

FORBES

Rising Demand For Learner-Driven Education Spurs Acton Academy Growth

Kerry McDonald

Contributor

I write about innovative K-12 learning models.

Follow

Dec 4, 2021, 10:10am EST



Demand for learner-driven education is growing.

GETTY

When Jessica Gregory and her husband moved from the Washington, D.C. area in 2020 to a suburban community north of Boston, they expected to find a school for their children that was similar in quality to the one they left behind. They were disappointed to discover that classroom and behavioral management consumed much of the school day, and a rigid curriculum stifled their children’s curiosity and creativity.

“Like so many other families across the country, when the pandemic brought public schooling onto my kitchen table, I was floored,” she told me. “We became the unintended participants in the daily grind of standardized learning plans, un-engaging lessons and

burnt out educators – conversations that, until the pandemic, were abstract for many adults,” she said.

Determined to provide her children with a learning environment that nurtures their talents and cultivates their individuality, this fall Gregory launched [The Wilder School](#), a microschool that is part of the booming [Acton Academy](#) network. Founded in Austin in 2010 by Laura and Jeff Sandefer, Acton Academy now has more than 250 affiliate schools in 31 states and 25 countries. Each Acton affiliate is founded by entrepreneurial parents like Gregory for whom the network’s philosophy of highly personalized, self-paced, learner-driven education resonates. Since its inception, Acton Academy has received over 15,000 applications from parents who desire to launch an affiliate school.

For Gregory, the chance to build a school from scratch that connects to a vision she believes in was enticing. “Acton offers a unique education model which complements individualized learning plans with small group, collaborative projects,” she told me. “When I found it, I was intrigued. Acton then takes this a step further, implementing the best aspects of the world’s leading learning models in an intimate, community-centered approach that feels like a natural extension of home life. I knew this was the right model for our family because it supports whole-child development, valuing equally the real-world application of leadership and academic skills,” she said.

On the day I visited The Wilder School, a bright, colorful and welcoming classroom in a standalone, home-like building behind the church from which Gregory rents the space, I got a glimpse of how a day at an Acton Academy operates. In the morning, learners of different ages are dropped off and have some free time to prepare for the day. Then, they gather together to set and review daily and weekly learning goals. These goals fall within the broad academic categories of reading, writing and mathematics, but the children, called “heroes” at Acton, decide how and what those goals entail, with help from their instructors, or “guides.”

For Gregory’s two children, ages seven and nine, who are the initial students in The Wilder School, math goals involve completing several units each week using Khan Academy, the free, online learning platform that is used in many schools and homeschools across the country. Reading goals are accomplished using Lexia, a literacy learning software, while writing skills are developed using Night Zookeeper, a playful, game-based platform that makes writing fun and engaging. While these are the learning tools Gregory’s children currently use to meet their weekly goals, children at Acton are free to set personalized learning goals using the tools or resources that work best for them.

After a morning of self-paced, learner-directed academic work, the children take a long lunch break and spend ample time outside before reconvening for collaborative, project-based work in the afternoon. At The Wilder School, that work currently involves participating in an interactive lesson on colonial America, as well as developing a sales pitch for which type of classroom pet to adopt.

At just over \$12,000 in annual tuition, The Wilder School, like most Acton Academy affiliates, is a fraction of the cost of other local independent private schools. Gregory has ambitious plans for the growth of The Wilder School in the coming months and years, including expanding her classroom space and introducing early childhood and middle school programs. Her optimism is well-placed, as Acton Academy programs across the country have seen extraordinary growth in recent years, a trend that has only accelerated during the pandemic response.

At [Acton Academy Placer](#), outside of Sacramento, founder Matt Beaudreau says the growth in his programs has been breathtaking. “We can’t build schools fast enough,” he told me, adding that he is already outgrowing the buildings in his three locations which currently serve more than 300 learners, ages four to 18. Beaudreau expects this number to nearly double over the next year, and with full-time annual tuition around \$10,000, Acton Placer is more accessible than other area private schools. Some of Acton Placer’s continued growth is due to parents seeking schooling alternatives after nearly two years of frustration with closed schools and ongoing coronavirus policies.

As a private membership association that operates as a learning resource center, Acton Placer was unaffected by school closures and related pandemic policies. Mask-wearing has always been optional for all community members, with individual decision-making a key tenet of Acton Placer’s culture. Each Acton Academy affiliate is free to create its own structure, school culture and procedures, while staying true to the overall Acton educational philosophy. Indeed, decentralization of authority and an elevation of the individual is at the root of Acton Academy’s broader mission. The network was named after Lord Acton, who wrote in 1887: “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

It’s precisely this decentralization of power and emphasis on self-directed learning and goal-setting that led Heidi Ross to enroll her 11-year-old son in an Acton Academy in [San Diego](#). A teacher and literacy specialist for 20 years in both public and private schools, Ross values the freedom and flexibility of the Acton model. “He’s learning a lot about responsibility, accountability, speaking up with kindness and respect,” she told me. “He’s also met some really great challenges and been successful in increasing math and

reading—the core skills they have at Acton. He sees his progress which really excites him, and has good friendships developing,” she added.

Acton Academy affiliates are benefiting from the surge in interest in [microschools](#) that began several years ago and has increased since the onset of the pandemic. They are also tapping in to growing demand by parents for private schooling options. According to a recent [analysis](#) by the Cato Institute’s Neal McCluskey, private schools have seen enrollment gains during the coronavirus response.

The Wilder School’s Gregory thinks that the growing interest in private education stems from remote learning during school shutdowns that gave parents a close-up look at what their children were learning. “Through this, they have begun to question why school remains so similar to their own experience and how this format will prepare their children for jobs that have yet to be created, spurring droves of families to depart the public school system in search of more effective, flexible alternatives,” she said.

Gregory added: “If anything positive came out of it, the pandemic has raised our collective awareness of education alternatives and the expectation families have for their children.”

Follow me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#). Check out my [website](#).

Kerry McDonald