

Microschools:

Assessment and Evaluation

A group of children are 20 feet in the air, climbing (and laughing) in a nature park oasis nestled within one of America's largest cities. The typical school day looks different in a microschool.

Students and parents are drawn to this academic environment for varying reasons. But their appeal to families with a broad range of needs is clear, as the demand for microschools has grown precipitously across the U.S. post-pandemic.

Small class sizes, personalized approaches and greater flexibility are viewed as advantages. In contrast to their traditional counterparts, microschools are more nimble and in many ways, better equipped to respond to a rapidly changing world. They're new, yet their roots run deep; community-centered learning is precisely how today's K-12 schools got their start.

Not to be overlooked is microschools' capacity for innovating on more traditional models. Leaders represent an intersection of educators and entrepreneurs—many of whom were brought up in public and private schools, and intimately familiar with their limitations and shortcomings. They have envisioned new ways to better meet students where they are.

Microschool leaders are building the schools they wish they or their children had been able to attend, structured upon founding values like experimentation, kindness and joy, principles of mastery-based progression and project-based learning. They share a deep commitment to developing academic proficiency, along with essential "durable skills" that will continue to serve students in the burgeoning AI era: critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

The Challenge of Traditional Accountability

Yet microschools are largely evaluated by the very mechanisms they seek to move beyond: standardized test scores, Carnegie unit requirements, and other metrics (think attendance and participation). These relics of the industrial era created for scale and simplicity are at odds with a deeper, more individualized focus.

This misalignment creates a fundamental tension. It forces educators to choose between honoring their pedagogical mission—focusing on rich, authentic learning experiences—and complying with external pressures to generate easily comparable, narrow data points that often fail to capture both the full scope of student growth and school quality.

Critics of microschools may point to a lack of traditional accountability. Because they are typically categorized as private schools, even when they receive public funding, they are not subject to the same rigorous data reporting requirements as their public and charter school counterparts. This has given rise to several concerns, such as:

Data sets are too small for meaningful comparative or longitudinal analysis, making it difficult to gauge student progress over time.

Standards may be lowered or student achievement gaps masked without mandated standardized testing.

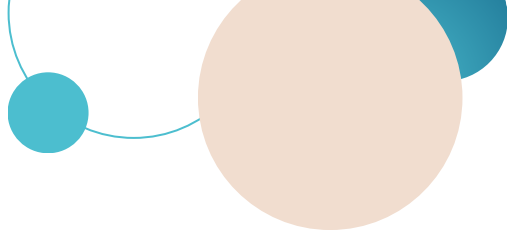
Alternative assessment methods might not be considered rigorous or valid by traditional policy makers.

Those that administer standardized tests measure a narrow band of cognitive skills (recall, procedural knowledge). As a result, they fail to capture the critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity that most microschools emphasize. According to a [2025 RAND report](#), the lack of consistent data surrounding student performance in microschools also “...poses threats to both the internal and external validity of studies intending to evaluate the impact of the sector on student outcomes, particularly those leveraging existing administrative datasets.”

In some ways, policies aren’t keeping up. Federal laws like the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) regulations present challenges for microschools operating as non-public agencies, requiring students to [experience years of failure in a traditional district setting](#) prior to receiving a referral for a specialized program.

Microschool leaders are finding themselves at a critical juncture: with student populations performing well in areas that truly matter, yet constrained by rigid accountability systems designed for a different educational setting. Compulsory testing leaves gaps where the full story isn’t told.





Moving Beyond Standardized Testing

Despite these concerns, many microschools are committed to high quality student-centered education. Instead of relying solely on one-dimensional tests, their leaders are developing more holistic and authentic assessment practices that look beyond traditional methods.

Internal and External Measures

An array of approaches to evaluation and assessment are being employed by microschool leaders.

Diverse tools

Many microschools use a combination of well-established, third-party assessments (such as MAP testing or the i-Ready diagnostic) and their own internally developed tools to create a comprehensive picture of student learning. They avoid using a single test as a sole determinant of a student's ability or academic placement.

For instance, Victory Creative Learning in Killeen, Texas, uses the [P.A.C.S. framework](#): project-based learning for hands-on educational experiences, academic planning that incorporates personalized learning goals based on data-driven assessments, creativity and innovation to enable students to explore and create solutions to real-world problems, and social and emotional learning (SEL) to support students developing self-regulation, resilience, and collaboration skills. Assessment begins as early as preschool, where educators track students' letter identification, phonics skills, and early literacy through multisensory activities.

Another powerful approach to assessment reframes students' knowledge deficits into awareness of accomplishments. For example, Primer uses a proprietary operating system (OS) that loads students' MAP testing and other work they've completed, and tells them how many skills they've already mastered. Instead of focusing on where students are falling short, the assessment emphasizes right out of the gate the broad foundation of knowledge that learners have already built. Primer also employs AI in mapping needed skills back to students' areas of interest.

Prenda microschools specifically track non-academic metrics that measure a student's development as an independent learner. This effort is communicated to parents through the Empowerment Report Card, which includes goal tracking in math and language learning, personalized feedback from guides, and shares how their child feels about learning via categories including Love of Learning, Challenge Level, Motivation and Sense of Control.



Trauma-informed practices

Some microschools, particularly those led by educators with backgrounds in trauma-informed practices, use rituals such as daily check-ins to create a safe space for students to learn.

A trauma-informed microschool leverages its intimate scale to create a deeply responsive environment. It moves away from traditional, punitive discipline models and toward a culture of connection, co-regulation, and psychological safety.

Trauma-informed teaching can take the form of a small, human-centered gesture, such as permitting a child to take a test beneath a table, or other creative and flexible solutions. like allowing chewable necklaces to be worn in class in order to alleviate anxiety. In doing so, educators consider the experiences and emotions of the child rather than focusing solely on their academic output.

At Da Vinci Rise HIGH, 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? The approach creates a more supportive and effective learning environment for every student in the community.

SEL and well-being

A key innovation is the use of tools for informal, daily assessment of student social-emotional learning (SEL). SEL is a pedagogical approach focused on helping all students develop key competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. By regularly checking in on the emotional state of their students, schools can create a more supportive learning environment and ensure a student's performance on a test isn't influenced by personal challenges.

SEL can be wrapped into a variety of academic frameworks, and it is also complementary to trauma-informed teaching. SEL is a proactive, universal framework for all students, while the latter is a responsive approach aimed at mitigating the effects of trauma on learning.

Defining student outcomes through joy represents a departure from the traditional "factory model" of schooling. Kind Academy founder Iman Alleyne relayed that positive energy was as critical to students' experience as academic growth, with most performing at or above grade level. "Parents understand the value of joy in their own lives and what their kids get to do by experimenting," she said.

"It makes me wonder how many kids would've benefited from checking in on them as a person before checking on what they know."

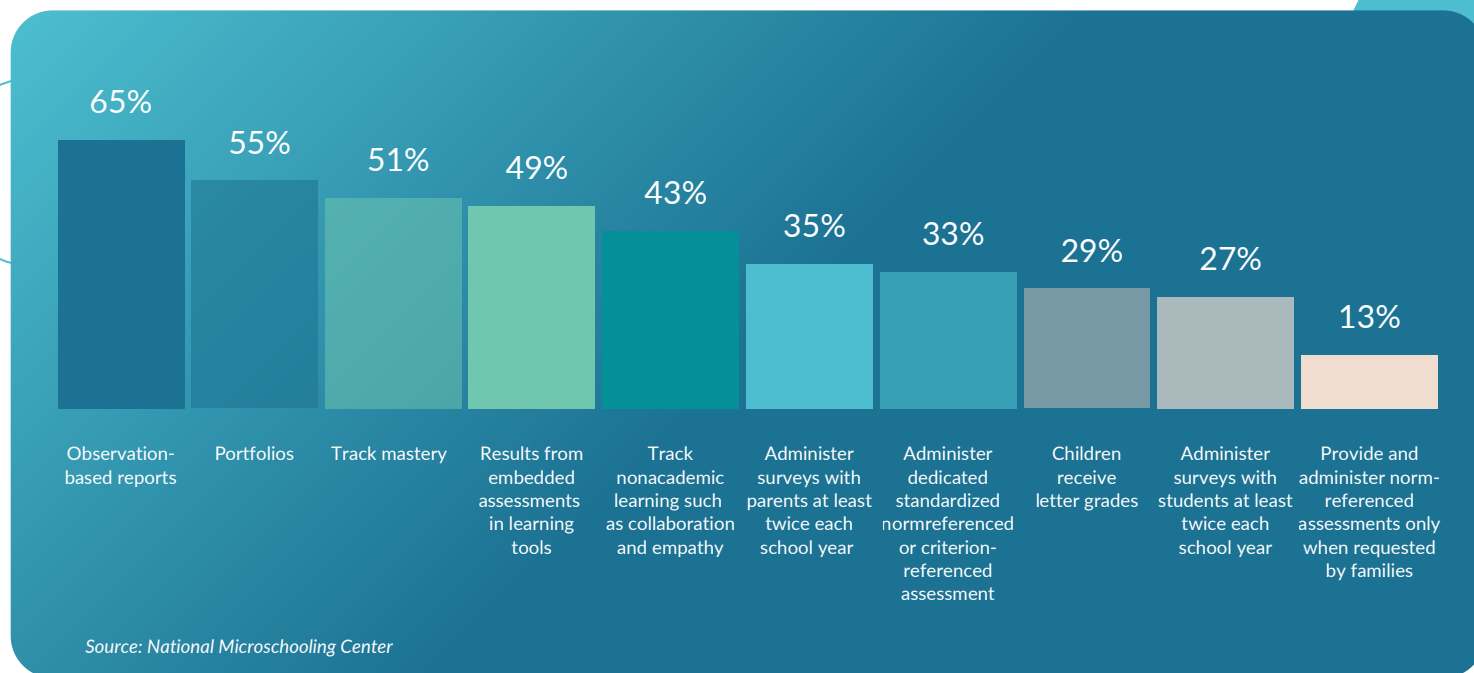
— Victoria Andrews
Partner, Professional Learning
Getting Smart



Authentic Assessment

A [2025 survey by the National Microschooling Center](#) asked currently operating microschools how they measured impact, prompting respondents to indicate all that apply.

School leaders cited the following most commonly employed assessment methods:



According to [Stand Together](#), microschools “...are primarily accountable to parents, measuring impact through observations, mastery tracking, growth toward nonacademic goals, and portfolio assessments. Most students (88%) are from average or below-average income households.”

Because of their unique status, microschools remain at the forefront of authentic assessment. This approach, which involves real-world projects and public exhibitions of work, often faces barriers to widespread adoption. But a growing number of organizations and policy changes are building trust in these methods:

- **Policy changes:** Loosening policies around seat time and embracing career and technical education (CTE) have opened the door for alternative measures of success. For example, a student’s hours in an apprenticeship and the attainment of a professional certification can now be considered as valid as a test score.
- **Advocacy:** Some microschools have successfully advocated to become official testing sites for standardized tests, enabling their students to take exams in a familiar, low-stress environment.
- **Entrepreneurial learning:** Some schools are taking assessment one step further by incorporating entrepreneurship. Student-created products are tested in a real-world marketplace, providing a tangible assessment of their skills in areas like marketing, pricing, and product design.



The Policy Paradox

While traditional K-12 schools have extensive government regulation, microschools operate under various models; sometimes they are classified as homeschooling programs, private schools, or charters. Microschools lack a single regulatory body, and their leaders “often make decisions about how (and whether) to assess students' academic proficiency and growth [on a student-by-student basis](#),” as they aren't held to the same state and federal accountability requirements and reporting requirements faced by public schools.

Accreditation status varies, according to [reporting](#) from the Hill, which stated that: “Many microschools operate as learning centers for homeschooled students and therefore do not need any accreditation. Others function as private schools, which do not need to be accredited nor have certified teachers in most states.”

This regulatory “no man's land” has led to a growing paradox in the national conversation around microschools. Enter the [Next Generation Accreditation](#), a pilot program developed by Middle States Association in partnership with Stand Together to offer faster, more flexible, and more affordable accreditation for innovative schools, particularly microschools. This new protocol moves away from rigid, standardized protocols, allowing schools to present their unique stories and learning environments using evidence that best reflects their models.

While some policymakers voice concern about a lack of traditional accountability, federal and state policies are making it easier for students to access them. As of June 2025, 18 U.S. states had active Education Savings Account (ESA) programs, which provide [publicly funded, government-authorized savings accounts](#) with various restrictions and multiple uses for educational purposes. Such programs enable more families to access microschools that operate privately and charge tuition.

A disconnect arises: How can officials be concerned about a lack of oversight while simultaneously expanding the opportunity for more students to attend these schools? The ongoing debate highlights the need for a more diplomatic and unified approach to measuring student growth that respects innovation while ensuring every student receives a high-quality education.

In practice, such an effort could look take on a collaborative form. Some microschools are teaming up with local education organizations to develop assessments that more accurately capture students' progress. For example, Da Vinci RISE High is working with Los Angeles County's Office of Education to design “A- Game Metrics,” a set of measurements for success in alternative schools.

- Graduation rates could be reexamined, with an emphasis on a more flexible timeframe. For those students who enter a microschool at age 17 or 18 possessing credits at a ninth-grade level, such a measure is not only exclusionary but largely irrelevant to their individual progress and achievement—and schools would be unfairly penalized with a lower graduation rate simply by serving those populations.
- In another scenario, students at risk of “aging out” of the system who pass proficiency exams would no longer be counted as school dropouts despite earning a high school diploma directly from the State of California.





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

— Dr. Erin Whalen
Co-founder, Da Vinci RISE High

States are increasingly adopting policies to support microschool growth, including the expansion of funding options and the removal of regulatory barriers to make them accessible and sustainable alternatives to traditional public schools. Policy shifts have been motivated by a variety of factors, including increased demand for alternative models from families, pandemic-era trends in small group instruction, and technological advancements that better support self-paced and personalized learning. Some of these pivotal changes include:

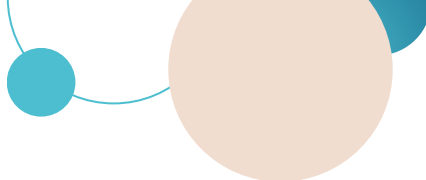
Integration into Public Funding: Many states are expanding school choice policies, particularly ESAs and scholarship programs, to include microschools, thereby providing public funding for these private alternatives. In 2022, Arizona lawmakers enacted legislation that transformed a scholarship program into a universal voucher which earmarked publicly funded support for microschools.

Formal Regulation of Microschools: Policies are shifting from microschools operating in a regulatory "gray zone" to one where states define their status, often as a form of homeschooling or private school. During pandemic-related closures in Connecticut, the state introduced legislation to provide protections for families forming educational "pods"—a precursor to today’s microschool policies.

Removal of Burdensome Requirements: Some policies seek to eliminate excessive regulatory hurdles like complex zoning and licensing requirements—byproducts of another educational era—to lower barriers to launching microschools. In 2024, Utah’s legislature passed laws allowing microschools to forgo costly rezoning in order to operate in either residential or commercial spaces, such as churches and movie theaters.

Broader School Choice Movement: Microschools are increasingly seen as a vital component of the broader school choice movement, characterized by an emphasis on educational freedom and innovation and the empowerment of parents and educators to create new educational solutions. State policies in Florida now allow for taxpayer-funded spending accounts to support both homeschooling and microschool programs, increasing accessibility.





Looking Ahead

Aside from emerging accreditation models, major organizations are moving towards personalized and "caring" assessments that align with microschool philosophy, such as ETS' pioneering research into dynamic tools that adapt based on students' non-cognitive attributes (prior knowledge, motivation, emotions) and context. This comes amid an evolution in governance and accountability.

Financial and leadership codification

The primary focus as microschools scale into networks is sustainability. This requires formal governance structures and advisory boards to manage succession planning and financial transparency, ensuring the school's mission outlives its founders.

Decentralized financial autonomy

In network models, power is pushed down to site-level leaders (guides/teachers). Rather than following a rigid central budget, this approach grants them financial control to directly allocate funds to individual student needs (e.g., specific software or apprenticeships).

Alternative assessment methods

Accountability metrics are moving beyond standardized tests to align with schools' unique goals, such as holistic data collection (SEL, well-being, mental health, and anxiety) and tracking parent and student retention via surveys to measure satisfaction and long-term commitment.

Microschools are growing because of the positive results they're producing for children and families. They provide a sought-after alternative to America's one-size-fits-all public education experience. Kids with different physical abilities or neurodivergence, children experiencing housing or food insecurity, and teens recovering from trauma represent groups that microschools are uniquely poised to support, and serve well.

However, we cannot truly understand or measure microschools' potential without developing and testing new evaluation paradigms that align with them: the frameworks, rubrics and testing that prioritize authentic evidence of student learning and comprehensive experiences over more standardized, easily comparable metrics.

Within this challenging work is an opportunity that policymakers, school leaders, and learning communities ought not to miss: the chance to have a deeper conversation about what success truly means for each child. By championing measures that capture holistic development, schools can finally measure what matters most. In the process, they'll gain insights that can enrich K-12 education for every student, in every context.

