

Why Massachusetts Should Be a Leader in Encouraging Education Entrepreneurship and Innovative K-12 Learning Models

By Kerry McDonald

Introduction

Tucked away on a sprawling 18-acre farmstead in Duxbury, Massachusetts, nearly 20 elementary school-age children learn together outside of a conventional classroom. They are part of [JEM Learning](#), a new microschool community that provides families with a child-centered alternative to both traditional public and private schools.

Microschools like JEM Learning are small, multi-age learning communities with paid educators that are reminiscent of the one-room schoolhouse model. They were gaining traction prior to 2020, but their popularity has soared amidst the education disruption of the past few years. In Massachusetts, numerous microschool collaboratives have sprouted, offering more individualized learning options and paving a pathway for a more bottom-up, decentralized education model.

“If the public schools continue the way the public schools are going, I think you will see more and more alternative schools,” said Linda Cashman, one of JEM Learning’s three hired educators. Cashman has been a certified teacher for over 40 years teaching mostly in Massachusetts public elementary school settings and serving as an assistant principal in a local school district before retiring recently. She, like the parents she serves at JEM, wants to see more personalized, less standardized educational models for children.

When she started her career, Cashman says teachers had much more autonomy and ability to tailor learning for every child. Now, that is no longer the case. “What I saw was more and more top-down messaging from the administration, saying this is what you need to do, this is how you are going to do it, and all are doing the same thing with the children. I thought, *‘Oh my goodness, have we forgotten how children learn? Have we forgotten that every child is an individual?’*”

JEM Learning prioritizes personalized learning, recognizing each child’s academic and social-emotional strengths and areas for improvement. Small, informal groups of children had been meeting at the farm periodically over the past few years, where JEM Learning co-founder Meghan King runs an equestrian program and non-profit animal sanctuary. Growing parent demand for new and different educational options prompted King and her co-founder, Ellen Arcese, to officially launch JEM Learning this fall. Their own children also attend the program.

JEM Learning offers families four-or-five-day drop-off learning options from 9:30 to 2:30 that range in price from \$700 to \$900 a month. Parents are responsible for registering and reporting as homeschoolers in their home district, and their children learn in a welcoming setting that blends core academics with key enrichment activities and ample outside time learning through nature and on the farm.



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“We decided to enroll in JEM Learning at first because some friends were going there and a favorite teacher we knew, but once we got there and learned what it was all about, we knew we found our place,” said Dawn Gallahue, whose eight-year-old son attends JEM. “A mostly outdoor, play-based, drop-off program with a very inclusive, co-op feel, where family’s inputs and needs are top priority is exactly where we are meant to be.”

Encouraging the proliferation and progress of nontraditional learning communities like JEM Learning should be a key consideration for policymakers and education choice advocates in Massachusetts and elsewhere. These innovative models offer creative, flexible, low-cost private education options for families, even in states without robust school choice policies that enable education funding to follow students outside local school districts. Supporting the growth of these programs can expand access to a wider variety of education possibilities from which more families can choose.

Entrepreneurial Challenges and Potential Policy Solutions

Entrepreneurs in every sector often face challenges and barriers to entry and scale, but education entrepreneurs working to reimagine learning and introduce entirely new categories of education encounter particularly burdensome obstacles. Microschools and similar models such as learning pods, hybrid schools, and co-learning communities, often don’t fit neatly into existing regulatory boxes. Indeed, many wouldn’t want to fit into these boxes because it would strip them of their innovative characteristics and ability to easily adapt to the changing needs and wants of the families they serve.

Some states create an atmosphere that welcomes novel educational prototypes, while others push them away. Even states that are ranked highly for their friendliness toward entrepreneurs, with lower regulatory burdens across sectors, are often hostile to education entrepreneurship. These were important findings in my new [report](#) for State Policy Network (SPN), a national network of independent, state-level, free-market think tanks. Pioneer Institute is SPN’s Massachusetts affiliate. I interviewed education entrepreneurs across the country, including in Massachusetts, to identify some of the regulatory impediments they face and offer seven general policy recommendations that could make it easier for education entrepreneurship to flourish.

These recommendations include:

1. Reduce early childhood care licensing requirements for emerging learning models.
2. Expand exemptions to childcare licensing regulations.
3. Create “innovation tracks” that support experimental learning models.

4. Ease zoning restrictions.
5. Expand homeschooling freedoms.
6. Make it easier to start a private school.
7. Loosen compulsory school attendance laws.

The states where education entrepreneurship is thriving and that are attracting new learning providers are those that have embraced, or are at least beginning to introduce, some of these recommendations. Massachusetts could be next. Its restrictive early child care licensing requirements, and limited exemptions from these requirements, sometimes ensnare experimental K–12 learning models in onerous regulations that are meant for infants and toddlers, not 10-year-olds. This can prevent education entrepreneurs from launching or growing their school-age programs. Similarly, existing regulatory frameworks are targeted toward traditional schools, but microschools and related models don’t fit these definitions. A “regulatory sandbox,” or broad “innovation track,” that allows entrepreneurs to imagine and nurture new learning models without being slotted into existing, inflexible licensing categories could be a way forward. Education today extends far beyond traditional schooling.

It can also be more difficult to start a private school in Massachusetts than in other states, with some towns unfairly denying private school applications. One Massachusetts entrepreneur I spoke to said that local officials stated outright that they don’t want private schools in their city, denying the request. This was a theme expressed by entrepreneurs in other states with more cumbersome private school laws as well—including states that lean both to the political right and left.

Local zoning ordinances can thrust microschool startups into less desirable commercial locations, often on busy streets or with limited outside space. Homeschooling in states such as Massachusetts is also more heavily regulated than in other states, including states such as New Jersey and Nevada that have seen a recent flurry of entrepreneurship and schooling alternatives for families.

A state’s compulsory school attendance laws can also limit the introduction and expansion of newer, more flexible learning models. West Virginia recently addressed this issue by exempting participants in a microschool or learning pod from the state’s compulsory schooling statutes.

Massachusetts Is an Education Innovation Exporter

Despite these regulatory hurdles, the Bay State attracts education entrepreneurs who want to create and cultivate ideas for innovative K–12 learning models. Often, however, these innovations spread faster and further outside of Massachusetts than they do inside it.

[Wildflower Montessori](#) microschoools, for example, were first launched in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2014 as an independent network of private, teacher-driven microschoools in convenient neighborhood shopfront locations that endeavored to increase access to the Montessori method for more children. Today, Massachusetts is home to 16 Wildflower Montessori schools throughout the state, but the network has seen nearly three times as many affiliated schools spring up outside of Massachusetts, including several charter schools in Minneapolis, New York City, and Washington, DC. Wildflower has tried unsuccessfully to launch affiliated charter schools in Massachusetts.

The accelerating growth of microschoools and similar creative learning models outside Massachusetts is influenced by both lower regulatory hurdles for education entrepreneurs elsewhere, and school choice policies that expand demand for and access to such programs.

[KaiPod Learning](#), for instance, was birthed in Boston last year but has experienced much more rapid growth elsewhere, especially in areas with regulatory openness to education experimentation and expanding school choice policies. Founded by Massachusetts entrepreneur and Harvard Business School graduate Amar Kumar, who previously worked in product development at Pearson Online, KaiPod merges the personalization and flexibility of virtual learning with an in-person, microschoool experience. KaiPod, which was accepted into the prestigious Y Combinator Silicon Valley startup accelerator program in 2021, enables parents to choose whichever online learning program for their children that best fits their individual needs and preferences. This could be anything from a state’s tuition-free public virtual school, to an online curriculum with a particular pedagogical approach such as Montessori, Waldorf or Classical, to a virtual, faith-based curriculum. KaiPod students then bring that online curriculum with them to a local pod, or microschoool environment with mixed-age students and an experienced educator. The teacher helps with curriculum questions, provides mentoring, and guides students to various resources, while also offering daily social and enrichment activities for the KaiPod community of learners. Families can enroll full-time or part-time, with the five-day option costing \$250 per week in Massachusetts.

KaiPod launched its pilot pod in Newton, Massachusetts in the fall of 2021 with two students. Today it continues to have its one flagship pod in Massachusetts with several more students, but the company has quickly scaled elsewhere and now serves over 130 students in multiple pods in three other states, including Arizona and New Hampshire, that have robust education choice programs that enable families to access KaiPod at little or no cost. What has influenced KaiPod’s growth strategy?

“When expanding to new states or areas, we primarily look for indicators of support for student personalization and parent choice,” said Kumar. “Sometimes those indicators can be regulatory, such as the number of public online schools or ability for families to homeschool. Other times those indicators are financial, such as expansive educational savings account programs which allow families to direct their tax dollars towards learning options that might work better for them.”

Massachusetts could become a leader in helping its education entrepreneurs grow their offerings in-state as quickly as they are growing out-of-state. State and local policymakers could loosen or streamline regulatory and licensing requirements that are often mismatched for experimental learning models, and champion education choice policies that give more families access to these models.

The microschoools and similar K–12 learning models that have been introduced in Massachusetts and elsewhere are part of a dynamic, diverse ecosystem of alternative education options. These new options encompass many different educational philosophies and approaches; yet they all reflect more individualized, decentralized learning models that benefit learners, parents, and teachers alike. Parents feel invited into the educational conversation. Learners gain access to a less cookie-cutter educational model that is more tailored to their distinct learning needs and interests. And teachers regain autonomy and respect as they guide children to reach their full potential.

As Linda Cashman, one of the teachers at JEM Learning said: “I would have stayed teaching at the public schools had they continued educating children the way children were meant to be educated. I would love to see the public schools re-evaluate what they’re doing, assess children differently, and put into play the whole child, what each individual child needs.”

For now, though, Cashman is glad to be in an innovative microschoool setting that fosters personalized learning and choice. “I love the alternative,” she said. “I love the fact that parents have a choice, and I applaud these parents for taking the leap. I think that parents are going to see the success their children are having, and these alternatives will grow.” Removing regulatory barriers for education entrepreneurs in Massachusetts will facilitate that growth.

