

Exploring Public Microschools

Picture your high school.


Stroll the hallways. Head into the gym, the auditorium, the classrooms of your youth. These well-worn paths in your mind may provide some nostalgia—but it's unlikely they conjure up words like “innovative” or “inspiring.” The learning spaces we inhabited are insufficient for educating today's students.

And it's not just because of the layout or resources, but how those classes were structured: The size, the topics, the exams, the schedule.

As traditional public school systems remain slower to evolve, microschoools-within-a-school provide a real-time glimpse at a paradigm shift. The small, nimble learning communities enable districts to pilot flexible, more student-driven education models.

So far, it's a win-win: Districts unlock access to low-risk innovation, where successes can inform wider system reforms and have a feasible chance at reshaping public K-12 education from within.

Here's how three microschoools are rethinking learning experiences in school districts across America.



Early adopters report higher attendance, improved academic outcomes, and stronger student agency—outcomes that traditional schools can replicate to benefit students.

Microschool Pilots in Progress

“What can we do that’s small enough for me to manage, but a means to start bringing the learning that we see—these incredible experiences—to our students?”

The question asked by Julia Bamba, principal of secondary innovation at Issaquah School District, ultimately led to the first microschool within her district.

Bamba is the founding principal of the district’s Gibson Ek High School, a competency-based and project-based environment where a waiver enables students to graduate with practical experiences like internships in lieu of grades or credits. The model worked well for students and had garnered internal support.

So when she presented to the school board and superintendent about the power and potential of a project-based microschool within their district’s comprehensive high school, it quickly moved into the pilot phase.

A powerful proof point

In spring 2024, 16 students entered a three-month hybrid model. **“The microschool-within-a-school was a proof point—a way to test interdisciplinary, competency-based learning within our traditional high school,”** she said.

Its interdisciplinary aspect meant that students earned English and science credits for their work in environmental studies. Two teachers co-taught, taking turns instructing in their subject of expertise. After securing additional funding, the program grew to 24 mostly 10th grade students the following school year.

“We tried to show that even in a traditional system, kids can be out in the hallways building, designing, using a saw to cut wood,” Bamba said. “Why hide this energy in isolated classrooms? Let’s put creativity front and center.”



Courtesy of Issaquah School District

The approach sent a message about innovation: “Something magical can happen in an environment like this as well,” Bamba added. “Creating a microschool-within-a-school is also about trying to help people see what’s possible.”

Bamba then pitched the idea to the middle school principals. Two strongly felt they had teachers on board and the space to make it happen.

They also wanted to offer a different experience for students—especially in science and history, two classes where the district’s eighth graders can struggle.

“This was our chance to bring those subjects together and monitor how the experience worked,” Bamba said, emphasizing the agency needed at the school level. “It was critical to have the principals be the ones to start thinking and dreaming about the school-in-a-school model rather than me saying ‘OK, you’re going to do this’.”



2025-26 Issaquah School District microschools

→ In one middle school, 50 interested students have enrolled in a morning and afternoon cohort, with a lead teacher co-teaching with an IEP teacher/case manager and an MLL teacher. The focus will be on ELA and science.

→ In the second middle school, a single cohort of roughly 30 students will be taught by two veteran teachers in social studies and science respectively.

They'll need a plan to coteach effectively. Another key logistical aspect: Will the kids stay in one room with teachers moving in and out, or will the students change spaces?

The shift to the middle school level was based on several factors, including:

- Hiring an external teacher to build the high school curriculum required additional funding that would not be continued for the following year
- A lack of connection to an existing team meant there was less internal buy-in and greater skepticism about this role
- The high school had no dedicated space for experimentation, which led to unconventional activities (think building with cardboard and duct tape) in venues specifically designed for other disciplines, which understandably caused some confusion and concern
- The shift to project-based learning was a higher instructional lift than expected, and was done on top of educators' existing roles
- While the microschool built a robust community of learners, students still felt the constraints of a traditional system of learning during other parts of their day.



Courtesy of Issaquah School District

With arguably high graduation rates, why try to improve upon the existing model?

Bamba candidly looks toward what can work better. "Our graduation rates look good on paper—but what are students really getting out of it?" Bamba asked. "For our BIPOC and special education students: Are we serving them in the best way and are we helping them be able to thrive in school?"

Outcomes for those groups (graduation rates and college entrance) are lower than the overall student population. Typically, Issaquah has 70 to 75 percent of students going to a two- or four-year college. Most graduates who do not attend college work part-time—often in industries with little opportunity for advancement, and 80% of these say they did not receive vocational training during high school for their role.

Bamba points to this data as a reason for developing meaningful community-connected, real world learning opportunities through a microschool environment.



For those who enter 11th grade after having experienced the microschool, Bamba explained the shift: “It’s like, now you’ve gotten your confidence. You’re coming to school, you love learning. You have these ideas of what you can do now.”

They had studied physics, and went on a rock climbing field trip which brought the subject’s principles into full view. The students also completed a joyful hands-on physics project: designing and constructing a mini golf course for preschoolers.

“You can see the confidence and personal growth that students can gain by working with mentors in our community, by being able to be problem-solvers and to simply get out of their seats, learning, being creative and collaborating. It’s amazing.”



Courtesy of Issaquah School District

Correlation measures such as attendance and participation offer clues as to student engagement, as do student surveys.

Bamba’s advice to those looking to launch a microschool within their school: **“The first hurdle you’ve got to clear is that you need a community of teachers who have agency to come up with cool things and to own them. If you don’t have that, it’s not going to work.”**

For now, her focus is on a bigger question: How can we incorporate more innovation and accelerate opportunities for more students?



Courtesy of Issaquah School District



EDGE Microschool

To hear principal Mike Sharp describe the EDGE microschool in Liberty Public Schools is to viscerally understand the enthusiasm and possibility behind a forward-thinking graduate profile. The district is creating opportunities to reach each student where they are, aiming to prepare them for their next chapter—whatever it may be.

“It’s amazing to see a freshman EDGE student walk in the door, and to compare that to the incredible transition through what they’re accomplishing as a senior,” Sharp said.

Housed within Liberty High School, EDGE’s roughly 85 students include freshmen through seniors. They have classes outside the program, and can also participate in the district’s built-in internship program called Network 53 program, which partners with local Kansas City career centers.

“We have kids that are state championship debaters and state championship wrestlers; an interesting mix

of students opt into this,” Sharp said. Part of the appeal, he believes, is the microschool educators’ magnetic presence. “Students want to be around these folks, and that makes a huge difference,” he noted.

EDGE is, in many ways, fundamentally different from the way many of us (and most of the kids in our lives) have experienced high school.

You might see students in a traditional classroom completing a worksheet to earn points. Meanwhile, EDGE involves tasks and touchpoints, such as: *What have you learned? Where are you in the material? And what are our next steps to ensure we’re going to accomplish what we set out to learn?*

“It’s a great opportunity for more independent and driven students,” Sharp said, pointing out that the microschool isn’t an ideal fit for every kid or every teacher, and that’s OK. “Definitely in comparison to when I was a classroom teacher, EDGE looks and feels a lot different,” he added.



Courtesy of EDGE

An agile learning experience

Unlike a typical master schedule that's set for the year, EDGE's offerings are drafted each week for the forthcoming week. Students then self-select depending upon what they're required to have and what interests them.



Courtesy of EDGE

Because the schedule rotates, the microschool cannot offer every AP course, international language or upper-level math course one might find in a traditional setting. This constraint has required a systems-level approach to scheduling reminiscent of a college model, with some students traveling across campuses to attend specialized courses outside of EDGE.

Each morning, the EDGE team hosts a kickoff session about how they might creatively intertwine different content areas. “They might say, for instance, you’re reading this book in literature—this would be a great opportunity for us to hit additional competencies related to government or overarching diplomacy,” Sharp explained.

The team has wrangled with tough questions, including:

- How do we know what we need to offer?
- How do we determine how often do we need to schedule it?
- How can we confirm students are actually learning the material?

Two educators took it upon themselves to become FACS (Family and Consumer Science) certified, enabling them to offer culinary skills instruction—implementing math, reading, writing, and other subjects in conjunction—while allowing EDGE to expand its offerings.

Student interests guide content and themes, leading to a boost in engagement, greater enjoyment and higher outcomes. Instead of: “Here’s the novel we’re going to cover,” teachers might suggest, “This is the genre we’re exploring; what interests you at this level?” It’s led to higher-than-average reading scores for EDGE students compared to their peers.

Overcoming obstacles

Yet assessment remains complex. One challenge: how to take attendance when you know a student is in the building for the EDGE program, but not in, say, room 101?

The district hired a halftime administrative assistant who manages teacher feedback, schedule updates, and student attendance, ensuring compliance with reporting, student requirements and state-level funding.

Some decisions make sense in theory, but not in practice. For example, the team found it’s more beneficial to add sections of Spanish outside of the program rather than bringing in a Spanish teacher who needed another block in her schedule. The former option leaves more flexibility for EDGE students instead of giving them a limited timeslot for taking Spanish 1 or 2.



Resource sharing also helps. EDGE and the broader high school cooperate, swapping equipment or staff expertise, if specific skillsets are needed.

Promising assessment outcomes

Trusting staff is key. “For me, it’s empower the teachers, then stay out of their way,” Sharp said. Teachers break down the curriculum to understand what material to cover and which skills to assess in accordance with state-level and local curriculum.

The results have been reassuring. “Our kids are prepared, and the state testing and ACTs are where

they need to be—and in some areas, even higher,” Sharp noted. EDGE students’ ACT scores are roughly 3 points above the national average, and their success in AP languages is tracking just shy of 30% higher than peers nationally.

With current staffing, the microschool could expand to 100 students, prompting more discussion about facilities needs and usage.

Such growth would likely be welcomed. “Our district made a significant investment in EDGE, and it has definitely paid off,” Sharp said.



Courtesy of EDGE



Prenda Microschool

In Mesa, Arizona, fourth through sixth graders have been opting into a different kind of school day.

Over the past seven years, more than 50 kids have engaged in a Prenda Microschool within Eisenhower Center for Innovation, a Title I elementary school in Mesa Public Schools.

Behavioral issues were common—especially in the upper grades, according to principal Robert Meldau. “A combination of teacher capacity and student need was out of balance such that often there were significant behavioral challenges that led to frequent disruptions in the traditional academic setting,” he said.

Meldau and the district’s superintendent were introduced to the founder of the Prenda model by a city councilperson, and believed it could be an excellent fit for their student population. A partnership was born, with support from the leadership team.

Catalyzing behavioral change

After entering the microschool, multiple students avoided placement in a district behavioral program placement. Meldau cited many reasons, including changing the social dynamics, students’ opportunity to focus on individual learning, and reducing the social overwhelm that can come with a traditional classroom of 20-30 students.

Early on, those who benefited significantly from the school-within-a-school model were academically advanced but often quite introverted.



Courtesy of MESA Public Schools

“Students really flourished when they had a smaller classroom, when they could work at their own pace, engaging in self-guided learning, and progressing as far as their work ethic and their focus would allow,” Meldau said.

Having the right personnel—an instructional aide who serves as a Prenda microschool guide—has been key to their success, as has funding to operate within the Prenda microschool framework, along with understanding how to support students in their largely independent work.

Students have the same supervising teacher throughout their microschool experience, and Meldau related that this has been crucial to all operational aspects, such as navigating report cards, onboarding and training of new Prenda guides, behavioral or logistical support for concerns within the microschool, communication with parents and parent-teacher conferences.

Designing with engagement in mind

The day begins with breakfast with peers; then students attend elective classes like band, music animation, media center, physical education, or art, followed by a brief social emotional learning lesson, or a community circle with a whole class of about 25 to 30 students.

Then they head into a smaller group of their Prenda peers (a total of 10 students), where they set a goal for how much they'd like to progress through their core curriculum that day. This is followed by "Conquer Mode," self-directed learning via a mix of Khan Academy, No Red Ink, or Lexia to work through core academic areas at their ability level based on a pre-test. Next, they transition into "Collaborate Mode," where they engage in a group project, such as building a timeline, preparing for and participating in a debate, developing a Socratic seminar, or something else they've decided upon together. Meldau described a "Create" part of the day as "a little bit of a genius hour style activity (creative or not, based on their individual interests) that can be done in groups or on their own. Then they join peers for lunch and recess.

Depending on the day, students might join their class for academic intervention targeted toward assessment preparation or writing skills, or they might do social-emotional learning. There's also a about personal finance entrepreneurship curriculum that they can participate in with their entire grade.

Creating an inclusive culture

Providing time to engage with peers both inside and outside of the microschool and creating the space for student agency are core tenets of the model. This integration into the broader cultural fabric of Eisenhower has been critical to its success, as has internal support for the model.

"Student voice and choice is a core value that we hope to see in every classroom on our campus," Meldau said, adding that they measure success by student and parent satisfaction first, followed by academic performance according to benchmarks.

District leadership has repeatedly signaled their support for the program, ensuring years of engaging experiences for cohorts to come at Eisenhower—and leaving the door open to potential expansion to other campuses.



Courtesy of MESA Public Schools



Looking ahead

By balancing innovation with practicality, educators can create impactful microschools that meet the needs of diverse student populations without compromising on equity or quality.

The following recommendations outline key steps—from securing internal support to designing responsive models—to ensure that small-scale learning environments can thrive within larger systems.

- **Empower educators with the authority to develop microschools-within-a-school** that best serve their unique student population.
- **Ensure deep connections to the broader school and surrounding community**, as this can increase microschool students' sense of belonging and access to a variety of courses and internships.
- **Student voice and choice can help guide meaningful learning experiences** that align with interests and needs, which in turn boosts academic outcomes and innovation possibilities.
- **Create a dedicated space for microschool activities** to reduce potential friction and increase the likelihood of internal buy-in prior to launching.
- **A shift to smaller class sizes also changes the social dynamics** for some students who may otherwise struggle with behavioral challenges.
- **Traditional methods of assessment may fall short** of telling the full story of student success; look toward participation and attendance as markers.
- **Establishing a community of learners takes time and intention**; lay a powerful foundation for relationship-building by deliberately designing microschool interactions.



Courtesy of Issaquah School District

What can educators and school leaders learn from the school-within-a-school model?

Operating within school districts lessens risk surrounding attempts at innovation; those implementing this model are able to experiment with more personalized instruction while fostering closer student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships. Enhanced engagement and improved academic outcomes often result.

And when experiences are tailored to the needs and interests of each learner, there is a ripple effect, with an impact going far beyond individual students. Sometimes, the culture of the entire district shifts.

It's difficult to predict just how much K-12 education will evolve in the coming years from the experiences of the past century. Yet microschools like those profiled here are demonstrating how innovative, small-scale approaches can coexist alongside and enrich larger school frameworks.

