

## PODS IN ACTION:

# Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy

A MICROSCHOOL OFFERED PERSONALIZED LEARNING FOR STUDENTS, SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS—AND A GLIMPSE INTO GAPS IN POLICY

By Paola Gilliam and Sharon Kebschull Barrett

In response to concerns about the children of first responders needing a safe, supervised place to learn in the midst of COVID-19 school closures, the City of North Las Vegas funded education nonprofit Nevada Action to set up a microschool. Students left the school district to learn at the microschool, which received from the city facilities, funding for personnel, support from city employees, and marketing support.

### KEY LESSONS:

1

This microschool shows how a public-private partnership can create an innovative education option for students and families during a crisis and beyond.

2

Learning models with a mix of whole-group instruction and self-directed programs with guided curriculum, such as Prenda and Cadence Learning, can create opportunities for personalized learning for students while supporting nontraditional educators.

3

A municipal government was able to tap public funds to provide a new learning option for students legally designated as homeschoolers. The arrangement will continue for at least another year, under the aegis of a charter school and backed by federal COVID relief funding. But the long-term financial and regulatory sustainability of this arrangement—and those of similar microschools that sprang up elsewhere in the country—remains an unaddressed policy challenge.

## KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:  
NORTH LAS  
VEGAS, NV

50

FALL 2020

100

SPRING 2021

1-8

GRADES  
SERVED

STUDENTS SERVED

With ongoing school closures due to COVID looming in the summer of 2020, North Las Vegas City Councilwoman Pamela Goynes-Brown, a former 30-year educator in Clark County School District, thought the city council could help—but what would be the best way, she wondered, to support the students most affected by the pandemic?

Clark County School District, the fifth-largest school district in the nation, struggled to reach all students effectively even before the pandemic. When schools closed due to COVID in spring 2020, remote learning challenged families, especially families of essential workers unable to stay home with their children.

Goynes-Brown met with Don Soifer, the president and founder of Nevada Action for School Options, a nonprofit working to ensure that all Nevada children have diverse, high-quality education options. Soifer, who has an extensive background in education research and school choice, suggested an idea he'd been considering for the past year: a microschool.

The microschool would create small, personalized learning environments for children in grades 1–6, with a curriculum that provides individualized support and a focus on creating strong relationships with parents and families (grades 7–8 were added in 2021). It would be open to all North Las Vegas residents and children of first responders—healthcare workers, police, and firefighters—throughout the greater Las Vegas Valley (which includes areas outside of North Las Vegas).

With strong support from the city council, Nevada Action set up the Southern Nevada Urban Microschool Academy, or SNUMA, in about two weeks. The city provided facilities, funding, and other services. SNUMA hired its own staff to supervise students and provide instruction and used Prenda and Cadence Learning for its curriculum.

After a year of high satisfaction from parents, SNUMA will continue for at least another year—or more, if funding can sustain it. It presents a unique example of how local governments can use technology to create new learning options outside of local school districts that meet the needs of their communities. It also underscores the challenges these options face to long-term sustainability without access to public education funding or clear regulatory frameworks that allow their continued operation.

## Public-private collaboration

The microschool idea gave Goynes-Brown pause at first. It would require students to withdraw from the public schools and be classified as homeschoolers by the state and work with “learning guides” who may not have traditional teacher backgrounds—all a very different concept from her experience as an educator and administrator in the school district.

However, as she reflected on the opportunities for tailored curriculum and increased student support, she quickly agreed. After all, in a large school district in normal times, she said, there aren’t always opportunities for educators to go back over challenging concepts or enough personnel to provide students with individual support. The pandemic compounded that, as remote learning left many Clark County students adrift.

Soifer saw an opportunity to serve students whose needs weren’t being met in existing schools.

“This model happens to have been accelerated by the pandemic,” he said, “[but] I really do think that even in healthy times microschooling can own as much as a 10 percent market share in a place like Clark County. We’re the fifth-largest school district in the country. Equity has long been an issue here—particularly for North Las Vegas leaders, I think acutely so. . . . It’s got chronic teacher shortages.”

By 9 a.m. the morning after meeting with Goynes-Brown, Soifer and his chief of staff, Ashley Campbell, had two briefing books of plans. With the councilwoman, they presented their work to the rest of the North Las Vegas City Council, which approved funding of \$179,000 for the first semester, plus facilities for the school. That gave Soifer and Campbell two and a half weeks to get SNUMA going.

The plan split the responsibilities between Nevada Action and the North Las Vegas City Council. Nevada Action provided the day-to-day management and organization of SNUMA, and the city council provided funding, some materials, city services, and some supplemental personnel.

## Overcoming initial resistance

As word about SNUMA got around, state leaders, including the attorney general, became concerned. It appeared to some that the City of North Las Vegas had opened its own charter school without permission, because students were required to unenroll from the school district and enroll as homeschoolers to attend.

After exchanges between attorneys, SNUMA was able to change its language to avoid legal issues. SNUMA could not refer to itself as a school, so it advertised a homeschooling program. It could not use the term “teachers,” so it began referring to them as “learning guides.”

The state superintendent and her leadership team visited to ensure SNUMA was meeting standards; soon after, elected city officials also reviewed the microschool.

“Some of those lawmakers came in with some tough, tough questions, and it was a great learning process,” Soifer said. “I think that was crucial to us, really, that they understood how their constituents were being served. And this is something different, but we’re an open book. . . . Being transparent and being equitable, in measurable ways, was something that I wanted to make from the beginning.”

The state superintendent and state department of education ultimately offered support and ideas for staff recruitment.

Initially, Clark County School District leaders expressed some concerns but did not push back too hard—possibly in part because Nevada districts continue to receive funding even if a student withdraws to register as a homeschooler. However, losing students to homeschooling makes it more challenging for the district to allocate money to specific schools because of uncertainty about where the unenrolled student’s funding should be allocated, a critique SNUMA received.

Due to the initial negative attention and the limited start-up time, SNUMA mostly recruited students by word of mouth.

SNUMA began with 50 students using its programming and allowed some other students still enrolled in the district to come to SNUMA solely for a safe, supervised space to complete their district lessons. Serving both sets of students proved challenging, however, and pulled educators away from leading students in SNUMA’s curriculum, so in the second semester, only students who were enrolled as homeschoolers could attend.

## Preparing funding and facilities

The city used its own revenue and some CARES Act funding to support the microschool. Nevada Action worked under a standard municipal service contract with the city, with most of the funding going toward expenses such as books and software and to pay the learning guides. Soifer and Campbell donated their time.

The city placed the microschool in a recreation center and library, adding another recreation center in the second semester. Families drop off their children at one of the recreation centers in the morning, with city-provided transportation taking some students from there to the library site. Staff of Safekey, a city partner, provide transportation.

The city outfitted each site with desktop computers and related technology and provided Chromebooks to students who needed a laptop at home. The city’s IT department provided tech support and helped set up Wi-Fi; other city employees made modifications such as bathroom changes to suit children’s needs.

## Teaching and learning at SNUMA

### Preparing funding and facilities

By the second semester, SNUMA served students from first through eighth grades, grouping them in two-grade classrooms (grades 1-2, 3-4, and so on). Each classroom had about 15 students, with a learning guide to lead and supervise them. SNUMA also used interventionists to help students who were behind in specific areas.

The Nevada State Department of Education offered resources to help recruit staff; the city police department handled background checks and fingerprinting.

Learning guides were required to have previous experience working with children and a passion for working with students and families. Most of the 15 staffers, including the coordinator, learning guides, and interventionists, were former teachers, teaching assistants, tutors, or long-term substitute teachers. Though Nevada Action handled the day-to-day needs of SNUMA’s multiple sites, it hired one coordinator for administrative work.

Staff from the parks and recreation department provided before- and after-school care, as well as an hour of recreational time during the school day.

## Providing low-cost, extended-day services

Recruiting mainly by word of mouth, SNUMA prioritized students who were struggling the most with the pandemic and remote learning. Once classes had started, SNUMA offered virtual and in-person tours for prospective parents.

Fifty students enrolled in SNUMA the first semester, for \$2 a day; by the second semester, SNUMA had 100 students and dropped the daily fee (students who came for a safe space to learn but stayed enrolled in their district school were initially charged \$20 a day, which brought some pushback before that arrangement ended in the second semester).

To further help working parents, the day could be extended for an annual fee of \$36. Parents could drop off students as early as 6:30 a.m. and pick them up as late as 7 p.m.

SNUMA provided breakfast, lunch, and a snack after school through Three Square, a southern Nevada food bank and hunger-relief organization that partnered with the city.

## Providing self-directed learning programs and curriculum

The academic day starts at 8:25 a.m. and ends at 3:45 p.m. Interventionists pull students throughout the day to work one on one or in small groups.

Instead of grades, SNUMA focuses on mastery, giving students feedback on all their work and the opportunity to revise and resubmit assignments. Though some learning guides found it challenging to motivate students without grades, others found that students were able to take more ownership over their learning because they could monitor their own progress.

Students spend a maximum of two hours online a day. All students have a 45-minute novel study. Science and social studies are more flexible, according to student and educator interests.

Nevada Action's leaders believed that many students would start SNUMA one or more years below grade-level expectations and wanted to address that through structured and personalized learning. So they opted to use learning models that had whole-group curricula and components that were self-directed, so students could keep up with grade-level content while working through concepts at their own pace. They selected the Prenda program for the younger grades and Cadence Learning for upper grades.

### ***Prenda***

Prenda began as a microschool for seven Arizona students in 2018; Soifer had visited pre-pandemic and liked what he saw. He opted to use Prenda learning models for SNUMA's first and second grades. The company provides a microschool "toolbox" with curriculum and software, and learning guides can obtain training and support from Prenda, including access to an online message board where they can connect with learning guides in other locations.

The model includes access to Lexia for literacy and Zearn for math—two self-directed, online programs students used between lessons led by their learning guide. Students get a workbook as well as video lessons created by Prenda; Anna Kamin, a learning guide for grades 1 and 2, noted the value of the workbooks as a physical object to balance the digital learning.

“The computer can be abstract for so long, but they need something concrete that they can turn back to in their book,” she said. “They could watch the video again, but sometimes that’s a little distracting for a six- or seven-year-old. It’s a short video—it’s about 10 minutes—but I really like them to have that hard-copy material.”

## ***Cadence Learning***

Shortly before starting SNUMA, Soifer and Campbell had the chance to observe a virtual national summer school initiative that Cadence Learning ran as a national pilot program in summer 2020, which included more than 200 Nevada students. Cadence is now a nonprofit with a learning model centered around mentor teachers who model strong instruction online and provide materials for learning guides to use. Soifer and Campbell were impressed by how much students seemed to learn in the five-week pilot and opted to use the curriculum for grades 3–8.

Cadence contracts with partners to give them access to the mentor teachers, Lexia, and Dreambox. A team of about 20 mentor teachers, largely drawn from Teach For America and charter school backgrounds, delivers a virtual lesson to a small group of students assembled by Cadence; SNUMA learning guides could watch the lesson, read the lesson plan, and review the lesson materials, and they could then deliver the lesson themselves or show all or part of the video lesson to their students.

SNUMA learning guides and parents raved about the novel studies Cadence provided. These lessons used a wide range of novels that opened the door to deeper conversations on race and social issues swirling during the pandemic year, they said.

SNUMA staff reported that reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* during Black History Month, with a lesson plan to guide the study of the novel, proved powerful for fifth and sixth graders.

“Those are the years that kids are trying to figure out when and how they’re going to mature,” said their learning guide, Kimberly Mitchell. “The books that we read and the questions and the activities that Cadence provided really [were] a huge icebreaker and a big confidence-builder with the kids in my class, I can say, learning to trust what they’re feeling and then marrying that with what they’re reading and really building empathy.”

Cadence Learning offers more than 30 hours of training for educators new to the program, and the guides each have a mentor teacher who can provide them with preparation for curriculum and materials as well as twice-weekly professional development. Learning guides can decide to use these resources as much or as little as they like.

Kamin, who had been a teacher before coming to SNUMA, said having good-quality lesson plans provided makes a huge difference.

## **Early results**

### **Learning guide experience**

“I left the school district because it was a struggle for me to take care of a Kindergartner and a first grader and teach my class at the same time,” said Kamin, one of several learning guides with prior experience working in schools. “I found SNUMA, and I am so glad, and I’m just thrilled to be here and be a part of it because it works.”

Mitchell, who previously worked as a private tutor, also felt drawn to SNUMA's model.

"I liked the attention to the entire family and community," Mitchell said. "One of the things that really appealed to me was that it wasn't just a place that kids came to school; it was a place that families came for learning."

Guides appreciated that they were able to focus on supporting students' academic needs, with other staff helping to meet students' other needs.

"I know it's because SNUMA is a smaller school in terms of population, but I think it's so incredible that any time when we turn in attendance in the morning, anyone who is not there, they have a person that literally calls each parent just to see what's going on," Mitchell said.

"In the classroom, I had a lot of burden on my shoulders with having to pull in, push out, find out what this student needs, the IEPs and all those things," Kamin said. "But here there are other people that come in—they step in, and they just take over and they do that. And I don't have to monitor all that."

Though the small staff could create some challenges, such as learning guides having to cover multiple classrooms when a colleague was out or the lack of a nurse or counselor, it also allowed for flexibility and quick changes.

"Things that need to happen can happen, and they can happen quickly, because we don't have this program with this school district saying, 'That's not protocol, we don't do that,'" Kamin said.

Learning guides especially appreciated the training and support that came with Cadence Learning and Prenda.

"I've done some training through them," Tammy Slank, learning guide for third and fourth graders. "I just absolutely love it. Everything about it makes sense, and the kids understand it. And it's been a breath of fresh air, actually, to be able to teach this way."

With lessons preplanned and clear instructions and tutorials, learning guides noticed they spent less time on planning than in previous roles.

"One of the biggest differences is the lesson planning, for sure," Kamin said. "Teachers spend countless hours planning lessons, and with having Prenda and also Cadence ready and available, I already have the foundation for all of my ELA and my math. And I love it. . . It's just there, because it's individualized for each student."

## Parent satisfaction

From the start, Soifer and Campbell aimed to create strong relationships with families. They sent weekly newsletters with general and grade-level updates, and learning guides regularly provided updates to parents about their child's progress. They also gave guidance on how parents could help students continue to learn at home.

Parents were encouraged to provide feedback on what SNUMA was and wasn't doing well; in interviews, parents appreciated these efforts.

"I [give SNUMA] full praises for this," one parent said. "I feel like there's a lot more communication, as well as more in-depth communication, in this case."

An anonymous survey backed up this satisfaction; the survey showed that all but two families planned to return to SNUMA in fall 2021.

“I mean, it fits what I feel is really the best criteria for education for children,” the parent said. “Small-sized classroom, very interpersonal; they also offer before- and after-school programs, which is essential for the working parents. And let’s face it, these days how often do you have two parents where only one of them works? I mean, between me and my wife [SNUMA] is a godsend. . . . My wife would have probably been without a job, because I have a government job.”

## Student results

SNUMA also reported impressive learning results.

According to Nevada Action’s data from Lexia and Dreambox assessments, all students at SNUMA began the school year below grade level in math. By the end of the year, the school said, 87 percent of students were at or above grade level in math.

Parents and SNUMA educators also noted that students became more confident academically.

“Even though a very open-minded and down-to-earth individual, [my daughter’s] very timid when it came to academic tasks,” one parent said. “She didn’t want to read too much, or she didn’t even want to try. She didn’t want to bother with mathematics.”

But by the end of the year, they could see significant academic improvement, the parent said.

“You know, in any school setting, your goal is to focus on developing the whole child, so to speak, and you want to make sure that your students get a well-rounded education,” Councilwoman Goynes-Brown said. “Just to see how [SNUMA students] have evolved and to hear the academic vocabulary and the literature that our kids are studying—it just blows me away, the amount of progress that they have made in such a short time.”

## Continuing, with changes, in 2021-22

SNUMA returned for the 2021-22 school year on August 9, still in the recreation centers it used in the first year.

Nevada Action is stepping back from operating SNUMA, serving as an advisor to SNUMA’s new operator, Pioneer Technology and Arts Academy, a Texas-based public charter school network. The city council selected Pioneer in July to continue to run SNUMA as a homeschool-student microschoo, with federal stimulus funding from the city council for the year. Pioneer sought a charter from the state authority twice in the past year to open a school in the Las Vegas area but was denied and has submitted a letter of intent suggesting it may try again for the 2022-23 year.

Nevada Action is launching a project to proliferate high-quality microschooing with partners in other settings.

## Open questions for scaling SNUMA’s model

In thinking about the potential to sustain and scale up the SNUMA model or replicate it in other communities, two important issues arise.

First, in cases of schools that are not district or charter schools but are publicly funded, how and by whom should they be held accountable for student learning results? Can the funding

agency (in this case, a city) play that role? What capacity or support would such public agencies need?

Second, how can such schools be funded systematically? SNUMA was made possible by federal COVID-relief dollars allocated by the city, the donation of staff time by a nonprofit and city officials, and facilities and equipment provided by the municipality of North Las Vegas. If this is an unusual alignment of resources, what mechanisms would make such microschoools scalable or allow them to access per-pupil revenue that flows to public schools?

Plans and funds beyond 2021-22 are uncertain, but Goynes-Brown said in a spring interview that she wants SNUMA to continue.

“My ultimate goal is to grow SNUMA as long as the families want it,” she said. “If that means that we branch out into a SNUMA school with its own contained building, I’m shooting for the moon.”



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