

## Collaborative Micro-Schools Community for Personalized Learning Experiences



**Max Ventilla**  
Founder & CEO

### **CEOCFO: Mr. Ventilla, what is the basic approach at AltSchool?**

**Mr. Ventilla:** The basic approach at AltSchool is to start from first principles. Because we have no legacy constraints, we can change anything. We ask ourselves what are all of the things people are doing well in school that we want to incorporate and what are all of the things we do not want to continue in the model of education? That could be across public, private and home schooling that families rely on to prepare their children for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It starts there, with the belief that we do not know what the future will hold. However, children can know what they need to be happy and successful and can change the world around them so that they can thrive. The way to achieve an education to promote that is to systematically look at what makes schools strong and figure out a way to not have that quality come from a large building or a great principal or other factors that are almost by definition scarce. Instead, have a school system that can get better and better the more people participate, through the foundational use of technology, interoperability that exists across classrooms, and ultimately, by giving autonomy to different teachers, different students and different families so that they can shape the experience for themselves.

### **CEOCFO: When you first started to formulate the plan and started to look at what was working and what was not, what surprised you?**

**Mr. Ventilla:** One thing that was a surprise is just how top down and ridged traditional schools is. We assume that schools move slowly. Related to that slowness is a lack of responsiveness that is at odds with the kind of environment that we take for granted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workspace, which is absolutely not the norm in a modern school. I met with many heads of schools when we first started and would sincerely ask what was their student satisfaction rate, how was it trending and what were the things that they were doing to make it go up. Often we would get blank stares, followed by anecdotes, because schools fundamentally just do not measure student satisfaction. Looking back, my school did not either. We almost take for granted that in the thirty or forty years since we were in elementary school that the rising tide in terms of how organizations operate would lift schools as well. However, it has not.

### **CEOCFO: How have you decided where to start your school? Is it around a principal, a teaching method or new approach?**

**Mr. Ventilla:** We really believe that technology and new approaches can transform education, but running schools is incredibly complex. The only way to understand what is needed is to actually run schools yourself - not so you can create a piece of functionality to improve existing schools, but rather to create a model that can scale and represent alternative options for in the long term millions and tens of millions of children. Then you have to figure it out by actually opening and running schools day-to-day and year-to-year. Therefore, the first thing that we did was bring together an amazing set of child-centered educators and families that want something different and want to be involved in the shaping of their child's school experience. Literally four months after we started the company, we opened a modern one room school house in San Francisco. From that seed we came to understand what a child-centered educator can do in a great classroom environment and what could support them in order for them to be better and make the quality of the experience more dependable, regardless of the teacher that you had. We have always taken that approach to hire exceptional educators, and give them sustainable support. Therefore, our focus is to build tools and processes that can become the norm for growing numbers of kids and do this at a range of cost points that can include what we currently spend in traditional schools.

**CEOCFO: *Is there a difference in the schools in Brooklyn from those in California? Does the culture of the city or mixture of students come into play?***

**Mr. Ventilla:** The culture does make a difference and it is a different physical environment. More formally they are going to prioritize different things that are really important about the education and about the community there than elsewhere. It is a fundamental belief of ours that we are not just trying to create an updated lowest common denominator experience. We are really allowing different classrooms to fundamentally shape what life is like day-to-day for each student and for the families that are a part of that community. In some senses we amplify the natural differences in population.

**CEOCFO: *How do you decide which children will be a part of your schools?***

**Mr. Ventilla:** First, it is important to acknowledge that parents come to us, so one of the things that we can do is take advantage of online and offline advertising. We make use of the natural interconnection between parents to get the word out. It starts there. If you do not have people applying, then you can never choose them in the first place. Second we get to know them through the application process. We put much less weight on the kind of document that is sent to us and more weight on the interactions that we have with the family and with the child throughout the interviews. This is through back and forth communication that is going to happen naturally over a period of months as we get a feel for each of the families that are applying. In addition, we have a rigorous process by which we look at all of the children that might be part of a class and across a few dozen dimensions to try and put together a group of students that are complimentary. Even something like having a mixed-staged classroom, gives you more latitude to put together a complementary class, because you have many more students who could be in classroom together, if you do not force yourself to have a twelve-month window of birthdays. We also look to find students with different skills, such as those who are creative or who might be an ideal friend to another child in the class. We speak with parents about these things as we are crafting a classroom. We are not just slotting in a small number of students to whatever slots that you have left according to a pre-defined criteria. We have a very significant waiting list for this year, but we are also building many more schools. We are always a year behind in satisfying the demand, which is different than the traditional schools where each year there will be more and more demand that they cannot satisfy.

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**CEOCFO: *If you want this to work universally, how does the hand picking translate to the mass of students?***

**Mr. Ventilla:** I would draw a distinction between which kids are going to complement each other and striving for a balanced classroom the way that we do and the narrow selection that the traditional high quality school employs. It is not to say that we are representative of the general population in America. We are not. We still operate private schools. Around 40 percent of our families receive financial aid, but the majority of families are paying an amount that most families in America unfortunately cannot afford. Therefore, we are less representative than a traditional urban public school. However, we are a great deal more representative if that population than a traditional private school or most public schools in wealthy suburban neighborhoods. We feel that even as we scale and we serve a much wider cross section of the US and ultimately an international population, we still want to be very intentional about which kids are in a classroom together with which teachers. The alternative to that is picking at random, which is what you have in a typical school. We can offer mixed-age classrooms that a child can be in, so it will give us a better chance to match them up with complimentary students and which teachers make sense based on the particulars of that class. We feel that this is a better model, but it requires you to have flexibility and technology that a typical school does not have.

**CEOCFO: *Does the building matter or can you create this perfect classroom in any setting?***

**Mr. Ventilla:** We do put schools anywhere, but it is not to say that nicer buildings or more resources could not be more additive. However, we do not think that the quality of the grounds should be the criteria by which you decide schools. We think that actually spending insane amounts of resources on giant buildouts and huge facilities is directly counter to spending focused on the things that are most important, which really takes place inside of the classroom. Therefore, one of the things that we stress is creating better classrooms, more multi-purpose classrooms and more classroom space per-child, in less facility space per-child and less overall spending on real estate per-child. In doing that you will get as much benefit as possible from spending as little money as possible.

**CEOCFO: *Where does your technology stand out?***

**Mr. Ventilla:** It is making a tremendous difference in our ability to open schools, find the right neighborhoods and manage the process of admissions, putting the right kids together and hiring the right teachers. It is also helpful in matching the

right teachers in the teaching team, as well as helping educators to personalize education for their students. It also allows them to make use of the broader world outside of school in a way that maintains the safety of students and maintains the effectiveness of being in school. It also makes a difference in how we can give agency to children to drive their own learning and how we can assess them in individual ways, as well as give transparency to them and their parents as to what is happening and what we can do differently. It is also making a difference in the involvement of not only families but also outside experts, mentors and the communities at large. All of those things use technology to bring down the cost of complexity and to increase the flexibility that we can have as it relates to personalization, teacher autonomy, parental involvement and the way that we can be flexible to the needs of each family. That may be around a 60 minute drop off window and a 3 hour pickup window, or the ability to offer a different foreign language to children in the same classroom. We can even let parents traveling abroad with the children get a list of activities so that they can make use of that time that they are away. Most schools cannot accommodate any variety in terms of the experience.

**CEOFO: *How do you help students who have been in a more traditional environment?***

**Mr. Ventilla:** Even an eleven year old is not so institutionalized that when they arrive in a school that gives them agency - where they are known and amazing educators are empowered to meet them where their needs are - that they will not respond, almost immediately. However, for all children there is a learning curve in terms of *making use of* that agency. They have to become accustomed to the responsibility to complete a playlist of activities each week. If they do not do that in school, they will have to do it outside of school. However, the learning curve comes pretty naturally.

**CEOFO: *What is the business model for AltSchool?***

**Mr. Ventilla:** We are creating an operating system to allow this kind of highly flexible personalized education and we can do the same three things with our operating system that a typical technology player can do with their operating system. We can use our platform to deliver an end user experience and that is what we are doing now. We run private schools, where parents pay tuition. We can also put our operating plan in the hands of partners, who in this case would open schools that might look different, but that are part of our network. They would be affiliated with AltSchool, even if they have their own unique brand. We can provide services and technology to them and be paid for the value that we create, where they are getting more from AltSchool for the cost that they could get elsewhere. Finally, we can take the kind of operating system that we iterate on and validate over a longer period of time and make it available in a packaged way to existing schools, so that they can modernize their approach. That might involve pieces of hardware and software that we have built, as well as access to structured content. It is a mix across those three approaches where we feel that we will be able to achieve both scale and material revenue, as well as the ability to fund R&D over the long term.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOFO Magazine

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## **AltSchool**

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