

# Promoting Microschool Partnerships

Steven Thayne

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## Key Points

- As more states adopt universal education savings accounts, analysts have declared that the “final frontier” of school choice has been reached. They’re wrong.
- Some parents want an intermediate option between private school and homeschooling and are reluctant to sever ties with their local public school district.
- States can foster district-parent microschool partnerships by incentivizing school districts to allow small groups of parents to teach students at home with public financial assistance but total curricular freedom.

In the past two years, nearly 10 states have adopted universal education savings account (ESA) programs. Does this suggest that the school choice movement is almost over, with nothing left to fight for except advancing these bills in other states where passage is politically possible? Far from it. There is another choice that parents might want to make and policymakers should support: Rather than opting entirely out of the public school system, parents should partner with their local schools to establish parent-run microschools.

Such a proposal is now being considered in Idaho. Many parents value their public school but object to the curriculum or wish their child could receive a more personalized and tailored education. Given the lack of private school options, an ESA program would simply send money to these parents and tell them they’re on their own. Rather than (or perhaps in addition to) doing that, the state could provide money to parents to *partner* with their district school to create and operate microschools.

Under the proposal being debated, parents may access state funds in one of two ways. First, the train-the-parent funding model would allow parents to teach their own children at home and receive up to \$1,700 per child to

be used for expenses. The funding would be allocated through the current funding stream going to district schools; no extra state funding is needed. The amount of family-controlled funding would be set in district policy. These partnerships can be pursued only with the school district’s sponsorship.

Second, the outcome-based-funding (OBF) model allows parents to access up to 40 percent—the amount set by law—of the average statewide spending per student (approximately \$4,000) in Idaho, given in three installments.<sup>1</sup> Two installments of approximately \$1,250 are allocated per semester, while the last installment is allocated on passage of the statewide test.

Why, exactly, would a school district agree to this partnership? After all, on the one hand, it would lose about half of the per-pupil money for students who opt into these microschool partnerships. But on the other hand, it would retain half of the per-pupil money—more than it would if a family decided to homeschool or took advantage of an ESA. Indeed, in states that have already passed ESAs, school districts should—in theory—support these microschool partnership proposals, as they present a financially advantageous

way to remain a competitive option in the eyes of parents who are fully empowered to take their state funds wherever they'd like.

## **Autonomy for Accountability**

Notably, parents would have complete freedom to determine what and how to teach. They could select their own curriculum and set their own hours. In the charter school context, advocates often speak of the “autonomy for accountability” trade-off: Charter schools get more administrative freedom than traditional public schools, but in exchange must be held accountable to an authorizer to continue operating. In this micro-school proposal, school districts essentially strike this same bargain for parents. Parents have the freedom to teach what and how they'd like. But in exchange, their children must take and perform above average on state standardized tests. Younger students may take an alternative test designed to measure reading skill and comprehension. Parents must also work directly with the local school district by providing weekly examples of completed assignments in core subject areas.

Parents who choose to form a parent organization under the OBF model work independently from the school district—the only sponsoring option. Parents hold each other accountable in the OBF model for participation, and students must also take the Idaho Standards Achievement Test and pass at a level equal to or better than the average public school student in the state *within two years*. If the student does not reach this level of proficiency in the allotted time, the parent can no longer receive state funding for that child until they reach this benchmark.

This level of accountability is more than exists in the current public school system. Public schools continue to receive funding even if no student learning takes place. Parents would still, of course, be free to homeschool their children, but the state would pay only upon evidence that the student is learning. Because the money would flow only for performance, no further academic or administrative regulations would be needed.

Parents will have the flexibility to set the school schedule. Students need not clock in five days a week for seven hours a day. Many families may find that four hours a day for three or four days a week are sufficient to accomplish what takes the public school far

more time—freeing up precious time for enrichment activities. The teacher need not be certified (though, of course, the families could choose to hire a certified teacher). The state has absolutely no say in what curriculum is used. The bill expressly gives families “more power not just to inspect curriculum, but to help choose it.”<sup>2</sup>

## **Fixing Public Schools' Original Flaw**

When Horace Mann first proposed the current public school system in the 1840s, its original structure contained a serious flaw. Mann declared the state should choose the curriculum. However, under natural law, which is at the heart of the American psyche, it is the right and responsibility of parents to choose the curriculum.

Modern math, common core math, lack of phonics, complaints about literature choices, and many other curricula concerns of parents have originated with experts. Parents have not generated these curriculum fiascos; so-called experts have. This proposal elevates the parents' voices to a level of greater equality with local school boards by creating a legal structure that allows parents to choose the curriculum they want for their children, independent of the school system.

The homeschool community has been developing solid curricula for 40 years. There are more great curriculum choices than ever before. This proposal allows parents to scour the education landscape for the curriculum that works best for them.

## **Conclusion**

The microschool movement may well be the future of K-8 education. This proposal gives parents maximum power to choose the curriculum without severing ties with local schools. With microschooling, parents with the power to choose curricula can positively change public education's very nature, unlike with ESA or voucher proposals that require the student to leave the system. Students that thrive in the current public school system will be able to access it as they always have. Students doing well in the current system will likely stay in traditional schools. Microschools, with their small class sizes, are an excellent way to help struggling students excel.

For states that have already passed ESAs, promoting microschool partnerships would grant parents an additional choice and provide school districts with a way to remain competitive in the eyes of parents who might otherwise withdraw completely. And for states that are unlikely to pass ESAs, promoting microschoools could be an excellent and achievable way to promote choice and flexibility.

The proposal also opens a great job opportunity for retired teachers, college students, and stay-at-home

parents to earn a decent part-time income, thus strengthening family finances. A student in an OBF model can generate up to \$4,000 per year. A teacher with five students could receive up to \$20,000 per year, which is more than the average salary of many part-time jobs. An excellent way to strengthen families in America is to strengthen their finances. What better way to do that than involve parents directly in the instruction of their own children in a microschool?

## About the Author

**Steven Thayne** is a former legislator in Idaho, former chairman of the Idaho Senate Education Committee, and the architect of the Advanced Opportunities program, the Self-Directed Learner program, and the Innovative Classroom program. All these programs are designed to give funds and choices to students and parents.

## Notes

1. Sadie Dittenber, “Special Education: Idaho’s \$66 Million Problem,” Idaho Education News, November 1, 2023, <https://www.idahoednews.org/top-news/special-ed-idahos-66-million-problem>.
2. Laura Pappano, “Who Picks School Curriculum? Idaho Law Hands More Power to Parents,” Hechinger Report, August 14, 2023, <https://hechingerreport.org/who-picks-school-curriculum-idaho-law-hands-more-power-to-parents>.

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