

## PODS IN ACTION:

# The Central Florida Urban League

A MICROSCHOOL MODEL DESIGNED TO UPLIFT BLACK COMMUNITIES

By Juli Kim and Sharon Keschull Barrett

Covid-19 hit central Florida's tourism industry hard—initially forcing it to a standstill—and left many families facing a new reality: supporting their children in their at-home learning while staying afloat economically. The Central Florida Urban League (CFUL), which focuses on combating the social, racial, and economic challenges that African American communities face, believed remote learning would exacerbate educational and economic gaps.

Recognizing both the need to stave off academic losses and the opportunity to implement a long-term option for achieving better academic results, CFUL opened Whitney M. Young Academy, a microschool designed to meet the individual needs of low-income, African American students.

## KEY LESSONS:

1

With partial funding coming through state tuition vouchers for low-income students to attend private schools, the CFUL microschool model aims to close the achievement gap by addressing students' individual learning needs in very small schools.

2

The CFUL microschool focuses on personalized learning and development, through an online learning platform that allows students to address individual academic needs and learning coaches who are trained to support both academic and social-emotional needs.

3

The two-generational approach includes job training for parents and caregivers, which aims to support entire families' access to economic prosperity.

## KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:  
FLORIDA

14

STUDENTS  
SERVED IN 2020-21

K-5

GRADES  
SERVED

1

NUMBER OF SITES IN 2021-22

10

TOTAL SITES PLANNED  
OVER THE 2022-23  
SCHOOL YEAR

## Education and economic mobility

CFUL is one of over 90 affiliates of the National Urban League, a leading civil rights organization founded in 1910 to combat the social, racial, and economic challenges faced by African American communities in the urban north. By territory, CFUL is the largest of the Florida affiliates, serving a seven-county region that includes the tourist destinations of Orlando, Kissimmee, and Daytona Beach; several universities (including the historically Black Bethune-Cookman University); and the Kennedy Space Center.

Despite its economic riches, Central Florida experiences uneven wealth across its communities. Due in part to low wages in the tourism sector, Greater Orlando ranks last in wages among the country's 50 largest metro areas. Glenton Gilzean, Jr., CFUL president and CEO, notes that according to the Orlando Economic Partnership, the average net worth for Black adults in Central Florida is less than \$18,000, versus more than \$215,000 for white adults. Gilzean blames the disparity in large part on a "subpar education model" in which generations of children in low-income Black communities have attended underperforming schools.

Gilzean would know, as he came to CFUL in 2015 with deep experience in education advocacy. After an early-career stint at the Florida Department of Education, he founded a nonprofit focused on providing after-school programs for disadvantaged youth. He then served on the Pinellas County School Board and worked for Step Up for Students, a nonprofit scholarship funding organization that helps administer state tuition vouchers to qualifying students to attend private schools.

Gilzean has prioritized educational equity for African American students. He credits his mother with helping him recognize the link between education and economic mobility: "As my mother would say, 'No one will hire you if you can't read.'"

When the pandemic forced the shift to virtual learning in March 2020, Gilzean anticipated African American families would suffer greater setbacks compared to others in the area when

low-paying service and tourism jobs were affected by shutdowns at amusement parks and other attractions.

“Then I started reading about how affluent families were forming pods . . . [and hiring teachers so they have] a very safe, controlled environment for their kids to continue to learn while mom and dad continue to work,” he said. “And I thought, ‘What about low-income minority families? Shouldn’t they also have that opportunity?’”

Gilzean had long contemplated school options that would help low-income African American children obtain an education that best fits their needs; the formation of pandemic learning pods accelerated his thinking. CFUL began its first microschool, the Whitney M. Young Academy (WMYA), in February 2021. The school was named for the civil rights leader and educator who directed the National Urban League from 1961–71.

## Aiming to lift up students and families

WMYA’s first students came from a small, struggling private school that allowed CFUL to pilot its microschool model with 14 of its students. WMYA uses curriculum provider Higher Ground Education, an online provider of Montessori education.

“In a typical classroom, one teacher has at least 20 kids,” Gilzean said. “One student may be reading below grade level, but that teacher can’t stop and help that kid catch up while everyone else is on pause. Further, every child learns differently and has unique needs, which may require a unique solution.”

Higher Ground Education customizes learning to meet each student’s individual needs, according to Gilzean. “With personalized learning, we should be able to help those students who are academically behind . . . be able to get up to the baseline where they need to be, without disrupting the [learning of others] in the school,” he said.

Each class, or pod, has two learning coaches, who help students move through the curriculum. They also lead tutoring and other opportunities to supplement students’ individualized learning. CFUL prioritizes hiring learning coaches who understand their students and their unique backgrounds.

Learning coaches must have bachelor’s degrees, though they are not required to have state teacher licenses. They identify each student’s needs, support them with behavior management, and address any family and social issues they face outside of school. WMYA makes every attempt to hire community members as learning coaches and to engage minority-owned vendors. Along with providing academic instruction and meals, WMYA focuses on student wellness, social-emotional well-being, and physical and creative activities.

WMYA offers parent education programs and family events, such as theater nights to help family members support their children’s learning.

“The road to ending generational poverty will not be simple, nor easy. Our approach is to use our concept of the three E’s: education, employment, and entrepreneurship as our roadmap,” Gilzean added.

## Using state scholarships for microschools

WCFUL’s microschool model may receive public funding in Florida because of the state’s school choice policies. Florida has long led states in school choice legislation, beginning in

1999 with its [first K-12 private scholarship program](#). In 2001, it established a [scholarship tax credit program](#) to generate funds for low-income families to use to send their children to private schools.

In 2019, Florida enacted its [sixth private school tuition voucher program](#), which allowed low- and middle-income students to attend a private school of their choice with the help of taxpayer-funded subsidies. In 2021, [the state legislature consolidated several scholarship programs and expanded eligibility](#), giving more low-income families access to private school tuition funds and increasing subsidy amounts to 95 percent of the per-pupil state funding districts receive.

In partnership with community leaders, CFUL is working to open schools in underserved, low-income neighborhoods. To be eligible to receive school tuition voucher funding, each CFUL microschool must get state approval to operate as a private school. Working with community partners, CFUL helps each school navigate the regulatory process and conducts intensive outreach to families living in these neighborhoods.

Scholarship grants average \$6,000 to \$8,000 per student per year, depending on the per-pupil state funding in the student's home district. CFUL focuses only on students who are eligible for scholarships, who they believe also usually stand to benefit the most from this form of education. However, the scholarship only covers about half of what it costs CFUL to support one microschool. WMYA charges [\\$11,370 in annual tuition](#), plus other fees, and families not eligible for state scholarships pay privately, according to Gilzean.

Given the priority low-income families receive for scholarship funding, and given that CFUL's microschools serve only students from low-income communities, Gilzean assumes families will receive state tuition vouchers and is confident CFUL can cover the other operating costs through fundraising and corporate sponsorships. His priority is ensuring CFUL's microschools deliver the high-quality education that families want, so that they will continue to enroll their children year after year.

## Growing the CFUL microschool network

Gilzean believes this model will provide a strong example for other Urban League affiliates or similar organizations focused on meeting their communities' educational and economic needs. He hopes to partner with the other Urban League affiliates in Florida.

Gilzean hopes organizations in other states with voucher programs for private schools will also implement the microschool model. In the meantime, his staff will continue to refine their model to ensure that it provides an innovative approach to educating underserved children.