

Unleashing Education: Innovation for Tomorrow's Children



SUMMARY

Ask parents what they should do for their five-year-old's education, and they will tell you the child should be enrolled in kindergarten. It is the standard answer.

Ask any high school student how they feel about school. Most will say, "Fine." Another standard answer. But fine is not acceptable. "Standard" is not acceptable. Not all children thrive in a traditional classroom.

More parents are realizing they want something different for their child,¹ and this is creating a state of disruption in the education industry.²

Here is the good news: A wave of education innovators are creating individualized education programs to address parents' desires for something different.³ But they face an uphill battle. Cities and counties don't know how to work with them, pushing them to busy streets or strip malls. State standards for education try to define what a "quality" education is, limiting the innovation in education.

How can elected officials and government entities encourage the growth and expansion of these unique and personalized learning models, rather than over-regulating them?

Cities and states should eliminate outdated regulations that make starting new education models difficult.

The Spectrum of Learning Models

Education can be delivered in a variety of ways.

Most parents choose to send their children to a traditional school, whether public, private or charter.⁴ These schools provide the same education to each child through an age-based, grade level system.

Students in elementary school are all taught the same curriculum at the same time without much individual modification. Once in middle school and through high school, students are given some choice in elective classes, but the majority of their day is spent in standard classes required to meet minimum state or district requirements for graduation.⁵ Every child's education must follow what the school or state deems important.

Traditional schools offer more than just education to families.⁶ Public schools provide transportation to and from school, breakfast and lunch,

create a marketplace for parents to create an individualized education for their child.

What is Individualized Education?

Imagine a student who is interested in video games and coding. In an individualized education, the parents could build learning experiences that are based upon these interests. To help the student design and code their first video game, the student can be enrolled in a coding class to ensure they have the skills to create the game. During writing class, the student can write the story they want to tell in the game. Perhaps, the video game will be science fiction, and the student studies physics to create a more realistic game mechanic.

Now imagine another student. This one wants to write mystery novels. Her parents enroll her in writing classes to enhance her skills, but they also enroll her in a forensic science course to give her practical investigation skills so her book will

and desires of the individuals. For example, in Acton Academies, they do not group students by grade levels, but by large age bands.⁹ It is not uncommon for a seven-year-old to be in the same class as a ten-year-old. And they can do this because Acton focuses on creating self-driven students, with the adults acting as guides instead of teachers.

Some education entrepreneurs establish a school to be part of a specific network of schools. Acton Academies and Waldorf Schools are examples of this. Others create their own model, picking and choosing curricula and styles to meet specific needs or interests of students.

An Unbundled Education

An unbundled education focuses on interests of the students and builds a curriculum, classes, and schedule to match.¹⁰ In the two examples above, one can easily see that both students are likely to dive into their curriculum and learning with gusto and enthusiasm. But they are unlikely to learn the exact same things. And that is okay.

The very nature of an individualized education requires parents to pick and choose between classes and curriculum.

As an example, a parent may:

- Choose a few classes from the public or private school
- Find a tutor in another area of interest, or
- Create a homeschool curriculum to match their child's interests.

Parents working with the child, decide what is taught, by whom, and when. The student is at the center of the entire plan.

An unbundled education focuses on interests of the students and builds a curriculum, classes, and schedule to match.

counseling services, vaccination clinics, vision and hearing testing, and some are beginning to offer medical and dental services.⁷ This is the traditional model, and for some students it works.

But learner-driven schools, wilderness learning, farm schools, online learning, and many other options

feel more life-like. On top of that, the student can read the great mystery authors to learn how they leave clues for their readers building suspense without giving away the ending.

An individualized education takes a student's interests and aptitude into consideration.⁸ Education models are then created from the needs



Slope School in Provo, Utah.



Ascend in South Ogden, Utah.

How Do These Models Innovate?

Microschool has become a catch-all term for many innovative models that are popping up all over the country. Some microschools are similar to homeschool co-ops while others look more like a traditional private school. The thing that ties them all together is their innovative model of teaching children. Below are some examples.

Student-Teacher Ratio: One of the first ways that education entrepreneurs innovate is through student-teacher ratio or class size. Some schools have a small total enrollment, sometimes with just one class of students or fewer than ten students in a class. A small total enrollment allows the school to be flexible in curriculum pacing, learning location, and student needs. It is far easier to slow down and speed up a curriculum with fewer students.

Instructional Days Per Week: Many new models of learning do not require students to attend five days a week for up to eight hours a day.

Ascend: A Mentored Education offers four instructional days per week, with one of the learning days being a hybrid of at-home and online.¹¹ Students join an online math class in the morning, and then because of the large volume of reading required, they are encouraged to complete their reading.

Family Lyceum students attend classes two days a week.¹² This school provides education in very specific subjects with the understanding that parents will provide the rest of the education in their own way. Many parents use Family Lyceum as a homeschool supplement for this very reason. Schedules like this allow working parents the flexibility to create an individualized education while meeting the demands of their jobs.

Curriculum Flexibility: Many schools have a set curriculum that they use, while others like Acton Academies allow children to choose from multiple curricula. Acton Academies do not hesitate to jump from one curriculum to the next. It all depends on the needs of the students.

Mixed-Age Grouping: Just like in life, many learning models have students working in mixed-age groups. There are many developmental benefits of mixed-age grouping in education.¹³

Older students become the natural leaders of the group, providing mentoring to their younger classmates. This cuts down on the need for students to compete with one another and creates an atmosphere of cooperation and community.

Academically, students are better able to succeed because they focus on their learning needs instead of comparing themselves to others. John Hattie analyzed over 1500 meta analysis and 90,000 studies involving more than 300 million students to figure out how children learn best. He found that peer or student tutoring has a large, positive impact on student learning.¹⁴

The effect size of peer tutoring is larger than adult tutoring and the average teacher.

In mixed-age groups, peer tutoring is a natural part of the classroom.

In addition to the academic advantages, mixed-age groups have a lower rate of bullying within their classrooms.¹⁵ For many parents, this is the ultimate advantage of innovative new models.

Focused Demographics: One major area of innovation in learning is the establishment of schools specifically designed to meet the needs of a specific demographic of student. These schools may focus on refugees, students with autism and attention deficit disorder (ADD), or many other needs.

Breakout School is an example of this. Dr. Dal Richardson created Breakout School to meet the needs of students with autism and ADD.¹⁶ His learning model has the students spending at least 80 percent of their school day outside. Why? His research shows that students with autism and ADD benefit from being in and around nature. His ability to find quiet parks, hiking trails, and points

of interest allows the students to learn where they are most successful. And during inclement weather, he utilizes the local library for indoor learning.

Heron School in Moab, Utah, focuses on helping students who are considered twice exceptional.¹⁷ These students are gifted in one area of learning, while also having a learning disability of some kind. Most of the students are neurodivergent, meaning their brains function differently than most other people. The founder created this school to meet the needs of her own son.

Mentoring: Many models are changing the role of the adult in education. Instead of adults lecturing and testing students, they become the mentors or guides. Oliver Demille, in his book *A Thomas Jefferson Education*, lays out how adults can guide students to learn how to learn.¹⁸

The adult learns and models how to learn to the students. Then the adult engages in discussion, either written or verbal, with students about ideas. The students gain the

wisdom of the adult, who has years of experience with life in general, while the adult is able to learn from the students' new ideas that they bring to the conversation. The main emphasis is that students are not required to learn any specific subject but are required to learn about what interests them.

Who Creates Innovative Learning Models?

Parents: Dr. Dal Richardson is the founder and creator of Breakout School. As a doctor of pharmacology, he met many parents and children who struggled with ADD. He began researching these students and became passionate about it when both of his own children were diagnosed with ADD. Eventually he created Breakout School, an outdoor school designed specifically for students with ADD and autism. This innovative school spends 80 to 90 percent of their day learning outside.

Dr. Richardson is an example of a parent innovator, creating a school



Heron School in Moab, Utah.

to meet the needs of children like his own.

Teachers: Javonne Tanner is a former public school teacher. During her days teaching science, she became frustrated with the state and district standards that kept her from lingering on topics the students were highly interested in. After leaving public education for a time, she came across the book, *Courage to Grow*, which shared stories of an Acton Academy in Austin, Texas.

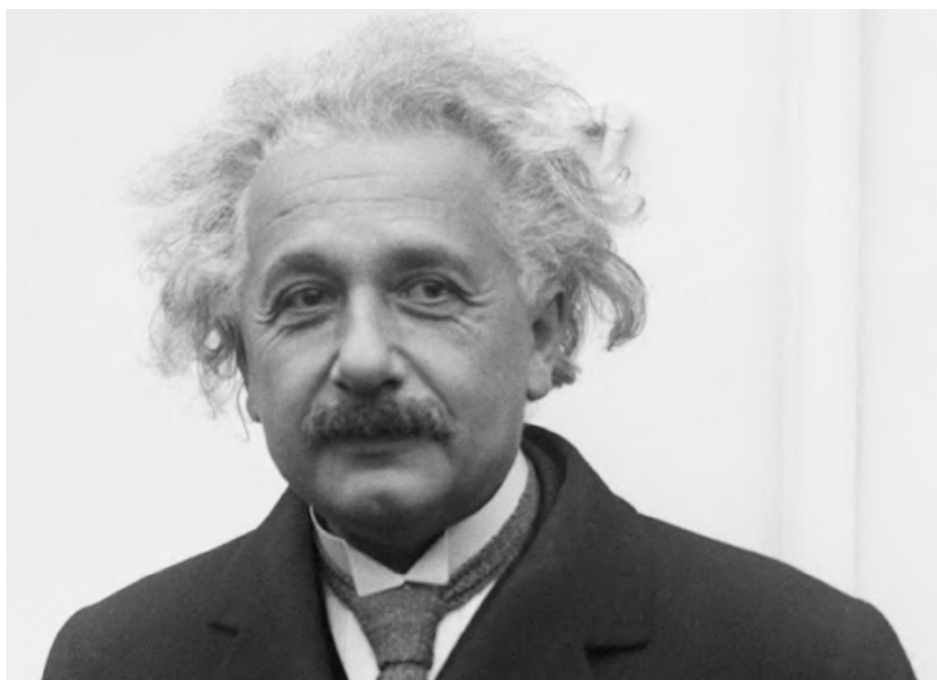
Her daughter found and read the book; she said Acton Academy is the school that she wants to attend. Working with her husband, Javonne created Choice Academy in Bountiful, Utah, an Acton Academy.¹⁹ Acton Academies put children in the driver's seat. Students set the pace for their own learning, using goal setting to create quarterly and weekly goals. Acton Academies do this by having the students follow the hero's journey, becoming the hero in their own learning.

These two groups, parents and former teachers, make up the vast majority of founders of new schools and learning models.

Who Decides What a Quality Education Is?

Many opponents of education choice deride these innovative models of learning. They argue that these schools do not provide a high enough standard of learning, and that some students may not learn.

It is an interesting argument considering we know that more than half of the students attending



traditional public schools are not meeting the state standards.²⁰

For many years we have been sold standardized tests as the greatest metric of education. But since the inception of high-stakes testing, schools have focused on reading and math, eliminating or limiting social studies, history, art, and many other subjects.²¹ The adoption of Common Core Standards across the nation limited these subjects further.²²

Some have argued that standardized testing not only limits what students are taught, but limits their potential and greatness. Holden Karnofsky asks, "Where's today's Beethoven?"²³ Why, with today's technological explosions, are we not seeing more Aristotles in philosophy or Shakespeares in literature?

The answer is our lack of individualized education options for children. The Rebel Educator Substack tells us that Albert Einstein found his

"strict, authoritarian school, and measurement-obsessed school environment in Munich stifling," and that his school "left little room for his ability to think creatively."²⁴ Greatness, it seems, comes not just from a wealth of knowledge, but an ability to put that knowledge together in different ways to create something new. Many new models of education provide students with the space for creative thinking through project-based learning and other means.

Parents are uniquely positioned to know what is best for their children.²⁵ It is very rare for someone else to know a child better. Parents know when their child is struggling. They know when their child needs help.

Because of this, parents can and should be entrusted with the ability to choose an education that fits their child. There are many factors that may go into that decision. The student's interests, aptitudes, and personality are just a few factors

that would apply. Family financial situation and home life are another set of factors that may be considered.

Although, someone may choose homeschooling for all of their children, it isn't always the best option for all families or students. The financial reality is that some families need child care as part of their education plan. In other situations, a hybrid model of all day, partial day and at-home learning may be best.

Problems Education Entrepreneurs Face

Compulsory Education: Compulsory education laws create a monopoly in the education industry. Because students are forced to attend public schools, governments are required to fund those public schools through taxes. Article X of the Utah State Constitution requires the state to “provide for the establishment and maintenance of the state’s education system including a public education system.”²⁶ This has been interpreted by some to

mean only public schools can be funded by the state.

Luckily, many states have passed education spending accounts allowing parents to control the state portion of education funding,²⁷ but parent demand is exceeding expectations and showing that these programs should be expanded.²⁸

Zoning: Some cities do not allow new education models to have the same zoning permission that public schools have.²⁹ This has led to schools opening in busy strip malls or business parks. Zoning is a limit on the education free market. Cities, counties, and the state should allow any education entity to exist in all zones within their jurisdiction.

Building Occupancy: Many new education entities are required to follow the highly restrictive “E” building occupancy codes. This occupancy was designed for high-density schools with twenty to thirty students per classroom. The intent was to require more safety requirements to allow safe escape in the event of a fire.

Here is the problem. Traditional commercial building occupancy allows for one person per fifty square feet. But education occupancy allows for one person per twenty square feet. This is more than double the number of people in a learning space. Schools willing to have a lower occupancy density should not be subject to the more restrictive occupancy rules meant for high-density schools.

Building occupancy rules matter because many new founders are leasing building space and are often required to go through a lengthy process to change the occupancy type. Some founders have spent over \$100,000 to make these renovations.³⁰

Cities allow other businesses to follow the less strict “B” occupancy designed for commercial buildings, including tutoring centers for children. No one questions the safety of these buildings. The same allowance could be reasonably made for these new education models.



Acton Academy in St. George, Utah.

Proposed Solution

Cities, Counties, and Other Political Subdivisions Should Limit Restrictions

Starting a business is extremely difficult under the best of circumstances. Beginning one in a regulatory environment increases that difficulty. The state, cities, counties, and other political subdivisions should, therefore, limit restrictions on new educational endeavors. They can do this in the following ways:

1. Permit all education entities in all zones throughout the political subdivision. This will allow new education options to be within walking distances of homes and daycares for parents, easing the burden of transportation. Cities can still regulate for things such as setbacks, parking, and other reasonable requirements.
2. Permit home-based education entities throughout residential areas. Daycares and preschools are already allowed to be run out of homes across the state. These education entities are extremely similar to these businesses and provide a similar service to the residents of the city.
3. Similar to other schools, cities should prioritize approval of permits and licensing of education entities. Most schools are on tight schedules to open their doors. Knowing that the school has met city requirements affects marketing of new options and could get in the way of a school opening on time and providing services.

Expand Non-Traditional Enrollment Options in Public, Charter, and Traditional Private Schools

Traditional schools (public, private, and charter) often have the only options for some classes or courses. It is not easy to find advanced math or science classes outside of a traditional setting. These schools should be willing to work with families to allow access. The goal of education is to do what is best for all students. Sometimes that is a traditional school, and sometimes it is not; oftentimes, it is a combination of the two.

Here are ways that traditional schools can adapt to the needs of today's students:

1. Develop policies for course access to non-traditional students.
2. Create course-by-course costs including pricing for students accepting an education spending account or similar education choice program. This can also be done through a part-time funding mechanism in states without education spending accounts.
3. Offer courses at a variety of times, including evening or online courses.
4. Provide a predictable schedule by creating courses that are independent of many high school's alternate-day, block scheduling, also called A/B block scheduling.
5. Create and promote self-paced courses that include support from instructors.
6. For elementary students, provide pre-made, take-home course bundles and supplies that can be checked out from the school's library that encourage exploration at home.
7. Eliminate seat-time-based funding models for public schools.

Endnotes

1. Michael Chu, et al., "The state of AI in 2022—and a half decade in review," *McKinsey & Company*, December 6, 2022, <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-state-of-ai-in-2022-and-a-half-decade-in-review>.
2. "New Survey: America's Families are Rethinking K-12 Education," National School Choice Week, June 14, 2023, <https://schoolchoiceweek.com/americas-families-are-rethinking-k-12-education-2023/>.
3. "The State of the Global Education Crisis," UNICEF, December 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-global-education-crisis>.

For the remainder of the endnotes, please visit [Libertas.org/unleashingeducation](https://libertas.org/unleashingeducation)

PUBLIC POLICY BRIEF

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UTAH CONSTITUTION
ARTICLE I, SEC 27