

Entrepreneur's worldwide micro-school network encourages 'heroes' to pursue self-directed learning

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Arts Thereafter Christian in St. Cloud, Florida, is one of 11 Acton affiliates in the state. The school uses the latest technology in a self-paced learning environment designed to foster responsibility, goal-setting, and teamwork.

Editor's note: You can read more about Jeff Sandefer's success story [here](#).

Every comic book superhero has an origin story – a narrative that informs his or her identity and motivation.

Orphaned science whiz Peter Parker became Spider-Man after being bitten by a radioactive spider. Russian assassin Natasha Romanoff, known as the Black Widow, defected to the United States and joined the Avengers.

Jeff Sandefer sold junk.

Though not of comic book fame, the Austin, Texas, billionaire entrepreneur is a real-world marvel with an equally fascinating origin story. As a kid, he ridded neighbors of their unwanted household items and held garage sales.



Jeff Sandefer

At 16, he formed his first company and increased productivity for his father's oil company by hiring high school football coaches who were idle during the summer to take over the duties of hourly crews. By age 30, he had made a half-billion dollars developing oil wells that large companies rejected because they were too small.

Since 2009, Sandefer, who attended public schools in the small Texas town of Abilene, has been disrupting K-12 education.

The co-founder of [Acton Academy](#), a worldwide network of 270 micro-schools that emphasize self-directed learning, Sandefer recalls the exact moment he and his wife, Laura, decided to turn education upside down.

Their two sons, Sam and Charlie, were aging out of their Montessori school in Austin. They wanted them to continue their education in the best possible environment. Sandefer asked an educator

considered the best at a top tier school using a historically traditional model if he should enroll the boys there.

The teacher's response stunned him.

“As soon as possible,” the teacher said, adding that once they'd been in an environment with the freedom of a Montessori school, they would “hate sitting at a desk and being talked at all day.”

Sandfer tried to picture his two curious, lively, sons and blurted out, “I don't blame them.” The teacher stared at the floor so long that Sandfer was worried he had offended him.

“When he looked up, he had tears in his eyes, and said ‘I don't either,’” said Sandfer, who recounts the conversation in speeches including a [2011 TEDx Talk](#).

“Here's someone known as the very best teacher, and he himself is telling me don't send your boys (to his school.) It was a very clear message, don't send them here because it will cost them their freedom. Charlie and Sam were so beautiful. It was really more me thinking of what natural learners they were. When he said that, it broke my heart.”

Sandfer talked the situation over with his wife, and the idea to start their own school was born.

Laura Sandfer, a former educator at the Oklahoma Arts Institute, set up the first Acton Academy in 2009 in a small, rented house in Austin with their sons and five other neighborhood kids using a stack of books and a few online resources.

The plan was to start a local school, not a worldwide network. But one family moved to California and wanted to take Acton with it, while a friend from Guatemala saw Acton during a visit and asked to start an affiliate. Things just took off naturally from there. Today, Acton refers to its network as “one-room schoolhouses for the 21st century.”

The Sandfers drew inspiration from several sources: the [Montessori method](#) of self-directed learning, the [Socratic method](#) of responding to questions with questions to inspire independent problem solving, and “just open curiosity” that led to more formal project-based learning.

The theme Sandfer says was most important was the concept that every student is “on a hero's journey.”

“You’re on this earth for a special mission. That came out of a lot of the work I’d done at the graduate level,” said Sandefer, who also founded [Acton School of Business](#). “We began to understand the power of story to help people shape their lives.”

Reaching the end of the story is important, Sandefer said. But what’s more important is the journey one takes to get there, and the maturation that occurs during the quest.

The Acton philosophy holds that every student is a hero, and that “everyone is a genius.”

“That doesn’t mean everyone has a 180 I.Q.,” Sandefer explained, “but that everyone has something they are great at.” He said one of Acton’s goals is to help each student find it and be the best at it they can be.

Sandefer compares the schools’ guiding principles to those of four disparate groups: Google (independent discovery); gaming (interactive learning); Alcoholics Anonymous (accountability); and the Boy Scouts (mastery-based learning in the form of merit badges).

In place of teachers, Acton employs “guides,” trained adults whose purpose is to create an environment for independent learning. Rather than responding to students’ questions with declarative sentences, guides ask students questions of their own to inspire thought and encourage students to find their own answers.

Owners and guides belong to online groups so they can share what works and what does not. All 270 affiliate schools are required to adhere to standards that surpass those of local traditional schools.

Classrooms are referred to as studios where self-directed and self-paced learning takes place. Students set goals and hold each other accountable. Age groups often are mixed.

“It’s like ‘Lord of the Flies’ some days, Sandefer said. “The society crumbles, and they have to rebuild it.”

Students can lose several weeks of progress in the process, but Sandifer believes great lessons come in the rebuilding. Setbacks are considered a source of growth rather than shame.

Acton students create portfolios of their work to show proof of mastery. They participate in exhibitions to show what they know, earning competency badges when they master a subject rather than receiving a grade. There are no tests, “black marks that stay on your record,” as Sandefer describes it.

For some students, the process takes longer, but that's okay.

“Failure doesn't mean ‘no,’” he said. “It means ‘not yet.’”

It's not surprising that the Acton Academy network's popularity has steadily increased, with more families expressing interest during the pandemic. Though 21 states enacted or expanded education choice last year and several legislatures are considering bills this year that include flexible education savings account, Sandefer chooses to stay out of legislative processes.

However, he admits that ESAs and other measures that increase choices are beneficial.

“Anything that results in more choices is a great thing,” he said.

He also believes that education should be accessible and affordable, pointing to Acton's model, which relies more on students learning independently and from each other than on paid adult staff.

Though the model helps keep tuition low, that's not the reason for using it, Sandefer said. “We don't do it because it costs less; we do it because it works better.”

In Florida, where there are 11 Acton affiliates, including two schools that will open in August, annual tuition ranges from \$6,500 to \$13,000 a year and can be paid in monthly installments. Schools such as [Arts Thereafter Christian](#) in St. Cloud, Florida, participate in state scholarship programs administered by Step Up For Students, which hosts this blog, to assist families.

“Florida has the right kind of mindset,” Sandifer said.

One would think that Sandefer's involvement with Acton Academy and its affiliates would keep him busy, but he has other projects that are thriving. One of them, the [Children's Business Fair](#), allows kid entrepreneurs to market and sell their own products. More than 50,000 children have participated in 1,000 fairs around the world, and at least 500 more fairs are planned for this year.

Another project, [Next Great Adventure](#), helps adults find greater meaning in their lives through six weeks of experiential challenges to help them find their unique career, community and mentorship opportunities.

Meanwhile, Acton Academy is going strong, attracting 20,000 applications since 2009.

Sandefer's two sons, who were 5 and 7 when the first Action Academy opened, are in college now. He looks forward to seeing what his future grandchildren's education will look like. In keeping with Acton Academy's model, he won't offer any advice.

"It'll be fun to see what they do," he said.

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