A School With 7 Students: Inside the ‘Microschools’ Movement

Parents, desperate for help, are turning to private schools with a half-dozen or so students. And they are getting a financial boost from taxpayers

Nathanael’s school, Kingdom Seed, has a student body of seven students.
By Dana GoldsteinPhotographs by Audra Melton

Dana Goldstein visited three microschools in the Atlanta area, and attended a national microschooling conference.

Published June 17, 2024

When Nathanael was in kindergarten, he told his mother, Diana Lopez, that he did not want to return to school — ever. His teacher yelled at him, he said. And when Ms. Lopez picked him up from school, he would often immediately start to cry.

Nathanael has autism, and in a busy classroom of 25 children, the teacher seemed to have few strategies for working with him, Ms. Lopez recalled.

This year at a new school, Nathanael, 7, was happier. He shared a teacher with only six other students — not in one classroom, but in the entire school.

Nathanael attended a microschool, an increasingly popular type of super-small, largely unregulated private school, often serving fewer students than are enrolled in a single classroom at a traditional school.

The programs are benefiting from two trends: Since the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted schooling, many parents have rethought their children's education, and are open to nontraditional options. And Republican state lawmakers and donors, who have long supported private-school choice, have increasingly directed money toward microschools across the country, saying they give parents a chance to withdraw from school districts at a reasonable price — typically $5,000 to $10,000 per year.

Microschool students are usually registered with their states as home-schoolers. But the new generation of microschools, like the program Nathanael attended, Kingdom Seed Christian Academy, operate more like modern-day one-room schoolhouses, meeting in homes, church basements and storefronts.

These schools are often open four or five days per week, with full-time teachers, set curricula and sometimes even standardized tests.

Kingdom Seed meets in its founders' suburban home, in what was once a family living room.

There is little data on the schools. But the National Microschooling Center, an advocacy group that surveys program founders, estimates there are 95,000 microschools and home-schooling pods nationwide, serving over 1 million students. During the 2023-2024 academic year, a third of the schools received public funding through voucherlike programs, up from just 18 percent one year ago.

That number is expected to grow as eight states last year joined Arizona and West Virginia in providing near-universal access to education savings accounts, a type of voucher that can be used for home-schooling costs. In April, Georgia, too, passed a law creating the accounts.

An estimated 1 million American children now use public funds for some form of private education, more than double the number from before the pandemic, according to new research from EdChoice, a nonprofit that supports school choice and tracks the sector.

Forty percent of microschool students previously attended public school, and another third were previously educated at home, according to the National Microschooling Center survey.

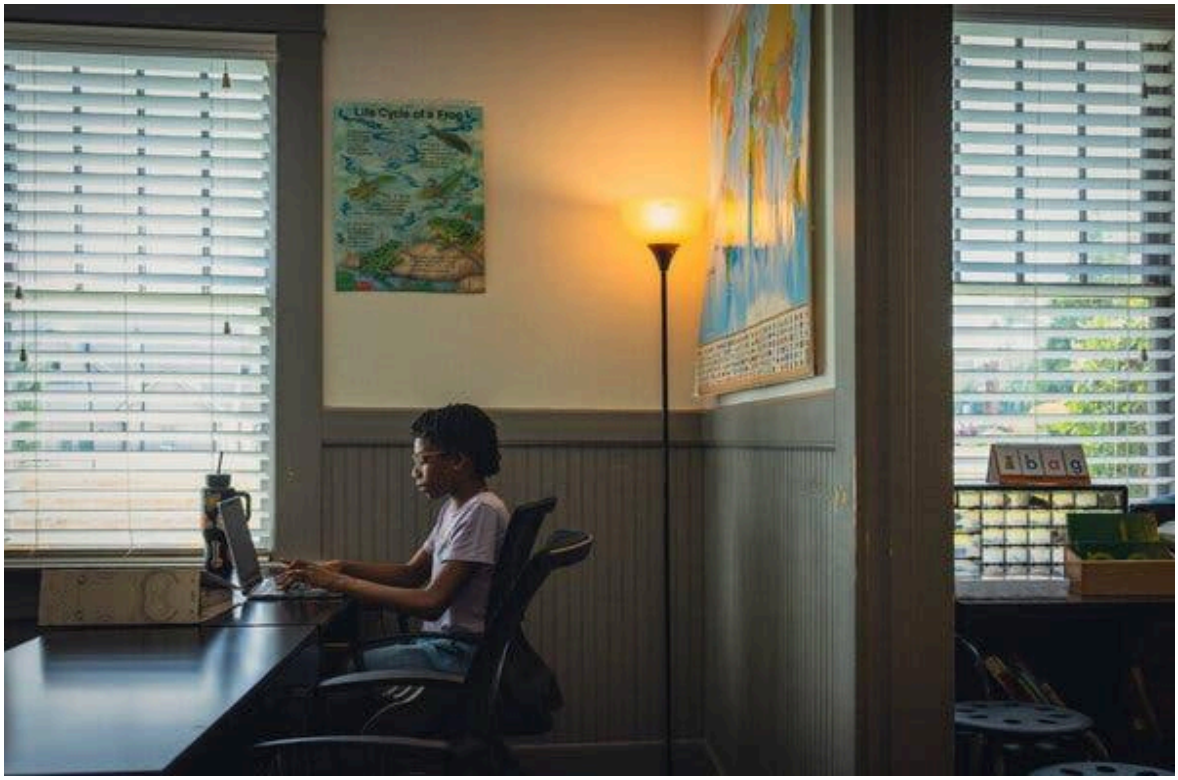
Conservative philanthropists have donated tens of millions of dollars to the programs, including Janine and Jeff Yass and the Koch family, major players in Republican politics.

But the appeal goes beyond the Republican base and includes many working- or middle-class Black and Latino parents — especially those whose children are disabled, and who feel public schools are not meeting their needs.

Ms. Lopez appreciates what the microschool gave Nathanael. He is more confident, she said, and no longer fears being in a classroom.

“I feel like I have an emotionally intelligent child,” she said.

Image



A seventh grader at C.H.O.I.C.E. Preparatory Academy in Lilburn, Ga.

Anyone can open a microschool, although more than two-thirds of founders are current or formerly licensed teachers. And these schools can teach anything they like, including biblical versions of science and history. Facilities may not be inspected; staff member background checks are sometimes unnecessary.

And while many microschool founders say they cater to students with disabilities, the programs do not have to follow federal disability law, and most do not provide the therapies and counseling that are often available in public schools. Even Ms. Lopez said that she may not send Nathanael back to Kingdom Seed in the fall, because of the cost and his need for additional support for his autism.

As momentum for such schools grows, Georgia Democrats have argued that instead of investing in vouchers, more money should go to public schools, helping them lower class sizes and hire additional counselors and social workers who could serve disabled and low-income students. The state spent an estimated average of $14,000 per pupil last year, below the national average of $16,000.

Image

Tri-Cities Christian School has six students, who meet in a church basement.

“We have groups who would like to impose upon all our public schools their values and beliefs,” said Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, a teachers’ union affiliate. Microschools, she added, are “another method for them to remove their children from our public schools where they are experiencing diversity.”

‘So Much of It Is a Ministry’

Nathanael’s teacher, Desiree McGee-Greene, founded Kingdom Seed Christian Academy last August, in the suburban house she shares with her parents, husband and son, a student at the school. A family living room is now a cheerful classroom, with walls festooned with letters, numbers and artwork.

On a sunny April morning, Nathanael joined just three classmates, ages 5 to 7, on the rug. The day began with Bible history, as the children put in order events from Genesis, “creation” to “corruption” to “catastrophe.”

Christianity is core to the curriculum, which was developed by Mrs. McGee-Greene, a former teacher in public and private schools. About a quarter of microschools are faith-based, according to the National Microschooling Center.

Michael Greene teaches a science lesson outdoors at Kingdom Seed.
Image

Desirée McGee-Greene works with students on a French-language scavenger hunt at Kingdom Seed.

“Anything not in the Bible, that goes against what God’s word says, is false,” Mrs. McGee-Greene said in an interview explaining her education philosophy. “The next principle is that God created everything. It wasn’t millions of years ago — that is another big truth.”

After Bible study and a counting lesson in French, Mrs. McGee-Greene’s husband, Michael Greene, a former teacher, stepped in for math and science lessons. In the yard, students drew and wrote about insects and flowers in journals.

Kingdom Seed, which charges $500 per month for full-time tuition, is the core of a family business. The school has also received a $10,000 grant from the VELA Education Fund, a nonprofit supported by the Koch and Walton families, which bills itself as a “community of entrepreneurs” in education.

In addition, Mrs. McGee-Greene works as a coach to teachers who want to start microschools, and hosts a podcast sharing her tips. She also sells custom-made curriculum.

Many founders have multiple streams of income because microschool fees often do not add up to a competitive wage.

The median teacher salary in Georgia was about $68,000 last year, plus a benefits package. A typical microschool might charge $7,000 per pupil for the school year, and start with seven students — a significant pay cut for the founder, who must also now pay for rent, supplies and other costs.

But many program founders said they were trading income for autonomy and passion.
Image

Marisa Chambers left her job in public schools to found a microschool.
Marisa Chambers, who runs Tri-Cities Christian School, a microschool just south of Atlanta, said that she left her job as a public school administrator in 2019, in part because she was frustrated by the state of education for students with disabilities. Many were several years behind academically — and without much more personal attention, she thought, unlikely to catch up.

“So much of it is a ministry,” she said of her six-student program for children aged 8 to 15, which she described as Christian and social-justice oriented.

On a recent spring afternoon, the students, meeting in a church basement, wrote stories or read aloud, depending on their grade level. A lesson on the life cycle of a butterfly was geared toward younger children. But the older students, Ms. Chambers said, had

recently studied the Civil War, and children who loved to write had met with a book editor.

Alan, 12, first met Ms. Chambers when he was in kindergarten, at the public elementary school where she used to work. He was so withdrawn that he was diagnosed with selective mutism. When his parents or older sister visited, they would often see him separated from his peers.

This spring, he was smiling, easily retelling this story to a stranger. “When I was a little kid, I didn’t raise my hand,” he recalled. Now, with so much attention from Ms. Chambers and only five classmates, “I actually like this school. I can learn more here.”

Image

Alan, a student at Tri-Cities Christian School, with his sister, Monica Laton-Perez.

Alan’s sister, Monica Laton-Perez, 24, who helps care for him, said Alan had experienced “tremendous” growth. But even with a substantial discount, the tuition is expensive for the family, and in the fall, he will instead enroll at a charter school.

Expanding With Taxpayer Dollars

Ms. Chambers said she hopes to serve more low-income students in the 2025-2026 school year, thanks to a law, signed by Gov. Brian Kemp in April, that will provide a $6,500 education savings account to parents who withdraw their children from public schools ranked in the bottom 25 percent. Households earning less than $125,000 for a family of four will receive priority.

Not all microschools will want to participate in the program. Though detailed regulations have not yet been released, schools accepting the money must administer annual standardized tests in math and English, and report the results to the state. They may also need to employ at least one certified teacher.

Image

C.H.O.I.C.E. Preparatory Academy meets in what was once a lawyer's office.
Some microschools are formalizing their status. Keyanna and Jamal Moreau have pursued private school accreditation for C.H.O.I.C.E. Preparatory Academy in Lilburn, Ga. Their program started as a microschool, but after six years, it is no longer so micro.

It now serves 40 students, ages 8 to 17, in a building that was once a lawyer's office. Ms. Moreau, who studied education in college, founded the school after her own children struggled to read.

The program is secular, and like the Moreaus, almost all of the students are Black. Rigor is a focus. On an April school day, older students studied Greek and Roman word roots, while younger ones built simple electromagnetic motors, with wires and batteries strewed across a large table.

Harmony, 11, explained why this environment worked better for her than public school. Here, she said, an adult would sit next to her and explain each lesson or concept, step by step.

Image

The founders of C.H.O.I.C.E. Preparatory Academy, Keyanna Moreau and Jamal Moreau.

Ms. Moreau said most parents would prefer public school if it worked for their children. Public schools are free, and their students have access to clubs, sports teams and a wider range of peers.

But in reality, she said, those schools too often passed Black students who had not mastered core concepts from grade to grade.

When students enroll in her program, “I have to build my kids back up,” she said. “They think they can’t do it, that they’re dumb, they’re unteachable.”

“Parents are waking up,” she added, “especially in the Black community.”

A version of this article appears in print on June 19, 2024, Section A, Page 11 of the New York edition with the headline: Desperate for Help, Parents Are Turning to Private ‘Microschools’. Order Reprints | Today’s Paper | Subscribe