

Four K-12 Education Models That May Gain Popularity During COVID-19

In just a few weeks, US education has dramatically changed. Schools have been closed for the academic year in most states, and some districts have already canceled their foray into virtual school-at-home this spring, ending the school year early. With more than 50 million US students at home with their families, engaged in varying degrees of quarantine schooling, questions emerge about how long this will last and what education may look like post-pandemic. Most families will be eager to resume their previous routines, returning to school and work as soon as it's allowed, likely with strong social distancing measures in place. But some families may be curious about K-12 education models that favor personalization, small group learning environments, high-quality virtual programming and other innovative alternatives.

While most of us have been forced to work and learn from home for the past two months, separated from our colleagues and community, some employers and employees are finding that working from home has its benefits, including higher productivity gains and lower costs. A recent Brookings Institution report reveals that we “may see a more permanent shift toward telecommuting” continuing long after the pandemic ends. Similarly, some students are finding that they prefer this pandemic distance learning experiment over traditional schooling. Additionally, a recent survey by EdChoice finds that more than half of respondents have a more favorable view of homeschooling as a result of the pandemic, suggesting a rising openness to different K-12 learning models. As parents experience a growing cultural embrace of teleworking that can create more workplace freedom and flexibility, they may also look to grant this freedom and flexibility to their children, seeking educational options beyond a conventional classroom.

Here are four K-12 education models that will likely get increased attention over the coming months:

Forest Schools

Forest preschools and outdoor early childhood programs were already gaining traction prior to the pandemic. *The New York Times* reported last summer that “nature-based preschools have seen a tidal wave of interest in recent years,” pointing to survey data from a national organization that represents nature preschools and forest kindergartens. These programs prioritize ample outside time, natural play and exploration, typically with small class sizes and enthusiastic educators who enjoy helping children to learn in and from nature in all kinds of weather.

As conventional schools implement social distancing measures that may include staggered

attendance to keep class sizes down and avoid over-crowded school buildings, some families may look to full-time programs that already focus on small groups and outside learning. Christine Heer, M.Ed. and Lisa Henderson are the co-owners of Sprouts, the first licensed farm and forest kindergarten in Massachusetts. They explain that their program is held almost entirely outdoors and already provides adequate space necessary for safe interactions between children and teachers. Heer expects that programs like Sprouts will become a model for other early childhood programs coping with reopening amidst the pandemic, as well as a magnet for parents exploring other educational options.

Heer explains: "COVID-19 is now forcing communities to look at new ways of offering safe, healthy options for education at all levels and we are convinced that programs like ours will attract the attention of parents and educators as we reconsider how to bring children back into childcare and preschool settings in a safe, stress-free way." Henderson adds: "We will be making some slight adjustments when we return to Sprouts, like creating a hands-free hand washing station and keeping lunch boxes in individual backpacks instead of mixing them together in a crate. We believe that nature-immersive programs are the perfect fit to address the stress-free, healthy environments we will need to provide for families."

Microschools

The push toward smaller, less institutionalized learning environments may also be a boost for the burgeoning microschool movement. Microschools usually operate out of homes or local community organizations and typically have no more than a dozen K-12 students, of varying ages. Often microschools operate as hybrid homeschool programs, where young people are registered as homeschoolers but attend a microschool either full- or part-time, taking classes and engaging with teachers and mentors. Sometimes microschools operate through state charter school programs, such as Arizona-based Prenda, a fast-growing network of in-home microschools that is tuition-free for Arizona residents. New microschool models may gain momentum as parents seek a consistent, in-person learning environment for their children that emphasizes personalization and small class sizes.

If history offers any lessons as to what might happen when schools reopen, it's possible that many parents may continue to keep their children at home, at least in the short-term. NPR recently highlighted historical research by health care economist, Melissa Thomasson, who found that when New York City schools reopened during the 1916 polio epidemic, approximately one-quarter of the city's schoolchildren stayed home, prompting the city to temporarily loosen its compulsory attendance laws. If this happens during our current pandemic, neighbors may decide to form their own in-home learning co-ops, taking turns caring for and educating each other's children while balancing their own work schedules. Well-regarded homeschool programs, such as Oak Meadow and Clonlara, could see a bump in sales as parents look for curriculum guidance beyond, or in addition to, virtual learning, and new curriculum offerings could emerge to meet growing demand.

Virtual Degree Programs

By necessity, the pandemic has introduced many parents and children to the possibility of virtual learning. While we may all clamor for face-to-face interaction again, we are likely more comfortable with online connections and learning and working remotely than we were prior to this stay-at-home experience. Some students are finding that they prefer online education, and parents may be curious about virtual learning options going forward. Many states offer tuition-free virtual public school options, such as those provided through K12. Some colleges and universities are beginning to offer rigorous online programs for high school students that combine earning an accredited high school diploma with college credits, giving young people more autonomy and flexibility in their learning, while helping to defray college tuition costs.

Affiliated with Arizona State University, ASU Prep Digital is a fully online, accredited high school that incorporates college credits into its curriculum. The online school is tuition-free for Arizona residents, and the full-time accelerated program for out-of-state students costs just under \$7,000 a year. Supporting the expansion of education choice mechanisms, such as education savings accounts, vouchers and tax-credit scholarship programs, can help more families to opt out of their assigned district school and select other education options that may otherwise be financially out-of-reach.

New online learning programs will also likely sprout during and after this pandemic, as parents and students become more at ease with, and supportive of, virtual education. One virtual school startup, Sora Schools, is already seeing more interest in its nascent, project-based program that serves high schoolers across the country. “We’ve actually been growing a lot in the last couple of months,” says cofounder Indra Sofian. “Recently we’ve had many conversations with parents who are not prepared to fully homeschool their children and parents who were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their students’ schooling in the fall. We’re currently projecting to enroll at least 50 students based on our current growth rate by the fall.” As many investors shift their portfolios toward edtech startups during the pandemic, it is likely that online education options and virtual learning tools will continue to expand in the coming months.

Homeschooling

Even though pandemic homeschooling is nothing like the real thing, the finding that parents have a more favorable impression of homeschooling now than before is a strong signal that at least some of them will choose the homeschooling option even when schools reopen. A recent informal survey conducted by Corey DeAngelis of the Reason Foundation found that 15 percent of parents say they will choose homeschooling when schools reopen. If these parents have warmed up to homeschooling under these difficult social distancing circumstances, just wait until they can actually leave the house, go to the library and

museums, gather with friends, take community classes and so on.

Images have started to appear of what back-to-school looks like in some countries as children return to school. Some parents might be turned off by the idea of their children wearing masks and face shields all day, as well as learning in spread out classrooms, and may choose homeschooling, at least until the pandemic ends. With more parents likely to continue teleworking post-pandemic, job flexibility may also allow for more learning flexibility, as parents discover that they don't have to be the ones teaching their homeschooled children but rather connecting them to both in-person and online tutors, mentors, classes and other resources.

COVID-19 has disrupted much of the way we live and learn, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Forest schools, microschoools, online learning programs and homeschooling will likely become increasingly popular in the coming months, as parents search for other education options beyond their local school. While some private schools are shutting down as a result of the pandemic, unable to cope with the economic shock, this can be a great time for visionary entrepreneurs to create more nimble K-12 learning models that give parents and learners the high-quality, flexible and safe academic environment they want.