MEASURING IMPACT IN MICROSCHOOLS

DECEMBER 2025

Report of the National Microschooling Center's Measuring Impact Cohort

NATIONAL MICROSCHOOLING CENTER

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Executive Summary

This report represents a product of the National Microschooling Center's Measuring Impact Cohort convened during the 2025-2026 school year. In addition to regular work sessions and webinars over this period, the working group convened to deliberate its subject over a substantive retreat held January 31-February 2, 2025 at the Pahara Institute at Lone Rock in Colorado.

This working group included 30 accomplished leaders and founders of microschools in 13 states, listed in the appendix of this report.

- While public school performance frameworks generally prioritize reading and math proficiency rates as aligned with state standards, other outcomes such as nonacademic and academic growth are found to be at least as prominent in microschools' missions and models.

- Data used in measuring microschools' impact must be selected intentionally, with an understanding of its purpose. Actionable impact information is especially important.

- Among the many reasons parents choose microschools is their dislike for standardized testing. Observation-based reports, information from parent and student surveys and other methods of measuring impact which align with microschools' missions and models represent important indicators.

- In-depth examples of four microschools' model for measuring impact are included: Nevada School of Inquiry (NV), Curious and Kind Education (FL), Micah's Mission School (MS) and Integrative Learning Academy (AZ.)

Details follow.

Measuring Education Impact

Today's microschooling movement is about creating options, innovative small learning environments, where children can thrive in ways they had not in their prior schooling settings. How can their impact best be measured in ways that matter most to their most important stakeholders?

Douglas W. Hubbard offers the definition of measurement in his landmark 2014 book, *How to Measure Anything*, as "A quantitatively expressed reduction of uncertainty based on one or more observations."

Measurement has assumed a prominent role in American primary and secondary education, particularly over the era since the implementation of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The particular systems of measurement associated with this trend, however, are distinctly limited in nature and shown to be subject to periodic meddling by public officials.

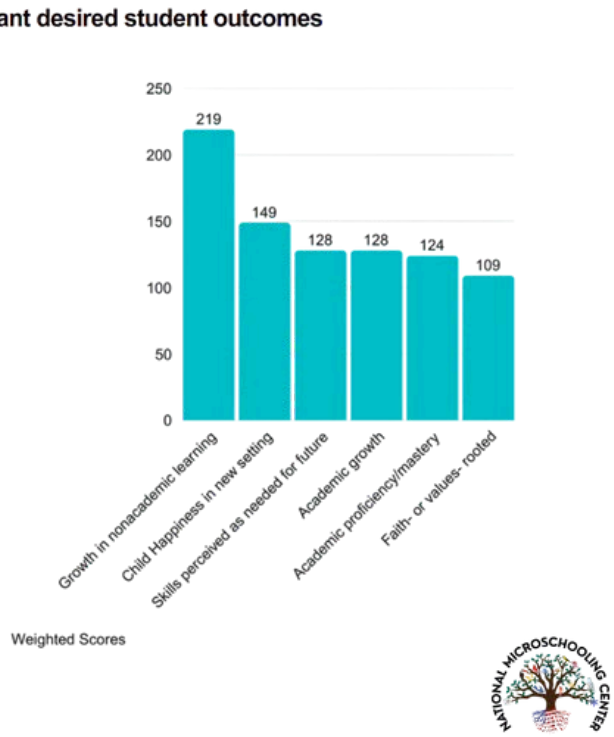
In fact, measuring impact related to effectiveness in teaching and learning can be complex business indeed. Education researcher John Hattie identified more than 250 factors related to student achievement outcomes in his *Visible Learning* research, to mention one renowned illustration of this complexity.

As education is generally governed in the United States at the state level, official systems of measuring effectiveness in public schools vary from state to state. They have marked similarities, however, in that they are generally focused on student proficiency in reading and math, as measured by the annual administration of a standardized assessment linked with state standards for grade-level content and mastery.

To what extent should these established systems for measuring impact influence how this work is conducted in microschools? More important, how should microschools, a sector which has generally evolved as nontraditional learning environments operating outside of established education systems, proceed in measuring their impact usefully in ways that their primary stakeholders will find the greatest value in?

Measuring Education Impact

Figure 1.



From: 2025 American Microschools Sector Analysis, by National Microschooling Center, p. 27

A weighted survey of microschool founders nationally reported growth in nonacademic learning to be their most important desired student outcome, followed by children's happiness in their current setting. These were followed by their strength in skills perceived as needed for future success and academic growth (tied), with academic proficiency/mastery in close succession. Faith-rooted or value-rooted outcomes rounded out the top six desired outcomes.

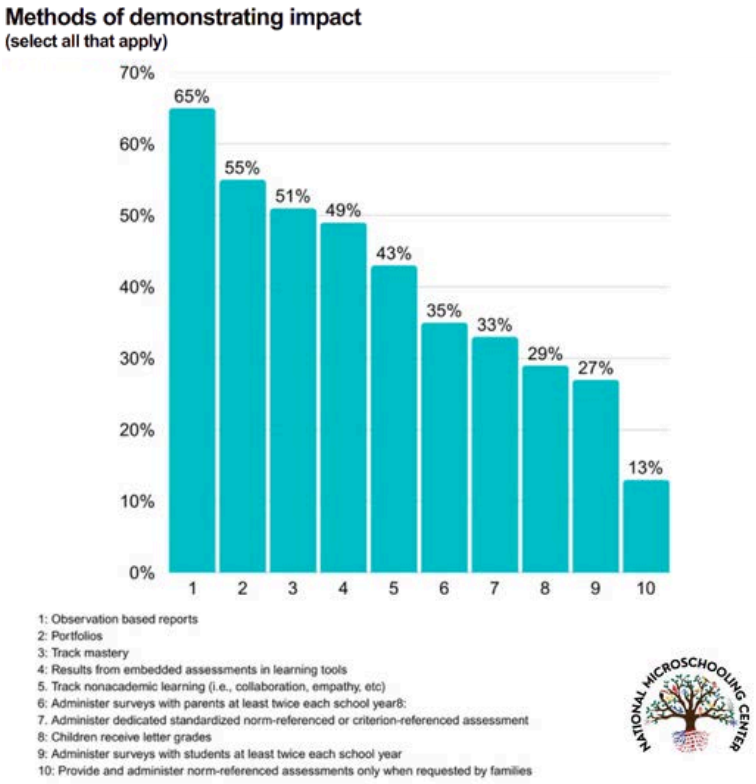
It should come as little surprise that microschool founders prioritize growth gains over proficiency. More than half (54 percent) of microschool founders are currently or formerly licensed public school educators or administrators, so their work is

informed by substantive professional experience. Microschooling as a movement seeks to serve children who are not thriving to the extent their families believe they could be.

This means that growth of individual children over time, including both academic, and nonacademic growth, are founders' primary emphasis, rather than the snapshot measures of proficiency at their grade level as defined by their state's public school performance framework. That children's happiness in their schooling environment emerges as a top founder priority will come as little surprise to anyone who has spent much time in today's microschools.

Methods of Demonstrating Academic Impact

Figure 2.



From: 2025 American Microschools Sector Analysis, by National Microschooling Center, p. 26

Leaders are mindful that there are many different reasons why a family might choose a microschool for their child, and that the measures of impact they choose to inform their most essential stakeholders must align with these reasons, and with the mission and model of their microschool.

The same survey asked founders to identify the methods of demonstrating impact utilized in their microschools, selecting all that apply. Observation-based reports were the most prevalent, used at 65 percent of microschools surveyed, followed by portfolios at 55 percent. These were followed by tracking mastery in different ways, 51 percent, and the use of embedded assessments in learning tools, 49 percent. Tracking nonacademic learning, administering surveys with parents at least twice each school year followed.

Dedicated norm-referenced or criterion-referenced assessments are used regularly by one-third of microschools, while only 29 percent give students regular letter grades.

Student surveys are administered at least twice each school year in 27 percent of microschools, while 13 percent administer norm-referenced assessments at families' request.

Given that children's growth in nonacademic learning ranked as the highest desired outcome of microschool founders, it is certainly worth noting that only 43 percent of them reported systematically tracking and demonstrating its impact.

Research published in 2024 by the National Microschooling Center found that among microschools operating in those states with Education Savings Accounts where microschools are able to participate as eligible providers, 49 percent report regularly administering norm-referenced or criterion-referenced assessments to track students' academic progress. This was significantly higher than the 33 percent of microschools overall ["Microschool Trends in ESA States," September 2024, National Microschooling Center]

Since that research, other states have implemented similar programs. Texas, for instance, is moving to implement its Texas Education Freedom Accounts program for the 2026-27 school year, which includes a program requirement that all

participating schools administer a nationally norm-norm-referenced assessment annually.

Social and Emotional Learning Measures in Microschools

As described earlier, microschool founders have consistently identified growth in nonacademic learning as among their highest priorities for student outcomes. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) often represents a major element of this growth.

As defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, SEL is, “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”

Assessing SEL competencies and growth in microschools can support a number of essential goals. “As with all learning learning processes,” note RAND Corporation researchers in their important 2018 report, Choosing and Using SEL Competency Assessments: What Schools and Districts Need to Know. “From PreK to adulthood, people’s brains are continually continually changing as their thought processes become increasingly complex and their cognitive abilities more sophisticated. Thus children, adolescents and adults vary over time in how they both learn and manifest SEL Competencies.”

Jonathan Schweig, one of this report’s authors, elaborates in adding, “SEL assessment provides a perspective on aspects of youth development that academic data alone can’t reveal. When educators measure SEL, they’re affirming that relationships, belonging, and self awareness matter just as much as reading and math.”

As many microschools, including several discussed in this report, identify elements of nonacademic growth in their mission statements, the assessment of elements of social and emotional growth offers a clear affirmation of the prominence of this commitment.

Character Education

Integration of character education can also represent a valuable aspect to the microschooling experience. For microschool educators, effective methods for assessing character development, and practical tools for measuring impact add important value.

Character development is often about growth. It is optimal for effective character education to be done in partnership with families when and where possible.

Because every individual student has individual outcomes relating to character education, logic models can be especially helpful aligning programming to a microschool’s mission, and also offer the perspective of “North Star” goals for outputs and activities. Measurements aligned with microschools’ logic models and goals can represent important impacts.

Examples of Measuring Impact Models in Microschools

Nevada School of Inquiry in Las Vegas, Nevada notes that academic growth is at the heart of its mission. The microschool middle school utilizes “a teaching style that focuses on students seeking answers through experiences rather than being fed information.” Its program relies on IXL Diagnostic English Language Arts and math administered at intervals throughout the school year.

“Over the course of the [2024-25] school year, NVSI students showed an average of two years of growth in both subject areas – a clear indicator that our instructional strategies and supports are accelerating learning well beyond expected annual gains,” observed co-founder Eric Threeton.

The microschool also utilizes a consistent, standards-based grading rubric on a 0-4 scale to

evaluate individual classroom assignments. This rubric, “allows us to provide clear, actionable feedback with grade-level expectations and learning targets,” Threeton explains. “It also empowers students to track their own progress and reflect on their learning journey.”

While these tools are essential to NVSI’s approach to measuring impact, they do not tell the complete story. Co-founders Eric and Christina Threeton explain, “Students overwhelmingly reported that, compared to their previous schools, NVSI offers a more enriching and engaging educational experience. Specifically, students responding to the most recent end-of-year survey agreed that at NVSI they:

- Feel **more challenged** academically
- Are encouraged to **explore personal interests**
- Work on **real-world problems**
- Have regular **learning opportunities beyond the classroom**
- Are given chances to **take on leadership roles**
- Set and monitor **personal and academic goals**
- Are **respected as individuals**
- Experience **integrated subjects** that make learning more meaningful
- Feel **comfortable collaborating** with classmates
- Are **more engaged and motivated to learn**
- Are **asking more questions** and **solving problems independently**
- Are **encouraged to think critically** and share their voice
- Learn in a **comfortable, supportive, and safe environment**

Curious and Kind Education in Sarasota, Florida, is a microschool whose mission is, “Encouraging self-directed learning blended with Forest School principles.

Curious and Kind’s founder Justine Wilson explained, “What has guided me most in this work isa deep respect for children and their capacity to thrive when given autonomy, a place to experience belonging and care. The Curious and Kind approach is rooted in being emotionally regulated adults, building community through empathy, co-regulation, and shared humanity, which I see reflected in the impact report. My focus has been on creating spaces where children, families, and educators grow together with intention and joy!”

Results reported on Curious and Kind’s most recent impact report included the following mean average growth data as reported by 45 Forest School/Agile Learning Center students, ages 5-12, on self-assessments from fall 2024 to spring 2025, using a 5 point scale where 1 represented the lowest score and 5 the highest) :

- Emotional Regulation grew from an average score of 3.2 to 3.8 over this period.
- Emotional Literacy increased from an average score of 3.3 to 3.9.
- Respect for Differences increased from an average score of 3.5 to 4.1.

The microschool’s 10 students from the Curious and Kind Teen Program (ages 13-16) were given a self assessment in the Fall and again in the Spring. “All questions indicated growth which suggest major improvements in emotional expression, self-advocacy, and sense of belonging, all key indicators of a supportive learning environment,” according to the impact report.

Meanwhile, results from a survey of 44 participants in a parent survey administered in March included the following, also from a five-point scale:

- 83% reported being “Extremely Satisfied” with their child’s experience, with 17% reporting being “Moderately Satisfied.”
- 83% reported being “Extremely Satisfied” with parent communication at Curious and Kind, while 13% reported being “Moderately Satisfied.,” and 3 percent reported “Neutral.”

Micah’s Mission School in Vicksburg, Mississippi describes itself as a hybrid learning and resource center dedicated to supporting its students spiritual,

emotional, intellectual and physical health. Its approach is rooted in an, “Educational Mission that provides hope while focusing on the whole-child in a Hybrid Learning and Resource Center with a unique corporate microschool faith-based model for K-12 educationally at-risk students through real-world project-based learning, online independent learning, daily living learning, pre-work skills learning, character development and leadership.”

Currently, 83% of Micah’s Mission School’s students are neurodivergent, with 76% of these on the Autism Spectrum, and 17% have been referred from the youth court system.

The microschool measures its impact in reference to overall increases in student mastery and student social change, as defined and reported by the school for a positive impact on school climate. Elements of these impacts tracked by the school in its annual impact report include the following for 2024:

<u>K-12 Overall Growth</u>

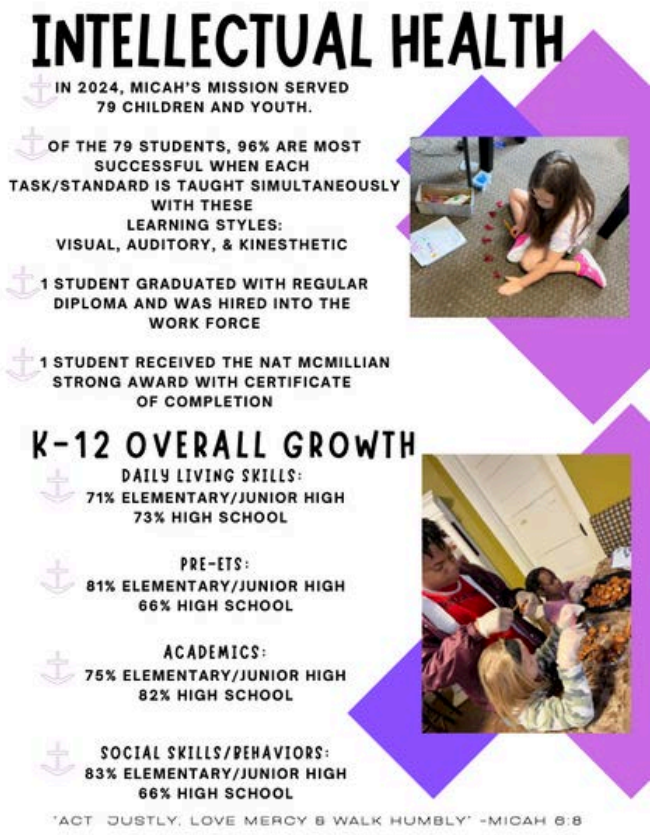
Daily Living Skills, practiced through various skills for K-12 students that include such daily activities as sweeping, mopping, cleaning dishes, tables, cabinets, etc.:
71% elementary/junior high
73% high school

Pre-ETS, notably pre-work skills that include self-advocacy, work-based learning experiences, workplace readiness, job exploration as well as exploration of postsecondary opportunities:
81% elementary /junior high
66% high school

Academics, including English Language Arts, math, science, social studies and electives:
75% elementary/junior high
82% high school

Social Skills/Behaviors, including collaborative skills and teamwork, coping skills, character development, leadership skills, and conflict resolution skills:
83% elementary/junior high
66% high school

Figure 3. Micah’s Mission School 2024 Impact Report



From: 2024 Impact Report, by Micah;s Mission School, Inc. Hybrid Learning & Resource Center, p. 9

Integrative Learning Academy in Peoria, Arizona is, “a Christ-centered, K-8 private micro learning center fostering diverse thinking, inclusion, autonomy, and engagement.” Typically, two-thirds of students are identified as neurodivergent.

The microschool measures impact in different ways, including administering the i-Ready benchmark test to students three times during the school year to measure growth in reading and math. The school’s director notes that, when needed, pencil and paper tests are administered in addition to computer-based tests.

During the 2024-25 school year, 20 students participated in the i-Ready reading assessment. The median percent progress toward Typical

Growth, defined by the assessment provider as, “the average annual growth for a student in their grade and baseline placement level,” was 198 percent. For math, the median percent progress toward typical growth was 146 percent.

Continual monitoring of student progress is essential to the microschool’s approach to ensuring the best possible instruction, explains Rachel Frevert, Integrative Learning Academy’s director and lead teacher. This, “allows us as teachers to group them accordingly when teaching, and it also allows us to ensure that we are providing them with the proper reading materials. And unlike public schools, we are able to monitor their growth with multiple different kinds of benchmark assessments and progress monitoring. So we get a more robust and in-depth picture of where they’re at.”

Lone Rock Measuring Impact Retreat February, 2025: Summary of Deliberative Sessions

The National Microschooling Center’s Measuring Impact cohort convened for a dedicated offsite working group retreat to consider these and related topics January 31-February 2, 2025 in Colorado. The working group was comprised of some two dozen accomplished microschool founders (listed in the appendix to this report). What follows is a summary of those proceedings.

The retreat’s deliberative sessions were organized around the following six core questions:
1. What are the necessary elements of measuring impact in microschools?
2. What should microschools’ impact measures not be?
3. How should microschools view pressures of convenience of comparison for research vs what’s important to the families they serve?
4. How to react responsibly when impact results aren’t what was hoped for?
5. How can you use these results from your impact to benefit the good of the movement?
6. What should microschool leaders be cautious of in this work?

Data used in measuring microschools’ impact must be selected intentionally, with an understanding of its purpose, and what the microschool might do with the information.

Actionable impact data is especially important, especially when it can be acted on in timely fashion, to guide instruction and interventions.

With so many founders coming to microschooling from traditional education classroom experience, many have experience using actionable student data in these ways. But they often gained this experience as part of a team, perhaps with the help of dedicated data support staff.

“Know what you want to measure, and how it’s interconnected. No data sits in isolation,” observed one experienced founder.

Data demonstrating negative impact is important for multiple reasons. It can be informative to inform work with individual students, so that intervention strategies can be adjusted appropriately. Impact data is also essential in driving the culture of continuous improvement most microschools strive to maintain. Data illuminating negative impact is important to consider in driving program improvements.

“When it’s not what you want, it’s still what you want because you can learn from it,” explained one founder. “These results are a tool, instead of an endpoint.”

Many microschools, in agreement with the families who choose them, opt to not rely on, or in some cases even to include, standardized test data from norm-referenced or criterion- referenced assessment. “Microschools are not mainstream,” one founder observed. “Families are coming because they are unhappy. How do we solve the

problems these parents bring us, and how do we measure that?"

"Parents came to us because they didn't like testing," another added. "Standardized testing can be useful, but many students have learned helplessness from testing, and don't see the benefits.

Other kinds of data show more than standardized test scores do, and many in the microschooling movement find these crucial to the microschool experience. It is important for microschool educators to remain vigilant to potential for overreaction to particular data points.

Dr. Jill Brown presents on Matching Reading Data to Intervention

From: National Microschooling Center's Lone Rock Measuring Impact Retreat, February 2025

With many microschools serving twenty children or fewer, often in multiage classrooms, established norms for protecting privacy in reporting impact looms as a challenge across the microschooling sector.

The importance of building and maintaining informed and active partnerships with parents is essential for microschools. Microschool leaders often observe that many families are not used to being welcomed to play active roles in their children's learning trajectories. "Creating a safe space for families to be involved," is essential, one leader observed.

Another emphasized the importance of, "communicating clearly with families to allow them to support you."

The working group registered strong views on what impact measures for microschools should not be.

"Impact measures can't contain shame," declared one founder with educator and administrator across different sectors of education. Data walls are common features of public and public charter school classrooms, often visually depicting each child's progress advancing through units of digital curricular content. While the intent of these is to encourage progress and motivate individual students, those making less progress at any particular time may be exposed to feelings of shame, exacerbated by the prominent placement and number of brightly-colored dots in a row alongside each child's name.

The group also observed what research from the broader schools of choice experience has documented – that a student's academic growth gains are often smaller in their first year in a new school setting. This can be especially true for students coming to microschools for the first time, leaving traditional schooling settings.

The "productive struggle" many new microschool students experience is related to an active involvement in daily decisionmaking inherent to many microschool models. Of these, many leaders, especially those who subscribe to self-directed learning approaches, encourage parents to let children "find their own way," even if this process takes time. For microschools whose education models include such expectations, impact data will likely appear to show flatter academic growth in the early weeks or months of

their trajectory.

On the other hand, the experienced microschool leaders in the group described observing immediate increases in kinds of nonacademic growth, such as decreased anxiety attacks and parents reporting an increase in children wanting to come to school, that they see as as-yet-unmeasured impacts.

Better Dashboard Tools Needed

The working group identified one important area of need for microschool leaders – dashboard tools which allow them to track student progress with ease of visibility across different subjects and mastery elements. Such tools should be adaptive, measure progress, allow for a variety of ways to allow assessment, include an option for observation based reporting, and allow for (and guide when needed) teachers to create their own rubrics.

“Microschools don’t want to pare down their innovative teaching and learning with a tool that is already available and not made for them,” one leader observed.

Essential parameters for such tools’ usefulness for microschools include affordability within the limited budgets microschools operate within, and practical limitations for training and setup time required for implementation.

Note: The National Microschooling Center wishes to express its gratitude to a number of experts whose generous time and involvement with this work contributed to building understanding of our team and members in important ways. In particular, we would like to thank Professor Daniel Hamlin, Aaron Schwindt, Ph.D., Head of Strategy and Impact at 4.0 and Jonathan Schweig, Ph.D., Senior Social Scientist at the RAND Corporation.

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Appendix

National Microschooling Center Measuring Impact Cohort Members

Gianna Banashak, Wonder Academy NWI, Crown Point, Indiana
Darla Baquedano, Spark Community Schools, Phoenix, Arizona
Jessica Benjamin, Arrows Learning Academy, Indianapolis, Indiana
Tiffany Blassingame, The Ferguson School, Decatur, Georgia
Dr. Jill Brown, Columbia Academy for Learning and Enrichment, Columbia, Missouri
Danette Buckley, Dream Tech Academy, Petersburg, Virginia
Cassie Crotinger, Arise Microschool, Topeka, Kansas
Mary Jo Fairhead, Onward Learning, Martin, South Dakota
Dr. Erin Flynn, Hedge School Cooperative, Dripping Springs, Texas
Rachel Frevert, Integrative Learning Academy, Peoria, Arizona
Kyle Gamba, La Luz Education, Denver, Colorado
Ar'Jillian Gilmer, The Foundation Christian Microschool, Little Rock, Arkansas
Mercedes Grant, Path of Life Learning, Yorktown, Virginia
Madeline Gregory, Soar Academy, Augusta, Georgia
Jill Haskins, Kainos Microschool, Fort Wayne, Indiana
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Tonya Kipe, Kipe Academy, Winter Haven, Florida
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The National Microschooling Center is a nonprofit resource hub and movement-builder committed to advancing the growth, health and evolution of the microschooling movement to live up to its fullest potential.