



FAMILIES ON THE NEW FRONTIER: MAPPING AND MEETING THE GROWING DEMAND FOR UNCONVENTIONAL SCHOOLING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Seismic shifts are shaking the landscape of K–12 education. Public school districts across the US have lost over a million students since 2020. Meanwhile, novel educational models—such as microschoools and hybrid homeschooling—have more than doubled their enrollments.

This paper explores what’s driving families to seek these new learning environments by utilizing a theory and methodology called Jobs to Be Done. According to the theory underpinning Jobs to Be Done, people adopt new solutions—such as microschoools—when struggling moments in their lives cause them to seek new ways to make progress in the face of those struggles. Through interviews with parents who recently moved their children to microschoools, this research uncovered three Jobs to Be Done driving families’ decisions:

- Job 1: When I disagree with decisions at my child’s school and I’m feeling unheard, help me find an alternative that will honor my perspective and values.
- Job 2: When my child is unhappy, unsafe, or struggling at school, help me find an environment where they can regain their love for learning.
- Job 3: When my child’s school is too focused on academic milestones and neglects other forms of learning, help me find a balanced educational experience for my child.

The growing popularity of microschoools hinges on their ability to understand and address the Jobs to Be Done of the families they serve. This paper provides a strategic playbook for microschoool founders to help them understand and then align their programs with families’ “Jobs.” In it you will find:

- Strategies to more clearly align your program’s vision, mission, and philosophy
- Ideas to improve your program’s learning experiences, marketing, and family engagement practices

- Suggestions for navigating the challenges that arise when families’ Jobs change

As the educational landscape continues to evolve, the insights in this paper have the potential to empower new educational models with the understanding and tools to successfully navigate these changes. Ultimately, the more programs strive to address the struggles that define families’ Jobs to Be Done, the more the overall educational landscape will support the desired progress of students and their families.

(The stories throughout this report are fictionalized amalgamations of themes found in our interviews.)

The insights in this paper have the potential to empower new educational models with the understanding and tools to successfully navigate education’s changing landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was a period of unprecedented challenges for many educators. But for Aisha, it also presented an unexpected opportunity. As a 5th-grade teacher, she had always felt stifled by school and district policies and expectations that kept her from really offering her students the types of learning experiences she believed in. But when the pandemic closed the schools across her district—creating a void of engaging learning environments for children—she saw an opportunity to channel her passion for education in a new direction.

In the fall of 2020, she founded Hero's Village, a microschool that promised a holistic approach to learning. She taught math and science through hands-on projects and maker challenges. Students read literature that was relevant to their lives and discussed it during scenic walks at a wooded local park. And significant blocks of time each day centered on learner-directed exploration rather than curriculum coverage. Many of the families of her prior students had joined her as part of the founding community of her program, seeking a respite from the endless screen time of remote learning.

As the pandemic receded, Aisha stood at a crossroads. Her microschool, conceived in a time of crisis, now faced its moment of truth: would families return to traditional schools? Aisha's ambition had always stretched beyond offering a mere stopgap during the pandemic. She had worked hard to establish an effective and inspiring learning community. Fortunately, as the months passed, she saw her foresight and steadfast commitment pay off. Day by day, her classrooms were abuzz with familiar faces. Families kept coming back—a heartening endorsement of her vision and her understanding of their needs. The sustained demand for her program was proof that she was onto something families valued.

Aisha's experience represents a story playing out in many cities and towns today. Public school districts across the US have lost over a million students since 2020.¹ Meanwhile, over the last decade, the one-room schoolhouse has seen a resurgence. Novel educational models—such as microschools, learning pods, and hybrid homeschooling—have more than doubled their enrollments to become a significant trend in the American educational landscape.² These small, purpose-built programs, usually catering to 15 students or fewer, gained prominence during the COVID-19 school closures and have persisted beyond that period.³

Estimating the number of students participating in these programs is challenging. Many are informal in nature and there is no comprehensive database tracking them. However, EdChoice estimates that approximately three to four percent of families are using these types of programs as a full replacement for traditional schooling, equating to about 1.1 to 2.2 million children across the United States.⁴ Additionally, analysis of a recent nationally representative survey found that “most homeschool families supplement home education with cooperative instructors and private tutors, online education, and brick-and-mortar schooling.”⁵

But what's driving this trend? What do some parents look for in their child's education that they can't find in conventional schools?



Jobs to Be Done represent the common pathways that lead people to a change of behavior.

PART 1: WHY DO FAMILIES SWITCH SCHOOLS?

This report aims to uncover answers to these pressing questions. Our approach uses a theory and a research method designed for understanding switching behaviors across a myriad of industries. This theory is called Jobs to Be Done.

What are Jobs to Be Done?

The Jobs to Be Done theory starts with a simple premise: all people strive to make progress in their lives. Progress, however, does not happen devoid of context. People seek progress within a set of circumstances, and those circumstances shape their decisions. When we identify a common set of circumstances linked with a common set of desires for progress, this is what we call a “Job To Be Done.” Just as people hire a plumber to help them fix a leak or a lawyer to help them build a case, people “hire” different types of solutions to help them make progress when the struggling moments that characterize a “job” arise in their lives.

One of the first Jobs to Be Done studies ever conducted illuminates the important role circumstances play in shaping decisions. To help a fast-food restaurant understand why people buy milkshakes, researchers spent a day interviewing their milkshake customers. Those interviews revealed a surprising trend: nearly half of the milkshakes were sold before 8 a.m. This presented a puzzling question: why were so many people downing milkshakes loaded with sugar and fat to kick off their day? The research team discovered that many people who purchased milkshakes in the morning faced a long, boring commute and needed something to make the commute more interesting. They weren't yet hungry, but they knew that they'd be hungry by 10 a.m., and they wanted to consume something now that would stave off hunger until noon. They also faced constraints: they were in a hurry, they were wearing professional work clothes, and they only had one free hand. People hired milkshakes over coffee, bananas, or donuts because the milkshake was the best-available option to satisfy their appetite in the context of a tedious commute.

While one might assume that flavor, thickness, and packaging were the keys to increasing milkshake sales, Jobs to Be Done theory revealed that demand really came from addressing the circumstances of a daily commute. Milkshake purchasing decisions had more to do with the **context** of a daily commute than the flavors or nutritional value of the **product**.

So what are Jobs to Be Done? At their most basic level, Jobs represent the common pathways that lead people to a change of behavior. At its core, a Job is a description of two things: the common **struggling moments** people find themselves in that impel them toward change, and the **desired progress**

they want to see in their lives. In the milkshake example, the struggling moments included being in a hurry to get to work, needing something to stave off hunger until lunch, and craving relief from the monotony of a long commute. People experiencing these struggles were then enticed by the milkshake more than other options—granola bars, bananas, bagels, etc.—because of how it helped them make the progress they desired. It was a food item they could hold in one hand, that didn't risk sticky fingers or dirty clothes, and that offered an element of mental stimulation.

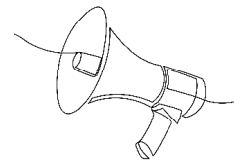
Jobs to Be Done have three dimensions: functional, emotional, and social. A Job's **functional** dimension determines the practical, tangible needs that a solution must meet. But underneath the functional requirements, a Job's emotional and social dimensions can often outweigh functional desires. The **emotional** dimension of a Job is about how people want a solution to make them feel. The **social** dimension highlights that people often care deeply about how their choices affect their relationships with others and their standing in their relevant communities.

Jobs to Be Done isn't just a useful theory for designing products and services that better meet customer needs. It's a theory that makes sense of a wide array of situations in which people bring something new into their lives. In recent years, researchers at the Christensen Institute have conducted Jobs to Be Done studies to answer a variety of key questions in education—such as why teachers change their classroom practices, why school district leaders adopt new curriculum, and why students choose to go to college.⁶

What Jobs to Be Done cause families to pick new learning environments?

For this research, we wanted to uncover the Jobs to Be Done that cause families to pick a microschool for their children's education. Following the Jobs to Be Done methodology, we interviewed a diverse set of parents who recently moved their children to microschools. Our interviews aimed to capture families' stories—the circumstances and struggles that led them to choose their microschool. Analyzing these stories surfaced three distinct Jobs to Be Done—each of which represents a common set of circumstances that drove families' schooling decisions. We describe these

three Jobs below. Each description begins with a story illustrating one possible set of circumstances that fit the broader pattern of the Job. (See the [Appendix](#) for additional details on our research methodology.)



Job 1: When I disagree with decisions at my child's school and I'm feeling unheard, help me find an alternative that will honor my perspective and values.

Laura sat in the quarterly board meeting for her son's charter school. In the meeting, it seemed the board and administrators carried on with their business with little recognition of the parents and other community members in the room.

Laura's attention was piqued when school administrators unveiled the new math curriculum they planned to roll out for the upcoming academic year. But as she listened, her excitement turned to discouragement. It became clear that the curriculum was heavily focused on rote memorization of formulas and procedures, leaving little room for conceptual understanding. Concerned, she approached the principal after the meeting to discuss her reservations.

The principal listened attentively and said, "Thank you for sharing your perspective, Laura. We'll definitely take your thoughts into account as we move forward." But weeks went by, and Laura received no further communication. The curriculum plans proceeded unchanged, making her feel as though her concerns had been politely heard yet deliberately ignored.

This experience left Laura questioning whether that charter school was the right fit for her family. She felt an increasing urgency to find an educational setting that would not only respect her views on effective instruction but also involve parents in substantive discussions about curriculum choices.

What are the struggling moments?

This Job centers on parents' efforts to navigate a complex emotional and intellectual landscape in their relationship with their school. The children of parents experiencing this Job are often fine, but the parents themselves are struggling with personal disagreements over the school's curriculum or educational philosophy. Parents may feel that the curriculum introduces topics they find objectionable or lacks depth in areas they consider important.

This struggle is often intensified by a perceived lack of open dialogue between parents and school administrators or teachers. Parents may feel that their concerns are dismissed outright or that they are excluded from important decisions affecting their child's education. The emotional toll of these struggles can be significant and lead to feelings of frustration and alienation, which creates a sense of urgency to find an educational setting that better aligns with their values and offers a more receptive forum for their concerns.

What does desired progress look like?

Functionally, these parents want evidence that their voice is not just heard but actively considered. They also desire a curriculum that aligns closely with their own educational philosophy and values. Transparency in decision-making processes is another key factor. They expect programs to keep their promises and want clear two-way communication about any changes to curriculum, teaching methods, school norms, etc. At an **emotional** level, parents experiencing this Job want to have a sense that they are in control of how and what their child learns. They feel like failures as parents if their children aren't receiving the type of education they believe their children deserve. From a **social** standpoint, these parents want to be respected by their children's educators and be seen as advocates for their children.



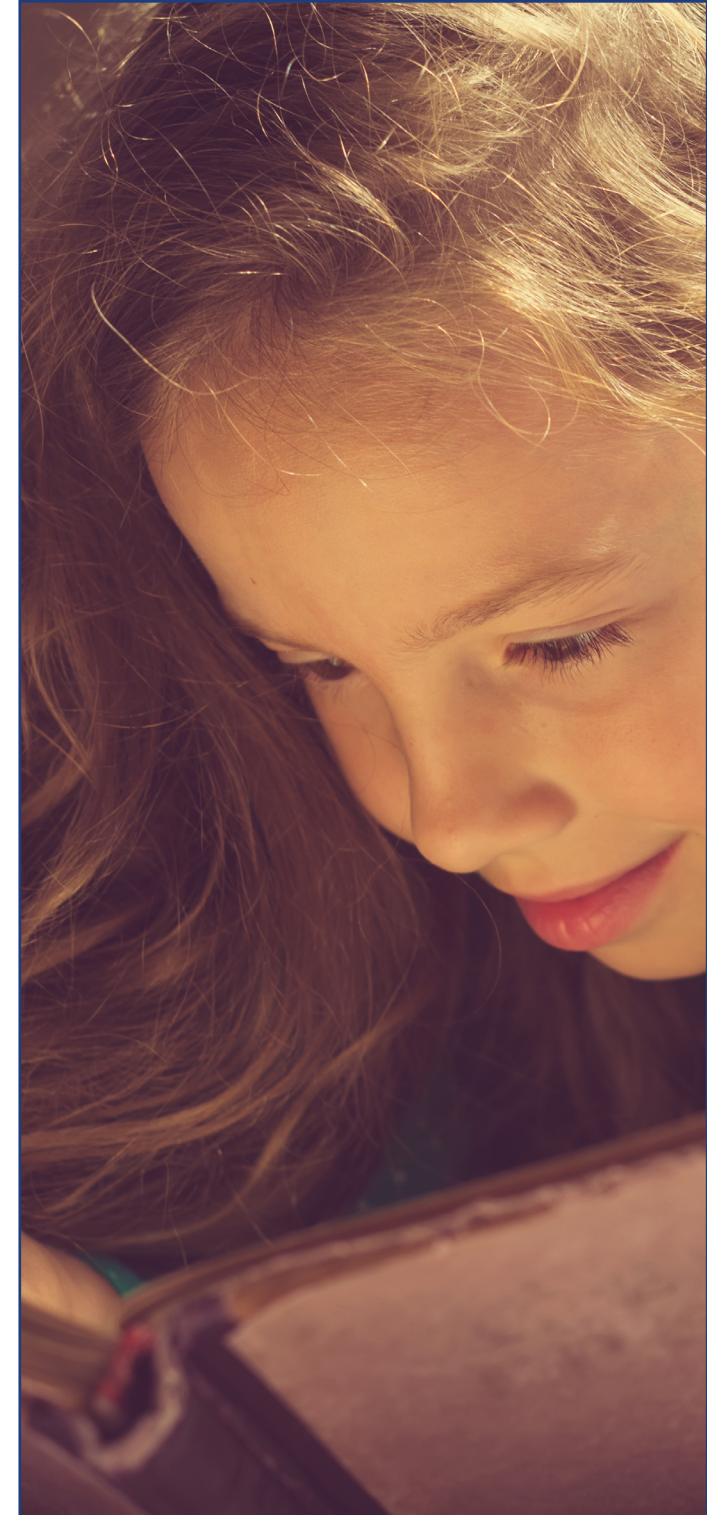
Job 2: When my child is unhappy, unsafe, or struggling at school, help me find an environment where they can regain their love for learning.

At 6:30 a.m., Priya stood in the doorway of her son Arjun's room. She felt her neck muscles tense up as she anticipated another round of cajoling and nagging to get him out of bed. The morning routine had become a daily battle, filled with tension and resistance. Arjun clearly dreaded going to school, especially because of the reading lessons that took up a significant portion of his day. Struggling with reading made him feel behind his peers, and the embarrassment of reading aloud in class was a constant source of anxiety for him.

This ongoing struggle made Priya realize that the current school's approach to reading was not meeting her son's needs. Despite his emotional distress, the focus seemed to be on adhering to a one-size-fits-all curriculum rather than adapting to individual learning challenges. Priya felt an increasing urgency to find a school that would not only be sensitive to Arjun's emotional needs but also offer a more tailored approach to help him overcome his reading struggles.

What are the struggling moments?

Unlike Job 1, parents experiencing this Job struggle because their children are struggling. They are distressed because their child's wellbeing is at stake. The struggle manifests when parents notice consistent signs of unhappiness, anxiety, or even dread in their child concerning school. This



emotional turmoil could be the result of various factors such as academic struggles, bullying, lack of accommodations for special needs, or a school culture that is not inclusive. The emotional wellbeing of the child becomes the driving force behind the search for a new schooling option, often imbued with a sense of urgency and deep concern.

What does desired progress look like?

For parents grappling with this Job, the **functional** goal is to find a program where their child feels safe, included, and enthusiastic about learning. The aim is not only to alleviate the immediate emotional distress their child is experiencing, but also to reignite their child's love for learning in a more supportive setting so that their child will continue to progress in their learning. **Emotionally**, parents want a reprieve from the exhausting daily battle to get their children to school. They also crave relief from the sadness, worry, and frustration they experience because their children hate school. Some also worry deeply about their children's safety and wellbeing. **Socially**, these parents are sick of teachers and administrators complaining to them about their children and making them feel like bad parents. They want to be seen as parents who take action to protect their children.



Job 3: When my child's school is too focused on academic milestones and neglects other forms of learning, help me find a balanced educational experience for my child.

Carlos sat at the kitchen table and sifted through Carmen's school papers. His 7th-grade daughter was a top performer, always bringing home A's and excelling in standardized tests. But as he looked at the endless worksheets and test prep materials, he felt a growing sense of unease. Carmen's life seemed to revolve entirely around academics, with little room for anything else.

He thought about the school's relentless focus on test scores, grades, and even college readiness. "Is this really what education is supposed to be?" he wondered. Carlos believed that a well-rounded education should include not just academics but also social-emotional learning, physical activity, and creative expression.

As Carmen came into the kitchen, eager to finish her homework so she could get back to her test- prep book, Carlos felt his concern deepen. He knew he needed to start researching alternative educational environments that could offer Carmen a more dynamic educational experience.

What are the struggling moments?

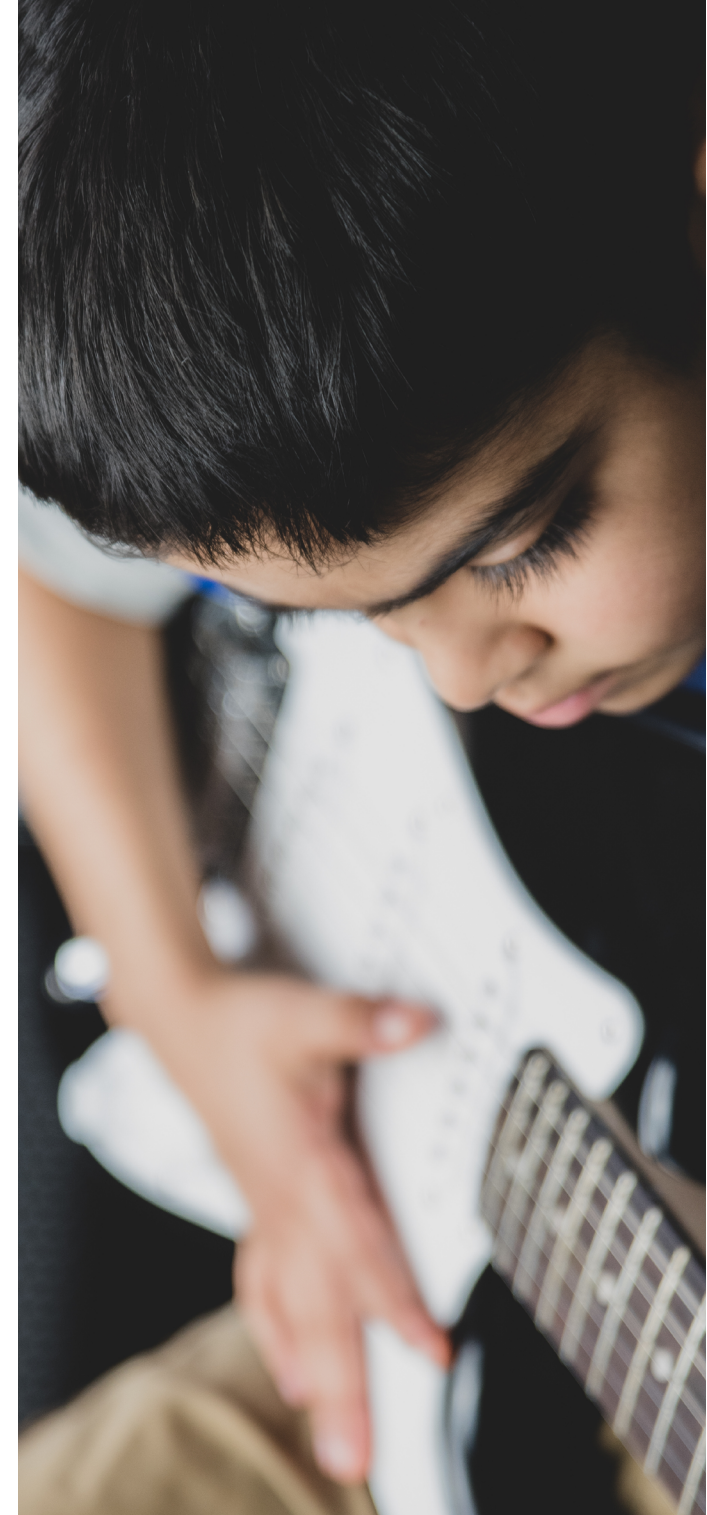
Parents who resonate with this Job often find themselves concerned about the narrow focus of their child's current educational setting. The struggle usually arises when parents perceive that the school's emphasis on academic achievement overshadows other experiences that they see as vital aspects of learning. This could include neglecting social skills, emotional intelligence, creative expression, and even physical wellbeing. Parents may notice their child becoming disengaged, stressed, or even burned out due to the intense academic pressures. This creates a sense of urgency to find a schooling option that offers a more balanced and holistic approach to education.

What does desired progress look like?

For parents dealing with this Job, the **functional** objective is to find a program that provides a well-rounded educational experience. They are looking for programs that recognize the importance of various learning modalities, extracurricular activities, and opportunities for social and emotional growth. The ideal program would have a curriculum that is not solely focused on academic milestones but also incorporates elements that foster creativity, critical thinking, and emotional resilience. Parents value educational settings that offer a diverse range of courses and activities, allowing their child to explore different interests and develop a more comprehensive skill set. **Emotionally**, these parents want relief from the worry that school is hurting their children's development as whole people. **Socially**, they want to be seen as the kind of parents who care about the holistic development of their children.

Questions to consider

- Which of the Jobs to Be Done uncovered by this research seem to resonate most with the experiences you've observed among the families your program serves?
- How does this research give you greater empathy for the struggles of families whose children attend your program?
- What ideas come to mind as potential strategies to better fulfill the functional, emotional, and social components of your families' Jobs to Be Done?



PART 2: HOW DO I BETTER SERVE THE FAMILIES WHO PARTICIPATE IN MY PROGRAM?

It's one thing to know why families come to your program. It's another to know how to keep them coming. Now that we've discussed the three Jobs to Be Done uncovered by our research, this part of the paper delves into how to parse the nuances of those Jobs as they show up among your families. It also offers strategies and practices for fulfilling families' Jobs.

Using Jobs to Be Done to design new solutions

The Jobs to Be Done theory not only identifies why people bring new solutions into their lives, it also reveals how to design solutions that effectively help people make the progress they are seeking. Bob Moesta, co-founder of the Rewired Group and an early collaborator with Clayton Christensen on the Jobs to Be Done theory, applied this lens a number of years ago to help a Detroit-area homebuilder market townhomes. The company had a problem: it offered affordable homes with a host of customizable amenities—such as granite countertops, crown molding, and stainless-steel appliances—that attracted lots of interested customers. But very few of those potential customers signed purchase agreements.

Through interviews, Moesta uncovered a key pattern: many potential customers were empty nesters looking to downsize their homes. Their decision to sign a contract hinged on figuring out what to do with all the memory-laden possessions they couldn't take with them. Equipped with this insight, the builder made some unconventional additions to the purchase agreements: offering free moving services and two years of free storage space with on-site sorting rooms where people could take their time going through their belongings. With these changes came a dramatic increase in townhome sales. When the builder understood customers' circumstances and then designed a solution to address those circumstances, demand naturally followed.

Interview families to uncover the nuances of their Jobs

To put Jobs to Be Done into practice, program leaders need a deeper read on the Jobs of their particular families. So, how do you uncover the nuances of your families' Jobs to Be Done? Focus on their actions, not their stated reasons. People are good at giving logically consistent reasons for their behavior. But their reasons are often filled with post-hoc rationalization. Meanwhile, people often forget or overlook the events that actually spurred their choices.

To truly understand the Jobs your families are trying to get done, take a storytelling approach. Instead of asking why they chose your school, ask them to narrate the circumstances that led up to their decisions. This method produces a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the struggling moments that propelled people's choice. It reveals the true contours of their Job to Be Done.

Decide what your program can and can't offer

A program needs to be unequivocal about which Jobs it aims to serve and which Jobs it cannot effectively address. A program can't be a panacea for every family's unique set of needs and priorities. Attempting to be all things to all people is both impractical and counterproductive.

Consider, for example, a family that is looking for a more self-directed, interest-based learning environment because they feel their child's current school is too focused on academic standards (Job 3). Now contrast this with another family whose child is struggling with reading and needs a more structured, phonics-based approach (Job 2). There's an inherent tension that emerges at any program that tries to serve both of these Jobs effectively. Another layer of complexity is added when considering families with special needs. A microschool might be small by design in order to fulfill Job 3. But for parents that experience Job 2 because their child has special needs, a microschool may be too small to afford hiring specialists equipped to serve their students.

Even within a single Job category, the way different families experience that Job to Be Done can create alignment challenges. For instance, consider how tensions can arise in the realm of Job 1—where parents feel their concerns are not recognized. One family may experience this Job when their current school doesn't give their child more freedom to choose books to study based on personal interests and preferences. Meanwhile, another family may experience this same Job when they believe their child's current school gives students **too much freedom** to choose what to study instead of requiring all students to read and discuss the same canon of classic literature. It's the same Job to Be Done, but it manifests around two different sets of values and priorities that are hard to reconcile. Rather than settling with compromises that frustrate both families, a program will

be better off deciding which version of Job 1 it can serve and then being candid about the versions of Job 1 it can't serve.

Serving families' Jobs to Be Done inherently involves trade-offs. A program must decide which Jobs it will focus on serving and which Jobs it will not prioritize. Program leaders must be crystal clear about their program's mission, vision, and educational philosophy. And these foundational statements should declare which Jobs the program is designed to serve. This not only helps with internal alignment but also sets the right expectations for prospective families. By being transparent about the Jobs your program is well-suited to serve—and, equally important, about those it is not—you pave the way for a more coherent and effective educational environment.

Once a program nails down its mission, vision, and values, it needs to communicate to families the actual experiences it offers its learners. Many programs advertise themselves with buzzwords like “classical education,” “personalized learning,” “whole-child development,” or “learner-centered education.” But those words become meaningless when they are just vague gestures at what many families want to hear. Ultimately, this kind of language often backfires. Misalignment between a program's offerings and a family's expectations stokes dissatisfaction. Good communication goes beyond mere catchphrases. Program leaders need to define their own versions of common buzzwords by clearly articulating the tangible offerings, experiences, and outcomes their program provides that align with families' Jobs to Be Done.

Recognize when families need a new option

Program leaders need to realize that sometimes they simply can't accommodate the evolving Jobs to Be Done of a family without compromising the core mission of their program. In fact, it's in the best interest of the family to be in an educational setting that aligns with their current needs. Holding onto families you can't adequately serve isn't fair to the families.

Moreover, making sweeping changes to your programs based on the shifting needs of a minority of families can be a perilous endeavor. It risks diluting your program's focus and undermining its ability to serve the Jobs

to Be Done it was primarily built to satisfy. When faced with such dilemmas, the most constructive course of action may be to work with the family to find options better equipped to address their struggles.

When a family's Job to Be Done no longer aligns with a program's capabilities, program leaders need to have honest conversations with that family. Being upfront about these limitations not only maintains the program's integrity but also steers families toward finding the right fit for the progress they seek. Even after these conversations, some families may still decide not to switch programs and instead just live with the fact that your program is not the best solution for their Job to Be Done. This will often be the case when better alternatives aren't accessible. But as microschooled options grow, and as it becomes easier for families to switch programs, fewer families will feel compelled to accept these kinds of trade-offs.

To be clear, the shifting Jobs to Be Done in a family's life are neither good nor bad; they simply reflect the family's current circumstances. Likewise, your program hasn't failed if it no longer aligns with a family's evolving needs. Both parties are merely seeking to fulfill specific Jobs to Be Done, and sometimes that means parting ways for the benefit of all involved.

When a family's Job to Be Done no longer aligns with a program's capabilities, program leaders need to have honest conversations with that family.



What might this look like?

Caroline Edwards, the founder of Riverdale Microschool, was proud of her thriving educational community. Nestled in a lively neighborhood, Riverdale had become a beacon of hope for families seeking an alternative to traditional schooling. The program was a testament to Caroline's vision for a different kind of learning.

One afternoon, as parents arrived to pick up their students, Caroline found herself chatting with Mr. Thompson, whose son, Alex, had joined Riverdale six months prior. With a smile, Mr. Thompson shared how Alex, once disengaged and listless in his previous school, was now brimming with stories and excitement each day. This conversation struck a chord with Caroline; she realized that she had heard similar stories from other parents too. The shift from disengagement to enthusiasm was not just Alex's story—it was a pattern.

Recently introduced to the Jobs to Be Done framework, Caroline wondered what specific Jobs were leading families to choose Riverdale. Determined to delve deeper, she arranged interviews with several families, seeking to understand their motivations and experiences.

As she spoke with parents, a compelling narrative emerged. Many families, like the Thompsons, had active and energetic children who struggled to sit quietly and follow instructions for extended periods of time. Unfortunately, their clashes with the conventional classroom experience had landed them in detention on a regular basis and had branded them as the problem kids. Parents recounted stories of their children feeling stifled, misunderstood, and frequently in trouble.

Caroline realized that Riverdale's success lay in its ability to cater to these children's needs in a way that other schools couldn't. The microschool's dynamic, hands-on approach provided an outlet for their energy and creativity. It wasn't just about academic learning; it was about understanding and embracing each child's unique way of interacting with the world.

With this newfound clarity, Caroline refined Riverdale's mission statement, emphasizing a nurturing environment for active and diverse learners. She looked for ways to weave hands-on learning activities into every part of the school day and to give students lots of opportunities to learn by following their curiosity.

The positive effects of Caroline's efforts to double down on families' Jobs rippled across the microschool community. Parents, who had once been cautiously optimistic, now enthusiastically endorsed Riverdale. Their

children weren't just learning; they were thriving in an environment that understood and catered to their needs.

Yet, this period of reflection and success brought Caroline to an important realization: her microschool, despite its appeal and effectiveness for many, couldn't meet the diverse Jobs to Be Done of every family. A particular case brought this into sharp focus. One family, initially drawn to the active and engaging environment of Riverdale, began expressing concerns that the school's curriculum—heavily focused on literacy and numeracy skills—did not align with their vision of education.

Caroline knew that many children coming from conventional schools, especially those who had struggled, were often academically behind. To address this, she had meticulously designed learning experiences aimed at building foundational academic skills. However, this structured approach towards academic proficiency stood in contrast to the family's desire for a learning environment where their child could freely pursue their interests and passions with minimal restrictions. This divergence highlighted a fundamental mismatch between the family's expectations and Riverdale's educational philosophy.

Reflecting on her journey with Riverdale, Caroline realized the importance of being true to the school's core mission. While it hurt to see a family leave, she knew it was the right choice. She recommended a nearby microschool that focused on self-directed learning as a better fit for this family's aspirations.

As the family expressed their gratitude for Caroline's honest advice, she felt a sense of peace. Her commitment to a specific Job to Be Done had defined Riverdale's identity, helping many families but also clarifying its limitations. Caroline had learned that while she deeply cared for every student, her program would do the most good by focusing on the unique mission that made Riverdale special.

Questions to consider

- What functional, emotional, and social expectations characterize your families' Jobs to Be Done?
- What ideas do you have for addressing the emotional and social components of your families' Jobs in addition to their functional requirements?

PART 3: HOW DO I ATTRACT NEW FAMILIES TO MY PROGRAM?

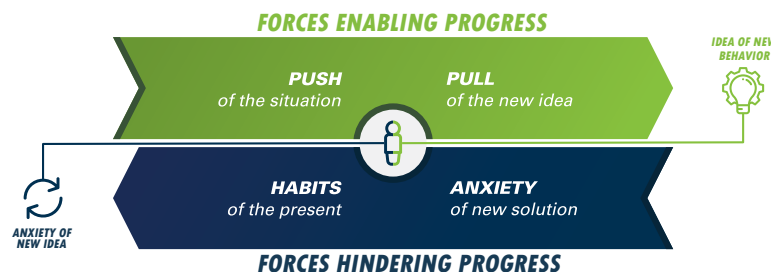
Whenever a family considers enrolling in a new school, there are powerful forces affecting that family's ultimate decision. These forces can either propel the family toward your program or hold them back. Any program founder aiming to attract new families needs to understand and address these forces.

In the theory of Jobs to Be Done, the Forces of Progress framework identifies four key elements that influence when and why people bring a new solution into their lives.

- **Push** represents the moments of struggle that nudge people to seek better alternatives. For families looking for new schooling options, these are often the problems and frustrations they experience with their current educational setting. The stronger the Pushes, the more likely a family will take action.
- **Pull** represents the features of various solutions that make those solutions attractive. These features might be a unique pedagogical approach, a strong sense of community, or a flexible program schedule.
- **Anxieties** are the concerns or fears about new solutions that create resistance to change. For families, these might be worries about the cost of tuition, concerns about how well their child will adapt to a new environment, or uncertainty regarding how well an unconventional option will prepare their child for college.
- **Habits** refers to the current practices or routines that keep people tethered to the status quo. Even when families are not entirely satisfied with their current situations, the ease and familiarity of what they're used to can be a strong force inhibiting change.

Families only change their children's learning environments when the Push and Pull forces collectively outweigh the Anxieties and Habits.

Figure 1. The Forces of Progress



Families only change their children’s learning environments when the Push and Pull forces collectively outweigh the Anxieties and Habits. This means the family’s struggles with their current situation and the allure of what your program has to offer must overpower a family’s reservations and break past the inertia of existing routines.

So how can you find and attract families who are experiencing the Jobs your program is designed to support?

Look for families using workarounds

One of the most fruitful strategies for finding families to serve is to look for people using makeshift solutions. When people experience a Job to Be Done but don’t have readily available options they can hire, they often end up creating their own workarounds. In education, typical workarounds include after-school learning, virtual schooling, or homeschooling.

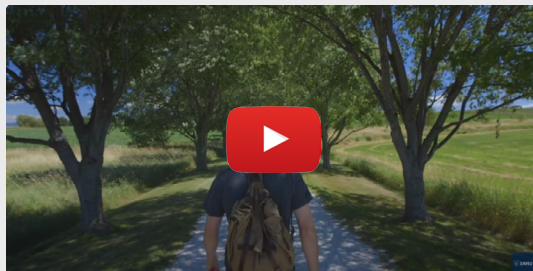
People who make do with workarounds often don’t know where to find better solutions to address their Jobs. The first step in attracting them to your program is often about discovering ways to connect with them to let them know what you have to offer. For example, you might join local online groups for homeschool families or participate in homeschool meetups. You might also schedule field trips to public parks, libraries, and museums where you are more likely to cross paths with these families and then introduce them to your program.

Find families in their moments of struggle

It’s common for entrepreneurs to see marketing as mainly about creating Pull for their solutions. When founders use advertising as a form of marketing, they often focus on sharing the specific benefits of their programs—an exclusively Pull-driven approach. But another effective lever for connecting people with your solution is to meet them when their moments of struggle (i.e., their Pushes) are strongest.

To embrace a Push-driven approach, shift your advertising from showcasing the benefits of your program to sharing the stories of families whose struggles led them to your program. Then highlight how your program helped them address their challenges—inviting prospective families to see themselves in those stories, and then also see your program as their solution.

For a great example of an advertisement that speaks to the struggling moments of a Job to Be Done, see SNHU’s video “Break the Cycle: Change Your Life with an Online Degree.”



Another way to speak to the Push of a Job is to create or sponsor affinity groups centered on the struggling moments of the Jobs to Be Done you aim to serve. For instance, if your program is designed to serve parents who are frustrated with their current school because they don't feel that it values their perspectives (Job 1), start an online group for parents who feel unheard. If your program caters to parents whose children have come to hate the academic or social aspects of their current school (Job 2), start monthly meetings for parents facing these challenges.

These groups can take various forms: Facebook groups, coffee shop meetups, park playdates, etc. Sometimes, you don't need to create new groups, you can just support existing groups by offering resources like meeting spaces or refreshments.

Although your program may be the key sponsor of a group, the group should not be branded around your program. Rather, the group should be broader than the members of your program's community. Families should feel welcome and included in these groups regardless of whether they are members of your community. When people connect to your program through these groups, those connections should happen organically through word-of-mouth recommendations, not through deliberate recruiting or branding. The purpose of the group should center on supporting the Job to Be Done, not about pushing a particular solution.

Address families' anxieties

Families who consider your program will naturally have anxieties to resolve before they make the leap to join. Some anxieties will center on worries about whether your program will really work out for them and their child as well as they hope. Other anxieties will be about what they feel they have to give up when they choose your program.

Identifying and addressing anxieties is key to converting families from being interested in your program to joining your program. Here are some ideas for addressing anxieties:

- Optional assessments: If families are concerned about academic progress, consider offering optional standardized assessments to reassure families of academic growth.

- Extracurricular partners: If families worry about losing out on experiences such as the sports and extracurriculars available at conventional schools, consider developing partnerships with external organizations—community sports leagues, art teachers, etc.—to provide these types of experiences as supplements to your program.
- Free trials: Offering a short-term period as a free trial when families first join your program is another potential way to relieve anxieties.
- Testimonials: One of the most powerful ways to alleviate families' anxieties is by leveraging social proof. When prospective families meet other families in your program with challenges and aspirations similar to theirs and who are happy with your program, those living testimonials are the most persuasive answers to the anxieties of prospective families. This is another reason why the aforementioned affinity groups can play a crucial role in bringing new families into your program—the social connections they offer also provide proof that your program works.

Connect with families at times of transition

When the COVID-19 pandemic closed conventional school buildings and threw off families' daily routines, many families who had been otherwise satisfied with their conventional schools began to explore new schooling options. Families were naturally more willing to change when life circumstances interrupted their routines and habits.

Changing a family's habits is largely beyond the control or influence of program leaders. Nonetheless, program leaders can take advantage of times when the events in a family's life weaken habits. Key transitions like moving to a new city or progressing from elementary to middle school are pivotal moments where families are more open to change.

How can a program connect with families in these moments of transition? One idea for savvy program leaders might be to build relationships with local real estate agents. Agents familiar with a program's offerings might refer clients to that program when they recognize their clients struggling with the Jobs the program aims to solve.

What might this look like?

The Johnson family was at a crossroads. Emily, their once academically thriving daughter, had brought home a report card littered with Bs, Cs, and a concerning D. This decline was a shock, especially considering her high state test scores from the previous year. The Johnsons knew Emily was capable but saw her growing increasingly uninterested in school. Every week for the last month, Emily had feigned illness to avoid going to school, revealing her deep-seated unhappiness. This was the decisive Push the Johnsons needed to start exploring other educational options.

Initially, the Johnsons turned to homeschooling, albeit with considerable reservations. They questioned their ability to effectively teach Emily, given their lack of teaching experience. Moreover, they were concerned about Emily's social development, fearing that learning at home might isolate her from meaningful interactions with peers. But, in the absence of known alternatives, they reluctantly embarked on this new journey, hoping to rekindle Emily's love for learning.

The homeschooling experience, initially a beacon of hope for the Johnsons, quickly began to lose its luster. Emily, who had eagerly embraced the idea of escaping the confines of her previous school, soon found the reality of homeschooling to be disappointing. The novelty of staying at home wore off rapidly, giving way to a monotonous routine that she found even more tedious than her old school. Day after day of sitting at the kitchen table with textbooks and worksheets wasn't the stimulating environment she had envisioned. Her parents, despite their best efforts, felt their frustration mounting. They weren't trained educators and struggled to keep Emily engaged and motivated. The situation had them reconsidering their options. They even contemplated returning to the public school system, albeit a different school within the district, in hopes of finding a more suitable environment for Emily.

It was at a local homeschool science fair where the Johnsons' path took an unexpected turn. The fair was bustling with energy, showcasing a variety of innovative projects by homeschool students. Amid this creative environment, one particular project caught their eye—a detailed model of a sustainable ecosystem. Intrigued, they struck up a conversation with the person they assumed was a parent or a volunteer, only to discover she was the teacher behind this impressive work.

Sarah, the founder of Innovative Minds Academy, was a warm and engaging figure. She explained that her academy was a hybrid homeschooling program, a concept new to the Johnsons. It provided structured learning while retaining the flexibility and personalization of homeschooling. This model seemed to

address their concerns about homeschooling—offering professional teaching support and fostering a community where Emily could interact with her peers.

The Johnsons' interest in Sarah's program grew as they learned more. However, doubts lingered. The idea of transitioning to a hybrid homeschooling model was a significant step and, in many ways, still echoed their current homeschooling setup, which had proven challenging. They worried that this new approach might be just another version of the homeschooling experience that had left them and Emily feeling unfulfilled. The Johnsons were on the verge of returning to a conventional school and feared that choosing a hybrid option could further delay finding a stable, effective educational path for Emily.

To help address these concerns, Sarah introduced them to Mr. and Mrs. Lee, parents of a student at her academy. The Lees shared how they had come to join Innovative Minds Academy a year ago, and their story resonated with the Johnsons' experience. They spoke of their child's similar struggles in traditional schooling and how the switch to Innovative Minds Academy marked a turning point. They, too, had doubted their own abilities to homeschool their child. But with the support of Innovative Minds Academy, homeschooling became doable and their child, once disengaged, was now thriving both academically and socially.

This conversation with the Lees was a turning point for the Johnsons. It alleviated their fears and gave them hope that Emily would rediscover her love of learning. Emboldened by this family's experience, the Johnsons decided to give Innovative Minds Academy a try and enrolled Emily in a one-month trial of the program.

Questions to consider

- How well do you know the anxieties and habits of the families currently enrolled in your program?
- What are some potential strategies for addressing each of the forces of progress for the prospective families you aim to serve?
- How can you meet families in their struggling moments and address the habits and anxieties that hold them back from picking your program?



CONCLUSION

In this paper, we've laid out a useful set of insights to help program founders better align their programs to the unique Jobs to Be Done of their families. We know it's a lot to take in, but refining your approach doesn't have to happen all at once. Start small. Pick one or two insights that resonate with you and focus on implementing those.

Make plans to revisit this paper as you work on implementing the ideas you've discovered. We aim for the paper to serve as a resource you can turn to again and again in your ongoing efforts to understand and meet the Jobs to Be Done of your families. Share it with your team as a way to build a common language for more effective discussions about how to better serve your families.

As you work on addressing families' Jobs to Be Done, keep this big-picture perspective in mind: You're not merely running a program; you're solving the deeply felt struggles that families experience as they try to do what's best for their children. We hope that the insights from this paper equip you to serve your families with greater focus and efficacy. So take that step, however small, to make your program a refuge for families who are desperate for a solution to their challenges—the challenges your program is uniquely positioned to tackle.

APPENDIX

Clayton Christensen, Bob Moesta, and others pioneered the Jobs to Be Done Theory to address a major limitation in conventional market research. First, quantitative research tends to surface only correlations among customer demographics, product features, and purchasing decisions—not the true causes of demand. Second, more qualitative market research, such as focus groups, tends to uncover customers' stated preferences, not their actual preferences as revealed by their decisions and trade-offs. Jobs to Be Done aims to uncover the circumstances in people's lives that cause their choices.

The Jobs revealed in this study are not a comprehensive list of all the possible reasons that families switch schools. In fact, other research has uncovered additional Jobs, some of which overlap with this set and some of which are distinct from this set.⁷ In other words, these Jobs do not represent immutable realities. Rather, they are valuable glimpses into common patterns that surfaced when we interviewed parents to uncover their Jobs to Be Done.

Sample Selection

To understand the Jobs to Be Done driving families' schooling decisions, we interviewed ten parents who had enrolled their children in a microschool within the last three years. This sample size does not allow for precise statistical inferences about the population of families that participate in microschools. Nonetheless, we made efforts to diversify our sample across demographic variables such as region, race, student age, and school so that our research would uncover patterns common to many programs and families.

Interview Method

Interviewees were asked to help us create a “mini-documentary” of their school selection experience. Our aim was to capture the conditions and events that shaped their choices, from the initial dissatisfaction with the status quo to the final decision to embrace a new option. This method avoids relying on post-hoc rationalizations, focusing instead on the actual circumstances and events influencing their decisions. As key events emerged in their stories, we delved deeper to understand how these influenced their eventual choices.

Analysis

After each interview, we coded the key events and circumstances in the stories as Pushes, Pulls, Anxieties, or Habits, according to the Forces of Progress framework. We then conducted a cluster analysis to group interviews based on similarities among their Forces of Progress. This analysis revealed three clusters of interviews with similar circumstances underlying interviewees' choices. By reviewing the details within each cluster and noting the commonalities across their stories, we developed the three Jobs to Be Done characterized in this paper.

Notes

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About the Institute

The Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to improving the world through Disruptive Innovation. Founded on the theories of Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen, the Institute offers a unique framework for understanding many of society's most pressing problems. Its mission is ambitious but clear: work to shape and elevate the conversation surrounding these issues through rigorous research and public outreach.



About VELA

VELA is a national nonprofit fund that was established in 2019 to catalyze the community-driven innovation happening outside of the traditional K-12 education system. Today, the VELA Founder Network is the nation's largest community of entrepreneurs providing alternatives to conventional schooling. By providing early capital, access to a thriving community of entrepreneurs, and connections to resources and support, VELA is accelerating the exploration of new frontiers in education.



About Rewired

The Re-Wired Group is an innovation and design consulting firm that helps world-class organizations, institutions, and start-ups build better products and unlock transformational growth.

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