

Equitable Pandemic Learning Pods? A Glimpse of an Emerging Ecosystem

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When COVID-19 forced students to learn from home in spring 2020, families were largely on their own to figure out how to fill the gaps in school structure and supports.¹ As the pandemic wore on, some families formed their own learning pods, pooling time and resources to share responsibility for supervising children’s learning. At the same time, new and familiar organizations stepped forward to provide or facilitate space, funding, and student supervision. In a crisis that decimated the usual definitions of school, teachers, and the part families play in education, individuals and organizations adjacent to traditional school systems took over many school roles.

What supports were needed to enable the small learning communities, or pods, that emerged in 2020 and 2021? While learning pods may have emerged as a temporary response to a crisis, some persisted in fall 2021, either because of continued uncertainty over the pandemic’s trajectory or because of their potential value as part of new structure for public education.² Considering the ecosystem of organizations needed to support a small subset of these learning communities—mapping the roles they played and the challenges they faced—may help in creating or sustaining pods and other kinds of small learning communities in the future.

Our effort to map this ecosystem led us to several conclusions that we hope will help leaders make the most of this opportunity:

1. **Start with the “organizer.”** Though many roles make up the pod ecosystem, the organizer is foundational: the entity that can ensure that all vital roles in the ecosystem are filled and that students have equitable access to learning communities.

1 See the compilation of reports and case studies about this: Ashley Jochim and Jennifer Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation: Pandemic Pods and the Future of Education* (Glendale, AZ: Center on Reinventing Public Education, February 2022), <https://crpe.org/crisis-breeds-innovation-pandemic-pods-and-the-future-of-education>.

2 Travis Pillow, “Reinventing on the fly: How learning pods may hint at a new structure for public education,” *The Lens*, Center on Reinventing Public Education, August 18, 2020, <https://www.crpe.org/thelens/reinventing-fly-how-learning-pods-may-hint-new-structure-public-education>.

2. **Focus on ecosystem gaps.** Organizers can focus attention on ecosystem elements likely to be lacking based on our research, such as special-education services and assistance with finding staff for small learning communities.
3. **Attend to funding.** To thrive outside the surreal pandemic setting, small learning communities would need a systematic and sustainable funding source (or sources). Possibilities include having some education dollars follow children to pods, tapping philanthropy, or “braiding” multiple sources (such as funds for childcare, after-school programming, or student support).
4. **Move (with caution!) toward accountability.** If pods become not a temporary phenomenon but a durable part of the landscape, policymakers will need to determine how to ensure these learning communities are safe and effective, without squashing the diversity and innovation that are their hallmarks.
5. **Pursue equity.** Although the proliferation of small learning communities serving a diversity of children showed that pods can advance equity, any decentralized activity that requires resources will favor the advantaged—unless strong actors counterbalance that force with an equity-oriented agenda. Organizers can play the critical role of ensuring that small learning communities serve students who need learning boosts the most.

Remote learning unravels the traditional school model

For families, prepandemic schools provided, at least somewhat, a one-stop shop for instruction, meals, extracurricular and social activities, a place for their children to be during work hours, and specialized supports for educational, social-emotional, mental-health, and social-service needs. Closing school buildings unbundled these core elements: Though schools continued to provide instruction via packets of materials or through live or asynchronous online work, distributed breakfasts and lunches to students, and offered limited services such as counseling to students by phone or online, disconnecting students from the school building created an opportunity for an à la carte approach to school.

Though homeschools and microschoools existed before COVID-19, more families chose them during the 2020–21 school year, as well as the pandemic pods that cropped up when schools closed in spring 2020. Some districts and schools created small learning communities, but most were run by parents or were coordinated and operated by community-based organizations.³

³ For an analysis of the landscape of small learning communities that emerged in response to COVID-19, see the following: Carolyn Gramstorff, “Mapping the Pandemic Learning Landscape,” *Medium*, August 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/@carolyngramstorff/mapping-the-pandemic-learning-landscape-2b1b21279d4a>.

New ecosystem of pod support organizations emerges

Reminiscent of the development of a supportive ecosystem that enabled the charter sector to grow and persist,⁴ an ecosystem of organizations supporting pandemic learning communities emerged. Largely comprising community-based entities—including nonprofits, civic agencies, and private businesses—these organizations played distinct but sometimes overlapping support roles. Some were newly formed; others shifted their regular operations to redirect staff and resources to implement these roles.

Using a sample of six small learning communities that operated during the pandemic—including parent-run and community pandemic pods, homeschools, and microschoools (see [vignettes](#) and [map](#))—we developed a typology of support roles that individuals and organizations played based on the functions they served or the services they provided.

An Ecosystem of Pandemic Learning Community Support Roles

Note: Individual organizations may play multiple roles within this list.

Organizers: Preexisting or newly formed organizations that sponsored pandemic learning communities and that convened/coordinated partners and community members to design, organize, and operate the learning communities and to recruit families, hosts, and staff.

Funders: Local and national organizations—sometimes city or state governmental bodies—that directly funded pandemic learning communities or served as intermediaries to raise, collect, and/or disburse private and/or public funds to learning communities or their operators.

School of record: Where students were officially enrolled—public school, private school, or homeschool. Some learning communities were the school of record; more commonly, students attended another school virtually, which served as the school of record.

Operators: Often synonymous with school of record pre-pandemic, learning-pod operators were individuals or organizations who hired learning facilitators (below) and often served as hosts (below), providing space for learning pods to meet. They sometimes provided supplemental curriculum but generally relied on students' schools of record for academic curriculum and instruction.

⁴ See, for example, the following: Bryan C. Hassel, Veronica Brooks-Uy, and Olivia Perry, *Beyond District/Charter: How City Leaders Catalyze and Support Systems of Great Schools* (Memphis, TN: Education Cities, 2017), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED585207.pdf>; Juli Kim, Tim Field, and Elaine Hargrave, *Growing a High-Quality Charter Sector: Lessons from Tennessee* (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact and Broomfield, CO: Charter School Growth Fund, 2016), https://publicimpact.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Growing_a_High-Quality_Charter_Sector_Lessons_from_Tennessee.pdf; and Christen Holly, et al., *Ten Years in New Orleans: Public School Resurgence and the Path Ahead* (New Orleans, LA: New Schools for New Orleans, 2015), <http://newschoolsforneworleans.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Public-School-Resurgence-Full-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

Hosts: Provided a safe physical space in which students can learn, including Wi-Fi access and possibly digital devices, such as laptops and tablets.

Facilitators: Adults who directly supervised students in pandemic learning communities. In parent-run pods and in homeschools, this could be a parent, a teacher, or a tutor. In community-based small learning communities, that could include teachers, tutors, and nonteacher adults, such as volunteers, out-of-school-time providers, and staff at host sites whose role was to supervise students to ensure their safety, lead them in instruction or keep them focused on remote instruction offered by their school of record or online learning platform, ensure students had working digital equipment, and monitor recess and meals.

Curriculum and instructional supports: Individuals and organizations that provided resources to supplement the main curriculum used in small learning communities.

Other operational supports: Addressed noninstructional but essential needs, such as student transportation to and from learning community sites, meals, school supplies, IT connectivity, hardware and software, and facilities maintenance.

Family navigators: Provided families with information about learning options, in some cases coordinating the marketplace of opportunities for students and families. These ranged from organizations that provided basic matchmaking functions, such as making descriptive lists of options available to families, to those that played a more full-blown “navigator” role, helping families make decisions.

Regulators: Were responsible for ensuring that operators, facilitators, and hosts adhere to a set of standard expectations regarding—at a minimum—instructional quality, student-performance outcomes (whether growth or achievement), student physical and mental health and safety, and fiscal management. Many pandemic learning communities operated in a regulatory greenfield, free from direct oversight, whether because no rules yet existed to govern their activities or because they just went unnoticed due to pandemic-induced chaos and distraction. If similar learning communities continue, some entity would ideally promulgate standards and policies governing oversight, and hold organizers and operators accountable for meeting them.

Organizers

Organizers took the initiative to create learning pods. While an organizer might establish just a single pod, many organizers formed to create systems of multiple pods, across a whole city or part of town. Their role included convening and coordinating partners and community stakeholders to design, organize, and operate pods. They brought partners together to address operational issues, including identifying pod hosts and facilitators, and ensured that pods had funding. Organizers also recruited families to join pods operated by community-based organizations, matched families to form parent-run pods together, or matched teachers to small learning communities of any type.

In 2020, parents were some of the first learning pod organizers. Many early reports

on “pandemic pods” described families coming together to share supervision responsibilities for children learning remotely or hiring tutors for this supervision.⁵

Some existing organizations acted independently or formed collaboratives to organize learning pods. The Cleveland Foundation, a community foundation that leads and supports community enrichment and grantmaking, joined with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District to organize partners from an existing out-of-school-time district initiative to form academic learning pods (ALPs). In 2007, the Cleveland Foundation had established MyCom to support a network of after-school care and summer programs. The foundation and its partners mobilized these out-of-school-time providers to quickly set up ALPs with MyCom providing management support. In North Las Vegas, Nevada Action, an existing community-based nonprofit focused on ensuring that all Nevada children have diverse, high-quality education options, collaborated with the city council to open the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy for students in North Las Vegas whose parents were essential workers in surrounding communities.

Boston, Massachusetts—Several community-based organizations—the YMCA of Greater Boston, Latinos for Education, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, and The BASE—served as organizers of the Boston Community Learning Collaborative to form learning pods for underserved students facing a year of remote learning. With a grant from The Lynch Foundation, a private family foundation in Boston, three of the partners operated pods—two hosted at their own facility and one hosted at a church. Their participating students were largely enrolled in Boston Public Schools; the Community Learning Collaborative organizers developed curricula to supplement their homeschools’ academic curriculum. They created an enrichment curriculum designed to nurture students’ nonacademic growth related to physical, mental, and social-emotional health and a culturally relevant curriculum addressing students’ identities. The collaborative also prioritized hiring learning-pod facilitators who reflected the racial and ethnic identities of pod participants, so the organizations hired predominantly Black and Latinx adults, over half of whom had bachelor’s or master’s degrees. Because they were hired as counselors, pod facilitators did not need teaching credentials, though the majority were educators.

New entities also formed specifically to create or support pods, particularly to ensure that pods were not solely for wealthy families or that they addressed certain needs, such as students’ social-emotional well-being or focusing on culturally relevant instruction and support. In Boston, several organizations—the YMCA of Greater Boston, Latinos for Education, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, and The BASE—formed the Boston Community Learning Collaborative to organize learning pods for underserved students facing a year of remote learning. Also formed during the pandemic, Equity Pods was an online community that supported the implementation of learning pods and community programs for children of color to help bridge academic gaps between White and Black/Brown students. The organization helped

5 See the following: “The Rise of Pandemic Pods,” WAMU Radio, National Public Radio, August 12, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/12/901746967/the-rise-of-pandemic-pods>; Melinda Wenner Moyer, “Pods, Microschools and Tutors: Can Parents Solve the Education Crisis on Their Own?” *New York Times*, July 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/parenting/school-pods-coronavirus.html>; and Michael B. Horn, “The Rapid Rise of Pandemic Pods,” *Education Next* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2021), <https://www.educationnext.org/rapid-rise-pandemic-pods-will-parent-response-covid-19-lead-to-lasting-changes>.

provide resources, such as curriculum and funding, and connect educators and those interested in forming learning pods.

The organizer was perhaps the most critical member of the learning-pod ecosystem. Early reports of pandemic pods were mostly associated with affluent families who acted as their own organizers, hiring a teacher and coordinating the location and schedule of their personal pods. Hearing about wealthy parents pulling students out of schools to create learning pods helped inspire entities in several cities to become “organizers,” setting a vision for more equitable access to small learning communities. In Cleveland, for example, the district and the Cleveland Foundation organized pods focused on students who lacked a home setting conducive to remote learning or an adult present during the day to supervise schoolwork.

Cleveland, Ohio—Cleveland Metropolitan School District, the Cleveland Foundation, MyCom, and United Way organized ALPs for students lacking adult supervision at home or a space conducive to remote learning by using their established connections with neighborhood organizations that provided students with out-of-school-time support. MyCom, a network of out-of-school-time providers created by the Cleveland Foundation in 2007, worked with the providers to establish the learning pods and provided pod oversight and management. The out-of-school-time organizations operated and hosted the pods, shifting current staff into facilitator roles and, in most cases, hiring additional staff. The Cleveland Foundation and United Way, among others, combined funds to pay the out-of-school-time providers. District schools remained students’ schools of record and provided remote instruction, though learning pods tailored their additional time to offer tutoring and other programs based on their prepandemic programming. The Cleveland Foundation hired a consultant to provide professional development twice a week to the facilitators. Some individual out-of-school-time providers provided more onsite training for their pod staff.

A diverse and broad set of community-based organizers may help ensure a range of learning-pod opportunities—in terms of learning environment, curricular focus, and student supports—that are equitably accessible to any family seeking to participate in or form their own small learning community.

Funders

Though some families had the means to fund their own learning pods, other funding sources emerged in 2020 so more families could join small learning communities. These could be local or national organizations that directly funded pods. For example, The Lynch Foundation, a private family foundation in Boston, made a grant to the Boston Community Learning Collaborative to implement learning pods; Engaged Detroit received funding from the National Parents Union to support a homeschooling network serving families affected by pandemic-fueled school closures. Organizations also served as intermediaries to raise, collect, and/or disburse private or public funds to learning pods or their operators. MyCom and United Way in Cleveland disbursed funds from funding sources to the out-of-school-time providers that led learning pods. Though local nonprofit organizations dominated among learning-pod funders, public monies sometimes funded learning pods. In North Las Vegas, Nevada Action received city funds for the microschool it created.

Funding presents potentially the greatest barrier to the ability of small learning communities to form and persist, especially in a way that allows equitable opportunity for any student and family to participate. Without state policies that direct funds to families to spend on education at their discretion, families are either left to their own means or dependent on a community source for pod funding. Community organizations serving as organizers, operators, and hosts also needed a source of funding, and many turned to private philanthropy and fundraising.

School of record

Though school closures displaced students from their usual learning locations, most continued to receive instruction from their schools of record, even if they were located in their learning pod each day. Cleveland students enrolled in learning pods, for example, continued to receive remote instruction from their district school while at the location of and under supervision of an out-of-school-time organization. In a CRPE survey, “55 percent of parents reported that ‘all’ or ‘most’ of their child’s English language arts instruction was provided remotely by their school. For math, it was also 55 percent.”⁶

In other small learning communities, the pod became the students’ school of record, such as in North Las Vegas, where the city-funded Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy was viewed by the state as a homeschool collective, meaning students had to leave their district and register as homeschoolers. This school is continuing in 2021–22 as a city-funded, homeschool-student microschool but is now operated by a Texas-based charter school network.

Detroit, Michigan—Engaged Detroit, a cooperative of 32 Black homeschool families, formed in August 2020 to share resources and coordinate coaching support for parents, helping them learn how to best lead their students in their studies. Homeschools were self-funded and family operated, with families creating their own curriculum, subject to the state’s homeschool laws and regulations. Engaged Detroit hired former homeschoolers to serve as parent coaches, mentoring parents on constructing learning goals and objectives for their children that reflected each family’s values and helping parents create and select academic curriculum and supplementary materials and extracurricular activities.

Operators

Prepandemic, operators and a student’s school of record were the same thing—the entity responsible for curriculum and instruction—whether they were run by school districts, state education agencies that operate statewide virtual schools, nonprofits such as private schools, churches, or charter management organizations, or families operating homeschools. With pods, students enrolled in an operator’s small learning community while remotely attending a different school of record, such as a local public school.

Learning pod operators hired facilitators (the adults supervising students) and often served as hosts for pods to meet. In Cleveland, the out-of-school-time organizations

⁶ Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*.

that hosted the pods and employed facilitators served as the operators; most also used their prepandemic locations to house the pods, though some had to find larger spaces to accommodate COVID protocols. Cleveland Metropolitan School District provided remote instruction, and out-of-school-time organizations redirected existing staff to serve as pod facilitators and often hired more staff to serve students. The start-up KaiPods launched spaces where families could drop off their students; students attended their schools of record online with the in-person support of “learning coaches.”⁷

Some operators relied on students’ schools of record for academic instruction but provided supplemental curricula. For example, students in the Boston Community Learning Collaborative were largely learning remotely through their assigned public school. The collaborative supplemented the academic curriculum with an enrichment curriculum and a cultural relevance curriculum that the collaborative organizers developed. In many learning pods, a facilitator (such as a tutor or volunteer) supported or monitored students’ use of curriculum without guidance from the actual instructor or curriculum developer. In some cases, operators new to remote learning got help creating stronger structures. For example, Community Works Louisiana staff worked with parents whose students participated in the homeschool pod to set up a curriculum and schedules.

The return to in-person school in the 2021–22 school year somewhat reestablished definitional boundaries. Data suggest that the number of students enrolled in traditional public schools has decreased over the course of the pandemic, with homeschool and private school numbers increasing; in all these environments, the operator’s role is clear. But if learning pods persist in which the operator and the school of record are different, or if districts continue to expand virtual academy offerings, these arrangements may challenge traditional notions of accountability. Can schools be held fully accountable when their students are learning elsewhere, with a different organization facilitating their activities? And how should operators be held accountable for their contributions to students’ learning?

Hosts

Hosts provided small learning communities with a safe space conducive to learning. Their facilities provided Wi-Fi and possibly devices such as laptops and tablets. Hosts potentially overlapped with other roles, as the host may also be the learning-pod organizer or operator. In 2020, hosts of small learning communities used a variety of locations, including commercial offices and retail spaces; community-based nonprofit facilities, such as libraries, churches, and out-of-school-time centers; and homes.

Both the Boston Community Learning Collaborative and the Cleveland learning pods used community-based nonprofit spaces. Two of the four community-based organizations that formed the Boston Community Learning Collaborative hosted learning pods at their facilities. A third used space in a local church. Various out-of-school-time providers hosted and operated the Cleveland pods. Black Mothers Forum, a network of homeschoolers, realized that homes would not work for all of their families, as some needed an alternate location for their children’s school day. They acquired space for this purpose.

⁷ Natasha Mascarenhas, “KaiPod Learning thinks ‘learning pods’ are here to stay,” *TechCrunch*, August 18, 2021, <https://techcrunch.com/2021/08/18/kaipod-learning-thinks-learning-pods-are-here-to-stay>.

In North Las Vegas, the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy was hosted in three city-owned buildings—two recreation centers and one library—due to the collaboration between Nevada Action and the city to set up the microscool.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, small learning communities redefined the types of places that could host “school.” Because they were generally small, they could find many suitable options for hosting them, especially when many spaces were otherwise shuttered during the pandemic. In a world of ongoing learning pods, a wide range of nonprofit and privately operated spaces could potentially host pods, such as museums, businesses, and higher-education campuses. But owners and operators would have to be concerned about any childcare, education, or health and safety regulations that would apply to them, so allowances or incentives may be needed to encourage potential hosts to open their doors. Organizers would also ensure accessibility: Are facilities located in places reachable by the families they wish to serve? Are there alternative modes of transportation that could be organized to ensure transport is not a barrier to equitable access when families cannot drive their students to the facility?

New Orleans, Louisiana—With funding from the Vela Education Fund, a national nonprofit focused on accelerating education innovation, Community Works Louisiana, a New Orleans community organization that previously ran out-of-school-time activities, opened two learning pods—one for district students who were children of teachers and another for homeschool students. Community Works hosted the homeschool learning pod at its office building; a local public school hosted the learning pod for children of teachers. Community Works Louisiana’s staff developed STEAM activities that were consistent with state standards to use during nonacademic time to encourage play and introduce students to new learning experiences and skills. All pod facilitators were experienced staff members with three to eight years of experience working with Community Works Louisiana. Though they were not certified teachers, they were a racially diverse group with a range of skills useful for enrichment programming, such as martial arts, art, and fashion design. Community Works Louisiana’s director of education, who supervised the pods, trained staff in developing lesson plans and instructional materials. Community Works also provided access to diversity, equity, and inclusion training for facilitators and used its inclusion lead staff member to support staff in developing learning plans for students with special needs.

Pod facilitators

Facilitators were the adults who directly supervised students in learning pods. In parent-run pods and homeschools, the facilitator may have been the parent, a teacher, or a tutor. According to a CRPE survey, the most popular option was to hire a professional with a background in education. Of surveyed families, 43 percent hired a teacher to supervise their pod, and another 25 percent hired a paraprofessional educator, versus 39 percent of families who cited supervision by one parent or a group of parents.⁸

In community-based learning pods, facilitators included former teachers, tutors, and nonteacher adults, such as volunteers, the staff of out-of-school-time providers, and

⁸ Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*.

staff at host sites. Their roles included supervising students to ensure their safety, making sure that they had working hardware and Internet connections, keeping students engaged in the remote instruction offered by their home school or online learning platform, and monitoring recess and meals.

Some pods focused on hiring facilitators who had previous education experience to help lead or guide students through their curriculum. The Boston Community Learning Collaborative prioritized hiring learning-pod facilitators who reflected the racial and ethnic identity of pod participants, so it hired predominantly Black and Latinx adults, over half of whom had bachelor's or master's degrees. Because they were hired as counselors, they did not need teaching credentials, though the majority had backgrounds as educators. The Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy employed facilitators called "learning guides" to lead curriculum and support students' academic progress using resources from Prenda and Cadence Learning. Due to state restrictions, learning guides could not be called teachers, but many were former teachers, substitutes, and tutors.

Other pods where students received remote instruction from their schools of record were more flexible with facilitator experience because they were not leading instruction. Cleveland out-of-school-time providers that hosted pods used their existing staff members and hired additional staff, most often those representative of students' home communities, to facilitate their learning pods.

Generally, teachers continued to teach during the 2020–21 school year, but they delivered virtual instruction from their homes or empty school buildings. Although teachers did become pod facilitators in some cases, collective bargaining and other contractual agreements prevented many from leading pods while continuing to be employed as teachers. The need for adults to be physically present with students presented opportunities for small learning communities to look beyond the traditional classroom instructor to community members, including nonprofit volunteers, childcare and out-of-school-time providers, and tutors. But unlike the paraprofessionals employed in schools, pod facilitators typically did not work under the supervision of licensed teachers. The level of instructional training and support they received varied. If small learning communities persist, organizers, operators, and regulators will need to assess what approaches to staffing work best in different kinds of pods.

Facilitator, program, and curriculum supports

The shift to remote learning in spring 2020 precipitated greater demand for supports for pod facilitators, educators, noneducators, and students. Facilitators needed guidance in supporting student learning, managing behavior, and addressing social-emotional issues. Pods also needed resources to supplement students' curriculum due to their concerns about catching students up, relieving students' isolation, or the need to focus on equity.

Operators pursued a range of approaches to supporting facilitators.

- **Employing external contractors:** The Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy used Prenda and Cadence Learning for curriculum—both of which included services for its facilitators known as learning guides. Prenda provided training and support, including a message board with learning guides in other locations.

Cadence Learning provided training and mentor teachers for learning guides, including preparation for instruction, materials, and twice-weekly professional development. The Cleveland Foundation hired a consultant to provide professional development twice a week on instructional support to the out-of-school-time program staff who served as facilitators.

- **Providing supports directly:** Some operators relied on in-house supports; for example, Community Works Louisiana’s director of education, who supervised the two learning pods that Community Works hosted and facilitated, trained staff in developing lesson plans and instructional materials. Community Works also provided access to diversity, equity, and inclusion training for facilitators and used its inclusion lead staff member to support staff in developing learning plans for students with special needs. In Cleveland, some individual out-of-school-time providers who hosted and facilitated learning pods provided more on-site training for their staff.

In Michigan, Engaged Detroit provided coaches to help parents learn how to support students in learning. Coaches mentored parents on constructing learning goals and objectives for their children that reflected each family’s values and supported parents in creating and selecting academic curricula and supplementary materials and extracurricular activities.

The Boston Community Learning Collaborative organizers developed curricula to supplement public school instruction: an enrichment curriculum designed to nurture students’ nonacademic growth related to physical, mental, and social-emotional health and a culturally relevant curriculum addressing students’ identity.

- **Leaving it to facilitators:** Our sample does not provide insight into how independent learning pods not part of a collective or a larger network got connected to such supports. CRPE’s survey suggests that in many cases, facilitators were left to their own devices in finding needed support:

To find more support, some pod instructors turned to the Internet, social media, or other “crowdsourced” resources. One instructor turned to the Internet to find “other teachers [to] bounce ideas off of” and help problem-solve in real time. Several instructors reported reaching out to a Facebook group for pandemic pods to source new ideas for the challenges they encountered. One instructor even learned “on the fly” by taking education classes online.⁹

Small learning communities offer great potential to create personalized learning settings with individualized supports. Outsourcing curriculum and program supports opens up new sources of expertise related to individual student needs and interests. But with students receiving services in a decentralized, widely varied range of settings, issues of equitable access can emerge. For example, a number of online providers offer curriculum and instructional supports, but only some of them are free, limiting options for families that cannot afford them. Similarly, a number of entities help match families with teachers and tutors to lead or support their pandemic pods, but these services can be expensive as well. No system currently ensures that

⁹ Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*.

services—particularly for students with learning differences and English language learners—are equitably accessible to students participating in learning pods.

One area of support that would need extra attention if small learning communities persist is special-education services. With their small size, pods are not positioned to provide a full array of services to students with disabilities. CRPE reported the following:

A parent in Utah who served as a pod instructor said that “the biggest drawback is, I don’t have the same resources that public school teachers will have.” One child in the pod struggled with handwriting, fine motor skills, and counting. If she were working in a public school, she said, she could have set him up with an occupational therapist immediately. But as a pod leader with no formal role in the school district, she had to make recommendations to the child’s parents, who were then responsible for convincing the remote classroom teacher to reach the same conclusion and then relay it to the school to provide support.¹⁰

These issues (and others) present a major challenge to any city seeking to make small learning communities like pods an enduring, scalable part of the landscape: how to fund these communities and the supports they need to thrive. In the “Looking Ahead” section below, we provide some initial thoughts on how to address this challenge.

North Las Vegas, Nevada—Nevada Action, a community-based nonprofit focused on ensuring that all Nevada children have diverse, high-quality education options, collaborated with the City of North Las Vegas to open the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy (SNUMA) for North Las Vegas students or area students whose parents were essential workers. With city funds, SNUMA used two learning models: Prenda, a microscool program begun in 2018 in Arizona, for students in first and second grades, and Cadence Learning, a new learning model that offered coaching and instructional materials and lesson plans for facilitators, for grades three through eight. SNUMA employed facilitators called “learning guides” to lead curriculum and support students’ academic progress. Due to state restrictions, learning guides could not be called teachers, but many were former teachers, substitutes, and tutors. SNUMA was viewed by the state as a homeschool collective, meaning students had to leave their district and register as homeschoolers.

Nonacademic operational supporters

Like schools, small learning communities required providers to assist with essential noninstructional needs, such as student transportation, nutrition, school supplies, technology needs, and facilities maintenance. For example, Three Square, a Southern Nevada food bank and hunger-relief organization, provided breakfast, lunch, and a snack to the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy, which the city helped organize.

The need to make spaces operable for learning pods created an opportunity for other community organizations to provide school supports that schools typically manage for themselves. For businesses or providers whose regular clientele or revenue sources dried up during COVID-19 shutdowns, supporting learning communities

¹⁰ Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*.

presented an avenue for redirecting staff and replacing client and revenue streams. But sufficient funding for learning pods is a precursor to their continuing to extend these opportunities for operational supports.

Family navigators

In the 2020 pod ecosystem, some organizations helped families navigate pod options. For example, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District helped connect families to learning pods in their area. Out-of-school-time providers connected parents with resources and kept them updated with school and learning-pod information.

In a landscape of multiple small learning community options, individual families would benefit from having help to pick the right, high-quality pod for their student or identify funding sources to implement their own pod. Having a navigator entity coordinate a marketplace of information about small-learning-community opportunities and options may also help ensure equitable access and guard against the development of a sector of fee-based, small-learning-community consultants serving only families that can afford them.

Regulators

Traditionally, elected officials (including school boards), charter authorizers, and other state and local agencies determine standards that apply to schools and the people in them. They monitor schools' compliance with and performance against those standards and impose consequences for violations or underperformance. In a world with ongoing pods, one could imagine learning-pod regulators that are similarly responsible for ensuring that operators, facilitators, and hosts adhere to a set of standard expectations regarding—at a minimum—instructional quality, student-performance outcomes (whether growth or achievement), student physical and mental health and safety, and fiscal management. They would promulgate standards and policies governing oversight of learning pods and hold organizers and operators accountable for them. Many pandemic learning pods, however, operated without any official public regulator.

Equity Pods, an online community, formed during the pandemic to provide K-12 educators and educational organizations, including learning pods, with culturally specific resources and curriculum for Black and Brown youth. It supported learning pods in Brooklyn, New York; North Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Houston, Texas.

Sometimes organizers took on regulator-type roles unofficially. For example, MyCom, an operator that helped identify out-of-school-time providers to host the Cleveland pods, also provided oversight of the pods, including prescreening for compliance with childcare and other regulations. Pod operators also had to demonstrate compliance with operating standards that MyCom developed for the out-of-school-time organizations receiving funding from the Cleveland Foundation.

But as pods proliferated, with different entities handling organizer, operator, and facilitator roles for the same pod, regulation sometimes defaulted to the identity

or status of a party participating in the pod. For example, childcare licensing requirements may have applied to a childcare facility or out-of-school-time provider hosting a small learning community but not a local church. Parent-run pods may have been subject to state and district homeschool rules if they unenrolled their children from their public school of record. If small learning communities persist and spread, policymakers will need to devote more intentional design to the role of regulator.

Looking ahead for future pods

Education innovations that spring up due to parent demand, such as learning pods, offer opportunities for individuals and organizations outside of the conventional school system structure to make new connections with students, offer them new learning environments, and bring new resources to education. The ecosystem of supports for learning pods introduced tantalizing possibilities for community members to provide more individualized education environments for students in a postpandemic future.

For pods to continue or restart in a future crisis—and, most important, to serve all students equitably and with high-quality learning—communities need a rich ecosystem that ensures an accessible, sufficiently funded supply of quality options, helpful information for families and those involved with running and supporting pods, and ways of ensuring accountability for students’ safety and—ultimately—learning. Based on what we learned through this research, leaders interested in fostering small learning communities in their locales can follow a few key guideposts:

- 1. Start with the “organizer.”** Although many roles make up the pod ecosystem, the organizer is foundational: the entity that can ensure that all vital roles in the ecosystem are filled. The organizer can recruit operators and hosts; inventory available supports and act to fill gaps; and ensure families have the information they need to navigate learning options. Organizers can play other ecosystem roles themselves, or they can enlist partner organizations to play these roles. Without a strong organizer, the ecosystem is likely to be incomplete. And small learning communities are much less likely to achieve equity goals if there is no organizer seeking to ensure that students who most need pods and other supports have access.
- 2. Focus on ecosystem gaps.** As described in this report, many roles make up a thriving ecosystem for small learning communities. Organizers can focus attention on ecosystem elements that our research suggests would likely be lacking. Critical examples include special-education services, ensuring that small learning communities are fully accessible, and talent services to recruit, place, and support educators and noneducators in pods. These two stand out because most locales would probably lack any preexisting organizations to fill these roles, as existing special-education and talent organizations are likely focused on schools. A strong organizer can incubate, recruit, or otherwise make sure each element is in place.

- 3. Attend to funding.** During the pandemic, small learning communities sprang up in a funding environment that would not be replicated in more “normal” times. Pod operators and hosts were sometimes organizations with preexisting funding that couldn’t carry out their normal activities; they could repurpose idle staff and facilities without needing additional funding. And philanthropy was poised to help, given the emergency of a global pandemic. These conditions wouldn’t exist in a post-COVID-19 effort to foster small learning communities across a city. So organizers would need to address funding in a more systematic, sustainable way. At scale within a city, one could imagine a situation in which school districts achieved savings by having so many students attend “school” elsewhere that it would be feasible to have some public school funding “follow” students to pods. Such an arrangement, however, would face extraordinary political and practical barriers. An alternative would be to arrange for districts to provide some range of services to pods, such as including them on transportation routes or providing services to students with disabilities within small learning communities. Another is to find ways of “braiding” multiple sources (such as funding for child care, after-school programming, or student support). Still another alternative would be to try to fund pods philanthropically, but that would likely place a severe limit on scale or longevity, or both.
- 4. Move (with caution!) toward accountability.** If pods became not a temporary phenomenon but a durable part of the landscape, questions of accountability would become more urgent to address. How can authorities ensure that pod environments are safe and conducive to learning? Should pod operators somehow be responsible for how much students learn or other values while in their care? If so, how? As organizers and potential regulators grappled with these questions, caution would be in order: overregulation could negate some of the real potential of small learning communities to make students’ experiences very different from the norm. At the same time, especially if public funds are in play, leaders have good reason to look for ways to ensure that “different” still meets some bar of quality and that families have visibility into whether students are thriving in a learning community. Given the diversity of pods, standardized measures will have limits; organizers can consider alternatives, such as family- or expert-driven rating systems and the use of surveys to gauge and report family and educator satisfaction.
- 5. Pursue equity.** When “pandemic pods” first emerged, many associated them with groups of advantaged families hiring teachers to tutor their children in their homes. But soon, a wide range of small learning communities emerged to serve a diversity of children. While this proliferation showed that pods can advance equity, any decentralized activity that requires resources will favor the advantaged—unless strong actors counterbalance that force with an equity-oriented agenda. Organizers can play the critical role of ensuring that small learning communities serve students who need learning boosts the most.

Attending to these challenges will not address all of the issues a locale would face but could go a long way toward fostering an array of small learning communities that can provide options for an increasingly diverse student body.

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About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.

Pod support role	Learning Pod Site					
	Boston Community Learning Collaborative	Cleveland Academic Learning Pods	Engaged Detroit	Equity Pods	Community Works Louisiana	Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy
Organizers	The Community Learning Collaborative: Latinos for Education, YMCA of Greater Boston, The BASE, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA)	The Cleveland Foundation, Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), MyCom, United Way	Engaged Detroit	Equity Pods	Community Works Louisiana	Nevada Action, the City of North Las Vegas
Funders	The Lynch Foundation	The Cleveland Foundation, United Way, some redirected funding from CMSD Funds distributed by MyCom and United Way	National Parents Union	Partnerships with funding organizations such as the Flex Institute; Equity Pods did online fundraising	The Vela Education Fund	City of North Las Vegas
School of record	District schools	District schools	Homeschool	Homeschool	Homeschool or district school (one pod of each)	Microschool, listed by the state as a homeschool collective, with students receiving curriculum from the learning models Prenda or Cadence Learning
Operators	YMCA, The BASE, IBA	Out-of-school-time organizations	Homeschool	The local pod provider	Community Works Louisiana	Nevada Action, Prenda, and Cadence Learning
Hosts	Two of the four community-based organizations that formed the Community Learning Collaborative hosted learning pods at their facilities; a third used space in a local church	Out-of-school-time centers	Parents	Local pod provider	Community Works Louisiana office space, Broadmoor Arts and Wellness Center office (same location as Community Works office), and a local school	City of North Las Vegas provided two recreation centers and a library
Facilitators provided by	YMCA, IBA, The BASE, Latinos for Education	Out-of-school-time providers	Parents	Educators hired by local pod	Community Works Louisiana	Nevada Action (called learning guides) and City Parks and Recreation staff

	Learning Pod Site					
	Boston Community Learning Collaborative	Cleveland Academic Learning Pods	Engaged Detroit	Equity Pods	Community Works Louisiana	Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy
Facilitator, program, and curriculum supports	YMCA, The BASE, IBA, Latinos for Education	The Cleveland Foundation hired an independent consultant to lead professional development Some out-of-school-time providers provided students with activities and academic support after remote learning	Engaged Detroit provided coaches to help parents learn how to support students in learning; Engaged Detroit also helped connect parents to organizations that could support students' interests	Equity Pods had curriculum and supplemental materials for parents who were interested	Community Works Louisiana's director of education on instruction; external training on diversity, equity, and inclusion	City parks and recreation staff provided recess, after-school care Cadence Learning provided professional development and guidance from a lead teacher for learning guides using the service, and Prenda provided initial training for learning guides using the platform
Other operational supports						Three Square; IT support from City of North Las Vegas
Family navigators	School district or student's individual pod	CMUSD and out-of-school-time organizations	Engaged Detroit	Local pod provider	Community Works Louisiana	Nevada Action, City of North Las Vegas
Regulators		MyCom	State homeschool laws and regulations	Varied by location of pod provider	Community Works Louisiana developed STEAM activities that were consistent with state standards	State homeschool laws and regulations