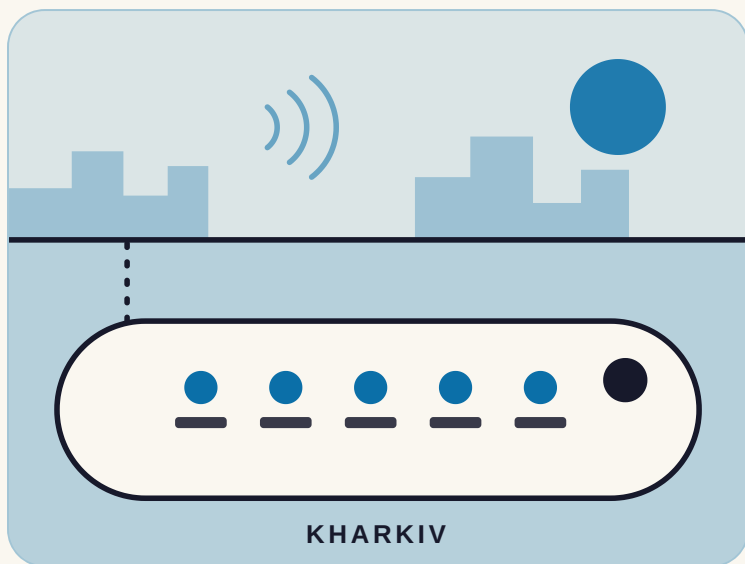




UKRAINE

The schools Kharkiv built underground

When missiles left no time to run, a city put its classrooms in the metro. Children came back.

WHERE Kharkiv

WHO Kharkiv's children, teachers and parents, and the city that moved school underground

WHEN 2022 to 2026

4 min read

The story

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, a girl in Kharkiv named Elmira Dergousova was turning five. She blew out the candles on her birthday cake, and then her mother rushed her down to the basement. Shells were already landing outside.

Kharkiv sits close to the Russian border. The mayor told CNN a missile can arrive in under 40 seconds, so air-raid alerts barely help. Schools became too dangerous, and lessons moved online.

Down into the metro

Mayor Ihor Terekhov had a different idea: teach children underground. The city fitted metro stations with classrooms, soundproofing, fresh air, a nurse and psychologists.

Lessons began on 4 September 2023, on a voluntary basis. About 1,000 children signed up. On day one, a first-grader named Nastia held the “talking yarn” and said, “My name is Nastia. I like chocolate.” The class clapped.

It's nice to feel the energy from the kids.

HANNA NEELOVA, FIRST-GRADE TEACHER, TO THE WASHINGTON POST, 2023

~1,000

children on day one,
2023

~17,000

in underground
schools, 2025

10

underground schools,
2026

What it gave them

Parents said the same thing: it beats online. Nadia Kozyreva had left Kupyansk with her twin daughters. On a janitor's pay, she found it hard to pay for the equipment for online lessons.

Teacher Olena Rudakova said her pupils came back from the war looking like adults. "They have grown up," she told CNN. Still, it is not the school they want: they ask for peace and their old school.

Growing, year by year

By February 2024, nearly 2,200 children studied at five metro sites, and the city had begun building bunker-style schools. By September 2025, Reuters reported about 17,000 children in underground schools.

This September, Gwara Media counted ten. As one welcome ceremony began, a siren sounded, and teachers led the waiting families down into the school until it passed. The old custom of graduates leading first-graders in, with little bells pinned to their uniforms, survived too.

A six-year-old named Maria was asked how it compared with kindergarten. She said she had never gone, because of the war. Her first school is underground.

How it unfolded

- **2022** Russia invades. Kharkiv's lessons move online.
- **2023** Metro classrooms open on 4 September.
- **2024** Nearly 2,200 children at five metro sites.
- **2025** About 17,000 children in underground schools.
- **2026** Ten underground schools are open.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Most war stories happen at the front line. This one happens at a school gate, on a bus, and around a ball of yarn. It is about adults refusing to let a whole generation lose its classrooms.

It is not a perfect fix. Places are limited, and one school told Gwara Media it cannot enrol more first-graders for lack of rooms. Attendance is voluntary, and the children still say they want their old school.

OUR TAKE

The city did not wait for peace to restart school. It built school into the war, and families chose it again each year, even with sirens still sounding.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Move the work, not the goal

Kharkiv could not make the sky safe, so it moved lessons underground.

Try this: Name one goal blocked by a risk you cannot remove, and write down one way to keep going with the risk contained.

2 Start voluntary and small

About 1,000 children started in September 2023, and CNN counted nearly 2,200 by February.

Try this: Test one idea with ten willing people this week before you scale it.

3 Care for the whole person

Psychologists and nurses stood next to the teachers from day one.

Try this: In your next one-to-one, ask: what is hard for you right now?

4 Protect the small rituals

The talking yarn, the embroidered shirts and the first-day bells all survived.

Try this: Keep one routine, such as a weekly dinner or a team check-in, even in a hard month.

5

Ask what people truly miss

Parents said online school could not replace being with other children.

Try this: Before fixing something, ask three people what they miss most.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

When you cannot make the world safe, make one room that is.

Sources

The Washington Post (via Stars and Stripes)

[Kharkiv's subways are now classrooms as school starts under Russian attacks](#)

CNN (via KTVZ)

['We won't hear the bangs': Ukrainian city moves schools into metro stations](#)

Reuters (via GMA News)

[Ukrainian children open school year by heading underground](#)

Gwara Media

[Kharkiv children go back to schools underground, behind armored doors](#)

Fact-check note: Numbers differ by source, date and definition. About 1,000 children on day one is the mayor's figure (Washington Post; Rubryka). CNN counts nearly 2,200 children at five metro sites in February 2024. Reuters says about 17,000 children attend underground schools in September 2025; that is for all underground schools, not only the metro, and is not independently checked. Gwara Media's count of ten underground schools (September 2026) comes from one local outlet. The number of metro classrooms is reported as 60 (Rubryka, 2023) and 19 (CNN, 2024), so it is left

out. The missile flight time of under 40 seconds is the mayor's statement to CNN. Reuters and the Washington Post were read through syndicated copies. The opening date of 4 September 2023 is from the Washington Post and Rubryka. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.