

Hubs of Education Entrepreneurship

Case studies of
entrepreneurial clusters in
South Florida and Wichita,
Kansas

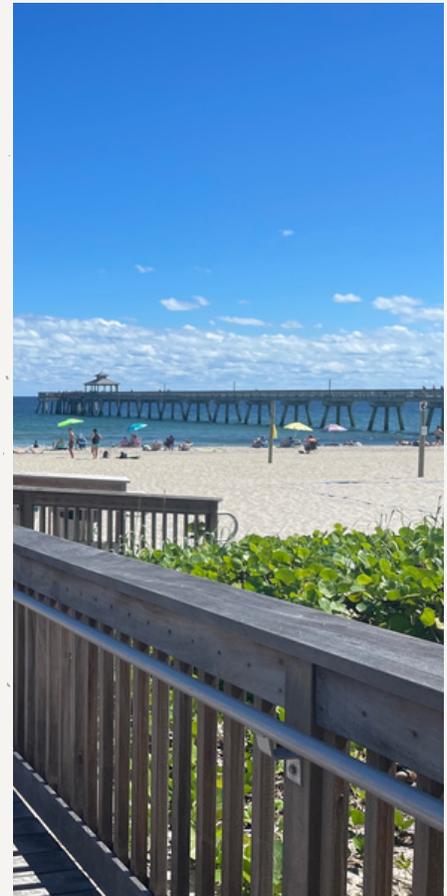
By Kerry McDonald
Fall 2022



These case studies spotlight the vibrant cohorts of VELA grantees in South Florida and Wichita, Kansas, respectively, whose frequent communication, collaboration, and peer support are helping to cultivate new and expanded learning options for families in their communities.

OVERVIEW

Since the VELA Education Fund was established in 2019 as a philanthropic non-profit organization to provide grants to everyday entrepreneurial parents and educators who are creating innovative K-12 learning models, geographic clusters of VELA grantees are sprouting across the U.S. More than 1,800 grants have been issued, totaling more than \$18 million, to education entrepreneurs in all 50 states and 3 U.S. territories. Through VELA's online portal, grantees discover each other and begin spontaneously connecting and gathering, building relationships, sharing resources, offering encouragement, and inspiring new education entrepreneurs in their communities.



SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

What is prompting certain areas of the U.S. to become dynamic hubs of K-12 education entrepreneurship and innovation? Curious about the answer, Kerry McDonald, in partnership with the VELA Education Fund, set out in the fall of 2022 to explore these entrepreneurial centers. Through a blend of site visits, group meetings, one-on-one interviews, and an anonymous survey to local VELA grantees, certain themes emerged. Some of these themes are consistent across entrepreneurial clusters, while others are location-specific.

Here are 6 observations for why the greater Fort Lauderdale, Florida and Wichita, Kansas metropolitan areas are experiencing significant and sustained growth in education entrepreneurship and non-traditional K-12 learning models.

1. Diverse models and mentoring

The South Florida entrepreneurial cluster encompasses an approximately 25-mile radius around Fort Lauderdale, while the Wichita cluster extends from the city proper to more rural areas within about an hour radius. Both clusters include low-cost microschoools and learning pods, homeschool programs and co-ops, and local course providers. Most of these programs have either received a VELA grant(s) or have recently applied. While these learning models represent a wide variety of educational philosophies and approaches, their founders come together under a common commitment to education entrepreneurship and to broadening educational options for families.

2. Entrepreneurial leaders

While the VELA Mighty Networks online community provides the platform to identify and contact local grantees, several entrepreneurs have come together spontaneously to help build community and connection with other education entrepreneurs in these identified hubs of education innovation. Committed community leaders with a deep appreciation for diverse educational models and a desire to bring founders together for regular meet-ups help to expand the local ecosystem of education options.



3. Community and collaboration

Education entrepreneurs in South Florida and Wichita connect in a spirit of collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Founders frequently refer families to other microschoools or learning programs that may be more convenient or a better educational fit. They also refer each other to various professional service providers and educational specialists, and offer insights and encouragement for starting and scaling a learning organization.

4. Ease of entrepreneurship

In both Florida and Kansas, it is relatively easy to be an entrepreneur in general, and an education entrepreneur in particular. Starting and growing small businesses are encouraged through comparatively few regulations and a widespread embrace of innovation and new ideas. Homeschooling is easy to do and widely accepted in both locations. It is also easy to start a private school in these two areas. Many local education entrepreneurs who have launched microschoools and similar learning models have started other small businesses in the past, and several continue to run those businesses on the side.

5. More parent empowerment

More parents are seeking smaller, safer, highly personalized learning environments for their children. This trend began before the pandemic disruption of 2020, and has accelerated since then. Local education entrepreneurs recognize this parent desire for smaller, more nurturing, more individualized learning communities and are responding by creating them. As demand for these models increases, current founders are planning to grow—not by building bigger schools—but by scaling their small, mixed-age microschoools and pods to more locations.

6. Choice and personalization

Education entrepreneurs in South Florida and Wichita regularly hear from parents regarding dissatisfaction with conventional schooling options and the desire to explore a different educational setting for their child. Education choice policies in Florida are praised by local education entrepreneurs for expanding accessibility. Emerging, tuition-free models in Wichita, such as public-private partnerships with the national Prenda microschoool network, also expand choice and access.

EDUCATION ENTREPRENEURSHIP



SOUTH FLORIDA

Iman Alleyne, founder of Kind Academy

**Community, ingenuity, and
education entrepreneurship
in the greater
Fort Lauderdale area**



Photo by Jack Koos

OBSERVATIONS

1. Diverse models and mentoring
2. Entrepreneurial leaders
3. Community and collaboration
4. Ease of entrepreneurship
5. More parent empowerment
6. Choice and personalization

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

DIVERSE MODELS & MENTORING

01

Types of Programs

South Florida education entrepreneurs have launched a variety of learning models, including microschools, hybrid schools, learning pods, virtual programs, and homeschool classes and cooperatives. Each represents a distinct educational philosophy and approach, but all emphasize personalized learning tied to an individual student's needs and goals.



Laurel Suarez, founder of Compass Outreach

A South Florida Pioneer

In 2019, Laurel Suarez founded one of the first hybrid homeschool/microschools in the area, Compass Outreach & Education Center, which now serves about 50 students. Her model and mentorship enabled other aspiring founders and entrepreneurs to see what was possible.

"Compass Outreach was the first microschool where kids could come and use funding from the state. There was nothing else like that at the time, this hybrid model, and she taught me a lot about that," said Iman Alleyne who now runs a microschool in Coral Springs with plans to scale.

Incubating Other Microschools

Suarez knew from experience that finding a suitable space for a microschool was a challenge, so when Felicia Rattray, a longtime teacher in Florida public and charter schools, approached Suarez with her microschool idea, Suarez offered to rent her a spare classroom space at Compass. "If I had not had her space to start the process, this school wouldn't have ever happened because I needed a building to accept scholarships," said Rattray, who incubated her program, Permission to Succeed, at Compass for one year before moving to a new classroom space less than two miles away. Her microschool now serves over 20 students with 4 teachers.



Felicia and Amnon Rattray of Permission to Succeed

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERS

02

The VELA online social platform, powered by Mighty Networks, identifies VELA grantees across the country, but active community leaders are instrumental in supporting and activating education entrepreneurship in specific locations. It is their commitment to community-building that helps to create an entrepreneurial hub.

Shiren Rattigan of Colossal Academy

A former public school teacher in the Chicago Public Schools, as well as in Florida private schools, Shiren Rattigan was approached by a group of parents in 2020 to lead a Montessori-inspired "pandemic pod" with a small group of students. That pod grew and evolved, eventually becoming Colossal Academy, a 30-student microschool for middle schoolers in Fort Lauderdale.



Shiren Rattigan, founder of Colossal Academy

Toni Frallicciardi of Surf Skate Science

Toni Frallicciardi and her husband Uli have been running surfing and skateboarding programs and camps in South Florida for years. Homeschooling parents themselves, they eventually began offering weekly classes that blend surfing and skateboarding with scientific concepts. They now serve nearly 250 homeschooled and microschool students in the greater Fort Lauderdale area.

Rattigan and Frallicciardi play a crucial role in facilitating local entrepreneurial collaboration.



Toni Frallicciardi of Surf Skate Science



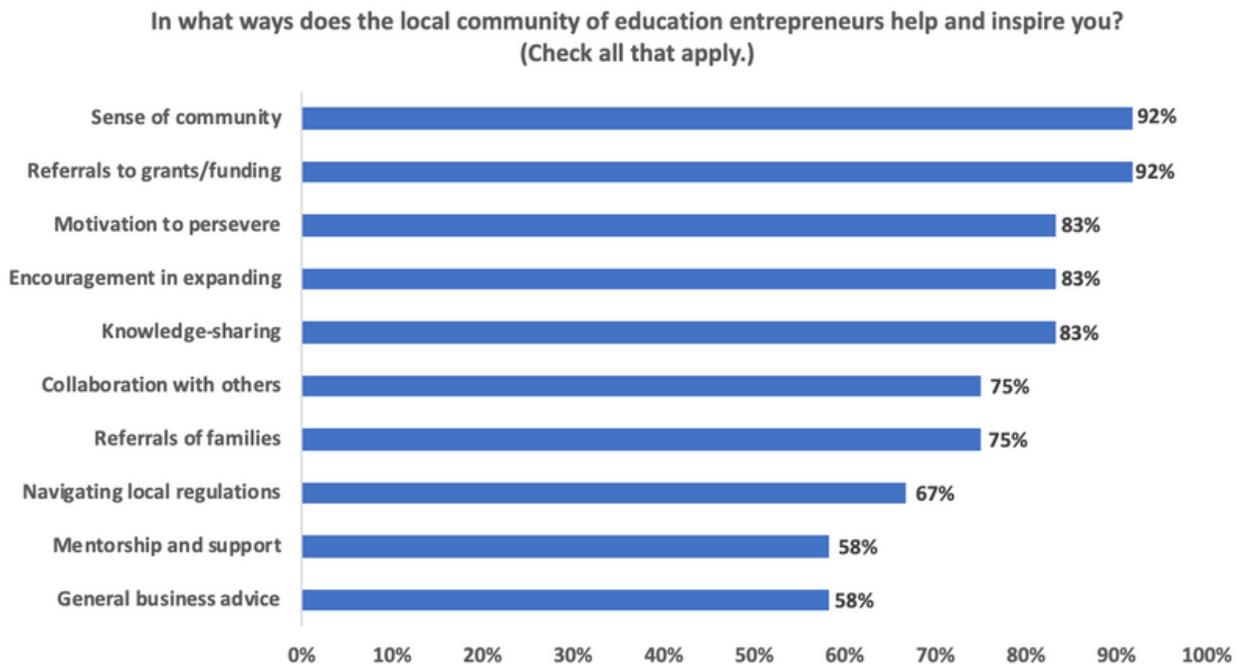
Left to right: Candace Lehenbauer, Uli and Toni Frallicciardi, Shiren Rattigan, Iman Alleyne, Laurel Suarez, Tobin Slaven

Rattigan and Frallicciardi, along with a small core of VELA-funded education entrepreneurs, have been instrumental in identifying new entrepreneurs to bring into the founder community as well as supporting the growth of existing learning programs.

According to Tobin Slaven, who recently launched Acton Academy Fort Lauderdale: "Toni and Shiren went above and beyond their own projects to get everyone together, to build community and camaraderie. They're rock stars, and leaders of this cluster of South Florida."

The pair hosts quarterly gatherings where they encourage education entrepreneurs to get to know each other and share resources. The fall 2022 gathering was hosted at Rattigan's Colossal Academy and included more than 30 local education entrepreneurs, most of whom are VELA grantees.

In a survey that followed that gathering, a dozen attendees responded unanimously on a 5-point scale that collaborating with a network of local education entrepreneurs was of top importance. Additional survey responses revealed the ways in which this collaboration was most helpful:



KEY OBSERVATIONS:

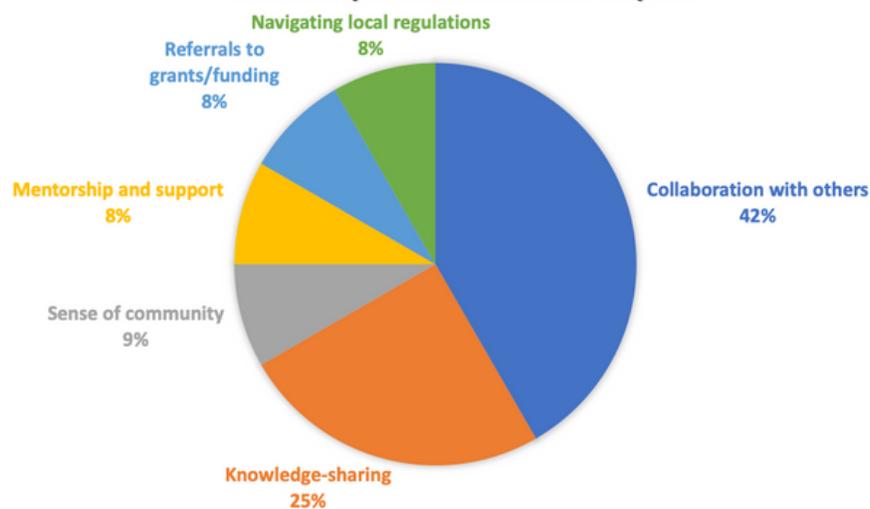
COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION

03

There is a lively spirit of collaboration among the education entrepreneurs of South Florida. Rather than competing with each other, they recognize that they can all accomplish much more if they work together. Toni Frallicciardi of Surf Skate Science refers to an African proverb when describing the collaborative culture of the local entrepreneurial community: *"If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."* Survey data reveal that other local entrepreneurs feel the same way.

Collaboration with others is the top characteristic of the local community.

Which of the following characteristics of the local education entrepreneur community has been the MOST helpful?



Comments from local VELA grantees

"Through the VELA grant, I just fell into this community. I've referred families to other microschoools. Nothing can be done alone. There is a lot of sharing, collaborating, copying. I want to see everyone thrive." ~ Laurel Suarez of Compass Outreach

"There's a real, deep connection that we have with each other in order to make sure we are all doing well and understand that we're not in competition with each other, that there are so many people to be served. There's something really special about meeting other educators who are entrepreneurs. We can feel inspired, feel connection, feel community so that we can go do the work we have to do." ~ Shiren Rattigan of Colossal Academy

"I started learning about all these other people who were doing amazing things, and we got connected with them, and started meeting up. It was the community that I always wanted but didn't know I needed. And VELA did that." ~ Iman Alleyne of Kind Academy

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

EASE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

04

In areas where it is generally easy to start and scale a small business, and where entrepreneurship is embraced, education entrepreneurship also flourishes. This is true in South Florida, as well as in other locations with high numbers of VELA grantees that are quickly emerging as entrepreneurial hubs of innovative K-12 learning models.

"The region is surging."

"There are a lot of entrepreneurs in South Florida. The region is surging. While much of the country pulled back over the past couple of years, Fort Lauderdale continued to move forward. There is a lot of new business energy here."

~ Tobin Slaven of Acton Academy Fort Lauderdale



Martina and Tobin Slaven of Acton Academy Fort Lauderdale



Iman Alleyne of Kind Academy

"Everyone is an entrepreneur down here."

"Everyone is an entrepreneur down here. It's really easy to start a business here, and education businesses are no different. There are lots of side hustles, people working on businesses on the side."

~ Iman Alleyne of Kind Academy

"We can start from nothing."

"Most of us are immigrants, entrepreneurs, and we know we can start from nothing. We had done it before and now we are doing it for our own children."

~ Anonymous survey respondent

"Merge of different cultures, ideas, and minds coming from different states and countries, shaping a new Florida with new ideas and new solutions."

~ Anonymous survey respondent

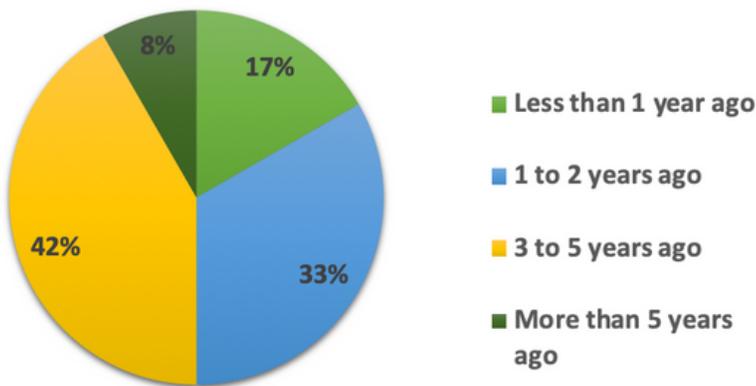
KEY OBSERVATIONS:

MORE PARENT EMPOWERMENT

05

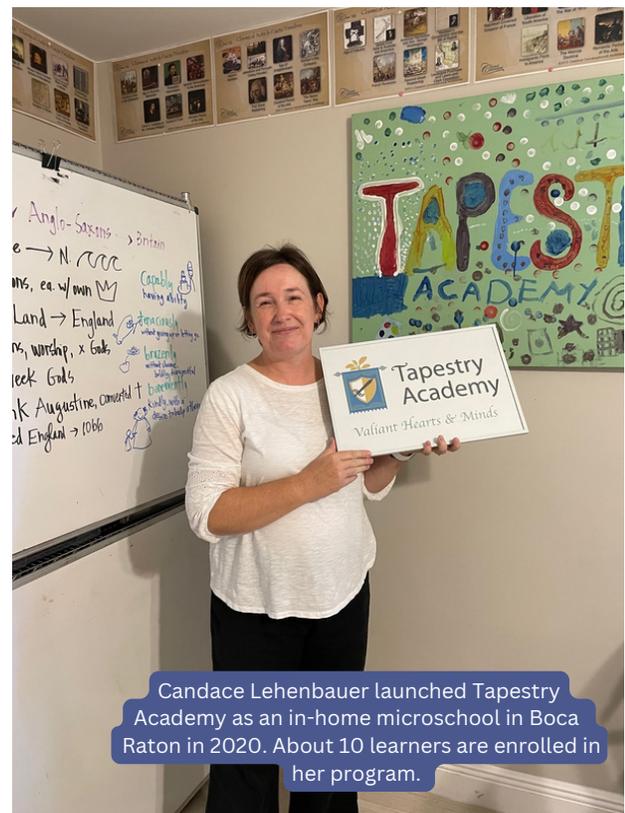
The vast majority of the education entrepreneurs in South Florida launched their programs within the past 5 years, according to survey data of this cohort. Half of these programs serve between 20 and 50 children, often with 5:1 student-teacher ratios. Parent demand for smaller, safer, more personalized learning communities over the past several years has contributed to the microschool burst in the region, as revealed in entrepreneur interviews and anonymous survey responses below.

When did you launch your program?

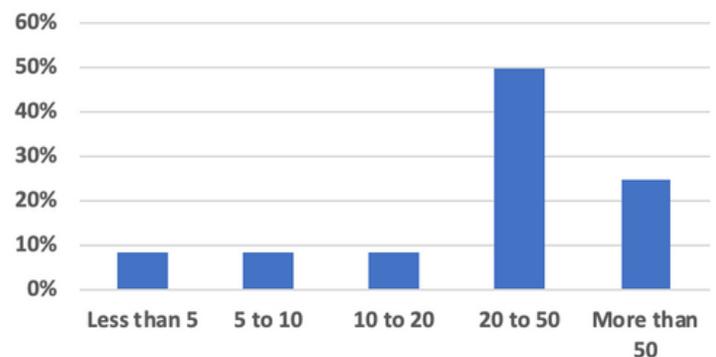


What do you think is contributing to the local growth of education entrepreneurship?

- "Families are learning that one-size-fits-all is not working for all children."
- "The demand from parents wanting a true personalized learning environment for their child(ren)."
- "The intense ecosystem of standardized curriculum and testing is killing so many children's natural curiosity and love of learning."
- "Children are suffering and 'failing' in a system that isn't designed to meet their needs."
- "Educators and parents alike are feeling increasingly inspired to refuse to accept the status quo."
- "COVID and racial injustice: forcing our community and the influx of northern transplants to rethink education within a school system that is beyond capacity."
- "Our community has gone through a school shooting and COVID which both lit the flame."



How many learners do you serve?





Outdoor pavilion area at Fort Lauderdale Beach used by Surf Skate Science for weekly programming

High parent satisfaction

Parents continue to seek out microschools, learning pods, homeschool collaboratives, and other non-traditional educational settings in South Florida and across the country. Education entrepreneurs in the greater Fort Lauderdale area report high levels of parent satisfaction, as well as waiting lists for their programs. Several entrepreneurs are planning to scale their programs by opening additional microschools throughout the region.

Jada's Story

Jada is an 11-year-old student at Shiren Rattigan's Colossal Academy microschool. Here is what her mother, Diane Perneti, says about Jada's educational experience:

"Schooling her in mainstream ways was always difficult. I could write a book on it (or better yet have her write it for me). Needless to say, we've changed schools a lot looking for a good fit and it never really happened until now. At Colossal, Jada is in advanced classes that were determined by her assessment scores. This is key in her intellectual development. She's challenged and yet still engaged with the other students in the other stimulating, hands-on learning model that Shiren incorporates. Focus is on the complete child, not only educationally, but socially and developmentally as well. The fact that it's a microschool enables Shiren to do this whole-person focus on self-actualization. My only wish now is that Shiren would expand to high school! Fingers crossed."



"I couldn't be more pleased with how my future looks and I know I will be thanking two people most of all: my mom, first, and Ms. Shiren Rattigan, Best Teacher in the World."

~ Jada

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

CHOICE & PERSONALIZATION

06

Florida is a national leader in school choice policies that enable education funding to follow students to their preferred educational setting. Many of the microschool founders and education entrepreneurs in South Florida attribute the state's tax-credit scholarship programs and related policies to activating the supply of education entrepreneurs and increasing accessibility to their programs.

What founders say

"A lot of our microschools thrive because we have these scholarships. More people, not just homeschoolers, are becoming aware of microschools. Parents are a lot more open-minded. They know they have choices." ~ Laurel Suarez of Compass Outreach

"Without those scholarships, we wouldn't be able to do what we're doing with our students, except for maybe two students. My goal is to have these small schools all over Florida, one in every county." ~ Felicia Rattray of Permission to Succeed Education Center

"As many children as possible should have access to something like this. It has to be an option. I want them to have opportunities to feel loved, valued, smart, capable and that they can do what they enjoy. They need it." ~ Iman Alleyne of Kind Academy





What's next for education entrepreneurs in South Florida?

In addition to their diverse learning models, South Florida education entrepreneurs are also racially and ethnically diverse, as revealed in anonymous survey data of this cohort. Fifty-four percent of South Florida education entrepreneurs identify as people of color, compared to 52 percent of VELA grantees nationally, according to VELA's comprehensive *Classrooms Anywhere* report.

Diversity of people and prototypes will continue to create more K-12 education options for families in South Florida.

"South Florida has a multitude of diverse families seeking a flexible and joyful lifestyle." ~ Anonymous

"It is so wonderful to see so many entrepreneurs developing programs and microschools to fill a need in our community." ~ Anonymous

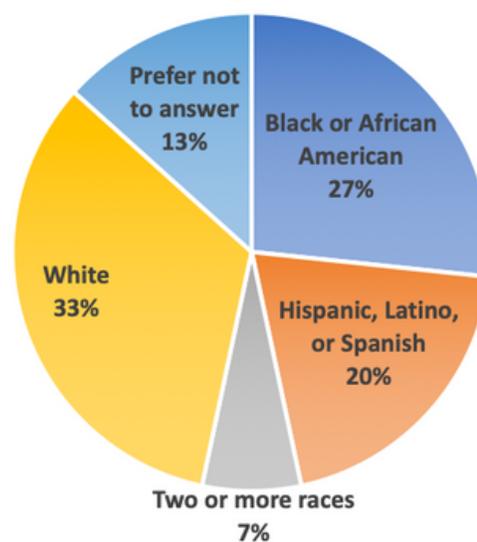
"This is the future."

All of the education entrepreneurs surveyed in South Florida responded that they are "very optimistic" about the growth of education entrepreneurship and innovative learning models in their area over the next 5 years.

"What we're doing, this is the future. I want people to see that microschools are not a for-the-moment thing. They are here to stay and will continue to grow."

~ Laurel Suarez of Compass Outreach

What best describes your race/ethnicity?



EDUCATION ENTREPRENEURSHIP



WICHITA, KANSAS

**Educator collaboration,
innovation, and
entrepreneurship in
Wichita, Kansas**



OBSERVATIONS

1. Diverse models and mentoring
2. Entrepreneurial leaders
3. Community and collaboration
4. Ease of entrepreneurship
5. More parent empowerment
6. Choice and personalization

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

DIVERSE MODELS & MENTORING

01

Types of Programs

Wichita area education entrepreneurs have launched a variety of learning models, including microschoools, hybrid schools, learning pods, tutoring programs, and homeschool classes and cooperatives. While they have diverse educational philosophies and approaches, they share a commitment to smaller, more individualized learning for young people.



Becky Elder of Northfield School for the Liberal Arts

A Legacy of Education Entrepreneurship

For Becky Elder, education entrepreneurship is nothing new. In 1963, her parents founded a local private school, Wichita Collegiate School, that has become one of the city's most prominent large, traditional private preparatory schools. Becky homeschooled her own children even before the practice was legally recognized. Then, in 1993, she helped to launch Northfield School for the Liberal Arts as a small, classically-oriented school for approximately 50 middle and high school students. "There is an education renaissance happening here," said Becky. "It's not so much innovating as remembering. It's a hybrid of the old and new again. I think Wichita might become a real beacon."

Supporting a new founder generation

Dalena Wallace had been running a homeschool cooperative for several years in her small town of Partridge, Kansas, about an hour outside of Wichita. After receiving a VELA microgrant, she began searching for other VELA grantees in her area and reached out to Becky and others for connection and mentorship. Dalena is particularly encouraged by the diversity and decentralization of the new microschoools and related models that are sprouting in Wichita. "It's so great that all these microschoools are so close by," said Dalena. "We're embracing the diversity of these microschoools because that is what makes this movement beautiful. All the families are so diverse and unique."



Dalena Wallace of AIM Homeschool Co-Op



Pam McEwen runs the Izora Elaine Dean Educational Center in Wichita

The educational diversity in Wichita is reflected in many ways, from the vast array of experiences and backgrounds of each founder, to the variety of educational philosophies, missions, and methods they embrace, to the types of learning models the entrepreneurs have created.

Tutoring Center Turned Microschool

Pam McEwen launched an afterschool tutoring center in Wichita in 2019 while working as a public school teacher. When COVID hit, the parents of her tutoring students begged her to open a full-time microschool so their children could go there rather than return to the large, district school. She resigned her teaching position in 2020 and now runs her Wichita microschool, the Izora Elaine Dean Educational Center, with about 50 children in kindergarten through 11th grade.

Faith-based homeschool co-op



Amy McVay has been leading Coop 412, a faith-based pre-K to 10th grade homeschool collaborative in El Dorado for 7 years with about 50 students. Coop 412 has a strong focus on classical education and Latin.

Unschooling center



Cassie Tinsmon launched Bee Curious, a part-time unschooling center that focuses on self-directed learning. As a homeschooling mom who works full-time, Cassie wanted to create a periodic drop-off option.

Outdoor-based microschool



Kimberly Stringer has run Kreative Kids, an outdoor-based preschool program, for over 30 years. Due to local parent demand, she has now expanded to include school-age children as a microschool.

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERS

02

VELA's Mighty Networks social platform helps to connect local education entrepreneurs, but it is the effort of grassroots entrepreneurial leaders who came together spontaneously to create the Wichita Innovative Schools & Educators (WISE) group who have been most helpful in fostering community and collaboration in Wichita.

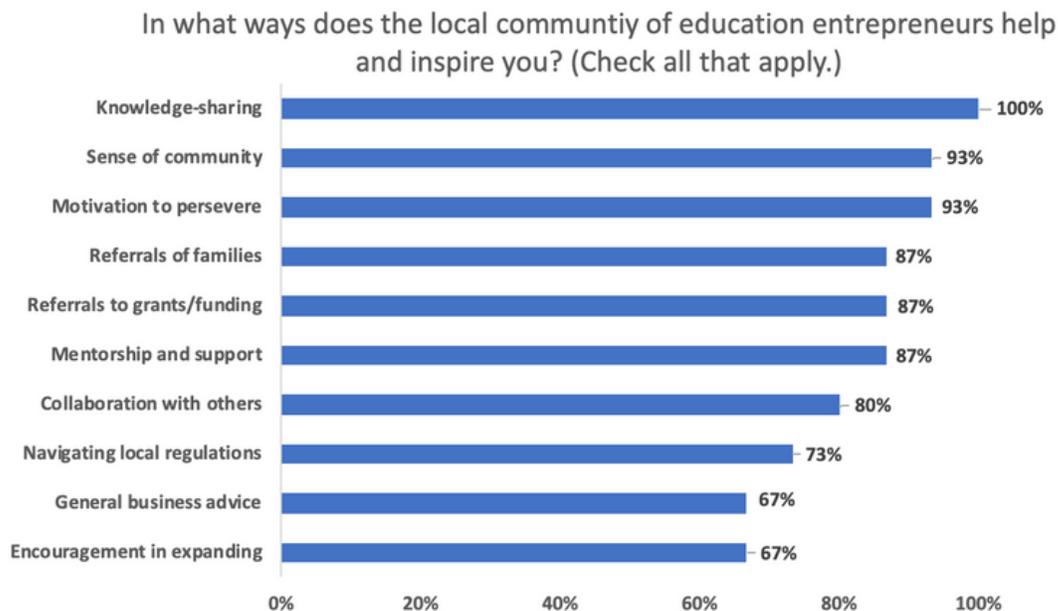
Wichita Innovative Schools & Educators (WISE)



WISE group leaders from left to right: Becky Elder, Dalena Wallace, Katie Saiz, Molly Stephenson, Emmi McCabe

After Dalena Wallace connected with Becky Elder and several other local VELA grant recipients in Wichita, an idea emerged spontaneously to create a local, grassroots group of education entrepreneurs that would offer support and encouragement, share resources and knowledge, and help build a community of innovative educators.

In spring 2022, the WISE group was created. WISE is led by a handful of Wichita education entrepreneurs who plan monthly gatherings for the larger entrepreneurial community to help founders get to know each other and share resources. Local microschoools take turns hosting the gatherings, which typically bring together more than a dozen local education entrepreneurs, most of whom are VELA grantees. In a survey that followed one of these monthly gatherings in fall 2022, 15 attendees responded and revealed the ways in which this collaboration was most helpful:



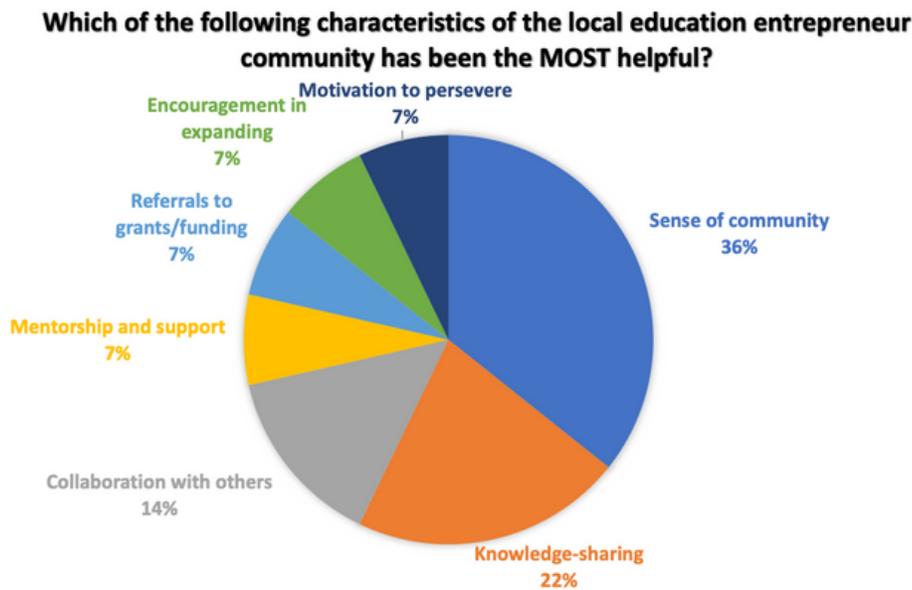
KEY OBSERVATIONS:

COMMUNITY & COLLABORATION

03

Education entrepreneurs in the Wichita area value the sense of community that is emerging. Survey results suggest that community support, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration with others are most helpful to local founders.

Wichita education entrepreneurs appreciate the local sense of community.



Katie Saiz of Green Gate Children's School

"A positive attitude toward community"

Katie Saiz runs the Green Gate Children's School in Wichita. She began as a licensed, home-based preschool in 2008 and then expanded into a commercial space in 2019. The education disruption of 2020 caused her program to surge in size, with significant demand by parents of school-age children. She moved to a larger microschool space and now serves 84 students, more than two-thirds of whom are at the K-6 level and the remainder are preschoolers.

"There is such a positive attitude toward community in this local entrepreneur group," said Katie. "The preschool directors' group I'm in is so competitive so I don't really connect there. This group of innovative educators is so inclusive and welcoming. It's really great that we can be there for each other and help everyone to grow."



Wichita area VELA grantees who run homeschool programs and co-ops. Left to right: Becky Unruh, Julie Vallier, Holly Spellman, Dalena Wallace, Kathleen Taylor

Local founders share more insights on the sense of community they feel among the education entrepreneurs in Wichita:

"We're just helping each other."

"More people are encouraging each other and it's not competitive at all. Candace from Freedom Prep just sent one family over to us. We're just helping each other. It feels like parents now have a choice." ~ Kim Stringer of Kreative Kids

"We realized that we were definitely all struggling to find all the things we needed alone in terms of resources, including things like tutoring services, legal advice, insurance, or logistical stuff. The ladies at WISE that have been established for awhile are so helpful for us." ~ Molly Stephenson of Wildflower Community School

"There's no competition."

Candace Fish planned to open a microschool with just a few students, but when the former public school teacher launched her low-cost school, Freedom Prep, in August 2022, she had over 130 learners signed up. Parents in Wichita are looking for more options, and the collaborative entrepreneurial community is creating them.

"We really have such a nice community of helping each other out," said Candace. "There's no competition. If there's something we don't have, someone else does."



Candace Fish of Freedom Preparatory

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

EASE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

04

Like other areas where education entrepreneurship and innovation are sprouting, the Wichita area welcomes new small businesses and embraces entrepreneurship. It is generally easy to start a small business in Kansas, with minimal regulatory hurdles that often stifle education entrepreneurship elsewhere. In Kansas, it is also relatively easy to start a private school and to homeschool, with minimal regulations for both. This friendliness toward entrepreneurship encourages experimentation and innovation, and is prompting more entrepreneurial parents and educators to introduce new K-12 learning possibilities.

"Innovation is happening here and it's supported."

Molly and Noah Stephenson launched their Prenda-affiliated microschool, Wildflower Community School, in Wichita last year. A public-private partnership between the popular Prenda microschool network and Kansas Public Schools enables local children to attend the Stephensons microschool tuition-free. It now serves 35 students, almost all of whom are neurodiverse with diagnoses of ADHD, dyslexia, autism, and more. Molly has been an entrepreneur for years, running her own holistic body work practice. She explains that the Wichita area is supportive of entrepreneurs and innovators:

"We start stuff here, we're entrepreneurial. It's embedded in our culture. You can decide to do something a little bit crazy and people are like, *okay, cool!* Innovation is happening here and it's supported," said Molly.



Molly and Noah Stephenson of Wildflower Community School

KEY OBSERVATIONS:

MORE PARENT EMPOWERMENT

05

Many education entrepreneurs explained that parents are more empowered now to seek alternatives to traditional schools. They believe this is what is driving the entrepreneurial burst in the Wichita area. Kansas public school enrollment has fallen by 15,000 students since the pandemic began, according to state data, and most are not returning. Microschools, homeschooling, learning pods, tutoring services, and various class offerings make it easier than ever for parents to choose a different educational path for their children.



Jessica Ramsay of Farmhouse Phonics

"Parents are taking things into their own hands"

Jessica Ramsay taught in the Kansas public schools for more than a decade before resigning in 2021 to launch her tutoring company, Farmhouse Phonics, full-time. Jessica thinks parents are more empowered now to take charge of their children's education and seek resources and alternatives.

"In the past, you sent your child to school from 8-4, you studied the spelling words, you went to parent-teacher conferences, and that was about as involved as parents could get. I think now kids are struggling in different ways, whether developmentally or due to a couple of years of COVID, and parents are taking things into their own hands. I love that! They're reading more, researching more. I think we're going to see a burst of microschooling and homeschooling because there's more help."

What other founders say

"Since COVID, parents are more aware of the need for alternative educational options to meet their child's unique needs." ~ Anonymous survey respondent

"I believe parents, like myself, are searching for alternatives to the traditional school setting. If they don't find options that appeal to them, the culture here is encouraging enough for parents to create the environment they want for their children." ~ Anonymous survey respondent

"Parents now have their eyes opened, and they don't like what they see." ~ Anonymous survey respondent

"I believe that during COVID many parents were able to really see what was happening to their children in the public school systems." ~ Anonymous survey respondent

"Parents are realizing that there are options out there for all." ~ Anonymous survey respondent



Students at Green Gate Children's House work on their projects.

High parent satisfaction

Parents continue to seek out microschoools, learning pods, homeschool collaboratives, and other non-traditional educational settings in Kansas and across the country. Education entrepreneurs in the greater Wichita area report high levels of parent satisfaction, as well as waiting lists for their programs. Most of the local education entrepreneurs are planning to expand their programs and move to larger spaces in order to keep up with demand.

One parent's powerful microschool story

Jessica Tran has four children who attend the Wildflower Community School in Wichita, run by Molly and Noah Stephenson. Three of her children are diagnosed autistic. She describes her children's microschool experience as transformative:

Prior to Wildflower, they attended an alternative school in our district which deals only with Special Education students with behavioral concerns. While one still struggles to regulate as he heals from his traumatic past, the other is THRIVING! This child has received community mental health services on the SED waiver since first grade. Last year was particularly traumatic as he was restrained inappropriately for nearly 30 minutes by untrained staff at one middle school, had an autistic meltdown at the next school because of adult failure to communicate, and finished the year at the alternative school.



Jessica Tran's children attend the Wildflower Community School

For the first time in seven years, this child does not qualify for the Mental Health services! I absolutely credit this massive change to this learning environment where kids are allowed to be messy and imperfect all while working toward becoming whole, healthy humans.

As an educator myself, I wish all schools would be more like this and allow more kids to have success in the classroom. Of course, some kids do exceptionally well in traditional settings. However, there are at least hundreds of kids in our own district who are drowning and desperate for a place such as this.

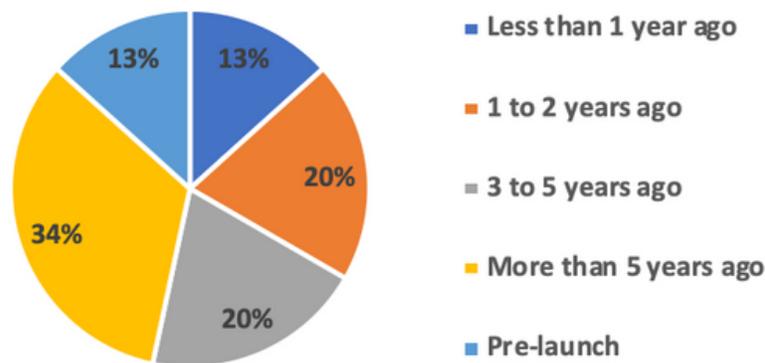
KEY OBSERVATIONS:

CHOICE & PERSONALIZATION

06

Parent demand for smaller, more personalized learning communities over the past several years has contributed to the microschool burst. Most of the education entrepreneurs in Wichita launched their programs within the past 5 years, according to survey data of this cohort. More than half of these programs serve fewer than 50 children, often with low student-teacher ratios. The Wichita area public-private partnership with the Prenda microschool network enables more families to access a microschool tuition-free.

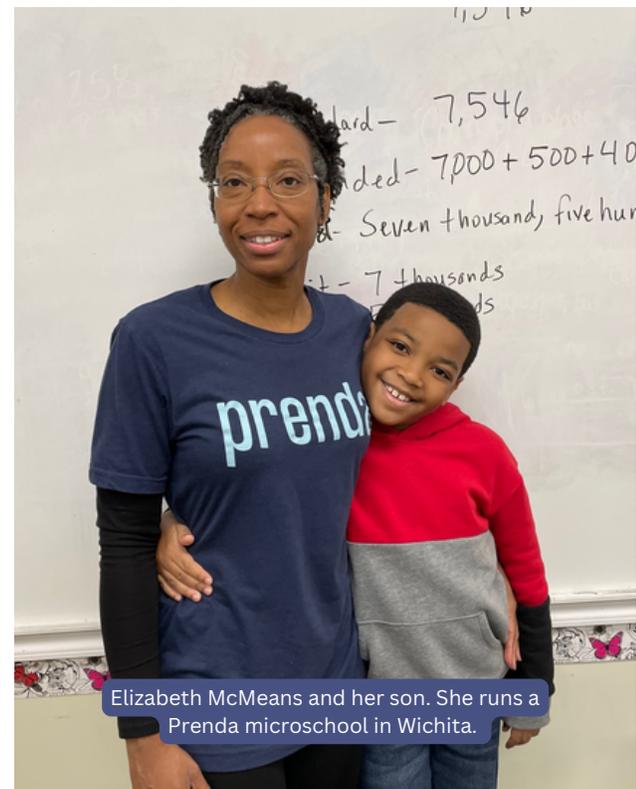
When did you launch your program?



Small, personalized learning pods are increasingly sought-after

Elizabeth McMeans launched her Prenda-affiliated, tuition-free microschool in a community recreation center in Wichita which also hosts several other Prenda learning pods. She became interested in alternative learning models when her own son reached kindergarten age. Now at age 8, he thrives in her microschool that emphasizes individualized, mastery-based learning and personal agency.

"I'm thinking that he may never have to go to a traditional school, and that's a wonderful thing to have options available," said Elizabeth. "We're understanding now that COVID did have an impact, but really there were a lot of things brewing under the ground before COVID hit us nationally that COVID has exposed as far as the education system. So I see many more parents talking about the things that they want for their children. What I want for my son is what Prenda offers. I want him to have a growth mindset. I want him to take responsibility for his education."





A high school class at Coop 412

What's next for education entrepreneurs in Wichita?

Survey data revealed that education entrepreneurs in Wichita are overwhelmingly optimistic about the growth of education entrepreneurship and innovative K-12 learning models in their area over the next few years.

"We're putting learners first."

"Over the next 5 to 10 years, I can see that microschoools, learning pods, and homeschooling are going to continue to grow, probably at astronomical rates," said microschool founder, Pam McEwen. "The reason for that is because, in all cases, we're putting learners first and creating the programs around the needs of the learner—not vice versa.

"I think that's what's happening here in the Wichita area, and I think we will continue to put the learner first and to realize that is what is most important. We have to be able to educate learners based upon their needs, and value the whole child. So I am predicting that it's going to continue to surge."



Pam McEwen of the Izora Elaine Dean Educational Center

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kerry McDonald is a senior education fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education, an education policy fellow at State Policy Network, and host of the LiberatED podcast. She is the author of *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom*.

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