

Education & Policy Exchange Florida Field Notes Fall 2024

Education & Policy Exchange is a nationwide effort to elevate black microschool founders and education entrepreneurs while exploring the gaps between their ability to innovate and the public policy that regulates how they operate. On this leg of the tour through central Florida, we met with three microschool founders, connected with regional networks for microschool leaders across the state, spoke with a leading public policy organization, and read state-based research from school choice advocates.

What we observed in the microschool ecosystem:

- Happy children and passionate educators
- Incredible diversity of learning environments and business models
- Incredible similarities in the professional backgrounds of founders and educators
- Multi-generational teams of educators inside the microschools
- Desire of founders to be connected with other innovators locally and across the state

What we learned from microschool founders and policy advocates:

- Difficulty in finding space – size, zoning, upfront cost
- Inability to provide guidance to current families on pathways for financial support from the state
- Significant delays in reimbursement to families of state educational freedom dollars
- Lack of a cohesive network for founders statewide despite the existence of regional networks
- Lack of understanding about the microschool experience by families

What questions are emerging as we analyze opportunities:

- How can we accelerate the increasing diverse support for educational freedom across the state?
- How and when can parents most effectively advocate for more choice in their districts?
- What public-private partnerships could create mutual value for all institutions and lead to more choices for families?

What we recommend for exploration to ease implementation of school choice:

The 2025-2026 legislative sessions -- although Governor DeSantis is still prioritizing K-12 education, the incoming Speaker, Daniel Perez (R) has indicated that he does not have it as a top priority. Over the last two decades, efforts to expand educational freedom have been driven by leadership with the last three speakers aggressively driving school choice. In this upcoming session the movement will need to depend on members and committee heads.

Consider convening a two-day summit of black and brown microschool founders, particularly those who run regional networks, and black and brown state legislators that support education freedom including: Lisa Dunkley (D), Gallop Franklin II (D), Kimberly Daniels (D), Webster Barnaby (R), Corey Simon (R) Chair of Sen Education Committee, and Berny Jacques (R). Facilitated by a neutral convener, Day 1 could be focused on the challenges each stakeholder group faces when it comes to operationalizing school choice, and Day 2 could be focused on the co-creation of solutions to ease implementation and continue increasing options and access for families.

Two decades after Republican Governor Jeb Bush's initial push for school choice, a broad bi-partisan, transracial coalition now supports educational freedom across the state. Now that so many families across the state and political spectrum have had access for years, culture has shifted politically beyond what used to be the domain of the right. Left-of-center constituents are now some of the most vocal supporters of school choice after experiencing it and its many benefits. In particular, black and brown families now understand more clearly that the teachers' unions, along with their funders and allies, are actually at odds with them and are increasingly looking to their legislative representatives to continue supporting and expanding educational freedom.

Consider a grassroots statewide public relations campaign aimed at parents, led by black and brown microschool founders, that underscores the opportunities that microschools provide for their communities including a pathway to secure funding for out-of-system learning environments, access to afro-centric curriculum, supplemental support for children with special needs, and the ability to find a learning environment that works uniquely for their child(ren).

Expectations for the next legislative session include: detractors taking another bite at the apple to restrict ESAs and further attempts, particularly by the League of Cities, to create new barriers to use, particularly by microschools such as land use zoning and fire safety regulations; supporters plan to offer solutions in an omnibus bill to preempt such restrictions, and new legislation is expected to extend the preference and first right of refusal that Charter Schools enjoy to utilize public schools post-shutdown to include other educational options using successful models such as state owned airports and public turnpike stops where private vendors own and operate services for the public.

Consider building a broad-based statewide coalition that crosses political ideology, industry, and geography to co-create and launch Learners Markets in districts where public schools are failing our children. Rather than demonizing public schools, engage in constructive and courageous conversation with open-minded coalition members willing to design and launch new spaces that allow public and private infrastructure to co-exist, strive for excellence together, and provide more choices to families across the state. If support of the Governor's office could be gained on the front-end, considering the shift that will be taking place with the upcoming legislative session, that could accelerate the process and aid in leveraging support.

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