

Communities in the driver's seat: Black Mothers Forum microschoools raise sustainability questions

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Black Mothers Forum (BMF) was founded in 2016 to combat institutional racism, including disproportionate discipline, unrepresentative curricula, and racial bullying in Phoenix-area schools. When the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted public education, the organization launched a network of microschoools as outposts of this mission.

These microschoools were able to start quickly, make frequent course corrections, and sustain their efforts after the pandemic, thanks in part to Arizona's growing ecosystem of diverse education options. The state offers multiple public funding options for new learning environments created by families, entrepreneurs, and community groups that have historically not played formal roles in education.

BMF's microschoools embody many of the themes driving the burgeoning microschoool movement in Arizona, including demand among parents and educators for more flexible and affirming learning environments. However, their Black leadership and overt emphasis on racial justice mean they occupy a unique niche in a movement and a region where Black families are often underrepresented.

The initial pandemic-era effort to launch these microschoools was documented in a [case study](#) published by the Center on Reinventing Public Education in 2022. This follow-up brief revisits the initial case study with an eye toward the pedagogical tensions and questions of sustainability that it brought to light. This brief is based on in-person classroom observations, a new round of interviews with BMF microschoool leaders and educators, and an analysis of Arizona's education policy landscape.

Beginning with a single location, Black Mothers Forum's network had grown to five microschoools in two locations when we visited in the spring of 2023, with plans to double the number of microschoools the following school year. Microschoools offer smaller alternatives to private schools, often at lower cost and with more structured support from professional educators than typical homeschool cooperatives. They typically rely on tuition paid by families as their primary source of revenue.

However, in Arizona, microschoools are allowed to receive public dollars through two different mechanisms: publicly-funded scholarship programs and subcontracting arrangements with charter schools. As microschoools receive public funding and

operate under the aegis of public schools, education leaders and policymakers must grapple with how these small, independently operated learning communities challenge conventional assumptions about public funding and appropriate oversight. The Black Mothers Forum case underscores many of the tensions and reflects the growing demand among families for the educational options that microschoools offer.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Black Mothers Forum has creatively adjusted its microschool model to meet the needs of Black (and increasingly Latine) families whose children often encounter challenges in conventional public schools. This has generated interest among families and community leaders, both within and outside of Arizona, to grow and replicate the BMF model.
- As small learning environments created by families and community groups with varying experience and credentials, publicly funded microschoools inherently break conventional assumptions about how schools are governed and funded, how their performance is measured and reported, and how educators are trained, recruited, and supported.
- The long-term success of the microschool movement may hinge on devising effective ways to fund, govern, and support these models—an effort likely to be complicated by complex political dynamics in a state with broad partisan divides.

Making microschoools work for Black students

The Covid-19 pandemic began an exodus of Black families from traditional public and charter schools. A widely-cited survey by the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) found the percentage of homeschooling families rose from 5.5% in April 2020 to 11.1% in October 2020. Black families saw the largest percentage increase in homeschooling of any demographic, from 3.3% in April 2020 to 16.1% in October 2020.

While [subsequent releases of state administrative data](#) cast doubt on the magnitude of the shift, federal and state data, along with other surveys of homeschooling families, point toward similar broad conclusions: the number of families pursuing alternatives to conventional public schooling jumped during the pandemic; at least some of this increase persisted after schools reopened; and the population pursuing homeschooling and other related alternatives [has grown more diverse](#).

News reporting suggests that [many Black families are uninterested in returning to traditional schools](#), even with the end of pandemic-era restrictions. When journalists interview [Black homeschooling parents](#), reasons for leaving public schools include racial microaggressions, a dearth of Black history and culturally responsive pedagogy, and harsh and punitive disciplinary systems.

At the time of our study in spring 2023, Black Mothers Forum enrolled approximately 40 kids in five microschoools across two locations. Two educators worked in each microschoool. Their primary goal is to create a safe and nurturing environment for Black students in a metropolitan area where they are underrepresented and frequently report mistreatment in public schools.

Microschoool educators shared that students had traumatizing experiences before enrolling, such as a student who was “kicked in the face, spit on and called a monkey” at a public school. A number of non-Black (primarily Latine) families have also been drawn to the Black Mothers Forum learning environment. Building relationships with families, centering student interest, and creating a safe environment seem to be appealing across racial lines. As the director of the microschoools stated,

“I have the opportunity and honor to listen to the student development coaches, the families, and the students in order to help create learning environments that are safe and supportive for Black and Brown children.”

A unique funding model supports Arizona’s public microschoools

When they first started their small pandemic learning environments, the Black Mothers Forum partnered with the microschoooling company [Prenda](#). Founded in Mesa, a Phoenix suburb, Prenda provides learning software and a framework for educators, called learning guides, who support groups of five to ten students through approximately 20 hours of self-directed learning per week. The company grew rapidly in Arizona during the pandemic and helped pioneer two models for microschoools to access public funding. Both have since been employed by other providers across the state. Microschoools can subcontract with public schools, including online charter schools, and receive a portion of the per-pupil funding for each student who enrolls. Alternatively, they can function as private learning providers that directly serve families who pay tuition using Arizona’s Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs).

From their inception during the pandemic to the time of our study, Black Mothers Forum’s microschoools have used the public-school subcontracting approach. The microschoools have an agreement with Sequoia Choice Arizona Distance Learning, a K-12 online public charter school. Sequoia is part of a network of schools affiliated with Ed Key, a charter school service provider, that includes both online and brick-and-mortar charter schools.

The online charter school receives an average of about \$9,000 per pupil in state funding (charter schools in Arizona do not receive local school district funding, and this figure does not include Covid-19 relief or other federal funding). The microschoools receive a portion of the online school’s per-pupil funding for each student they serve under their subcontracting agreement. The charter school assumes responsibility for some services, like administering state assessments, performing special education evaluations, and providing related services. It also offers microschoool students access to other amenities, like extracurricular activities.

In an effort to diversify revenue sources, Black Mothers Forum leaders said they are interested in pursuing microschoools that would charge tuition to students using the ESAs, which allow parents 90 percent of what the state would spend to educate a student in public schools. For students with disabilities, funding allocations can reach [tens of thousands of dollars](#). For other students, the scholarships are typically worth

[approximately \\$7,000](#). Families can direct these funds to a variety of different education providers.

Microschools that rely on ESAs for funding are subject to fewer regulatory requirements. For example, their students are not required to take state assessments. They also would not receive the support services that BMF's original microschoools receive from their charter school partner.

Microschool pedagogy evolves to incorporate more direct instruction from teachers

While the relationship with Prenda may have aided the initial launch of the microschoools, Black Mothers Forum leaders said the company's model did not fit the needs of students or families they served. Students entered the microschoools academically behind and needed more than 20 hours of learning time per week. Many students were not ready for full-time, self-directed learning—they required more hands-on support and direct instruction from educators. Parents also wanted the school day to be longer to fit their work schedules.

“We recognized our children were far behind,” BMF's CEO, Janelle Wood, said in an interview. “They were much further behind than the students that typically would go to Prenda. Our children also needed an extra [adult] in the space to deal with some of the behavior.”

Starting in the 2022-2023 school year, the microschoools switched to EdMentum, an online curriculum provider also used by Sequoia. Students also accessed other online learning tools, such as Khan Academy. The microschoools operated approximately six hours a day (compared to four hours with Prenda). Schedules posted during our site visits describe a daily routine for elementary-aged students that included teacher-led instruction, art projects, computer-based work on core academic subjects, and blocks of time for students to complete modules on Khan Academy and IXL programs.

A typical classroom had ten students and two learning coaches. Learning coaches provided some direct, whole-group instruction, especially to the younger elementary students. Even as they shifted to a model that offered more teacher-led instruction, the microschoools worked to preserve some aspects of a student-led learning environment, such as offering students more freedom of movement than in a typical classroom. When we conducted interviews with BMF educators, we observed students freely moving around classrooms and getting snacks when they were hungry.

Challenges and trade-offs

Black Mothers Forum faces many challenges and trade-offs in a policy landscape that is not built for small learning environments operated by community organizations.

Funding stability and sustainability remain critical questions for microschoools

The Black Mothers Forum leaders are committed to ensuring that microschoooling is accessible to Black families by offering low-cost or free tuition. To supplement the public funding they receive, the group's microschoools have attracted a range of national and local support, including grants for the Vela Education Fund, finalist honors from the Yass Prize recognizing education innovations, and donations from the local NBA

and WNBA franchises. During our visit, we observed a display featuring a \$10,000 check from the Phoenix Suns and Mercury's charitable arms, as well as art honoring players who were scheduled to visit the microschoools.

Following this early philanthropic support, these microschoools now face the question any education start-up must confront: can they sustain their operations using only the funding they generate from their students? This can be especially challenging for learning environments that serve large numbers of low-income students who cannot afford to pay the full tuition cost.

Assuming every student [uses an ESA valued at \\$7,000](#) (or receives similar funding through a charter school subcontracting agreement), a BMF microschoool serving ten students would receive revenue of \$70,000. Since BMF is committed to two learning coaches per microschoool, that funding would need to be spread across two adult learning coaches, plus any additional expenses associated with curriculum, technology and network-wide overhead.

Wood, Black Mothers Forum's CEO, said that the microschoools needed philanthropic support when they were housed in a small operation serving only a few dozen families. They would become more financially sustainable once they started operating on a larger scale. "I believe once we really start to settle in and get our flow, then it shouldn't be a problem with the state funding being able to support the microschoools," she said. She added, "I believe as we grow, those dollars will be able to sustain us a little more." She noted the growth of Arizona's ESA program would allow them to diversify revenue streams. However, she has also indicated in media reports that [funding remains the organization's biggest obstacle](#).

This raises a second concern: stability. Wood noted in an interview that, like other organizations that cater to economically diverse families of color, they contend with high student and staff mobility. She noted, "We've had that where parents just move out of state just due to job situation or housing. Housing's been a big issue here in Arizona. It's a lot of money right now to live here."

She also noted that the schools' philosophy is not the right fit for every family or educator. "I think some people had one idea of it, and then actually when you get into it, and as we continue to evolve, it may not be for everybody," she said.

This suggests that some families or educators may join the microschoools, discover they are not an ideal fit, and quickly transition to another environment, taking their funding with them. Developing a backstop for unstable attendance, funding, and staffing may require additional financial resources.

Existing mechanisms for performance measurement and academic transparency are ill-suited to microschoools

It is challenging for the public, regulators, and policymakers to identify the educational effectiveness of the BMF's microschoools. As very small learning environments spanning multiple grade levels, they are not subject to reporting requirements that apply to most public schools. If they were required to publicly report academic outcomes, any data would be subject to high levels of volatility.

As public charter school students, BMF students are required to take annual state assessments. They also take interim assessments through iReady, which Sequoia uses

for progress monitoring. However, assessment results for BMF students are included alongside the hundreds of other Sequoia students in the schools' public-facing accountability reports.

If the microschool network expands to include private schools catering to students using ESAs, they would not be subject to these testing requirements. Unlike some other states that offer similar programs, Arizona does not require ESA students to take assessments, and learning providers that operate as private schools are free to set their own requirements. A [report](#) by the National Microschooling Center found slightly under half of the learning environments surveyed relied on norm-referenced tests to gauge student achievement.

These policies may present difficulties for parents wishing to verify their own children's progress against their peers nationally or on state standards. They also raise questions about academic transparency. How can families assess the academic efficacy of a microschool without standardized assessments? How can charter school authorizers assess these microschools' academic outcomes separately from those of the larger online charter school?

Microschool leaders are looking beyond test scores in thinking about how to assess their effectiveness in supporting students. Wood stated, "How is [success] measured? It's measured by the kids being engaged in the curriculum and what's going on in class ... Our attendance rate is ridiculously high because the kids don't want to miss school."

Further, the parents we interviewed appreciated that microschool students were able to follow their own interests and passions, which may not necessarily align with standardized testing. One mother explained that the microschools allowed her daughter to "really delve into" her interests and follow her curiosity in ways that were not possible in more conventional schools.

These broader indicators of success mirror the sentiments of all microschool staff who sought to create a space where students truly enjoy learning. Yet, they raise questions about student preparation and rigor as traditionally defined. For instance, will students be academically prepared to succeed in four-year colleges? This issue may become more salient if BMF's network of microschools expands beyond its current focus on grades K-8 and serves students in high school grades.

Current methods of academic accountability, centered on reporting student outcomes at the school level and imposing consequences on learning environments according to students' proficiency, academic growth, and educational attainment, are unsuitable for small learning environments housed within larger public schools. The difficulty of measuring success for microschools suggests a need for new individual assessments to measure academic progress and postsecondary readiness. If academic transparency at the school level is not feasible, academic transparency at the student level becomes paramount.

Black Mothers Forum must continually address facilities, transportation, and overhead

As small learning communities that rely on ESAs or charter school partnerships, microschools often do not have access to public education infrastructure, such as facilities and transportation. Their small size often makes them unavailable to students

whose only form of transportation is the traditional yellow bus. During our visit, the organization's CEO left one microschool to personally transport a student home—an arrangement she said underscored both the organization's responsiveness to families and the systemic need for more flexible school transportation.

State leaders in Arizona recognized this challenge. BMF received a state grant to develop a new app to facilitate parent carpools—one of several efforts to address shortcomings of traditional school transportation arrangements.

BMF microschools do not receive public funding for facilities, and they rely on partnerships to provide learning space. During the 2022-2023 school year, it ran two microschools in a set of classrooms housed in a facility operated by EdKey, an education service provider that supports Sequoia Choice's charter school network, and another three in an Episcopal church facility formerly occupied by a school that closed during the pandemic. As a result, their ability to grow and sustain microschools will likely depend on access to similar facilities, either through donations or at low cost.

Black Mothers Forum employs a staff of student learning coaches who lack formal teaching credentials

[Teachers in Arizona are overwhelmingly White](#) (80%) and do not match the student population of the state. BMF microschools have been able to recruit a teaching force of student learning coaches who share the demographic backgrounds of their students. They often have some experience working in schools, but many lack formal teaching credentials.

Online public school students in Arizona are required to enroll with a teacher of record who holds a formal educator credential. Black Mothers Forum employs a Microschool Director who fulfills this role. Wood, BMF's CEO, described the state's law: "No, the [learning coaches] do not have to be certified. You need a teacher of record and we have a teacher of record."

As the microschools adjust their model to include more direct instruction, it is notable that uncertified teachers are making key pedagogical decisions in the classroom. While [research on teacher effectiveness](#) is ambiguous on the impact of certification on student outcomes, it is clear that factors like teacher experience, professional knowledge, and instructional behaviors are related to achievement. Instructors we interviewed also described a lack of familiarity with some aspects of public school teaching, such as special education accommodations.

The majority of learning coaches previously worked in traditional public schools and charter schools as classroom aides or paraprofessionals. Many of the coaches were attracted to working with smaller student groups and with Black students. One coach said, "It's important to teach students that look like me, because growing up I only had two African-American teachers, and that was through 12 years of school." Another coach stated that she was attracted to the position because she could see that "the students were well-loved."

Research indicates that having access to educators who share their racial identity [can improve students' academic trajectories](#), and that existing teacher credentialing systems [disproportionately block aspiring educators of color](#) from entering the profession.

The trade-offs between reduced credentialing and increased racial matching deserve further exploration.

Over the past two years, the microschoools have had issues with teacher retention. As Wood stated, “Some people thought that they wanted to do this, but they didn’t realize how intense it can be.” BMF’s microschoool director added that when conventionally trained teachers become student development coaches, there are many things they must unlearn. Students can no longer be sent to the principal’s office. Coaches are expected to work collaboratively with students and parents to resolve any issues at school.

In an interview, one instructor also described a challenging transition from leading a one-grade classroom to preparing lessons for students of multiple ages who were working through different levels of the material, noting, “I’m pulled into like three different directions right now.” Combining multiple grade levels is a common feature of microschoools, but can be difficult to manage in an instructional model that requires more teacher-led instruction.

The same instructor also noted the benefits of a diverse age group in a single classroom—especially the tendency for older students to help the younger ones. But this suggests the need for training and support systems to help educators make necessary pedagogical shifts.

In a state with broad partisan divides, BMF’s leaders walk a political tightrope

Before the pandemic, BMF’s leaders [critiqued racial disparities in criminal justice and school discipline](#) and endorsed efforts by leaders such as former state Superintendent Kathy Hoffman to increase diversity among public education leadership. After starting the microschoools, leaders found themselves at odds with groups with whom they used to have political alignment, such as teachers unions and other Black civic organizations such as the NAACP.

Black Mothers Forum has also been accused of self-segregating students, an accusation that participants from our study found offensive. One parent argued, “For people who say that having Black schools is contrary, we fought for freedom to be able to learn, right? And we should be able to have that ability to learn in the best way for our children. It may or may not be in a traditional school system. And why should it be looked upon negatively?”

As Black Mothers Forum has embraced its new role as a schooling provider, the organization has sided with leaders such as former Governor Doug Ducey, a Republican, to support school choice initiatives, including a major new expansion of the state’s education savings account policies. The organization’s co-founder and CEO appeared with Ducey at a rally celebrating his signing of legislation offering universal eligibility for the state’s ESA program.

The organization’s work, according to a public school advocate interviewed for this study, further hurt their standing among education advocates who prioritize issues such as improving public schools. For instance, the advocate states, “I think that their alignment with Governor Ducey on the voucher issue made them persona non grata in the education space, and they really were sort of rejected for that.” However, the public school advocate also conceded that Black and Brown students are often not taught in

culturally affirming and safe environments. The advocate stated: “I mean, they’re not wrong. I’m not gonna disagree with anything in that statement.”

The Black Mothers Forum staff, leaders, and parents we interviewed spoke forcefully about their right to use whatever means were available to access safe education environments for Black students. As one mother stated, “Why can’t we create schools and let each child learn in the way ... that they can be the best adult citizens when they get older ... When you talk about the microschool or a charter school or things like that, why is it that it’s such a negative that we’re allowing the kids to learn at what’s best for them?”

BMF’s leadership believe that the detractors of their work “don’t understand” what they are trying to accomplish. Arizona’s current Democratic governor, Katie Hobbs, opposes continued expansion of the state’s ESA program, but BMF shows no signs of backing away from its pro-school choice stance. According to Wood, the organization sees a need to continue to “fight for [school choice] laws to be implemented and executed in the spirit in which they were intended.”

Despite these political tensions, leaders see that the demand for microschools may increase as word spreads. One learning coach said, “more parents [are] wanting more information. ‘How do I get involved? How do my kids join school?’ Things like that.” To that end, the leaders of the group hope to expand to more locations in greater Phoenix. Organizations outside of Arizona are also reaching out to BMF for guidance on how to replicate their model in other states.

New systems needed

Across the country, two parallel developments in individualized education are receiving increased attention. On one hand, [a growing movement](#) created by families and community organizations—often working [outside public school systems](#)—seeks to design small learning environments for students whose needs are not being met by existing schools. On the other, public school organizations, including [districts](#) and charter networks, are experimenting with small learning environments that can serve as laboratories for more innovative teaching approaches and as alternatives for students who need more flexible learning experiences.

As a community microschool network under the aegis of a public charter school, Black Mothers Forum illustrates the demand for these learning environments and raises critical questions about how public education should govern them.

- **Regulation and oversight:** How can microschools such as the Black Mothers Forum offer transparency about their outcomes while maintaining their identities as alternative learning spaces? What is the role of state regulators in monitoring academic outcomes in small, unconventional learning environments that are supported by state funds? How can these schools provide families with accurate information about their children’s academic progress?

- **Teacher recruitment:** How can traditional school systems learn from microschoools that are recruiting and retaining racially diverse educators? Are there ways to enable more racially diverse educators to obtain teacher certifications and gain skills that are key to supporting student achievement?
- **Educator support:** What new support systems are necessary to help match potential educators with unconventional learning environments? What on-the-job supports can help educators who lack formal educator credentials but possess other attributes valuable to students?
- **Politics:** What is the role of politics in sustaining microschool learning environments? How do groups like Black Mothers Forum navigate political tensions to sustain the alliances they need to continue their efforts?
- **Financial sustainability:** Can small learning environments led by parents and community groups achieve the necessary economies of scale to serve economically diverse students while relying primarily on public funding? What financial backstops are necessary to weather short-term financial disruptions, such as student mobility?

We conclude this report with questions rather than answers. This blossoming of small learning environments, created by families and community groups to meet the needs of specific groups of students, is still in its early stages. Its intersection with public education is still evolving. Our findings suggest that amid systems that were never designed for these sort of learning environments, leaders may need to devise new approaches to measure quality and success, inform parents about children's academic progress, ensure financial stability, and support their educators. Otherwise, they risk leaving the success of both these learning environments and the families they serve to chance.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The [Center on Reinventing Public Education](#) (CRPE) is a nonpartisan research organization at [Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College](#). We rigorously examine and test transformative ideas, using our research to inform action. We are truth tellers who combine forward-thinking ideas with empirical rigor. Since 1993, we have been untethered to any one ideology but unwavering in a core belief: public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we work to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice that will drive the public education system to meet the needs of every student.

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