

PODS IN ACTION:

Black Mothers Forum

HOW THE BLACK MOTHERS FORUM CUSTOMIZED A MICROSCHOOL MODEL TO BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF ARIZONA'S BLACK FAMILIES

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Stories of the pandemic's impact on homeschooling and "podding" often focus on the predominantly higher-income White families, who use their privilege and resources to [hoard opportunities](#) for their children in times of crisis. Less often heard are the stories of Black and Latinx families, who invented educational solutions not just as a crutch to get through the crisis but also as an antidote to problems plaguing school systems long before COVID-19. The story of the Black Mothers Forum (BMF) in Arizona is one of these.

Founded by mothers long concerned about the safety and welfare of their Black children, BMF is an Arizona-based education advocacy group that responded to the COVID-19 crisis by launching two microschools for Black families in Phoenix, Arizona, in January 2021. BMF partnered with Prenda, a well-known microschool provider, but adapted their model to better meet the needs of Black families.

KEY LESSONS:

1

Microschools provided Black families with a safe and affirming space for their children during the pandemic that was explicitly designed to address shortcomings these families perceived in their past experiences with school systems.

2

How BMF adapted Prenda's microschool model to better accommodate Black families offers important lessons for education leaders working inside and outside of districts to design learning environments around the needs and desires of Black families.

3

Despite Arizona policies enabling tuition-free microschools, BMF had to raise money from other sources to pay for enhancements to the Prenda model, raising questions about financial sustainability.

The microschoools they created made students and their families feel safer, more affirmed, and more engaged than their prior school experiences, and they offer important lessons that could help school districts and other educational innovators become more inclusive and supportive spaces for the Black families they serve.

Microschools Long Appealed to BMF, but the Pandemic Quickened Plans to Launch Them

BMF is an education advocacy organization founded in 2016. BMF was created to address difficulties Black students in Arizona, boys experienced. As founder Janelle Wood described, “I felt called to develop a space for Black mothers to come together to talk about their pain, talk about their concerns, their fear, our frustrations, our disappointments, all of those things in a safe space where we can just be ourselves.” What began as a meeting of 40 Black mothers became an influential advocacy group whose members showed up at school board meetings and at local schools to fight back against the school-to-prison pipeline, racial bullying, and anti-Black curricula.

As their political work progressed, BMF’s leadership felt a need to educate Black students in a safe space while advocating for policy changes because—as BMF executive director Debora Colbert-Green expressed—Black students were being “retaliated against” in schools due to the group’s activism. The organization felt that students should have options other than traditional schools until the issues they raised in their advocacy were resolved. Further, BMF’s leadership indicated that implementing their own schooling model would serve as an opportunity to show school systems how to educate Black students. Wood explained the decision:

“We started looking for other modes of educational institutions and other ways to get our children educated while we’re working with these districts in trying to fix these [issues] but [while also ensuring] our children are safe and supported. [In] the suburb [we were] focusing on, no one seems to know what to do. So we were like, let’s show them better than we can tell them.”

BMF’s leadership looked at several alternative schooling models. One model that was appealing was homeschooling. However, homeschooling raised two concerns: (1) Black families often cannot afford to homeschool and (2) student socialization. As a result, microschoooling, where small groups of students are taught in intimate settings, became the leading option.

COVID-19 Creates a Window of Opportunity

While BMF’s interest in developing their own educational option for Black families predated the pandemic, the disruption created by COVID-19 accelerated their plans to start their microschoools as families sought new educational alternatives.

BMF decided to work with Prenda, an education company that operates microschoools where learning guides support small groups of students through a mix of self-paced, online curriculum and facilitated hands-on activities. Learning guides were hired as contractors by Prenda and worked with five to 10 students daily, Monday through Friday, in four-hour sessions. If a particular student needed additional time, Prenda would allow for an additional hour per day.

BMF launched two Prenda affiliated microschools, Nia and Crum in January of 2021. By May 2021, 13 students were enrolled across two schools: one that served students in grades K-2 and the other that served students in grades 3-8. Initially, families enrolled with Prenda's partner online charter school. BMF learned how to streamline the enrollment process by working directly with the charter partner, Sequoia, while continuing to utilize Prenda's learning platform.

BMF adapted Prenda's business model to meet the needs of their students by having two learning guides per class of 10 students, while adhering to state and local policy conditions.

Arizona's school-choice-friendly laws offer families three different avenues to access its microschools with public funding.

1. Students can enroll at Prenda through an online charter school that hires Prenda as a subcontractor. The online school operator takes a portion of the public funding allocated for these students and may assume responsibility for some services, such as special education. The remaining funding flows to Prenda, which hires learning guides and provides the curriculum.
2. Prenda can enter similar subcontracting arrangements with school districts.
3. Families can pay microschool tuition directly using education savings accounts, a form of school vouchers first enacted in Arizona and now available in eight other states.

Two learning guides supported each classroom, for a ratio of approximately one teacher to five students. Each learning guide was a Black mother with a master's degree in K-12 education or a teacher certification with diverse experiences.

BMF did not advertise the microschools. Instead, parents learned of the schools through personal networks and word of mouth. Most parents suggested that they enrolled their students in the program as an alternative to virtual school offerings from district or charter schools. However, several parents interviewed indicated that they looked for long-term solutions to address needs that had gone unmet before the pandemic. For example, one mother described her son's struggles in his previous school:

"It was . . . a school that was primarily White. He was the only Black child in school. And so, I knew . . . there was a misunderstanding culturally of what he needed. And so, I wanted to try him in this microschool, which was taught by Black mothers."

BMF Adapted the Microschool Structure to Work Better for Black Families

From its inception, BMF adapted Prenda's microschooling model to meet the needs of Black families.

Hosting Outside the Home

BMF decided that the typically home-based Prenda model would not work for their families, leading them to instead seek a separate facility for the microschools. One of the program leaders described the decision: "The problem is that many of our parents . . . don't have homes that would have space for [the schools]. So now what we're going to have to do is get funding to fund [space]." This decision required the organization to independently fundraise to support the costs of the space.

BMF did not stop there, however. Committed to making the microschool model work for their families, BMF invested in supplies to support the schools and provided school lunch. Transportation is also an issue and is something the organization aspires to provide in the future.

Hiring Black Mothers as Learning Guides

Through Prenda, the BMF microschools hired four learning guides as contractors to support learning across the two schools, all of whom were themselves Black mothers with a master's degree in K-12 education and/or teacher certification. While Prenda screens all learning guides, BMF founder Janelle Wood personally vetted each candidate before bringing them on board to support the microschools.

When asked to describe the most important characteristics for guides, a BMF leader put it simply: "Loving children. . . . If a child knows that you care about them, they'll be open and willing to learn. If they feel that they're safe, if they feel that the adult is there to protect them and not hurt them and want[s] them to learn, they'll want to learn."

Guides were offered six weeks of training before beginning work, though some came to the role with prior backgrounds and experiences in education. BMF learning guides met weekly to support peer problem solving.

Parents especially appreciated the models' inclusion of Black mothers as educators. As one stated, "Prenda has allowed us to really step into an education program, but to put our own twist on it as Black mothers, being the first teachers our children will ever have. . . . That's the best thing about it."

Adding a Second Learning Guide

The Prenda model calls for one learning guide per five to 10 students. However, BMF found that their students required enhanced behavioral support. "We have to have two [learning guides] because of the trauma," one BMF leader explained. That way, one guide could support a student who needed help calming down, while the other could continue to work with the remaining students.

Both leaders and the learning guides described the importance of "de-schooling," or learning how to be in a microschooling environment, which was a process. The second learning guide assisted in ensuring that the schools would remain a productive learning environment during the transition and would receive equal pay as primary learning guides under BMF's model.

Learning guides and parents alike pointed to the larger class sizes in traditional schools as a point of contrast and key benefit to the microschool model. As a learning guide described, "When you have so many kids in your classroom, it is really hard to focus on those one on ones, and the kids that you do focus on one on one [normally has] behavior problems or learning issues." A parent observed, "The smaller class sizes, they have a lot more aides. . . . Usually teachers don't have the capacity . . . to deal with any sort of high-needs children acting out in a classroom without having to implement retribution or special services."

Extending the Day

The traditional Prenda model has students attending school four hours a day, two-and-a-half hours shorter than a traditional school day. Feedback from families and guides spurred BMF to extend the learning day from four hours to five to six, with an extra hour per day for the Learning Guides to prepare for and wrap up their days for the 2021-22 school year. "Our kids need more time, time; the parents are saying they want more time. They're like, this four to

five hours a day is not going to work. We need six,” one BMF leader explained “So they want six hours a day, which is true. Our children really do need more time.”

One parent described how the shorter day required her to invest more effort into supplementing learning at home: “It really requires a parent, guardian to step up the game.”

Working within the constraints of the four-hour day required learning guides to get creative to support students who needed help to get caught up. As one shared, “We take at least a good 30 minutes to an hour, depending on the day, to do one-on-one instruction.”

Infusing Culturally Relevant Curricula

BMF also infused culturally relevant curricular material into Prenda’s standard curriculum during their school day. As one of the leaders explains,

“We talk about cultural things, which that wasn’t a part of the Prenda curriculum, because when we talk about history we talk about it using our culture and really showing them aspects of our culture. We’ve brought in, for example, Black firefighters, Black police officers, nurses, different things, different careers, so that they could see people who look like them in different [careers]”.

The curricular additions highlight the organization’s aspiration to create a learning environment explicitly for Black students.

Public Dollars Were Not Enough to Fund the Needed Adaptations, instead Requiring BMF to Turn to Fundraising

Most of these adjustments require BMF to fund them with philanthropic dollars. BMF makes these investments because they strive to meet the needs of students, parents, and learning guides, and feedback from families has indicated the importance of these adaptations. But they also underscore the need for sustainable funding sources that will allow them to provide students with the level of support they need.

The BMF Microschools Created More Affirming Learning Environments for Black Students and Families

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed that the microschoools created a more affirming space for Black students compared to their previous school experiences. One parent described her son’s experience:

“It’s been very positive. He’s been able to have a positive experience. He’s happy when I pick him up from school. He’s happy about his work while he’s in school. He’s proud of himself. He feels pride in how much he’s learning, how good he’s doing. He’s fostered great relationships with the other children. He’s learning a lot about himself. I think he’s feeling safer than before. He’s feeling seen and heard.”

Several factors seem to contribute to families’ positive experience with the schools.

Racial Representation

Black students make up 5 percent of the student population in Arizona. Multiple parents shared that their children were the only Black students in their previous schools. Having a space where all the educators and most peers are Black seems to protect students from experiencing racial discrimination and trauma in the school setting. One of the learning guides, whose son was also enrolled in the school, described her son’s experience:

“I know my son has made comments that he likes having a teacher that looks like him because it’s a different mindset and a different perspective. There were several occasions [at his previous school] that he did feel he was singled out because of the color of his skin. And he’s like, ‘I don’t feel like that anymore.’”

Or as a parent described, “It makes a huge difference to have Black teachers and Black kids around. And not be the only one, not be singled out for whatever you might do, like speak too loud or be too excited or jump around too much. And as [previously] the only Black child in a White school, that makes a huge difference compared to where he is now.”

A Relational Approach to Discipline

Instituting the second learning guide in each classroom allowed the microschoools to take a relational approach to discipline that most traditional schools do not. As one of the learning guides described, “The key element is creating an environment as a family where children can feel safe because if a child doesn’t feel safe . . . it’s hard to lead them through anything. . . . And so letting them be able feel this is a safe space . . . you can just be yourself to come in and let your light shine.”

This approach enabled the staff to help support students who had struggled in other settings. For instance, one Kindergarten student displayed intense behavioral issues at the beginning of school. The student’s mother was worried that he would be kicked out of the school, as he had already been suspended from two other schools. One of the learning guides described the mother’s initial reaction to the behavior issues:

“So then obviously with his mom, when there were issues in the beginning she was very frustrated and fearful that we were going to be the next people to kick him out. We reassured her, ‘No, that’s not what we’re doing. We’re here to help.’”

BMF’s leadership and the learning guides took a relational approach to discipline and worked with the family to help the student adjust. At the time of this study, the student had transitioned well into the environment. The mother of the student described how BMF’s approach to discipline was different from what she had experienced in the past:

“Just the leaders in the Black Mothers Forum weren’t willing to give up, right? They were not going to say, ‘Well, you need to be expelled.’ Or, ‘You need to be suspended.’ Or, ‘You need to find another school.’ Which is traditionally what happens in a lot of schools.”

The Black Mother’s Forum approach to discipline is one they have been advocating for in the traditional school system.

Another mother described the relief she experienced knowing her son was not attending his prior school, where he had been suspended multiple times: “Less stress. I don’t get phone calls every day. . . . [The microschoool] can handle him.”

Communication and Feedback with Parents

BMF’s leadership and staff were in constant communication with parents. The parents had a monthly meeting with their student’s learning guide. A weekly newsletter also went out to each parent on Friday. Further, each parent had the number of the BMF education coordinator and executive director and was encouraged to call at any time. Importantly, it was not just that BMF communicated with parents; they were responsive to parent’s concerns and requests. As one learning guide phrased it,

“So, we have had feedback from parents, just different things that they’ve noticed with their child that we can try to implement, and . . . thankfully this microschoool model gives us that freedom and flexibility that the parent does have a say in a choice in their child’s learning.”

Ultimately, the Affirming Environments Fostered by the Microschools Impacted both Students and Participating Families

Many parents described the challenges with their children's previous schools. Mothers of Black boys seemed to constantly deal with discipline issues and their sons being singled out. Parents expressed how negative school encounters placed an emotional toll on the family. Enrolling their children in the microschoools brought a sense of security from knowing that their child was in a learning environment where they were physically and emotionally safe. One parent described it as "the difference between a peaceful family and a stressed out family that's on survival mode."

Another observed, "I'm not having the stress of a frustrated and unhappy child. That means that we have a happier home life. And we relate better. I'm less stressed, I'm less triggered . . . because he's no longer having behavioral issues or feeling unseen or hurt or feeling unsafe."

One learning guide whose two children also attend the microschool described the shift in her children to becoming self-motivated learners, no longer viewing school as something on the "to-do" list. She attributed the change to an "environment of having unconditional support and feeling . . . included, safe, and just able to speak."

Lessons for Launching, Growing, and Sustaining Affirming, Community-Driven Learning Environments

Standing in stark contrast to BMF leaders' experiences with traditional schools, BMF's microschoools show that caring and affirming educational spaces for Black students are indeed possible. However, creating such spaces requires centering the needs and perspectives of Black communities and families. BMF's initiative shows Black mothers and Black women educators can lead in designing and maintaining safe and nurturing learning environments for Black students. As one participating mother described: "We can step into a situation such as educating our own kids, and we can do it in a way that does not take away from anyone else . . . [a way that] involves the entire community, and we can do it well."

The specific steps taken by the BMF to customize Prenda's microschool model and curriculum to meet the needs of Black families offer important lessons for families or school systems seeking to better meet the needs of all students, especially Black students. Modifications to the location and duration of Prenda's microschool model might be mirrored by other prospective microschool leaders. And other modifications (like infusing culturally relevant curriculum, hiring staff that represent marginalized demographic groups, providing additional staff to support behavioral patterns stemming from trauma, and habitually soliciting and responding to feedback from parents) reinforce best practices already within the purview of traditional schools—practices they should take up with renewed urgency following the pandemic.

But BMF raised private donations to fund these modifications, exposing hidden bias in the surrounding policy structure. In Arizona, Prenda microschoools are tuition-free because of the organization's charter school partnerships. While this policy structure makes it possible for microschoools to receive public funding, it is not equitable and means BMF will have to continue raising money year after year to sustain the level of support that families said they needed. Instead, policymakers and charter authorizers should take note of the specific ways the BMF had to adapt its model to work for its families and incorporate these modifications into their funding structures—for example, by ensuring that microschoools operating under the aegis of public schools can access public facilities.

The microschoools are not simply a COVID-19 solution for BMF. The organization received \$3.5 million in grant funding to open dozens more microschoools across Arizona for the 2021–22 school year. The forum’s leaders have had [regular engagements with Governor Doug Ducey](#) and other state policymakers and [received a grant from A for Arizona](#), an education reform group, to help design transportation solutions that will work for microschoool students.

Policymakers and others interested in education equity and better policies must consider how to provide sustainable funding for equitable, community-based efforts to improve education for Black students. Further, the fact that these microschoools arose from advocacy groups fighting for better educational opportunities before the pandemic suggests school-system leaders should consider other mechanisms to amplify the voices of Black families’ in education, regardless of the school they attend.



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