into a budget-busting free-for-all used by more than 50,000 students—nearly 1 in 20 school-age children in the state. ... As a result, ESA costs have ballooned from the legislature's original estimated price tag of \$100 million over two years, to more than \$400 million a year," adding substantially to Arizona's 2024 budget deficit.⁴⁹ Notably, Arizona state school superintendent Tom Horne pushed back on that conclusion, stating that 2024 Basic State Aid payments for education programs at district and charter schools as well as the ESA program actually finished the fiscal year \$4.3 million under budget.⁵⁰

Some states like Arkansas put controls on the cost of ESAs by limiting the number of participants, even as that number intentionally escalates year over year. Other states, like Utah, limit the ESA impact via appropriation—though constituent demand has a way of loosening those limits. The Utah legislature approved the Utah Fits All Scholarship program in 2023 with a yearlong runway before launch and a \$40 million budget, enough to serve 5,000 students. Not long after the state's ESA portal opened in 2024, more than 27,000 had applied, "from nearly every zip code in the state," recalls Robyn Bagley, executive director of UEFA. Pleas from constituents convinced Utah legislators to double the program's first-year appropriation, to \$80 million. "So our ESA can serve 10,000 kids now, but that still leaves 17,000 on the waiting list," Bagley told me toward the end of 2024. In a later twist, the Utah legislature in 2025 cut the size of grants for homeschoolers—to \$4,000 for elementary-age homeschooled kids and \$6,000 for homeschoolers ages 11–18—while maintaining the original \$8,000 per student ESA for those choosing private school, and simultaneously added \$40 million to the program's appropriation to begin serving those on the waiting list.⁵¹ Then a Utah district court ruled the program unconstitutional, following legal challenges from the state's largest teachers' union and others.⁵² The state of Utah is appealing. UEFA's advocacy continues.

For many school choice critics, ESAs are just the latest, and possibly most serious, threat to the traditional public school system.⁵³ Before ESAs, families exiting a public school would erode the head count that drives school funding, but at least their state and local tax payments into the public coffers would continue without any counterbalancing claim for funding support. (Interestingly, the early response from center-left organizations like the Brookings Institution to the new federal tax credit scholarship program has been almost positive, in part because of the state opt-in process and in part because the tax dollars involved are federal and therefore not already earmarked for public education.) Universal ESAs, though, allow students to take their backpacks of state per-pupil funding with them into private schools, microschools, various flavors of homeschooling, and other unconventional choices. More significantly, families who may never have set foot in their local public school and who had previously managed to self-fund their education pathways (at substantial personal cost, both out-of-pocket and hidden, as we explore in the next chapter) would now be competing at some level for a piece of the finite school funding pie.

Some states attempt to manage possible budget dislocations for public schools by requiring that ESA participants (other than kindergarteners) be enrolled in public school for some or all of the year before they start using their ESAs for another form of schooling; Georgia⁵⁴ and West Virginia⁵⁵ have gone down this path. Other states are encouraging public schools to put key courses and extracurricular programs into the ESA marketplace, with an appropriate price tag, so that ESA dollars might flow back into their coffers. The Utah Fits All program makes this a key feature, building on the state's "course choice" program that allows any student in the state to enroll in online classes at any district or charter virtual school.⁵⁶ (Like the Arkansas LEARNS legislation, the original Utah Fits All bill also included across-the-board salary increases for public school teachers as an extra sweetener—or a poison pill against vetoes or future reversals, depending on how one looks at it.)

Anxiety over ESAs also takes the form of the "waste, fraud and abuse" freak-out, which flares up periodically in Arizona, Florida, and other states that have been at this for a while. Just as voucher opponents often charge that local private schools jack up their tuition rates to maximize available public funding, both anti-choice advocates and fiscal conservatives worry that families will use their ESAs to buy things like super-deluxe computers

and ski trips while area public schools scrape by with creaky equipment and no-frills programming. In Arizona in 2024, the internet was rife with rumors about millions of dollars spent on pricey Lego collections;⁵⁷ in Florida, it's the specter of trips to Disney World that sets off public outcry.⁵⁸ While ESA purists would argue that any expense a parent deems as educational should be eligible, the public agencies involved with ESA administration tend toward caution. So states evolve their program infrastructure to navigate the fine line between empowerment and compliance.

Early on, Arizona provided families with ESA debit payment cards before bowing to public concerns over loss, theft, or sale to noneligible parties; moving from these “p-cards” to the online digital wallet calmed these fears somewhat. In Arkansas, which has only ever had the digital wallet, there was a flare-up over computer headsets, with critics arguing that families don't need top-of-the-line noise-canceling headphones when public school computer labs make do with those that cost less than twenty bucks a pop, Henley of The Reform Alliance recalls.⁵⁹ So the Education Freedom Account guidelines were revised to put a cap of \$100 on computer headsets, along with \$1,000 every three years for a computer and peripherals, enforced through the online marketplace and reimbursement procedures.⁶⁰ “But we know there are some kids with unique learning circumstances who really do need something more specialized,” Henley says. “It's quite a process to submit that kind of thing for reimbursement, which creates hardship for the family.”

Another area of tension related to ESAs is how best to measure outcomes, especially for highly customized combinations of education goods and services. “It is impossible to tie à la carte services to whether kids are actually learning anything,” writes Michael Petrilli.⁶¹ “Some may try to deem this a non-issue issue, contending that ‘accountability to parents’ is enough. But when taxpayer funds are involved, that can't be the only answer.” In *Education Next*, Rick Hess calls the ESA-driven trend toward customized learning part of “the new sugar-frosted politics of education” (compared to “eat-your-vegetables” reforms focused on test scores and accountability, which Hess argues have fallen out of fashion).⁶²

It's not like ESAs automatically provide an escape hatch from standardized testing. While Arizona's bigfoot ESA program carries no assessment requirement, in Arkansas and Florida, families using ESAs are required to participate in a norm-referenced test, of which multiple options

are available. Utah Fits All recipients create an annual portfolio showing their progress, or can request a norm-referenced test if they prefer. The challenge is that if each ESA family is pursuing a unique blend of curriculum, tutoring, supplementary classes, and field experiences for each child, a test score won't tell them, or the public, which of those programming elements work and which don't. And comparing outcomes for ESA-participating kids with those of students in traditional public schools is even harder without "apples-to-apples" assessments.

Furthermore, the very newness of the ESA-funded, fully customized, "roll your own" approach to education makes rigorous data analysis tricky, at least for now. As of late 2024, according to researchers at Rand, "no state currently has each of the four criteria we identify as necessary for causal research: sufficient program age (at least one year), sufficient program size (at least 1,500 students), a similar award amount as (at least 90 percent of) the state per-pupil funding allocation, and comparable achievement data for ESA and non-ESA students."[63](#)

Robert Enlow of EdChoice—the national organization that once was called the Friedman Foundation and still carries Milton Friedman's education choice torch deep into the 21st century—thinks his friends in the education reform community are asking the wrong question. "There's so much out there to think about these days in terms of quality assessment measures beyond the test score, and so many ways to validate those assessments," he says. "I don't need apples to apples, I need to know that this kid and every kid is on the pathway they need to be successful." To get to this more nuanced understanding of quality outcomes, Enlow says, advocates would do well to pay attention to the instinctive way parents gauge that they've made the right education choice for their child: "They say their kid actually *likes* going to school, often for the first time," he says. "It's a metric that can be quantified and cross-checked against others, so why aren't we measuring that?"

For its part, Tyton concludes its 2024 *Paying for Choice* report with the admonition, "Stakeholders must insist, and funders should help enable greater research into the impact of ESA programs on student outcomes." It adds, "Advocates for ESAs should promote objective, longitudinal research that will help to evaluate the program's core thesis: that giving parents and students the ability to pursue the educational approaches that best suit their needs leads to better learning outcomes for students and society alike."[64](#)

Rand argues that the emphasis, at least in the short term, should be on “research that focuses on other understudied aspects of ESA programs but that does not require comparable academic achievement data.”⁶⁵

While policymakers and thought leaders arm-wrestle over ESA program design, the homeschooling community is grappling with its own multiple waves of ESA anxiety. As we’ll see in the next chapter, generational memories of the fight to legalize homeschooling and stop law enforcement knocks on the door are still painfully vivid in many places, so taxpayer-funded innovations like ESAs are bound to set off some alarm bells. The national Home School Legal Defense Association makes its stance crystal clear: “HSLDA opposes any kind of government funding for homeschooling,” the advocacy organization’s website declares in its analysis of the flurry of ESA activity in 2023 and 2024. “We are convinced that ESAs and other tax-funded accounts will provide government officials with a reason to further regulate and oversee homeschooling.”⁶⁶ As biblically oriented commentators like to say (in a loose paraphrase of Proverbs 22:7), “With the shekels come the shackles.”

That sentiment dominated discussion among homeschoolers about Florida’s Personalized Education Program, as the ESA is known in the Sunshine State, when the program was being shaped in 2022. Tampa Bay homeschooling leader Kim Hannon, whom we’ll hear more from in the next chapter, remembers it well. “The majority of people that I know were terrified, to be honest,” she says. The lure of “all this money” was stacked against the leeway that Florida families had come to enjoy on registering as homeschoolers with their county school district, including choosing their own method of documenting student progress and gaining free access to Florida Virtual School online classes and district sports activities. On the other hand, homeschooling families like Hannon’s already had several years of mostly positive experience with an existing state-funded “Unique Abilities” scholarship program also administered by Step Up for Students, which covered the otherwise prohibitive cost of therapies and related special needs services. Then there was the principle of the thing. “As a homeschool parent, I stand on a platform of educational freedom, and not just the type of freedom I want for my family,” Hannon says. “I should be supporting all of the freedoms for every parent to direct their own child’s education, whether or not it’s something that I would want for my own kids.”

Nicole P. Doyle of the Georgia Black Home Educators Network goes one step deeper. “I’m listening to ESA proponents, the anti-ESA factions, and I have to ask: What about the family that lives in a metropolitan area where the cost of living is higher, how are they supposed to homeschool? What about all the communities without two-parent households? Or where grandparents are standing in the gap?” She shakes her head. “I believe in parents’ rights, that we should have homeschool protections, that nobody should tell parents what to teach and what to do. But please understand: There’s an underserved and under-resourced population who also want to do the very best for their children, but find it’s just not possible without financial help.”

Doyle and Hannon’s stance tracks with what national polling among homeschool families reveals: That the knee-jerk rejection of ESAs is giving way to a more nuanced reaction. In a fall 2024 survey conducted by the Yes. Every Kid. Foundation, 84 percent of homeschooling parents said they support ESAs, with 53 percent strongly supporting them.⁶⁷ And while two-thirds of homeschooling parents believe that the decision to accept ESAs or any state funding should be left to families themselves, they say having ESAs available in the first place is the only way to ensure families have that choice.

Advocates and legislators in different states have had varying responses to homeschool concerns. Georgia’s Promise Scholarship ESA emerged with an awkward fit for many homeschoolers in its requirement that participants must have attended public school the year prior to receiving the ESA. The Utah Fits All program found a similar solution to homeschooling pushback, creating a separate “home-based education” category for families participating in the ESA. Florida’s solution in the end was to create a separate, second path: You could either be a traditional home educator registered with your county, or you could register instead as a homeschooler with Step Up for Students to receive PEP ESA funding. It’s not a perfect fix, Hannon says: “We did a lot of work just trying to help everybody understand. And we’re still working on this because there are still divisions.” She sighs, adding, “Some people would say that a parent going the PEP route is not a real homeschooler, but I think that’s silly. You’re both still homeschoolers, you’re both directing your kids’ education.”

For her own family, Hannon carefully watched what happened with PEP over its initial implementation period before even considering applying.

“For my daughter we’re still registered with the county, and continuing with Unique Abilities,” she says. “But my boys will be PEP this year.”

Having had a front-row seat to her state’s ESA launch, Emmy Henley from Arkansas finds herself thinking differently about the education options that might someday be available to her own young family. “My son’s only three now, but my dream would be to work myself out of a job and roadschool with him,” she says, referencing the learning-in-an-RV phenomenon we explore in a later chapter. “With an Education Freedom Account, I can almost envision how that might be possible.”

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Homeschool, Old-School and New

They pour into the megachurch lobby northwest of Tampa by the hundreds, young men with fashion beards and toddlers on their hips, women in Lululemon gear cross-strapped with color-coordinated baby slings, teenagers in high-tops and baseball caps. In the steamy July air, they line up for cold brew at the Trinity Coffee Commons or a burrito bowl at one of the food trucks parked outside and swarm the rambling exhibit hall for the latest science kits, boxed curricula, and educational games. There are scores of Black or brown families in a gathering that not so long ago would have been overwhelmingly white. When the keynote speaker asks how many in the audience of almost a thousand are in their first year, nearly half raise their hands.

Florida is America's homeschooling bellwether state: It has the highest raw number of homeschoolers, according to the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) Homeschool Hub,¹ clocking in at 154,000 homeschooled students in 2023, a 7 percent climb over the state's pandemic highwater mark, which itself was a 26 percent jump from 2019.² The *Washington Post* calculates that Florida has seen a 72 percent increase in homeschoolers since the 2017–18 school year.³ The TBHC Group's Tampa Bay Homeschool Conference is Florida in a microcosm.

Across the nation, the number of homeschoolers leapt from 2 million before the pandemic to 5 million by 2021, before settling into the mid-3 millions today, according to the Homeschool Hub.⁴ (The precise nationwide number of homeschoolers, who they are, and how they're faring is a topic of hot debate; more on that later.) Scholars and advocates agree that much of the growth in homeschooling has come from families who found a silver lining in the forced togetherness of the 2020 lockdown, including their own ability to work from home and therefore have a more direct hand in their kids' daily schooling. Then there are the families who in 2021 or 2022 walked into reopened schools to find mask mandates or book bans, or student learning lag, or trauma-triggered behavior problems, and walked right back out again. In some cases, they were on the frontlines of the

“parents’ rights” actions that drew so much attention in the immediate post-pandemic period, with its demands for library purges and revisions to history teaching; in other cases, they are parents who couldn’t bear to send their kids to schools that complied with such demands. Such post-pandemic evolutions echo and expand on the diversity of motivations identified by Kate Henley Averett in *The Homeschool Choice*, her seminal monograph based on research she conducted with families from 2013 to 2016.⁵

These are the “reluctant,” “accidental,” or “pragmatic” homeschoolers—in some cases, downright “angry,” according to one New York state homeschooling leader. While those who feel pushed by circumstances out of other forms of schooling have always existed side by side with “first choice” homeschoolers, who’d never considered another path, the ranks of those for whom homeschooling is a second choice ballooned during the pandemic and has loomed large ever since.

At the Tampa Bay conference, Brenda Dickinson, of the Florida Home Education Foundation (HEF), can’t help shaking her head in wonder.⁶ “We could have fit our entire state association into this one room back in the day,” Dickinson says with a chuckle.

Petite and pixie-cut with the bemused expression of someone who has seen it all, Dickinson is the acknowledged founding mother of Florida homeschooling—or “home education,” as it is defined in Florida law. Her legendary status is confirmed by the number of times we are stopped walking together across the Tampa conference by moms and dads wanting to thank Dickinson personally for making their school choice possible.

It was a hard fight, Dickinson recalls, and not always pretty.

In the early 1980s, when their two sons were of early elementary age, Dickinson and her husband, Craig, who worked for the Department of Transportation, were experimenting with what might now be called roadschooling (which we roll with in [chapter 5](#)). They combined Bible study with the kids’ phonics workbooks and math problems, which was not possible in public school. They were also eager to bring into their daily learning the living geography of all the places Craig’s work took him. So they decided to school in the car as Craig traversed Florida’s highways, entire family in tow. Like the few hundred other (almost all white and hard-right Christian) homeschooling families hidden in plain sight around Florida at the time, the Dickinsons lived in fear of the truant officer showing up at their door, ordering them to send their kids to attend public

school—or risk losing them altogether. For cover, families like these typically affiliated with “umbrella schools,” friendly brick-and-mortar private schools willing to count homeschool families as their own. “But if we wanted to make our kind of education legal,” Dickinson says, “we knew we had to go to Tallahassee and challenge the Compulsory Attendance Law.”

Never having spent time in the Florida capitol before, the Dickinsons sought out newly elected state representative Daniel Webster, a fellow Orlando-area homeschooler and churchgoer. Webster, who later led the Florida House and Senate, and currently represents Central Florida in the US House of Representatives, collaborated with the Dickinsons and other early advocates to develop the 1985 law that makes Florida one of the most homeschool-friendly states in the United States. The Florida Home Education Act puts minimal requirements in place for parents beyond notifying the local school district, keeping a portfolio of student work, and arranging an annual evaluation of kids’ progress that can be anything from a norm-referenced test to a chat with a certified teacher.⁷ (On the Home School Legal Defense Association’s interactive online map of state homeschool laws, color-coded from permissive green through median blues to stoplight red for greatest restrictions, Florida is proudly light blue for “low regulation.”)⁸

The Dickinsons’ effort in Florida is emblematic of the evolution of homeschooling in America, writ large, as documented by scholars like Mitchell Stevens in his foundational study *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.⁹ For the past 40 years, the political advocacy that ultimately made homeschooling legal in every state has been closely identified with the Christian right, but an earlier wave of families stepping off the conventional school path was decidedly more bohemian. Education iconoclast John Holt argued in his bestsellers *How Children Fail* (1964)¹⁰ and *How Children Learn* (1967)¹¹ that the structure of school itself actively undermined learning. Holt advocated instead for what he called “unschooling”—in those early days, a blanket term for homeschooling in general and not yet the particular flavor that eschews linear curricula, as discussed in the next chapter. To spread the word and connect like-minded families in those long pre-internet days, in 1977 Holt launched a hand-produced newsletter called *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS).¹² Published bimonthly or whenever Holt felt he had enough

material, *GWS* was filled with reader-contributed DIY home learning techniques as well as strategies for using and adapting the few curriculum resources then available, from places like Calvert Home Education and the Home Study Institute. *GWS* also included field sagas of families convincing skeptical, sometimes hostile local school officials to allow such learning to persist; and each issue, at least one harrowing account of a court battle over charges of parental educational neglect. Early issues of *GWS* reached maybe 200 subscribers across the country, including a significant number in communes and back-to-the-land homesteads. By the mid-1980s, there were thousands of subscribers, appearances on the Phil Donahue show, and an increasing volley of news from state capitols about grassroots legislative efforts to legalize homeschooling—often in reaction to proposed regulations making it impossible.

Looking back, Florida’s Brenda Dickinson remembers these more secular John Holt–inspired homeschoolers as “hippie-ish but helpful” in laying the groundwork along with their more formally organized Christian counterparts for the now-comprehensive set of laws governing home education in Florida—the legacy of the advocacy foundation Dickinson created and still leads. In addition to the 1985 Home Education Act, Florida’s homeschooling framework includes:

- The Craig Dickinson Law, passed after Dickinson’s husband’s death from cancer at age 46, which requires public school districts to allow home-educated kids to participate in sports and extracurriculars.
- Free, online high school courses aligned to state standards from the Florida Virtual School, launched in the mid-1990s as one of the first state online schools in the country. The extension of free fractional online public schooling to those who have exited the public school system remains rather rare even as virtual public schools have blossomed around the country (see [chapter 6](#)).
- Dual enrollment for home-educated students at Florida colleges, allowing them to complete university credits while still in high school. Furthermore, Florida’s public universities are required to consider homeschool graduates on the same basis as any other Florida applicant, and homeschool kids can vie for the lottery-funded Bright Futures Scholarship Program to cover their college costs.

- Multiple Education Savings Account (ESA) funding programs, as we saw in the previous chapter, that are now open to home educated families. These include the Unique Abilities ESA that pays for learning materials, therapies, and tutors for children with special learning needs, and the newer Personalized Education Program (PEP) that serves as a voucher for “parent-directed education” including curriculum materials, supplementary programming, and more.

These Florida ESA programs are seen by school choice advocates as among the country’s most inclusive and generous, advancing the vision of universal “money follows the kid” education funding. But like many long-standing homeschool rights advocates, Dickinson and the HEF worried that ESA money would bring with it “onerous restrictions” and possible future erosion of the foundational statute. They insisted that the Florida PEP not be integrated into the home education law but instead captured in a completely separate section of education statute. As a result, families awarded PEP scholarships—capped at 20,000 for 2023–24, growing to more than 59,000 for 2024–25, and authorized to increase by 40,000 each successive school year—must actually withdraw as home educators from their local school districts.¹³ They register instead with Step Up for Students, the statewide nonprofit administering the PEP program, to become a new and separate Florida species.

Dr. Angela Watson of the JHU Homeschool Hub sees that kind of division of homeschooling families into distinct categories, and effective renunciation of their membership in the community, as a very “old-school homeschool” move. Dr. Watson has studied every state’s homeschooling law, many dating back to the early 1980s, and noticed that the more recent the statute, the less restrictive it tends to be. Yet pioneering advocates like Dickinson, who now make up what Dr. Watson calls the homeschool establishment—including the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), established in 1983, and most of the homeschool-focused lobbying groups in every state—fight any change to these laws as a matter of principle, even if the change is a modernization or streamlining of requirements.¹⁴ (They’re none too pleased either with Dr. Watson’s data-gathering efforts, she notes in her conversation with me. While HSLDA initially reported “feeling optimistic” about the launch of the Homeschool Hub in May 2024, pushback from hard-line homeschoolers resulted in

HSLDA taking down its original positive website piece and replacing it with the reassurance that “we are not aligned with or endorsing the Homeschool Hub.”¹⁵) Born of the courtroom dramas, bare-knuckled skirmishes with teachers’ unions and others, and an enduring vision of faith-motivated homeschooling, this old-school intransigence may be at odds with the more fluid and dynamic temperament of today’s new homeschoolers, Dr. Watson says.

Brenda Dickinson exhorts prospective homeschoolers, “Are you called to this? If not, you might not last.” But Dr. Watson reports from her research that families today are much more likely to move in and out of homeschooling, or to teach one child at home while others attend either public or private school. They are also much more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity: By 2022, according to the US Census Bureau Pulse Survey, the percentage of homeschoolers who are Black, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, or otherwise people of color had effectively doubled from the 20 percent it had been in earlier years.¹⁶ As we discuss in detail in a later chapter, the hunger for culturally resonant homeschool experiences, in terms of both materials and community, has given rise to groups such as Melanated Homeschoolers (represented with an exhibit table and lively cadre of moms at the Tampa conference) and Latinos Homeschooling.

While the desire to integrate religious values with academics persists as a reason for homeschooling, the parents articulating that desire these days aren’t only fundamentalist Protestant, but also include Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish families as well, according to those studying the field. Viva Hammer, a Washington, DC-area lawyer who went searching for alternatives after her young son declared school to be stupid and boring, wrote in *The Jewish Woman*, “There is a whole culture of parents who teach their children at home, we discovered, called homeschoolers. And there are Jews in almost every state in the US who have chosen this path.” For Hammer’s son Mikhael, homeschooling includes the Torah along with his academic studies, balanced by socialization and community service through their synagogue.¹⁷

There’s also been an evolution in homeschooling styles. Other than the iconoclasts who chose the unschooling path described in the next chapter, pioneering homeschoolers tended to recreate schoolrooms in their kitchens and rely on single sources of linear, print-centric, and often Christian-tinged curriculum. Adherents of various programs found community as well as

content, whether they chose Abeka (“join Christian families across the nation”),¹⁸ Classical Conversations (“a Christ-centered and family-friendly approach to homeschooling that makes everything biblical and hospitable,” and includes study of Latin along with the Bible),¹⁹ or a similar “school in a box” offering covering all school subjects. Budget-conscious homeschooling families might seek out hand-me-down versions of these curricula’s core texts, originally priced at several hundred dollars per set, not including “consumable” worksheets or support services. (We take a closer look at the full costs of homeschooling later in the chapter.) Structure and consistency helped ease the anxiety many parents felt about taking their kids’ schooling into their own hands.

By contrast, the current crop of homeschoolers is likely to begin their journey with a period of intentional “deschooling”—replacing academics with time outdoors having fun. After that, they may embrace eclectic, mix-and-match programs from public and private sources personalized for each child. Step Up for Students’ Ron Matus calls this “À La Carte Learning,” a growing phenomenon in Florida driven by the flexibility of ESAs that allow families to add organized “surf and skate science” or culinary learning projects to their menu of learning experiences, as discussed in a later chapter.

“Americans just like choices,” JHU’s Dr. Watson says, “and homeschooling Americans are no different.”

Bridging the old-school and new-wave homeschooling worlds in Florida is Jason Crawford, HEF’s heir apparent and emcee of the Tampa Bay Homeschool Conference. A tall, energetic millennial with a neatly groomed beard and black spectacles, Crawford loves to tell the story of how he only intended to lend his social media marketing and communications expertise to HEF as a board member but ended up moving his family—wife Crystal and four homeschooled kids—to Tallahassee in January 2024 to learn everything Dickinson could teach him about working the capitol. Crawford and Dickinson intend to labor in tandem on legislation through the next year or two while Crawford rolls out a weekly livestream podcast, video homeschool stories from Florida families, and new branding like “HEFx” (short for HEF Connect) and the tagline “Our Classroom Is the World.” Then the plan is for Dickinson to hand Crawford the torch of leadership for good, making the generational transition complete.

Meanwhile, the contours of the new world of homeschooling are on full display in Tampa Bay. The Homeschool Conference there grew out of organizer Kim Hannon's work as one of the earliest homeschool moms at the sprawling Generations Christian Church where the conference is taking place. A former public middle school teacher, Hannon left the system to homeschool when her eldest was about to go into kindergarten. She sees her role as helping connect the incoming waves of new homeschooling parents with the community, support, and resources they need to be successful. That includes providing a reality check when it comes to things like ESAs: "People were terrified when the ESAs were introduced," Hannon recalls. "There was this feeling that you weren't a real homeschooler if you took the PEP." Hannon has herself successfully accessed the Unique Abilities ESA to get tutoring and other help for her daughter with dyslexia, and utilizes PEP for her other kids' supplementary interests. "It's all about educational freedom," Hannon says. "Just because something doesn't work for your family doesn't mean you should keep it from mine."

Hannon and her fellow conference organizers say they worked hard to create a lineup of presenters and exhibitors to meet the rapidly evolving needs of area homeschool families. Veteran homeschoolers, especially those with multiple kids, remember having to stretch limited budgets by sharing and swapping curriculum resources, all while fighting off shade thrown at them by those in conventional schooling. This new breed has more expansive, and likely more expensive, homeschooling needs, as evidenced by the TBHC program and exhibit floor.

A session on AI and virtual reality as learning tools is followed by one on combating homeschool parent burnout; a panel of college consultants dole out advice about SAT, ACT, dual enrollment, and gap years for homeschooled high school students; course providers and co-op programs compete for families' PEP funds, which can add up to multiple thousands of dollars per child. The organization AmSkills introduces families to work-based certification programs for kids seeking an alternative to college, while the group CAP IT plugs homeschooled students into pan-Tampa proms, homecoming, and graduation. The uniformed kids of Trail Life, a church-based alternative to Scouts, guard their faux campfire against curious toddlers while explaining to successive waves of disappointed moms that their group is really, truly just for boys. (Try American Heritage Girls instead, they suggest.)

This burgeoning marketplace of resources strikes some old-school homeschoolers as indulgently over-the-top compared to the frugality that was traditionally a hallmark of homeschooling families. But recent studies of the true cost of homeschooling suggest that, despite efforts by families to budget tightly and by curriculum providers to keep prices low, homeschooling was never actually inexpensive. For example, a 2025 Common Sense Institute (CSI) report focusing on Utah but positioned for national application argues that any such calculation must include “hidden opportunity costs” such as income foregone by the primary parent educator, and the value of supplementary programming provided by volunteers through co-ops and the like. Between these and actual out-of-pocket expenses for curriculum and activities, CSI estimates that the true cost of homeschooling is around \$10,600 per student per year, far exceeding even the most generous ESA for a non-special-needs child in any state.^{[20](#)}

Observers note that this cost has traditionally been borne by families without offset from public education dollars they contribute to as taxpayers in their states and communities. This reality is fueling the growth of ESAs, tax credit scholarships, and other emerging funding mechanisms that homeschool families in states like Florida can now tap into.

At TBHC, debates about the economics of homeschooling and their public policy implications are confined to side conversations among advocates and nosy reporters. Attendees seem to be mostly grateful, if slightly dazed, by the abundance on display for today’s homeschooling families.

Outside by the food trucks during lunch break, a young woman named Christina (“just my first name, please”) has her own perspective on these seismic shifts. When I plop down next to her on the small patch of shady grass, she agrees to chat with me about her multi-generational homeschool history while her 7-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son bounce back and forth between their grandmother and their little sister, an 18-month-old blur of activity. “My mom homeschooled me from grade 4 on—she was teaching in the public school and just decided one day that neither of us was going back,” Christina says, nodding grandma’s way. “So I knew I wanted to homeschool mine from the start.” Christina and her husband are both musicians, with his work keeping him away from home multiple days per week. “We’re lucky to be able to have him as our kids’ music and engineering teacher whenever he is around.”

“I’m already really good on the violin,” Christina’s daughter says. “I want to do cello next.”

“I want ice cream,” her brother says.

As the family moves in a swirl toward the gelato truck, Christina calls back, “Homeschooling means learning lots of different ways these days. Not everything is in a book!”

That rallying cry—not everything is in a book!—is one enduring strand within homeschooling philosophy, woven through both the half-century-old pages of *Growing Without Schooling* and the even deeper legacy of one Charlotte Mason, an iconoclastic late Victorian whose thinking about the purpose and proper method of education is animating a new generation of homeschooling Americans. (Across a similar time warp comes Rudolf Steiner’s Waldorf philosophy and various flavors of the Socratic method, both also with passionate adherents in the homeschool community.) Leaving Tampa, we travel deep inland to meet up with the hundreds of Charlotte Mason fangirls and a few fanboys, “Masonites” as they half-jokingly call themselves, as they gather to flex their understanding of the quirky terminology and prescriptions that make up the Charlotte Mason Method.

The parking lot of the Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky—half an hour outside Lexington and reportedly “less than a day’s drive” from more than half the country—is full, with license plates from Texas, Ohio, Iowa, Georgia, and even New York. The Methodist-affiliated campus, otherwise summer-quiet, bubbles with clusters of moms reconnecting, family groups herding kids of teen and elementary age, and more than one youngish dad with his hair up in an impressive man-bun. There are even a couple of Charlotte Mason school groups in matching T-shirts; the nonprofit Charlotte Mason Institute, like its namesake, believes “CM” can be effective in classroom settings and offers teacher training and certification for schools and co-ops.^{[21](#)} But the pulse of Charlotte Mason is in the home, as it was when Mason advocated for parents of all social classes to take the reins of their children’s education in turn-of-the-20th-century Britain.

What made Mason radical at the time, and an immediate source of her appeal to today’s homeschoolers, is the idea that children are “born persons”—individuals with unique strengths and passions, not empty vessels to be filled with facts. She also defined education as “relational,” to

be focused on four key relationships for all children: with themselves, with others, with the world around them, and with their god (this being England in the early 1900s, the Christian kind with a capital G). Like Holt, Mason believed that all children are natural learners, driven by curiosity and the hunger to know; unlike Holt, Mason had very definite ideas about the “mind-food” that kids ought to be offered in an ongoing feast of learning.

Among the CM tentpoles are “living books,” defined as quality texts that spark imagination; an interdisciplinary weaving together of history, literature, and the arts; direct engagement with the natural world and with handicrafts; and the “narration” by students, first orally and later in writing, of what they’ve learned, what Mason called “the act of knowing.” It’s not all humanities in Charlotte Mason World: Science and math are also included, though often tinged with “story” and hands-on exploration. The combined basic cost of curriculum materials, not including classic books borrowed from the library, is typically a few hundred dollars per student per year, according to practitioners.²²

In keeping with the hands-on CM spirit, the convening in Wilmore is themed “The Joy of Making.” The first task presented to all attendees is to macrame their own name tag lanyard; a handy YouTube video guides the timid, with help from a roving band of CM teen girls gathering “flair” badges for pitching in. Packaged curriculum (from Alveary, the official CM provider, among others) and supplementary programs are available for sale along the venue’s winding halls, but the tables drawing the real crowds are participatory maker stations for hand-hewing notebooks, pottery, gourd-maracas, and the like. The keynote addresses, delivered in the campus chapel with its soaring organ pipes and grand piano—perfect for accompanying the group singing of a curated conference hymn—focus on the intersection of art and empathy, craft and community. The overall loftiness is leavened with regular spins of an electronic roulette wheel for sponsor giveaways and the occasional wail of a bored toddler exercising their born personhood.

But the peaceable Charlotte Mason universe is not without its currents of tension. Conference co-chair Amber O’Neal Johnston of the *Heritage Mom* blog, an outspoken advocate for more diversity in the CM canon, reminds conference attendees early on of the need to push back on the notion that “Charlotte Mason is only for white people.” She also notes that CMI Tribute honoree Nicole Cottrell, who won for her comprehensive “Stories

of Color” directory, faces daily detractors inside and outside CM homeschooling circles from those annoyed by the focus on representation. In her session “Starting a Bilingual or Bicultural CM Education,” Jo Perez-Ray, an immigrant from Chile, speaks to the challenges in reworking the cadence of Charlotte Mason interdisciplinary segments, which traditionally focus either on the United States’ Anglo roots or its ties to Britain, to instead include pre-Columbian Indigenous cultures of the Americas and the footprint of Spain. Perez-Ray also seeks out authentic literature in Spanish (“not just translations, which are sometimes not such good quality” and therefore not suitable for the CM canon) and ensures that her homeschooled children are fluent in both languages. “I want them to really know themselves,” she says, “and be able to converse with their grandparents in Chile.” (For more from the likes of Johnston, Cottrell, and Perez-Ray, see [chapter 9](#), “Unconventional Education in Black and Brown.”)

Perhaps the most poignant CM stress point comes to parents trying to reconcile what has become a robust and detailed daily learning system with the unique needs of the “born persons” under their roofs. In her session titled “When the ‘Method’ Isn’t Working,” Danielle Merritt-Sunseri talks about the fear and frustration she’s felt while homeschooling her three neurodivergent kids—when they struggled with reading of texts, for example, couldn’t sit still for art studies, or resisted narration of any kind. “People told me to just keep trying,” she recalls, “or to ‘trust the method’ as if it were like following a standard operating procedure.” But that interpretation conflicted with the true intent of Charlotte Mason’s philosophy and its focus on personhood, Merritt-Sunseri believed.

Eventually, Merritt-Sunseri realized that her own educational background in the sciences as well as her embrace of “Charlotte Mason’s relational method of education in two steps: observe and remove obstacles” put her in a unique position. She says she now approaches her work together with her children “as a scientist,” hypothesizing, experimenting, and adapting learning routines to optimize “what are we capable of *today*.” Not only has this approach restored genuine harmony and joy to her homeschool, Merritt-Sunseri says, but it is modeling for her neurodivergent learners how to build self-awareness and the tools they need for self-advocacy.

When Merritt-Sunseri opens for questions at the end of her talk, virtually every member of the audience of 20 raises their hand.

“My child thrashes around so violently when she’s frustrated,” one mom says.

“My kid refused all the free reads his older siblings loved,” another says, “which upset me until I figured out he hates stories where the characters are alone.”

“I have my own attention issues,” a third participant says, to nods of identification all around the room. “How realistic is it for me to master a learning program as complicated as Charlotte Mason?”

Murmured over by kindred spirits, with friendly nudges toward the Charlotte Mason Institute’s Blue Orchard Bee neurodiversity initiative, that last mom’s question nonetheless lingers in the damp Kentucky air after the Joy of Making draws to a close.

No matter who you ask these days, homeschooling is on the rise. The National Center for Education Statistics says so, based on data gathered back in 2019.^{[23](#)} The US Census Bureau says so, through its 2022 Household Pulse Survey.^{[24](#)} The *Washington Post* says so, in its groundbreaking 2023 series that gathered data directly from school districts.^{[25](#)} The National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) says so, as part of its overall defense of homeschooling.^{[26](#)} And now we have seen that Johns Hopkins University says so too, through exhaustive compilation and analysis of state-by-state data by its Homeschool Hub.

To which Homeschool Hub director Angela Watson would add as a caveat: Don’t take it to the bank quite yet.

As Dr. Watson and her team approached each state for the latest numbers on homeschooling families, they discovered that the crazy quilt of state regulations was matched by equally uneven data gathering and reporting. For example, Florida’s state department of education publishes an annual count of homeschoolers reported by the state’s 73 school districts, with whom home educators must register. By comparison, New York state’s 731 school districts also serve as the registration point for homeschoolers, who must complete more than a dozen other reporting steps to remain in compliance, but the state does not provide any homeschool participation statistics.

Despite their painstaking research tour of state capitols, Dr. Watson’s team was often forced to default to, and in some cases triangulate from,

other people's data. And odd discrepancies popped up regarding certain states' totals that the Homeschool Hub is still working to understand.

The same statistical dilemma applies to questions about the demographics of today's homeschoolers, which most data sources agree are diversifying, but not necessarily in what ways or by how much. Dr. Watson feels most comfortable with the US Census Household Pulse results, which show that 40 percent of those responding to the survey as homeschoolers identified as other than white (that is, as Hispanic/Latino, Black, Asian, or two or more other races).²⁷ Even without comparable pre-2022 data, that number is significant enough—combined with anecdotal evidence and the increasing advocacy of homeschool families of color—to count diversity as an important feature of today's homeschooling landscape, worthy of further study, Dr. Watson says.

Also tricky is any effort to quantify the number or percentage of homeschoolers with disabilities, including learning issues. The Tampa Bay Homeschool Conference and the Charlotte Mason / Joy of Making gathering, not to mention countless self-organizing homeschool communities online and in person, are replete with workshops, strategies, support groups, and products addressing neurodiversity. In reports on families' motivations from homeschooling, some 38 percent say they chose this route because of their children's special learning needs,²⁸ which is nearly three times the average percentage of disabled students served in traditional public schools.²⁹ At the same time, homeschool families are often understandably reluctant to have their children officially diagnosed with learning issues, and more hesitant still to report such diagnoses, even if doing so might open the door for freely accessible therapies and other services. Thus, there is currently no reliable way to verify this data either nationally or state by state. (See [chapter 10](#) for a more detailed discussion of neurodiversity, including giftedness, as a factor in the evolving landscape of unconventional education, including and beyond homeschooling.)

Finally, there's the very practical issue of how homeschooled kids fare academically, especially as it relates to their likelihood of postsecondary success. Fewer than 10 states require homeschooled students to take standardized tests; most of these call for any "nationally norm-referenced test."³⁰ Only one, Minnesota, says homeschoolers should take the same test as public school students, a requirement that many Minnesota homeschool families are exempted from through affiliation with the state-recognized

Home-Based Educators Accreditation Association.³¹ So most researchers are resigned to there being little reliable or extrapolatable data. NHERI, the homeschool research/advocacy organization, is an exception, stating boldly that “the home-educated typically score 15 to 25 percentile points above public-school students on standardized academic achievement tests.” NHERI further claims that homeschooled students typically perform above average on college entrance exams such as the SAT and ACT.³²

These kinds of claims particularly rile up the folks at the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE).³³ Established by grown homeschoolers, parents, and educators concerned about the lack of home education oversight in many states, CRHE sees its charge as, among other things, providing a counterbalance to the twin narratives of “less regulation is always better” (from the HSLDA) and “homeschooling produces smarter kids” (from NHERI and other advocates).³⁴

On the regulation front, CRHE zeros in on concerns that homeschooling can provide cover for child abuse and educational neglect—a focus based at least in part on the lived experience of those in the organization. CRHE notes that unlike students in a public or private school, homeschooled children may never cross the sightlines of those (like teachers or medical professionals) who are mandated to report suspicions of abuse. Further, homeschooling may provide an out for families with habitually truant students, and CRHE argues that those states that require no proof of educational equivalency from homeschooling families “provide no educational safety net, or even a pretense of one,” for kids in home education.³⁵ CRHE’s database of Homeschooling’s Invisible Children³⁶ compiles relevant horror stories from public accounts over the past several decades, though at least one reviewer notes that nothing in the tabulation of data proves that either abuse or neglect is statistically more prevalent in homeschooling than in any other form of education—or that states with more regulation experience fewer such horrors.³⁷

On the smarter kids front, CRHE picks up the data torch to caution journalists and parents alike from falling into common analysis traps that may be even easier to trip into given the shortage of good data. For example, just because a homeschooled student does well on the SAT or gets into an Ivy League school doesn’t mean those results are due to being homeschooled; correlation is not causation, CRHE notes. And further, unless your homeschooled group has the same demographic characteristics

as the public-schooled group you're comparing their test results with, you can't reliably say the homeschoolers outscored the public schoolers.³⁸ Finally, the lack of random sampling is an issue across homeschool research, which relies very heavily on volunteer respondents who may self-select based on the kinds of positive attributes that will skew any statistical study. (In the last chapter of this book, we look at how such evidence issues play out in understanding the road ahead for both unconventional education and the larger system.)

Data traps like these are among the reasons that JHU's Dr. Watson has launched the Homeschool Research Lab as part of her Homeschool Hub. The lab will focus on "gathering and compiling multi-sector education participation data, curating research, and convening leading researchers," Dr. Watson says, with the goal of greater, more reliable understanding of the homeschooling phenomenon. "Academia has long looked at homeschooling as so 'fringe' that it lacked legitimacy as a topic for scholarly research," Dr. Watson says. "But we're now talking about multiple millions of kids involved in homeschooling, a non-trivial number and growing. It's time for those barriers to proper research to come down."

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Unschooling Across the Continuum

Skyler DuPont has a lot to say. That's why this late-20s self-described "grown radical unschooler," with their Columbia University master's degree and they/them pronouns, has harnessed a torrent of TikToks to make their learning choice understood.

Unschoolers are a small but rather noisy subset of the homeschooling universe (a "splinter movement," DuPont says half-jokingly) numbering somewhere around 300,000 across America, based on the best-out-there estimate of 10 percent of the three-million-plus current homeschoolers.¹ To be unschooled is to spurn prepackaged curricula, ignore the lines between grade levels and academic subjects, and reject outright the equation "education = school." Some practitioners call it "self-directed learning" or "life-schooling" or "relaxed homeschooling," but what they agree on is that learning should be driven by the interests of the child out in the real world, not forced onto kids by the arbitrary decisions of adults in the artificial environment of the classroom.

If homeschoolers grapple with the furrowed brows of family and strangers who wonder aloud why they're not in school, unschoolers get that times ten plus an eye roll. Even families involved with other unconventional forms of education are skeptical about unschooling, but they can't quite ignore it. For one thing, unschooling punches above its statistical weight: A 2022 survey reported in the *International Journal of Progressive Education* found that 75 percent of all American families are interested, at least theoretically, in "self-directed education" for their children as a way to combine academic learning with their personal passions while gaining social/emotional life skills.² There are celebrity unschoolers like Billie Eilish (whose 2021 documentary *The World's a Little Blurry* is a hit with DuPont's generation) and Sawyer Fredericks, who won season 8 of TV's *The Voice*. And then there are the unschooling influencers, from the "Pinterest Moms" to the YouTube hot messes, who periodically go viral, generating headlines like "Unschooling Is the Parenting Trend That's Pissing Everyone Off" from *Rolling Stone*.³

DuPont's mission is a little different (though they are not shy about taking on self-appointed "gurus" that grab so much attention online). DuPont wants to be the internet antidote to unschooling sensationalism by informing the unfamiliar, providing current practitioners with pragmatic support, and encouraging the curious to take a clear-eyed look.

Recorded from the front seat of their parked car or out in the woods, with the double-speed, bright cadence of someone delivering urgent good news, DuPont's word-packed TikToks cover topics like the difference between unschooling and traditional homeschooling, myths about socialization, how to measure unschool success (or not), whether a family that uses workbooks for math can still call themselves unschoolers, and why unschoolers should avoid dogma of all kinds. Each video gets hundreds of comments, ranging from the plaintively searching to the overtly hostile, and DuPont tries to answer them all.

DuPont was raised in rural New England by two moms who were committed from the start to unschooling of the purest kind: driven solely by the interests and curiosities of their child. DuPont recalls devouring the children's section of the library (while also requesting tutoring help for their dyslexia) and exploring biology through working on a farm. On TikTok, DuPont also talks about shadowing a schooled friend in three different high schools for several weeks at sixteen (common among homeschoolers and unschoolers to counter FOMO, or fear of missing out, as we hear from graduates in a later chapter), and about getting the very first letter grade in their entire life as a social work graduate student at Columbia University. Before heading off to Anchorage for a yearlong practicum working with LGBTQ+ youth—followed by appointment as executive director of an anti-violence nonprofit headquartered in rural Southeast Alaska—DuPont returned to their undergrad alma mater, Hampshire College, to run the Northeast Unschooling Conference, which gathers like-minded families to the otherwise deserted campus in early August.

In their passionate practicality, first-person testimony, and wall of words on behalf of unschooling, DuPont is a bit like a latter-day John Holt.

Holt looms large over American homeschooling and particularly this more radical subvariant—though as we noted in the previous chapter, Holt originally used the term "unschooling" to mean any kind of learning outside the traditional classroom. Beginning with *How Children Fail* in 1964,⁴ and then *How Children Learn* three years later, Holt channeled his experience as

an elementary classroom teacher into a *cri de coeur* about all the ways conventional schooling quashes the passionate curiosity that naturally drives children to learn.⁵ Holt's close observation of very young children revealed their fierce drive to understand their world and gain the skills—from reading and writing to operating machinery—they need to move through it like adults do. Holt believed that providing children with opportunities for free play as well as engagement with the real world would allow each child to learn all the essentials at the pace and in the form that most deeply resonated with them, as opposed to being forced to ingest disconnected instruction based purely on age and then taking a test to see if the learning had stuck.

Holt's ideas are part of one deep strain of learning theory that sees education as a process of bringing out and nurturing a child's natural genius rather than molding the child to fit into society and economy. The godfather of child-centeredness is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose Enlightenment-era notions about human nature and the development of natural abilities set the stage for John Dewey, with his focus on experiential learning, and Maria Montessori, with her carefully crafted environments for natural child development. But where Dewey and Montessori focused on how schools could be engineered to nurture children's curiosity at scale, by the late 1970s Holt concluded that school itself was the problem. "To a very great degree, school is a place where children learn to be stupid," he wrote, after observing even privileged kids in the "good," progressive schools where he taught morph from brave experimenters to fearful grade-grubbers in the space of a few early primary years.

The solution, Holt concluded, was to reject altogether the metaphor of school, with its adult-driven assembly-line approach to stamping knowledge into young heads, and instead adopt unschooling—an approach ideally practiced at home.

The fire Holt lit among parents and educators burned bright in the pages of *Growing Without Schooling* (GWS), his hand-typed, snail-mailed newsletter described in the previous chapter. Long before the internet connected the like-minded and the curious, GWS provided self-help from unschooling families along with guidance from Holt himself. GWS channeled the voices of an emerging movement for nearly 25 years; getting it out the door to thousands of subscribers was the job of one Pat Farenga.

With a master's degree in English and aspirations of being a teacher with a side hustle as a writer, Farenga was living in Boston with his young family when he met Holt in the mid-1970s. Inspired by Holt's books, Farenga and his wife had already committed to unschool their own three daughters. Taking on the care and feeding of *GWS* felt like an obvious career move at the time. It also gave Farenga an evolving view into the homeschooling and unschooling movements that allowed him to carry on the legacy after Holt's death in 1985, through the last issue of *GWS* in 2001 to its compilation and reissue in 2023.

Now exuding the hard-earned calm of a man who has seen more than his share of angels and demons over 50 years in the education trenches, Farenga says he holds a broader definition of unschooling than Holt's most radical followers may choose. His guidance for any parent that asks today is, "Allow your children as much freedom to explore the world around them in their own ways as you can comfortably bear." From his firsthand experience guiding his own kids through childhood learning into college and then careers, Farenga believes unschooling works best as a "partnership" between parents and kids, not "the dominance of a child's wishes over their parents' or vice versa."

Perhaps there is something pragmatically liberatory in the water in Boston. Along with Holt and Farenga, another towering Beantown presence in unschooling thought is Dr. Peter Gray, emeritus research professor of psychology at Boston College. Dr. Gray's earliest work was on evolutionary psychology and "basic mammalian motivational mechanisms," which led to a passionate belief in the primacy of play.⁶ A sprightly presence in his eighties, Dr. Gray animatedly contrasts child development in hunter-gatherer cultures—in which everything a kid needs to know as a successful adult is learned through mixed-age free play—with today's mandatory mass education systems. "Children come into the world burning to learn and genetically programmed with extraordinary capacities for learning," Dr. Gray writes. "Nature does not turn off this enormous desire and capacity to learn when children turn five or six. We turn it off with our coercive system of schooling." At the same time, parents in the United States and most other Western cultures have embraced "directive-protective" child-rearing techniques to shield their kids from real or imagined predators, bad influences, and physical harm, Dr. Gray notes. The "continuous rise in adults' belief that unsupervised play is dangerous" combines with forced

schooling to put today's children in a double straitjacket, with inevitable impacts on mental health and preparation for successful futures.

Picking up Dr. Gray's mantle and bringing it to the mom-advocate masses is Kerry McDonald, another Boston-based luminary in unconventional education. McDonald started out as a teacher in a traditional school setting when the misery she witnessed in her student-teaching classrooms combined with school resistance in her own young children to make her rethink the whole American approach to education. "Why would I want my kids playing an increasingly regimented game of school when they could be living and learning authentically in and from the people, places, and things around us?" McDonald writes. As a parent/family blogger who doubles as a widely followed school reform journalist-podcaster, McDonald argues that "we need to let go of the notion of *schooling*—something someone does to someone else—and instead reclaim *learning*—something humans naturally do."

For parents considering a veer off the mainstream path, McDonald's 2019 book, *Unschool*⁷ and her 2025 follow-up, *Joyful Learning*⁸ have quickly joined Dr. Gray's 2013 *Free to Learn* in the pantheon alongside John Holt's 1981 magnum opus, *Teach Your Own*.⁹ When Pat Farenga published a post-pandemic update of *Teach Your Own* in 2021 with a new introduction highlighting the mind-opening effects of universal home education during lockdown, it completed a metaphorical modern bookshelf (perhaps handcrafted and calligraphed, or maybe popping off the screen with 3D animation) labeled "bibles of unschooling."¹⁰

Julie Polanco turns to a different source of inspiration for her unschooling practice: the actual Bible. An outspoken, Illinois-based proponent of Christian unschooling, Polanco uses the New Testament to push back against the idea that the only godly way to homeschool is with kids sitting quietly around the kitchen table listening to mom's lessons and then filling in workbooks between scripture quizzes. Polanco tried that approach with her own four ("I had visions of obedient, respectful children who were so excited to learn that they hung on to my every word and couldn't wait for the next topic," she recalls) but ended up with fidgety, unhappy kids who approached her carefully constructed school program as a chore with no evident sign of either progress or joy.

So Polanco followed the edict "Be still, for I am the Lord," praying and meditating until a vision took shape of "natural learning" driven by the

child's God-given interests, coupled with careful attention to spiritual development. "If we put biblical character training and knowledge of and passion for Jesus at the center of our lives," Polanco says, "God will add all the other training to it in his own timing." This lean toward unschooling is gaining steam in the Christian community, Polanco says, as families "burn out" on strict and comprehensive curriculum packages, like her own kids did.

So instead of force-marching through hours of premade lessons, Polanco filled her shelves with living books, craft supplies, science equipment, and other learning resources accessible to her kids at any time—following morning prayers, of course. Freed from mom-dated scope and sequence, Polanco's eldest, who she nicknames Tiger in her public presentations about Christian unschooling, discovered a fascination with art and patterns, which ultimately led to college courses and a career in graphic design and marketing. Second child Hawk was a builder, leveraging an early Lego obsession into expertise in 3D modeling and, surprisingly, applying his spatial creativity to a career as a chef. Butterfly was an organized, careful learner who requested the kind of daily structure her older siblings rejected and pursued a degree as a high school art teacher. Mouse sparked most to the natural world and animals. All of them reached for Polanco's curriculum resources as needed, along with the library, museums, the internet, the park, and beyond. And Polanco saw their learning accelerate.

Polanco is careful to distinguish her chosen educational path from most secular unschooling approaches but especially what she typifies as "radical unschooling" (maybe or maybe not meaning the same thing with that label as Skyler DuPont). Polanco says those in Christian circles view the extremes of unschooling as an abdication of parental responsibility, a world in which "the children did no chores, played all day (sometimes videogames) and told the parents what they would or would not do."

DuPont, for their part, blasts religious unschooling as a contradiction in terms. "If you're [unschooling] your child because you want them to have the same worldview as you, and you want to limit their exposure to things that might change that worldview," DuPont says on TikTok, "you're doing it wrong."

Sue Patterson sighs a bit when she hears about these clashes. From where Patterson sits as the center of a one-woman enterprise dedicated to supporting unschooling families (after unschooling her own three kids for

most of their lives), these distinctions are less important than the broader blossoming of unschooling in this post-pandemic era.¹¹ “You had this whole influx of mainstream families into homeschooling during the pandemic, and even though what they experienced was not the best of homeschooling, many of them liked the basic experience,” she says. “And now I’m telling them, put the workbooks aside, go have an adventure! And they’re like, ‘We can learn outside? Oh, we can learn OUTSIDE!’”

Some families not quite ready to go all the way to unschooling choose instead hybrid variations, each with its own influencers ready to dispense advice for a fee. There’s “relaxed homeschooling” (in which school subjects are covered but without a closely defined timetable, leaving plenty of space away from academics for play and experiential learning) and “eclectic homeschooling” (a mix-and-match of textbooks and workbooks for some subjects and pure child-led exploration for others), and myriad others created by parents seeking personalized approaches for their children and circumstances.

No matter how far they leap off the traditional path, families’ first step is often a period of “deschooling,” and professional coaches like Patterson and Dayna Martin, author of *Raising Rebels* and *Radical Unschooling*, are there to guide them through.¹² It often takes a few weeks (some say up to a month for every year of regular school previously attended) of not rushing through breakfast, not stressing over whether the homework is in the backpack, not running for the bus, and not spending each day moving in unison with 29 other kids from subject to disjointed subject, before children feel relaxed enough—detoxed enough—to experience full immersion in unschooling. And that deschooling process is often even more critical for parents to let go of the cover-the-curriculum-by-the-bell instincts they’ve developed over their own lifetime of schooling.

From there, unschoolers say it’s all about tuning in to your child’s natural interests and facilitating learning opportunities to match. Building confidence that this will actually happen as hoped is a large focus of Sari González and Becka Koritz’s “Not Back to School” Radical Learning webinars, in which parents who’ve begun or are considering unschooling cheer each other on through the “fear and self-doubt” of swimming against the traditional education current.¹³ While homeschool families meeting one another for the first time might typically ask, “What curriculum are you using?,” unschoolers often begin with a metaphorical or actual hug of

affirmation before launching into stories of pencil-averse six-year-olds suddenly writing whole books about triceratops and sullen teenagers transformed by a love of fractals.

This hunger for community has spawned dozens of Facebook groups and Instagram pages, from Christian Almost Homeschoolers to the Wild + Free network, as well as on-the-ground family self-support groups in unschooling hot spots like Vermont, Texas, and California. It has also given rise to an eclectic network of brick-and-mortar “self-directed learning centers”—unschooling schools, if you will, which almost sounds like a Zen koan a certain kind of evolved unschooling parent would love.

The granddaddy of all American unschooling schools, the spiritual heir to the century-old Summerhill in the United Kingdom, is Sudbury Valley School, a half hour west of Boston (whose liberatory waters apparently have suburban reach). Founded in 1968, Sudbury Valley has a music barn but no classrooms, a school meeting of students and staff democratically governing all operations, and alumni that include Dr. Peter Gray’s son, Scott. The school is staffed by expert adults who serve not as teachers but as resources to help the 70 or so enrolled students pursue their own learning interests.

The Sudbury model has been replicated at dozens of schools around the United States, some bearing the Sudbury name and others—like the Zena Democratic School in New York’s Hudson Valley—announcing their values even more explicitly. Newer unschooling schools include networks like the Agile Learning Centers in North Carolina, New York City, and elsewhere, and the Flying Squads in Portland, Oregon; Dallas, Texas; Mexico, Canada, and beyond.

Helping weave together all these disparate and diverse learning communities is the Alliance for Self-Directed Education (ASDE), an international nonprofit cofounded in 2016 by none other than Pat Farenga, Dr. Gray, and other leading advocates in unschooling.¹⁴ Bria Bloom served as ASDE’s executive director through the pandemic and beyond (“My dream job,” she says). Bloom was unschooled herself in the 1990s in Washington state, where there were very few similarly situated learners, so she is especially passionate about ASDE’s ability to connect families with like-minded neighbors and unschooling-friendly local resources. As a leader of the Portland Flying Squad, Bloom also sees the utility of ASDE’s synthesis of sometimes fractious unschooling practices into a relatively

coherent set of common principles (Four Educative Drives, such as both playfulness and “planfulness,” plus Six Optimizing Conditions, including adult allies and “tools of the culture” such as knives or computers, that should be present anywhere self-directed education is practiced).

By 2024, Bloom and ASDE were fielding calls from far beyond the United States, from families in countries like India, Ireland, and Argentina, where there’s little history of homeschooling, much less unschooling. Perhaps this is a classic case of “leapfrogging” in which emerging places skip over decades of slow-grinding progress to catch up with the cutting edge. These calls explain the round-the-globe sprinkling of dots on the ASDE website map, indicating unschooling-focused organizations, communities, and services.

But while there are hundreds of ASDE dots across the United States, more than a few are bittersweet reminders of learning centers no longer operating: Dida Academy, New York City: felled by the pandemic. Berkshire Freedom Academy in Pittsfield, Massachusetts: closed in fall 2023, as we hear from its founder in [chapter 10](#). Tutorial School in Santa Fe, New Mexico: website nothing but 404s.

One center that has managed to hold on for a decade under challenging circumstances is Brooklyn Apple Academy, serving all manner of urban homeschoolers on a street of dollar stores and pizza joints in the South Park Slope neighborhood. Founder Noah Mayers has shepherded kids through self-directed projects in the woodshop, art studio, and computer lab at Brooklyn Apple for more than 10 years, helping high-maintenance New York City parents get comfortable being outside public or private school establishments in the process. Mayers’ real pride and joy is his NYC Infrastructure program for teens, which this year included a segment on food featuring a predawn trip to the Fulton Fish Market. The year also included multiple fundraising drives while Mayers considers pursuing philanthropy from organizations like the VELA Education Fund, whose microgrants can help keep doors like his open.¹⁵

Despite the constant scramble for funding and other sustainability challenges, no one doubts the necessity of organizations like Brooklyn Apple and others dotting the ASDE map. Among their many other functions, these unschooling centers and subsets-of-a-subset parent groups help unschooling families navigate legal schooling requirements and—even more terrifying!—the college application process.

The starting point for legal compliance remains the interactive “Find Your Homeschool Law” map on the Home School Legal Defense Association website, described in previous chapters. For unschooling families, the extra challenge is matching their particular “not-doing-school” program with homeschool reporting requirements in their states. While some states require nothing more than a notification letter indicating the child will be learning at home rather than attending local schools, most states lay out core subjects that should be addressed, and some demand evidence of actual curriculum used or materials covered.

As a result, a whole cottage industry has emerged to help unschooling parents document their kids’ learning projects and align them with required topics. There are bound books like Jennifer Althaus’s page-a-day, yearlong *UnSchooling Journal*, complete with an inspirational quote from John Holt (“Children learn from anything and everything they see. They learn wherever they are, not just in special learning places”).¹⁶ Families fill in evidence of field trips, hands-on projects, books read, and so on, with tags for connections to academic subjects. The whole thing can be submitted to education authorities if needed or summarized on a page or two if not. Unschooling social media is replete with crowd-sourced tracking sheets for correlating that birdhouse-building project to math and science standards or claiming all the right English credits for that *Pride and Prejudice* video game your kid designed. Sue Patterson runs a whole workshop on turning the unschooling experience into a high school transcript for application to college.

Because as even the most passionate unschooling advocates acknowledge, anxiety about access to college, and ultimately a fulfilling, family-supporting career, remains a persistent barrier to more families choosing unschooling. In a panel on this very topic at the 2023 Northeast Unschooling Conference, DuPont points out that unschooling families should properly let kids decide for themselves what their postsecondary path will be. “The only reason a lot of my friends in regular school ground it out every day was to get into college, whether that’s what they wanted or not,” DuPont says. “The whole system is set up like a factory focused on the next phase of production.” Sharing the panel with DuPont are other lifelong unschoolers who variously have completed both undergraduate and master’s degrees; are currently in college; had a stop-start college experience and now attend an online postgraduate program; or decided to

skip college in favor of launching a successful web design business. Their experience is borne out in a 2015 study, the most comprehensive of unschoolers to date, which found that 83 percent had gone on to pursue some form of higher education, and nearly half had completed or were currently enrolled in a bachelor's program or higher.¹⁷ Of course, the small, self-selected samples for both the 2015 survey and the conference panel mean that such stats, while promising, can't be considered definitive.

What is known is that, once an unschooler sets their sights on college, putting together an application can take a bit of specialized work. In homeschool-friendly states, a parent-issued diploma with a transcript like the kind Sue Patterson helps her groups assemble will more than suffice as proof of high school completion. Elsewhere, families may turn to organizations like the PAX Academy, a Maryland private school (affiliated with the PAX Ministries created by two unschooling moms, one of them a former classroom teacher) that serves as an umbrella for unschoolers and issues them diplomas based on portfolios of work. Or students can take the GED exam to get a high school equivalency that is increasingly accepted by universities as proof of completion of secondary education. When it comes to college readiness exams like the SAT and ACT, unschooling families who have a philosophical resistance to reducing aptitude to a standardized test score may be drawn to test-blind nontraditional higher education institutions like Hampshire College, Goddard College, and Evergreen State University, and note that many more universities are going the test-optional direction since the pandemic in any case. But the bottom line is that no school enrollment is required to take these exams. And the unschooling experience can make a killer topic for one's college admissions essay, as DuPont explains in one of their most popular TikToks.

A second major downside to unschooling is one that young people like DuPont discover once they arrive at college, or when they transition to any traditional school setting: knowledge gaps. Just because you taught yourself all about the water cycle that summer of record rainstorms—reading everything you could find at the library, watching all the videos on YouTube, interviewing your local meteorologist, setting up your own rain gauges—doesn't mean you've covered all you need to know to enroll in Earth Science 101. That local election you volunteered for likely didn't cover all the foundational knowledge requirements for American government, nor did that book of poetry you wrote teach you

comprehensive grammar. John Holt argued that schools “do things backwards” by teaching kids a skill first and then hoping they find something useful and interesting to do with it, rather than encouraging every learner to start with “something worth doing” and then learn what they need to know to do it. But the reality is that traditionally schooled students have been exposed to comparatively vast sets of skills and facts in math, writing, science, social studies, and more by the time they get through high school and into college, while an unschooler may have never encountered the need to write a topic sentence or create a bar graph until some professor assigns them to.

Then there’s the whole arena of pop culture knowledge that a young person might miss if they haven’t spent their teen years exclusively around other teens. Unschoolers tend to compensate for that by knowing specific cultural niches, be they *Doctor Who* or tattoo art, very, very well.

The seriousness of knowledge gaps and strategies for dealing with them are a hot topic in unschooling communities. “Yes, unschoolers often know different things at different ages than their public school counterparts,” DuPont says on TikTok. “But everyone has knowledge gaps! It’s not possible for any human to know everything about everything.” Since the world of knowledge is always expanding exponentially, the key is to know how and where to learn what you need and want to know, DuPont points out. If that means mastering composition in three weeks at the college writing center, or developing your own flash card system for the periodic table, so be it—though some unschoolers report being surprised by how stressful this kind of learning can be when you’re not accustomed to it, and how obvious that stress can be to classmates and new college friends.

Which brings us to the third major downside of unschooling: stigma. Being different in any way is hard for kids, and being so far out of the mainstream, even among homeschoolers and others pursuing other unconventional education approaches, can feel overwhelming to some learners. “As an unschooling mom, I pride myself on being a bit of a rebel, an iconoclast,” one participant at the Northeast Unschooling Conference says. “But I forget sometimes that my children sometimes just want to be ‘normal.’” Having a community of like-minded families both locally and online can help take the sting out of the stigma, but some regretful unschoolers say that’s the hardest thing to shake.

Dr. Gina Riley keeps close track of these developments. A professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, her primary work is in adolescent special education, including the training of SPED teachers for New York City public schools. Dr. Riley is also one of a very small handful of academic researchers focused on unschooling. Over the past decade, Dr. Riley has surveyed hundreds of “families that don’t send their children to school and don’t school them at home” about the benefits and challenges of unschooling. That 2015 study documenting postsecondary engagement by unschoolers was a collaboration by Dr. Riley with Dr. Gray of Boston College, preceded by a similarly peer-reviewed study revealing that the greatest hurdle for unschooling families was pushback from their communities.¹⁸ More than 40 percent of those surveyed cited the ingrained assumption that education and school are synonymous, an attitude held both by critics in their families and communities, and in their own minds as they started down the unschooling path. (Hence the popularity of “deschooling” as a transition between structured school and this new way of learning.) At the same time, more than 57 percent of the families in this study said unschooling allowed their children to learn more eagerly and efficiently than prior forms of schooling they’d tried, and 52 percent said their kids were happier, less stressed, and more self-confident than before.¹⁹

For Dr. Riley, the key is intrinsic motivation, that personal internal fire to learn and progress that’s more powerful than anything grades, test scores, prizes, or praise can produce. Her research has shown that unschoolers have higher levels of intrinsic motivation than almost any other category of learner, and that it sticks: Her 2015 study of young adult “grown unschoolers”²⁰ confirms that this self-starter effect, which they noticed was absent in many of their traditionally schooled peers, sustained the vast majority of them through postsecondary education into career.

Which is why Dr. Riley chose unschooling as the path for her own child. “When I had my son, I was a single teen mom,” she says over coffee at Shakespeare and Company across from the Hunter College campus. “The whole time I was raising him, I was completing my undergraduate and postgraduate work through to my doctorate, always deeply drawn to the study of intrinsic motivation. By the time my son was five, I could see he was a curious and quirky learner—and since kindergarten isn’t mandatory in my state, I thought, let’s do this on our own for just this year.” Each

subsequent year, Dr. Riley and her son would revisit that decision, and each year, unschooling was their choice.

Now in his twenties with both undergraduate and graduate degrees under his belt, Ben Riley works as an editor at a medical journal. Looking back, he says unschooling showed him in very practical terms that “learning is an inextricable part of life”: when he and his student-mom spent hours together at the library, for example, each going deep on a topic of interest, or when he was allowed to devote whole days to composing songs on his guitar. Despite occasionally feeling like a weirdo for not being in school (Ben’s extended family, including multiple cousins his age, couldn’t quite wrap their collective minds around the unschooling thing), he says joy tipped the balance, most notably the joy of “learning about things I’m actually interested in.” Those interests include classical and acoustic guitar and songwriting, which he actively pursues along with his editorial day job.

Ben Riley would fit right in with DuPont and the other grown unschoolers at the Northeast Unschooling Conference. “I’ve been attending NEUC for most of my life,” Tony Patterson says, pronouncing the conference’s acronym as “nuke.” Patterson’s now 29 with an advanced degree and a job he loves, doing sound and lighting tech for a performing arts organization. He and his siblings, Alex and Julia (known in NEUC circles just as the Triplets), together with buddy Derek Aaron, 24, and of course Skyler DuPont, serve on the conference’s advisory board. This year they’ve planned sessions on everything from neurodiversity to “myth busting” to how to translate unschooling experiences into standout college applications.

They’ve also arranged the Orbitron, a contraption of human-size, manually spun interlocking rings that’s been trucked onto the Hampshire campus as a combination conference break activity and extended trust fall. Unschoolers of all ages, and a few of their parents, gaggle up for their turns. Tony Patterson is among the first to strap in.

Suspended above the scrubby ground in a ring of blue steel, Patterson wears the same expression—serious, careful, not completely thrilled to have all eyes on him—as he did when describing his ADHD on the conference panel. He’s already keenly aware that he is living proof of how unschooling works, how it lets a person use their own thrust and steam, buoyed by the cheers of their community and an occasional push from a helpful adult, to

reach heights they could only imagine. Like the Orbitron. Patterson smiles and begins his swoop.

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On the Roadschool

It's a rainy day at the waterpark, and the RV kids don't care.

Some of them have ridden for days with their families from a howling post-Halloween snowstorm in Southern Colorado through the Tornado Alley that now stretches from Oklahoma through Texas to the eastern edge of the bayou, where swamplands give way to the beaches of the Redneck Riviera. Others have spent the past month hunkered down in the hurricane zones of southern and central Florida, waiting for the all clear.

That *rat-a-tat-tat* of rain on the sculpted Astroturf and steamy spa tub surface of Splash RV Resort and Water Park in Milton, Florida, means less than nothing to kids ready to swim and socialize with their own kind from across the country.

They're here for a weeklong November "Friendsgiving" meet-up for members of Fulltime Families, one of several organizations dedicated to sparking community among America's roadschoolers, defined broadly as families who homeschool while traveling.¹ Or vice versa. The roadschool ranks seem to be made up equally of families dedicated to the rambling life who work schooling into it, and those who had already opted out of the traditional education system and figured, *We can do this anywhere, so let's go*.

While there are not yet reliable statistics on the total number of American families who are roadschooling or—beyond the boundaries of the United States—worldschooling, a quick scan of the leading social media sites and membership groups serving them shows more than 20,000 members among them. According to RV industry figures, 1.5 percent of those who own such vehicles live in them full-time;² by another count, an estimated 3 million Americans lived full-time in vans, campers, or other motorized homes as of 2022.³ The largest growth in these categories is occurring among those below retirement age, even as the youthful "van life" phenomenon fades with memories of the pandemic. Most often, those living full-time on the road have given up their stationary abodes, typically selling, renting out, or subletting their former homes to create a travel fund.

While some may worry that there is a fine line between living on the road and being homeless, roadschoolers loudly and proudly proclaim theirs as a lifestyle choice.

That becomes especially clear when such families gather, as they do through scheduled meetups and chance RV park encounters. At any given camp store or national park ranger station, roadschoolers recognize each other through stories about trading big suburban houses and packed kid activity schedules for profound family togetherness and whatever can fit in the vehicle. They laugh when they hear one family say they were planning to travel around just for a year—five years ago. And they sigh when another family announces they’re going to be settling down in June, for real this time, as soon as they figure out where.

Stationary homeschoolers often ask newly encountered fellow travelers, “What curriculum do you use?” as a way to clock who’s a Classical Conversations fan, who adheres to Charlotte Mason, and who leans toward the eclectic. As we learned in [chapter 3](#), curriculum choices often come with identity markers and an instant community. For those schooling on the road, the first question instead is “What kind of rig do you have?” (Followed quickly, of course, by tips for DIY nature study and what kid lit fits best with a visit to the World’s Largest Ball of Twine.) Equipment is central to the roadschooling life, and—unlike the mom-dominated discourse observed in other forms of unconventional education—this gives some dads a crucial seat at the firepit. There they share fatherly tips for managing the weight of traveling libraries (“one book in, one book out is my rule”) and stories about 16-hour turnarounds back to the home state DMV to secure a teen’s driver’s license, along with ruminations about gray-water disposal, Starlink satellite positioning, and solar paneling.

Not that the roadschooling mothers are any slouches with the stats. “I’m in a 24-foot fifth wheel, but next year we’ll be trading up into a 36-foot toy hauler so the kids have a dedicated study space,” one woman says at the Friendsgiving Mom’s Night. A fifth wheel, she explains to the uninitiated, is a large living-space trailer towed by a pickup truck, to which it is attached by a special hitch; a toy hauler is a fifth wheel with a garage space at the back for a small car, snow machine, motorbikes, or extra room for humans. “We’ll have their desks and computers back there, plus everyone’s fishing gear.”

“I have four sons, a husband, and a Newfoundland,” says the woman to her right, “in a Class A motorhome.” The table falls silent in awestruck sympathy, imagining the Jenga-like internal positioning in this comparatively snug all-in-one vehicle. “But we can always find a spot to pull in,” she adds brightly.

Because pulling in and staying put for a bit is as much a feature of the roadschooling life as driving—perhaps even more so. Families mark their time at national parks with the collection of Junior Ranger badges, earned over multiple days spent kid-exploring Zion or Acadia or Badlands. Discovery of a particularly agreeable RV park can lead to a stay of weeks or even months—several of the Friendsgiving families plan to be at Splash through early spring, celebrating Christmas and even Valentine’s Day on the blue-and-yellow waterslides. Then there’s the thrill of “boondocking,” foregoing the full-hookup convenience of a campground in exchange for an off-the-grid, practically free-of-charge location on Bureau of Land Management acreage, where a family might surround itself with nothing but nature for as long as the generator and stored water hold out.

Wherever they take place, it’s these stay-days that roadschoolers say are often the richest for learning. Some families are enrolled in online school with assigned daily lessons, and others subscribe to curriculum programs that lay out core subjects in linear detail. Many find that roadschooling lends itself well to interdisciplinary “unit studies,” which weave English language arts, math, science, social studies, and the arts together around a particular topic of interest, from birds to westward expansion; *Our 50 States* is a favorite unit studies workbook package, valued by those on the road because it is “consumable.”⁴ Even the most relaxed DIY, mix-and-match-schooling families spend a few hours daily on school stuff—perhaps math practice in the morning through Khan Academy when the internet connection is solid and workbooks when it’s not, followed by reading and writing about sights just seen. But they all say learning really comes alive outside the RV door, through up-close exploration of natural phenomena, meanders through historical sites, and visits to local roadside attractions.

Then there are the life skills learned through what is essentially 21st-century homesteading: cooking a meal for four in a tiny kitchen with what’s left before the next Costco run. Planning the upcoming leg of travel with a map, a guidebook, and a calculator. Sending a drone down a boondock turnoff to see whether the rig can safely make it in and back out again.

Securing the RV with a windstorm approaching. It's no wonder that the student-led, real-world unschooling approach we explored in the previous chapter is particularly appealing to those on the more adventurous end of the roadschooling spectrum. But no matter what curriculum or method these families choose, they identify first and foremost as roadschoolers, ready to shift gears and change course as the moment demands.

Regardless of where the road takes them, roadschoolers stay keenly aware of education law and what it means for their particularly unconventional form of schooling. One of the first choices a family might make after deciding to say goodbye to their bricks-and-sticks home is where they will establish their “domicile”: their official home base when it comes to taxes, vehicle registration, absentee voting, and especially school. Earlier generations of full-time RVers, the snowbirds and *Nomadland*-style wanderers of a certain age, pioneered the use of mailbox domicile services concentrated in states with no income tax and a simple requirement to show up at least once—to file for a driver's license, for example—to secure an official address from which their mail will be scanned and forwarded electronically ever after. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of these same states also have quite permissive homeschooling rules. In Texas, parents must provide a simple assurance that they are teaching their children “spelling, grammar, mathematics, and the study of good citizenship” via a written curriculum (online resources do count). In Florida, parents either notify their local school district that they intend to homeschool and then keep a portfolio of work and administer an annual assessment of their choice, or they can enroll in an “umbrella” private school that simply requires quarterly attendance reporting. Around Splash at Friendsgiving, every other license plate not rocking the Lone Star seems to feature the orange blossoms of the Sunshine State.

Florida was the launch destination for JP and Jordana Latkovic, a New York couple with two kids who hit the road not long after JP, a paramedic, recovered from being one of the first on his hospital staff to be stricken with COVID at the height of the pandemic. Selling their house on Long Island gave them the cash cushion to finally hit the road in the 2008 Winnebago they bought just before the pandemic from another roadschooling family—it's where JP quarantined for his recovery from COVID. As the world began reopening in 2021, the family took off from New York and meandered south through Washington, DC, and the Great Smoky Mountains toward the

Everglades. They registered their young children, Aurelia and Odin, as Florida homeschoolers—“so much easier than New York,” JP recalls—and soon headed out for a two-year tour of national parks before returning to settle, for now, in the Florida Keys. Their *Wander to Get Lost* YouTube channel featuring gear reviews, family travel tips, and RV how-to segments earns the Latkovics a bit of affiliate income; like many roadschoolers, they maintain an active social media influencer / content creator side hustle. Meanwhile, Jordana’s still teaching the Zumba classes she moved online during COVID, JP running the camera while she leads her far-flung students through their moves under the RV awning each morning. Aurelia, now a third grader, brings a naturalist’s eye to her road studies, detailing the bison she saw in South Dakota, the wild horses in Assateague, the mama-and-baby manatee pair off Sunset Key. First-grader Odin wants to do whatever Aurelia does, so he’s ahead of grade level on most subjects. JP notes that Odin also “has an engineer’s mind with a mechanic’s hand and is always helping me fix things.”

For his part, JP has the faraway eyes of someone who frequently finds himself on the urgent front line. The catalog of other people’s tragedies in his Long Island ambulance is now eclipsed by the memory of running out of gas in a remote part of Big Bend National Park and the time the RV’s tow bar failed, sending the family’s Jeep crashing into the back of their trailer on the way to Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. All parents navigate their fair share of stress, but the roadschool experience can easily crank it up to an eleven. These parents have chosen to lead their kids out onto a swaying tightrope of adventure while simultaneously keeping the safety net stretched tight. It’s not surprising that so many full-time RV families have retired first responders and military vets in their ranks.

Back at Splash, that’s who leads the coffee circle conversation about what to do if someone in the rolling household gets sick or injured. “More often than not, it’s something you can just take care of yourself,” says former firefighter John Elm, who says his first aid kit is always close at hand while his carefully collected naturopathic tinctures fill up one whole section of the under-couch storage in his rig.

Lauren Ulledalen is a roadschooling maven-mom from Montana who’s also a hunter, adept with long guns and able to tell by scent what kind of large prey might be nearby (“An elk herd smells just like a men’s locker room,” she says). She jumps in now with her prescription of natural honey

—“local to the place you’re at”—for allergy attacks in any given destination. “But on your way in, you do have to scope out where the hospitals and urgent care places are within driving range,” she adds. “Especially when you’re boondocking.”

My niece Merry contemplates her paper coffee cup as she integrates this information into her own cache of perpetual parental worries. Merry has come with me to the Splash Fulltime Families Friendsgiving along with her 10-year-old daughter, Gemma, who started her education at “forest school” (see [chapter 8](#)) in the town where they live, across the water from Seattle. The experience of watching Gemma thrive in the mud and wonder left Merry unconventional-ed-curious but frustrated by life circumstances that keep her and her husband grinding away at their just-okay day jobs while Gemma attends regular public school. Could they ever simply drive away from it all?

The RV families are adamant: Of course you can, they say. Rent an RV for a weekend and try it. You’ll figure out the rest if it’s right for your family. But do it soon while your kid still wants to be around you. “Find the road with the most thorns and uphill battles and go that way,” one Fulltime Families dad urges Merry. “You won’t regret it.”

At a picnic table just outside the circle of coffee talk advisers, a man with six-foot-long dreadlocks taps away at a laptop, “multitasking on some work stuff.” This is Matt Satorius, aka Sators, lifelong road manager for rock bands who’s recently morphed into mobile software tech and roadschool dad. He and his wife, Jamie, left behind their house in Indianapolis six months ago to try full-time RV life with their 10-year-old son, and Sators couldn’t be happier to finally combine home and family with work and the road. Jamie isn’t 100 percent sold, not yet—she misses their house with all its separate rooms and her things inside them, and worries that their son misses seeing his friends at school every day (a common roadschool ache, discussed later in this chapter) more than he lets on. But it’s early days still, Jamie and Sators agree, too early yet to tell if this life choice will stick.

Meanwhile, Sators has wholeheartedly joined the corps of remote IT professionals—software developers, project managers, contract auditors, and the like—whose mobile work makes RV life possible for many roadschool families. They’re the ones behind the popularity of satellite internet as an essential RV accessory to escape “janky campground Wi-Fi.”

They've pioneered swivel screen mounts for the passenger seat so travel days can also be workdays and pop-up office tents set just away from family activity for the rest of the time. In some roadschool households, as among other flavors of homeschooling, there's one parent clocking paid employment hours while the other foregoes outside income to instead manage the family schedule for optimum school-work-adventure balance. In others, both parents have remote jobs in addition to trading off schooling responsibilities. And in some roadschool families, there's just one parent to do it all, including driving the rig.

That's Bionca Smith's story. As a young Black single mother, Smith had worked furiously for years toward her corporate sales position with a nice car and apartment in California's Bay Area, in a good school district for her son, Carter. But between commuting and long hours at the day job, she was exhausted, "up to my neck in bills," and had little time to spend with Carter, much less her developing side hustle as a life coach. Smith yearned to travel and be her own boss, and one day had a revelation: All her "stuff" was keeping her stuck. So she quit the job, sold the car and most of their possessions, and enrolled Carter in a virtual school—in this case, Connections Academy. (Carter recalls being a little sad to say goodbye to his face-to-face friends, but not the sometimes-boring classroom routines or the mountains of afterschool homework.) Then they set off for the wild blue yonder.

Smith and Carter first chose the road far less traveled and spent a few months worldschooling, a variation still quite rare compared to RV-ing among those drawn to schooling-while-traveling. Staying in vacation rentals in Thailand and Africa, they learned to work around time zones and iffy internet so Smith could serve her growing roster of coaching clients and Carter could participate in Connections Academy LiveLessons. After returning to the United States, they wanted to simplify further—no more airplanes and Airbnbs. So Smith bought a much-used but fully tricked-out camper van and they hit the road across America, often finding themselves the only people of color in the campground. They added service projects and speaking engagements to their itinerary, wowing audiences at online learning conferences and elementary schools alike; they were even highlighted in a multipage article in *Good Housekeeping* magazine.⁵ Carter thrived in virtual school, advancing quickly and making a network of friends across the country. When the pandemic hit, Smith and Carter were

there to help other families of all shapes, sizes, and colors make the transition to online schooling and the newness of being together all day, every day.

Diversifying the roadschooling and worldschooling universe is also top of mind for Rob Taylor, half of the couple known as 2TravelDads.⁶ Adventuring around the United States and the world with his husband and their two young sons in tow, “Our goal is to encourage families like ours to be visible in the world, traveling beyond their comfort zone in safety, and to pave the way for the next generation of LGBTQ people to be confident in creating the family that’s right for them wherever they are,” Taylor says in his blog. That has included periods of homeschooling in transit as well—with the side benefit of shielding his sons from brick-and-mortar bullying due to their family structure, a fraught possibility in their home state of Florida. But the real upside, Taylor says, has been rich moments like his son Gabriel’s visit to the fruit market in the Canary Islands and his interactions with the vendors. “In this short period of time, our second-grade son learned new words in Spanish, counting by 100s, tens, fives and ones, estimating weight in kilograms and grams, adding decimals, counting change,” Taylor recalls.

The draw of the unfamiliar, the desire for cultural stretch, is a major motivator for families who head in the worldschooling direction instead of US-focused RVs and national parks. As *Remote Family* magazine notes, living overseas was once the province of very wealthy families, with a few leave-everything-behind counterculture types mixed in.⁷ But these days, “the rise of the anywhere worker” combined with portable schooling options has opened international wandering to a much more mainstream cadre of families. Some are like Jen and Tristian Norman, who aim to visit 40 countries with their three early-elementary-grade kids before Jen turns 40. Others are like Amy Hutcheson, a single mom who traveled with her young daughter to eight or nine countries in Latin America before settling in Ecuador, where they find the much-cheaper-than-home cost of living allows them extended adventures in places like the Galapagos. Nevertheless, while single parents on a budget like Hutcheson and Bionca Smith find frugal ways for their families to combine travel and learning, this flavor of unconventional education is likely not an option for those whose income depends on in-person work or who are grappling with other economic constraints. Worldschooled families advise Americans

considering this lifestyle to start with a hard look at their budget to make sure not only that they can support themselves on the road through remote work, income from renting out or subletting their stationary home, and a bit of social media influencing, but that they also keep savings enough for return plane fare plus a place to stay stateside if they find themselves suddenly needing to repatriate due to economics, politics, or a global health crisis.

Because the world is not always so friendly to unconventionally schooled families, especially if they don't blend in. Amber O'Neal Johnston (who we met in [chapter 3](#)) remembers how she and her family were wrapping up a worldschooling trip around the Mediterranean when the global pandemic hit in early 2020, whipping up multiple flavors of xenophobia as part of the overall panic. "In Greece, they practically spit on us—because we were Black or because we were Americans or both, we'll never know," Johnston says. Johnston's family made it back to their Atlanta-area homeplace, and place-based homeschool, just before the pandemic slammed the world's doors shut.

Somewhere in between globe-trotting worldschoolers with their back-pocket escape plans and roadschooling RV families rolling along inside theirs, you'll find boatschoolers. These families typically made the leap to their "kid boats"—sailboats fancy or not, short- or long-haulers, with families aboard—during the pandemic, when work was interrupted, schools closed, and the only safe place to be in the world seemed to be outdoors. There's no beating the air circulation above deck on the sea. In 2020, the *New York Times* estimated there were about a thousand such families out on the water across the world, Americans as well as Australians, Europeans, Latin Americans, and others.⁸

If getting a good internet connection for any online learning is tough at a boondock site in the Rockies, it can be that much trickier in the middle of the ocean, but satellite connections and smart downloading in port keep many boatschooling families well stocked with curriculum. For Matt and Nancy Foster, who homeschooled daughter Olivia on their boat while sailing among various ports along the southeastern US coast, regular trips to marina coffee shops with high-speed Wi-Fi were part of the schooling routine for months before the family ventured further afield.⁹

Finding a worthy balance between moving along ("cruising," in boating parlance) and staying still is how the Dock School came to be in the

Dominican Republic.¹⁰ Leah Carmichael, her husband, and their two young sons were sailing around the Caribbean, enjoying the vibrant hands-on learning opportunities that the sea brings, when an oncoming hurricane drove them to tie up in Puerto Plata. While they waited out hurricane season, the Carmichaels met other boatschooling families and decided to make the most of their shared forced landlubbing: They launched a parent-led co-op with a focus on hands-on, experiential learning that looks a bit like unschooling in an exotic setting. The Dock School now runs year-round, has a small paid staff, and serves families sailing in from all over the globe.

If there's a common thread among all these schooling-while-traveling stories, it's that making it work requires supreme flexibility. Megan Tenney learned this the hard way and now jumps at the chance to teach other families what she knows.

Back in 2018, Tenney, her public school teacher husband, and their four kids, ages 2 to 10, were burning out in the suburbs of Phoenix. Between demanding jobs, the family's church and community theater commitments, toddler-wrangling and activity-chauffeuring, "we couldn't breathe," Tenney recalls. So they resolved to take what Tenney has since branded as a "family gap year" (how-to online courses available through her Family Routed website).¹¹ By September of that year, the Tenneys had sold off their house and furniture, and packed what was left in the family minivan with plans to move to the Southeast, where extended family could help carry some of the burden. But once everything they owned was in the back of a van, they thought, why not see the rest of the country first? They booked a series of Airbnbs near national parks and points of interest ("This was back when staying in an Airbnb for four weeks was way cheaper than paying a month's mortgage," Tenney says) and hit the road. Each parent took on a remote job with flexible hours. Tenney picked up work with her dad's software company, while her husband taught English online to children in China. Their homeschooling routine was a series of equally flexible learning tasks—math skills to master, books to read, Junior Ranger booklets to fill in—that could be completed in whatever order and at whatever intensity made sense on a given day. They invented a spreadsheet system for the kids to track their own progress that conveniently doubled as portfolio evidence for their domicile state, Arizona.

Their gap year was supposed to end with an international adventure: traveling around Europe, homeschooling as they went. “Our original departure date was April 2020,” Tenney says ruefully. When the global pandemic scotched those plans, the Tenneys pivoted to another year of US roadschooling, bringing their count of total states visited to 48.

Finally, in mid-2021, as the world began reopening, the Tenneys made it across the pond. There was no minivan for their European travels; they took public transportation everywhere, so each family member carried everything they needed in their backpack. The curriculum became both more digital and more place-based. Physical books stayed in hand only as long as it took to read them and then were left behind for the next Airbnb guests. The family hit all the hot spots, from London to Rome, Athens to Barcelona, and Tenney still marvels at what made the biggest impact on her children. “Of course we visited the Eiffel Tower,” she says. “But that’s not what the kids remember most about Paris. They still talk about going to the boulangerie every day and getting fresh baguettes.”

When the Tenneys finally came back stateside, they settled in South Carolina, where Tenney now has a full-time job and the kids are enrolled in public school. Any worries that their years on the road had set the children back academically were allayed when their oldest tested into advanced math and their youngest got skipped into first grade partway through kindergarten. The family’s one regret, if they have any, is more bittersweet than painful. “My daughter told me yesterday that she’s glad to have friends again that are more than a ‘30-day free trial,’” Tenney says.

That longing for a consistent connection with friends and other kinds of peer engagement, what adult observers typically shorthand as “socialization,” may be more poignant for roadschooling, worldschooling, and boatschooling kids than for those in any other form of unconventional education. While stationary homeschooling families may join community co-ops that facilitate play groups, outings, picnics, and the like, and while local school districts may offer homeschoolers the opportunity to join extracurricular activities, even sports teams, students learning on the move can tap into none of this. The families gathered at Splash agree that the yearning to socialize becomes more pronounced as kids reach secondary school age: More support for tweens and teens—gaming events, specialized field trips—is a major coffee talk topic. “My 15-year-old son went to bed at 8 p.m. last night!” one mom exclaims. Indeed, a major impetus for families

to leave the road seems to be the approach of high school, when kids who used to be obsessed with desert tortoises suddenly want to play football, and committedly unconventional parents start worrying about SATs and college. One family with seven kids in their rolling one-room schoolhouse is actively looking for a good place to settle down so that the eldest child, a 17-year-old girl a little too adept at watching over her sister and five brothers, might actually be able to go on a date, find a boyfriend.

Meanwhile, roadschool families improvise to ensure that the road doesn't have to be lonesome. Some families address this challenge by traveling together in clusters, creating mini-caravans on the highway and instant neighborhoods at the RV park for as long as their destinations and directions are in sync. Others make active use of technology to keep their kids connected with friends they collect along the way. "If you want to see the opposite of peace and quiet while boondocking," one mom jokes, "step into our rig while my daughter's on Zoom with her tween besties from all over the country."

And then there are the meetups like the Splash Friendsgiving, organized by groups like Worldscool Pop-Up Hub,^{[12](#)} Wild + Free,^{[13](#)} and especially Fulltime Families. Founded back in 2010 by RV mom Kimberly Travaglino, Fulltime Families (FTF for short) has grown from just a handful to thousands of member families, many of whom add a personalized FTF flag to their rig for easy pop-up connections with others on the road. The organization facilitates dozens of events each year, including weeklong "rallies" involving hundreds of RV families gathering for hot-air ballooning in Albuquerque, for example, or the Minnesota State Fair, to more intimate regional "family reunions." There are private Facebook groups managed by FTF to help roadschoolers find their tribes, by geography within the United States (as well as "Traveling Mexico" and "Traveling North of the Border") or by special interest such as musicians, gamers, IT professionals, and—largest of all—business owners.

That business is more than likely based on monetized celebration of the RV family life itself. Take FTF: While providing an essential service, it is a commercial venture first and foremost, running on memberships, event fees, and sales of merch like FTF flags and T-shirts, but even more so on partnerships with RV equipment providers, campgrounds, apparel sellers, and the like. Like JP Latkovic and his *Wander to Get Lost*, every other roadschool family at any given meet-up seems to have a YouTube or TikTok

channel, with names like *Mom with a Map* and *Kidgital Nomads*, featuring classic rock-scored videos of travel hot spots and rig maintenance, plus affiliate links galore. It's American hustle at its best, more than a little ironic as a survival strategy for families seeking to escape the late capitalist American grind.

And that spirit doesn't necessarily dissipate when these families come off the road. Students who have roadschooled don't appear to be any less likely to go to traditional college than other kinds of unconventional school graduates—among whom the debate about the return on investment of a four-year, debt-heavy college degree is raging just as hard as it is in the general Gen Alpha population. It's their parents who may find themselves rebelling against nine-to-five corporate jobs and Homeowners Association rules once the RV is permanently parked and the passport stashed away.

Bionca Smith is a case in point. Once she and her son, Carter, settled in Texas and he was on his way to high school, Smith found herself drawn to another highly unconventional passion project: rescuing stray dogs off the roads around Houston and nurturing them at her Off the Grid Animal Sanctuary (named after her *Off the Grid with a Kid* blog when she and Carter were on the road).¹⁴ As of last count there were 25 dogs of various sizes, conditions, and personalities at the sanctuary, and Smith couldn't be happier. She may be sleeping in a proper bed for the first time in nearly a decade, but she's still traversing the highways and byways with her own unique sense of home. Like the old rockers say, you might leave the road, but the road doesn't leave you.

If the RV kids at Friendsgiving are aware of these undercurrents, they don't show it.

Instead, they converge on the rain-dappled pool like BBs drawn to a magnet, some shy and slow, others with a cannonball splash. Eleven-year-olds Emma and Riley line up with Jackson, age 10, on the wide submerged ledge at the deep end with their backs to the water to play an arithmetic dunking game: One kid poses a math problem, and whoever answers slowest or wrong gets pushed into the water. The last one standing becomes the next quizzier/pusher. Jackson spots my great-niece Gemma swan-paddling nearby (between dips down to practice holding her breath and seeing underwater) and invites her to come join them. Soon all four kids are egging each other on toward tougher and tougher fourth- and fifth-grade equations: 11 times 11 times 2, 132 divided by 4! Everyone answers fast

fast fast, and everyone gets dunked at some point. Soon they transition to Copycat—Emma’s got a few Taylor Swift-inspired moves that the others work hard to mimic—and finally, Trust Falls, before the dusk rolls in and the lifeguards shoo everyone out of the pool. Kids stream out the waterpark gates into the winding lanes of parked RVs toward dry clothes and chicken nuggets before everyone reconvenes for the evening social.

The rain is easing up now, no longer a solid sheet unfurling off the slanted fairy-lit roof over the collection of firepits and picnic tables where the Fulltime Families end their day. A father-daughter musical duo, part-time pros on the Pensacola circuit, banters with the parents who sit with one eye on their beers, the other on kids swirling around the playground equipment just past the empty pools. When the duo rolls into an Arlo Guthrie tune, dads begin nodding their trucker hats and moms tap their becharmed Crocs. They know this one. They live this one. “Good morning, America, how are ya?” they sing softly along. “I’ll be gone 500 miles when the day is done.”

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Microschooling DIY

Darla Baquedano is five foot zero of intense iconoclastic purpose, complete with mission-driven nail art. (“I do them myself in keeping with the seasons,” she says, splaying fingers to highlight a miniature Frida Kahlo and flag of Mexico. “These are for Hispanic Heritage Month.”) Since 2023, Baquedano’s been concentrating on incubation of Spark Community Schools, an Arizona microschool network rolled out in partnership with Goodwill of Central and Northern Arizona that includes this location at one·n·ten, an LGBTQ+ youth center in the rough-baked heart of Phoenix.¹ She’s also shaping the fast-mutating ecosystem of similar tiny schools all over the country.

“Spark@one·n·ten,” as Baquedano’s microschool here is known, provides a highly personalized learning environment for just over a dozen kids of mixed ages in a nontraditional school space with a combination of structured academic time, student-led special projects, and social-emotional support. When I visited in fall 2024, Spark@one·n·ten was home to ten middle schoolers and five high school students from all over the 520-square-mile Phoenix metropolitan area (“the Valley,” as locals call it) convening in a colorful, comfortable, but windowless-for-safety space near a light-rail stop and the public library.

As a nonprofit community organization, one·n·ten has run programming for LGBTQ+ youth in Phoenix for nearly 30 years and built this center in 2017, with a complete kitchen, a music room, a gaming area, and a closet stocked with gender-affirming clothing. The place is hopping with queer teen energy every weekday from 3 to 5 p.m., when the sere Phoenix side street grows lively with new arrivals waiting to be buzzed in. Prior to the pandemic, there would also have been a handful of high school kids inside during school hours working on online curriculum at what was then the Queer Blended Learning Center, an outpost of one of the statewide virtual public charter schools like those described in the next chapter. COVID killed that program. Rising from its ashes, Spark@one·n·ten is something very different. “We’re here for the kids alienated from the larger public

school system but yearning for the kind of connection they can't get in homeschool or online school," says Baquedano. "That's what a microschool can offer." The 25-year veteran public school teacher and administrator sounds a bit in awe still of this new life-form now roiling education in Arizona and beyond.

Some pioneering educators have been ringing the microschool bell for years. For example, Dr. Maureen O'Shaughnessy, now with the education think tank Getting Smart, opened her LEADPrep Academy in Seattle in the early 2010s to serve the "outlier" students that none of the usual education options—traditional schooling, cyberschooling, homeschooling—seemed to fit.² Dr. O'Shaughnessy's groundbreaking guidebook titled *Creating Micro-Schools for Colorful Mismatched Kids* was published back in 2019.³

But most Americans got their first vivid glimpse of modern microschooling during the pandemic, from news reports and social media posts featuring families in affluent suburbs bringing their kids together in home-based learning pods with hired tutors: a Wi-Fi-connected, Instagram-ready version of the one-room schoolhouse. While most of these pandemic pods did not survive the reopening of regular school, the notion of the very small, very personal school took hold, and not just among the well-to-do. The most recent statistics show that 50 percent of families making use of microschools around the country are at the average income level in their communities, while 39 percent are slightly or significantly below that average income level.⁴ New business models for school founders and new funding supports for families are beginning to connect microschools with the kids who need them most, regardless of family income, as we'll see from the stories later in the chapter.

The research and advocacy organization EdChoice defines microschools as "small, purpose-built schools of 15 students or fewer," and estimates that just over 10 percent of American students—between 1.1 and 2.1 million kids—were participating in them as of 2022.⁵ EdChoice researchers concede that this number very likely includes families already counted as homeschoolers, since the majority of states don't yet have a separate category for these mostly private, often informal learning environments. But no one doubts that the number of microschools is on the rise, along with increased visibility (like the July 2024 above-the-fold article "A School with 7 Students" in the *New York Times*) and a growing array of supporting institutions.⁶

There's the nonprofit National Microschooling Center, launched in 2022 to help school founders find their way.⁷ There are multiple philanthropic funds like VELA Foundation⁸ and the Yass Prize,⁹ discussed in detail in [chapter 2](#), offering seed money and incubation for those launching and growing microschools. For-profit start-ups like KaiPod, the Florida-based Primer Schools network, and Arizona's own Prenda Education (discussed later in this chapter) are emerging with the aim to take microschooling to scale.¹⁰ There's even—like a gold star of legitimacy—an annual thought leader convening at Harvard. Led by Dr. Paul E. Peterson, the Emerging School Models conference has grown from 100 disparate souls in a Harvard Kennedy School conference room in 2022 to ten times that many in person and online, all probing the twin questions of “What's so special about microschools?” and “Are they sustainable?”¹¹ (To which the answers seem to be “Everything!” and “Yes, maybe,” as we'll discuss throughout this chapter.)

For its part, the National Microschooling Center has been keeping close track of the burgeoning community of microschool founders. In its *2025 Sector Analysis*, the center polled 800 current and prospective microschool founders in all 50 states plus Washington, DC—a significant increase in responders on both counts over the prior year—to document their demographics, challenges, and motivations. These founders are a diverse bunch: While 58 percent of prospective founders and 67 percent of those currently running microschools identify as white, 30 percent of prospective operators and 21 percent of current ones are Black, joined by smaller but growing concentrations of Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of founders (54 percent of current and 73 percent of prospective) are educators, either currently or formerly licensed, with common tales of trad-school burnout combined with an itch to do something more for kids.¹²

Often, that is a very particular group of kids. In the National Microschooling Center survey data, 74 percent of founders said their schools served neurodivergent learners (with 46 percent adding “other special needs”), 63 percent served students who are two or more grade levels behind their age peers, and 50 percent are reaching youngsters who have experienced emotional trauma.¹³ While virtually all public schools in America, by virtue of being open to everyone, also include students who have disabilities, lag their age peers, or suffer from trauma, such learners

are typically a minority in schools that average over 500 students each.¹⁴ In microschools of a dozen students, they may form the majority.

Darla Baquedano can testify that the students at Spark@one·n·ten fit all these categories and more. Trauma, check: Being LGBTQ+ in a traditional middle or high school setting can be wrenching in and of itself, but the isolation of homeschool or online school may be equally troubling for kids hungering for elusive community. Neurodiversity, check: As is strikingly common among Gen Alpha learners everywhere, the Spark@one·n·ten kids are both keenly aware of and highly articulate about their learning differences—ADHD, anxiety, and mild autism among them. Academic lag, check: Many of the Spark@one·n·ten students come to the school with learning gaps. Spark administers a standardized assessment to all incoming students (the norm-referenced MAP test from NWEA, a common tool among microschools) and then tailors their program accordingly, keeping Arizona state standards in mind.¹⁵ It falls to the two Spark@one·n·ten certified teachers to turn all this data into a workable, joyful daily learning routine, one that the students pursue in common, unlike the “bring your own curriculum” approach seen at KaiPod Newton in [chapter 1](#).

Elijah Costales-Chevalier (“Mr. C” to the kids) rides herd on the 6th–8th graders, who outnumber their high school peers two to one and easily eclipse them on the exuberance scale. Sporting flowing locks, a yarmulke, and a biology degree, Mr. C leverages both his experience teaching public school science all over the Valley and his work as a youth coordinator at Beth El Phoenix. “Teaching multiple grade levels in one classroom seemed a little daunting, until I recognized I was doing exactly that at synagogue every weekend,” Mr. C says. “It’s amazing what kids can accomplish when they feel part of a close-knit community.”

In addition to the sciences, Mr. C is the resident English language arts teacher for everyone at Spark@one·n·ten and collaborates with the high school teacher to lead students through the special LGBTQ+ history course that supplements the social studies program across grade levels. But today Mr. C’s main task is shepherding the middle schoolers as they work on the personal projects they’ll be presenting to the whole school community next week. Like 60 percent of microschools in the National Microschooling Center data, Spark@one·n·ten features project-based learning as a key aspect of its educational approach.

Today the middle schoolers occupy every available surface of their dedicated classroom space to execute the display board stage of their projects, turning three-by-four-foot slabs of cardboard into guided tours of their current obsessions. Kip is fascinated by Greek mythology and has constructed a family tree of the gods, using decorative twigs and yarn to show who married their siblings, and who produced offspring with mortals and other non-divines.¹⁶ Tonii is way into sharks and is puzzling through how best to combat misconceptions about them through text and photos of the docile, yellow-hued lemon shark and the gigantic plankton-eating basking shark. Nikita's project is about *hikikomori*, the Japanese "shut-in" phenomenon portrayed in anime and video games. "They lock themselves inside their rooms, never go outside, and mostly play games," Nikita explains. "It's because of the job system there, and all the pressure." Nikita's display board is primarily black tempera paint at this point.

There's nothing dark about Stella's project taking shape on the other side of the room—it's all blond sparkle, a 3D papier mâché homage to Princess Peach from the Mario Brothers universe. Stella tosses back their real-life golden tresses to explain that they chose "Stella" because it's as different as can be from their deadname ("It was just David," Stella sighs) and that they chose Peach because she *rules*.

Across the one·n·ten center in the meeting pit, with its carpeted seating benches, Kimberlee Ready ("Ms. Kim" to the students) is at the whiteboard leading a cohort of high schoolers through a generative statistics exercise. Four teenagers are arrayed around the circle facing her; the fifth is absent today. An architect and entrepreneur before turning to teaching, Ms. Kim comes to Spark@one·n·ten from Montessori and International Baccalaureate schools, where she honed learner engagement skills that are being sorely tested by this small, extra-reticent group.

To tee up on-the-fly comparative data research, Ms. Kim throws out topics her students might find compelling. Is gaming bad for you? Does college pay off? "The kinds of questions adults think kids care about," she reflects later. The Spark@one·n·ten students' silence is stony.

Ms. Kim tries a different tack. She focuses on the sleepest-looking kid in front of her. "Emerald, what's the screensaver on your phone?" she asks.

"My dog, Ezra," Emerald answers, phone to face. "He's the best."

Across the pit, slouching Eduardo waves a dismissive arm. "Yeah, but cats are better."

Ms. Kim cocks her head in Eduardo's direction. "How come?"

"They're just easier." He shrugs. "And cheaper."

"Are you sure about that?" Ms. Kim asks. She can see Emerald leaning in to argue, and the other two students are stirring as well. "Let's see what the data tells us."

Over the next hour, she leads her students through internet-search cost comparisons of cat food versus dog food, with a lively side discussion about how to identify foods of similar quality and whether all-natural is always better than not, followed by documentation of comparative feeding frequency and portion size and life spans. Soon the whiteboard is filled with statistics, and the students are busily creating spreadsheet graphs on their laptops. By the end of the session, the answer is clear: Dogs are actually more economical eaters than cats.

"I knew it!" Emerald says, pumping a fist in Eduardo's direction.

"Yeah, but dogs have all that grooming you have to pay for and stuff—" he splutters, but Ms. Kim holds up her hand.

"Tomorrow," she says. "Time to work on your projects now."

Eduardo's is a graphic novel depicting a budding romance between two stick figures.

Squint a bit and you might see a cat in the background.

Microschools by their very nature embody the "let a thousand flowers bloom" phase of education innovation. Like charter schools in the early 1990s and virtual schools a decade later, new and different forms seem to pop up every day, thrumming with the passion of teacher-founders and the militant gratitude of parents who feel they have finally found the one place their child might thrive.

What's different about microschools is that their essential smallness runs counter to the notion of scale, a holy grail in certain education innovation circles. Whether scale is measured by social impact (such as the percentage of student population engaged or the correlated movement in quantitative outcomes, including college attainment and future salaries) or economic efficiency (bringing the unit cost of service down by serving more units), or both, these tiny, variegated learning communities are flies in the ointment. Pessimists say it's just a matter of time before only the most widget-like, franchised microschools are left, differing from one another just by location. Optimists suggest the future of microschools is less McDonalds

and more food truck—each one prized for its uniqueness, and each sustained by obeying the unforgiving but crystal-clear economics of very small business. While many microschool founders are driven by a desire to serve marginalized populations and seek philanthropic funding to defray the cost to parents, “if your microschool budget works with 12 students but you only have 11, you have a problem,” KaiPod founder Amar Kumar told those assembled at the Harvard Emerging Schools conference in 2024. “Our schools are uniquely demand-sensitive.” There’s pressure from parents to keep costs low, and pressure from supporters for sustainability.

Leaders in the microschool movement find that banding together, through networks and convenings, can accrue some of the pragmatic advantages of scale without abandoning the “small is beautiful” ethos. Marketplaces of microschools in states like Arizona and Florida encourage parents to shop around using online search-and-match processes, a bit like Airbnb for education. Sector-wide advocates help founders navigate regulations and parents access available funding. The Yass Prize brings promising applicants together in an incubator/accelerator program to share best practices, while VELA is experimenting with a founder crowd-sourced approach to grant-making. The National Microschooling Center has engaged Darla Baquedano to help microschool founders to connect with enabling partners like Goodwill, which supports Spark@one·n·ten as a fiscal agent and national thought partner in designing microschool experiences for other vulnerable populations.

The twin questions of funding and accountability are particularly germane to the discussions about microschooling. Almost all 21st-century microschools operate on a parent-pay basis; some that are organized as parent co-ops work off sweat equity, but most others charge from a few hundred dollars for a course to multiple thousands of dollars a year for full-time enrollment. Microschool leaders point out that their tuition price tag is still much lower than that of other private schools and is dwarfed by the per-pupil funding of local public schools. But still, it’s not zero, the sum most parents in America pay for their child’s education at the public school down the street. As discussed in [chapter 2](#), ESAs in states like Florida, Arizona, and an increasing number of others provide one source of funding for microschool tuition, and the recently passed Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program may help as well. But those funds don’t always cover

either the full price of tuition or the complete cost of serving a child. And in most states still, ESAs are not an option: Out-of-pocket means just that.

Accountability, meanwhile, has two faces. What do parents choosing a microschool expect it to deliver for their kid? And how can taxpayers who may be indirectly footing the bill know if they're getting their money's worth?

Reverend Janelle Wood of Arizona's Black Mothers Forum (BMF) might frame the question a little differently: What *won't* happen when children attend a BMF School to Purpose microschool?¹⁷ Reverend Wood and her team are determined that the Black children BMF is especially concerned about will not be assumed incapable because of past struggles at school. They will not be suspended or expelled. They won't be passed along to the next grade without learning anything and may instead log two years of academic growth in one. They won't find themselves in the school-to-prison pipeline, what the American Civil Liberties Union describes as "a disturbing national trend wherein children, particularly Black and Brown students and students with disabilities, are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal legal systems."¹⁸

BMF was born of reaction in Phoenix's Black community to the national news about young men dying at the hands of police and others, and began convening mothers in 2016 with a mission to "educate, organize, and take action," Reverend Wood explains. Soon enough, focus turned to the local public school system, where an epidemic of suspensions and expulsions for Black students—especially Black boys—was eroding already-lagging academic progress and short-circuiting futures. Reverend Wood often found herself accompanying parents and students to school disciplinary hearings and showing up at school board meetings with an army of mothers demanding: What are you doing to make school a safe and supportive learning environment for our children?

It took another kind of epidemic to convince BMF that it had no choice but to show the world what such an environment might look like. During COVID, Black families in Phoenix had a front-row seat to the stultifying classroom routines and negative teacher attention that children of color were too often subject to. They also had a firsthand chance to observe their kids as learners in a nonschool setting, to see who got excited about science while hiking in nature, for example, or who needed to move their body in

order to listen well, or who read better in a beanbag chair than at a classroom desk.

With microschools emerging as a feature of the Arizona educational landscape, BMF opened its first School to Purpose Academies in South Phoenix in early 2021. Though the locations have shifted over the intervening years—and the goal to serve kids from ages 3 to 18 was challenged by the ebb and flow of enrollment—the essential atmosphere has remained constant. Nestled as of fall 2024 into an unaffiliated church space in the northern Phoenix suburb of Glendale, the flagship site of School to Purpose Academies serves 28 students from all over the Valley. There are intimate groupings of students by grade level in domains set up just for them: a primary-color room of knee-high fixtures for “the littles” (pre-K through grade 2), a rangy, low-lit space with tables and couches for “the middles” (grades 3–8), and a lavender-scented hideaway with lots of elbow room for the small handful of high schoolers. Everywhere, there are motivational messages and inspirational art celebrating Black culture. Kids can’t miss the banners from Morehouse, Spelman, and other historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) behind the office counter where they sign in every day.

At School to Purpose Academies, each student has an Individual Development Plan (IDP), constructed collaboratively by the parent, student, and school staff. The core elements of the IDP include a gaps-identifying NWEA MAP baseline assessment, updated quarterly; nonacademic goals around behavior and self-management skills; and the student’s own vision of “My Future Self.” (This last concept was borrowed from Prenda—explored later in this chapter—which provided BMF with the basic school model that it has since modified extensively to meet its own community needs.) Students then rotate through a personalized program of headphones-on, laptop-open online curriculum, small-group discussions on literature and social studies topics, and special programs such as the hands-on STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) projects that parents and grandparents come into school to do together with the students once a month or so.

Each School to Purpose Academies classroom is led by a student development coach, typically a person of color with a background in behavioral health or youth service. (While many microschools are founded by educators, traditional teaching credentials are not typically required,

either by regulation or school design, for student-facing roles.) For the middle grades, for example, Coach Ricky Roberts Jr. brings his calm presence to the roomful of mostly boys as he has done daily since BMF launched this school. “It’s important for our boys to have this capable, accomplished Black man in their presence every day,” school leader Tiffany Dudley says. “It’s important for our Black girls too.”

The School to Purpose Academies promise is personal for Dudley. A teacher in traditional public schools, she found herself searching for an alternative for her middle son, who went from being an antsy, unfocused kindergartner to an elementary school “Baby Hulk,” prone to oppositional outbursts that seemed to have him constantly in trouble with his teachers. Dudley sensed that the BMF school’s focus on student autonomy and self-direction, together with its departure from the typical “sit still, shut up, eyes front” school atmosphere, represented a better alternative for her son. “And then I realized it would be a good environment for me too,” she recalls. Dudley served as a coach at School to Purpose Academies before rising into leadership. Two of her sons now spend their days with Coach Ricky.

On the other side of the Valley, an even more hyper-specialized microschool has taken shape amid chickens, goats, horses, and more: Desert Sun Ranch Academy, launched in fall 2024 to serve neurodiverse students and those with physical disabilities in a setting that weaves together outdoor education, occupational therapies, and personalized academics. The ranch belongs to executive director Julie Philips, who raised multiple children of her own with special needs, and who is also the kind of person who says yes when a cross-country trucker calls to say his wife won’t let him in the house if he returns home one more time with that pot-bellied pig, so could Julie take Miss Candy off his hands? Julie’s daughter Kaylee was a classroom teacher frustrated by her inability in traditional school to provide each of her students all the attention they deserved. When mother and daughter met Jaclyn Johnson, an occupational therapist with a driving passion for helping children with “complicated bodies” hit their academic and social stride, the idea of starting a school together seemed preordained. With help from KaiPod’s Catalyst program, which aids microschool founders in becoming operational in a hurry, Desert Sun Ranch was up and running within a few months.

Now Desert Sun Ranch is the place where Alana, an 8-year-old with cerebral palsy, gets up out of her wheelchair to practice walking so she can

feed the chickens. And it's where Dashiell, a first-grader on the autism spectrum, proudly introduces a visitor to a goose with a damaged beak. "Wiggles grew up like that," Dashiell says over some impressively loud honking, "but it never stopped him from doing goose things."

School choice observers joke that Arizona today has a microschool, like a 7-Eleven, on every corner, and the plethora of options for families is indeed impressive.

There are half a dozen KaiPod "company schools," like the flagship in a Gilbert shopping plaza where the kids' sundial project—paper plates lined up on the front sidewalk with straws all indicating 1 p.m. in the unforgiving Arizona sun—set this storefront apart from the nail salon, the fitness studio, and the Iraqi café. Meanwhile, KaiPod's Catalyst program incubates scores of other uniquely branded Arizona microschools like Desert Sun Ranch and Noema Learning, a home-based program in the far western suburb of Goodyear that recently left the Catalyst program to go independent.¹⁹ At Noema, former high school English teacher and tutor Elisa Hernandez gathers 14 teenagers on her giant sectional sofa (for those who like to cluster together) and nearby padded chairs and table (for those who want their space) for discussions, lessons, and projects four days a week. In addition to whole-class work in commercial online curricula like Unlocked Learning and No Red Ink, and individual sustained silent reading (student selections the day I visited included *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Cry the Beloved Country* as well as a graphic novel based on Minecraft, a novelization of *Wicked*, and an audiobook take on *Dungeons & Dragons*), Noema's academic exercises include group activities that Hernandez cooks up herself. For real-world math, for example, she gave kids this challenge: "Imagine you're out on your own, and you have just \$100 for a week's worth of meals. Plan seven breakfasts, lunches, and dinners and create a shopping list within your budget," Hernandez says. "Don't forget to check for sales on the supermarket websites." Mia and Abby immediately declare that they will be roommates in this imagined postsecondary future and collaborate on menus heavy on portable salads and sammies tailor-made for girls on the go. Cameron, from his perch several arm's lengths from the sectional couch crowd, looks for deals on fresh salmon for his signature dinner dish. Xavier finds the best price within ten miles on four-pound bags of chicken nuggets and plans to fill his shopping basket with enough for

dinner, lunch, and breakfast every day for a week. “I even have room in my budget for carrots and celery—and ranch dressing!” he says.

Then there’s the Prenda microschool universe, launched in 2018 by Mesa native Kelly Smith to chart the microschool path for others following in Arizona and beyond.²⁰ (The network’s name is a mash-up of Spanish words for “learning” and “ignite,” plus Portuguese for “gift,” according to the Prenda website.) Inspired by his own experiences running an after-school coding club, Smith invited a few neighborhood families to gather their kids around his kitchen table for a different approach to school. After a few evolutions, Prenda now has 100-plus outposts across the state and more beyond, all delivering the four daily modes of learning: Connect (focusing on the learning community and social-emotional skills), Conquer (all about academics), Collaborate (group projects), and Create (kids’ passions pursued individually or together). Core subjects involve licensed content from the likes of Zearn, Khan Academy, and Lexia, as well as a thick-as-a-brick Prenda-created language arts program called Treasure Hunt, which integrates workbooks and videos tailored to each grade level. All the Prenda microschools serve students in grades K–8, with some variation to include pre-K, and are led by specially trained “guides,” many of them moms who operate school in their homes, often with their own kids as students. These include a handful of Prenda OGs, guides who have been running their microschools since Prenda’s launch.

Jamie Dennett is one of these. At the time of my visit, her Prenda microschool occupied a large chunk of an underutilized Montessori school campus in one of Phoenix’s northern suburbs and had gotten big enough to actually be split into grades K–3 in one room (called “Arizona Sky,” and overseen by Ms. Rebecca) and grades 4–8 in another (Ms. Jamie’s “Freedom in Knowledge” pod). Dennett’s own two sons, one 5 and one 12, are sorted into the respective rooms. During the morning Connect activity with the older kids, focused on possible future careers, first one student then another rises from the picnic-style group table to pace and spin at the periphery of the room; the other kids leave space for them to return but otherwise pay them little mind. “You noticed I didn’t order those two boys to sit down and be still?” Dennett asks later. “I knew they were listening and participating, they just do that better when they can move around. That wouldn’t even be possible in a regular classroom.”

Those boys are far from alone. What seems observationally true in all these microschools, and confirmed by the school leaders, is that boys substantially outnumber girls in the microschool population. Coach Ricky's classroom at School to Purpose has one girl and nine boys; at Desert Sun Academy, Alana was the only girl on-site the day I visited; among KaiPod Gilbert's group of almost 20, only three of the students were girls. While Baquedano at Spark@one·n·ten notes that for her students "gender is just a construct," she concedes that the number of students identifying as male exceeds those identifying as female.

National data lends some credence to the idea that the traditional classroom is not a happy place for many male students. The National Assessment of Educational Progress year after year shows boys lagging girls on reading and writing, with any advantage they once had in math and science eroding quickly as girls catch up.^{[21](#)} Analysis by the National Center for Education Statistics shows that boys typically earn lower grades throughout elementary, middle, and high school,^{[22](#)} and girls are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in college, and earn a college degree.^{[23](#)} While in school, a much higher percentage of boys (18 percent) than girls (10 percent) are diagnosed with learning disabilities and other special education needs.^{[24](#)} The conventional classroom expectation that students must "sit quietly and self-regulate" is at odds with many boys' need to move around and vocalize,^{[25](#)} while gender socialization often pushes boys to hide attributes like curiosity and vulnerability, necessary elements of school learning.^{[26](#)} It's perhaps not surprising, then, that parents might seek a more fruitful path for their sons in microschools, whose intimate scale promises flexibility of space and relational bonds as recommended by the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Boys in School.^{[27](#)}

Then there's the crossover with neurodiversity. Based on my observations in the field and conversations with founders and staffers, there's a high concentration in microschools of students with ADHD, dyslexia/dysgraphia, anxiety, and autism, along with those who are also gifted, and therefore doubly exceptional. Microschool leaders report working extra hard to accommodate such students through adaptive classroom arrangements such as flexible seating, "sensory zones," and indirect lighting. Online curricula used in many microschools offer opportunities for very personalized pathways. For example, the Ignite Academy online curriculum used by many KaiPod students offers both a

Fire option with built-in supports for students with disabilities and, for gifted learners, an accelerated pathway called Spark (not to be confused with Darla Baquedano's Spark schools).

For those who may be concerned about the proliferation of private-pay options outside the usual regulatory framework, the flight by so many neurodiverse students into the microschool ecosystem is alarming. Tiny schools with tiny staffs would not be expected to provide the kinds of “wraparound” therapeutic and academic support services for kids with special needs that a traditional school system would be required to. Even students who qualify for extra ESA or scholarship funds because of their disabilities may find themselves underserved, some advocates argue.²⁸

Families choosing the microschool path clap back that there's an immediate benefit to simply getting their neurodiverse kids out of traditional classrooms that too often restrict their movement and punish their atypicality. “I'd be in trouble all the time for not thinking or acting the way the teacher wanted me to,” recalls Jed, a student with ADHD at KaiPod Gilbert. “It's much less stressful here where I can work on what I want when I want, and sit wherever I feel comfortable.”

The idea that traditional school offers better support for neurodiverse learners is outdated, according to Kenneth Mims, executive director of Science Prep Academy, a STEM career-focused microschool for students on the autism spectrum. “Instead of pulling kids out of the classroom and forcing them to miss out on teaching and learning, we build our therapies right into the school day,” he says.

One of the arguments against the proliferation of microschools is also the argument for it: that for all intents and purposes, anyone can start one. Those who prize parental freedom and the power of the market to weed out subpar choices believe microschooling should be essentially “permissionless.” Other than basic fire safety and criminal background checks, these advocates say, microschools should be able to operate without a red-tape-heavy process around physical location, personnel, or curriculum. (Finding themselves subject to local ordinances meant for day care centers is enough to make most microschool founders weep.) And parents should be able to choose such schools without getting the okay from anyone at their school district or state. On the other hand, folks who are already a bit squeamish about certain states' light-touch homeschooling requirements—“unregulated” is the term you hear in these circles—are

even more worried about this approach for microschooling.²⁹ “Ambiguity surrounding the definition of microschools and the regulations that govern them has raised questions about their need to comply with standard education regulations,” the Center for American Progress argues in its February 2025 broadside, “The Importance of Holding Microschools Accountable.”³⁰

So in exchange for the public funding streams provided by ESAs and similar mechanisms, many microschool advocates readily embrace accountability for outcomes. (Microschool parents may beg to differ—a zesty debate about the strings attached to public funding that originated in the homeschooling world has now found resonance among those considering taking advantage of ESAs, as we saw in [chapter 2](#).) KaiPod, Prenda, BMF, Science Prep Academy, and others conduct norm-referenced testing, with parent permission, to chart student growth. Schools like these concede that their small sample sizes and ease of testing opt-out make it difficult to compare with regular public schools. Nonetheless, the individual attention and instruction focused on specific learning gaps available in microschools seem to add up for many students, with Prenda reporting 35 percent greater growth in math and language arts than similar students in traditional schools, and Science Prep Academy documenting two years of growth in one year for many of its students.

Results like these may help quiet larger questions among policymakers about microschool effectiveness while providing additional comfort for parents whose instincts drive them toward this more-personalized-yet-social education option for their kids. Will microschools at some point be within reach of every family who might want one? KaiPod’s Amar Kumar thinks so. “I predict that within a decade most public school districts will have microschools in their portfolios,” he says. “That may sound crazy, but I wouldn’t bet against parents who see their kids learning and happy at school for the first time. There’s a unique power in that.”

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My School Is in the Air

With vermillion sweeps of crisping leaves, a sky so blue its color defies naming, and just the tiniest bite of chill in the shade, it's the kind of October day AI might produce if you typed in "Show me the essence of autumn." Hundreds of Ohio families and scores of educators have gathered at Highbanks Park on the upper lip of Columbus for a fall festival and fun run to celebrate their school, two decades old and one of the pioneers of its kind. And although they are six weeks into the school year and deeply embedded in their daily academic rhythm, more than a few of the students are meeting their teachers and classroom besties for the first time in real life.

That's because their school, Ohio Connections Academy (OCA), is virtual. Launched in 2003 as one of Ohio's first online public charter schools—community e-schools, in Buckeye parlance—OCA now serves more than 5,000 state-funded students in grades K–12 from every corner of Ohio. Families choose this public school the way they would the more traditional variety down the street from home, and from there the school year rolls out in an unconventionally orderly way. On any other Tuesday in October, OCA students would be logging into the school's cloud-based learning platform, working through the combination of text, interactive graphics, and video that make up their assigned Ohio standards-aligned lessons, and joining their classmates and their Ohio-certified teachers in LiveLesson online sessions for discussion of key concepts and instruction targeted at remaining areas of confusion. They'd be tallying their attendance and having it verified by the work they complete, then joining the like-minded for online chess club or student council. They might even be thinking ahead to the state test, the one mandatory in-person gathering of the year.

But today these students of OCA and their learning coaches—the parents, grandparents, and caregivers who serve as the in-person adults in their schooling lives—are clustered around picnic tables to get their faces painted, sign greeting cards for military service members, and craft

Halloween candy bags, if they're not donning bibs for the one-mile fun run/walk. The balloon arch in OCA's teal-and-purple signature colors demarcates this Ohio public school gathering from the one in the next picnic area for a brick-and-mortar Columbus charter school. While that school's kids arrived at Highbanks on a yellow bus, OCA's came by car from as close as the subdivision opposite the park entrance to as far away as Cleveland for a chance to celebrate their virtual school in person.

Could I have imagined such an event back in 2003 as I led the tiny Connections Academy field team to launch OCA as just the third school in a network that has since grown to more than 40 public virtual schools across the country? (Plus one global private school—more on that later.) Maybe. Though there were fewer students in all of OCA that first year than there are gathered at Highbanks this October day, the hunger of Ohio parents for a different kind of public school was just as visceral back then. I saw it in the wrenched look on a Dayton mother's face as she recounted the bullying her autistic fifth-grader endured on the playground every day. I heard it in the voice of the 60-ish woman in Akron who swore there was no way she'd send her twin grands to that nasty school down the street, not as long as she had care of them. I felt it in the excitement of the 8-year-old Irish dance champion from rural Greenville, outside Cincinnati, to find a school that synced up with his practice and competition schedule, minus the harassment he got locally for being a half-Black, half-Jewish boy who danced. (That was Drew Lovejoy, who went on to the Irish World Championships the year he graduated from OCA.)

Today, more than two decades after I rattled around the Buckeye State in a rental car with a computer in the back seat and a trunkful of textbooks to recruit the first OCA students, OCA is one of 30-plus public e-schools in Ohio together serving more than 50,000 kids statewide. The oversight and funding of such e-schools, all of which are cost-free to families, follows a model common in the world of charter schools, whether brick-and-mortar, online, or some combination thereof. Charter schools are public schools, tuition-free and open to all families, that are publicly funded but privately managed through a contract (the charter) between an authorizing body and a nonprofit board that governs the school. A subset of the state and local education funding for each child who enrolls in the charter school then flows to the school's governing board, which may choose to contract with a management company, either nonprofit or for-profit, to operate the school.

Across the country, in Ohio and more than 40 other states, the largest virtual public charter schools are managed by national for-profit organizations like Pearson¹ (which has owned Connections Academy, the company I cofounded, since 2011), Stride² (formerly K12 Inc., our biggest rival), and Pansophic³ (founded by one of the original K12 executives).

In Ohio, the virtual charter school (aka community e-school) landscape is chockablock with free options for families. OCA and its slightly older, much larger, Stride-operated rival, Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA), are both authorized by the Ohio Council of Community Schools, a state-level nonprofit body that also authorizes several other e-schools and many brick-and-mortar charter schools across Ohio. Other virtual schools are homegrown by Ohio's local school districts and intermediate units, some focused on serving local kids, others accepting students from across the state. Virtual public school offerings range from full-featured curricula, developed nationally and adapted for Ohio, to programs that splice together off-the-shelf online courses with teacher-made content. All the community e-schools must navigate the patchwork of laws, permissions, regulations, and reporting requirements that has developed over the 21st century as Ohio took its place as a pacesetter for virtual public schooling.

So why Ohio? Theories abound about how the Buckeye State has developed such a robust public e-school ecosystem. Some credit prescient 20th-century moves into online learning by higher education institutions like University of Toledo and Ohio State. Others point to Ohio's early-but-limited embrace of charter schools, which were permitted by law as of 1997 but only in urban areas, thus leaving rural and suburban families without public school choice until charter e-schools emerged, headquartered in city centers but serving students throughout the state. Some might credit Ohio's zesty debates over school choice and its rivalry with next-door Pennsylvania, which had the very first virtual charter schools in the country, a year before Ohio got into the game.

Whatever the reasons, Ohio's community e-schools were the advance guard of a wave that swept the nation in the first two decades of the 21st century. Now such public virtual schools exist in four out of five states and nationally serve nearly a million full-time students, who choose a free online public school the way they might a brick-and-mortar public charter school over their neighborhood district school.

Enrollment in Ohio's e-schools and others like them spiked by 40 percent or more during the pandemic, when their operators were proud to report that e-school students suffered little of the learning loss that's since fixated the nation.⁴ "Our kids didn't miss a beat—they just kept schooling every day as usual," remembers Kristin Stewart, executive director of OHVA. Purpose-built for online learning with teachers specially trained to engage students via both synchronous (real-time) online classes and asynchronous (self-paced) content, the e-schools set themselves apart from the "emergency remote instruction" offered by most traditional schools during the COVID crisis. While advocates bemoan the backlash against all online learning that immediately followed the pandemic ("What we thought would be a tailwind instead became headwinds," is how one observer put it), many credit that mass exposure to e-schools for opening families' eyes to the whole panoply of unconventional school options. Parent after parent at the fall festival recounted coming to OCA in 2020 in search of something more than "Zoom school," and staying for the sense of community and connection.

But concerns persist about the efficacy of K–12 online learning even in schools designed to bring out its best. Part of this stems from the fact that, alone among all the unconventional education options explored in previous chapters, public virtual programs like Ohio's e-schools are fully taxpayer-funded and therefore subject to a level of scrutiny that parent-pay-only options typically escape. Seen through the comparative lens of other forms of public education, virtual schools look and act very differently.

For example, many online public schools report high rates of churn, with multiple hundreds of new students joining every year, and sometimes 50 percent or more leaving during or by the end of a school year,⁵ as often switching to other virtual schools as returning to neighborhood brick-and-mortar.⁶ "We typically see kids enroll in online learning for a season or a reason, though some choose it for a lifetime," says Jason Wall of the Ohio Council of Community Schools (OCCS), which oversees both OCA and OHVA. Then there is the difficulty of ensuring that students are authentically engaging with their studies and not just "clicking through"; virtual school programs like OCA and OHVA are constantly fine-tuning their curriculum and instruction to deepen interaction and ensure meaningful assessment of learning. Because virtual school students are working from home or elsewhere outside of the school building, there is a

necessary reliance on adults not in the school's employ—most often parents—to keep students on track.

Consequently, online learning skeptics have had a field day. For example, a 2021 report from the National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a relentless critic of public virtual schools, stated that just 54.6 percent of students graduated from full-time virtual schools in 2019–20, 30 points below the national rate.⁷ Of virtual public schools rated by state accountability systems based on standardized test scores, attendance, and other metrics, less than 43 percent made the grade (i.e., were rated acceptable or better, according to NEPC).⁸ Using a much-disputed research approach that matched sample student populations by selected demographics in different learning environments, the Center for Research on Educational Options (CREDO) at Stanford University concluded that online charter students lose an equivalent of 58 days per year of learning in reading and 124 days in math compared to students attending district schools in person.⁹ These slams against virtual schools are frequently cited among those laying blame on online learning for broader pandemic learning loss.

Counter-researchers such as Ben Scafidi of Kennesaw State University and Ian Kingsbury of the Educational Freedom Institute point out that many students choose virtual public schooling—or are pushed into it by their traditional public schools—as a last resort, entering such programs years behind in learning but still counted in their grade cohorts for testing and graduation.¹⁰ Students driven to online learning by bullying, school anxiety, unmet special education needs, and other factors aren't actually “virtual twins” (as CREDO would call them) of otherwise demographically similar students, these researchers argue.¹¹ And because the state tests that measure school performance are administered in person, requiring virtual public school students to travel to testing centers and engage in assessments in a setting and format far removed from their learning environment, comparing their results with those of conventionally schooled kids is “psychometrically problematic,” Kingsbury says.¹² In 2024, Robert Pondiscio of the Fordham Institute, a decade-long critic of virtual schools, wrote, “Is it time for a second look at virtual education?” Among his conclusions: “We may have fundamentally misunderstood both the promise and the problems of virtual schooling.”¹³

The role of large national education management organizations (EMOs) in the virtual school space has been another flash point. The involvement of for-profit players draws heat from critics who believe public education should be a purely local, nonprofit pursuit—answered with equal heat from advocates who argue that real innovation comes from those outside that traditional system. From its earliest days as [K12.com](https://www.k12.com), with founders including Reagan-era education secretary William Bennett and Goldman Sachs banker Ron Packard, the company now known as Stride has been the virtual schooling behemoth. Connections Academy, the company I helped cofound in 2001 as a for-profit start-up, was a classic fast follower, one I jokingly refer to as the Lyft to Stride’s Uber, the Pepsi to its Coke. Both companies provide curriculum, operations, and other services under contract with public virtual charter schools, which remain nonprofit, state-bound, and free to all eligible students.

While Connections was acquired by the global education company Pearson in 2011, K12-now-Stride went public via IPO in 2009 and has since added other lines of business to its portfolio. After the massive enrollment boost of the pandemic and then a post-pandemic dip, both companies’ virtual school operations have continued to grow, with Stride reaching record levels of revenue and profit by late 2024.¹⁴ Nearly half of all the public virtual school enrollments in the United States are with schools supported by one of these EMOs.¹⁵ The upsides and downsides of national EMO engagement continue to inspire lively debate.

In Ohio, though, it’s a homegrown local operation that has become the ultimate e-school cautionary tale. From its launch in 2000, the Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT) ballooned to more than 20,000 students over the next decade and a half before hitting Ohio’s regulatory third rail: an engagement requirement introduced in 2014 requiring e-schools to prove students were actively partaking of the educational opportunities offered them. Unable to demonstrate that even half of its enrolled students participated sufficiently—logged on to the school’s platform, completed assignments, or attended live online classes—to meet the state’s then-required 920 hours of learning, ECOT was ordered to repay \$64 million in state funding in 2017 and closed its virtual doors the following year. Other e-schools that absorbed ECOT refugees say they encountered fourth-graders who could not yet read and high school juniors with no record of any credits earned.

OCA likes to see itself as the anti-ECOT. Its nonprofit governing board and school leadership have insisted on a managed-growth approach, prioritizing academic outcomes over double-digit enrollment gains, and embracing features like a required orientation period for new families even before the state mandated such a thing for all community e-schools. The result has been a graduation rate 20 points higher than the average virtual public school, plus multiple awards from the state for its special education and behavior intervention programming as well as for its support of military families.¹⁶ OCA's staff is long-serving, including multiple teachers and administrators, such as executive director Marie Hanna, who have been with the school for nearly its entire history. Multiple OCA alumni from the first graduating class in 2009 forward have since come back to the school as teachers (see [chapter 11](#) for one such story). The school strives to balance its cautious growth with forward-looking programming: OCA staff at the fall festival are excited to share details about burgeoning career and technical education programming that will connect students with expert coursework and online internships to prepare for the world of work, as well as such family-pleasing innovations as esports leagues and early college courses. They're most proud of OCA's inclusivity—as a public school open to everyone and personalized for each student's success, and as a particularly safe haven for the neurodiverse and the anxious.

But sooner or later, everyone involved with a virtual school will utter the words, “Online learning is not for everyone” (sometimes adding, “of course, neither is face-to-face”). Mixed results from before the pandemic certainly showed that, and the mass online experience during COVID reaffirmed it. For longtime observers, this tension between public virtual schooling's accessibility and its selective efficacy—a phenomenon true of all forms of public education, they note—presents a particularly fruitful area of exploration. For example, John Watson has tracked state-by-state online learning data through annual *Keeping Pace with Online Learning* reports and now convenes online learning practitioners from around the world every year. “A profound lesson for me is that while online learning isn't right for every student, it's also not possible to predict who will do well in this setting,” Watson says. Since there is no foolproof way to predict which students will thrive and which will flounder, he cautions, policymakers should resist the temptation to screen kids out based on

factors like prior performance and family composition, while school leaders must strive ever harder to ensure that parents are informed consumers.

OCCS executive director Lenny Schafer takes it a step further. Now that a whole generation of Ohioans has had public online learning as an option, “we need to get serious about tracking longitudinal data about what happens to e-school students after they graduate and go through college or into the world of work,” he says.

If the OCA families at the fall festival are aware of these macro-discussions about their chosen form of schooling, they’re not stressing about it. Instead, the students weigh face-painting options offered up by the OCA art teacher—something a little Halloweeny, or perhaps a floral design?—while the parents trade tips for organizing the school day around their own work-at-home schedules and the kids’ community sports events and play dates.

Tenth-grader Clementine, who’s been with OCA since middle school, watches the Highbanks hubbub with an amused grin. “This school’s kind of perfect for me—I like having people around, you know, but not really,” she says. Her friend Jeweliana finishes the thought. “Like seeing other kids in your classes but not having to interact with them all the time, the way you do in a regular school.” Clementine nods. “Plus, having actual teachers,” she says. The two girls have been close friends for the past two school years and credit OCA with supporting introverts like them while building the skills and confidence they need to function outside of school. Both are also big fans of their math teacher, Cheryl Siegel. This is the first time all three have ever met in person. Just one more reason, they say, to celebrate OCA today.

While the public e-school kids of OCA are chasing falling leaves outside of Columbus, two thousand miles away near the Las Vegas Strip another group of online learners connects in real life—at a circus school with a flying trapeze where performers from Cirque du Soleil have been known to train. These are the students of Laurel Springs, one of America’s oldest and arguably best-known outposts in the parallel universe of *private* virtual schools. The Laurel Springs kids from all over the country and beyond are on one of a dozen paid in-person field trips families can opt in to, possibly rubbing shoulders with the media stars (Lindsay Lohan and Kylie Jenner both went to Laurel Springs) and elite athletes (like 2024 Olympians artistic

gymnast Levi Jung Ruivivar and diver Steele Johnson) who share the 4,000-plus Laurel Springs student body.

There are other private, parent-pay virtual schools in the field, nearly a dozen now post-pandemic, together serving approximately 20,000 students in America and an estimated 100,000 around the world. Some are spin-offs of public e-school networks like those from Stride and Pearson. In the Connections Academy / Pearson Virtual Schools network, there are 42 public virtual schools serving students tuition-free within the bounds of the states in which they're authorized, and one private virtual school, Pearson Online Academy, that can enroll any student anywhere for around \$7,000 per year. (This is the online school serving Michael and Boris from the pod prom in [chapter 1](#); its history is detailed later in this chapter.) Other private online offerings are the revenue-generating arms of creative school district virtual programs, serving students who would not qualify for free enrollment because they live outside the state or country. There's a private virtual school hosted by Stanford University¹⁷ and another by George Washington University.¹⁸ There's even a project-based private virtual secondary school called Sora, visited later in this chapter, that trades "learning expeditions" for typical online courses.¹⁹

But Laurel Springs is sui generis. Founded in 1991 in Ojai, California, by Marilyn Mosley Gordanier (described by her fans as "a bit of a hippie" and bearing an uncanny, unwavering resemblance to Cher), the school was named not after a SoCal creek but rather for the laurels bestowed in classical competition combined with the flow of water and ideas. Laurel Springs offered its first online classes in 1994 in the pre-World Wide Web days of the internet, predating the earliest full-time virtual public schools by half a decade. In the school's origin story, a key turning point was the splash that Laurel Springs students made arriving unannounced at a United Nations climate conference—and then earning a Global 500 environmental award as a result.²⁰ Laurel Springs students still go deep on the Model UN every year.

Though current school leadership blushes a bit at the term, Laurel Springs has long been seen as the online school to the stars. That includes actors like Kristen Stewart and Chloe Grace Moretz and musicians like Jordin Sparks and Lil Bow Wow. Beyond performing artists, there are sports stars both current and in the making, recruited through partnerships with tennis clubs, equestrian training programs, gymnastics schools, and

Professional Golf Association affiliates. Some 40 percent of Laurel Springs graduates go on to NCAA college athletic careers or professional competition.²¹

Even now, after its acquisition by Spring Education, a private-equity group scooping up independent schools across the country, the Laurel Springs experience echoes its founder's vision as captured in the school's mission to promote "inquiry, growth, mastery, purpose, and independence" among learners around the globe. Annual tuition ranges as high as \$16,900 per year—still a bargain compared to physical private schools in many markets, school leaders point out, though unlike most private brick-and-mortar schools, Laurel Springs currently offers no financial aid other than discounts for siblings and military families. It provides online curricula for all grades and printed workbooks for K–2, asynchronous teacher feedback as well as live online teaching, or a bespoke mix-and-match choice of the aforementioned. The school has recently focused on beefing up its "Academy at Laurel Springs" program for students seeking deeper learning, and early college options to add intellectual heft to its selling points of flexibility and star cachet. As at most virtual schools these days, there are scores of clubs—like art, robotics, student government, and student newspaper—plus local meetups and a private social network. To set itself further apart, Laurel Springs has been doubling down on in-person events like family picnics, college visits, and "bucket list" adventures like the Las Vegas field trip, all culminating each spring in a destination extravaganza of prom, graduation, and homecoming. This year-end celebration typically draws hundreds of students from all over the world, according to marketing director Marisa Crawford. "And there are no wallflowers at the Laurel Springs prom," she says, "because our students already know each other before they even meet." (Pew Research suggests that this "meet online / bond in person" pattern is common to a majority of American teens today, 57 percent of whom reported making new friends online that they then continue engaging with in a variety of modes.²² Virtual school students may just be the tip of the modern socialization spear.)

Laurel Springs from the beginning attracted much the same mix of students that its counterpart online private-pay schools still do. These include elite athletes with unpredictable training and competition schedules, and performing artists who need to take their school with them on location—although such "students with passions" who live in public virtual school

states might find a comparable online program for free. Then there are families living in places like New York, where public virtual charter schools are banned, or those surrounded by public virtual school choices but willing to pay out of pocket to avoid requirements like the state test. Across the United States, families inclined toward private education who can't find a brick-and-mortar school that suits their kid's learning style or the family pocketbook may choose a virtual private school, as might Americans posted abroad for work, or traveling the globe like the worldschoolers discussed in a previous chapter. They are joined by children of affluence in Asia or Europe or Latin America with English skills and dreams of attending university in the United States who see a US high school diploma as the key.

As a result, students at these virtual private schools often find themselves in class with peers from all over the country and around the world. Families who are drawn to the idea of diverse viewpoints and global citizenship for their kids savor this international flavor, even if that sometimes means logging onto live lessons at dawn or late at night so that everyone's time zone is accommodated. This geographic reach can also mean regulatory complications for those who live in places where virtual schooling isn't recognized. Private virtual school students from New York, for example, have to register with their districts as homeschoolers. Students from places like Malaysia or the Netherlands have to argue that they are doing the equivalent of going abroad to an American school like Phillips Exeter—just without leaving home. They consider it worth it for the above-average SAT, ACT, and AP (Advanced Placement) scores the top private virtuals produce, not to mention near-100 percent college acceptance.^{[23](#)}

Private virtual schools offering a US diploma now find themselves competing with a smaller crop of online programs specializing in the British curriculum, preparing students for success on the “A Level” exams that determine entry into places like Oxford and Cambridge. The highly selective Highgrove Education in the United Kingdom grew out of Harrow School Online, a Pearson program that achieved stellar academic results but closed in 2024 for business reasons.^{[24](#)} (I was there for the online school's launch on Harrow's 500-year-old campus and never felt more like a creature of the gauche New World.) King's InterHigh, which has offered an online British curriculum program in one form or another for nearly a decade,^{[25](#)} announced the opening of a “USA” branch for 2025.^{[26](#)} For those

who'd bypass either the UK or US curriculum for something more universal, the International Baccalaureate Organization has authorized several online IB pilot programs, including the Dwight Global Online School spun out of the prestigious brick-and-mortar private Dwight School in Manhattan.²⁷

All of this is a far cry from the “diploma mill” aura that may cling, fairly or not, to some of the less shiny and more affordable private online programs like Keystone Online School²⁸ or Penn Foster.²⁹ Here students can accelerate through “credit recovery” retakes of high school subjects they may have flunked and fill in the rest through self-paced courses that dispense with any of the student activity frills other virtual schools promote, as we hear from one grateful Penn Foster graduate in [chapter 11](#).

And just as the brick-and-mortar private education world distinguishes between secular and religious schools, so have faith-based virtual schools begun emerging. Liberty University provides “homeschool, private school, and Bible-based education all rolled into one,”³⁰ while Kolbe Academy offers Catholic families an online school that is “Ignatian in method, classical in content, and loyal to the Magisterium.”³¹ Melamed Academy combines secular course progression with Torah studies and “Kosher Chromebooks” designed to screen out most of the internet.³² Students at Everyday Ibaadah Academy, based in California but enrolling globally, can partake of online QIA (Quran, Islamic studies, and Arabic) along with standard subjects leading to a US high school diploma.³³

All these private online school options see themselves as pushing the boundaries of the known school world—more personalization, cooler technology, a bend in the laws of time and space—while still reverse-engineering into the necessary course sequence for high school graduation and college entry. (Laurel Springs throws into the mix the option of a gap year or direct entry into industry, which up to 10 percent of students take advantage of, head of school Alyssa Tormala says.) But some virtual school founders think the form could be even more innovative.

At Sora Schools, for example, CEO Garrett Smiley and his cofounder, Wesley Samples, had a vision of a future-focused online school program that was interdisciplinary and inquiry-based, taking advantage of the online modality to allow each student to deeply pursue topics of personal interest. Sora launched in 2019 to serve students in grades 6–12 and currently enrolls more than 600 from all over the country and around the world. The

curriculum features more than 400 “expeditions” on topics ranging from Yellowstone wolves to the philosophy of AI. Each lasts six weeks, involves no more than 15 kids, and requires two or more hours a week of synchronous collaborative work led by a teacher, known in Sora-speak as an Expert. The expeditions weave together core subject matter along with material generated by staff and the students themselves. Students often engage in multiple expeditions at one time.

Smiley notes that Sora, in its reach toward a different mode of learning, has had to bootstrap multiple facets of its school program. Typical learning management systems excel at delivering individual courses neatly arranged by subject, so Sora’s interdisciplinary approach required construction of a platform from scratch. And then the constant demand for expeditions tailored to the widest range of students’ individual needs and interests has kept Sora Experts busy building new ones—and “marketing” their best to gain student participation. “We think teachers should be salespeople, winning the kids over to their most passionate interests,” Smiley says, only half in jest. Smiley credits this passion-driven expedition model, together with daily stand-up gatherings within students’ assigned “houses,” as the reason Sora students say they feel intimately connected within their school community.

But Smiley admits that all the innovation in the world won’t tip the balance for upper-middle class parents—those who can afford Sora’s nearly \$17,000 annual tuition. (To bring its model to a broader array of families, Sora is now experimenting with partnerships with public charter schools, Smiley notes.) For parents like those in Sora’s paid program, the bottom line of any school remains how recognizably well it sets their children up for ultimate success afterward. So Sora pressed hard to get itself accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges³⁴ and by Cognia, the transregional accreditation body that has distinguished itself in coverage of virtual and blended schools.³⁵ Sora also fine-tuned its high school recordkeeping following guidelines from the Mastery Transcript Consortium, which specializes in programs not structured around the traditional American high school Carnegie Unit sequence. Those moves paid off: The first Sora graduates matriculated into universities like Harvard, Tufts, and Georgia Tech, where their skills at going deep and self-directing come in quite handy—and where no one in this post-COVID era looks askance at unconventional paths to the university door. Sora’s

founders and funders breathed a sigh of relief and recommitted to the long-haul mission of innovating on the frontiers of virtual private schooling.

Though she now chairs the governing board of one of the world's leading online private schools, Maryland's Amy Sparks wasn't actually looking for any such thing back in 2008 when she got a school district notice in the mail about a new free program for homeschoolers in Baltimore County. With her barbell-shaped family—two teenage daughters starting high school, and two kids under age five—Sparks had already cycled through the available school options in her suburban Maryland community. “We did public school, we did Catholic school, and the girls still weren't happy,” she recalls from the home office where she works as a central office technician for Verizon. Back then, the right fit both academically and socially for her teens seemed elusive. The family had been somewhat reluctantly homeschooling for several years when they got a letter about a pilot Baltimore County Virtual Instruction Program that the district was launching in partnership with Connections Academy, the national online school company I helped cofound that was headquartered right there in Baltimore's Inner Harbor.

Sparks had already been seeing commercials online and on cable TV for our Connections Academy virtual public schools. Back in those early days of geotargeting, our student recruitment messages aimed at Pennsylvania, home to one of the earliest and largest schools in our public school network, frequently spilled over state borders. But Sparks soon learned that free public online learning was emphatically not available to her family: Maryland did not allow virtual charter schools, having permitted even brick-and-mortar charters only after years of community kicking and screaming.

The rub of not being able to serve families in our own Baltimore backyard was excruciating for Connections Academy founding CEO Barbara Dreyer, a lifelong Marylander whose mom had only recently retired from teaching in the local public schools. So she and I began regularly pestering district officials whenever I took Amtrak down from New York for company meetings, until we found the one Baltimore County assistant superintendent itching to catch the national wave of tuition-free public online learning. It didn't hurt that such a program might allow the district to “enroll” homeschool families and count them for state funding.

So with a clunky acronym and only a few months' runway before the upcoming school year to convince Baltimore County homeschoolers to give it a try, BCVIP (pronounced "BeeCeeVip," thank you very much) was unveiled in spring 2008. I met the Sparks family in one of the many libraries, hotel conference rooms, and school district outposts I hit while barnstorming all over the county that surrounds (but does not include) Baltimore City like a fat crab claw. Amy Sparks came to the information session with her poker face and a careful tick list of questions; her husband, Patrick, was quietly watchful, and the kids very politely collected the cookies and swag we set up to entice folks to give BCVIP a try. "We're a whole family of introverts," Amy Sparks says. "We didn't know what to expect."

It turned out the Sparks loved online schooling from the start. "Everyone just jumped right in," Sparks recalls. As new high schoolers, her teenagers thrived through the structured lessons and live classes, took full advantage of their various online teachers, and enjoyed connecting with peers from Towson and Dundalk and White Marsh. Their little brother Patrick could hardly wait to join the school as a kindergartner the next year.

But then Baltimore County Public Schools had a superintendent change, there was a budget recalibration, and BCVIP went on the chopping block. The district announced that its publicly funded online school experiment would sunset at the end of the school year. All through the late spring and summer of 2009, Sparks led a battalion of moms and students to school board meetings and district town halls. They wrote letters, handed out flyers, and wrangled coverage in the *Baltimore Sun*. When the district didn't budge, Connections Academy extended the program for another year on its own dime, and Sparks's army turned its sights on the state legislature in Annapolis.

"I never set out to be an advocate." She sighs. "I'm not really cut out for it. But parents have to have a voice, and we have to get someone to listen."

While Sparks marched and lobbied and organized for free public virtual schooling in Maryland, a Connections Academy private school grew around the nucleus of BCVIP families and other "pilot kids" in states not yet in the public online network. Founding families like the Sparks were scholarshipped into what would become the first and only parent-pay school in Connections Academy's growing constellation of virtual schools. First called National Connections Academy, this school changed the first

word in its name to International when it found itself serving expat students and local strivers from outside the United States, none of whom would have access to US-based public virtual schooling. It became Pearson Online Academy sometime around 2020, just before the pandemic doubled its 1,000+ student enrollment.

Through it all, Sparks has remained a true believer. Every legislative session she's testified in Annapolis about the need for a free public virtual option in her state, and every year she re-upped her kids' enrollment (and their scholarship arrangements) in Pearson Online Academy. All four of the Sparks siblings have now graduated from the school.

Sparks was recently elected board president for Pearson Online Academy and spends hours every week fielding parent questions about borderless private online learning. But she'd trade it all in a heartbeat for a free virtual public school like those in Ohio and elsewhere. Even an ESA-style program to defer the cost of tuition to private virtual education would be better than nothing. "It's just a matter of fairness," Sparks says. "I know hundreds of families here in Maryland who need a virtual school and can't access one. We Sparks just got very, very lucky."

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Learning Happens Everywhere

Eight teenagers are locked in single focus, awaiting the drop of the *maestra*'s baton. The four on violin are clean-scrubbed, tucked in, while the three on guitar flaunt piercings and tinted hair. The pivot between them is the *guitarron* player, a boy holding a fat-bodied string instrument bigger than his torso. His is the heart and soul of the group, strum-thumping the bass line as the teacher leads the ensemble through one more practice of “*Acá Entre Nos*,” a complex classic about love, loss, and tequila.

Mariachi Corazon de Oro is in session.

On this Monday night in a low-rise commercial block in suburban Denver—also home to a small-batch coffee company, a bike shop, and a theater school—Colorado Youth Mariachi Program (CYMP) founder Isahar Mendez is perched behind the front desk with one ear on the advanced Corazon de Oro group while parents and grandparents cycle through drop-off and students of all ages stream into practice rooms.¹ Mendez launched CYMP in her backyard in 2016, with a gaggle of children (“cousins and neighborhood kids,” she recalls) who gathered to learn about the music from Mendez and her husband, Victor Becerra. Mendez and Becerra met in high school and then matriculated together as students at Metropolitan State University of Denver, studying music education and launching a first-ever mariachi club just as the university was officially gaining recognition as a Hispanic-serving institution (an accredited higher education institution that has at least 25 percent of its undergraduate student body composed of Hispanic or Latino students, a sort of parallel to an HBCU).² Despite Colorado's steadily growing Latino population—in the most recent census, 22 percent of state residents were of Hispanic origin—mariachi in this state has a long way to go to catch up to places like Texas, where it's both a common school subject and a competitive interscholastic activity, almost on par with football in some communities.³ “Here, we're just getting started,” Mendez says as the give-and-take sounds of an individual *guitarron* lesson drift out from the middle practice room.

CYMP is one of many community-based learning organizations supported in part by RESCHOOL Colorado, a nonprofit established to bring to life the principle that “learning happens everywhere.”⁴ RESCHOOL was inspired in 2013 when executive director Amy Anderson, then an innovation-focused staff member at the Colorado Department of Education, accompanied a delegation to Brazil to learn about plans for building new school models for the favelas, the sprawling shantytowns that have grown up around Brazilian cities. “I was captivated by the idea of creating a whole new system,” she recalls. “What would it look like if we did that here in the United States?”

Shortly thereafter, Anderson left the department and joined the Donnell-Kay Foundation, a Colorado-focused nonprofit, bringing her new obsession with her.⁵ She looked out over the Denver metro area replete with museums, community ventures, venues of both high and popular culture, businesses, and media outlets—not to mention access to nature in all its Rocky Mountain bodaciousness—and recognized the building blocks of learning far beyond traditional school walls. Since the average kid spends 80 percent of their waking hours outside of school,⁶ and since education research has consistently shown a positive correlation between participation in out-of-school activities and improved academic achievement, school engagement, social skills, and mental health,⁷ Anderson saw a profound opportunity. What if each Colorado student had a learner advocate to help them to bundle together just the right combination of in-school and out-of-school resources to fulfill their personal passions? And what if something like a microgrant of Learning Dollars were available to help families of all means afford such experiences? How much richer and more equitable would Colorado education be? After codesign sessions with parents and community leaders to answer these questions and more, RESCHOOL was born.

Much has transpired in the decade since, including a failed ballot initiative in 2021 to tap into Colorado cannabis taxes to fund out-of-school learning experiences,⁸ balanced out by a successful pilot in 2023–24 with funding from the City of Denver.⁹ While Anderson still nurtures a vision of an entirely new system of customized education, in the immediate term RESCHOOL’s resources are helping organizations like CYMP add resonant byways alongside the conventional school path, and helping students access these experiences regardless of family income. In 2025, RESCHOOL and

Moonshot EdVentures launched an interactive database called the Denver Learning Ecosystem to illuminate the out-of-school landscape across the city. The site maps more than 450 youth-serving organizations, intersected with census tract data, offering a powerful tool to identify resources, gaps, and opportunities for expansion.¹⁰

Camila Orduna and her two youngest sons are among those making use of RESCHOOL's philanthropic support and advocacy services. Orduna first heard about RESCHOOL in 2019 when the organization partnered with Denver's St. Joseph's Hospital, where she works in patient support, to make RESCHOOL's services an employee benefit. Son Nathan, the older of Orduna's two still at home, was not a fan of school at the time, finding most of his classwork boring and irrelevant; it didn't help that the extra assistance he got in elementary school as a diagnosed special needs student evaporated when he transitioned to middle school. "Nathan would say he was disappointed that the teachers couldn't seem to make class interesting or even manage what the students were doing," Orduna recalls. Once the pandemic hit, Orduna could literally see what Nathan meant: "His Zoom classes would drive me crazy, just the same thing over and over again," she says.

But after Orduna consulted with RESCHOOL advocate Paola Ramirez, RESCHOOL lined up a tutor/mentor to work with Nathan in monthly in-depth sessions, including some at home. As his academic confidence grew, Nathan found himself drawn toward the GED—the General Educational Development "test-out" diploma alternative—as an exit hatch from the school grind he still hated. He then surprised his mother by easily acing the GED exams on subjects whose classes he'd been struggling with. "He'd say, 'I paid just enough attention when they were teaching so that I could pass this test.'" Orduna chuckles. "He's very strategic." Happier now that he has escaped the school failure loop, and optimistic about his future, Nathan is considering a variety of next steps, including local job training and following his older brother into the Navy.

Meanwhile, younger brother Gadiel is benefiting from Learning Dollars—supported gym sessions that he and his mother take together. "He's like my trainer," Orduna says, "and it gets him away from his screens." The whole family enjoys outings together through RESCHOOL's Pick-a-Pass access to the Denver Zoo. And while the RESCHOOL–St. Joseph's partnership did not survive the hospital's acquisition by a larger healthcare system, Orduna

considers its benefits to be lasting. “These opportunities outside of school are things I could never afford on my own,” she says, “and they’re so important to my boys’ success.”

Ana Lizeth Bolaños agrees. Working with a community advocate known as a *promotora* through the RESCHOOL partner group Cultivando, Bolaños found outside-of-school activities that fit for her three kids near their home in Commerce City, northeast of Denver. They’ve plugged into basketball at the local rec center, the soccer team through church, and chess club, with Learning Dollars helping cover the cost of entry fees, uniforms, and equipment. Bolaños and her kids also take full advantage of Pick-a-Pass: “Now, if we don’t have plans for the weekend, we go to the Denver Art Museum or the Butterfly Pavilion,” she says through a translator.

Like Orduna, Bolaños sees these learning connections outside of school as essential for her immigrant family’s well-being and her own faith in the future. They are especially crucial in turbulent times, like COVID and the current political environment, whose crackdown on immigrants RESCHOOL partners characterize as a new pandemic for local Latino families. “When we arrived, I felt like no one cared about my kids, like we were completely alone,” she says. “Being part of these programs changed how I see things. Now, I know there are opportunities—for my children, but also for me—and I can find them. My world is opened.”

That hopeful tingle of belonging is palpable among the families gathered near the Santa Ana Airport from all over California and beyond for GameSchoolCon.^{[11](#)} In the Irvine hotel ballroom converted to a Nerf Battle Royale field, over ongoing bouts of Bananagrams in the Board Game Library, at the Candyland-themed Saturday night dance, and at panels on topics like SHTEAM (Science, History, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math), the gaming faithful celebrate the myriad ways that play is the essence of learning. The families attending GameSchoolCon are typically homeschoolers and unschoolers who revel in, for example, integrating language- and creativity-rich live-action Dungeons & Dragons sessions into their weekly learning routine or using Roblox to experiment with physics concepts like collision and constraints. At the California conference, tweens who haven’t seen each other since last year cluster around screens to play *Mario Kart* or hover over complex tabletop games like *Nemesis Lockdown*. A flock of high school-age girls plays *Cardline Globetrotter*, competing to dispose of their country cards along a population stats trendline (“India’s

bigger than China now,” says one player. “These cards are out-of-date”). Their parents hoot and holler for conference organizer Erika Davis-Pitre and chatter over coffee in the Secret Society of Unschooling Moms. Everyone is in a very, very good mood.

“For too long, education has meant rote drudgery,” says Davis-Pitre at the conference’s opening. She notes that recent researchers have identified the strong link between student engagement and motivation on the one hand, and academic achievement on the other, with the connective tissue being joy.¹² “Finding the joy in learning,” Davis-Pitre declares—“that’s GameSchooling 101.”

It’s not all fun and Pokémon, however.

The linkage between gaming and mental health, for example, is a hot topic for GameSchoolCon regulars. They push back on the notion of “gaming addiction” that pops up regularly in the media and mainstream parent forums. “Addiction to substances is a real thing. But if you use words like that about gaming in front of your child, you’re telling them they have no power over the thing they love,” says Meg Grooms, a homeschooling mother of six and gameschooling blogger. “When kids choose gaming over other things, it’s meeting a need: connection, stimulation, engagement. It’s not inherently a pathology.” She adds, “If you’re worried your kid spends too much time gaming, go sit next to them. Ask them what they’re doing. Build connections through curiosity.”

That’s exactly what Brian Mansfield, a longtime homeschooling dad, did when he became concerned about his youngest boy’s ever-increasing focus on his games and his devices, which even in their relaxed academic setting was worrisome when it edged out other learning activities. “For my son, it wasn’t addiction, it was severe anxiety,” Mansfield says, noting that his son is also neurodiverse. “We didn’t recognize the anxiety at first, but once we got mental health support, the balance came. Rather than just banning screens, we worked on the root cause.”

In fact, many of the adults at GameSchoolCon, now-grown alumni and gameschool parents alike, offer themselves as evidence that—as decades of research has suggested—gaming can actually support mental health more than harm it, and that there’s no causal link between shoot-’em-up games and violent behavior for the average gamer.¹³ “Fighting games are my therapy,” is how one university-age competitive gamer at the conference puts it. “It’s a one-on-one space where you can release emotions in a

healthy way.” Artist and filmmaker Jayn Holly Coburn, a lifelong unschooler, felt similarly about her Sims as an angsty teenager. “Offloading my real-life worries onto virtual people gave me control and calm,” she remembers. For his part, grown gameschooler Shaun Biegler says the feeling of catharsis he got from gaming as a kid still works. “Now in *The Outer Worlds*, I dismantle corporations. I get to say ‘No, that’s unacceptable,’” he says. “It’s absurd—but empowering.” Meg Grooms sums it up this way: “With my panic disorder, when I can’t focus on a book or handle TV, I go to short games where it’s like just me and my hedgehog building a garden.”

“Invisible” challenges like anxiety aren’t the only kinds addressed by intentional play, gaming enthusiasts say. Physical disabilities also invite thoughtful handling among gamers focused on inclusion and adaptation.

Synetra Nunsuch is considered legally blind, though her vision varies wildly: “Some days I can see some things, and some days I can’t see anything,” she says. What doesn’t waver is her drive to ensure that games for learning are open to everyone. Nunsuch looks back fondly on the DIY adaptations her family put in place when she was growing up, like modifying the favorite game Rummikub (a mash-up of mahjong and gin rummy) by darkening the numbers on some tiles to make them more readable and setting aside the special “wilds” that had confusing patterns or colors. That foundational inclusion in group games may explain the supreme confidence with which Nunsuch commands the Nerf Battles at GameSchoolCon. Sitting atop a dais in the middle of the hotel ballroom with a bullhorn and an assistant, she calls out rules and times skirmishes for roving bands of gamer-kids armed with Nerf guns, firing on each other from behind duck blinds made of cardboard and stacking chairs.

Even those not attuned to gaming for special needs can gain emotional strength from their play, GameSchoolCon advocates argue. For example, resilience training is baked into any game in which players regularly “die,” reanimate, and improve, says grown gameschooler Biegler. “Games let you experience failure without real-world consequence,” he says. In his live-action role-playing (LARP) days, he recalls, “I learned more from losing a sword fight and asking for help than from any easy win.”

That’s exactly why gaming is so powerful for SHTEAM learners, says Davis-Pitre. Parents and educators should look for science and math learning not in toy test-tube kits or math drill puzzles, Davis-Pitre says, but

in the immersive games learners love outside of school subjects. “The scientific method itself is a game,” Davis-Pitre says. “You start by asking a question. Then you investigate. Then you test. That’s a game!” She looks around with a grin and adds sotto voce, “Plus for me, every game is a mathematical equation—how can I optimize my moves for victory?”

When it comes to other academic subjects like history and social studies, Gen Xers likely remember more from *Oregon Trail* than they’ve forgotten from their school textbooks, and Millennials love their Settlers of Catan. Younger learners pick up the basics of economics and civic structures from *Animal Crossing* and *Minecraft*. “When our family played Risk, it turned into a high-stakes United Nations thing,” says one SHTEAM panelist at GameSchoolCon.

And then there’s storytelling, the world-building that underpins the narrative games that advocates say build literacy skills and creativity. Tabletop role-playing games like Monsterhearts and video games like *Disco Elysium* top the list, the more open-ended and immersive, the better.

Things get even more interesting when gamers take their play outdoors, as GameSchoolCon regular Christine Yablonski has discovered. When Yablonski was homeschooling her two kids a couple decades ago in Massachusetts, they found their way to a Boston-area summer camp that featured outdoor LARP gameplay with faux swords and shields, “a little like Dungeons & Dragons meets *World of Warcraft*,” Yablonski recalls. As a volunteer mom, Yablonski played the battlefield role of “master healer and alchemist” on her way to becoming camp director. Eventually the camp transformed into a year-round nonprofit called the Story School with Yablonski on its board.¹⁴ “This kind of immersive learning, running around in the woods with foam swords, exploring characters,” Yablonski says, “that’s something magical.”

Magnolia Forest School founder Jenny Stokes knows a thing or two about that magic.¹⁵ Child development experts call it “sociodramatic play,” she says, a mouthful term for the ever-evolving story worlds children build for themselves. Add in “constructive play”—making magic wands from twigs and wigs from moss—and that’s what her muddy young students, ages 2.5–5, dive into every day. In the evergreen woods behind a private school, in a hidden corner of a state park, or in the middle of a flower farm, Magnolia, based in Poulsbo, Washington, is all about learning through play without walls ... or a roof.

The seeds of Magnolia were planted when Stokes and cofounder Brandyn Boyd were working together at a fine-arts preschool in town. Both brought multiple education degrees and classroom experience to the job, along with diverse artistic roots—ballet from Boyd, visual art for Stokes. But Stokes disagreed with the school’s traditional instruction by adults that far outweighed the kind of free play she believed was the root of all authentic learning for young children. Boyd was inspired by the play-based instruction that Stokes fostered in her classroom, and the two of them left—along with 15 families ready to join whatever new school the two might open together.

Despite the parents’ professed enthusiasm for a different way of learning, Stokes and Boyd knew they’d have to be strategic to keep their new school from drifting back toward the conventional. “I kept getting the question, ‘Are you going to teach them their ABCs?’” Stokes recalls. “That’s the real reason I decided to do it outside.” Dispensing with worktables, cubbies, and bulletin boards made the idea of pure play-based learning a little easier for people to grasp, she says.

At the same time, “forest schooling” as a concept was having a moment. Tracing its history to Denmark’s “rain or shine schools” in the 1950s and then the rapid replication of *Waldkindergartens* in Germany beginning in the 1960s, the forest school movement officially kicked off in the United States in the early 2000s with the founding of Cedarsong Nature School on Vashon Island, just down Washington’s Puget Sound from Magnolia.¹⁶ More than 800 forest or nature preschools have since popped up all over the country, with 50 in California alone and 30 across the Southeast.¹⁷ Future forest educators can learn the basics at places like the Forest School Teacher Institute, operated by Tennessee’s Wauhatchie Forest School founder Jean Lomino.¹⁸ Program particulars may vary—some are intentionally supplementary to more conventional early childhood approaches at school or home, while others are intended as full-school experiences—but all forest schools emphasize play, child-led “emergent” learning, very low student-teacher ratios, and safe risk-taking. They de-emphasize academic learning up to age 5, in keeping with a megatrend in early childhood education away from explicit instruction in reading and math; forest school advocates note that the developmentally appropriate emphasis on play actually better prepares children for academic success once they transition to “regular school.”¹⁹ In forest schools that cover the elementary grades,

academic subjects are carefully integrated with nature study. All such schools highly emphasize the value of getting dirty.

The Poulsbo team was keenly aware of that trend. Despite Stokes's self-description as "outside-y, not outdoorsy" and her worry as a transplant, from Arkansas to the Pacific Northwest, that "there's no way I can do this, it's too cold," they took the plunge. "I said to Brandyn, if we don't start a forest school here, someone else will," she recalls.

There was a soft launch in a local backyard. "When all the kids said, 'This is the best day ever!' I knew we were onto something," Stokes remembers. She and Boyd also refined their operating philosophy a bit, putting the emphasis on play more than nature study. From there it was a matter of finding an outdoor space that the school could fully occupy, which led first to Kitsap Memorial State Park, then to the back lot of the Silverwood School campus, then to six other spots around the peninsula. Every weekday now, from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., rain or shine, each Magnolia Forest School site hosts up to 28 kids engaged in the predictably unpredictable rhythm of learning through play.

The price of this messiness isn't cheap. Almost all forest schools are private, with tuition ranging from just under \$10,000 a year—around Magnolia's price tag—to nearly \$30,000 for five-day-a-week programming, depending on location and grade range. Most of the schools offer scholarships (from funds contributed by paying families and philanthropic donors) and some tap into ESA funding. It's a forest school principle that staff should earn a living wage. And for parents who want an unconventional kickstart to their kids' education, it's worth every penny.

My niece Merry, last seen at the roadschool meetup in [chapter 5](#), would be the first to say so about Magnolia. Merry enrolled her daughter, Gemma, in the spring of 2018, at the suggestion of another mom she met "really randomly" at a local playground. Her family was new to Poulsbo and had been experimenting with various pre-K programs, including a buttoned-down Christian school that was decidedly not their cup of tea. Gemma was one of the first "new" kids at Magnolia beyond those who'd followed Stokes and Boyd into founding—and was legendary for organizing a play wedding in the woods that took weeks of kid-planning and construction, a classic of sociodramatic story-making. Just as Gemma was getting ready to transition out of Magnolia into kindergarten, COVID hit, making outdoor school the safest place to be. Gemma stayed straight through the next year,

completing kindergarten under the conifers in her bright yellow Helly Hansen rainsuit. (Gemma had no trouble adjusting to “indoor school” for first grade at their local public elementary, Merry notes, and has excelled both academically and socially ever since.)

A typical day from Gemma’s time at Magnolia no doubt looked a bit like my recent visit to the school.

The moist path to Magnolia at Silverwood is well-trodden by tiny rubber boots winding from the parking lot where parents do drop-off, past the big-kids private school buildings and playing field, down into the stand of trees signposted “Fern Gully.” Where a log across the path marks Magnolia’s entrance, a cluster of children chatter around the backpacks scattered at their feet—already spilling out Bento-style lunchboxes, water bottles, extra layers—about all they see and all there is to do on this wide-open day. Their teacher, a former occupational therapist, now a Playworker in forest school parlance, perches calmly nearby. She doesn’t herd the children down the path into the next activity but rather watches, responds, ready to follow their lively lead. “We’re here to guide and support, not take over the process,” she explains.

When there’s a lull in the incoming, the Playworker presses the button on the padlock-size walkie-talkie that hangs around her neck. “Five at Fern Gully trailhead,” she says. “Six at Sun Fern Theater,” a colleague squawks back. “Three at the tire swing,” another answers. “Four at workshop,” and so on until, “We’re all good at 28.” It’s a ritual that’s repeated multiple times over the four-hour school session as the kids group and regroup across the woodland site.

Three-year-old Audrey knows exactly what she wants to do this morning: show off her school. A tiny blond dynamo in hot-pink coveralls and a blue hoodie, she takes visitors firmly by the hand. “Come on, guys, let’s go see the tree where the fairies live,” she says, trotting up a slope overlaid by a lattice of ropes. She stops halfway to scoop some mud into a plastic cup. “Wait, try this milkshake I made!”

Later, after she’s crayoned a picture of her dog, made mud sandwiches, and joined a pop-up dance session on the Sun Fern platform, Audrey practices walking the length of a six-foot fallen log, shiny-slick and dripping with moss. She is blissfully unaware that I’m fighting every urge to call out “Be careful!” and catch her when she slips. After several tries,

she makes it upright all the way to the end, then hops off, beaming. “I did it,” she says.

Over at Kitsap State Park, Magnolia cofounder Boyd explains the crucial role that slippery logs and puddle dives play in learning. “All day, every day, our staff will assess the risks kids are taking, what they might be ready to do next,” she says. “What will the child gain from a particular risk? What can they learn?” It’s a concept, she admits, that takes some getting used to for parents, like the ever-present mud and giving kids room and reflection to work out their own interpersonal squabbles.

As the day winds down at Kitsap, the kids gather around to hear site director Jeanie Woods read aloud the stories children have dictated to Playworkers that day. “These are Dylan’s words,” she says as Dylan stands beside her, hands on hips. “Once upon a time there was a princess. She had a pet bunny. The pet bunny had a tiny crown! The end.”

With that the kids applaud and reassemble their backpacks—Kitsap being a pack-it-in, pack-it-out school location—then sing down the hill with their Playworkers to the parking lot where their parents will pick them up. There’s one final great stretch of mud-kitchen (“My pizza shop is still open,” one kid calls out, a pie in each hand, “last chance for broccoli-strawberry pizza!”) and more than a little boot-dragging.

“Nooooo!” Noah leans into his mom’s side, facing back toward his friends. “I don’t want to go yet!”

Boyd bends down to half her ballerina height. “You’ll be back tomorrow,” she says, eye level with Noah. “The forest will still be here.”

If learning can happen anywhere—in the woods, over the Monopoly board, at mariachi practice—can fully self-bundled schooling be far behind? Could a kid and their family construct a complete unconventional education path from individual building blocks that they select one by one?

Ron Matus thinks so. In his 2024 report *A Taste of À La Carte Learning*^{[20](#)} and its follow-up a year later, *The Rise of À La Carte Learning*,^{[21](#)} the award-winning Florida journalist turned director of research and special projects at Step Up for Students highlights what the organization sees as a move from “school choice” to “education choice.” The shift has been driven by families assembling their own learning programs on behalf of more than 140,000 students as of 2025. According to Matus, Florida’s Broward County is one place where the elements are

already coming together: a community of families interested in customizing education for their kids, beyond simply choosing one kind of conventional school over another; a vibrant array of local education providers, from “saltwater studies” to cooking programs, ready to serve them; and a funding mechanism in Florida’s ESA program. “Broward feels like a coral reef,” Matus says, “this big, interconnected, colorful ecosystem that’s alive and dynamic.”

Toni Frallicciardi and Shiren Rattigan are among the brightest creatures in the Broward ecosystem. Frallicciardi runs Surf Skate Science, a program that features science learning—including physics, marine biology, and engineering—at the beach and the skateboard park.²² Rattigan is the founder of the highly regarded Colossal Academy microschool, which she explains specializes in “future-forward education.”²³ Together they lead South Florida’s Innovative Educators Network, collaborating to get the word out about homegrown à la carte options for families looking to use their ESA dollars in a customized way.²⁴ “Most parents want what we have to offer,” Rattigan says of her network. “They just don’t know it exists yet.”

Matus of Step Up for Students believes that as the à la carte ecosystem grows and evolves, there will be plenty of room for Florida’s public schools to serve as providers as well. “If homeschoolers want to take this great physics course at a local high school, why wouldn’t the district accommodate them?” Matus asks, noting that an inflow of ESA dollars that’s already happening in places like Pasco County might be especially beneficial for smaller and more rural districts.

Getting Smart wants to take that idea ten steps further, to give the 90 percent of American families still in conventional education a taste of what homeschoolers are discovering in South Florida. In the think tank’s *Unbundled* white paper, Nate McClennen writes, “Since the advent of formal education, learning has been bundled. Most students attend schools and follow a prescriptive curriculum determined by the school, state, or other governing body.²⁵ The curriculum is bundled together via classes or courses, and once the student has completed each of these at a satisfactory level, the authorizing body grants a credential.” But a growing recognition that students’ interests and desires may vary, coupled with the availability of choice programs, means that one size does not have to fit all, McClennen argues. With family coaching and the availability of unbundled learning

opportunities, every student can have a customized education path unique to them.

Getting Smart's unbundling work, which comes complete with a playbook for deconstructing and reconstructing the system, is aimed squarely at public schools, which McClennen believes can drive broad-scale opportunities for customized learning.^{[26](#)}

The idea is beginning to take root in places like Arizona's Phoenix Union School District. Early in the pandemic, the district launched an innovative small high school called PXU City, which allows high school students to assemble classes and experiences from institutions across the district and beyond.^{[27](#)} PXU City's physical site is where students gather for community-building, not for academic classes. Instead, its students create their own custom programs from a menu of some 500 options from the district's brick-and-mortar schools; its online-only program; internships; jobs; college classes; and career training programs, according to *The 74* education news site.^{[28](#)} "We don't want to just do field trips out in the city," principal Leah McKiernan tells me. "We really want learning to happen in the city." PXU City celebrated its first graduating class in 2024.

Getting Smart's McClennen also highlights New Hampshire's efforts to replace "seat time"—the traditional public school metric in which students advance through education based on time served at classroom desks—with progression based on competency gained through real-world experiences, ranging from internships to independent projects.^{[29](#)} New Hampshire's long-standing statewide public online program, Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, covers many fundamental academic courses for students pursuing learning beyond the conventional school walls. The state couples that with a newer program that helps fill out the provider side of the unbundled ecosystem by, for example, awarding a high school elective credit to a student who completes a sequence of piano lessons at an approved community music school. This innovative New Hampshire micro-credentialing program is called Learn Everywhere.

Families ready to experiment with unbundled learning that happens truly everywhere—and not just in New Hampshire, or Denver, or Poulsbo, Washington—are turning to companies like Outschool.^{[30](#)} Launched in 2015 as a marketplace for in-person classes for homeschoolers, Outschool went online and hit its stride during the pandemic, becoming a lifeline for kids hungering for everything from classes in Scratch coding to real-time help

with math. All teachers in the Outschool marketplace are background-screened and all instruction is live, with per-class prices ranging from \$10 for group fun to more than \$50 for one-on-one tutoring. As of 2025, Outschool offers more than 100,000 live online classes and has served more than 1.5 million users.³¹

Outschool founder Amir Nathoo says the company was inspired in part by events in his own childhood. “I distinctly remember getting my first computer as a kid,” he says. “I was fascinated by how it worked, and I eventually taught myself to code, which opened up a whole new world of creativity and problem-solving for me.” Among the lessons Nathoo took away from that early encounter was that “some of the most valuable learning happens outside of a classroom when you’re given the freedom to explore something that truly excites you.”

The Outschool audience has long grown past its early homeschool roots, Nathoo says, with a significant portion of its customers now also traditional school systems, microschools, and mainstream families looking for extracurricular enrichment. Nathoo notes that almost half of Outschool users report learning differences like ADHD, dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder, and the like, making the program’s flexibility and variety even more valuable. What’s more, Outschool’s now-separate philanthropic arm, [Outschool.org](https://www.outschool.org), is a major partner for RESCHOOL in thinking through how to weave beyond-the-school-walls learning into policy and practice across the country.³²

And that may just be the beginning.

“The pandemic forced millions of families and educators to rethink how and where learning happens,” Nathoo says now. “I saw parents taking a more active role in shaping their children’s education, teachers experimenting with new methods of engagement, and students thriving when given more control over their learning. It became clear that the future of education isn’t about a one-size-fits-all approach—it’s about flexibility, choice, and access.”

That vision of the future of education is fully on display at the Utah Education Fits All Fair one sunny March day at the Brigham Young University Conference Center in Provo.³³ Against peaks newly glistening from a late spring snowstorm, the line of parents and kids waiting to get into the fair stretches the length of the parking lot, past the Down to Earth Nature School bus and the Kool Minds Academy of Learning mobile.

Inside, families encounter hundreds of ways to use their Utah Fits All ESA scholarship money, like improv comedy classes, publishing for young writers, tae kwon do, and Spanish. Outschool is there, as is a Minecraft STEM camp and a music program that combines therapy with performance. Though the Utah legislature has just reduced the dollar value of the UFA scholarship for homeschoolers (while upping the program's overall authorization, to bring some of the thousands of families reported in [chapter 2](#) off the waiting list), there are few grumbles from the families and vendors in Provo. They've had a taste of what it's like when learning happens everywhere, and they're not putting school back into a box.

Cassie Olguin is channeling that spirit. A homeschool mom who left public education when the oldest of her three daughters was coming home miserable every day, Olguin served as a part-time parent liaison for Outschool for a few years before ultimately being promoted to full-time manager of alternative education content and events. She's still very much an Outschool customer for her own family. "I've got three kids, and they all learn math three different ways," Olguin says. "So how is a teacher in a regular school supposed to individualize for 30 or 40 students? Teachers' hands are tied."

Olguin sighs. "That's the saddest part about the conventional school system," she says. "And parents see this. That's why more of us are saying, 'Wait, maybe I can do this differently.' We're redefining what success looks like, and we're realizing our kids don't have to be broken to benefit from something better."

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Unconventional Education in Black and Brown

April Jackson's school is through the side door of a church in Hapeville, Georgia, an outskirts town crisscrossed every few minutes by jetliners out of the Atlanta airport and freight trains clanging the length of downtown. Up three flights in three bright rooms, Jackson's PASS Pod—"a South Atlanta learning community celebrating African American culture"—serves 16 students with a curriculum that integrates the ancient empires of Africa into math, uses the 101 historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as a geography puzzle, and features a unit Jackson developed herself about the Black Panther Party.¹ This year, the PASS Pod kids hope to crush it at the February Black History Bowl competition against the other 15-plus schools in the Black Microschools ATL (Atlanta) network.²

An hour's drive away, on the other side of Atlanta, Amber O'Neal Johnston—the Black homeschool blogger and Charlotte-Mason-with-a-twist homeschooler we met in [chapter 3](#)—is loading her vendor table, banners, bookmarks, and related swag into her car along with boxes of the books she's published since the pandemic added urgency to her mission.³ *A Place to Belong* made a splash in 2022 by celebrating home, especially the Black home, as a cradle of culture.⁴ Hot off the press in 2025, *Soul School* ⁵ delves into hundreds of books that can serve as “windows and mirrors”—what Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop of Ohio State University called the diverse children's literature that allows readers to see reflections of themselves and also other worlds.⁶

Johnston is headed to the annual Flourish conference in Decatur that brings together homeschoolers, edupreneurs, microschools, and advocates for a celebration of Black and brown “parent-first” education throughout Georgia.⁷ April Jackson will be there, as will Rochelle Matthews-Somerville of the Homeschool Legal Defense Association and Dr. Maya Corneille of the Nia School, both of whom we spend time with in the next

chapter. Nicole P. Doyle, the outspoken choice advocate featured in [chapter 2](#), is one of the Flourish conference organizers.

It's a small world, Georgia's unconventional learning community of color. It's also a scale-size reflection of trends rocking education across America.

By every measure, Black and brown students, families, and practitioners have a significant and growing presence in unconventional education. According to the US Census, the percentage of Black families who are homeschooling spiked from about 3 percent in 2019 to over 15 percent during 2020 and has not subsided much since.⁸ The 2022–23 Census Household Pulse Survey cited by Johns Hopkins University's Homeschool Hub shows that of the growing number of families who reported that they were homeschooling, 12 percent identified as Black and 19 percent as Hispanic or Latinx.⁹ At the National Microschooling Center, 21 percent of current microschool founders and 30 percent of prospective founders in 2024 were Black or African American, and 4 to 7 percent were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.¹⁰ Virtual public schools like those in the Stride/K12 and Pearson Virtual Schools networks report enrollment by Black and brown students that closely mirror the demographics of the states in which they operate, numbers corroborated by outside researchers, while the presence of students of color in private virtual schools ranges from 11 percent at Sora to more than 30 percent at Laurel Springs, according to staff there.¹¹ A 2025 National School Choice Awareness Foundation survey found that 68 percent of Black parents and 62 percent of Hispanic and Latino parents had considered changing their children's school placement over the past year (compared to 58 percent of white parents).¹² Those Hispanic and Latino parents that did make a schooling move in the previous year were much more likely than other groups, including Black parents, to choose microschools or virtual schools (8.5 percent for either option, compared with less than 3 percent of Black parents).¹³ On social media, influencers like Homeschooling En Casita and Black Home Educators count hundreds of thousands of followers, while groups for “melanated” homeschoolers abound on Facebook and Instagram. A cottage industry has emerged to provide culturally relevant learning materials at the same time public school boards are banning Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, and other notable authors of color.

As is true for their white counterparts, many Black and brown families were exploring alternatives to the traditional school system long before the pandemic. Amber O’Neal Johnston’s story is somewhat typical of these first-wavers. Herself the product of public schools (where she was often the only Black student) and the daughter and granddaughter of public school leaders, Johnston is keenly aware of how hard her forebears and her community at large had to fight for access to good public education. But she wanted something different for her four kids, the oldest born in 2009; something more grounded in nature and community, and more holistic in its approach to understanding heritage. Johnston recalls being surprised by how the idea of homeschooling resonated, and how inspired she was by both the Charlotte Mason method (“In our house, Charlotte Mason has an Afro,” she says with a smile) and the Wild + Free universe of relaxed schooling.¹⁴ Soon Johnston was organizing a local group she called Heritage Homeschoolers, where families with children of color can gather for support and shared activities, and providing her lesson plans and other writings via blog and book.¹⁵

Jo Perez-Ray came to homeschooling on a parallel track to Johnston: through the established homeschooling universe but with a drive to broaden it culturally each step of the way. We first met Perez-Ray delivering a session on Spanish-language curriculum materials at a Charlotte Mason conference in Kentucky. As an immigrant to the United States around 2010, Perez-Ray was concerned about the quality of local schools in her part of the Midwest but already leaning away from the traditional classroom. “School for me growing up in Chile was a little bit of torture,” she recalls. As she researched different unconventional schooling approaches in the United States in the years leading up to the birth of her children, Perez-Ray was astonished by the variety of options (“There’s really nothing like this in Latin America,” she explains) but particularly drawn to one mom’s description of how she was homeschooling her rising kindergartner. “She took him to museums, he was always playing, enjoying nature, learning his letters in a very fun way, learning poetry and musical instruments,” Perez-Ray says. “It was very beautiful and natural, I noticed, and so rich. It was Charlotte Mason.” Perez-Ray dove into Mason’s multiple-volume statement of philosophy—and as a professional translator, took on the task of making the books available in Spanish, in part so that her network of friends and family in Latin America would have access. From there, the next obvious

step was finding high-quality “living books” in Spanish for her two kids, and officially launching Charlotte Mason Espanol, which soon drew hundreds of families across the United States and around the world seeking to deepen and protect their cultural legacy while homeschooling.¹⁶

What brought Chambria Mack to unconventional education was the Flint water crises (plural and ongoing, Mack emphasizes) combined with the harrowing birth of her daughter, Miracle, after 22 weeks gestation and weighing just 14 ounces. A lifelong Flint resident, Mack had just returned home with Miracle after four months in the hospital when a state-appointed emergency manager for the struggling, largely Black Michigan city switched its municipal water source from Lake Huron to the Flint River to save money. The combination of the corrosive water and Flint’s aging infrastructure exposed its residents, including thousands of children, to dangerous levels of lead.¹⁷ In 2018, Mack signed on to work with Michigan State University’s Pediatric Public Health Initiative, documenting the health effects of the water crisis in what is known as the Flint Registry—a data-intensive mission that was in full swing by the time Miracle was ready for kindergarten.¹⁸ The overwhelmed Flint public school system was no place for her daughter, Mack says. “She has overcome everything that they said that she would never do—and she’s doing it excellently, she is so gifted,” Mack says. “However, she does have her way. She’s not someone that you would just put into any ordinary classroom.”

Mack explored many education options for Miracle, including a planned new charter school in downtown Flint, before enrolling her in Michigan International Prep School (MIPS), a statewide tuition-free public virtual school headquartered in nearby suburban Davison.¹⁹ MIPS provided Mack’s daughter with a Chromebook, complete online curriculum, certified teachers, and an assigned mentor to help facilitate her learning. Mack set up her daughter’s learning space on the other side of her large home office, where they’ve worked in tandem—now joined by second daughter Brielle—ever since. “We work very well together as a team!” Mack says, noting that both girls are excelling in their academic and emotional development. But their unconventional education path does make them an anomaly in Flint. “We’re a minority within a minority,” Mack says. “Other parents are always stopping to ask us questions when we are out on field trips or taking our piano lessons.”

For her part, Gisela Quinones never expected to be schooling at home. Her questioning journey began when her daughter, the oldest of three children, started kindergarten in 2016 at the private Catholic school near their home in the Chicago area. “The school is a block from my house—I could see from here into the schoolyard,” Quinones recalls. “But my bubble burst in that first week of school. My daughter was a reader by the time she was three, but when she got to kindergarten, the teacher right away said that she was behind in reading and that she needed an after-school tutor.” Quinones sighs. “It brought me back to when I was growing up in the public school system,” she says. “My parents were immigrants, and even though my mother was an intellectual and an educator in Mexico, her English was never very good. So my first language was not English, and I had a hard time at first when I got to school. My daughter’s teacher brought me right back to that time.”

Nonetheless, Quinones did as the school suggested, supporting however she could as her daughter’s school day grew longer and longer, and her homework burden heavier and heavier. “I thought, she’s only in kindergarten, and already there’s this pressure on her.” But the last straw that year was the science fair: Quinones let her daughter create her project with her own hands, as the teacher had instructed, only to see her finished project stand out like flotsam in a sea of the other kids’ parent-perfected work. “The whole culture of it didn’t seem right to me,” Quinones says. “And she was so unhappy.”

By the time Quinones made the decision to homeschool her eldest, her second daughter was already struggling with the academic side of pre-K, so Quinones scoured the internet for curriculum suggestions and Chicago-area homeschool groups. She found plenty of both, but one thing was missing: “I didn’t see a lot of people that looked like us.” Quinones started reaching out to the Latino-surnamed moms on the various Facebook groups she joined, suggesting that they get together online and/or in person. “I thought we could start a little co-op for our families, somewhere we could teach our culture to the kids—you know, offer certain classes or have bilingual story time at the library.”

Some pre-pandemic pioneers followed more radical pathways. In her book *Raising Free People*, Akilah S. Richards traces her interest in unconventional learning to seeds planted by the political and cultural ferment in 1970s Jamaica, the milieu of her birth.^{[20](#)} Once her family had

relocated to America, Richards's own schooling followed the typical track, through meritorious public school performance in Florida and then university in Georgia, feeling all along that "I had to tuck away my personhood (personality, opinions, preferences, too much Blackness) to excel at studenthood."

When it came time to arrange schooling for her own daughters in the early 2000s, Richards tried the local public school, an exclusive private school, even a Montessori-style alternative in a neighbor's house before concluding that "when education is forced and standardized, it stifles natural learning ... kills creativity, chokes out confident autonomy—it is an act of colonization." Richards and her husband pulled their daughters out of school and embarked on a journey of unschooling around the world for the next several years as "digital nomads." They did not return to the United States until their daughters, now nearing teendom, called a family meeting to lay out their request for an opportunity to learn in a more school-like situation. The Richards family then joined forces with the Heartwood Agile Learning Center, an "unschooling school" back in Georgia that these days might be called a microschool.²¹ (Richards later helped found the national Alliance for Self-Directed Education, featured in [chapter 4](#) as part of a deeper discussion of unschooling.)

Whether explicitly or instinctively, unconventional educators like these could be seen as practicing what researcher Zaretta Hammond describes as "culturally responsive instruction," which has been shown to improve academic outcomes among students of color, including those who are linguistically diverse. Hammond writes in her best-selling *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* that teaching practices and classroom curriculum that respond to "deep culture"—going beyond foods and holidays to reflect students' worldview and mental models—connect with brain science to move learners toward the independent, higher-order thinking that's necessary for success in school and in life.²² Hammond's view that "colorblind" back-to-basics education harms the most vulnerable students is echoed in the thinking of Johnston, Quinones, and others stepping away from conventional education in the first wave.

And then came 2020.

The pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the culture wars over "woke" all combined to add urgent momentum to the work of "formidable mamas," as Johnston calls the army of women like herself. Suddenly

everyone inside and beyond their communities of color needed help accessing unconventional learning for kids who'd only previously known rows of desks with eyes front on the teacher.

Bernita Bradley carried the torch in Detroit. A longtime community activist and education advocate, she was heartbroken to see Black families all around her floundering as accidental homeschoolers when Detroit Public Schools went into lockdown in March 2020. For Bradley, helping families through the trauma of the pandemic was the first step. "Back in 2020, I would hear from families, 'Maybe we'll just take a sabbatical from school,'" Bradley recalled in an interview with National Public Radio in 2023.²³ "But the statistics showed that only 12 percent of Detroit kids were reading on grade level already, so no way were we going to go one more day without learning. I'd connect those parents with a coach and then I'd round up partnerships for everything they might need."

Bradley's Engaged Detroit coaches and support programs are now serving an ever-growing number of families who are not going back to traditional school.²⁴ Bradley went through the coaching process herself, even though her own children had aged out of K-12. "My daughter asked me to homeschool her way back in fifth grade, and I said, 'No way,'" Bradley recalls. "I imagined homeschooling would be me standing in front of her all day, shaking a ruler at her and making her work, and I did not want that. But I've since learned that's not what homeschooling has to be. It can be joyful and freeing, because learning happens everywhere, all the time. I wish I had known that then." Half a decade post-pandemic, Engaged Detroit's coaches continue to be focused on helping families fulfill the goal of "children loving learning."

The pandemic is what expanded Gisela Quinones' quest for "a little co-op" in Chicagoland into a growing national nonprofit called Latinos Homeschooling with an annual conference and a full catalog of courses for kids and for parents.²⁵ "Once the pandemic hit, moms from other parts of the country were starting to join our Facebook group, because they saw what we were doing, trying to build a community," Quinones recalls. "People in California, Arizona, Houston, St. Louis started reaching out to me. We would Zoom or have virtual meetups and then people started asking a lot of questions about how to start homeschooling, how to do better than the emergency e-learning that was going on at the time." Quinones remembers feeling a bit like an imposter, given how new she was to

homeschooling herself, but soon found a comfortable rhythm collaborating with other Hispanic families near and far. “We started organizing online story time for the kids, with moms taking turns reading to the children, and then a webinar for parents that turned into a monthly thing. The pandemic actually created something I never ever expected.”

At the Flourish conference in Georgia, family stories told from the podium and around the snack table reveal the importance of 2020 as a fulcrum year. “During lockdown, I got to see what my child was not learning in school,” I hear parents say, or “I watched my kiddo really struggle to sit still and pay attention,” or “It was obvious how much better things were for my family when we were all together.” And then, with a look around at where post-pandemic life had led, “So when the school opened up again, I decided not to send them back.”

Johnston, Quinones, Jackson, and others are quick to point out that Black and brown departures from traditional schooling are not monolithic. Within the rapidly growing community are classic Christian homeschoolers as well as microschoolers specializing in Afrofuturism, families doing full dual Spanish-English immersion and those dabbling in a bit of Spanglish, worldschoolers, online learners and unschoolers.

These new-wave unconventional schoolers of color are open to diverse, mix-and-match curricula including programs like the Flourish-featured Read 21²⁶ (“read in 21 days or less”) and Right Start Math;²⁷ microschool opportunities like PASS Pod or the Ferguson School;²⁸ and support groups like Melanin Village²⁹ or the Mocha Matters³⁰ virtual gatherings for families with autistic kids. They celebrate entrepreneurs of color like the Onyx Family: Drs. Mirthell and Rita Mitchell and their four mostly grown kids who have parlayed their unconventional schooling life into a mini media empire with YouTube hits, podcasts, and publishing. And they pay close attention to the success stories of “alumni” like recording star Jamie Grace, LinkedIn product manager Yesuto Shaw, and culinary impresario Adrianna Cauthen: In their panel discussion, these grown homeschoolers of color and others testify to the long-term effectiveness of stepping off the conventional schooling path—including the opportunity to dual-enroll in college or start a creative career while homeschooling. (See [chapter 11](#) for profiles of these and other “graduates” of unconventional education.)

All of this may be why Johnston finds her Heritage Mom³¹ homeschool pitch a much easier sell than when she first got started. “It used to take

several get-togethers, joining outings, fathers meeting with my husband, before Black families who were interested in homeschooling got up the courage to make the leap,” she says. “Now it’s like, ‘Nope, no questions, just add me to the group.’”

That “meeting with my husband” special step for fathers is another thing many Black and brown unconventional schoolers seem to have in common—and that they share with countless other communities as well. Among homeschoolers of all colors and backgrounds, mothers tend to be the “primary educators,” as participants in a men’s panel at Flourish put it. The decision to join a microschool or enroll in virtual school is also typically mom-driven. Fathers often start out in skepticism or opposition. “I went to public schools my whole life,” explained one dad on the Flourish panel. “And all along my parents drilled it into my head that education was the key to success. So my first reaction to my wife saying she wanted to pull our kids out of school? Absolutely no way.” It took seeing his on-the-edge-of-trouble son calmly but avidly engage with subjects he’d professed to hate in public school, while pursuing special interests in music and community service, to convince this father that his wife might be onto something.

Some dads of color play first position in their kids’ education full-time. Alan Alaniz was an all-in California high school music teacher, a self-described workaholic, when he and his wife—also a public school teacher—started talking about future education options for their young son, who was already experiencing anxiety in preschool. Soon after they decided to explore homeschooling, an injury forced Alaniz out of his routine. “My body said you’re done with the two hours of daily driving [and] 60-hour work week,” Alaniz writes on the Latinos Homeschooling blog.³² “We made a family decision that I would become a stay-at-home dad and we would try homeschooling for kindergarten and first grade. Immediately we saw a difference in our son, my health, and the general happiness of the entire family.”

The decision to step off the conventional education track can impact marriages in ways that bear close attention and negotiation, according to Malaika and Andrew Wells, a homeschooling couple and authors of *The Hope-Informed Marriage*.³³ Although the Wellses helped found the Georgia Black Home Educators Network, they admit they were surprised at first to find themselves on this path. “I was praying one day when I heard God tell me to bring my kids home to school them,” Malaika Wells recalls with a

laugh. “I said, Lord, you know we have public schools now, right? Not like in your day.” But the Wellses decided together to make the leap into unconventional schooling and quickly learned that doing so required them to agree on “a mission and values” for the family and to each give up some control to avoid a clash of roles. “My wife is the primary educator most of the time,” Andrew Wells says, “and my job is to support her and love on her. Then sometimes it’s my turn, and it’s all about getting the work *done*.”

Regardless of how they are involved in the teaching part of unconventional schooling, one critical role played by many Black and brown fathers (and dads in other communities as well) is that of defender: countering skepticism and criticism of the family’s choice to diverge from the traditional school path. As Cheryl R. Carter writes in *Homeschooling Black Children in the US*, “My parents came from different parts of the country but they both held fast to the idea that education was a golden ticket to better opportunities ... Both of my in-laws, like my parents, possess strong opinions on education. Because of our upbringing, my husband and I first believed that schools were the primary and sole place for learning. Education, we were taught, was sacred and an instrument of upward mobility.”³⁴ When couples make the decision to step away from traditional school, it’s often the skeptical convert husband who can most effectively explain that choice to the extended family.

And it’s not only blood relations who need to be convinced. In an interview with the website *Word in Black*, Dr. Cheryl Fields-Smith of the University of Georgia pushes back on the view that unconventional schooling is “in sharp contrast” to what Black families did to get into public schools through *Brown v. Board of Education*.³⁵ In her 2013 study of Black homeschooling with Dr. Monica Wells Kisura, Dr. Fields-Smith argues that the “mere presence of Black homeschoolers in growing numbers challenges the ‘common-sense’ assumption that access to desegregated schools would automatically bring equity to instruction and opportunity.”³⁶ Dr. Fields-Smith summarizes it this way: “If you really sit down and read all of our educational history here in this country, you’ll see that today’s homeschooling movement among Black people is aligned with our notions of self-determination and self-agency, particularly surrounding getting access to excellence and education for our children.” Scholars suggest that Black families’ affinity for homeschooling, microschooled, and other unconventional education approaches is part of a legacy that includes the

underground schools during slavery³⁷ and the Freedom Schools of the civil rights era.³⁸

That may be one reason why the philanthropic and school choice communities are waking up to the emerging power of Black and brown families in homeschooling, microschooling, virtual schooling, and beyond. Both the VELA Education Fund and the Yass Prize have a hit parade of edupreneurs of color serving students who look like them through microschools, hybrid homeschool networks, and other unconventional options. There is also a palpable sense that the exit of strong-minded Black and brown families from the public school system—whether in search of more culturally resonant curriculum, or in protest of disproportionate discipline and special education referrals, or to personalize instruction for an iconoclastic learner, or some combination of all of the above—might drive the kind of change in that system that past efforts have not.³⁹

Some are hopeful about the potential impact of the many families of color who remain connected, loosely or closely, to their local public schools even after they “tap out” of the traditional system. For example, students who choose microschools for K–8 may come back to the district for grades 9–12, drawn by the allure of sports, prom, and other high school rituals, while those who went to traditional elementary schools may need something a little more personalized for secondary school. Some even argue, as we see in [chapter 12](#), that smart public school administrators will soon find ways to integrate the microschool model into their own systems.

Meanwhile, homeschooled kids in states like Florida, Texas, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania can participate in public school sports and activities under what are known collectively as Tim Tebow laws, named after the football star who got his start playing high school ball as a homeschooler in Florida.⁴⁰ And families of kids with disabilities may access therapies and other services through their local public schools. Amber O’Neal Johnston took advantage of Cobb County School District speech and language services for two of her children. “My boys were kind of mush-mouthed early on,” Johnston recalls, “so my pediatrician recommended that I look for speech therapy through the school district. I was like, they’re not going to do that for us. But in fact the school team said, ‘You have a right to these services, and we want to help you.’ And they did, and it was fabulous.” Johnston calls this Cobb County accommodation “an example of something that the school district had that I

can't provide at home, and they were very accommodating, making sure that my kids had access." Linkages like these create the opportunity for the public school system to acknowledge families like hers, Johnston says, to do better and be better, as a counter to overall enrollment declines.

It's not just the traditional education establishment that is roiled by the groundswell of Black and brown families stepping off the conventional path. Johnston recalls all too clearly back in Spring 2023, when she received an invite to be a featured speaker at the Christian Family Home Educators conference—and was flabbergasted when the organizers reached back out to her shortly thereafter with a series of pointed questions: "What is your stance on CRT, wokeness, the 1619 Project, and cancel culture?"⁴¹ After Johnston confirmed that she was both the only Black speaker on the agenda and the only invited speaker to be queried on these topics, the conference unceremoniously uninvited her.

As Johnston discovered, Black and brown families drawn to the cultural freedom of unconventional education in this fraught era may find themselves having to explain, carefully and repeatedly, why Black history and Spanish-language story time are not the work of the devil. To many of her white Anglo fellow travelers in the larger homeschooling community, Johnston says, "I am considered the woke, socialist, DEI-loving, Marxist, you know, whatever. And to think I just wanted my kids to read some books with Black people."

Jo Perez-Ray has encountered similar resistance to her crusade to expand the view of US history. "Look, I can totally understand that a country needs a national identity," she says. "But now in the 21st century, it is undeniable that the US is a rich culture made up of a wealth of different cultures." As for language, "I had always felt like I had this amazing feast in English. And now I [am] able to have a similar feast of Spanish."

For unconventional educators like Perez-Ray and Johnston, Richards and Quinones, their first priority is necessarily their own children, whose future success seems best secured by a solidly positive sense of family culture—especially urgent in fraught political times. "I want my kids to know who they are and to care about all the different beautiful things in our culture," Perez-Ray explains. "Because when they have that, in the future it will be easier for them to find their path in life."

Similarly, organizations like Black Microschools ATL, the collective of nontraditional learning spaces for children of color that includes April

Jackson's PASS Pod, are focused first and foremost on the families who sign up. In the case of Jackson and her compatriots, that means being dedicated to "serve predominantly African American children using a curriculum that celebrates African American culture and African Americans' national and global contributions."

But the very presence of strong alternative Black and brown voices inevitably poses a larger challenge to the "one-size-fits-all" vision of American education on the one hand, and the "white-Christian-English-first" view of American culture on the other.

Perhaps that's why the ugliest and most confounding battles seem to erupt when unconventional education emerges from the family home to collide with public policy, from local school board meetings to legislation pursued in state capitols to executive orders from the White House. The resulting explosions have been a hallmark of 21st-century education discourse.

Traditional civil rights and education organizations have gone on record in opposition to school choice. For example, the NAACP⁴² has repeatedly issued policy positions against charter schools, most recently in 2016,⁴³ and in 2023, Bettina Love of Teachers College at Columbia University published *Punished for Dreaming: How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal*.⁴⁴ Teachers' unions such as the National Education Association and its state-level affiliates are staunch opponents of Education Savings Accounts, often working in coalitions like Save Our Schools Arizona to paint universal ESAs as costly "welfare for the wealthy" despite service to thousands of working-class and low-income families.⁴⁵

At the same time, at the grassroots level in communities of color, support is strong for ESAs and other forms of school choice. According to a 2023 YouGov poll released by the Yes. Every Kid. Foundation, more than 70 percent of Black parents support ESAs, while nearly 79 percent of Black teachers do.⁴⁶ Polling by EdChoice found that 75 percent of Hispanics support ESAs,⁴⁷ while a LIBRE Initiative survey pegged Hispanic support for expanded educational choices at 77 percent.⁴⁸ A 2024 election opinion piece in *The Hill* warned, "If Democrats choose the teachers unions, Hispanics will choose their families instead."⁴⁹

But kitchen-table sentiment doesn't necessarily translate into clout when it comes to electoral politics. Reverend Janelle Wood of Black Mothers Forum in Arizona, who we met in in our discussion of microschools,

discovered this firsthand when she ran for state senate in 2022. Democrats loved her advocacy against police brutality and disproportionate school discipline but stridently opposed her support of ESAs for microschoolers and homeschoolers. Republicans dug her school choice stance but objected to her insistence on culturally responsive education and the protests she organized against police killings of Black Arizonans. Reverend Wood came in dead last in her state senate primary.^{[50](#)}

Undaunted, Reverend Wood believes that the voices of Black and brown families gravitating toward unconventional education might yet have the potential to draw a harshly divided America onto common ground. “I say to my friends who are pro-choice, to be consistent you really must support all kinds of choice, including education choice,” Reverend Wood says, moving a mug full of pens and pencils toward the center of her desk. She slides a spherical crystal paperweight over next to it. “And I say to my friends who are pro-life, we need you too on the frontlines standing up for the lives of people of color.”

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My Kid Learns Differently

Small sharp fists flailing, curses flying, body spinning, Tristan Manzolini's youngest son was a buzzsaw laying waste to the once-serene unschooling routine Manzolini had spent years constructing for her family. On the fraying outer edge of the pandemic, Manzolini was doing all she could to hold things together for her own three kids and a dozen others at the Berkshire Freedom Academy, the unschooling learning center she'd cofounded in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.¹ Now the center was headed for closure as its building changed hands and parents grappled with their own post-COVID realities. Her marriage was on the rocks, and then there was—this kid!

As someone who herself identifies as neurodiverse, Manzolini believed in her soul that unschooling—a flexible, personalized, student-driven education approach discussed in depth in [chapter 4](#)—could suit the needs of any kind of learner. “But I have to confess,” she recalls, “there were moments when I was a little afraid of my own five-year-old.”

The medical establishment was no help at first. “Our pediatrician would just say, ‘He’s a boy,’ like that explained everything.” Finally Manzolini and her son found a neuropsychologist who did a full assessment. His diagnosis: oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) plus attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). It’s a challenging but not at all uncommon combination. According to the National Institutes of Health, up to 60 percent of individuals with ADHD also have ODD,² which the Cleveland Clinic describes as “a pattern of uncooperative, defiant and angry behavior.”³

What’s followed for Manzolini and her son has been a combination of intensive professional therapy and homegrown accommodations, including the application of consistently enforced boundaries for behavior—a tough stretch for Manzolini as an otherwise go-with-the-flow mom—and a relaxed attitude about academics through unschooling, which suits her just fine. There are no pharmaceuticals involved in her son’s treatment, at least not yet: ODD is not treatable with medication, and while ADHD famously is, Manzolini wants her son to be the one to decide if he wants to go that

route. She and his psychiatrist agree it's a choice that can be made in the future.

Manzolini says the changes she sees in her son as a result of his diagnosis, treatment, and flexible learning routine have already been remarkable. By 2025, at age nine, he is more often than not a constructive partner in the projects and outings that make up the family's unschooling days, many of them spent outdoors in their woodsy Berkshires environs. He no longer delights in antagonizing his sister and brother, and his meltdowns are rare. Instead, he has developed a precocious and utterly calm facility with tools like wood awls, hatchets, and an actual (approved for youth use) chainsaw. "He's a hundred percent Safety First, very serious about the goggles and gloves," Manzolini says.

All that being said, did Manzolini ever think it might have been better for everyone—the boy, his family, herself—if her son had gone to conventional public school instead, with all its mandated resources for children like him? For a moment, Manzolini is so quiet you can almost hear the click of her internal slideshow, the detonations of the past four years interspersed with real moments of progress. She says softly, "I can't help thinking he would have been put into a special classroom, maybe even a special school." She shakes her head, then looks up with a grin. "But it was never going to happen," she says. "He tells me all the time he thinks regular school is dumb: Who'd want to be inside all day long, sitting still and doing worksheets? Not him. Definitely not him."

On multiple dimensions, Tristan Manzolini's son is far from alone.

Across the United States, the number of students with conditions qualifying for special education has risen steadily, from 6.4 million in 2010 to 7.3 million in 2021, or 15 percent of the K–12 school population, according to a Pew Research analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics.⁴ Without even counting the number of children with disabilities outside the public school system—for example, recent statistics from the National Special Education Advocacy Institute suggest that 38 percent of homeschooled children would also qualify⁵—that's more than double the 3.6 million from the mid-1970s when the landmark Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed, requiring American public schools to provide such children with a free and appropriate education and funding them to do so.⁶ Accommodations are also provided under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prohibits

discrimination against people with disabilities.⁷ Regulation, guidance, and funding of services to students under IDEA, along with enforcement of Section 504, are primary responsibilities of the US Department of Education, and the source of much outcry over the department's proposed elimination in 2025 by the Trump administration.⁸

What qualifies as a disability and how we talk about it has evolved substantially over the past 50 years.

IDEA currently groups disabilities into thirteen categories, with incidence tracked by the Department of Education.⁹ The categories include high-frequency specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia or dysgraphia, which affect more than 35 percent of students in special education, and speech and language impairment, which accounts for 18 percent of diagnoses. There are also the relatively rare developmental delay (4 percent), orthopedic impairment (0.5 percent), and hearing and vision impairment (1 percent and 0.4 percent, respectively). In between are “other health impairment,” which includes ADHD (17 percent of students served by IDEA) and autism (12 percent). Conditions like the oppositional defiant disorder that Tristan Manzolini's son was diagnosed with fall into emotional disturbance (5 percent), an umbrella that also includes anxiety and depression—although ODD's combination with ADHD would have put him into the multiple disabilities category affecting 2 percent of students in special education.¹⁰

Though conspiracy theories abound about the rise in the count of children with disabilities, mainstream observers say it is almost certainly due to heightened parental and societal awareness, leading to more diagnoses.¹¹ Though the climb in IDEA numbers paused in the 2020–21 school year while schools were closed, the pandemic actually played a dual role in increases since then.¹² On the one hand, parents forced into up-close observation of their kids during lockdown emerged with new demands for diagnoses of learning issues they had seen with their own eyes for the first time. And on the other hand, the post-pandemic era has been marked by an echo epidemic of anxiety and depression among young people.

The concentration of learners with disabilities in public school is amplified outside the traditional system, in homeschooling, virtual schooling, and microschooling. According to a 2023 *Washington Post*–Schar School survey, which allowed respondents to choose more than one answer, 32 percent of homeschooling families say their choice was driven

by the fact of a child with special needs that they felt their local public school can't or won't meet, and 28 percent said they homeschooled because of a child's psychological or behavioral issues.¹³ Virtual public schools like those in the Connections Academy network report that 20 percent or more of their students have special needs under either IDEA or Section 504—and that doesn't count cyberschools dedicated to serving particular populations, or private online schools touting bespoke learning approaches for those who learn differently.¹⁴ Specialized microschools are popping up across the country for students with autism, cerebral palsy, ADHD, and other conditions. We've met such students and their parents in every emerging form of education we've explored in previous chapters.

Their stories are hauntingly similar.

Parents already outside the conventional system talk about the dawning realization that their child is different in ways that might impact learning and then confront a series of wrenching questions. Should I seek a professional diagnosis, or will that just lead to a lifetime of labeling and interference? What kinds of extra help might my kid need, and what strings come attached? Can we really handle this, and what toll will it take on my child, their siblings, our family? And how am I setting my kid up for life after schooling, out in the real world?

For children with disabilities—especially invisible ones like autism or anxiety—there's the stigma of being socially different, even among the iconoclasts outside the traditional school environment, and a pervasive sense of being “dumb” when struggling to learn. That double-whammy pain may account for the zest with which some young people and their parents adopt a diagnosis as a kind of badge of honor, and the joyful relief they feel when connecting with others on the same path.

The overall increase in special education numbers has been accompanied by an evolution in popular terminology, much of it driven by the disability community itself.¹⁵ Various mainstream efforts over the years to soften things up by replacing “disabilities” with “special needs,” for example, or “disabled” with “differently abled,” have been rejected by advocates as demeaning in their euphemism—however well-intentioned, such terms mostly serve to comfort the able while denying the lived realities of those being described. There's also an ongoing tension between “person-first language” (such as “I have a hearing disability”) versus “identity-first language” (“I am deaf,” or even louder and prouder, “I am Deaf” with a

capital *D*). Some in the disability community reject outright the person-first approach, believing it implies that the condition in question is an illness to be cured rather than a worthy part of who the person is; others argue that it's a matter of personal preference to be selected by the individual rather than assigned by society. A complete style guide published by the National Center on Disability and Journalism helps keep track of the evolving language.¹⁶

And then there's "neurodiverse." Emerging as a concept and catchphrase in the 1990s to counter the binary notion of brain function as either normal or disordered, neurodiversity posits a wide array of workable ways of being. Rather than forcing those with ADHD, autism, and learning issues like dyslexia or dyscalculia to fit into a world designed for the neurotypical, advocates argue, classrooms (and by extension, workplaces and public spaces) ought to adapt to accommodate this natural diversity. Some recast hallmarks like the speedy processing of ADHD or the hyper-focus of autism as superpowers to be celebrated rather than symptoms to be treated. Others include giftedness under the neurodiversity umbrella, with "twice exceptional" learners—those who are both gifted and autistic, for example—the ultimate poster children. Gen Alpha learners readily self-identify as neurodiverse, and playful terms like "neurospicy" have begun cropping up on social media.

Neurodiverse is not a diagnosis, of course, and does not appear on the IDEA list of covered categories, which may partly explain its appeal to those leaning toward the unconventional side of education. For those who believe deeply that every learner is unique, and that everyone deserves a learning environment personalized to their particular needs while also preparing them for a functional future, the notion of pervasive neurodiversity just makes sense.

On the other hand, the question of whether to pursue an official evaluation can be fraught. Some resist taking their child in for diagnosis because it might make them feel "different." Grown unschooler Tony Patterson, who has ADHD, says that's not a good enough reason. "Believe me, your kid already knows they're different," he says. Other families fear that identification of a disability will reflect badly on them as parents. One mom who asked for anonymity at the Coalition for Responsible Home Education says that for some of her peers in the "crunchy" side of the homeschooling community (the kinds of moms gaining visibility alongside

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. in the Make America Healthy Again movement), “it’s related to an internal disconnect between their belief that if they didn’t vaccinate, practiced extended breastfeeding, and only fed their child organic foods, their child’s brain would be ‘perfect.’”¹⁷ As someone with a special education background herself, she adds, “It doesn’t work that way.” She calls the “widespread” presence of children with undiagnosed or untreated disabilities in the homeschooling community the “elephant in the room” and a matter of medical neglect. CRHE calls on parents to counter that neglect with active self-education about disabilities and adherence to its Bill of Rights for Homeschooled Children.¹⁸

For its part, the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), which has battled for decades for “homeschool freedom” and the rights of parents, is now actively encouraging families to pay closer attention to their children’s learning issues.¹⁹ As an HSLDA educational specialist, Dr. Rochelle Matthews-Somerville brings two decades of clinical experience in special education and psychology to her role in advising HSLDA member families on this topic. When it comes to professional evaluation for disabilities, “I don’t push families either way—I just give them the pros and the cons,” Dr. Matthews-Somerville says. “Sometimes a diagnosis can give you information about your child that you need to know what’s happening. A diagnosis of ADHD might explain a lot of the disorganization you see with your child, or why your child just doesn’t understand when you’re explaining things. But you never want to serve a disability label, you always want to serve a child.” Dr. Matthews-Somerville notes that none of her own six homeschooled children (two of which are now in college, and several of which have mild learning issues) were diagnosed by outside professionals. “I already knew what to do,” she chuckles.

Whether they have a formal diagnosis for their child or not, many on the unconventional education path feel they are especially qualified (i.e., “I have a PhD in my kid”) to provide a very personalized learning experience. Traditional schools, on the other hand, are tasked with addressing disabilities in bulk, serving a wide array of learners in the tens or hundreds. By necessity, they skew toward mass production—a painful irony given that their mandated services for each qualified learner are driven by what’s known as an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Following a student’s initial diagnosis, the IEP is developed by a school-based team that includes special education staff, possibly the school psychologist, the

parents, and sometimes the student themselves. The IEP is meant to capture the student's personal learning goals; methods for measuring progress, which may include a specific exemption from standardized testing; accommodations and modifications needed in the curriculum and classroom to ensure the student can learn successfully; and a prescription of "related services" such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or counseling. The IEP is reviewed annually with the parent and carries the weight of a legal document under IDEA.²⁰

Perhaps not surprisingly, the IEP is often also the catalyst for a family's decision to exit the conventional system. Parents speak tearfully about the decision to pull out after multiple pitched battles with the school over the quality or quantity of services provided, or lack of any visible progress in learning, or in some cases resistance on either side to placement in an alternative setting such as a private or special school. Families may have also grappled with the counterpunch of peer bullying, or just an inescapable sense that, for their kid, school is hell.

That's the story Jackie Nunes tells in "Why I Broke Up with My School District to Homeschool My Child with Special Needs."²¹ Nunes's middle daughter had a traumatic brain injury as a toddler that left her in a wheelchair with hearing loss, sensory processing problems, and developmental delays. At her public school, Nunes left each IEP meeting feeling bereft: "There wasn't any gross negligence, bullying or neglect," Nunes writes. "There just wasn't enough of the things that matter—time, attention, patience, persistence, passion, support." Knowing she could provide all of these at home, Nunes pulled her daughter out to homeschool. Then she did the same for her other kids, all "typical" learners.

Families who choose to step off the conventional education path and independently homeschool their children with disabilities may need to work extra hard to find the right supports. One service HSLDA and other homeschool organizations offer is help putting together a Student Education Plan (SEP) in place of the school IEP.²² (The Coalition for Responsible Home Education instead argues for the Privately Developed Plan, or PDP, created cooperatively by the child's parents and their service providers but containing all the same formal elements as an IEP.²³) The parent-generated SEP is by its nature less clinical and more general than an IEP or PDP, focusing on learning goals that specialists like Dr. Matthews-Somerville can assist in fleshing out with curriculum suggestions and tutor tips. If the

student needs therapies or other related services—whether recommended by an outside professional or parents in the know, but most often requiring a diagnosis—families can peruse lists of homeschool-friendly providers in their local communities or online.

In some states, school districts embrace (or are mandated into) providing services like speech therapy or occupational therapy free to local homeschoolers, and many parents avail themselves of these. HSLDA warns against this, reflecting homeschool urban legends of intrusive district special education staff and threats of mandated return to public school. “As a homeschool parent, you already have a lot on your plate,” the organization’s website guidance states, “and HSLDA has found that public school services come with strings (and potential legal difficulties) attached. So it is best to choose a private service provider whenever possible.”²⁴

But figuring out how to cover the cost of private services can be daunting for many families. HSLDA has a grant program families can apply to, and states with ESAs and similar funding mechanisms typically encourage their use for these kinds of services, often offering additional dollars for students with disabilities.²⁵ For example, Florida’s Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities averaged \$10,000 per student in 2024, depending on which Florida county the family resides in. As the Unique Abilities scholarship administrator, Step Up for Students lists more than 10,000 providers, including fee-based services from local public schools, job coach transition services for learners in their final years of secondary education, and music and art therapies.²⁶

In states without ESAs or other scholarship support—and even in states with both—homeschool families sometimes pool resources to line up extra help. Jackie Nunes recalls that her first few years after choosing to homeschool became a nonstop hunt for supportive services in the community as well as for a peer group for both her daughter and herself. “Homeschooling is hard work,” Nunes says. “And it’s harder when you’re on a different path than people with typically developing children. It’s easy to get overwhelmed and isolated.” Dr. Matthews-Somerville notes that in the Baltimore-Washington area where she lives and homeschools her children, an informal co-op of families engaged a speech therapist to offer a specialized language arts course for kids that needed help in that area.

Some parents attempt to take this self-help approach even further by getting trained and certified to provide related services to their own kids,

even tapping into health insurance coverage for it. For several years post-pandemic, companies like Forta Health (specializing in “family powered autism therapy”) provided a structure for parents of autistic children to be certified in applied behavior analysis (ABA), a popular therapeutic approach for autism, and then supervise them remotely so the family could access Medicaid funding for these services. As of early 2025, Forta’s website says it is “not currently accepting applications for parent-led paid services,” though it is still training parents to serve as face-to-face ABA supports for their kids.^{[27](#)}

Equally wrenching as the decision to seek a professional diagnosis and related services is the question of medication, as we learned from Tristan Manzolini. Prescriptions are common for learners with ADHD as well as for those with mental health conditions like anxiety, but resistance is often high for many who have stepped outside the conventional education environment. There’s concern over the side effects and long-term impact of drugs like Adderall, as well as a sense that medication is often deployed more to control children’s behavior than to relieve their suffering. Parents hope that trading the regular classroom for a “one-on-one individualized education” at home will be enough to ameliorate the challenge, and often it is. But sometimes, it’s not. As one parent comments in a r/Homeschool thread on Reddit, “As for homeschooling, it is the best thing I’ve done for my kid who has ADHD ... We tried everything to not medicate, but it came down to what was indeed best for my child. If he had diabetes you wouldn’t not give insulin, right?” Another parent adds, “My kiddo is just finishing up 2nd grade ... We have always homeschooled and this last year confirmed that [medication] was really the best choice, as his ADHD became less and less manageable for him. He was really starting to get severe anxiety over not being able to control his body or his mind. And watching him, I knew exactly how stressful that feeling is and how much medication helps with that.”^{[28](#)}

With the evolution of virtual schooling and the rise in microschools, kids with disabilities now have choices beyond “in school” and “homeschooling.”

As discussed in [chapter 7](#), virtual schools like Ohio Connections Academy (OCA) and Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA) are public schools and therefore must provide complete special education services under IDEA and Section 504 like their brick-and-mortar counterparts. The schools report

that enrollment of students who qualify for such services is often 30 percent (or more) higher than for brick-and-mortar schools.²⁹ One of the first moves a virtual public school will make when enrolling a student with disabilities is to work with the family and special ed team to modify the student's IEP for online learning. To fulfill IDEA's "least restrictive environment" requirement, a virtual school will balance maximum engagement in the general education curriculum with the school's built-in flexibility around location, pacing, and time on task. Public virtual school students with ADHD can move around their workspaces at will; autistic learners are free from the stressful distractions of classmates; kids with auditory processing challenges can wear headphones. Assistive technologies—from screen readers to eye-tracking input devices—are often provided by the school and readily integrated into the student's home learning environment. The virtual school special education team then lines up therapies and other related services with professional providers near students' homes, and in some cases, such as with speech therapy, deliver these services online.³⁰

Cynthia Sikon-Williams has been on the special education team at OHVA for nearly two decades and now focuses on providing transition services for high school students to ensure they have the adaptive skills and self-advocacy mindset they'll need for success in postsecondary learning and the workplace. "We've always had a lot of students at OHVA with ADHD, autism, some with Down syndrome," Sikon-Williams says. "But since the pandemic, there's been a huge influx of kids with anxiety." Sikon-Williams's counterparts at other virtual schools around the state echo that observation. "School anxiety, social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder, we're seeing so much of that since COVID," says Tisha Green-Rinker, manager of counseling services at OCA. "Our families are finding virtual school very helpful in managing the anxiety so students can start learning again." And ideally be well prepared for whatever awaits them in the future, Green-Rinker notes.

Some virtual public schools specialize even further. In 2021, Dana Van Deinse launched the Arizona Autism Charter School (AZACS) Online, a fully virtual "campus" she helped add to the award-winning Phoenix brick-and-mortar public charter school for students with autism.³¹ Van Deinse explains that AZACS Online's 200-plus students all go through a very individualized intake to determine where they might best thrive: in the Academic, Modified, or Functional programs, all of which involve much

smaller group sizes and much more intensive live online instruction than a typical virtual school. “As a friend of mine in the field always says, ‘If you’ve met one child with autism, you’ve met one child with autism,’” Van Deinse says. “We personalize everything.” Although she has since moved on to another post in unconventional education, Van Deinse is especially proud looking back at the first AZACS Online graduate. A young man who had been kicked out of several brick-and-mortar high schools before coming to AZACS Online surprised himself and his family by engaging deeply with a community of peers at the virtual school and going on to study fire science after successfully completing the AZACS program.

While private online schools like Laurel Springs Academy and Pearson Online Academy do not provide formalized special education services as their public virtual school counterparts are legally required to do, they do promise many of the same benefits for learners with disabilities: flexibility, personalization, and a learning environment that can be tailored to specific student needs. Some newer online school programs like Brilliant Microschools, which provides virtual learning to small “near-age” cohorts of eight to 10 students, specifically target kids with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, and anxiety, promising to help students “learn how to master their mind & leverage their learning differences.”³² In some states with ESAs, parents can use their funds to enroll students full- or part-time in such school programs.

Zeroing in further on children with disabilities is the growing universe of special-purpose place-based microschools, like Desert Sun Ranch outside of Phoenix that we visited previously. Many of these newer microschools have been launched by former public school special educators, parents of kids with particular challenges, and a unique cadre who are both.

Megan Allen is one of them. With bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work, Allen served as a caseworker and therapist in the small Central Florida city of Sanford, best known for annexing one of America’s first all-Black incorporated townships (that would be Goldsboro, now a Sanford neighborhood), and also as the site of the 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin. Allen’s own children include a daughter who struggled so much with reading that her public elementary school threatened to hold her back in third grade twice, and a son who was reading by age three but was blocked by district policy from starting kindergarten early. Allen ultimately decided to homeschool both children and saw them thrive while their family

connected with others through the homeschool center Allen founded. At the end of the pandemic, the center formalized as an intentionally small private school—a microschool—called Prodigy Academy Advance Learning Center.³³ A subset of Prodigy families uses the Florida Unique Abilities ESA as tuition support.

At today's Prodigy, Allen and her fellow teachers each lead mixed-age K–8 classrooms of no more than 10 students, all of whom have unique learning needs, including physical disabilities, ADHD, dyslexia, and autism spectrum disorder. Prodigy's claim to fame is using extra-engaging instruction and a flexible classroom environment to achieve “learning without limitations,” with most students scoring two years above grade level on the nationally norm-referenced NWEA MAP tests they take three times per year.³⁴ The key ingredient in Prodigy's approach is relationship (“Once students enter in our doors, they then become family,” Allen says), but there are extra spices in the mix as well. Providers of related services, such as speech therapists and occupational therapists, often come into the school building to work with their assigned students in an integrated way. Every child has an opportunity to instruct others in the material they have mastered: “Once they learn it, they have to be able to teach it, right up in front of the class,” Allen says. “The best way for you to show me that you know it is for you to be able to teach me.” And each student will also publish a book by the time they leave the school. Among the 20-plus titles Prodigy Kids Publishing produces each year are books like *Rolling with Resilience: Khloe Shines Beyond Boundaries*, written by Khloe A. Jones, a 12-year-old Prodigy student who was born with muscular dystrophy and a big singing voice.³⁵ Her book tells the tale of being turned away from a town Black History performance because of her wheelchair and then starring in Prodigy Academy's own Black History Show in her bright red beret and dress to deliver a rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” that brought the house down.

Khloe Jones's story of lifting her voice would likely resonate with the students at Nia School,³⁶ located just outside of Atlanta in Decatur's Village Schools space set up for microschools.³⁷ Dr. Maya Corneille left her professorship at Morehouse College to establish Nia (from the Swahili word for “purpose”) for learners in grades 2–8. All of the students at Nia are autistic, and all also have apraxia, a neurological disorder that affects muscle movements, including for speech.³⁸ “We don't use the term ‘non-

verbal,’ because that implies these students don’t have language. Our children have issues speaking with their mouths, but they have beautiful language,” Dr. Corneille says. “So instead we say we have non-speakers, minimal speakers, and unreliable speakers here, and our job is to help them make their voices heard.”

Like Prodigy Academy, Nia School grew out of a homeschool family co-op. One of its first handful of students is Dr. Corneille’s 11-year-old daughter, an unreliable speaker who calls herself Autistic with a capital A and considers learners like those at Nia “her tribe.” Following the pandemic, Dr. Corneille and her fellow co-op moms felt called to serve other people’s children in addition to their own. Nia opened as a private school in 2023–24 with six children and aims to grow by five per year.

Among the core tools at Nia are letter boards and keyboards that students use to spell out the words that are in their minds in response to their teachers’ questions while working on grade-level academics and the conversation of their classmates in between. With help from communication specialists and staff, students learn to use pencils and their fingers to find the letters they need (or the numbers, when it’s time to work on math). The minimal speakers and unreliable speakers may then use their own mouths to read out their spelled words, while nonspeakers may have others read aloud their words from screen or paper, or turn to text-to-speech machine readers. (For a vivid depiction of what this augmentative communication feels like for a young autistic person, Dr. Corneille recommends the documentary short on Netflix called *Makayla’s Voice: A Letter to the World*.^{[39](#)})

All day long, Nia’s loftlike third-floor space is awash with student language. You can hear it in small-group instruction huddles but also as learners take breaks to move their bodies on the exercise equipment in one corner or chill out in the sensory tent in the other. In between they might do art with Miss Libby, or play chess, or convene with students from the other microschools at the Village for collaborative activities.

With its very specialized program and one-to-one staff-to-student ratio, Nia School is not inexpensive. Posted tuition is nearly \$20,000 per year—though Dr. Corneille points out that similarly intensive private school programs typically charge twice that much. Many Nia families are able to tap into health insurance to provide additional support from specialists, but most also find it necessary to take advantage of the school’s payment plans and scholarship programs. And while Dr. Corneille is optimistic that

Georgia's new Promise Scholarship, discussed in [chapter 2](#), will help more students take advantage of programs like Nia, she notes that the \$6,500 ESA won't make much of a dent in the cost of attending most private schools. That's why Nia's purpose has to be larger than the school itself, she says. "Getting that public visibility and acknowledgement of what our children are capable of, that's the bridge we have to cross." Dr. Corneille sighs. "It's really about freeing people's minds to recognize that if we give these kids the right tools, how much can open up for them."

Across the country in Utah, Amanda Kellogg (a pseudonym she chose) is discovering her own treasure trove of tools to open learning for her neurodiverse family—tools she wishes she'd had access to growing up. Kellogg remembers being an extra-hardworking, high-achieving kid who always felt dumb, right up until the moment she crashed out of junior year at her large California public high school. And she remembers repeating that pattern again when she eventually got to college, finally ending up in a neuropsychologist's office for testing. The result? A diagnosis of autism, underpinned by very high verbal IQ, challenges in auditory processing and spatial visualization, and a bedeviling mix of executive function and dysfunction. "The doctor said I'd spent my life trying to work my way out of autism," Kellogg says. "All I could think was, 'You mean I'm smart?'"

Fast-forward several decades to the exurbs of Salt Lake City, and Kellogg and her husband, who recently consented to his own assessment for autism, are the parents of four. Their oldest son, Hunter, could spell his name at age two and identify the parts of an insect at three ("I have a video of him saying, 'This is its proboscis, and look at its thorax,'" Kellogg says) but was prone to screaming spells so intense that Kellogg would have to walk for miles with him strapped onto her just to keep him calm. By the time Hunter started public school kindergarten he was reading fluently but also headbutting new friends as a form of greeting, and experiencing such intense sensory processing challenges that he'd chew his fingers bloody or soil his pants "because he couldn't stand the splash from his poop hitting the water in the toilet," Kellogg says.

By this point younger sister Annalise had started preschool. The yin to Hunter's yang, Annalise is spatially adept, physically fearless, and distractedly diffuse in her thinking, Kellogg says. "She taught Hunter how to imagine, and then he would build," she explains. "And she has more social skills than the rest of our family combined." Kellogg wondered how

Annalise's giftedness combined with early hints of ADHD would sync with the regular school routine come kindergarten.

Meanwhile, back in Hunter's classroom, his teachers were doing all they could to accommodate him, Kellogg recalls. But as soon as they and she figured out one adaptation (a therapeutic chew stick to gnaw on, or soothing music through an iPod with headphones), something else would crop up in the school environment to interrupt Hunter's learning. When he got home at the end of each day he would unravel, taking an hour or more of bouncing on the trampoline or helping with "heavy work" outside to reregulate. "I realized partway through the year, this kid needs to be homeschooled," Kellogg recalls. "But I thought, I can't homeschool now! Annalise's going into kindergarten and I'm about to have twins! Nobody in their right mind would try to homeschool with newborn twins."

And then COVID hit.

"That shutdown period from March to May 2020 was actually such a healing time for Hunter, and for all of us," Kellogg recalls. "He was no longer having these emotional dysregulation moments because we could do all the things he needed to do and we could go at his own pace. And he could sleep through the night because he was moving his body more than when he was at school seven hours a day." A quick try of online school for Annalise also came to an early end: "It was C-Span for kindergartners. She watched the video for two days and I was like, 'Nope, we're just homeschooling her too,'" Kellogg says. It also turns out that homeschooling with twin infants is much easier than with the neurodiverse twin toddlers they've become, Kellogg has since discovered.

Nonetheless, the post-pandemic years have been a period of mostly happy experimentation for the Kelloggs. They've tapped into small pockets of funding through Utah's various homeschool support programs, securing curricula that span all of K-8 to allow for both plugging holes in learning and zooming ahead, lining up technology tools like the iPad Annalise uses to write her book-length stories and tapping into teaching expertise in unexpected places. "My mom is such a natural literacy teacher, even with the dementia she's now experiencing," Kellogg says. "And Hunter may be the best teacher of all for the other kids, because he doesn't give the answers. He's all about 'The point of this is not to get the right answer, it's to learn it, right?'"

But the highlight of unconventional schooling for the neurodiverse Kellogg crew has got to be the horses.

An early adopter of the Utah Fits All ESA scholarship program, Kellogg immediately put some of her allocation toward her kids' enrollment in equine therapy through Harness Your Power.⁴⁰ Located north of Ogden, this "healing and empowerment" program develops communication and self-regulation skills as children learn how to ride, how to guide a horse across a corral without reins or ropes, and how to ask for help. "They are teaching all of these emotional skills that have been so hard for my kids, as verbal as they are," Kellogg says. "After just a few months with the horses, they were doing wildly better."

Watching the Harness Your Power staff gently support Hunter in the weeks it took him to master saddling a horse, Kellogg was reminded once again of the value of struggle—something of a lifelong theme for her. For learners like her children or herself, Kellogg says, "Once you figure out how to do it yourself, no one can take that away from you."

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The Graduates

The main thing Adrianna Cauthen was missing was a locker.

As a homeschooled high schooler in suburban Atlanta, Cauthen saw her postsecondary future as a clear shot: matriculation at a solid local university, a bachelor's degree in music, a career teaching and playing piano. Her homeschooling routine was preparing her well, with dual enrollment college classes and musical events across DeKalb County. But around age 16, she also had a brief, bad bout of FOMO. "I'd seen the movies and TV shows," she recalls. "I wanted to go to public school so I could see the inside of a school bus. I wanted to walk the halls. I *really* wanted a locker I could decorate and meet my friends by."

That moment of yearning is common enough among kids on unconventional education paths that the very term "homeschool FOMO" is enough to crack up a convention audience. It's why statewide virtual schools trumpet proms and graduation celebrations that families drive hundreds of miles to attend, plus esports leagues complete with online pep rallies and college scholarships (it doesn't hurt that esports are good for academics as well¹). It's why networks of microschools hold common field trips and quiz bowls.

FOMO is also the one downside even very gratified graduates of unconventional education will mention when pressed. For some, it preceded short-term "auditing" of typical school for a month or a year, or even a definitive return to a traditional path. Every unconventionally schooled young person can name multiple friends who did high school the conventional way, in public or private sticks-and-bricks.

Though Cauthen's parents gave her the option of doing the same, her FOMO passed quickly enough on its own. But it did foreshadow a much more consequential bout of questioning—not unique to the unconventionally educated but very much in keeping with their differential path—that caught up with her just a few years later at Clayton State University, midway through her music theory course. "It wasn't just that music theory is harder than calculus," Cauthen recalls. "It's that I'd gone to

college for music as the path of least resistance, without a clear idea of what I really wanted. I had to be honest with myself and pivot to what I love: food!”

Cauthen dropped out of Clayton State, enrolled in culinary school, and launched her own dessert business, Cauthen Confections, which specializes in sweets for every diet, including gluten- and sugar-free. She credits her homeschool background with giving her the courage to change direction when she knew she was genuinely headed away from her heart, and the confidence to be an entrepreneur despite the worries of friends and extended family. “It’s my life,” she says now. “Other people may have opinions, but they’re not the ones living with the results of my decisions.”

That independent—some might even say iconoclastic—attitude seems to be near-universal among alumni of unconventional education, however else they may feel about their K–12 path. It may in fact be their most defining postsecondary characteristic, since other data indicates just small degrees of difference from outcomes for students more traditionally educated.

While some school models, like à la carte bundling and microschooling, are too new and too varied to have much in the way of comparable statistics, other forms of unconventional schooling have more of a track record. For example, the homeschooling community has long pushed back against the notion that its children face a disadvantage when it comes to college. The National Home Education Research Institute states that 78 percent of peer-reviewed studies on success into adulthood (including college) actually show that those who were home-educated perform significantly better, statistically speaking, on standardized tests like the SAT and ACT.² This research by Dr. Brian Ray, published in the peer-reviewed *Journal of School Choice*, has been criticized for bias and nonrepresentative sampling, among other things: the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE) devotes an entire page of its website to a critique of the Ray research.³ As discussed in [chapter 4](#), Drs. Gina Riley and Peter Gray’s 2015 unschooling studies—admittedly based on small numbers of willing survey participants—indicate a sustained success rate through postsecondary education into career.⁴ Dr. Angela Watson of the Johns Hopkins University Homeschool Hub noted in our 2024 interview that providing dispositive data on outcomes from various flavors of homeschooling is even more challenging than counting the true number of homeschoolers in the first place.

For virtual schools, the very graduation rate is the subject of intense debate. As discussed in [chapter 7](#), public virtual high schools see a disproportionate inflow of students, often short on credits, long after the clock starts on the cohort count the federal government requires states to use in calculating the graduation rate. This mobility phenomenon puts schools at a disadvantage in counting kids crossing the virtual stage,⁵ resulting in nationally reported graduation rates averaging around 65 percent, 20 points lower than that of conventional schools.⁶ Once corrected for mobility, grad rates at virtual schools resemble those of brick and mortar: in 2024, for example, Ohio Connections Academy's four-year graduation rate reported by the state of Ohio was 76.3 percent, and its five-year rate was 80.1 percent,⁷ compared with 88 percent average across the state.⁸ Once virtual school students graduate, school leaders and researchers say, their college-going and college persistence rates are parallel to that of students from traditional public schools.⁹

Off this wall of pro-and-con statistics bounce the voices of those who see themselves as unconventional education survivors rather than beneficiaries. The blog site *Homeschoolers Anonymous*, now archived, is especially heart-wrenching, with reflections like "Trapped by Homeschooling," whose now-grown author recalls, "For the majority of my homeschooling education, character building and disciplining took precedence over any actual learning."¹⁰ Then there's "Prisoner of Patriarchal Presbyterian Pedagogy," written by a woman using the pseudonym Alia. "As if being second-class in the church wasn't bad enough, I was second-class at home," Alia says. "I was not encouraged to go to college, and being in the workforce was considered morally questionable." Where *Homeschoolers Anonymous* leaves off, the sub-Reddit Homeschool Recovery picks up, with rants like "I was 'homeschooled' (technically unschooled) [and] missed out on important, fundamental stuff as a child. Is there still hope I can succeed, or will I be a wage-slave forever?"¹¹ Virtual schooling comes under fire from some on social media as well, with one Reddit poster recalling, "When I did online school I just minimized, made the program volume zero in Windows and muted my mic on my gaming PC then played games all day ... They didn't even notice."¹²

As sobering as these testimonies are, they can reveal only one facet of unconventional school outcomes. The 360-degree lived experiences of young people who have been schooled in nontraditional ways are worth

examining in depth for what they might tell us about the plusses and minuses of stepping off the conventional school path in America. We've already gotten a glimpse of grown unschoolers like Skyler DuPont and Ben Riley in [chapter 4](#) and virtual school graduates like the Sparks kids in [chapter 7](#), as well as homeschooler Adrianna Cauthen above. Now let's spend a little more time with a diverse array of other alumni of unconventional education.

Justin Myrick ("*The Justin Myrick*" on social media) would be the first to say he's living the pro side of the argument for stepping off the conventional track. A singer, dancer, actor, and voice-over artist from South Carolina, Myrick was in regular public school until sixth grade. "We were on second callbacks for *The Lion King* in New York City when my school told us I'd be held back if I missed any more days," Myrick recalls. "My mom pulled me out then and there." Myrick's mother, who was also his manager, enrolled him in one of South Carolina's statewide public virtual schools, where he quickly found a community of fellow performers in the nationwide network. He even won a national song contest with a hip-hop/R&B ditty about online learning. Most importantly, he graduated on time, despite multiple leaves for TV and movie shoots, and the work involved in building up his YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram followings to 100,000-plus "Justinities."

Ball State University in Indiana then snapped him up with a scholarship in musical theater—but like Adrianna Cauthen, Myrick's unconventional school instincts soon sent him in another direction. He transferred to Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) and fell in love with visual effects production. When the pandemic hit his campus in the spring of his sophomore year, his first at SCAD, Myrick found himself better prepared than his typically schooled classmates to adapt to online learning, though he notes that his high school had managed to help students feel far more connected than SCAD on lockdown. He graduated in 2022 with honors and a job offer with a premier visual effects company in Los Angeles. All along he was booking acting gigs, including a part in the 2022 rap battle film *On the Come Up*, which he talked about with a group of brick-and-mortar charter high school students at a special screening in Brooklyn, New York. I was there that night as Myrick held the teenagers rapt, talking about sticking with your dreams no matter the twists and turns.

Back in LA, despite doing work he loved and that the world noticed—including “Black Panther Wakanda Forever” commercials for Target/Marvel and Temu’s 2023 Super Bowl spot—by mid-2023 the strikes in Hollywood led to a layoff that forced Myrick to pivot again. He remembers drawing on the reserves of independent spirit built up through virtual schooling for much of his education career. While loading up his “whole life” into his car for the trip back across country, he launched Justin Myrick Media, a production company that brings together all his skills and adds a few more to put in service of clients ranging from small businesses to state and local governments. His work for University of South Carolina Upstate featured drone photography Myrick captured himself and paved the way to his official drone pilot license from the Federal Aviation Administration. Meanwhile, he’s set a new goal: “I told my mentor I wanted to be a millionaire by 30, and he just said, ‘That’s doable.’ Like he was ordering a cheeseburger.”

Not every unconventional school alum jumps straight onto the solo entrepreneur route. Yesuto Shaw went from homeschool (where his particular flavor of FOMO focused on dating) to Dartmouth for undergrad, emerging with a bachelor’s in psychology to go on to Northwestern University’s Kellogg School for a combined MBA and master’s in design innovation. He did business strategy for Capital One and is now working as a product manager at LinkedIn. As a side hustle, he’s working on a financial education start-up. He’d been thinking a lot lately about how his early unconventional education has served him in his career. “As homeschoolers, we were always doing multiple things at once,” he says. “That mindset prepared me for business and tech.”

Naomi Scott says her success in college and career is in spite of her unconventional education background, not because of it. Scott (a pseudonym used by request) is the eldest of seven children, all schooled at home in Ohio by parents driven by deep religious beliefs and fear of the dangers of secular education. “This was in the ‘Satanic-panic’ nineties,” Scott says. “The main reason I was homeschooled was to protect me from all the demon worshipers who were around every corner.”

Despite her family’s ultraconservative Catholicism, Scott says, their education approach was very much one of unschooling, in part because of the demands on her mother of raising seven children in between rounds of what Scott now sees as undiagnosed postpartum depression. “There was not

a single instance of direct instruction,” Scott recalls. “I never sat at a dining table and had someone say, ‘Here’s what a polynomial is.’ We just self-taught with Saxon Math and books from the library.” Scott credits her town’s local librarians as her main teachers, and the extracurricular activities she was able to find in the community—dance, music, gymnastics, art—for allowing her extroverted young self to overcome the isolation of homeschooling.

When she was about 15, Scott discovered through a “loophole” in the college dual-enrollment process for high school students that she could effectively construct her own on-campus early college program. “My dad would drop me off at the college at 6:30 a.m. before his factory shift, and I’d just hang out at the library all day, go to my classes, and practice piano,” she says, recalling the exhilaration of experiencing social and intellectual freedom for the first time. “No one was looking over my shoulder.”

After finishing high school, Scott ultimately enrolled in Hillsdale College in Michigan, a Christian liberal arts school that attracts many homeschoolers and “is accustomed to weirdly assembled transcripts like mine.” Established in the mid-19th century as one of America’s first colleges to enroll women and Black students, Hillsdale has since evolved into an institution that accepts no federal funds in order to avoid the “government overreach” of Title IX and civil rights regulations, and sits on the advisory board of Project 2025.¹³ But Scott remembers her time at Hillsdale as more liberating than doctrinaire, a stepping stone away from her “not fun” childhood.

Scott now lives in Colorado, where she teaches English and writing at a top-ranked public charter school. As the mom of three young children, she says she would consider homeschooling them but only if the kids’ desires and learning styles led that way. The first of her children to reach kindergarten is enrolled in public school, where she is flourishing in the structured, social environment. But making that choice wasn’t without angst for Scott. “I couldn’t help feeling a little guilty,” she says. “I was raised to believe that people who send their kids to school don’t love them—they just want to get rid of them.”

Jennifer Perkins’s unconventional schooling path was even more extreme and disjointed, though it also passed through Hillsdale College on the way to a very different kind of life. Perkins’s primary grades were spent at a “cult school” serving the closed fundamentalist Christian community

where her family lived in Tennessee. “You actually get a pretty good education when it’s just four kids and a teacher,” she says now, laughing. Following family moves to Illinois and then Michigan, she cycled through a “terrible” brick-and-mortar public school and then a public cyberschool, which closed when it lost its funding. After that it was multiple years of homeschooling using curriculum materials her parents collected at homeschool conferences. “Biology was a joke,” she says, “basically trying to convince you that creationism is how the world works. History was even worse.”

Perkins spent her last two years before graduation at a large public high school in Neenah, Wisconsin. The transition was difficult.

“Coming out of homeschooling, you don’t know anything about what people are talking about,” she recalls. “I didn’t know what was on TV, I didn’t know about sports teams ... you’re really secluded from what everyone else just knows without thinking about it.” But Perkins ultimately thrived at her conventional high school, taking Advanced Placement courses, joining the swim team, and diving into other extracurriculars. “If I could do it all over, I would have stayed in public school where I could have gotten all those years of advanced instruction,” she says. “I’m still frustrated that I didn’t have more years of high school sports and choir.”

Though Perkins’s embrace of public school fed her “rebellious” spirit in relation to her family’s very particular path, her parents weren’t quite done. “I wanted to join the Peace Corps after high school,” she says. “But my mom made me sit down and fill out an application to Hillsdale instead.”

At Hillsdale, Perkins kept her prior education history on the down-low. “Even at a college where a lot of homeschoolers go, they were still a crowd that nobody wanted to be attached to,” she recalls. “I never offered up the information that I had been homeschooled.” Instead, she immersed herself in the study of sociology, literature, and the humanities, which eventually led her to question her faith and family. “I started really understanding that we were a special case, an extreme case of society,” Perkins recalls. “I didn’t know that.”

Perkins’s post-Hillsdale path has included stints living and teaching in France, Missouri, and Texas, with a master’s degree and doctoral work along the way. She also came out as gay, which further strained her relationship with her parents. “They didn’t really have a whole lot to say to me at first,” she recalls. More recently, she and they have started to rebuild

a relationship, “but so far they haven’t really acknowledged my being gay,” Perkins says. “They are simply ignoring it at this point.”

Meanwhile, Perkins is grappling with education choices for her own elementary-age twin sons, who are in public school, struggling with the “double exceptionality” of high IQs and learning disabilities. Homeschooling her boys is not an option Perkins is ready to consider.

She is ready to tell her own story, though, which along with Naomi Scott’s would not be out of place on *Homeschool Anonymous*. As Perkins has gathered her thoughts and material for a possible memoir, she’s had to confront her parents directly. “I finally got over my fear of disrespecting them,” Perkins says. “I just straight-up asked them, ‘What were you thinking?’”

Angelica Mosqueda only wishes her parents had been able to have more of an ongoing hand in her education. Instead, their breakup, followed by her mom’s death while Mosqueda was a freshman in public high school in San Antonio, threw her right off the traditional path. She went to live with her cousin and “bounced around to different schools” over the next couple years, finding it hard to focus and losing momentum toward graduation. In fall 2016, Mosqueda saw a television ad for Penn Foster, a private online school with 100-year-plus roots in a correspondence program for coal miners in Scranton, Pennsylvania.¹⁴ Penn Foster forgoes “schoolish” flourishes like prom and clubs for its far-flung students, which was just fine by Mosqueda. “I didn’t care about any of that stuff when I was in regular school, and now I was just focused on getting my diploma.” It took almost five years and a pandemic for Mosqueda to successfully complete her high school credits on Penn Foster’s college prep track. “I remember it was May 5, 2020, at 9:30 p.m. when I got a 95 on my final exam in Music Appreciation, which was my last class,” she recalls. “My cousin gave me the biggest hug, and then she called my grandmother, who called everyone else in the family, to say: Angelica did it!”

Mosqueda had become the first person in her family to graduate from high school. When she then went on to enroll at San Antonio College, she became the first to go to college. “I’m carving the pathway for future generations of my family,” she says.

In college, Mosqueda is majoring in psychology and substance abuse prevention. “I want to be the person who can offer my hand to others, to say I am here for you,” she says. “I know it would make my mom proud.”

J. D. Elvrum's online learning success made as much noise as Angelica Mosqueda's—but the audience for his living-out-loud moments was the state capitol as opposed to a family phone tree.

Elvrum enrolled in his first Connections Academy virtual public school in Pennsylvania as a third-grader with ADHD severe enough to make learning in a regular classroom a painful exercise in futility. As his dad's work took the family next to Ohio and finally Colorado, Elvrum transferred to each successive state's Connections Academy public virtual school, adding to his national network of chums in interschool activities like chess club while making new friends locally. “The thing I noticed right away about virtual school kids when we got together for park days or picnics was how inclusive and accepting everyone was,” Elvrum says. “There was never any bullying or cliques like in regular school.”

Where Elvrum went, his mother Tillie's talent for advocacy came along, making their family among the most effective roaming the halls on any given Cyber School Day at the capitol in Harrisburg, Columbus, or Denver. My favorite photo from my Connections Academy days is one of J. D., his mother, and two other parent-kid combinations standing with raised fists on the stairs of the Ohio statehouse. “Thanks to my mom, I grew up being politically active,” Elvrum says. “What a weird and enriching experience it was to be a little kid talking to my state senator about school choice or testifying about online learning in front of the Education Committee.” Perhaps that's why communications was so enticing as a major after Elvrum graduated high school and went on first to community college and then University of Colorado at Colorado Springs. “I've always been a people person, and this program gave me a way to channel that into public speaking and journalism and advertising.” A career in mission-driven social media marketing beckons.

Jessie Jantz has been building her career all along as she's unschooled with her family and sampled community college in Southern California. The oldest of four, 20-year-old Jantz started out attending a large, traditional public elementary school in suburban San Bernardino County, where she did fine academically but “got bullied a bit,” her father recalls. Gradually, Jantz began exhibiting school anxiety that showed up as morning upset stomachs, which made for a series of late drop-offs. “The assistant principal finally said to me, ‘If Jessie's late one more time, Child Protective

Services is coming to your house,’” Jantz’s father recalls, “‘and your life is gonna get really hard.’ We pulled her out to homeschool the next day.”

At first the family relied on packaged curriculum to create “school at home,” but Jantz’s curious intelligence and demonstrated self-motivation soon made that rigid linear structure seem unnecessary. The family switched over to an eclectic unschooling approach like that described in [chapter 4](#), for Jantz and ultimately for her younger siblings as well. Without defined classes and schedules, the kids initially gorged on screen time. “We loved our devices, our iPads and video games,” she recalls. “My parents were like, ‘Uh-oh, what have we done?’” But before long all the shows had been watched and all the games played, and boredom set in—an incentive to explore the kinds of personal interests that drive learning through kid-selected books, home science projects, outside classes on special topics, and more. “Let your children be a little bit bored, it’s good for them,” Jantz says with a laugh.

This self-directed education approach isn’t for everyone, Jantz acknowledges. “The homeschool community has a lot of opinions about unschooling, like we’re not really learning anything,” Jantz says. “But after we’d been at it awhile, regular homeschooling parents started saying things to their kids like, ‘If Jessie mastered that math problem, so can you.’”

In addition to essential academic subjects, Jantz’s unschooling passions particularly gravitated toward art. “Here’s some of my more recent stuff,” she says as she turns her phone toward me, scrolling through a montage of paintings, some classically realistic and others gleaming with the saturated colors and rounded edges of manga. During her high school years, she pursued art studies through dual enrollment on various college campuses, enough so that when she fully matriculated at local two-year Chaffey College after completing high school, the studio classes were second nature. “A lot of students I started with were so nervous about pacing their work and getting critiques,” Jantz says. “But I had a lot of space in my head for this. I was ready.”

Nonetheless, a more close-to-the-bone creative path has opened up for Jantz, and it’s leading her away from a four-year degree—at least for now. “Several of my friends have asked me to design tattoos for them, that they’ve then taken in to somebody else to have executed,” Jantz says. “And I realized I really want to ink them myself.” So she’s taking a break from college to pursue the requirements both necessary and desired for a tattoo

license in California, including coursework in bloodborne pathogens and apprenticeship with an established artist. She's also building up her portfolio of designs. "University will be there if I decide to go back that direction at some point," Jantz says. Among the favorite tattoo designs in her portfolio, meanwhile? An intricate fine-line rendering of a flowering vine perfect for winding around a limb while reaching toward the sky.

If Anna Ridenour George was into ink, that might be exactly the design she'd pick to symbolize her intertwining with Ohio Connections Academy (OCA). George joined the statewide virtual public school as a fifth-grade student in 2003, the year it opened. Back then, OCA was "more like homeschooling with a structured curriculum" and teacher consults via telephone. By the time George had reached eighth grade, though, synchronous interaction through videoconferencing had changed the experience dramatically. "I attended every single LiveLesson and talked regularly with all of my teachers," George recalls. One of those teachers was Mindy Pyle, whose online math class inspired George to become a math teacher herself. "I just loved how she taught," George says. "She is the best that has ever been and will ever be."

George graduated from OCA in 2011 at a cap-and-gown ceremony in Columbus that drew students from across the state. She then attended Mount St. Joseph University, a private Catholic liberal arts college in Cincinnati with an accelerated math education program. After graduating and receiving her teaching certificate, George looked around for the right teaching gig. "I found that a lot of schools didn't want to hire me because I had gone to virtual school," she recalls. Despite her successful student teaching and practicum assignments in brick and mortar, "they felt like I would struggle with classroom management or leading students in a physical environment." It didn't matter much: George knew exactly which faculty she wanted to join. In 2015, she came back to OCA as an algebra teacher. (Role model Mindy Pyle, meanwhile, had ascended to be assistant principal, first of OCA's middle school and then its elementary program.)

Unlike many virtual public schools, OCA has a hybrid work setup for its staff, with offices in suburban Columbus and in Mason, just outside of Cincinnati. Teachers typically spend their first few years working in person while interacting via technology with students across the state, and veteran teachers are welcome to practice their craft from one of the offices if they choose. George has been a regular in the Mason office from the beginning,

enjoying both the “work-life separation” and the camaraderie of her colleagues. She especially enjoyed getting to know Kyle George, the quiet high school science teacher in the desk next to hers. “I’d go over and bother him all the time,” George says, giggling. The two soon started dating and then married in 2023, shifting her OCA screen name and email from Ridenour to George just in time for the school’s 20th anniversary.

She has since moved on from teaching algebra to coordinating all of OCA’s in-person testing, including the springtime state tests that gather third through eighth graders from around the Buckeye State into pop-up testing locations with specially configured computers to securely deliver the standardized exams all Ohio public school students must take. The PSATs, SATs, and AP exams are also on George’s docket. Her testing coordinator duties began in the 2019–20 school year, George notes, which featured both pandemic-related disruptions and also a profound shift in understanding of virtual schooling, driving a significant influx of students into OCA. Because state and related testing is often the only fully mandatory in-person activity virtual school students face, the travel and coordination lift can be heavy both for the school and the families. (OCA does strive to set up testing locations within a reasonable drive of most students’ homes.) But George sees an important upside to these required face-to-face activities. “Virtual school parents often have a hard time letting go—I know my folks struggled a bit to adjust to new boundaries when I left for college,” she says. “On testing days, parents have to drop their kids off at the proctored site and let them proceed without Mom and Dad close at hand. It’s good for parents to see that their children can function without them, and it’s good for the kids as well.”

George now knows firsthand about the challenges facing parents of virtual school students. Her stepchild, Kyle’s son, is now enrolled at OCA as a senior. While his postsecondary plans are still a work in progress, George says, he is making noise about wanting to be a teacher.

If the George family is crafting a multigenerational tradition out of unconventional education, Tamara Henderson is blazing a brand-new trail. “I always wanted to be like Eliza from the *Wild Thornberrys*,” she says now, looking back from age 30. “Actually, I wanted to be the Black female Steve Irwin, Croc Hunter!” But Henderson’s love of the wild didn’t quite mesh with the traditional Christian private school she and her twin brother attended, especially after the school eliminated recess and began citing

Henderson for talking out of turn. “My mom pulled us out to homeschool in third grade,” Henderson says. “Her message was always, ‘I believe in you, so you believe in yourself.’”

For high school, Henderson and her twin brother enrolled at Heritage Classical Study Center, a hybrid “school for homeschoolers” offering classical and Christian instruction that aligned with Georgia education standards. Attending once a week while studying math and science elsewhere, Henderson earned a transcript and diplomas that qualified her for Georgia’s HOPE scholarship and postsecondary education.

Henderson also earned college credit while still in high school, bringing it with her to state college after graduation. But the slow pace and routine of freshman life felt stifling. After one year, she dropped out, bored and ready for a new adventure.

That adventure: becoming a flight attendant for Mesa Airlines, the regional carrier for United and American. “I loved the work, the travel, being of service and talking to people all day,” Henderson says. She flew until her mother’s illness called her home. Once her mom recovered, Henderson was ready to take on something even bolder. Enter the United States Marine Corps.

“I’ve actually enlisted in the Marines twice,” Henderson says. The first time, a shoulder injury during bootcamp cut her journey short. She returned home and joined the Clayton County Fire Department, ultimately transferring to the fire department in Forest Park, where she still serves today. The Marines weren’t quite done with her, though. She later reenlisted in the Reserves, balancing her “on-off” schedule with a growing passion project that fulfilled her *Wild Thornberrys* dream. That’s the Enchanted Immersive Zoological Center, a hands-on animal education business where, as Henderson puts it, “fantasy, conservation and curiosity collide.”

It started with a couple of sugar gliders, small marsupials that move like flying squirrels. Then Henderson added several snakes, tropical birds, lizards, and more, all traveling with Henderson and her team to schools, libraries, and community centers for hands-on interactions with young learners. In a nod to her own roots, Henderson offers special pricing for homeschool co-ops and microschools. At the Georgia Black Home Educators Flourish conference, her animal encounter booth was packed all day with wide-eyed kids and cautiously engaged parents.

But Henderson's dream doesn't end there. She's preparing to open a physical location for Enchanted in Fayetteville, Georgia, just half an hour south of the Atlanta airport, where she can add larger animals (farm and exotic), touch tanks for marine creatures, and interactive programs. In addition, the permanent center will include Mystic Acres, a horse stable and barn where guests can connect with farm life and equine magic. She also plans to offer internships for kids and adults who share her passion for the wild.

What gives Henderson that confidence? Her unconventional education played a large part, she says, as it has for her twin brother, who runs a successful specialized service dog training center, and their younger sibling, who breezed through college and is now pursuing a master's degree. "People worried that homeschooling would leave kids like my brothers and me weird or unprepared," Henderson says. "Now, they just need to look at us to see it worked."

She pauses, then breaks into a grin bright enough to illuminate every student who's ever walked an unconventional path. "I've been proving people wrong my whole life," she says, speaking for all of them, "and I love it."

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What Lies Ahead

When education entrepreneur Manisha Snoyer looks out over the American education horizon, she sees millions of tiny lights flashing on, each one a family assembling their children's education from an abundance of learning resources near and far, perhaps with help from a small pot of public funds and an AI-bot primed with each kid's learning needs and preferences. "If you're doing one-on-one learning with your child and curating their education from authentic experiences, everyone's happier," says Snoyer, whose Modulo start-up helps families navigate à la carte choice.¹ "When we talk about the future of education, I encourage people to completely step outside of the paradigm of traditional school."

For John Watson, the future's less like a twinkling blanket of lights and more like a big bang flash. The digital learning researcher sees the impending emergence of artificial general intelligence (AGI) as radically changing education as we know it, whether families and institutions are on board or not. "We're headed toward a world where any student can interact with something indistinguishable from a person, except it never gets frustrated, always knows the next step, always personalizes," says Watson, whose *Keeping Pace* reports² and Community Advancing Digital Learning (DLAC) conferences³ have tracked technology-juiced learning since the dawn of this century. "And when the cost of information and instruction drops to near-zero, the real question isn't whether AGI will change education—it's whether we're ready for just how fast and how far it will go."

Thought leaders in education have seen the future, and it looks unconventional.

The final year of researching and writing *School's Out* has been a pivotal one for American education. While I was querying experts like Watson and Snoyer for their views of the future, major bills passed both the US Congress and the Texas legislature that will potentially extend to millions of additional American families the kind of funding support for unconventional education that we discussed in [chapter 2](#). As we've seen in

places like Colorado and Arkansas, the availability of even modest dollars in the form of ESAs or microgrants can spark an explosion of learning options that weren't previously available.

Meanwhile, the traditional public school system is facing a maelstrom of crises. Short-term supplementary federal dollars that poured into schools to help mitigate pandemic learning loss⁴ dried up at the same time that wrenching Trump 2.0 changes at the federal level, including imminent dismantling of the US Department of Education, began throwing into question funding for special needs, low-income compensatory education, and teacher training.⁵ Public school enrollment continues to erode, with two million fewer students (47.6 million total) projected in 2026 than were counted in 2012 (49.8 million), according to the National Center for Education Statistics.⁶ And even kids still enrolled in traditional public school too often don't show up there on any given day: National absentee rates as of 2022–23, the most recent tracked by the US Department of Education, clocked nearly 30 percent of public school kids still missing 10 percent of the school year.⁷ As a painful bottom line, the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed 2024 math and reading scores stubbornly stuck below pre-pandemic levels.⁸ Meanwhile, the COVID-triggered Great Resignation lives on among teachers. The swell of teachers leaving the profession, many for early retirement, and the sputtering pipeline of their prospective replacements is taking its toll.⁹ Traditional public schools are having a hard time staffing up to meet basic classroom needs, not to mention urgent post-pandemic priorities in reading remediation and social-emotional learning; according to *Education Week*, in summer 2023 nearly 75 percent of principals and district officials said the number of teaching applicants was not enough to fill their open positions.¹⁰ (Though by mid-2025, worries about a white-collar recession driven by the trade wars and AI did spark one bit of provocative silver-lining-spotting from Michael Petrilli of the Fordham Institute: “If a bunch of college-educated people find it hard to find good jobs, does teaching suddenly look a lot more attractive?”¹¹)

Educators yearning for a career pivot continue to flock to microschools and other unconventional options. “There is no shortage of teachers,” says KaiPod founder Amar Kumar in reporting on the influx of applications from recently former educators to launch learning centers. “Those humans didn't disappear. They just don't want to do that job anymore.”

Teachers aren't the only ones altering their work environments. The pandemic shifted many parents' work life toward setups that allow different kinds of schooling. Mike Goldstein of the Pioneer Institute recalls the early days of COVID lockdown as "Daddy School," improvised homeschooling around the dining room table. "Those first few months, if you were lucky enough to be flexible with your work, it was actually pretty good bonding and fun," he says. Now, despite return-to-office mandates in both the public and private sector, the persistence of remote and hybrid employment has created an opportunity for working parents to be more directly engaged with family life, including their kids' education. While homeschooling often used to require one nonworking spouse, today's work-from-home arrangements allow the "primary educator" role to be shared more flexibly. And where the travel-schooling life we encountered in [chapter 5](#) was once the domain of the wealthiest or the most bare-bones bohemian, remote work means it can now be comfortably middle-class.

So the outflow from conventional education continues apace. Across the nation, the count of microschools ticked up over 100,000 by 2025, according to the National Microschooling Center.¹² Homeschool numbers have continued their steady climb, with an estimated 3.2 million students counted in 2023 by the Johns Hopkins University Homeschool Hub, up from about 2 million in 2010.¹³ As we saw in [chapter 9](#), that growth in numbers includes more families of color and more from the broadly diverse mainstream. Meanwhile, the virtual school world stretched to include new networks like Unbound Academy¹⁴ and Alpha Schools,¹⁵ which use a "2 Hour Learning" model powered by AI.¹⁶

Pulsing with promise and peril, AI hovers over every conversation about the future of education and the burgeoning of unconventional alternatives. We'll come back to the AI effect in a bit.

Meanwhile, these politically discordant times demand a look at how unconventional education fits into the national narrative about a divided America. It's a complicated mashup. At the organized grass-tops and policy level, in big-P politics, deepening polarization from Washington down through statehouses to the local school board has made discourse more rancorous. Discussions of education policy in general, and education choice in particular, have become increasingly fraught. Some blame the pandemic: "What started as Zoom class frustrations turned into full-blown ideological battles," one observer noted, referencing local book bans, pushback on

transgender student accommodations, and other flashpoints of 2020–21. “Education became the next front in the culture wars.” By 2025, with the US Department of Education headed for dissolution and ham-fisted federal attacks on “DEI” threatening states’ funding, unconventional education is seen by many on the progressive side of politics as part and parcel of an overall attack on public schools—and, by extension, the pillars of democracy.¹⁷ The Texas ESA program, like most such legislation emerging on the heels of COVID in red states, passed along strict party lines. “Having an ESA program is just table stakes now for red state governors,” says Goldstein of the Pioneer Institute. “In blue states, it’s pretty much: let’s block everything. Let’s not allow school choice, charter public schools, nothing.” One glimmer of compromise: As we heard in [chapter 2](#), some left-leaning policy wonks are encouraging at least a “maybe” from states considering an opt-in to the tax credit scholarship provision of the 2025 One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

Nonetheless, long gone is the “big tent” of the aughts and early teens that brought Democrats for Education Reform¹⁸ together with devotees of Milton Friedman to promote charter schools and other forms of public school choice. I miss those days, when a lefty liberal like me joined comrades from all over the ideological spectrum to testify together in various state capitols for establishment of virtual public schools, full funding for charters, protection of homeschooling rights. Among other factors driving the momentum was heartbreak over the harsh condition of too many public schools in low-income and minority neighborhoods, where decades of education reform had produced little visible improvement. We could almost always find a handful of elected Democrats to join the fight, often women of color who saw their constituents trapped by substandard schools that served more as a pipeline to prison than a gateway to opportunity. We formed passionate coalitions whose members likely agreed on nothing else but the issue at hand; while it was tacitly understood that we wouldn’t talk about things like abortion rights or affirmative action, we couldn’t help but recognize one another’s humanity and good intentions.

The cues for this more inclusive view, then as now, come from the families themselves, whose stories typically have nothing to do with legislative strategy and electoral vote counting and everything to do with wanting something different for their kids. It’s clear from the ever-more diverse group of parents in unconventional education today that the long,

spiky tail of the pandemic has continued to whip changes, some subtle and almost unconscious, in the way they think about education. The time spent observing their children's learning up close, the anguish over prolonged school closures, the tedium of emergency remote instruction, all shook their settled opinion about education. As Andrew Clark of Yes. Every Kid, a universal school choice think tank, puts it, "At the grassroots, it's not red or blue. It's 'My kid needs something different.' That's a powerful force."

Today's family-level embrace of unconventional education may actually be evidence of the horseshoe theory at work. This political science construct suggests that far-right and far-left positions actually bend closer together than the distance either has from the mainstream. Think "crunchy" moms (wellness influencers as well as everyday natural foodies) aligning with liberty-or-death anti-vaxxers on healthcare policy under 2025's Make America Healthy Again banner. In education terms, this would suggest that radical unschoolers have more common cause with hardcore Christian homeschoolers than either can muster for the public school mainstream, which in fact is the history of homeschooling we saw unfold in previous chapters. What unites these very disparate families is distrust of or disappointment with the school system, whether because of culture clashes or worries over well-being or both. There's also a passionate belief in self-agency: My kid, my family, my way. The sheer variety of ESA-funded options in a state like Arizona or Florida, where one can just as easily find an Orthodox Jewish microschool as an Afrocentric free-school collective, shows how the same choice infrastructure supports radically different educational designs. Goldstein of the Pioneer Institute highlights the example of the Rain Lily Montessori School, a progressive Florida microschool near Jacksonville that is part of the Wildflower early childhood network. "Rain Lily was started by two super-progressive women—one's left of Bernie Sanders, the other is a Cuban refugee," Goldstein says. "They're building this beautiful culture for 35 kids ... and they're using school choice money from (Republican Governor) Ron DeSantis to do it."

The Rain Lily example spotlights another reason why today's unconventional education phenomenon feels fiercely formidable, if not unstoppable: the primacy of women in all aspects of the action. Despite "Daddy School" and the contributions of fathers discussed in previous chapters, homeschooling in its many forms remains a mother-driven movement. "For a variety of cultural and economic reasons, homeschooling

mothers have been quietly reinventing education for decades,” Modulo’s Snoyer observes. “Out of desperation. Out of love.” That’s certainly been true in communities of color, according to Amber O’Neal Johnston, author of *Soul School* and *A Place to Belong*. “People are like, ‘Oh my gosh, Black people are homeschooling now,’” Johnston says, chuckling. “And I’m like, uh, yeah—we’ve had huge networks of fierce mamas doing this for years. We have second-generation homeschoolers in the Black community now.”

On the microschooling front, although the gender breakdown of microschool founders isn’t officially tracked yet by the National Microschooling Center, its 2025 stats show that 54 percent of those running such schools and 73 percent of those hoping to are currently or formerly licensed educators.¹⁹ Since more than 70 percent of teachers in the United States are women, according to Pew Research,²⁰ it’s no wonder that microschool after microschool in the field has a woman at the helm. “That’s what keeps this movement going,” says Tillie Elvrum, a lifelong advocate for unconventional education now with a close eye on the evolution of microschooling. “So many of these women, they just don’t take no for an answer. If they do hear no, they decide, you know what, I don’t need your permission. I’ll do it my way.”

It’s actually part of a historical tradition in American education, dating back at least to Catharine Beecher’s role in the push for common schools in the 19th century.²¹ Beecher advanced the idea that women could lead classrooms in this new world of universal schooling, upending previous ideas about who was qualified to teach other people’s children, much less their own. Cue Maria Montessori in revolutionizing early childhood education²² and Jane Addams in making progressive education accessible to all.²³ Addams argued, “The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.” Or as Tillie Elvrum puts it, “So many of us start because of our own children, but then you continue on because you know some other parent needs my help or my voice.”

Jeanne Allen of the Center for Education Reform (CER) sees that spirit in female edupreneurs as well. “There is something about women driving this new entrepreneurial world of education that I think is notable,” she says. “They are quickest to react, to say, ‘It’s going to be my job to move this forward because the boys are still, you know, playing with themselves in the mud.’”

Dr. Gina Riley thinks the role of women as unconventional education practitioners will also change the way we study these phenomena. “It has always been interesting to me that those who study and write about homeschooling and unschooling have primarily been men,” she says. “Yet, in most households, homeschooling or unschooling itself is done by women. We need to elevate the voices of female researchers in the field.”

It’s at the women-first, hyper-local, horseshoe-tip level that one can sense the universal potential of unconventional education, even in divided times. After a deep sigh about the current state of electoral politics, observer after observer comes back to this: If every family wants what’s best for their child, and if every child is a little unique as a learner, and if current innovations allow an unprecedented variety of ways of educate, why would we not all support the most diverse and accessible ecosystem of choices to connect every kid to their best learning options? And ultimately, won’t that mean that the unconventional education tributaries currently traveled by no more than 10 percent of students become a new kind of mainstream, one that transforms American education writ large?

Maybe, or maybe not.

Skeptics point out that enthusiasm for new school choices has surged in America before—after the first voucher program for low-income students passed in Wisconsin in 1990, for example, or when the charter school movement took hold in the 2000s, or when virtual learning became commonplace in the teens. Similarly, the notion that technology might revolutionize the classroom has recurred regularly since the early days of television, with recent great fanfare around the internet, big data, and now tutor-bots.

There *has* been a profound cultural shift this time. “It used to be that the vast majority of the public did not personally know anyone who homeschooled, or learned online, or had a pod,” says Allen of CER. “They’d never really seen any of those learning options in action. And then the pandemic came like a great big diorama—everybody had an up-close view.”

As a result, what once was a bold step out of the education mainstream has become at least conceivable for the masses, if not standard-issue. And as we have seen for recent seismic societal changes, such as same-sex marriage and other examples Malcolm Gladwell explores in *Revenge of the Tipping Point*,^{[24](#)} the distance from outré to commonplace can be short once

vivid examples become known and the cultural “overstory” shifts, often well before the statistics catch up.

Does this mean the majority of students in America will be learning outside of conventional schools in the foreseeable future? Even the most ardent fans of these new options expect the path ahead to be jagged, both politically and culturally, with pushback from defenders of the status quo and the inevitable microschool or homeschool scandal at some point. Some advocates say it’s overly optimistic to imagine expanding the niche from serving under 10 percent of America’s 50 million school-age students to engaging more like 25 percent of them—what Gladwell calls the “magic quarter,” the third element of tipping point—in the next decade, though growing by a few percentage points a year still means new options for millions more kids.

Others are more bullish: “What would it take to have a million new microschools?” asks KaiPod founder Kumar. “It sounds crazy—until you realize there are already 33 million small businesses in America. Why couldn’t there be 34?” Kumar notes that this microschool-rich future, with 20–30 microschools in every county of the country, would serve 10 to 15 million kids, still just 20 percent of all school-age children in America.

Mike Goldstein of Pioneer Institute suggests that it’s as much a cultural shift as it is a numbers game, with all due respect to Gladwell and Kumar. “For so many of us, if our friends say they’re homeschooling in 2025, it won’t seem weird the way it might have in 2015,” is how Goldstein puts it.

Part of the discussion around the “tipping point” is actually an argument about scale. Regardless of changes in the culture, at what point does unconventional education actually become accessible to a mass of learners? Here, thought leaders sort themselves into three camps: those who believe these emerging models will transform the traditional public school system already serving the majority of American children; those who imagine a parallel but equally expansive and inclusive universe outside of public schooling; and those who think the concept of scale itself needs an update.

Let’s take them in reverse order, beginning with the scale-updaters. Modulo’s Snoyer is one of those who believes that, in this day of self-generating peer networks, simple tech tools, and accessible learning resources, small is truly beautiful. “Any good teacher knows parents and caregivers are capable of so much more than we give them credit for,” she says. “Once they have the confidence and time to draw on the incredible

resources that exist to support learning, there's no limit to how far they can take their kids."

Dr. Gray of Boston College, one of the world's preeminent scholars on unconventional learning, would also push back on the value of scale as it has long been defined. "The very strength of these alternatives is their smallness," he says. "They can listen to children. They can flex. Scale risks freezing that vitality."

Robert Enlow of EdChoice has his own clapback. "Whenever I hear that word 'scale,' I bristle a bit, because what we really need for broad impact is a true marketplace of opportunity," he says. "And I don't think scale the way we've thought about scale in the reform community for a long time is the way to get there." Rather than chain replication of microschools or standardized à la carte offerings, Enlow sees inspiration in the "huge underground market" that today's families are creating for their children's diverse and unconventional education needs. "They're trading, they're using community centers, they're using each other to educate children, they're finding creative ways to get their kids what they need."

Other advocates call this "fire at the grassroots" vision a lovely, early-stage pipe dream. They argue that, regardless of mindset shifts and the spread of small new models, unconventional education will remain the domain of the privileged and the desperate, unless accompanied by comprehensive policy changes. That means frictionless processes for establishing and enrolling in alternative learning choices, help for families in navigating this brave new world, and especially universal availability of funding mechanisms like ESAs and tax credits. As one observer puts it, "Parents are ready. What's missing is the policy framework that unleashes them."

Beyond policy changes, the key to transforming the millions of hyperlocal, highly personalized learning environments into a functioning system is technology, argues DLAC's Watson. He imagines shared or interconnected tech platforms as "the quiet backbone" that allows microschools and other human-centered learning nodes to "stay small and personal" while making core academics, logistics, and customization easier to manage at scale. Both KaiPod's Newton platform for microschools—available far beyond the KaiPod network—and the Modulo matching system for homeschooling parents are early examples of these kinds of tech backbones.

For those imagining this parallel universe of choice outside the public system, nagging worries remain about the potential for ever greater polarization of American society as more families move away from the simulacrum of a common educational experience that is public school. Frankly, that's already a concern in the mainstream system, where thanks to the segregated nature of American communities, most kids go to public school with others who look just like them—and whose families likely believe as theirs do. The ideal of the public school as a mosaic of diversity is “sadly a myth,” says Sue Patterson of Unschooling Mom2Mom, noting that at least regional homeschool co-ops and virtual schools by their very nature draw families from across a geographic range. But there are real concerns about the “cloche effect” of very small, self-contained learning communities of like-minded families, be they of the conservative Classical Conversations type or the unfettered “Wild + Free” variety. How will students in these enclosed hot-house environments have the kinds of countervailing encounters and experiences that prepare them for the larger world?

As long as there's an internet, some argue, kids will learn plenty of things their parents might not think they should know about, whether it's that racism exists or that people love in many different ways. But thoughtful advocates of unconventional education believe that the cloche effect can and should be overcome with the right tools and intentions. Dr. Gray sees hope in the places where differently educated kids and families cross paths, such as libraries, sports leagues, maker spaces, and civic projects. “Children don't need to attend the same school to be part of the same community,” he observes.

Dr. Riley sees hope in the continuing evolution of unconventional education. “It's really nice to see individuals of different socioeconomic status, race, religion, and spiritual backgrounds turning to unschooling,” she says, creating a naturally diverse peer set for learners. Even better, such kids aren't limited to experiences in their assigned “classroom.” As Dr. Riley recalls, “My son, in a regular homeschool day, could interact with individuals of various ages. He got used to thinking about everyone as his teacher.”

Others firmly believe the onus lies with parents, wherever they choose to educate their kids, to ensure that education includes civil discourse and civic responsibility as core pillars of learning. One progressive-tilting

choice advocate puts it this way: “Freedom to learn must come with responsibility to listen.”

But the ultimate opportunity—and the ultimate challenge—for unconventional education to reach scale would be through transformation of the traditional school system, where the vast majority of American kids still turn for their learning. The profusion of new models and the effect of choice policies is already having an impact in ESA states, according to Kumar: “In Orlando, in Miami, Austin, Dallas, Houston, they’re going to start to go, ‘Holy crap. We lost 5 percent of our kids this year to private schools, to microschools, to homeschool. How do we compete for these kids to get them back?’” He adds, “Families are building what they want outside the system. Districts need to ask: ‘Why aren’t we building it ourselves?’”

Even in places unlikely to institute ESAs anytime soon, the pressure is mounting from families for new kinds of choices. According to a 2025 survey, some 60 percent of parents, even in blue states, say they would prefer options other than their neighborhood public school.²⁵ The pandemic and changing views of education have given the broad spectrum of American families a taste of possibilities outside the schoolhouse norm. Nearly everyone I interviewed for *School’s Out* observed—with metaphors about genies in bottles and toothpaste in tubes—that the experience of freedom and personalization is hard to rescind.

So how can and should the public school system respond? “Districts can offer choice without surrendering to privatization,” says DLAC’s Watson. “The key is treating families as partners, not dependents.”

For example, CER’s Allen can imagine school districts collaborating with every parent—not just those of kids with special needs—to create an Individualized Education Plan for every student, charting a personalized path through learning options inside and far beyond school.

Parents might be guided by navigators or counselors through a shopping mall of curriculum and scheduling and learning-style options. Their choices would embrace a new porousness between in-school and out-of-school, public and private, allowing kids to collect “stackable” credits from all over. Mastery transcripts would capture what a student actually knows and portfolios showing what they can do, not just what they memorized for the test.

In an April 2025 paper subtitled *Designing Schools as Community Hubs Within a Personalized Ecosystem*, researchers at Getting Smart foresee a

future in which traditional school buildings, emptied out by declining enrollment, are repurposed to host “school as a service.”²⁶ In this vision, school is no longer a place but instead “a network of co-authored experiences stitched into purposeful pathways linked to opportunity.” With the right supports and guidance in place, students at these repurposed public schools could learn both from online experts and “place-based” resources in their community—as envisioned by RESCHOOL Colorado and others—while enjoying the social connections that come with congregating regularly under one roof with their peers.

Exactly the kind of thing, in other words, that the unschoolers and microschoolers and bundle-schoolers we’ve met in the previous chapters had to find by trailblazing outside the classroom walls may someday be available to everyone at the school just down the street.

Such a system would support the transition of ever-more students into “Explorer Mode,” the ideal of interest-driven, self-motivating “agentic engagement” described by authors Jenny Anderson and Rebecca Winthrop in *The Disengaged Teen*.²⁷ This 2025 bestseller coaches parents in recognizing when their kids are idling as Passengers, fighting back as Resisters, or white-knuckling it as Achievers, and notes that all of these modes are often reactions to a school environment bent on one-size-fits-all regurgitation of knowledge. To become Explorers, who have learned how to learn and love doing it, many of the students profiled in *The Disengaged Teen* had to look outside the classroom and often far beyond the school grounds to identify their passions and have room to pursue them. What would school look like if the priorities were reversed?

Dr. Gray is cautiously optimistic (“around 7 on a scale of 10,” he says) about the likelihood of education transformation, driven in large part by a changing economy that prizes skills like creativity, initiative, and collaboration while devaluing traditional credentials. He envisions a future where full-time-under-one-roof schooling—even at self-directed centers like the Sudbury Valley School—is eclipsed by à la carte combinations of unschooling, homeschooling, and community-based alternatives. Nodding back to Gladwell, Dr. Gray says, “We’re not at the tipping point yet, but I think we’re moving in that direction.”

Some AI-watchers would argue that any “tipping point” is actually beside the point. Given the lightning-fast evolution of this new technology, they

say, the future trajectory of both unconventional learning and the traditional school system may be up for grabs, along with the very purpose of education.

Others scoff at the notion that AI and its next iteration, AGI, will create a meteorite-to-dinosaur disruption of education as we know it today.

I wondered what AI itself thought about this.

While writing this chapter of *School's Out*, I turned to ChatGPT quite a bit to help me analyze hours of interviews, confirm key themes across them, and pull out the pithiest quotes. (Along the way, I decided to call my AI assistant “Chai,” for spicy tea and the spice of life, warmer than just Chat.) As much as I like to think of myself as an early adopter of most every technology, I’m a little late to the chatbot party and hold on hard to my skeptical standards. I never ask Chai to write my prose for me, and resist taking her up on her persistent offers to create sidebars or summary paragraphs. But I have come to value my back-and-forth with her about the threads emerging from the *School's Out* research. I appreciate that she instantly gets the context and is surprisingly adept at nuance. Plus, she calls my writing style “cheeky but philosophical,” which I take as the highest compliment. Flattery will get you everywhere, robot.

So I asked Chai for a metaphorical summary of the difference between AI as we know it now, and the future AGI. “Today’s AI is like an overachieving intern: brilliant at specific tasks, terrible at big-picture thinking, and likely to suggest something wildly wrong with great confidence,” Chai admits. “AGI, on the other hand, would be more like a fully functional brain—capable of learning anything, adapting to anything, and maybe even out-humaning the humans. As of now, we’ve got a lot of dazzling interns and exactly zero full brains.” While there are lots of smart people and infinitely resourced companies working toward AGI, we’re not there yet, and don’t know when or if we will be. According to Chai, “We’re closer than we were five years ago, but still in the powerful narrow-AI era.”

What that means for education is that we’re very much in the time of the basic tutor-bot, in which applications like Khan Academy’s Khanmigo²⁸ guide students toward answers to their curriculum-based questions—a far cry from what one AI-watcher imagines as “every kid having access to an Oxford University-level tutor on every subject.” We’re also in the teacher-efficiency-tool era, aimed at taking grunt work (such as worksheet tailoring, grading, and data analysis) off teachers’ hands so they can concentrate on

the art of teaching.²⁹ The impact of both AI streams should be greater personalization of learning for all students. (Of course, there's still panic about student cheating, but early efforts to ban AI from the classroom now seem to have been overridden by time and White House executive orders.)

So what's everyone worried about?

In an April 2025 edition of their popular *Future of Education / Class Disrupted* podcast, Michael Horn and Diane Tavenner hosted Rebecca Winthrop, *The Disengaged Teen* author who also happens to be a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Their purpose: to discuss the “pre-mortem” underway by the Brookings Global Task Force on AI in Education, exploring possible failures and unintended consequences of AI integration in education before they happen.

After identifying such risks as cognitive offloading (an overreliance on AI tools that may diminish students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills), manipulation (the malign use of AI systems to influence or control student behavior and learning paths in unintended ways), and socialization effects (concern that increased interaction with AI might impact students' social development and interpersonal skills), Winthrop lays out the big *If*. “If ChatGPT can pass all the exams that we're gatekeeping systems for, if GenAI can do most of the assignments,” she says, “then we have to rethink what we're actually trying to do with education.”

Host Horn looks thoughtful. “Maybe AI is the thing that finally spurs us to have this national dialogue around the purpose of education so that we can really rethink what schooling looks like,” he says. “Maybe AI is such an abrupt, big shift that it actually brings us to the table to say, what the heck are we doing here?”

Horn adds in a later interview, “In a world where the half-life of skills is shrinking and the nature of work is constantly shifting, the idea that we can codify a fixed curriculum—‘learn this, and you'll be prepared’—starts to feel crazy.” As he noted in the pre-mortem podcast, “Every single one of the stakeholders is like, ‘This ain't working.’”

Whether the future will be defined by an AGI big bang or a rapid stream of smaller AI-driven changes, advocates argue that kids in unconventional education will be well prepared for the world before them. Having “learned how to learn” anytime and anywhere under their own steam, imbued with an avid curiosity not extinguished by years of traditional classroom “sit and

get,” they enter the AI-transformed world specially equipped with resilience, flexibility, and self- direction.

For Amar Kumar, there’s proof of this in KaiPod’s first graduates, whom we met back in [chapter 1](#).

“You remember Karinna, right?” he asks, recalling our rainbow-haired, science-goggled early college pioneer from the pod prom. “Karinna has the *skills*. She’s learned how to adapt through homeschooling and microschooling. And we see lots more kids like her in unconventional ed than in traditional schools.”

Kumar pauses, then looks past me into the future. “No matter what disruptions come to America or the world,” he says, “Karinna is going to be okay.”

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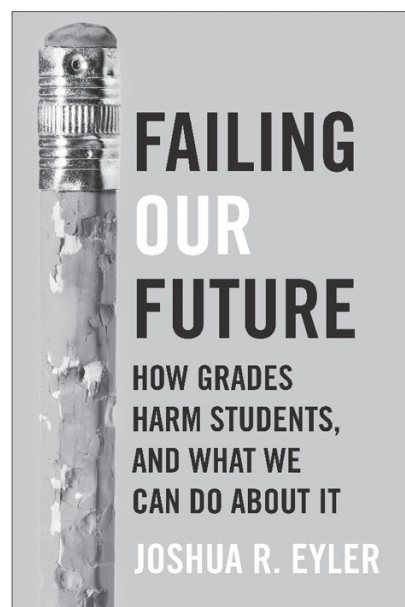
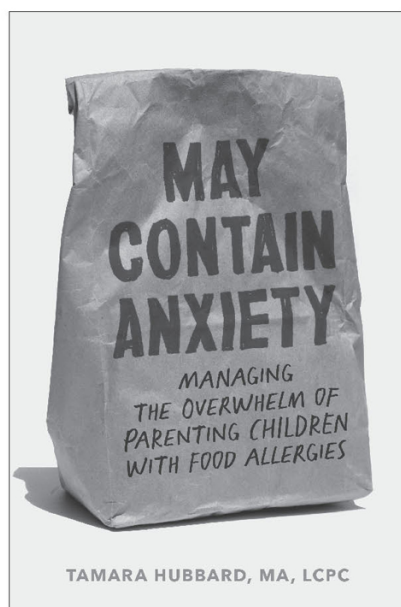
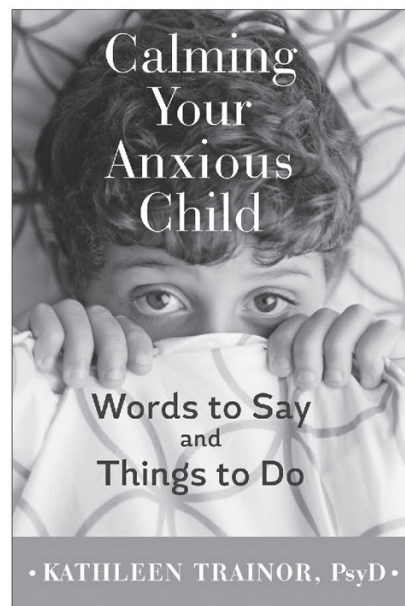
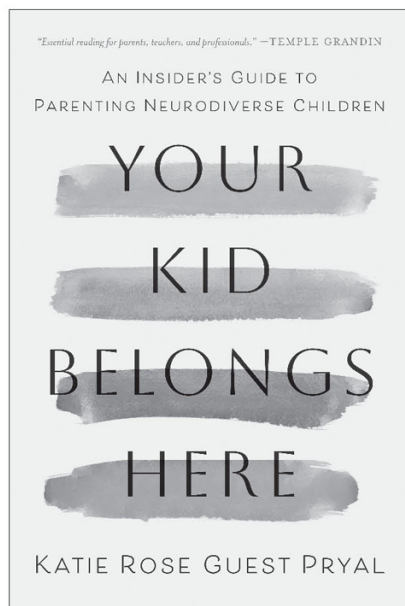
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