

Empowerment, Exit and Entrepreneurship Will Continue to Transform Education

Over the past two years of social and economic disruption, U.S. education has experienced an extraordinary transformation that can best be defined by 3 “Es”: Empowerment, Exit and Entrepreneurship.

Empowerment

Beginning in the spring of 2020, and prompted by widespread school closures and remote schooling, parents began to reclaim control of their children’s education. For some, getting a close-up look at their children’s classrooms and curriculum over Zoom was the prompt they needed to make a change. For others, they may have long pondered a different learning environment for their children but lacked the catalyst to take the leap. The education upheaval of 2020 provided that catalyst.

By summer 2020, “pandemic pods” emerged, as parents began taking their children’s education into their own hands to confront the uncertainty of fall schooling plans. These spontaneous, parent-driven learning communities brought together small groups of local children in someone’s home, often with a hired teacher or with parents taking turns facilitating a curriculum.

Exit

With most American children beginning the 2020/2021 academic year remotely, many parents exercised their newfound empowerment through exit. Some shifted their children into private schools that were more likely to reopen for in-person learning than district schools in certain locations. Others delayed early school entry for their preschoolers and kindergarteners. Many parents left schooling altogether, pulling their children out of school for independent homeschooling. The U.S. Census Bureau found that the homeschooling rate doubled from the spring of 2020 to the fall of 2020, with more than 11 percent of the U.S. school-age population being homeschooled at that time. The largest increase occurred among Black homeschooling families, who experienced a five-fold increase in homeschooling rates between the spring and fall of 2020. Black children were overrepresented in the homeschooling population in the fall of 2020 compared to the overall K-12 public school population.

Even though most district schools reopened for full-time, in-person learning in the fall of 2021, many parents stayed away. This was particularly true if they lived in a school district that adopted remote learning the previous academic year. Those districts continued to lose students, though not by quite as high a rate as the previous year, according to new data

analyzed by the American Enterprise Institute.

A similar pattern was true for homeschooling. “Homeschooling numbers this year dipped from last year’s all-time high, but are still significantly above pre-pandemic levels,” the Associated Press reported last month after evaluating data provided by 18 states. It concluded that homeschooling numbers rose 63 percent in the 2020/2021 academic year, then dropped by 17 percent this school year, remaining significantly elevated.

Entrepreneurship

Recognizing mounting parent demand for a variety of learning options and schooling alternatives, education entrepreneurs began to create solutions. Some of these entrepreneurs were parents or teachers themselves who were frustrated by school closures and ongoing virus-related policies. New Jersey mother of four, Jill Perez, began teaching in public schools 20 years ago and then shifted into a student-teacher advisory role at a local university until Covid hit. She started a “pandemic pod” with several other families in 2020/2021, but demand grew for something bigger and more formal.

In the fall of 2021, Perez opened Tranquil Teachings Learning Center that allows children to attend part-time or full-time. She hired teachers, especially public school teachers who wanted more freedom and flexibility. “These teachers are loving what they’re doing in a way that they hadn’t in years,” she told me in a recent podcast interview. Her program has grown to over 50 children, and she recently purchased a building for her learning center with plans for continued expansion.

Education entrepreneurs who introduced new learning models, such as microschools, prior to 2020 found their growth hasten over the past two years. As I wrote at Forbes.com last fall, the fast-growing microschool networks, Acton Academy and Prenda Learning, saw interest in their programs soar.

Microschools are typically small, multi-age classrooms led by a facilitator or guide that often meet in family homes, re-creating a one-room schoolhouse feel with personalized learning as a top priority.

Other microschools meet in small, storefront locations in local communities, offering convenience and customization. KaiPod Learning, for example, launched its pilot microschool model in Newton, Massachusetts last year, bringing together a small groups of students into a public, commercial space with an experienced educator. Each student comes to KaiPod with whatever virtual learning curriculum the family has chosen, ranging from a tuition-free public virtual school option, to private, online options such as Sora Schools or the Socratic Experience, to a faith-based curriculum if a family chooses. This allows for maximum family autonomy in terms of curriculum decisions, while gathering groups of children together for social and enrichment activities facilitated by the KaiPod

educator. Students can attend a couple of days a week or full-time.

KaiPod is expanding into more states this year, including Arizona where a child could participate in KaiPod part-time for \$25/day. If the child was eligible for one of Arizona's education savings accounts and scholarship programs, or enrolled in a virtual public school, the total cost to attend KaiPod would be minimal.

KaiPod participated in the prestigious Y Combinator startup accelerator program in Silicon Valley last year, and has already raised \$1.5 million in venture capital funding. Amar Kumar, KaiPod's founder and CEO, has found that many of the families who are joining his program are doing so because their children thrive with the personalization of online learning, while also wanting daily access to a consistent peer group and adult mentors.

Kumar thinks learning models similar to KaiPod, that bring together the best features of online learning platforms with crucial in-person, human-to-human interaction, is the future of education. "It all starts with students getting a very mastery-based content delivery, something that's personal to them, with another human, and something that's flexibly delivered," Kumar told me in a recent interview. "If we can keep those touchstones or pillars in our mind, then all the innovations that come out of that are almost certainly going to be net-positive for kids."

Over the past two years, parents have been empowered to regain control of their children's education and explore, or create, new learning models. Many parents exited district schools in 2020 for a variety of private education options, including homeschooling, and a lot of them have decided not to return. Entrepreneurs continue to invent and innovate, building fresh K-12 education solutions that work better for families than old models of schooling. This dynamic cycle of empowerment, exit and entrepreneurship is poised to continue and accelerate, expanding education options for more families. It's a great time to be a learner, a parent, an educator and an entrepreneur.