

# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation Across the US

A case study of unconventional  
learning models in 5 cities

**KERRY McDONALD**

MAY 2023



Children at Wildflower New York Charter School in the South Bronx

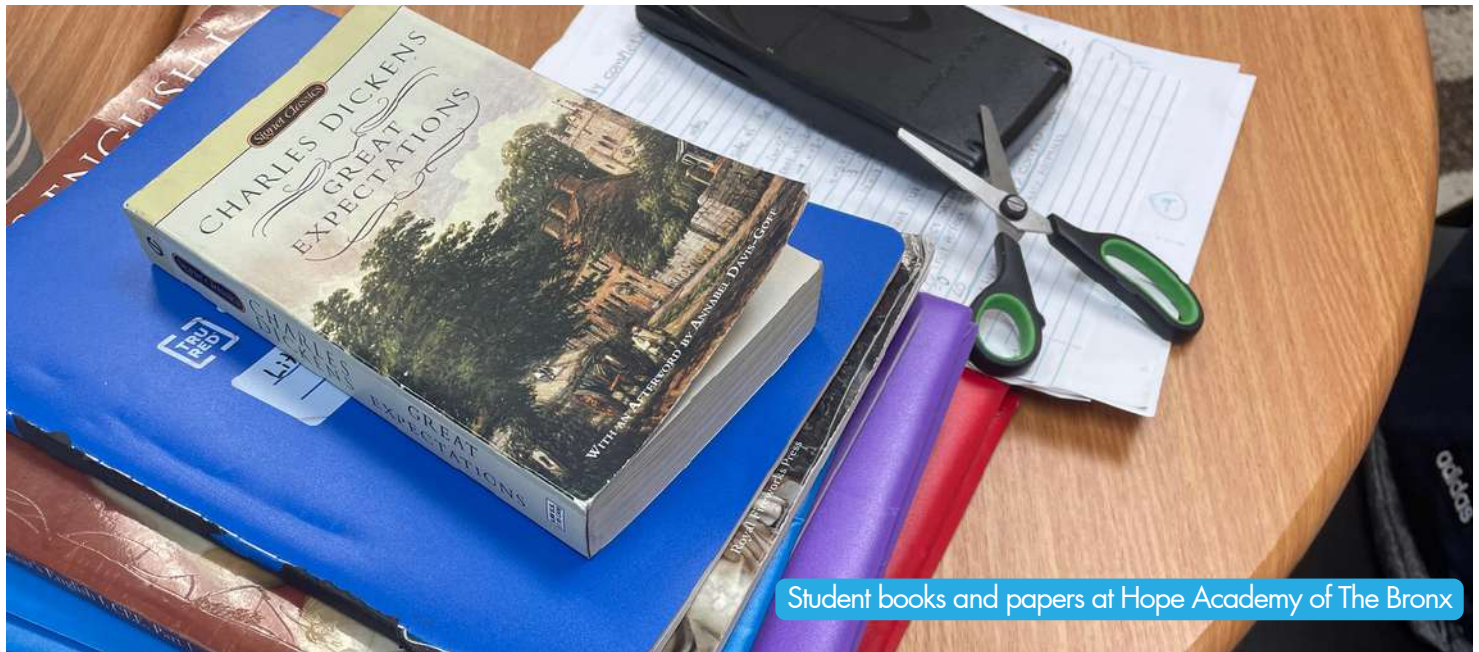
# The rise of bottom-up education models

Across the US, everyday education entrepreneurs are reimagining K-12 education in simple but profound ways. Some of these entrepreneurs are parents trying to solve an educational problem for their own families who decide to bring others along with them. Others are teachers who became fed up with one-size-fits-all standard schooling and set out to create better options. All are ordinary people who have taken on the extraordinary challenge of transforming K-12 education from the bottom up, with small, neighborhood solutions that are having a big, nationwide impact.

Increasingly, these solutions feature out-of-the-box learning models that challenge the traditional schooling status quo. They are learning pods and homeschool collaboratives that bring together local families for shared instruction. They are hybrid schools that offer part-time, drop-off classes for homeschoolers. They are microschools, which are intentionally small, mixed-age learning settings with hired educators that emphasize individualized, mastery-based learning. They are low-cost private schools that prioritize personalized learning. They are small, public charter schools that seek to innovate while offering a tuition-free option for families. They are virtual platforms, coaching services, tutoring centers, and similar programs that make it easier for parents and learners to step outside of a conventional classroom.

This burst of education entrepreneurship is occurring in big and small communities across the country. From the bustling boroughs of New York City to the suburban neighborhoods of Richmond, Virginia, to the busy Dallas/Fort Worth area of Texas and the lively neighborhoods of Detroit, to the rural corner of Grants Pass, Oregon, everyday entrepreneurs are creating innovative, community-based educational models that enable each individual learner to flourish.

Over the past few months, I have crisscrossed the country meeting these entrepreneurs and visiting the programs they've built, as well as interviewing them for my twice-weekly LiberatED podcast and regular articles at Forbes.com and FEE.org. These entrepreneurs are diverse in every possible way, from their geography and demographics, to their distinct educational philosophies and approaches, but they share a common commitment to meeting children's educational needs beyond a traditional classroom.



## Parents want different learning options

Interest in alternative education models, such as homeschooling and microschooling, had been rising during the first two decades of the millennium, as I detailed in my 2019 book, *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom*. The education disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic response supercharged this interest. Beginning in 2020, more parents became aware of learning options beyond their local, traditional schools and became more receptive to different types of teaching and learning methods.

According to a 2023 analysis by Stanford economist Thomas Dee, more than 1.2 million students left local district schools between the 2019/2020 and 2021/2022 school years, with many of them going into homeschooling or private schooling settings—and staying there.[1] As Chicago PBS reported in January 2023, the Chicago Public Schools have lost 10 percent of their student body, or about 37,000 students, between the 2019 and 2022 school years. Ninety-one percent of those students who left are from low-income, predominantly minority households. They are choosing private education and charter schooling instead.[2]

In 2021, the U.S. Census Bureau confirmed this exodus from district schools, reporting a doubling of the homeschooling population and a five-fold increase in the number of black homeschooled students, who became overrepresented in the homeschooling population compared to the overall K-12 public school population.[3] Homeschooling numbers today remain well above pre-pandemic levels in most areas of the US. Private schools and charter schools have also seen enrollment gains in many places over the past three years, and rough estimates suggest that up to two million students are currently learning full-time in a microschool.[4]

Parents want new and different education options. They want alternatives to the traditional school system, as recent polling from Populace, a Massachusetts think tank, revealed. “Americans don’t want ‘better’; they want different,” said Todd Rose, a former Harvard Graduate School of Education professor and the cofounder of Populace. “They want a way out of the one-size-fits-all approach driven by standardized testing models and elite institutions making us compete in a zero-sum game and instead an educational framework geared towards individualized learning, practical skills, and preparation for a meaningful life.”[5]



## Everyday entrepreneurs are reimaging learning

Everyday entrepreneurs are responding to this growing demand for different learning models beyond standard schooling. The VELA Education Fund, a philanthropic non-profit that supports non-traditional, out-of-system learning models, has issued 2,000 grants to these everyday entrepreneurs since 2019, totaling more than \$24 million. In surveying their grantees, VELA found that 93 percent of the students and families attending these non-traditional learning environments are low-income or from historically underserved populations, and nearly 40 percent of the entrepreneurs leading these programs are intentionally serving these populations as part of their organizational mission.[6]

“Our research affirmed something we at VELA already knew: that unconventional education is for *everyone* — not just for white, affluent families,” said Michael Crawford, VELA’s Director of Community Research. “What we continue to see is that a diverse range of entrepreneurs are creatively responding to the needs of learners and families in their communities by devising bespoke, flexible, and resilient business models to launch and sustain their programs.”

Research conducted by the National Microschooling Center reveals similar results, with the opportunity to serve “systemically underserved or marginalized communities” named the top motivator of 100 prospective founders, followed by the opportunity to “enable children to thrive as they had not in prior settings.”[7]

This case study offers snapshots of 35 of the entrepreneurial parents and educators who are transforming K-12 education in five communities across the country, showing parents what is possible for their children and encouraging aspiring entrepreneurs everywhere to take their own enterprising leaps.

[1] Dee, Thomas. "Where the Kids Went: Nonpublic Schooling and Demographic Change during the Pandemic Exodus from Public Schools," Urban Institute, February 9, 2023: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/where-kids-went-nonpublic-schooling-and-demographic-change-during-pandemic>

[2] Adu-Wadier, Bridgette, et al. "More Chicago Families Turning to Private, Charter Schools as CPS Enrollment Declines," WTTW, January 14, 2023: <https://news.wttw.com/2023/01/14/more-chicago-families-turning-private-charter-schools-cps-enrollment-declines>

[3] Eggleston, Casey, and Fields, Jason. "Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey Shows Significant Increase in Homeschooling Rates in Fall 2020," US Census Bureau, March 22, 2021: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>

[4] McShane, Michael, and DiPerna, Paul. "Just how many kids attend microschools?" EdChoice, September 12, 2022: <https://www.edchoice.org/engage/just-how-many-kids-attend-microschools/>

[5] "Populace Study Reveals Crisis of Confidence in American Education," eLearning Inside, January 18, 2023: <https://news.elearninginside.com/populace-study-reveals-crisis-of-confidence-in-american-education/>

[6] "Open For Business." VELA Education Fund, 2023: <https://www.openforbusiness.velaedfund.org>

[7] "American Microschools: A Sector Analysis," National Microschooling Center, April 2023: <https://microschoolingcenter.org/american-microschools>

# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation Across the US

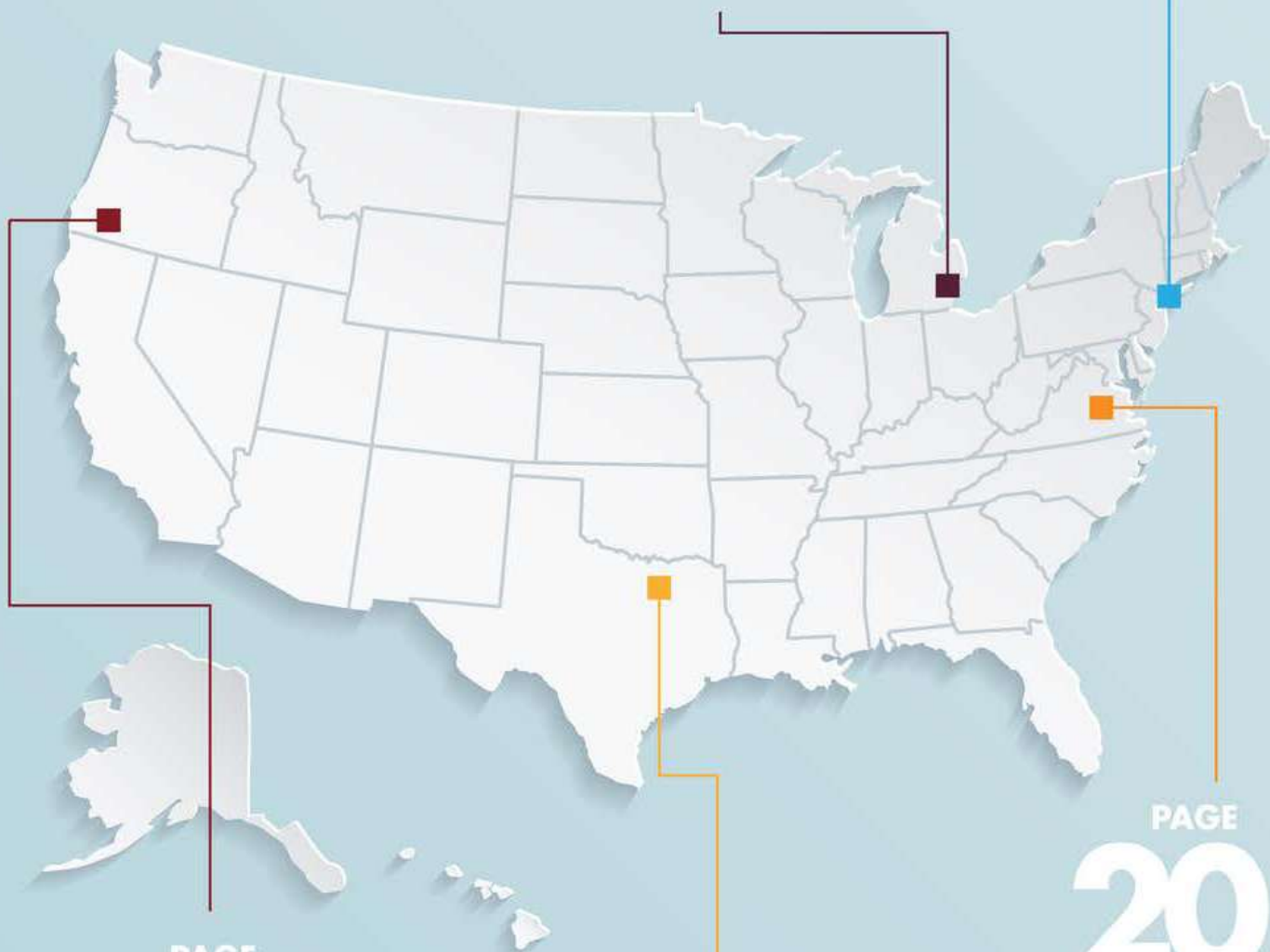
KERRY McDONALD

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**RICHMOND, VA**

# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in New York City

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Unconventional learning models  
in New York

**KERRY McDONALD**



## Big educational change in the Big Apple

New York City is emerging as a hub of education entrepreneurship and innovation. From homeschooling centers and microschools, to low-cost private schools and charter schools that emphasize individualized learning, New York City is home to visionary parents and educators who are redefining K-12 education from the bottom up.

While new learning models have emerged in recent years, New York City has long attracted entrepreneurial educators who have launched learner-centered programs outside of traditional schooling.

The following pages showcase nine innovative learning models in the Big Apple, but there are many more. Some of these programs have been around for more than a decade and continue to attract new families and evolve their offerings. Others are brand new, created in response to rising interest in learner-centered, out-of-system education possibilities.

All of the educators spotlighted here believe deeply in an educational vision that celebrates the individual gifts of each learner, and enables all children to achieve their personal goals and live fulfilling lives.



A child learns at Wildflower New York Charter School

01

**Brooklyn Apple Academy (Park Slope, Brooklyn)**

One of the first self-directed learning centers for homeschoolers in New York City, established in 2010

02

**The Art of Words Community School (DUMBO, Brooklyn)**

Founded in 2020 as a small, private school with a focus on personalized learning through art and literature

03

**Joyful Learning Academy (DUMBO, Brooklyn)**

A drop-off homeschool resource center offering part-time, supplemental programming and after school tutoring

04

**Pono NYC (Citywide)**

Launched in 2010 as the city's first democratic, outdoor co-learning community

05

**Off Da Beaten Path (Citywide)**

One-on-one coaching and support for young people who want to take a self-directed approach to their education

06

**Coney Island Clubhouse (South Brooklyn)**

A newer self-directed learning center for homeschoolers

07

**Synergy: An Acton Academy (Manhattan)**

New York City's first Acton Academy

08

**Wildflower New York Charter School (South Bronx)**

A tuition-free school that is part of the national Wildflower Montessori microschool network

09

**Hope Academy of The Bronx (Bronx)**

A faith-based microschool for students with learning disabilities and delays





## Brooklyn Apple Academy

### Noah Mayers

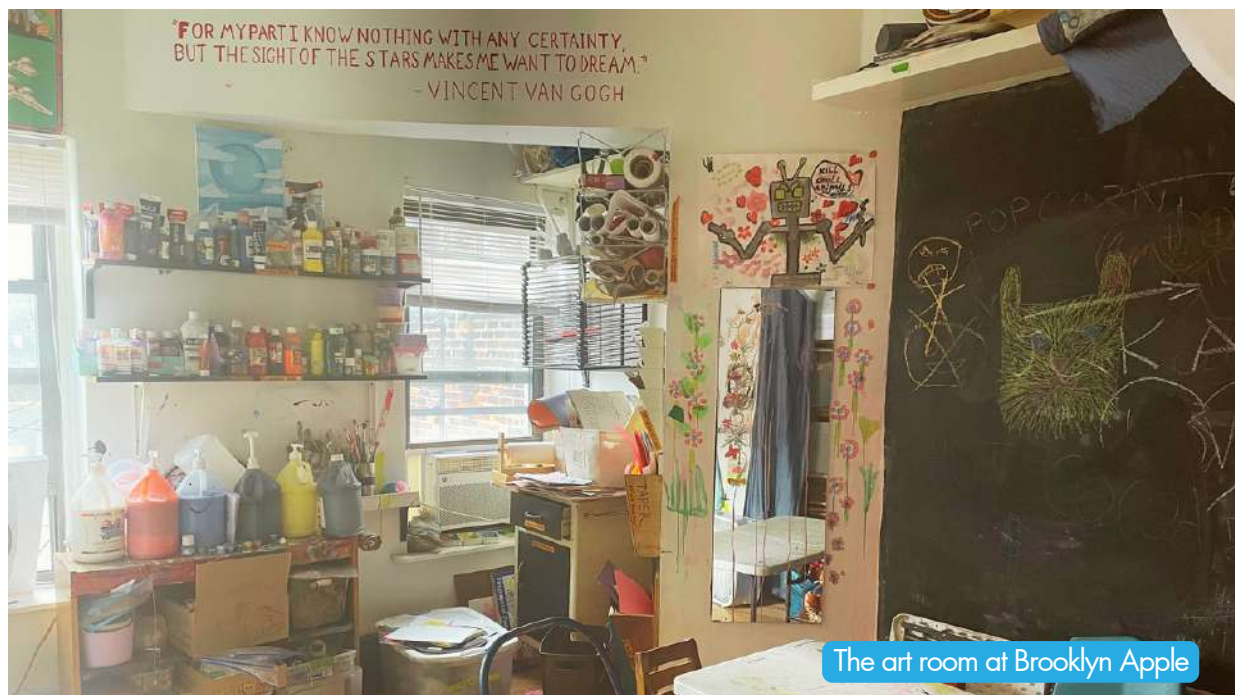
#### Founder

Noah Mayers launched Brooklyn Apple Academy in 2010 after working for nearly a decade as a teaching artist in public, private, and charter schools throughout New York City. Located in the Park Slope neighborhood, Brooklyn Apple was one of the city's first self-directed learning centers for homeschoolers, providing part-time, drop-off classes and social activities throughout the week.



Mayers was attracted to homeschooling and self-directed education from both his personal and professional experience. He was homeschooled for one year as a middle schooler in Maine and described it as an important childhood marker, when he was given the freedom to explore his interests. Later, he worked at a democratic free school where his understanding of the value of learner autonomy and self-determination deepened. Creating Brooklyn Apple was a natural next step.

About 50 young people of all ages use Brooklyn Apple to supplement their homeschooling and as a launching pad for regular city excursions with peers and educators. Equipped with an art room, full kitchen, woodshop, updated technology, and cozy spots for games and gathering, Brooklyn Apple is a happy place where children are free to direct their own learning without coercion.



Self-directed learning centers like Brooklyn Apple have been gaining popularity over the past two decades, as more parents opt out of traditional schooling for homeschooling and unschooling. "Large institutions don't work on the individual level," said Mayers, who founded Brooklyn Apple to support the growing numbers of homeschoolers throughout New York City.

Since 2020, Mayers has seen enrollment in his microschool grow. Parents are now more open to schooling alternatives, while young people benefit from a wider assortment of educational possibilities to fit their unique needs and interests.



**"Large institutions don't work on the individual level." ~ Noah Mayers**



Art adorns the walls at Art of Words

## The Art of Words Community School

**LISA SCOTT**

Founder

Tucked into a light-filled, art-laden space on the first floor of a corner building in the DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) section of Brooklyn lies The Art of Words Community School (TAWCS). Founder Lisa Scott earned her Ph.D. in education at Claremont Graduate School and taught classes in the history and philosophy of education at both CUNY-Queens and Hunter College before leaving academia to launch her microschool in September 2020. “I began to feel more like a salesperson than an educator,” said Scott regarding her work with graduate students in the field of education. “We have to have a different paradigm because what’s going on in traditional education isn’t working, especially for marginalized kids,” said Scott. “We need to find a place for them to feel comfortable so that they can thrive.”



Lisa Scott



Scott, a Jamaican immigrant, decided to create that space, not only for her own children but for others as well. The Art of Words is a Waldorf-inspired private school that emphasizes art and literature across its curriculum, while prioritizing social justice and community-based learning. Each morning, children spend time on core academic content that is often centered around a theme, such as the ancient world. Later, the small group of students, that is currently concentrated in the lower primary grades, walks to the nearby playground with their teachers. The children then may go to the neighborhood public library or to one of the city's museums. Afternoons are spent in "work time," which Scott describes as her favorite time of the day. Students are given about 90 minutes to work on personal projects, interact with the many toys and manipulatives in the space, or become engrossed in a book. "We have voracious readers here," said Scott.

**Scott had been thinking about opening a microschool for awhile, "but the pandemic solidified what I wanted to do," she said. "I wanted to create more opportunities for us to make substantive changes to our world."**





The DUMBO area of Brooklyn, NY

## Joyful Learning Academy

**Yesi Sol**  
Founder

Just a block away from The Art of Words is Joyful Learning Academy, a homeschool enrichment and tutoring center founded by former New York City public school teacher, Yesi Sol.

Sol began homeschooling her own children in 2019. Her small co-op evolved into a drop-off learning center with hired educators that now serves local homeschoolers up to three days a week.

Sol's mission is to create a learner-centered environment that supports families in their efforts to educate their children. "Change always comes first from within the family," said Sol.

Interest in Joyful Learning continues to grow, with some families traveling over an hour to attend. Sol is looking at expanding her program to other boroughs.



Yesi Sol



# Pono NYC

## Maysaa Bazna

Founder

New York City's vibrancy and abundant resources make it an ideal classroom in which to nurture childhood discovery. This was something Dr. Maysaa Bazna realized early on in her parenting journey. She was working as an education professor at Columbia University's Teachers College focused on disability studies and inclusive education when she became a mother. Watching her daughter's natural curiosity drive her early learning, Bazna began to wonder about alternative education models—a topic that was absent in both her own graduate studies in education and in her work as an academic.



Maysaa Bazna  
(Photo: Bazna)

She stumbled upon the New York-based Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO), that was founded in 1989 by educator Jerry Mintz to promote learner-centered education and entrepreneurship. Bazna learned about the idea of democratic education, a philosophy that places learners in charge of all educational decision-making in community with others. She was hooked, and launched Pono in 2010 as New York City's first democratic, urban outdoor education program, including a licensed daycare program for her youngest learners. Over the past 12 years, Pono learners have directed their own education using the city as their backdrop and their teachers as guides and mentors.

Now, with its "City to Sanctuary" project, Pono has expanded to create opportunities for New York City public school students to experience agency and autonomy through a regular connection to nature and outdoor education.

## 05. OFF DA BEATEN PATH LEARNING Citywide



## Off Da Beaten Path Learning

**Dominique Paloma Bible**  
Founder

Dominique Paloma Bible was born in Brazil and raised in Brooklyn, eventually dropping out of high school. That experience led Bible to discover the importance of personal agency and self-determination, as well as the possibility of alternative learning models outside of traditional schooling. Bible earned a GED and enrolled at Goddard College, which embraces self-directed education. After collecting undergraduate and graduate degrees from Goddard,

focusing on culturally responsive and inclusive education, and spending time tutoring students in various subjects, Bible launched Off Da Beaten Path Learning in 2020. It provides personalized guidance, encouragement, and mentorship for young people who are looking to take control of their education in creative, authentic ways, often outside of the traditional K-12 system. "My genius is seeing other people's genius and helping them actualize it," said Bible.

## Coney Island Clubhouse

**Jenny Markus**  
Founder

Jenny Markus recently launched Coney Island Clubhouse as a part-time, self-directed learning community for homeschoolers in South Brooklyn. She wanted to provide a learner-centered education for her daughter, and connected with other local homeschooling families who shared her vision. Coney Island Clubhouse is a project of Metsada, a network of learning centers committed to educational and family freedom.

## 06. CONEY ISLAND CLUBHOUSE South Brooklyn





Synergy learners (Photo: Greebel/Sornik)

## Synergy: An Acton Academy

**Jacob Greebel & Melissa Sornik**

Cofounders

One of the first and fastest-growing modern microschool networks is Acton Academy. Founded in 2009 by Laura and Jeff Sandefer in Austin, Texas, the Acton Academy network now includes approximately 300 independently owned and operated schools throughout the US and around the world. The Acton model emphasizes learner-driven education, empowering children to embark on their own "hero's journey" toward self-discovery and personal mastery.



Jacob Greebel & Melissa Sornik  
(Photo: Greebel/Sornik)

Jacob Greebel was working as a special education teacher at a democratic free school in New York City when he discovered Acton Academy and traveled to Austin to visit the flagship campus. He teamed up with Melissa Sornik, who, like Greebel, is a licensed social worker who also runs a private therapy practice. Sornik was interested in alternative education models, especially as she was seeing rising rates of anxiety and mental health concerns in her practice.

The colleagues launched an initial learning pod on Long Island, New York in 2020, but in 2023 moved to the heart of New York City to open Synergy: An Acton Academy in Manhattan.



Wildflower New York Charter School

## Wildflower New York Charter School

**Mario Benabe and Aura Cely**

Cofounders

A few years after Acton Academy's launch, Wildflower Schools emerged as another nationally-scaling microschool network. Its inaugural school opened in 2014 in Cambridge, Massachusetts to bring authentic Montessori education to local neighborhoods by activating teacher-entrepreneurs.

Today, the Wildflower network includes approximately 60 private Montessori microschools across the US and Puerto Rico.

Wildflower also has a growing ecosystem of public charter microschools, now operating in Minneapolis, Washington, DC, and New York City.

In 2020, Aura Cely and Mario Benabe opened Wildflower New York Charter School in the South Bronx to bring individualized, child-centered learning to the children of the Morrisania neighborhood. “Parents want options other than a district school,” said Benabe, who grew up in this neighborhood. “They have a more restrictive setting for students, and parents see us as an alternative to sending their kids there.”



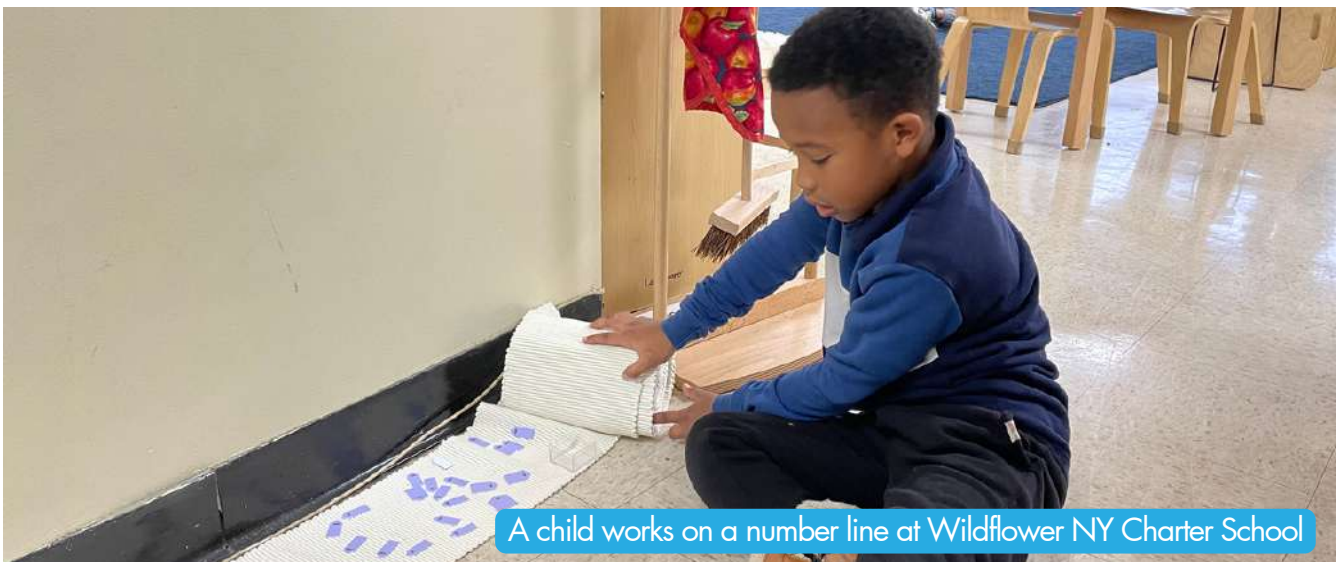
Aura Cely and Mario Benabe



Elementary school students at Wildflower NY Charter School

Montessori education prioritizes child-led learning, providing children with freedom and time to engage in focused, creative play with high-quality learning materials and hands-on manipulatives. There is a calm, unhurried atmosphere to Montessori classrooms, which are characterized by age-mixing and industriousness.

For Benabe and Cely, expanding access to the beauty and impact of Montessori education was a primary motivator for opening their school. Wildflower New York Charter School currently enrolls about 50 students in small classrooms from pre-kindergarten to middle-elementary ages, and is expanding each year. More than 30 percent of its students have diagnosed special needs, higher than the district average. “Our purpose is the safety of the children, the joy of the children, and making sure that they are academically prepared,” said Benabe



A child works on a number line at Wildflower NY Charter School



Students at Hope Academy of The Bronx

## Hope Academy of the Bronx

**Naomi Woodmansee**

Head of School

Not far from Wildflower New York Charter School is Hope Academy of the Bronx, a low-cost, faith-based microschool that serves just over 20 middle and high school students who struggled academically or emotionally in a traditional school. Many students have diagnosed learning disabilities, including

dyslexia. "We want to provide a quality education to kids who are really far behind," said Head of School, Dr. Naomi Woodmansee, who has worked in Christian education for over 20 years.

Founded in 2014 in partnership with The Bronx Household of Faith, a Christian community of worship, Hope Academy educators find that individualized learning, highly-personalized attention, and a small, nurturing environment lead to positive academic outcomes and success in adulthood. "We treat each child as an individual," said Woodmansee, who explained how the school helps to connect student interests to community programs and mentors. While faith is a centerpiece of the school's curriculum, students do not need to be religious to attend. Some Hope Academy students attend with scholarships provided by Children's Scholarship Fund, a national nonprofit that provides partial private school tuition assistance to low-income students.



Naomi Woodmansee

## Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in New York City

### NEW YORK CITY UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING MODELS

Brooklyn Apple Academy: [brooklynappleacademy.org](http://brooklynappleacademy.org)

The Art of Words Community School: [tawcs.org](http://tawcs.org)

Joyful Learning Academy: [thejoyfullearningacademy.com](http://thejoyfullearningacademy.com)

Pono NYC: [pono.nyc](http://pono.nyc)

Off Da Beaten Path: [offdabeatenpath.com](http://offdabeatenpath.com)

Synergy: An Acton Academy: [actonsynergy.org](http://actonsynergy.org)

Wildflower New York Charter School: [wildflowerschools.org](http://wildflowerschools.org)

Hope Academy of The Bronx: [bhof.org/hopeacademy](http://bhof.org/hopeacademy)

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# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Richmond, Virginia

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Unconventional learning models  
in the Richmond area

**KERRY McDONALD**

**FEE** Foundation for  
Economic Education  
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## Reimagining learning in Richmond

From former public school teachers who have created large homeschool co-ops and small, low-cost private schools, to parents and grandparents trying to tailor learning to meet their children's and grandchildren's needs while bringing others in the community along, to a young innovator with national reach, the greater Richmond, Virginia area is brimming with everyday entrepreneurs who are introducing alternatives to the conventional K-12 classroom.

The following pages highlight seven of these out-of-system education entrepreneurs in and around Richmond, who are collectively serving hundreds of learners. Their programs reflect a wide variety of educational philosophies and approaches, but they all elevate the individual needs and talents of each learner and favor personalization over standardization in both curriculum and assessment.



**A cozy reading nook at Pace Academy**

01

**The Grand Magnolia School (Richmond)**

A microschool founded by Dr. Natalie Summerville who taught in the Virginia public schools for over 20 years

02

**Cultural Roots Homeschool Cooperative (Richmond)**

A homeschool co-op with over 125 learners created by former public school teacher Alycia Wright that is focused on a culturally relevant curriculum

03

**Canary Academy (Richmond; Nationwide)**

An online learning platform created by a teen homeschooler for homeschoolers that provides curriculum curation, learning tools, coaching, and community engagement for homeschooling families across the US

04

**Dream Tech Academy (Hopewell)**

A microschool located to the southeast of Richmond launched by former public school teacher Danette Buckley

05

**Pace Academy - An Acton Affiliate (North Chesterfield)**

A new Acton Academy microschool located to the southwest of Richmond

06

**Homeschool Resources Group/Pierian Spring Academy of Arts of Sciences (Mechanicsville)**

Located just northeast of Richmond, this homeschool collaborative and microschool provide maximum flexibility for families

07

**Path of Life Learning (Yorktown)**

A new microschool founded by former public school teacher Mercedes Grant, located about an hour southeast of Richmond





# The Grand Magnolia School

**Dr. Natalie Summerville**

Founder

Dr. Natalie Summerville taught in the Virginia public schools for over 20 years before retiring to help raise her grandchildren. She moved to Atlanta and opened a licensed daycare center to care for them when they were babies. Later, when her daughter got a tenure-track academic position at the University of Richmond, the family moved back together and Dr. Summerville opened The Grand Magnolia School in 2021.

Grand Magnolia is located in a peaceful, residential area in a small, single-family home that Dr. Summerville purchased exclusively for the microschool. With eight elementary-age students, including her two grandchildren, along with two full-time teachers and occasional interns, Grand Magnolia focuses on learner-centered education that celebrates the individuality of each child.



**Dr. Natalie Summerville**

***"Some of our work is a worksheet because sometimes you have to do mathematics using a worksheet. But most of our learning occurs in a play-based, open, loving environment." ~ Dr. Natalie Summerville***



When she taught special education in district schools, Dr. Summerville was discouraged at the inability of the system to adapt to individual student needs. "What I think I saw the most was a sadness of the children who were struggling to learn and how they were asked to repeat or to come to special classes because they weren't being successful," she said. "But instead of the system changing to make it more doable for them, the system just kept doing the same things and trying to get the children to adjust."



**Grand Magnolia exterior**

At The Grand Magnolia School, learning revolves around each child's distinct needs, strengths, talents, and areas for improvement. In addition to the full-time microschool program for homeschoolers, Dr. Summerville also hosts an after-school program for local children, as well as summer camps, and is hoping to expand to additional locations and age-groups by encouraging more teacher-entrepreneurs to open new, affiliated microschools. Her advice to aspiring founders? "Be strong, believe in yourself, find a mentor."



**Children at play at Grand Magnolia**



Cultural Roots students (Photo: Alycia Wright)

## Cultural Roots Homeschool Cooperative

**Alycia Wright**

Founder

"I'm on a mission to inspire families to homeschool, but especially black and brown families," said Alycia Wright. Her 125-student homeschool co-op meets at a Richmond community center two days a week, with hired educators and an interactive, interest-led curriculum. The co-op participants, along with dozens of other local homeschoolers, also spend additional days together on field trips to museums, cultural events, and nature preserves.

Wright was a middle school special education teacher in the Virginia public schools for over a decade before deciding to homeschool her own four children.



Alycia Wright



Cultural Roots students (Photo: Alycia Wright)

She tried out various homeschool co-ops, but didn't find one that had everything she was looking for. So, she created her own. "I remember thinking: Why not just build it?" said Wright. Cultural Roots emphasizes the historical and cultural traditions of black, brown, and indigenous people, weaving this perspective into the curriculum and group activities. What began in 2016 with 12 families has ballooned into a 45-family cooperative that has outgrown its current gathering space and is now looking to expand to an even larger building. Wright also hopes to extend her high school microschool program this year to more days and offerings, and she is launching a "forest school" location just outside of Richmond.



Cultural Roots students (Photo: Alycia Wright)

***"We really just try to celebrate the cultures and histories of all the children, all the backgrounds."***  
**~ Alycia Wright**

Some of the families who participate in Cultural Roots drive more than an hour each way, so Wright is working to support parents in creating new homeschool co-ops—both in Virginia and elsewhere.

"I'm trying to encourage families to create new spaces in their own communities," said Wright.



Nasiyah Isra-Ul

## Canary Academy Online

### Nasiyah Isra-Ul

#### Founder

Nasiyah Isra-Ul is the founder of Canary Academy, an online learning platform for homeschoolers that provides curriculum curation and expert instruction, learning tools, coaching, and community engagement for homeschooling families across the US. In 2017, when she was a 15-year-old homeschooler, Isra-Ul started Canary Academy to help make her own family's homeschooling experience easier and more efficient. Her brother was entering middle school at the time, and her mother was balancing work and homeschooling, so the young entrepreneur decided to create a learning platform that would both help her mom and be fun and engaging for her brother.

In 2020, Isra-Ul won a youth entrepreneurship business plan competition, and officially launched Canary Academy as a non-profit organization in 2021. Now graduating from college with a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education, Isra-Ul continues to lead and grow Canary Academy from her home in Richmond, with a specific focus on expanding access to homeschooling resources to low-income families. In 2023, Isra-Ul expects to reach over 1,000 families across the country.



## Dream Tech Academy

**Danette Buckley**

Founder

Ever since Danette Buckley was a child, she was drawn toward education. She was born in Jamaica and moved to the US as an adolescent, eventually earning undergraduate and graduate degrees in education and working for several years in the Virginia public schools.

“Coming from public schools, I often felt that if only I could have a student for a couple more months, or if I could just offer them a little more or slightly different from what they were getting, they would excel,” said Buckley. The idea of being a school founder came early, as her passion for education grew alongside her love of entrepreneurship. Finally in 2019, as one of her children asked to be homeschooled, Buckley began planting the initial seeds of what would blossom into Dream Tech Academy.



Dream Tech is a microschool in Hopewell, Virginia, about 20 miles southeast of Richmond that now serves 30 K-12 students in a mixed-age setting, with four hired teachers. Hopewell is a low-income community, with most students in the district schools eligible for free or reduced lunches. More than 90 percent of the students in the Hopewell district schools are classified as being economically disadvantaged, and 80 percent of district students are minorities.

***“Parents want the small, home-like, personalized environment.”~ Danette Buckley***



Dream Tech students

Annual tuition at Dream Tech Academy is approximately \$4,600 which, like most microschools, is less expensive than traditional private schools but still financially out of reach for many families. Accessibility is a key concern for Buckley, who tries to offset tuition expenses any way she can, including through grants, like the one she received in 2020 from the VELA Education Fund.

The personalized, customized curriculum and educational approach enable Buckley to meet each child's learning needs. For example, one student entered Dream Tech in the fall of 2022 as a third grader who had been receiving Bs and Cs on his report card at a local district school.

When Buckley assessed the student upon his enrollment at her microschool, she discovered that he couldn't read at all—not even simple words such as “dog.” Buckley created a tailored curriculum for the child, and within three weeks, both she and the boy's parents noticed significant improvement. The multi-age, competency-based learning environment at Dream Tech meant that the boy didn't feel noticeably behind his peers academically. “We don't emphasize grade levels here. It's all based on ability,” said Buckley.

***“The whole point is to have a personalized learning experience. It's about giving everyone a chance to excel and asking, how can we help you be at your best?”***

***~ Danette Buckley***

This student's story is hardly an outlier. Other children enter Dream Tech Academy many grade levels behind their peers, and are able to quickly catch up with the help of a personalized curriculum approach that targets their specific learning needs. Still other children are far ahead of their peers academically, and the microschool environment enables them to work beyond their grade level to master advanced content.



## Pace Academy

### Matthew Dreier & Kristen Braia

#### Cofounders

Matthew Dreier retired from a 20-year career as an officer in the US Marine Corps and began pursuing his interest in education. He earned a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and then teamed up with his niece, Kristen Braia, to open Pace Academy, an Acton Academy affiliate about 10 miles southwest of Richmond in North Chesterfield, Virginia.

Braia was increasingly discouraged about education options for her nine-year-old son that she felt were too rigid and top-down. When Dreier told her about the learner-driven Acton Academy model that focuses on each child's unique "hero's journey," she knew that it would be an ideal fit for her son. Braia is also an entrepreneur who owns several Young Chef's Academy locations, offering children's culinary classes, so launching a new school didn't feel so intimidating. "You can only wait so long for other people to make a change before you need to take action," said Braia.



Matthew Dreier and Kristen Braia

Braia is also an entrepreneur who owns several Young Chef's Academy locations, offering children's culinary classes, so launching a new school didn't feel so intimidating. "You can only wait so long for other people to make a change before you need to take action," said Braia.

When Pace Academy officially launches this fall, it will join approximately 300 other microschools in the fast-growing Acton Academy network. Located in a beautifully renovated building that Dreier and Braia lease from a church, with access to 15 acres of outdoor trails and forest, Pace Academy is one of six Acton affiliates in Virginia. Tuition is just under \$10,000, which is significantly less than traditional, secular private schools in the area. With 15 K-6 students enrolled, Pace Academy is just about at capacity for its first year, and Dreier and Braia plan to grow enrollment organically over time. "All parents want their children to thrive," said Braia, whose son is eager to be among Pace Academy's first students.



**Shari Robinson**

## Homeschool Resources Group/Pierian Spring Academy of Arts & Sciences

**Shari Robinson**

Founder



When Shari Robinson's oldest son was in elementary school, she pulled him out for homeschooling. "He wasn't getting what he needed," she said of her son, who was autistic and dyslexic. Homeschooling enabled him to thrive and to focus on his passions, which included the STEM subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Now 25, Robinson's son is a successful mechanical engineer.

It was Robinson's personal experience of homeschooling her own children that inspired her over the years to create various STEM activities for local homeschoolers, including continuing to lead one of the highest-ranked robotics teams in the state. Those efforts evolved into Homeschool Resources Group and Pierian Spring Academy, two low-cost education organizations that are located in Mechanicsville, Virginia, about seven miles northeast of Richmond. Families can choose to join either organization depending on their needs. Homeschool Resources Group serves as a membership-based learning center for homeschoolers who can attend drop-off classes periodically throughout the week, participate in STEM-related activities, or just gather with peers and mentors. Pierian Spring Academy is a small, recognized K-12 STEM-focused private school that uses a variety of tailored curriculum resources, along with a hands-on, project-based approach.

Robinson's goal in creating both organizations was to extend the benefits of homeschooling and personalized learning to all families that wanted it, regardless of circumstance. "I have been a single mother for a lot of years," said Robinson. "As an engineer, I've been privileged as a single mother to afford what my kids needed. I've always worked and homeschooled my kids. It feels impossible to homeschool and work, but it's not."

She also wanted to encourage more children to discover the joy of engineering. "I think you're born an engineer. I was. We tend to beat it out of them in traditional schools, especially girls," she said.



# Path of Life Learning

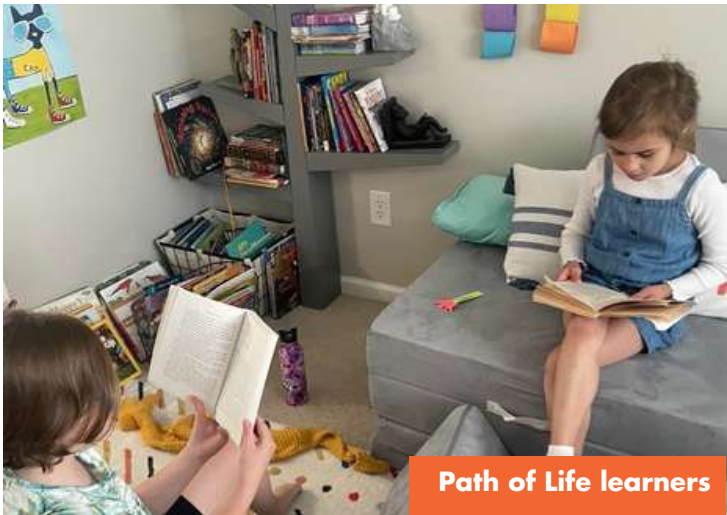
**Mercedes Grant**  
Founder

Mercedes Grant had a tough childhood. She was a troublemaker at school who acted out and was expelled. She lived in foster care for a time. She became a young, single mom. Out of that adversity came a desire to work with young people and, in particular, with at-risk youth who can easily fall through the cracks. Grant became a public school teacher to help kids like herself.

After teaching in four states, she finally decided that she had to leave the system to create new, learner-focused education options.



Mercedes Grant



Path of Life learners

Grant is now the founder of Path of Life Learning, a new K-8 microschool in Yorktown, about an hour outside of Richmond, that is launching this fall. Grant opened enrollment in April 2023, and within three weeks her microschool was at capacity at 35 students, with a growing waitlist. Many of her microschool students are those she has tutored or mentored within her community for the past year. In the future, Grant hopes more at-risk youth gain access to schooling alternatives that recognize and appreciate their individual gifts.

## Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Richmond

### RICHMOND AREA UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING MODELS

The Grand Magnolia School: [thegrandmagnoliaschool.com](http://thegrandmagnoliaschool.com)

Cultural Roots Homeschool Cooperative: [culturalrootsco-op.com](http://culturalrootsco-op.com)

Canary Academy: [canaryacademyonline.org](http://canaryacademyonline.org)

Dream Tech Academy: [dreamtechacademy.com](http://dreamtechacademy.com)

Pace Academy: An Acton Affiliate: [pacerva.com](http://pacerva.com)

Homeschool Resources Group/Pierian Spring Academy:  
[homeschoolresourcesgroup.org](http://homeschoolresourcesgroup.org); [pierianspringacademy.com](http://pierianspringacademy.com)

Path of Life Learning: [pathoflifelearning.com](http://pathoflifelearning.com)

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# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Detroit, Michigan

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Unconventional learning models  
in the Detroit area

**KERRY McDONALD**

**FEE** Foundation for  
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# Driving educational progress in Detroit

The innovator and entrepreneur Henry Ford, who helped to build Detroit into the onetime world car capital, said: “Don’t find fault, find a remedy. Anybody can complain.”

There is a lot to complain about in Detroit, especially regarding education. The Detroit public schools consistently rank among the lowest in the US in terms of academic proficiency, with 2022 data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealing that only three percent of Detroit fourth graders were proficient in math and only five percent were proficient in reading.

Instead of finding fault, entrepreneurial parents and educators in the Motor City are finding remedies. They are creating new and better educational options for Detroit children that prioritize individualized, learner-centered education and maximize human potential.

The following pages highlight some of these Detroit-area entrepreneurs and the extraordinary organizations that they lead outside of traditional K-12 public and private schooling.



**A child at Engaged Detroit**

01

**Engaged Detroit (Detroit)**

Founded by Bernita Bradley in 2020 to provide resources and support for local homeschooling families, Engaged Detroit now serves more than 200 learners

02

**Detroit Discoverers & Young Scientists in Action (Detroit)**

Weekly homeschool programming that incorporates structured activities and city immersion, with a focus on child-centered learning

03

**Big Bad Wolf House (Detroit)**

What began as a "pandemic pod" in 2020 evolved into a full-time microschool that incorporates elements of Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and other child-centered educational philosophies

04

**The Homework House Homeschool Hub  
(Highland Park)**

A community hub for homeschoolers and other local youth

05

**Clonlara School (Ann Arbor)**

Founded in 1967 by Pat Montgomery, Clonlara has long been a pioneer in alternative education, including becoming one of the first correspondence and online schools for homeschoolers.





Homeschooling parents and children gather at Engaged Detroit

## Engaged Detroit

**Bernita Bradley**  
Founder

"I didn't come to this life on purpose," said Bernita Bradley. She owned a hair salon, but became increasingly involved in her daughter's schooling since the elementary years.

By the time Covid hit and schools shut down, Bradley had been working on education issues in Detroit for a decade, including as an AmeriCorps volunteer. In 2020, she launched Engaged Detroit, a citywide co-op for about a dozen families who wanted to homeschool their children during the pandemic.

When her daughter, who had been doing well in school, told her at the end of her junior year in 2020 that she would rather drop out of school for her senior year than deal with more remote schooling, Bradley decided to homeschool her as well. She began by trying to replicate school-at-home, cajoling her daughter to learn chemistry and forcing other school subjects, leaving both of them frustrated.

A longtime homeschooling mother in the community suggested that Bradley detach from a traditional schooling mindset and instead ask her daughter what she wanted to learn. It was such a simple suggestion but it had a significant impact, as Bradley's daughter began immersing herself in the study of forensic science and earned a full scholarship to Wayne State University.



Bernita Bradley

**"One of my goals is to be a connector to make sure parents have the support they need."**

**~ Bernita Bradley**



Even as the pandemic subsided, Engaged Detroit grew. More homeschoolers joined the co-op, which today serves over 100 families and more than 200 learners. New homeschooling parents are partnered with a coach, an experienced homeschooling parent who provides the type of “deschooling” advice that Bradley found so valuable, while also helping homeschooling parents to establish a homeschooling plan, find curriculum and resources, and monitor progress.

One such coach is Marla Wellborn, who began homeschooling her two children 30 years ago, just after it became fully legal to do so in Michigan, thanks in large part to the efforts of Pat Montgomery, founder of the Clonlara School, described below. “We made that choice because we didn’t have faith in the system,” said Wellborn. One of her children is currently completing a Ph.D. at Vanderbilt University, while the other attended the University of Michigan and is a full-time minister. “They have a confidence that I think they wouldn’t have if they were in school,” said Wellborn.

Wellborn now works with Engaged Detroit families, including Jayne Jackson, a birth and death doula who homeschools her five-year-old daughter. In addition to her check-in calls and meet-ups with her coach, Jackson attends homeschool activities at Engaged Detroit at least once a week, and participates in other local homeschooling programs, including Detroit Discoverers and Young Scientists in Action, described on the following page.

In March 2023, after three years of serving families nomadically, Engaged Detroit moved into a dedicated building. Homeschooling families, who pay nothing to belong to Engaged Detroit thanks to Bradley's fundraising efforts, now have a permanent space to attend weekly classes and activities, and gain support and access to resources, such as complimentary classes provided by Outschool.com, as well as curriculum and assessment tools. Homeschooling parents can also use the space as a social gathering hub, or somewhere to complete their own work or studies.

For Jackson, having a reliable spot for homeschool classes and meet-ups blends nicely with the wide variety of homeschool offerings across the city. “I like both the consistency and the diversity of local homeschool programming,” she said, adding that a great benefit of homeschooling is not being tied to one building all the time.



## **Detroit Discoverers & Young Scientists In Action**

**Syreeta Farria &  
Victoria Washington**

Founders

Homeschooling parents like Jayne Jackson are able to take advantage of weekly programming for their children throughout Detroit. In addition to spending time at Engaged Detroit, Jackson also participates in Detroit Discoverers and Young

Scientists In Action. Homeschool moms, Syreeta Farria and Victoria Washington, created these two separate but complementary homeschool programs as a way to build both community and competency.

“A lot of families started realizing things weren’t working in the conventional system,” said Farria. Her homeschool program, Detroit Discoverers, meets once a week at Brilliant Detroit, a community center focused on neighborhood empowerment and early literacy. Homeschool activities revolve around a particular theme that incorporates lessons and activities at Brilliant Detroit's Central location, as well as field trips across the city. For example, a recent theme about birds involved reading stories about birds, singing songs, and making a bird feeder out of pine cones. The homeschoolers then visited a local nature center to spot birds and learn more about their habitats.





**Detroit Discoverers and Young Scientists In Action meet weekly at Central Brilliant Detroit**

***"A lot of families started realizing things weren't working in the conventional system."***  
**~ Syreeta Farria**

"It's about learning lessons inside and outside in the community," said Washington. Her program, Young Scientists In Action, weaves STEM subjects and science experiments into Detroit Discoverers, providing a balanced set of educational experiences. Washington, who has a chemistry degree from the University of Michigan, is able to bring her passion for science to young homeschoolers, including her six-year-old child, while also supporting the growing community of Detroit homeschooling families.

"These are really child-led programs that encourage parents to be involved," said Farria, who has a background in social work and whose two homeschooled children are also part of these programs. "These aren't drop off programs. We're not trying to replicate school. We want parents to observe and participate," she said.

This is the first partnership with homeschooling families that Brilliant Detroit, which has 14 locations throughout the city, has formed. As it expands its reach over the coming year, opening an additional 10 locations, there may be even more opportunities to team up with entrepreneurial parents and educators like Farria and Washington to support unconventional, out-of-system learning options across Detroit.



**Children at play at Central Brilliant Detroit**



## Big Bad Wolf House

**Danna Guzman**

Founder

When schools shut down in 2020, Danna Guzman joined countless parents across the US who created “pandemic pods” to enable their children to continue learning together in small, safe settings. “We started with seven kids and ended with 15 because people started hearing about us,” said Guzman.

Enthusiasm for her learning pod led Guzman to expand it into a microschool for homeschoolers. “I thought it would be temporary and everyone would go back to school, but a parent asked if I would keep it going,” said Guzman, who has a background in early childhood education. She was exploring different options for her own three children, and decided that the intentionally small, individualized learning environment offered by the microschooling model would be ideal.



**Danna Guzman**

***“Education doesn’t have to be a constant challenge. It can be joyful and relaxed.” ~ Danna Guzman***



**Spring planting at Big Bad Wolf House**

Named by the children as Big Bad Wolf House, the microschool recently expanded into a larger residential space in Detroit with abundant outdoor access. Parents are able to choose a 3- or 5-day option, depending on their needs.

“It’s very child-directed,” said Guzman, who has experience in Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and self-directed educational philosophies, and incorporates a blend of these methods into her microschool. She also invites other educators in the community to offer classes to her students, including a local forest school instructor who comes once a week.

“Education doesn’t have to be a constant challenge,” said Guzman. “It can be joyful and relaxed. One of the greatest compliments I received from a parent was when they said that they don’t have to fight with their children to go to school. If we’re on school vacation, they want to know when it’s opening again so they can go back.”

It’s also rewarding for Guzman as an educator. “I’ve been in a lot of different schools and there was always something that didn’t sit well with me. Homeschooling also didn’t feel right,” she said. “In over 20 years of working in education, this has felt the most joyful.”

Guzman’s goal now is to inspire others to open microschools so that each neighborhood can have this kind of hyper-local educational offering for families. She will be hosting workshops this summer to share how she started and encourage parents and teachers to build their own. “I want to help other people to do this,” said Guzman.



## The Homework House Homeschool Hub

**Boniswa Brock & Shamayim "Mama Shu" Harris**  
Founders

Once a booming area buoyed by the automotive industry, Highland Park, a city just outside of Detroit, has faced decades of blight. In 2011, the city repossessed more than two-thirds of Highland Park's residential streetlights due to outstanding electric bills. The streetlights were removed, literally leaving residents in the dark.

It was around this time that Shamayim Harris, known to all as Mama Shu, decided to embrace a mission of "blight to beauty" for her Highland Park neighborhood known as Avalon Village. She began buying up crumbling properties on her rundown street, having solar-powered lighting installed, renovating buildings or tearing them down and replacing them with new shipping containers to house small shops run by local entrepreneurs.

One of her proudest accomplishments is the creation of The Homework House, a renovated single family home that now serves as a meeting space for local youth. There, young people can enjoy a warm meal, get help with homework, and gain important life skills.

Under the guidance of education director Boniswa Brock, a public school teacher and administrator for 35 years, The Homework House also serves as a warm and welcoming hub for local homeschooled students who enjoy daily access to the space from 9:00 to 2:00 for classes and enrichment opportunities. The public library in Highland Park was closed several years ago, so The Homework House is filled with books, as well as school supplies. It includes other resources as well, such as sewing machines, chess boards, musical instruments, and digital recording equipment.



**Boniswa Brock & Shamayim "Mama Shu" Harris**



**A music and recording studio at The Homework House**

Brock leads activities and field trips for homeschoolers through The Homework House Homeschool Hub. “We’ve always known homeschoolers, but since Covid the number of homeschoolers here has increased exponentially.” Brock recently organized a trip for approximately 30 local homeschooled students to a popular amusement park that integrates STEM topics into the study of roller coasters, blending learning and play. STEM is a passion for Brock, who has a science background and is currently preparing to launch a STEM-focused, child-centered preschool, called Every Child Is A Genius, at The Homework House.

Through their inspirational work, Brock and Harris show that it is possible to turn blight into beauty through bottom-up efforts that empower individuals, and especially children.



**A view from The Homework House of one of the shipping containers that houses a small marketplace**



## Clonlara School

**Pat Montgomery**  
Founder

What began as a microschool in 1967 for Clonlara School founder Pat Montgomery's two children and six others has grown into an internationally-renowned, K-12 private school serving 2,000 off-campus students around the world, and a small group of on-campus students at its Ann Arbor headquarters, about 40 miles outside of Detroit.

After teaching in both Catholic schools and public schools, Montgomery grew disillusioned with the coercive nature of conventional schooling. "School was synonymous with control," she wrote in her 2017 book, *The School That's Inside You*, celebrating Clonlara's 50th anniversary. "The message from the adults to youngsters was sit down, keep quiet, listen, and repeat after me. Rewards and punishments were the carrot and stick that adults used to lure kids into compliance."

Dissatisfied with the prevailing schooling options, Montgomery decided to create her own school that would encourage childhood creativity and curiosity, without coercion. Inspired by A.S. Neill, the founder of the famed, self-directed Summerhill School in England, Montgomery built Clonlara as an alternative to traditional schooling.

It quickly became clear that parents outside of Ann Arbor were attracted to this learning model, particularly as the modern homeschooling movement gained traction beginning in the 1970s. Some Michigan families were charged with truancy for homeschooling their children using Clonlara, so Montgomery mounted a lawsuit against the Michigan State Board of Education. In May 1993, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in favor of homeschooling families, securing homeschooling rights throughout the state.



**Pat Montgomery (Photo: Clonlara School)**



**A student-created k'nex structure at Clonlara School**

Clonlara's position at the cutting edge of correspondence schooling for homeschoolers led it to also become one of the first schools to embrace online learning. Today, students can enroll in Clonlara anywhere in the world, gaining access to high-quality, learner-driven curriculum content, regular, virtual meet-ups with peers, and extensive one-on-one coaching with a trained Clonlara advisor.

Its on-campus program continues to serve local families who seek a learner-focused education, while also inviting other local youth into after-school programming and enrichment activities.

More than 50 years after its founding, Clonlara School continues to be a beacon for homeschooling families, virtual learners, microschool founders, and others interested in the benefits of alternative education.



**The exterior of Clonlara School's Ann Arbor location, opened in 1997**

## Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Detroit

### DETROIT AREA UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING MODELS

Engaged Detroit: [engageddetroitshc.com](http://engageddetroitshc.com)

Brilliant Detroit: [brilliantdetroit.org](http://brilliantdetroit.org)

Big Bad Wolf House: [instagram.com/bigbadwolfhouse](https://www.instagram.com/bigbadwolfhouse)

The Homework House Homeschool Hub:  
[theavalonvillage.org/thehomeworkhouse](http://theavalonvillage.org/thehomeworkhouse)

Clonlara School: [clonlara.org](http://clonlara.org)

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# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Dallas/Fort Worth

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Unconventional learning models in Texas

**KERRY McDONALD**

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## Disrupting the educational status quo in Dallas/Fort Worth

The Dallas/Fort Worth area of Texas has been a longtime leader in unconventional education options for families. There is a booming homeschooling population and microschools have been sprouting for several years, particularly those focused on learner-centered education.

In the wake of school shutdowns in 2020, more parents began exploring schooling alternatives, and local education entrepreneurs responded, building upon the momentum that had been growing pre-pandemic.

This momentum is hardly slowing down. More families in the Dallas/Fort Worth area are exploring out-of-system learning possibilities and more entrepreneurs are creating them. "It is only beginning," said Amber Okolo-Ebube, founder of a local homeschool co-op and microschool.

From forest schools to STEM-focused microschools, and a blend of secular and faith-based options, Dallas/Fort Worth is an expanding ecosystem of education innovation.



Parents and learners at Barefoot University

01

**Wild Roots Learning Community (Denton)**

A part-time, self-directed learning center for homeschoolers launched by a former Texas public school teacher

02

**Barefoot University (Dallas/Fort Worth and Nationwide)**

A growing, national network of outdoor forest schools for homeschoolers

03

**Leading Little Arrows (Arlington)**

A weekly homeschool co-op focused on neurodiverse learners that is expanding into a microschool program

04

**Braveheart Christian Academy (Arlington)**

A faith-based microschool launched by a former public school math teacher that emphasizes individualized learning

05

**Westside Learning Collective (Fort Worth)**

A part-time, self-directed learning center for homeschoolers founded by a former public school teacher

06

**The Humanist Academy - An Acton Academy (Irving)**

One of the early Acton Academy affiliates, a PreK-12 microschool founded by a former public school teacher

07

**STEM Connexion Academy (Dallas)**

A STEM-focused microschool launched by a former public school teacher that grew out of a tutoring center and "pandemic pod"



Students and a teacher at Braveheart Christian Academy



Learners and facilitators at Wild Roots

## Wild Roots Learning Community

**Cassidy Younghans**

Cofounder

Cassidy Younghans taught middle school English in Texas public schools before deciding to leave the classroom to explore alternative education options. “Children are incredible,” she said. “It’s the structures, the systems that were in place that just weren’t serving the kids.”

She connected with the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO), a national network focused on learner-centered education models, and discovered a self-directed, democratic school in her area. “My mind was blown,” said Younghans, who had attended Montessori schools as a child but was impressed by the greater degree of youth empowerment reflected in self-directed education spaces.



Cassidy Younghans



**Learners and facilitators at Wild Roots**

“The biggest difference between Montessori and self-directed education is instead of, ‘here’s the work that you need to do and you decide when and how you want to do it,’ it was: “This is your day. Your day is open. This is your community. What is it going to look like? Let’s work together and make that happen.”

Over the subsequent year, Younghans visited several self-directed learning spaces across the country, including North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens in Massachusetts, one of the first microschools for homeschoolers to embrace self-directed education. Founded in 1996 by former public school teacher Ken Danford, North Star has inspired the creation of similar learning models around the world.

Younghans was hooked and became increasingly committed to expanding self-directed learning options for families in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. In 2021, she cofounded Wild Roots Learning Community as a worker-owned cooperative with 23 homeschooled students. Wild Roots learners, who range in age from preschoolers to teens, currently meet twice a week in a rented church space in Denton, Texas, north of Fort Worth, with several adult facilitators. Younghans expects to expand to more learners and more days over the coming months.

“I believe self-directed education is something that should be an option for everyone no matter where you are, and should be an option for educators. Educators should be able to leave and be a part of something like what I’m a part of. It’s the most natural, most beautiful way to be with other people, whether their kids or adults, where you’re building community together around the love of learning.”



## Barefoot University

**Madeleine Braden**

Cofounder

What began as a weekly outdoor meet-up with a handful of local homeschooling families in the Dallas/Fort Worth area has become Barefoot University, a national, non-profit forest school that reaches over 3,000 learners in six states, with nine states set for 2024.

“The importance of getting outside once a week is absolutely invaluable,” said Madeleine Braden who cofounded Barefoot University with Amber Brown in 2019.

Each Barefoot University group has 35 homeschooled children and their parents who make a yearlong commitment to gather together each week in public parks, nature preserves, forests, or hiking trails, and participate in shared activities around a general outdoor theme.



**Madeleine Braden**



A learner at Barefoot University walks with a field guide

Spreading mostly through word of mouth, Barefoot University has attracted group leaders throughout Texas, as well as Tennessee (where Brown now lives), Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, and Connecticut. Prospective guides go through an application process with training and background checks, and then are ready to launch their programs.

There is no cost to the guides to become part of the Barefoot University network, and each family pays about \$75 a year to participate for two to three hours a week for 36 weeks, plus a \$25 annual materials fee for each child.

Braden and Brown say they intentionally keep the cost low to enable wide access to the program.

The cofounders hope that Barefoot University will eventually be available to all who want it, including non-homeschoolers and even adults and senior citizens. “We want to be as big as Boy Scouts, be that kind of a household name,” said Braden.

**“The importance of getting outside once a week is absolutely invaluable.”**  
~ Madeleine Braden



Students and a teacher at Leading Little Arrows

## Leading Little Arrows

### Amber Okolo-Ebube

#### Founder

Amber Okolo-Ebube is a longtime homeschooling mother in the Fort Worth area who runs Leading Little Arrows, a weekly homeschooling enrichment program for children ages three to 17 focused on nature, art, and STEM subjects. Her program has become so popular over the past year that she recently leased a building across the street from the University of Texas at Arlington campus. With 33 students and several educators, Okolo-Ebube is already near capacity, and will be expanding to run a multi-day, drop-off microschool this fall.

Approximately three-quarters of Okolo-Ebube's students are neurodiverse, with several, including one of her own children, on the autism spectrum. The program offers personalized curriculum content with academic blocks bookended by ample outside and free-play time, creating an environment that enables both neurodiverse and neurotypical children to thrive.

Okolo-Ebube sees continued interest from families in homeschooling and other schooling alternatives. "I feel like there's been a shift," she said. "I think Covid showed parents what was happening in their children's schools, and also showed them that they could do better with homeschooling." She doesn't think interest in homeschooling in her area is waning anytime soon. "It is only beginning," she predicts.



Amber Okolo-Ebube



Elementary students and a teacher at Braveheart Christian Academy

## Braveheart Christian Academy

**Chrystal and Joshua Bernard**  
Cofounders

After school shutdowns in 2020 led Chrystal and Joshua Bernard to homeschool their kindergartener and second grader for the 2020/2021 academic year, they discovered that the personalized approach to learning offered through homeschooling allowed their children to excel academically, while prioritizing family time.

“Homeschooling enabled us to connect more as a family and helped our two eldest children skyrocket in their academics, drawing other people to our method of schooling,” said Chrystal, who taught high school mathematics in Texas public schools before launching her own CPA firm.

**“Parents are the best advocates of their children and ultimately know what type of schooling is best from an academic, social and moral perspective.” ~ Chrystal Bernard**



Chrystal and Joshua Bernard



**Middle school students and a teacher at Braveheart Christian Academy**

In the fall of 2021, the couple founded Braveheart Christian Academy, a pre-kindergarten to 7th grade microschool in Arlington, Texas that emphasizes individualized, mastery-based learning with a focus on character development. Some of Braveheart's teachers taught in the local public schools but were attracted to the new school's smaller, more holistic learning environment. "Instead of placing students in a box, education is brought to their level," said Chrystal, who uses assessment tests to evaluate each child's skill level upon enrollment and then adapts the curriculum accordingly. "We had one child who entered school as a fourth grader by age but who performed at a first grade level. Now, after a school-year-and-a-half with us, that student has nearly caught up academically to his fifth grade peers," she said.

With an annual tuition of about \$7,000, Braveheart is significantly lower in cost than most traditional private schools in the area, but it is still financially out of reach for many families. "Cost is the major barrier," said Chrystal, who hears often from parents who wish to enroll their children but can't afford it.

"Parents are the best advocates of their children and ultimately know what type of schooling is best from an academic, social and moral perspective," she said.



Learners at Westside Learning Collective

## Westside Learning Collective

**Cara Kuhl**

Cofounder

Like Wild Roots Learning Community, described above, Westside Learning Collective is a part-time, self-directed learning center for homeschoolers in Fort Worth. Cara Kuhl, who cofounded Westside with Ellis Maxwell, is a former public school teacher who taught middle school French for 12 years. “I really had to do some soul-searching to quit my job,” she said. She loved teaching, but with 160 students at a time, it was difficult to really get to know them. Kuhl wanted a smaller, more personalized learning environment that would enable greater relationship-building between teachers and learners. Covid prompted Kuhl to start something new.

“With Covid, parents saw what was happening in the schools through remote learning and thought they wanted something better,” said Kuhl, who launched Westside in a leased church space in the fall of 2021 with four learners. Many parents began exploring homeschooling options, and some were drawn to Westside due to its secular nature, flexible schedule, and the fact that Westside continued mask-wearing when other homeschooling programs stopped.

Today, Westside has 16 students ages five to 13, and meets three days a week. Much of the learning is driven by student interests, with structured lessons supplementing abundant free play and exploration time. “I can express myself more here,” said one Westside learner who previously attended public school.

“We get to do interesting things, like learn how to build a robot,” added another learner. “The teachers make everyday things fun and after class you can learn by yourself.”



Cara Kuhl and Westside learners



Middle school learners at The Humanist Academy

## The Humanist Academy

### Vijay Shah

#### Founder

A former high school English and math teacher in the Chicago Public Schools, Vijay Shah founded The Humanist Academy in 2016 in Irving, Texas, about 10 miles northwest of Dallas.

The Humanist Academy was one of the early affiliates in the Acton Academy network that now includes approximately 300 microschools, including several in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Like all Acton Academies, Shah's school embraces learner-driven education, empowering each child to lead his or her own learning while participating fully in a dynamic, mixed-age community of learners. The Humanist Academy now has more than 85 students in pre-kindergarten to 12th grades.

"I believe every single human being is born with a purpose and they want to make meaning of their lives," said Shah. "So we all wake up every day hoping that we can do something meaningful, something productive. And I get to see that through this model every day in children. It's amazing."

This year, The Humanist Academy celebrates its first high school graduate, who began at the school when it opened and has spent the past several years blending outside apprenticeships and skill development with core academics and peer learning at school. He had multiple, high-paying job offers in the tech field, but turned them down to attend college next year instead.

"I feel really excited and hopeful for a model like this that supports learners and youth to find what they're passionate about and work on what we like to call their next great adventure," said Shah.



Vijay Shah



A learner at STEM Connexion Academy

## STEM Connexion Academy

### Tamira Fleming

#### Founder

Tamira Fleming has taught for over 20 years in both public and private schools, with a special focus on STEM subjects. Most recently, Fleming, who has both a Master's and Doctorate degree in education and a Bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, taught elementary school mathematics for several years in the Dallas Public Schools. She left in 2018 to focus exclusively on providing private tutoring services for local students.

When Covid hit, some of her tutoring families asked her to lead a "pandemic pod" for their children, who were struggling with remote learning. That pod was so successful in helping students to grow academically and socially that the families asked Fleming to continue and expand.

She now leads STEM Connexion Academy, a microschool in East Dallas for students ages 11 and up that meets five days a week from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm. Fleming also continues to offer tutoring services in addition to running her microschool.

"During the pandemic, a light was shone on the disparities in education, especially for marginalized and low-income students," said Fleming. She believes that the microschool model of individualized learning can be valuable in helping more children to thrive. "I think if we can pull students out of the larger districts into smaller learning models, we can really give them what they need, and offer more of the remediation from pandemic learning loss," she said.



Tamira Fleming

# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Dallas/Fort Worth

## DALLAS/FORT WORTH AREA UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING MODELS

Wild Roots Learning Community: [wildrootscollective.org](http://wildrootscollective.org)

Barefoot University: [barefootuniversity.org](http://barefootuniversity.org)

Leading Little Arrows: [leadinglittlearrows.com](http://leadinglittlearrows.com)

Braveheart Christian Academy: [braveheartacademy.org](http://braveheartacademy.org)

Westside Learning Collective: [westsidelearningcollective.org](http://westsidelearningcollective.org)

The Humanist Academy: [thehumanistacademy.org](http://thehumanistacademy.org)

STEM Connexion Academy: [stemconnexion.org](http://stemconnexion.org)

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# Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Grants Pass, Oregon

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Unconventional learning models  
in Southern Oregon

**KERRY McDONALD**

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## The growth of alternative education in Grants Pass

Education entrepreneurship and innovation are occurring all across the US, including in rural communities like Grants Pass, Oregon. Located about 250 miles south of Portland, close to the California border, this stunning area known as the Rogue Valley is rimmed by beautiful mountain ranges, rich farmland and forests, and refreshing rivers.

Farming and ranching remain a vital part of the local landscape and economy, and there is widespread appreciation for nature and traditional, land-based skills. An embrace of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency are qualities shared by many Rogue Valley residents.

Alternative education models, particularly learner-centered ones inspired by Montessori and Waldorf traditions, are sprouting, with some growing quickly over the past few years thanks to the vision and drive of local education entrepreneurs like those spotlighted in the following pages.



**A microschool student in Grants Pass, OR**

01

**Madrona Folk School (Grants Pass)**

A microschool for homeschoolers in grades 4th through 8th that blends academics, art, nature, and traditional, land-based skills

02

**River's Edge Academy Charter School (REACH)  
(Grants Pass & Rogue River)**

A hybrid charter school designed to blend homeschooling and traditional schooling, with a highly personalized approach to learning

03

**Raindrop Academy (Rogue River)**

A K-5 Waldorf- and Montessori-inspired microschool for homeschoolers, located in an agricultural grange

04

**Earthwise Forest School (Williams)**

A forest school program for children ages 3 through 8 that meets 3 days a week at a 420-acre nature preserve

05

**Mountain Montessori (Williams)**

A home-based Montessori microschool for early-elementary age students

06

**Envision Homeschool Collective (Talent)**

A pandemic pod that evolved into a microschool for middle school and high school age homeschoolers

07

**Arrows Christian Academy (Central Point & Grants Pass)**

A hybrid homeschool with nearly 200 students in two locations





Students at Madrona Folk School

## Madrona Folk School

### Shandin and Dove Oldham Cofounders

Back in the 1990s, Shandin Oldham was introduced to and inspired by the work of John Holt, the teacher and best-selling author who coined the term “unschooling” in 1977 and helped to support the growth of the modern homeschooling movement.

When the education disruption caused by Covid led to shake-ups in local schools, Shandin and his wife Dove decided to homeschool their own children, who were seven and 10 at the time, using a self-directed, or unschooling, approach.

They valued the freedom and flexibility of homeschooling but wanted a more structured and more social experience. They learned that other families, including a mix of longtime and new homeschoolers, wanted the same thing. So in January 2022, the couple launched Madrona Folk School in a free standing, meticulously renovated building on the Oldham’s farmstead property.



Shandin and Dove Oldham



**Middle school students at Madrona Folk School discuss the acclaimed book *Echo Mountain* with Dove Oldham.**

Today, this drop-off microschool for homeschooled students in 4th through 8th grade meets two days per week from 9:30 to 3:00, and is expanding to a third day in the fall of 2023. While Madrona Folk School, like most microschools, is less expensive than traditional private school options, cost is still a barrier for many families. “If parents had funding they would want to be here full time,” said Dove, noting that full-time schooling would be a 4-day week like the schedule recently adopted by the local public school district.

Hired educators, along with the Oldhams, teach classes on core subjects, as well as Spanish, art, music, theatre, nature immersion, and traditional farming skills. All of the content is tailored to each child’s individual needs and mastery levels.

“This was the best thing to ever happen to me, other than being adopted,” said Addie, 13, who attends Madrona Folk School. “At public school, it was hard to make friends, but here I’ve already made friends fast. I just love this school.”

The Oldhams enjoy the current age-range for Madrona Folk School and don’t desire to offer programming for older or younger students, but as their own kids get older, they are looking into other entrepreneurial possibilities. Dove is currently collaborating with another Grants Pass education entrepreneur, Brettani Shannon, who runs the website [optionsforeducation.com](https://optionsforeducation.com), to help local parents better understand their learning options. The pair is hoping to launch a new high school microschool this fall.



**Samples of Madrona Folk School student work**



**Early elementary students at REACH's Rogue River location**

## River's Edge Academy Charter School

**Cecile Enright**  
Founder

“Getting charter schools started in Oregon is really hard,” said Cecile Enright, founder of River’s Edge Academy Charter School (REACH). Enright persevered despite the hurdles and launched REACH in 2011 with 70 students in a leased church space in Rogue River. Today, the school serves over 200 students in two locations, including a large, freestanding building in Grants Pass and a smaller rented space of a community center in Rogue River.



**Cecile Enright**

REACH is a K-12 hybrid charter school, enabling students to be on campus for part of the week and to learn from home or in the community for the remainder of the week, often taking enrichment classes in areas such as art, music, and 4-H with local community partners. As a charter school, REACH students attend tuition-free. Some families choose a fully home-based option, with REACH acting as a versatile support for homeschooling.

REACH families are able to enjoy broad curriculum choice, ensuring that the curriculum aligns with their needs and with their child’s personal interests and goals. All REACH students engage in weekly check-ins with REACH educators, and participate in statewide standardized testing.

“I believe in the parents’ right to pick the best learning option that’s right for them,” said Enright, who finds rising interest in REACH’s flexible, individualized educational model that she says is an ideal blend of homeschooling and public schooling. “People don’t want the normal; they want something different,” said Enright, adding that REACH’s yearly growth rate is limited due to statewide charter school caps. Hybrid charter schools such as REACH enable greater access to individualized learning and curriculum choice, while providing the resources and supports of a conventional classroom.



# Raindrop Academy

**Olivia Hasey and Emily Sieger**  
Cofounders

Olivia Hasey and Emily Sieger are the cofounders of Raindrop Academy, a Waldorf- and Montessori-inspired microschool in the rural town of Rogue River, just outside of Grants Pass.

When Covid hit, Sieger, an educator, began homeschooling her son and saw remarkable academic improvement in a highly personalized, less competitive learning environment. She wanted that to continue for him, but with more opportunity for relaxed, peer learning. At the same time, Hasey's daughter was just reaching school-age and she was not very enthusiastic about the available options. Homeschooling was a possibility, but she really desired something more structured and social.

The two came together with a shared vision to build what they couldn't quite find for their own children. They began surveying local parents and talking with local preschool owners and, in the fall of 2021, opened Raindrop Academy, a drop-off, K-5 microschool for about 20 homeschoolers that meets four days a week in an old, renovated agricultural grange building. Their program embraces non-coercive, child-directed learning, facilitated by hired educators.

As they complete their second year of running Raindrop, the founders are more committed than ever to their vision and educational philosophy, while also being more focused on inviting others in the community to use their space for their own learning pods or homeschool programs. They see a bright future for schooling alternatives, both in their rural community and across the US.

"I hope that people look at what we're doing and know that they can do it too, and know that there are granges and tiny buildings in all of rural America, and people who are staying home with their children who would rather be in a community environment," said Hasey, a local farmer. "Because it's not necessarily that what we have here is what anyone else needs. It's that everyone can provide for their own needs if they choose to, and that by working together, there is enough energy, and by pooling resources, there is enough money."





Earthwise learners

## Earthwise Forest School

**Sarah Bobertz Larue**  
Cofounder

It was her deep respect for the natural world and appreciation of ancestral skills that led Sarah Bobertz Larue to create a forest school for her own two young children, as well as others in her community. In 2019, she teamed up with Torreyanna Suttle, a certified Waldorf teacher who shared Larue's passion for ecological preservation and education, to launch Earthwise Forest School in Williams, Oregon, just outside of Grants Pass.

Earthwise is an outdoor, nature-based school for children ages three to eight that meets three days a week from 9:30 to 3:00. There are currently 14 children who participate in the program, which operates in two, 12-week blocks, along with three teachers.

The forest school meets at Pacifica, a 420-acre nature preserve dedicated to education and environmental conservation. On cold or rainy days, the group takes shelter in a teepee that Earthwise has placed on the property.

Through stories and songs, nature walks, and seasonal projects, Earthwise students gain a greater understanding of the world around them, and develop a kindness for the Earth and each other.

Tuition ranges from \$375 to \$500 per month, depending on a child's age, which is less expensive than traditional private educational programs but still cost-prohibitive for some families in this rural area. Earthwise is an approved vendor for TEACH-Northwest, an Oregon virtual K-12 charter school which, like REACH described previously, enables families to customize their children's education in unique ways. The partnership with TEACH-NW helps to defray tuition costs from some Earthwise families, which Larue believes is important to expanding access to unconventional programs like Earthwise.



Sarah Bobertz Larue



**Books, yarn, and wood outside of the Earthwise teepee**



**The Earthwise teepee on the grounds at Pacifica**

The Earthwise founders are content with their current age range of preschool and early-elementary age learners, but collaborate with other local education entrepreneurs to provide consistency through the years. For example, Earthwise families are encouraged to consider the Madrona Folk School, described above, when their children age-out of Earthwise.

This spirit of entrepreneurial collaboration and community is a common thread connecting founders throughout this picturesque valley.



A learning nook at Mountain Montessori

## Mountain Montessori

**Karen Weary**  
Founder

Karen Weary was a licensed teacher in Colorado who taught for many years in both public and private Montessori schools before moving to southern Oregon. There, she taught in an established, private Montessori school in Medford, the area's largest city, near Grants Pass.

The education disruption of 2020 prompted Weary to explore other education options, and in the fall of 2021 she opened Mountain Montessori, a drop-off, K-3 microschool for homeschoolers in a small classroom above her garage.

"I started this to be a better mom, not to educate my children," said Weary who grew tired of a 45-minute commute to Medford each way to teach at the private school. She felt that the long days, for both herself and her young son who attended the school, prevented her from having the kind of peaceful parenting approach that she cherished. When schools shut down in 2020 and she was at home with her boys, she felt relaxed and reinvigorated and knew that she didn't want to go back to the typical classroom.

Other parents in her area also didn't want to send their children back to conventional schooling. So, Weary created a microschool on her tree-filled property, just down the road from Earthwise Forest School, described above. She and her husband renovated an apartment above their detached garage, transforming it into a bright and welcoming space filled with colorful Montessori manipulatives and cozy learning nooks. Also like Earthwise, Mountain Montessori is an approved vendor for TEACH-NW, enabling greater financial access for some families for whom the \$6,000 annual tuition is cost-prohibitive.

She now has seven students who learn four days a week in the mixed-age, highly personalized classroom environment characteristic of Montessori. "As their teacher, I get to help them move along at their own pace," said Weary, who is passionate about the Montessori philosophy and is thrilled to combine her passion with a home-based, child-centered educational model that local families also find appealing.



Karen Weary



Middle school students at Envision

## Envision Homeschool Collective

**Cara Frantz**  
Founder

Cara Frantz is a certified professional midwife who attends births throughout the Rogue Valley. “In my studies of the history of medicine, I also studied the history of industrialized education and definitely felt in my own path as a child and through college that there was a lot of fluff in the institutionalized model. I always wanted something a little bit better for my kids,” said Frantz. She began exploring alternative education options for her own children and gravitated to homeschooling, hiring tutors from the local university to offer instruction on various subjects.



Cara Frantz in front of Envision's high school microschool space

When Covid hit and schools shut down in 2020, many families were at a loss. “All of us are working parents. The ability to be home full-time and educate our children is extremely challenging,” said Frantz. But her experience using private tutors to help with homeschooling enabled her to imagine extending that approach to more students and families. “Why don't we just pull together and all pitch in and hire them for a full time group?” Frantz wondered.

That was the start of Envision Homeschool Collective, a drop-off microschool in the Rogue Valley with over 20 homeschoolers and three experienced educators that meets four days a week. The high school students gather in a renovated, light-filled addition on Frantz's sprawling mountainside property, while the middle schoolers meet just down the road in a guesthouse on the property of one of the microschooling families.



**The view from Envision's high school microschool location**

"The component of mentorship and the freedom to teach is what I love most about this model," said Mike Dickenson, one of the Envision teachers who has a degree in English Education and experience in Montessori learning environments. "I became a teacher because I was so dissatisfied by how I was taught. I see this learning model as the bridge between what's relevant in the students' lives and the content."

His wife, Amy Schlotterback, agrees. She is another Envision guide who has a background in Waldorf education and was drawn to the microschool model for its highly-personalized, immersive characteristics. "At Envision, I am able to meet the students where they are," she said, adding that the microschool group also takes frequent van rides into the community for field trips and events. "We do a lot of academic work, but we also get out into the world and have real experiences."



**Amy Schlotterback & Mike Dickenson, two of Envision's teachers, at the middle school location**

Over time, Frantz hopes to expand Envision while consolidating the two separate locations into one on her property. She also hopes that Envision-inspired microschools will sprout across the country.

"We want to develop a program that we can then send all over the nation, and little pop-ups of Envision can happen all over, particularly for the middle school and the high school ages," said Frantz.



Students at Arrows

## Arrows Christian Academy

**Becky Abrams**  
Founder

Becky Abrams is a longtime homeschooling mom in the Rogue Valley who started a parent-run homeschool co-op in 2015 with about 40 kids.

Today, that small co-op has grown into Arrows Christian Academy, a drop-off, K-8, hybrid homeschool program with nearly 200 kids and 25 staff members in two locations. Homeschooled students attend age-specific classes two days each week with trained classroom educators, and then spend the remaining three days at home or in the community.

Arrows continues to grow, attracting more local families who value a high-quality, faith-based educational program offering the freedom and flexibility of homeschooling with some of the structure of standard schooling.

As she delegates more of Arrow's day-to-day operations, Abrams is now helping other education entrepreneurs to create similar learning models across the country.



Becky Abrams

## Education Entrepreneurship & Innovation in Grants Pass

### GRANTS PASS AREA UNCONVENTIONAL LEARNING MODELS

**Madrona Folk School:** [madronafolkschool.love](http://madronafolkschool.love)

**REACH:** [reach-school.org](http://reach-school.org)

**Raindrop Academy:** [raindropacademy.com](http://raindropacademy.com)

**Earthwise Forest School:** [earthwiseforestschool.org](http://earthwiseforestschool.org)

**Mountain Montessori:** [sites.google.com/view/mountain-montessori](https://sites.google.com/view/mountain-montessori)

**Envision Homeschool Collective:** [envisionforkids.com](http://envisionforkids.com)

**Arrows Christian Academy:** [arrowschc.wildapricot.org](http://arrowschc.wildapricot.org)

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Learners and a guide at Madrona Folk School in Grants Pass, OR

## Top Takeaways from Today's Education Entrepreneurs

It's extraordinary to see the reach and impact of unconventional, learner-centered education options that today's education entrepreneurs are creating all across the country. While the founders and their approaches are all distinctive, there are five common, consistent themes that emerge from these five entrepreneurial clusters across the US.

1. **Diverse:** The entrepreneurial parents and teachers who are building unconventional, out-of-system learning models are demographically, geographically, and ideologically diverse, and their programs are also diverse in terms of educational philosophies and approaches. From unschooling and self-directed models, to Montessori and Waldorf-inspired pedagogies, to more classical educational approaches, as well as secular and faith-based programs, there is an increasingly wide assortment of nontraditional educational options from which families can choose.
2. **Decentralized:** Both parents and teachers are turning away from centralized, one-size-fits-all schooling in favor of decentralized, hyper-local learning models. These bottom-up models often fill gaps in a particular community, such as programs that cater to neurodiverse students or provide a more culturally relevant educational experience. Decentralization allows for broader creativity and agility to meet the needs of all learners.
3. **Individualized:** Despite their diversity of approaches and models, everyday entrepreneurs across the US are all focused on building more individualized education solutions that meet each child's distinct needs and enable them to forge their own personalized learning path.
4. **Collaborative:** "It's fun because I don't see myself as competing with any of these others," said Karen Weary of Grants Pass, Oregon who runs the Mountain Montessori microschool. "I see myself as offering something that moves me, and that I think is great for children, and that some families want, and others doing something that moves them and is different than what I'm doing." Weary's statement is shared by so many of today's education entrepreneurs who see themselves as collaborators, not competitors, with others in their area. They frequently share resources, offer advice, and refer families to each other's programs, helping to make sure that each child finds the best educational fit.
5. **Accessible:** Today's founders are dedicated to making their programs as accessible as possible to all families who want to participate. Many of them support school choice policies that enable education funding to follow students and that can make their programs more widely available. Even in the absence of such policies, these entrepreneurs offer scholarships, do extensive fundraising, seek grants and philanthropic support, and offer sliding-scale tuitions to reduce costs and expand access.

After visiting these 35 founders, and meeting and talking with scores of others across the country, I agree with Amber Okolo-Ebube of Leading Little Arrows in Texas that we are only at the beginning of the shift toward unconventional, out-of-system learning models.

As more education entrepreneurs create more of these innovative learning models, more young people will be able to enjoy an individualized, decentralized, learner-focused education that will lead to greater human flourishing.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kerry McDonald is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education and host of the LiberatedED podcast. She is also the Velinda Jonson Family Education Fellow at State Policy Network, an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, and a regular Forbes contributor. Kerry is the author of *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom*.

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