

# Microschools: Serving Unique Student Needs

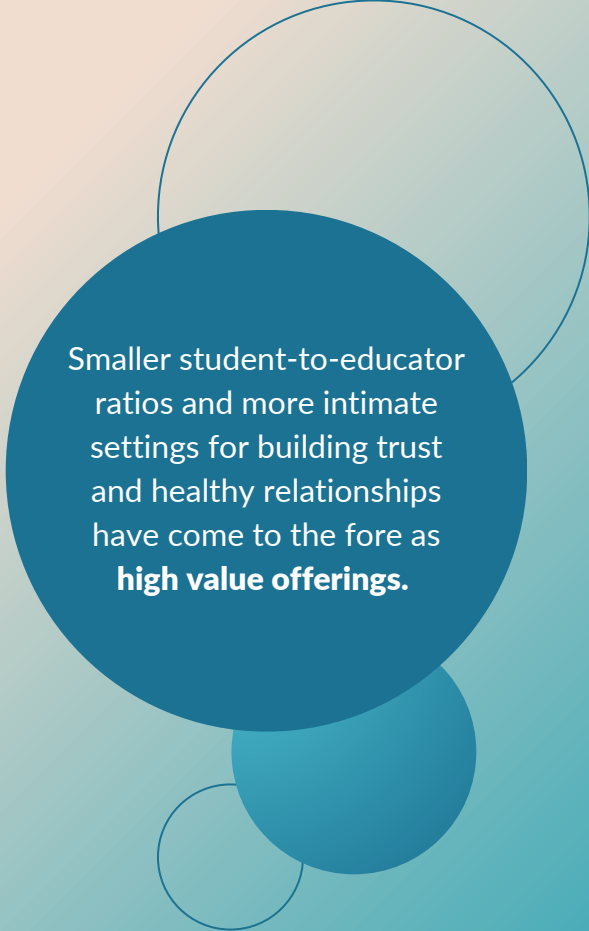
The first public school system in the U.S. was established nearly two centuries ago in what was a very different world. That same year, the nation's first railroad carried passengers and freight. A European immigration boom was still several years away. The U.S. government was actively pursuing a policy of "Indian removal"—a dark chapter in its treatment of indigenous people. The still-quite-new country had yet to fight its own Civil War, and regrettably, it would be decades before slavery would be abolished.

It is important to say the quiet part out loud: traditional K-12 education in America was in no way designed for every student to succeed, nor to meet every student's needs.

To expect even a reformed or evolved version of that environment to suit all kids is unrealistic. Yet alternative options that address highly specific circumstances have taken many decades to develop and gain momentum.

Families, educators, entrepreneurs and policymakers recognize the inflection points of human development, and school leaders are designing experiences around those who are encountering remarkable hardship rather than marginalizing them.

Two such microschools offer lessons on healing and resilience.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping circles in various shades of blue and teal, positioned on the right side of the page.

Smaller student-to-educator ratios and more intimate settings for building trust and healthy relationships have come to the fore as **high value offerings.**



As a young educator, Erin Whalen quickly realized that most of what he learned from administration was what not to do: *Don't provide food. Don't drive kids home after practice when it's late. Make sure that you're maintaining strong and clear boundaries.*

"To me, all of those things felt like they were getting in the way of doing the right work," he said.

The Los Angeles native and Teach for America alum returned to his home city in 2015, where he eventually teamed up with Kari Croft to co-found [Da Vinci RISE](#), a microschool supporting youth "navigating foster care, housing instability, probation, and/or other circumstances that have caused disruptions in their academic journeys."

Their approach—a responsive, holistic, and integrated model designed to meet the needs of these high school students—nurtures the whole student as a vital part of their education.

Croft and Whalen had noted similar trends across student populations in different states: "Kids were coming with needs that based on Maslow's Hierarchy are obstacles to learning, if we think about what learning science tells us," Whalen said.

"But schools expect you to defy the odds and learn—while you're feeling unsafe, you're hungry, you're cold, you're not wearing the clothes that you need, you haven't showered in two days—we're expecting you to learn magically."

All too often, grades are used as a means for inducing shame, he said, a way to punish students for not performing to the same expectation of their more affluent peers. "It makes you feel like you're bad at school when in actuality you haven't provided the necessary human conditions to do well," he added.



Courtesy of Da Vinci RISE High

## Helping families and communities

To fundamentally rethink the high school experience, Croft and Whalen convened wide-ranging focus groups. "We brought foster youth to the table, attorneys, social workers, law offices, probation officers—and then most importantly, students within those systems to really talk to the essential question: What would school look like if it was built around you and your needs, or the needs of your clients and the needs of your community?"

The idea for Da Vinci RISE High was born; a subsequent \$10m grant the pair received from XQ Super Schools in 2016 greatly accelerated the microschool's development.

[Da Vinci Schools](#) supports the school, which is designed to educate students experiencing a range of challenges because it brought the organization closer to its stated mission and vision.



## Creating a caring environment

Abandonment and exposure to violence leave both visible and imperceptible marks. On top of that, dealing with unmet basic needs that could derail any adult's day has required creative and compassionate thinking.

"We've had to figure out how we can fast-track trust, because many of our students have no reason to trust adults and have been in systems where doing so has actually been incredibly painful," Whalen said.

"One of the ways we've done that is by creating an intimate environment for students with fewer triggering factors," he explained. "A school of a thousand kids is terrifying for many of us. But for kids who have been through trauma, it's another level." So RISE's co-founders intentionally developed small communities of about 100 students total enrolled in a microcampus, with roughly 30 or 40 students present on campus at any given time.

The pair designed with project-based, experiential learning and career technical education in mind, thinking about what their students deserve, and as Whalen said, "not being jaded by the system that alternative schools are often placed within."

"You get to know everyone; you learn about everyone. It has been a really big game changer for allowing us to see the whole student because then the student can blossom quicker."

– **Erin Whalen**  
Da Vinci RISE High

## A holistic intake process

Professional social workers and therapists help with the student intake process, where they conduct a typical childhood experience assessment to understand what students have gone through. The first question: *What are the barriers to you accessing school and how can we be supportive in bringing those down?*



Courtesy of Da Vinci RISE High

"Our young moms often say childcare has been a challenge," Whalen added. "Our kids who have been through things like sex trafficking or gang involvement might say 'Taking a bus to my neighborhood is actually the most challenging thing to do.'"

The RISE team then works to find a solution, such as providing rideshare services or access to affordable childcare options.

Conversations enable students to integrate safely and help educators to see them more fully. There is a sense of curiosity, openness and understanding; finger-pointing and shame lead to emotional walls and therefore have no place in the process.



## Training in nonviolent communication

“The way that you’ll hear RISE staff members talk to students can often be starkly different from other charter schools or schools in general,” Whalen explained. All staff are trained to engage in nonviolent communication.

For example: instead of asking why a student is late for school, a RISE educator might say: “Cameron, we missed you today! What can be done so that we can help you get to school? How can I be of support to you? I’ve been late to work before; I completely understand. What can we do together?”

Educator and student are aligned, forming an allyship that allows for candid discussion about choices, time management, and overcoming obstacles—all under an umbrella of support.

The goal: to not put students in a position where recidivism is the answer, which is the disciplinary path taken by most schools. “If you suspend a student for a week for showing up high one morning, you lose the opportunity to engage with them and brainstorm solutions together, acting as an empowering partner and a coach versus an authority figure that dishes out punishment,” Whalen explained.

Putting in place solutions and services as well as discussing coping mechanisms mean students are no longer left to attempt to change behavior on their own.

## Measuring success and student progress

Unfortunately, such institutions are often punished for not meeting specific performance measures, despite their population being much farther behind for valid reasons.

“The system really beats out the innovation in alternative schools, right?” Whalen said, noting that many principals are stuck trying to perform to a certain measurement, “just like students are in the nitty gritty game of trying to perform to the standards of their more affluent, more stable counterparts.”

It’s why RISE is working with Los Angeles County Offset Education to design what they’re calling A-Game Metrics, which are measurements for success in alternative schools.

“The throughline is growth over proficiency, but that’s not revolutionary,” Whalen explained. “It’s really looking at all the different factors that impact our students’ lives and how we can accurately tell the story.”

Two examples:

- Reexamining graduation rates within a more flexible timeframe for many students who might arrive at age 18 possessing credits at a ninth-grade level.
- Students who pass proficiency exams while in danger of “aging out” of the system would no longer be counted as dropouts of the school despite earning a high school diploma directly from the State of California.

Once completed, the revised measurements could serve as a model for others across the country.



*Courtesy of Da Vinci RISE High*

## Responding to students’ interests

In 2024, RISE launched its first career technical education pathways based on student interest and market demand. A mental health pathway includes dual college enrollment. Many students who have received support are passionate about helping others as mental health practitioners. The other pathway focuses on digital media—marketing and content creation—inspired by what today’s high schoolers absorb on online platforms and social media channels.







[Ellemercito Academy](#) takes its name from its first three students: Elle, Oliver (“Mer”) and Eli Cito. What began as an effort for founder Lizette Valles to homeschool her son evolved into a private homeschooling service based on demand from other families.

Today, the place-based microschool in Downey, California, is a “modern spin on the one-room schoolhouse consisting of blended age groups, experienced educators, curated curriculum, and customized instruction with real-world applications.” They serve Pre-K to 12th grade students in a hundred-year-old church.

Ellemercito’s application form is extensive. It’s the first step in an ongoing conversation with parents and foster/resource families that dives into students’ preferences.



*Courtesy of Ellemercito Academy*

## Creating a calming, trauma-informed environment

“Our whole approach has been trauma-informed and restorative from the very beginning,” Valles explained. She and her husband are foster and adoptive parents, which greatly influenced the design of the school. “We thought about how would we want their educational experience to be, understanding that behaviors need to be decoded and that kids are often in a state of fight, flight or freeze—they’re in survival mode.”



*Courtesy of Ellemercito Academy*

Determining how to best meet students’ needs and not be quick to add labels like ‘stubborn’ or ‘defiant’ has required flexibility and compassion.

“These kids are having a hard time, they’re not actively trying to give us a hard time,” Valles explained. “We don’t have a ton of behavioral issues because they’re not perceived as such; it’s more that this child is communicating what they need and then let’s go ahead and see how we can help them regulate their nervous system. We do this by reframing challenging behaviors, realizing students are communicating that they are feeling anxious, uncomfortable, or myriad other emotions.”



## Addressing every student's needs

"We create these individualized learning plans for every child and that is one of the points you know what is the love language of the child," Valles added, noting that sometimes there is a mismatch between educators and students that they can bridge.



*Courtesy of Ellemercito Academy*

"If a child is able to receive love through quality time, one of us might be missing that—so how does that child feel most loved? This is the root of them feeling connected."

Acknowledging the difficulties even young children face is crucial. Students who are having a great day learn how to be supportive or provide comfort to their classmates.

For example, one student whose father had passed away has had a great deal of separation anxiety. "She sometimes will hide under the table because she feels like her mom won't come back," Valles said. "At her previous school, she'd get in trouble. Here, we get down on the floor and offer her methods for relaxation like fidget toys or sitting alone in a quiet teepee with lights and pillows."

Educators bear witness, reaffirming and validating the pain a child feels. "That might involve saying I'm sorry that you're having such a hard day; I'm sorry that you know your body feels very uncomfortable right now," she said. Valles and her team lets kids know that they as well as their peers are here for each and every student. Promoting and practicing empathy has been put to the test in the recent 2025 wildfire crisis.

## Responding to a local crisis

"We have a firefighter family and a police officer family, and so I'm rallying not only around our student who lost her family's home or grandma's home but also these other two families; as a community, it seems like a natural next step to ask 'How are we going to unite and support others?'" Valles said.

Showing up in tangible ways while keeping students safe is visible in actions large and small.

"It sounds so inconsequential, but I had all this sourdough bread that families had ordered and I just took them to all my neighbors with my son," she added. There was so much ash in the air they wore N95 masks. "It was something so simple but so powerful," Valles said. "It teaches him resilience and that spills over into our microschool community because they're seeing the adults handling it—so the kids are coming from a place of 'We can help, too.'"

Valles witnesses the empowerment that emerges as her students openly discuss their fears. "We talk about the discomfort they feel in their lungs and explain why we've increased the use of air purifiers... It's emergency preparedness in action—real-time learning in the midst of a very scary situation," she said.





## Incorporating nature into learning

In a typical week, students learn at Ellemercito's main location, but also have nature days. Their last one included a visit to a "sky gym," a facility with a ropes course and harnesses that challenges students to face their own apprehension and ended up, in their words, "better than Disneyland."

"It took a lot of breathing and encouragement, but that was a good way to practice what to do if you're in a stressful situation. That particular trip was not as calming but I want to say it was very therapeutic because they overcame some fears." Spending time in nature is important to Ellemercito's team, but it can be difficult to find within a large metropolitan area. Valles and colleagues must be intentional about identifying places that tick certain boxes—experiencing hiking, seeing waterfalls or other activities that students may not otherwise have the opportunity to enjoy.

As some of their favorite hiking spots are now completely burned, the team has had to regroup. For a while, Valles said, their nature days are going to look a lot like community service. "For example, a lot of horses were taken to the the Los Angeles Equestrian Center, so taking our students there to feed the animals, helping to clean or do whatever is needed...I think there's something really beautiful in that."

## Shifting away from letter grades

Ellemercito moved away from the traditional A-F grading scale a while ago, Valles explained, as it only worked well for some of its student population. As their enrollment grew, they realized it wasn't an approach that would best encourage growth and achievement. Currently, they're embracing mastery-based learning, which provides a deeper, more comprehensive view of a learner's educational journey—incorporating not just academic progress but also soft skills and personal goals.

"We're in the middle of transitioning to a new system and trying to figure out what's going to work best for our kids," she said. "While it's optional to take the the state test, some of our families do opt into it—and seeing our kids testing two or three grade levels above is remarkable. It's proof that our model works."

The journey to design a responsive, inclusive K-12 experience continues. "School is optional," Valles said. "Education is not. You can be a very well educated, contributing member of society and not have gone to a conventional school one day in your life. To consider what that means for our students: What do they want to learn, what brings them life and joy? Let's go ahead and pursue that with everything we've got."



*Courtesy of Ellemercito Academy*



## Focusing on what works

Microschool leaders interested in providing similar supports to their students have a variety of options to choose from; note that some may work well in *any* context, while others may be especially relevant and timely for addressing specific needs.

### Exploring the natural world

Shifting students' perspectives about themselves and the world around them often requires a change of scenery. Visits to local arboretums or preserves, or regular field trips to parks or facilities that care for animals can nurture students' social and emotional wellbeing. But you don't have to take our word for it: nature-bathing is backed by neuroscience.

### Embracing trauma-informed teaching

Trauma-informed practices remove punitive measures and rewire classrooms for resilience. Prioritizing emotional safety and empowering students with voice and choice can turn would-be barriers into much-needed breakthroughs for those facing adversity. Educators can tailor supports for each child that help them express and regulate their emotions, build trusting relationships with peers and adults, and thrive academically.

### Prioritizing students' interests

Curiosity is a driver. Research shows that interest-driven learning boosts engagement, retention, and skill-building. Microschools can leverage their size to co-create learning pathways with students. Surveys, interviews, or hands-on exploration to determine learners' interests can inform lesson formats, apprenticeships, passion projects, or interdisciplinary themes, while scaffolding choice within structure ensure that foundational competencies are met.

### Embracing mastery-based learning

Traditional grading can feel as if it reduces education to a game of points and averages, encouraging learners to simply memorize and move on. With mastery-based learning, students progress when they've demonstrated deep understanding. In a microschool environment, this approach can take root—providing personalized pacing, real-time feedback, and a focus on competency over compliance.

## Incorporating nonviolent communication

Modeling nonviolent communication principles such as expressing observations without judgment, identifying feelings and needs, and making clear, compassionate requests creates a culture of mutual respect and active listening. Role-playing, community circles, and real-time mediation can shift classroom dynamics. This approach aligns seamlessly with trauma-informed practices and student-centered learning, empowering young people and the adults supporting them to articulate their emotions, advocate for themselves, and build healthier relationships.

## Micro approach, macro-level impact

The examples shared in this case study—fostering creativity and resilience beyond classroom walls, intentional immersion in nature, and creating safe spaces where emotional well-being and academic growth are intertwined—are much more than an alternative model.

Together, they form a blueprint to meet learners where they are, honor their lived experiences, and prepare them not only to succeed, but to thrive in a future that's shaping up to be vastly different from the world we inhabit today.

*Courtesy of Da Vinci RISE High*

