



# CRISIS BREEDS INNOVATION

PANDEMIC PODS AND THE  
FUTURE OF EDUCATION

By **Ashley Jochim and Jennifer Poon**  
Center on Reinventing Public Education  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**..... 6

**About**..... 9

**Part 1: A Resurgence of the One-Room Schoolhouse** .....10

**Part 2: Pods Provided a Vehicle for More  
Student-and Family-Centered Education** ..... 17

**Part 3: Pods Redefined the Teaching Experience** ..... 33

**Part 4: Will Pandemic Pods Endure?** .....43

**Part 5: Conclusion and Implication** ..... 53

**Photo credits**..... 58

# INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2020, it became clear to growing numbers of families and community organizations that COVID-19's unprecedented disruptions to public education would not subside in time for the coming school year. Facing the prospect of continued school closures and uncertain public health safeguards, families were forced to make new childcare arrangements, often at the expense of their employment, and had to navigate the stress of dislocation and isolation with little support from the institutions they had long relied upon.

Across the country, some families devised their own solution: the pandemic pod. They brought together small groups of students and enlisted adults—hired instructors, or groups of parent volunteers—to supervise students and support their learning.

These efforts were born of necessity, but they also provided a unique opportunity for families to remake learning based on their own visions and find a better way. We set out to learn from them and found that many parents, students, educators, and community leaders did not want to go backward once they charted this new path forward.

The lessons of this accidental experiment—if we take them seriously—can have profound implications for education leaders and policymakers seeking to build systems that work for all students.

In partnership with our funders, the Center on Reinventing Public Education launched a national initiative that brought together researchers from around the country to track and analyze [the pandemic pod movement](#). Our goal was simple: to learn from the families, educators, and community-based organizations who stepped in during the crisis to solve urgent challenges and, along the way, invented educational solutions that could outlast the pandemic.

This report is one part of that larger effort. It offers the first in-depth look at families' and educators' experiences with pandemic pods, drawing upon a national survey of 152 parents and 101 instructors who participated in a pod during the pandemic, and follow-up interviews with 62 survey respondents.

Pandemic pods were both hailed as creative solutions to the challenges of remote learning and critiqued as [exclusive arrangements that may widen inequality](#). But evidence shows that the experiences of families and educators do not align neatly with either the hopes of pods' most fervent cheerleaders or the fears of their most ardent critics.

The lessons we learned from these short-lived crisis responses have enduring relevance as policymakers contend with a historic rise in homeschooling and a proliferation of micro-schools, as school districts work to meet the needs of families who might otherwise leave public schools in search of other options, and as school and system leaders look for new ways to design learning environments that respond to a vast range of student needs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Families and teachers alike saw benefits in pods. Overall, two-thirds of families who responded to our survey cited at least one tangible benefit over pre-pandemic schooling. Pod instructors also reported satisfaction with the experience—they had the flexibility to design learning experiences and developed close relationships with students and families.

But not everyone reflected positively on their experience. Parents in pods that relied more heavily on remote learning reported less overall satisfaction with their experience than those that operated independently. And some families and educators reported feeling cut off from essential supports, including special education services for students and professional development and opportunities for collaboration for instructors.

Importantly, we found that pandemic learning communities often offered valuable relational benefits. Families reported strengthened social bonds with those who collaborated with them to form pods. In particular, the Black families we interviewed in our study liked selecting the instructors who would work with their children. At the same time, pods were not immune from conflicts over health precautions and hot-button societal issues; they also showed a tendency toward homogenous grouping that could leave out students with different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Our findings suggest that families and educators can carve new, promising paths forward when freed from the rules around how school is supposed to work. At the same time, some of pods' flexibility arose because they were disconnected from the rules and routines that typically govern school systems. While this could yield benefits for students and freed educators to work in ways they found fulfilling, it also meant that students and educators in pods were cut off from critical forms of support.

Altogether, pandemic pods suggest important new paths to achieve a more joyful, customized, and relationship-based learning environment for both students and teachers. In other words, when families and educators had the opportunity to redefine school, they chose to go to the core of what they believe is most important. This has important implications for those who want to facilitate the creation of small learning environments and for those who want to bring more of those elements back into public education.

Some families and educators said that they don't want to go back—they plan to continue podding. For them, local schools and districts should provide increased support to ensure that pods can access services and address inequities. They should also look inward, learning from the greatest strengths of pandemic pods to build learning environments that offer affirmation, individualization, flexibility, and relationship-building. These lessons should not be ignored, even as pandemic podding fades from view. Sustaining pandemic-era innovations and applying the lessons from these unplanned experiments won't be easy, but it may ultimately improve public education for all students.

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and teachers.”



# ABOUT THE PROJECT

In February 2021, the Center on Reinventing Public Education administered an original survey to 253 families or educators who organized or participated in a pandemic pod. To build on our survey results, we conducted in-depth interviews with 27 parents and 35 pod instructors or participants in the spring of 2021. See the [Appendix online](#) for our survey methods and sample characteristics.

Parents we surveyed were predominantly white, well-educated, and economically advantaged, with respondents more likely to live in urban or suburban communities than rural areas (Table A1 in Appendix A). Sixty-three percent of parents and 69 percent of educators were white; 5 percent of parents and 18 percent of educators were Black. Pod families and instructors were similarly well-educated: for both groups, about 80 percent had graduated from college, including more than 40 percent who had a graduate degree. Nearly half of parent respondents reported a household income above \$125,000 per year. Our respondents included individuals living in all regions of the country.

How representative of the larger movement is this sample of pandemic pod families and educators? It's hard to say. Nationally representative surveys have yet to provide definitive evidence on how participation in pods varies by race and household income. Instead, it seems to vary from one survey to the next. For example, the [University of Southern California's Understanding America Study](#) reported that 11 percent of children were part of pods, defined as "in-person groups of students learning together with the help of an in-person tutor or teacher, organized by families, not by schools." In that survey, low-income families were far more likely to report participating in a pod compared to higher-income families, at 18 percent versus 4 percent. But in January 2021, a [nationally representative survey](#) conducted by Civis Analytics found that 18 percent of children participated in a pod. In this survey, higher-income families were more than twice as likely to participate compared to lower-income families, at 23 percent versus 10 percent.

Given these data limitations, our survey and interviews cannot claim to offer a representative look at the whole of the pandemic pod movement across the United States. What we are sharing is something different: the first in-depth assessment of families' and instructors' experiences in pods, based on their detailed reporting.

# PART 1:

## A RESURGENCE OF THE ONE-ROOM SCHOOLHOUSE

Pandemic learning pods arose due to the peculiar circumstances families confronted when school buildings closed in March 2020: Students could not attend school in person, and families could not always provide the supervision and support with remote learning they required.

In our surveys and interviews with parents and educators who participated in pods, we found that:

- **Families formed pods to combat isolation and provide child supervision during the workday when schools turned remote.** Concern about socialization opportunities for their children was the most oft-cited motivation among parents who participated in pods, followed by the need for supervision during the school day.
- **Families most commonly recruited former teachers or paraprofessional educators to lead their pods.** Families with annual earnings over \$75,000 were more likely to hire educators with formal training than were those with lower earnings.
- **While most pods remained somewhat tethered to remote learning provided by their brick-and-mortar schools, the extent of that reliance varied considerably.** Instructors played a larger role when pods were more detached from a school's remote learning. In these cases, they designed customized support, enrichment, and learning activities for their students or, in some cases, replaced instruction provided by schools entirely.

### *Pods in Profile*

Facts about the pods in our survey sample, which includes 152 families and 101 instructors from 33 states who participated in pods during the 2020-21 school year

**\$306**

Average weekly cost

**6**

Average # of students in a pod

**80%**

of students were 8 or younger

**80%**

of pods were directly organized by the families that participated in them

**69%**

of pods provided at least 6 hours of supervision

**49%**

of pods met 5 days per week

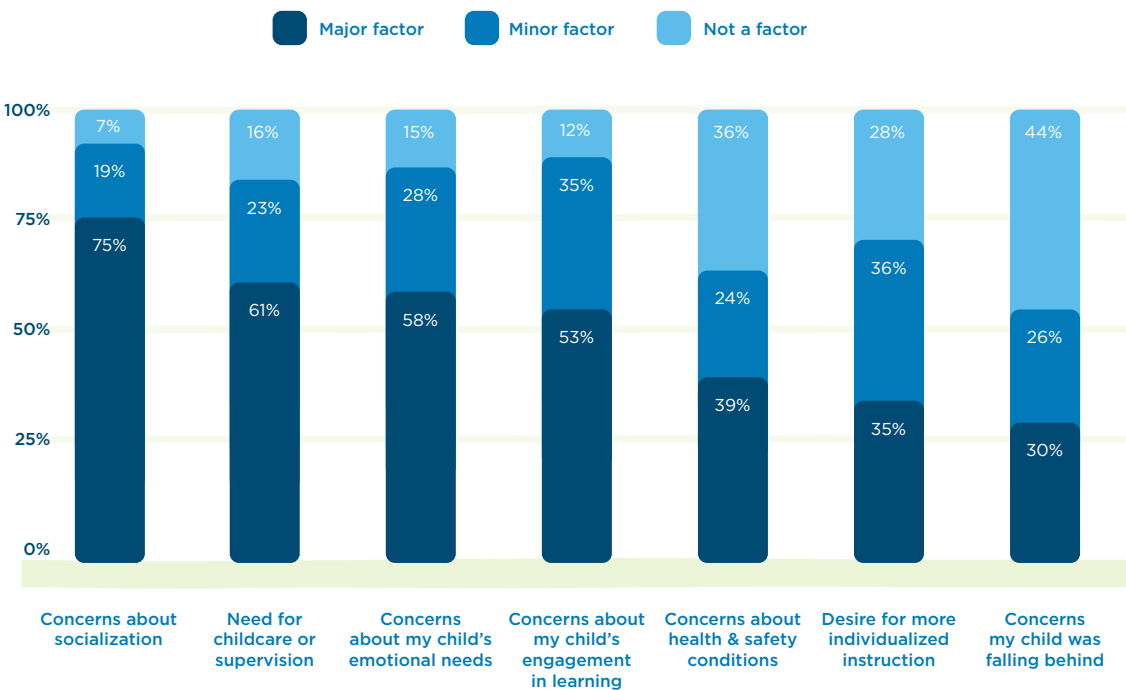
# Families formed pods to combat isolation and provide childcare for working parents

According to our survey, concerns about their children's ability to socialize with peers motivated the vast majority of families to join a pandemic pod (Figure 1.1). Concerns about their children's academic progress were less significant—just 30 percent said it was a major factor in their decision to join a pod, and 44 percent said it was not a factor.

As a parent from Georgia said about her “really extroverted” daughter, “She just really desperately needed to be around other kids.”

A desire for more regular social interactions often coincided with parents' concerns about their child's emotional needs, which was cited by 58 percent of parents as a major factor in their decision. In interviews, several parents reported that their children experienced stress, anxiety, or panic attacks related to the pandemic. They viewed pods as safe spaces to help children cope. “My daughter's emotional health was certainly primary,” one parent said.

Figure 1.1. Reasons why parents formed pods\*



Childcare was the second most commonly cited factor in their decision to join a pod—not surprising, given the strain of school closures on working parents. One parent of a third grader from Washington State said, “We saw no other way to meet the demands of our careers. We need an income. And also to make sure that our children were [okay]. It’s truly about supervision.” A Colorado parent said that her child had started remote learning at home, but supervising her was in constant conflict with her professional responsibilities. She said that soon reached “a point where I was like, ‘I can’t do this and hold a job,’”and formed a pod instead.

\* The data from all charts in Parts 1 and 2 of this report come from a CRPE survey of 152 parents and guardians administered February through April 2021.

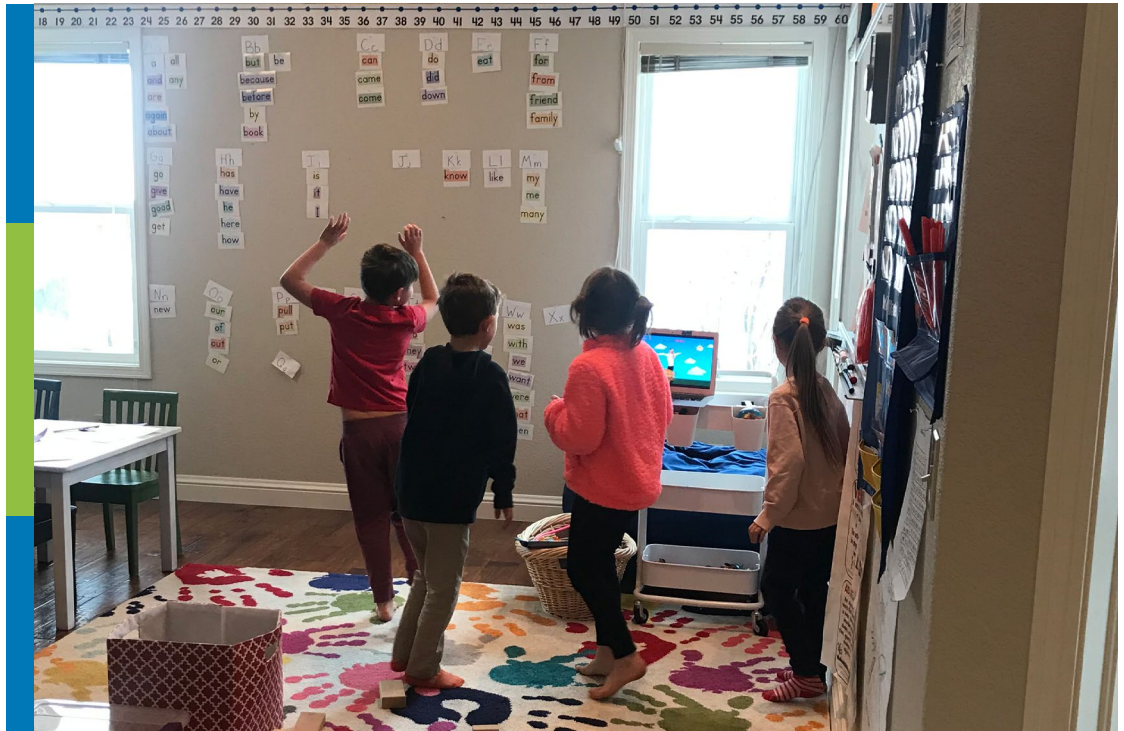
## Keeping Safe from COVID-19

Only 39 percent of families cited health and safety as a major factor shaping their decision to pod. But for a small subset of pods we interviewed, fear of COVID-19 was primary. These pods developed unique norms and protocols to minimize exposure.

In interviews with families and instructors, many said pod members had verbal agreements or a “shared understanding” that families would follow health officials’ guidance for reducing the risk of COVID-19 exposure. One in four of the families and instructors said their pods were expected to form a “bubble” that restricted contact with the rest of the world. Some of these pods created contracts through which families formally agreed not to socialize outside of the pod. One pod instructor’s contract stipulated that she order her groceries for delivery instead of shopping at a grocery store. Other pods developed color-coded spreadsheets, routine questionnaires, and even a 55-question survey to assess each family’s risk level based on their activities outside the home and the people with whom they were in close contact.

Some pods made regular use of outdoor spaces to improve ventilation. Many pods required students to stay home with the slightest symptoms or temporarily shut down if someone came into contact with a COVID-positive person.

Masking rules varied. More than four in five pods decided that students were sufficiently isolated and could safely convene without wearing. Of that group, some would still require parents to wear a mask when visiting.

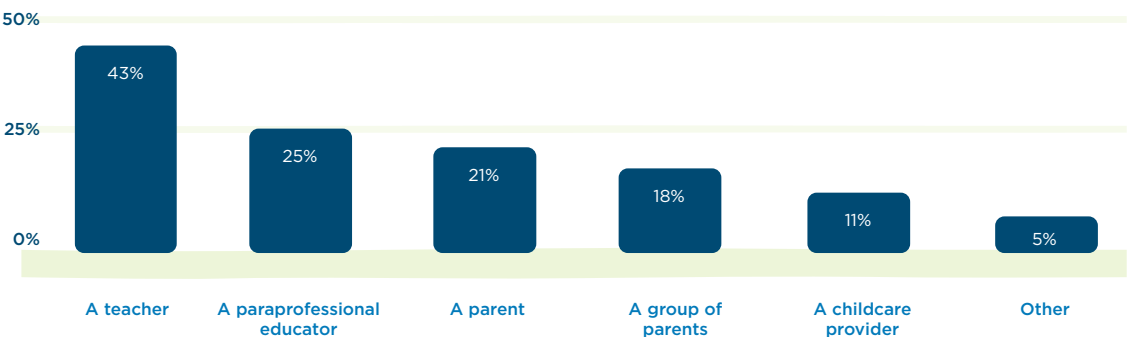




## Families were more likely to hire pod instructors with professional backgrounds in education

Hiring a professional with a background in education, either a teacher or paraprofessional educator, was more common than having parents provide pod supervision (Figure 1.2). Hiring a teacher was more common among higher-income families: 57 percent of families earning over \$75,000 reported hiring a teacher, compared to 41 percent of families earning less than \$75,000.

**Figure 1.2. Who supervised pods**



*Note: Survey respondents could select more than one option. Percentages do not sum to 100%.*

In securing supervision for the pod, families used a variety of strategies. Some went to social media websites, posting about their needs on one of the many groups that formed organically to support pods. Others tapped social networks to spread the word about an available role, asking friends and family to connect them with educators or childcare providers willing to take on pod work.

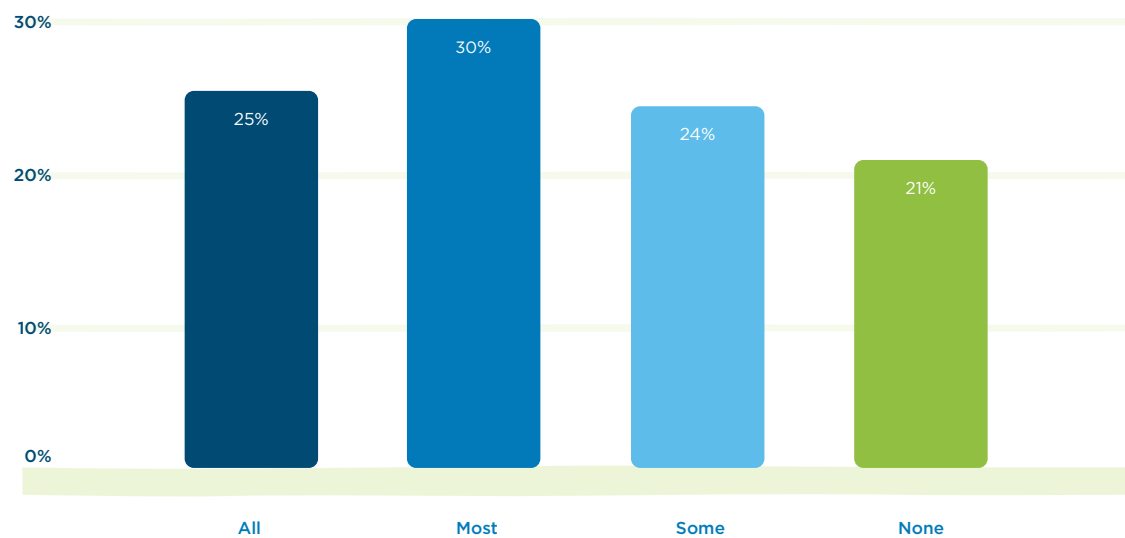
Searches could be methodical. One pod conducted seven interviews, with two parents present for each and a set of prepared questions. Other searches—both for instructors and fellow parents to help form pods—were conducted without much forethought, reflecting the scramble many families experienced when schools made late-summer decisions to remain closed for in-person learning at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. When one working parent learned two weeks before the start of school that her local school district would be remote indefinitely, she panic-called two other parents from her daughter’s second-grade class and asked: “Should we work together?” Thus, their pod began.

## Most pods relied on schools’ remote learning, but the extent varied

Most of the pods in our sample were designed to supplement, not replace, remote instruction delivered by schools. However, pods varied dramatically in whether and how they incorporated local schools’ curriculum and instruction. In our survey, 55 percent of parents reported that all or most of their child’s English language arts instruction was provided remotely by their school (Figure 1.3). For math, it was also 55 percent.

Some instructors we interviewed said they were primarily responsible for supervising virtual learning, with minimal supplemental services or supports. As one instructor said, “I really wasn’t responsible for making any curriculum.... Because they had to be online every hour, we didn’t have time to do anything extracurricular.” These instructors would ensure students were logged on to platforms like Zoom and help students access and submit independent work, offering varying degrees of hands-on guidance.

**Figure 1.3. Share of English language arts pods instruction provided by a child’s school**



Other pods supplemented schools’ remote instruction with direct instruction, tutoring, or enrichment provided by parents or instructors hired by the pod. Educators we interviewed shared the many ways they supplemented schools’ remote instruction, which often did not fully meet students’ needs. “I essentially taught these kids how to do the math when they couldn’t get it online,” one pod instructor said. “They didn’t have that interaction with their teacher that they would have in a classroom, so I ended up doing a lot of teaching of math and writing, those sorts of things.”

Another instructor said she would observe what students were learning on the computer and then create “experiences to support what they were learning at the time” rooted in art, play, and both group and individual instruction.

An instructor whose pod included a mix of some students who were enrolled in a traditional school and some who were not embraced a differentiated approach. She used assignments provided by the schools where students were still enrolled in remote learning, but also created her own materials for the students who were not currently connected to a school outside the pod.

To create more flexibility in their school day, some families kept their children enrolled in remote learning through their school but opted out of specific parts of the virtual school day. In one pod, led by a licensed educator from New York, families opted their kindergarten and first graders out of remote instruction in social studies and science, freeing their afternoons for instructor-led, project-based learning.

One in five families surveyed reported that their child was not enrolled in another school while participating in a pandemic pod. These pods mostly served the youngest students: forty-five percent served preschool-age children and 77 percent served children in third grade or below. In these pods, parents or instructors often created tailored, in-person learning experiences that followed their own curriculum. In some such pods, learning was entirely bespoke.



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“When my son was going to public school...he’d say ‘I’m not feeling well,’ he tried everything under the sun not to have to go to school. And with the pod, that has not happened once. He wakes up on his own, he’s excited about school.”



## PART 2:

# PODS PROVIDED A VEHICLE FOR MORE STUDENT- AND FAMILY-CENTERED EDUCATION

Comparing their pod to their child's school experiences before the pandemic, the majority of families in our survey felt their pod was an improvement overall—a striking finding against a backdrop of “[panicked parents](#)” “[desperately](#)” cobbling together pods with little lead time. Indeed, very few families in our study said they set out to improve public education. Families that did ultimately prefer pods over traditional schools valued the unique opportunity to remake the learning environment in ways that felt more relational, personalized, and responsive to both student and family needs.

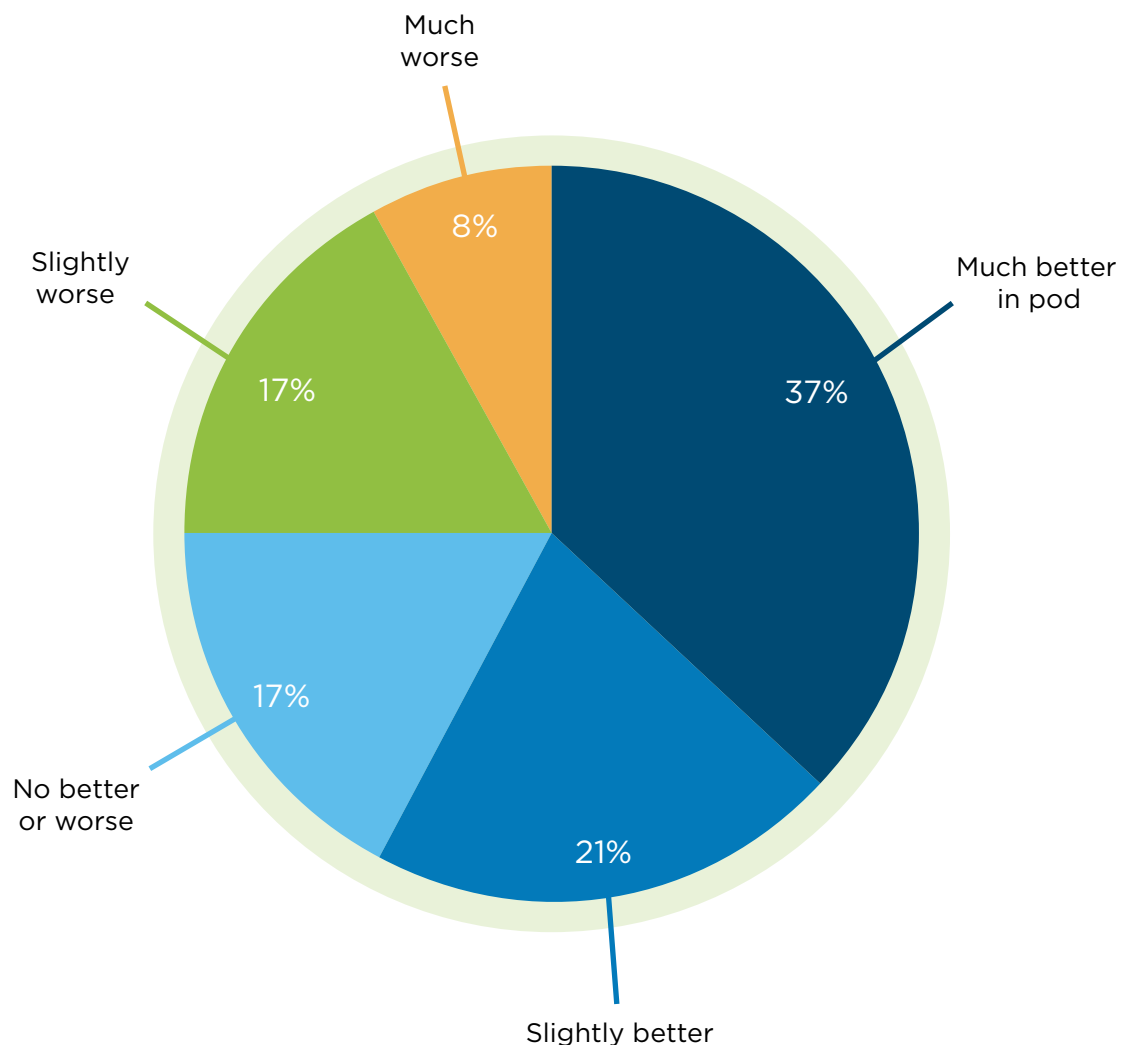
In particular, we found:

- **Over two-thirds of pod families cited at least one tangible benefit for their child**, such as feeling known and valued, being more engaged in their learning, completing more challenging assignments, or feeling happier overall. However, more than half of families also cited at least one area in which their experience could have improved.
- **Families valued pods' student-centered learning environments.** Pod instructors could more nimbly respond to student needs, which appeared to yield academic benefits, but they also lacked training and support from local schools, which proved especially challenging for students with disabilities and other learning differences.
- **Families participating in pods that primarily relied on remote instruction were less satisfied with their experience.** The need to keep pace with school schedules undermined one of pods' key advantages: their flexibility that allowed them to tailor instruction and activities to students' needs.
- **Pods could help families gain information and influence over their child's learning.** Increased ability to direct their child's education, and select the educators they would work with, proved especially salient for families of color.
- **Pods brought families closer together—often for better, sometimes for worse.** Some families reported forming new, lasting relationships with others who formed pods with them. But when conflicts arose over parenting philosophies or health precautions, they lacked clear mechanisms for resolving disputes.
- **Families tended to pod with “like-minded” people, but some sought to increase diversity and inclusion.** Issues fueling divisions in public education and other institutions, from teaching about race to embracing students' diverse identities, divided some pandemic learning communities and showed some parents' desire to homogenize into like-minded groupings.

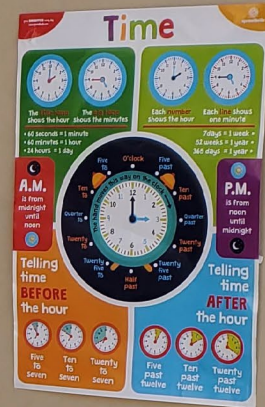
## Over two-thirds of pod families cited at least one tangible benefit for students over pre-pandemic schooling

Nearly 3 in 5 families found participating in a pod to be better than their child's school experience before the pandemic (Figure 2.1). Of course, not everyone agreed, with 25 percent of families reporting the experience to be slightly or much worse than pre-pandemic schooling. Overall, 58 percent of families surveyed said they found participating in a pandemic pod to be "slightly better" (21 percent) or "much better" (37 percent) than their child's school experience before the pandemic (Figure 2.1). Of course, not everyone agreed: one-quarter of families felt podding was "slightly worse" (17 percent) or "much worse" (8 percent) than prior, pre-pandemic schooling.

**Figure 2.1. Parents' views on their child's overall experience in a pod, compared to pre-pandemic school**





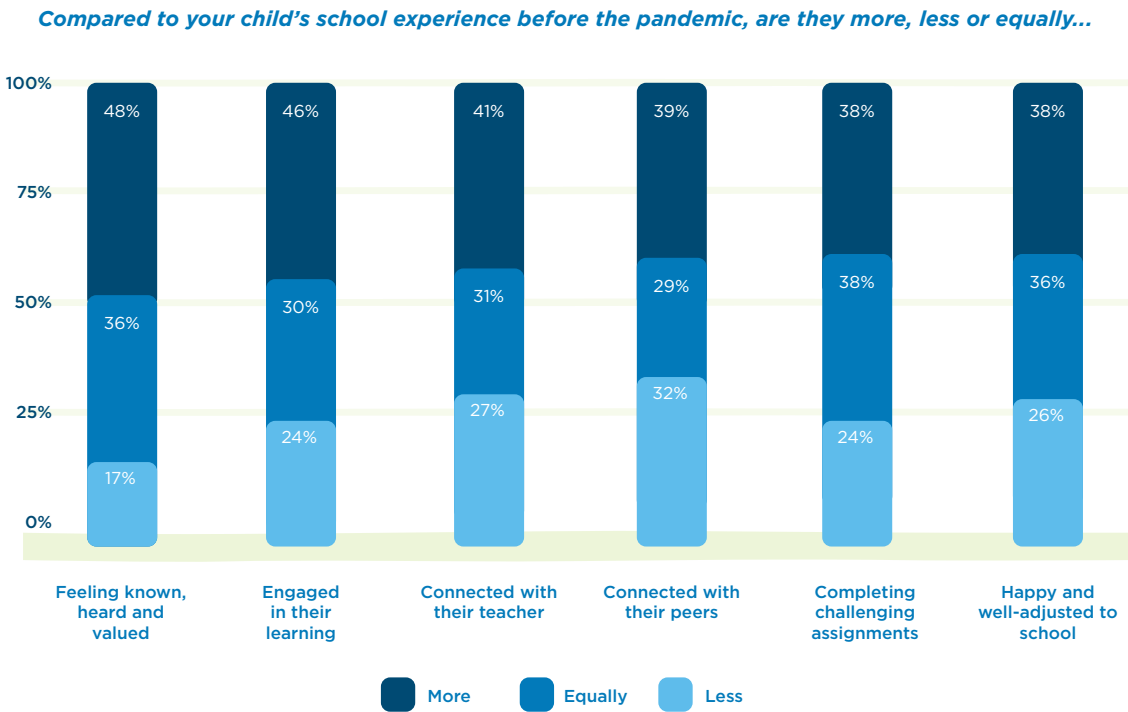




When asked how their experience compared along specific kinds of outcomes or benefits, 69 percent of families reported at least one tangible benefit over pre-pandemic schooling. Nearly half said their child was more likely to feel “known, heard, and valued” in their pandemic pod than they were in their pre-pandemic schools, and a similar number said their children were more engaged in their learning (Figure 2.2). Two out of five families cited other benefits, like completing more challenging assignments, increases in their child’s overall happiness, or stronger connections with their teacher or peers.

One parent described a sharp turnaround in her son’s enthusiasm for school: “When my son was going to public school, it was a nightmare waking him up...he’d make excuses, he’d say ‘I’m not feeling well,’ he tried everything under the sun not to have to go to school. And with the pod, that has not happened once. He wakes up on his own, he’s excited about school, he wants to go, he wants to go see his friends. He’s excited the night before.”

**Figure 2.2. Parents’ views on their child’s learning environment in a pod, compared to pre-pandemic school**



Pods weren’t infallible, however. Just over half of families identified at least one area in which they felt their pod fared worse than their child’s pre-pandemic school. Weaker connections with peers was the most commonly noted shortcoming, cited by 32 percent of pod families. Even so, 49 percent of families felt their pod experience was at least as good as prior schooling, if not better, across all six dimensions we surveyed.

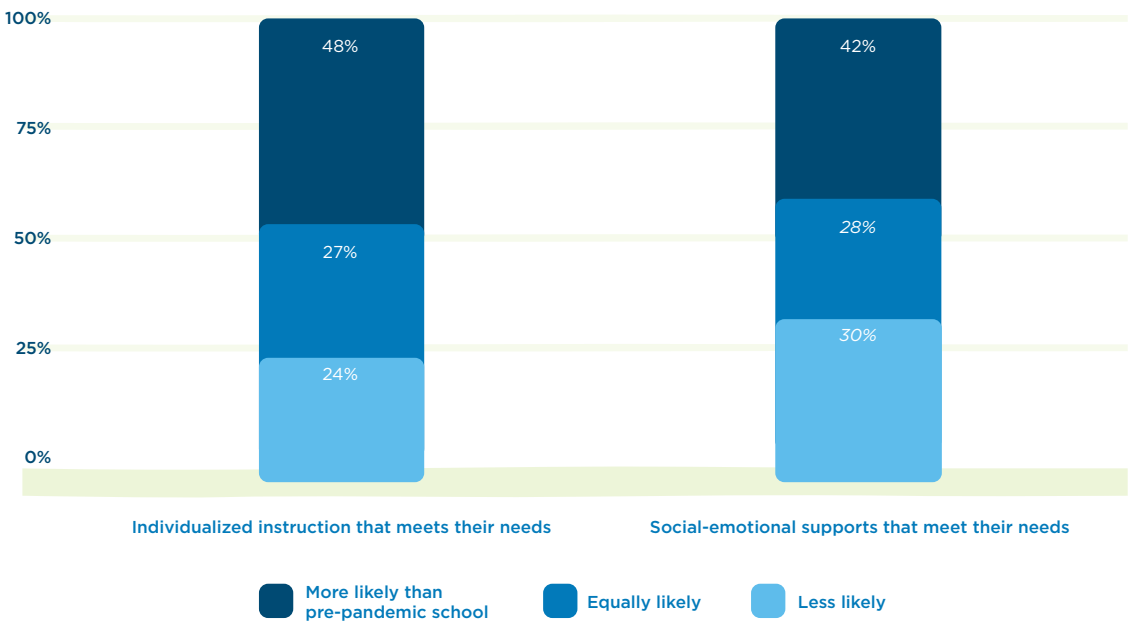


## Families valued pods' student-centered learning environments

When asked which aspects of their were particularly improved, families most often pointed to expanded opportunities for personalized, student-centered learning environments.

Nearly half of all survey respondents—48 percent—said their pod provided more individualized instruction that met their child's needs compared to their child's school before the pandemic (Figure 2.3). And those that did were more likely to feel satisfied with their pods: 85 percent of surveyed families who said their child received more individualized instruction in the pod also felt their pod was overall better than their child's school experience prior to the pandemic, compared with only 16 percent of families who reported less individualized pod instruction.

**Figure 2.3. How likely students were to access personalized learning in a pod, compared to pre-pandemic school**



The flexibility of the pandemic pod format empowered some families to customize learning based on student interests. One parent noted that her third grader “initiated what he learned” in the pod. He “wasn’t shut down and just told, ‘Oh, you’ve got to do this,’” she said. Instead, the teacher noticed what the child was interested in and allowed him to explore that as part of his lessons. As a result, the parent said, “he was consistently learning, but it didn’t feel like school or learning because it was something he was interested in.”

Smaller group sizes made it easier for instructors to notice individual student behavior, have detailed conversations with parents, and attend to students' wellbeing. For example, one pod instructor collaborated with a parent to develop a routine of breathing and mindfulness exercises to help her child cope with and overcome frustration. According to the instructor, the routine was successful because she was able to devote more of her attention to the child. "I would be able to notice when they were struggling and when they needed help and when they needed breaks and things like that," she said.

Other pods leveraged their intimate setting to develop students' social awareness and ability to get along. One parent described "powerful" moments of conflict resolution in her small pod: Instead of someone "getting ticked at a kid, and going and hanging out with some other kid, and having these factions form like you see so often in middle school, they were like, 'These are my people. I've got to figure this out.'" In these moments, the pod instructor would pause lessons to hold a "council" meeting, when students would sit down and work out their issues together.

Several families felt their pod's attention to student needs positively impacted their child's attitude toward school. Happiness as an outcome was especially salient for families of color. One Black mother said that because the pod could "adapt literally to the needs of the child," her child was "happy and they weren't suffering. We weren't getting calls about misbehavior because [at the pod] literally the needs of the child were being met." Another Black mother described how, before the pod, her child was bored because his teachers didn't pay enough attention to him and failed to challenge him academically. In the pod, she said, "he comes home, and he's just so happy. And he's at peace."



### ***Academic gains in personalized learning environments***

Interviews with families and instructors suggest that when pods took advantage of small group sizes to personalize learning for each child, academic benefits could result.

One parent of a four-year-old said her pod of six students was able to provide “little tweaks” in the schedule customized to her child’s needs that resulted in “mind blowing” academic gains: “He’s reading now,” she said. “He does basic math problems. They’re addressing the things that are not available at the local school” where “only 12 percent of the students are proficient in math.”

Other interviewees told accounts of a first-grader who achieved third-grade level in reading in their pod, a second-grader who achieved fourth-grade level in math, and a first grader who made so much progress through the pod that, according to his parent, he “has been identified as a gifted student.”

One parent, who also serves as her pod’s instructor, explained her pod’s academic gains by contrasting the personal attention she gave each student with the “anonymity” of her child’s former school:

“Every kid that’s here, they’re here and they feel their space... There’s no getting lost in this. In the pod, there’s no sneaking by without getting your work done like there would be in school. I notice. If your work is half done, I can see it. Whereas a teacher who has 20 kids wouldn’t.”

Others echoed this sentiment, such as an instructor who went from teaching in a traditional school to facilitating a pod. She noted that, “the instructional delivery is definitely more personalized in terms of what resources I can give [to each student]. I can give them huge chunks of time now, even one-on-one, where I don’t feel like, ‘Oh gosh, I need to move on to the next kid, because I have 24 more to go’.” That sustained attention allowed this teacher to try multiple instructional strategies with each student to help them work through a given concept until they could master it.

### ***Benefits and limitations for students with special needs***

The customized approach offered in some pandemic pods could offer particular benefits for students with disabilities and other learning differences. One parent who suspects her daughter has undiagnosed ADHD said she “blossomed” in her pandemic pod. “She definitely has a harder time focusing in a larger classroom,” the parent said, “but I have really noticed that she has excelled this year. And I think that a lot of that has to do with the fact that she’s had the one-on-one attention from the tutor and there’s been less distractions.”

Another parent said that when her son was one of five students, “the amount of one-on-one attention that he received, the quality of the education he received, we’ve just been so overwhelmed with gratitude for where we ended up.... Certain things he would do, he doesn’t even do anymore, like fidgeting with his hair, some stressful things that he would do. His behavior is better.”

No matter their size, though, not all pods were well-equipped to support the full range of student needs, especially for students with disabilities and learning differences. One parent described the difficulties in supporting a child with ADHD: “He tends to be more structured, and having different situations every single day was hard to adjust to in terms of routines and schedules.”

Some pod instructors felt inadequately prepared to serve students with special needs on their own, while finding it difficult to coordinate supplemental services with local schools and districts. One instructor, whose pod included a child with a condition affecting both physical and cognitive abilities, was concerned that the child's functional skills weren't addressed the way occupational therapist would have been able to.

Another parent-run pod included a child who had an individualized education plan and had been receiving therapy for prior trauma, but those services came to a halt in the pandemic. A parent in this pod tried to find appropriate help even though they couldn't afford a full-time aide themselves: "It was very rocky for months and months to feel confident that we could actually service a student who did have a lot of needs in the way that she deserves to be serviced," she said. "It was a tremendous challenge."

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.



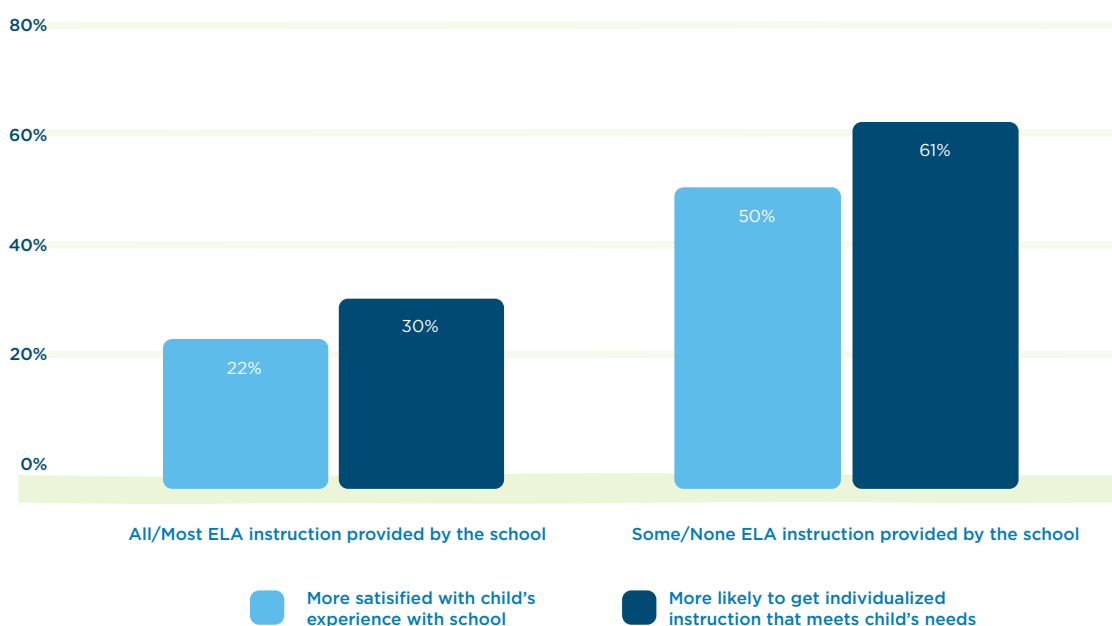


## Families participating in pods that primarily relied on remote instruction were less satisfied with their experience

Just as access to student-centered learning experiences seemed to drive higher rates of satisfaction, heavy reliance on remote learning tended to erode it. Families we surveyed whose pods relied more heavily on remote learning delivered by schools were half as likely to report more satisfaction with their pod compared to their child's pre-pandemic school experience (Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4. Parents' views on pods, by source of English language arts instruction**

*Parental satisfaction and child's access to individualized instruction compared to school experiences before the pandemic, by source of instruction*



One reason: reliance on remote learning could afford pods less freedom and flexibility to offer the kinds of student-centered learning experiences that families and instructors found valuable. Families participating in pods that provided their own curriculum and instruction were twice as likely in our survey to report more personalized instruction compared to pods that remained tethered to districts' "Zoom school" (Figure 9). Nearly two-thirds of families, or 61 percent, who said that schools remotely provided "none" or "some" of their child's English language arts instruction said their children received more individualized instruction in the pod compared to their prior school experiences. By contrast, half as many families, or 30 percent, whose schools provided "all" or "most" of English language arts instruction remotely said their children received individualized instruction in the pod.

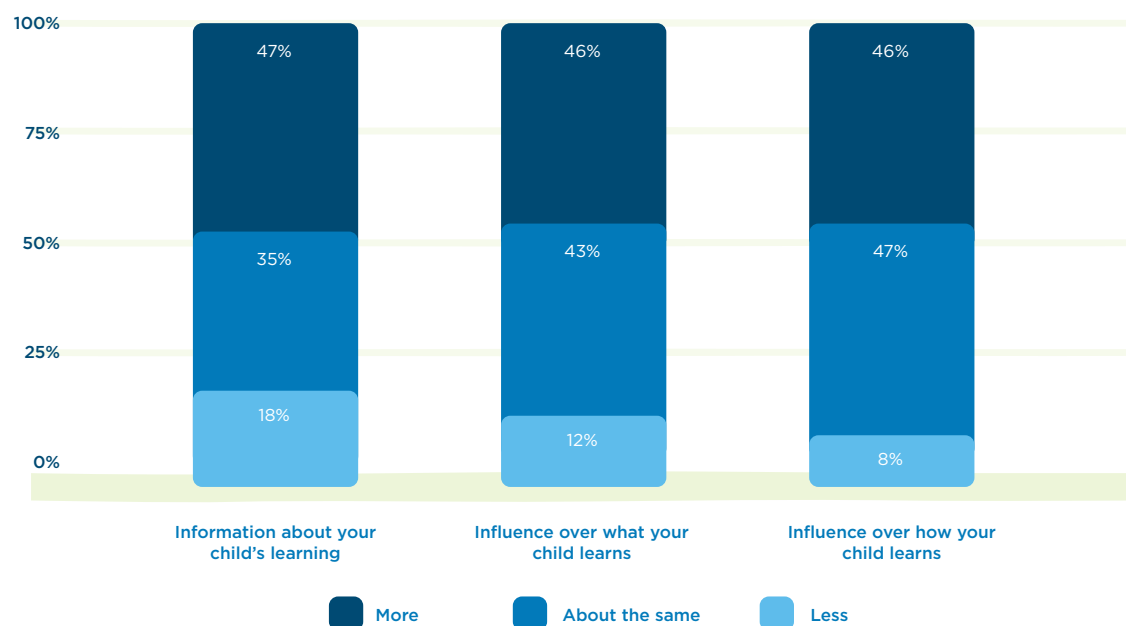
According to some families we interviewed, pods that primarily supervised remote instruction provided insufficient attention and instruction to their students. As one parent whose child's pod primarily offered remote-learning supervision with little supplemental instruction said, "I think a lot of people have this impression that the pod is somehow accelerating their kids academically, compared to other children. I don't think that's the case." In her daughter's kindergarten class, she said, children who were getting one-on-one help from their parents seemed to be moving ahead of the children who are in pods like hers where instructors "just make sure that the kids are on Zoom."

Some pods that traded supervision duties among non-educator parents felt similarly challenged to meet student needs. One parent of a second grader, who formed a pod where parents took turns supervising the group, said the adults were "mainly just making sure they're getting on and off their computer at the appropriate time.... My daughter fell behind, she was getting lost in all the chaos of being online and it just wasn't beneficial at all for us." For many families, the more direct engagement with an in-person instructor, the better.

## Pods could help families gain information and influence over their child's learning

Nearly half of the parents we surveyed felt their pods offered them more information about their child's learning and greater influence over what and how their child learns—47 percent of families reported they had more information and 46 percent said they had more influence (Figure 2.5).

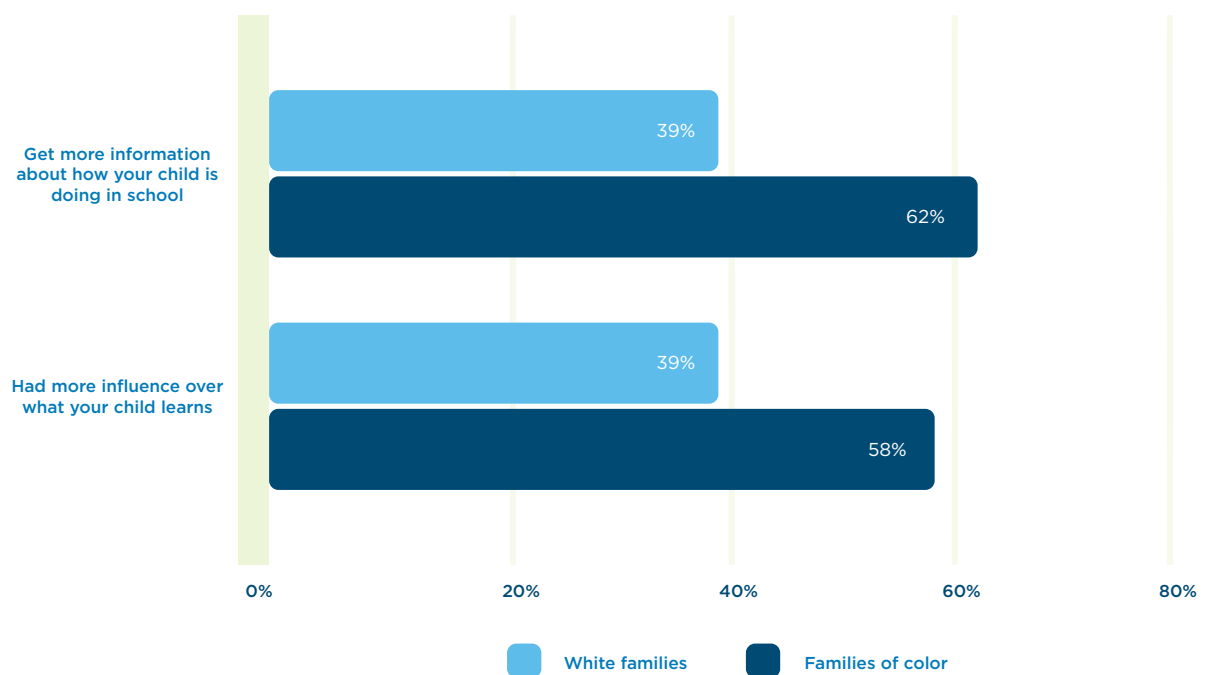
**Figure 2.5. Parents' information and influence over their child's learning in pods, compared to pre-pandemic school**



“The pod really represented a way to not have to feel like you were being jostled around so much by the larger systems at play,” said one parent. “We could have some control over what was happening.” Another parent commented on how her ongoing, hands-on involvement in her pandemic pod provided welcome insights. “It’s not just a project that we are doing, but the everyday,” she said. “You learn a lot about how your kids learn.”

Families of color were more likely than white families to report they had more information and influence within a pandemic pod compared to their child’s prior school experiences—though given small sample sizes, these results should be interpreted cautiously (Figure 2.6). One Black parent participated in a self-described “village pod” that intentionally centered on the experiences and cultural values of families like hers. “We got to choose the books that they’re reading and the projects that they’re doing,” she said. “And we got to have say-so in voting on their curriculum. And that level of empowerment to parents is something that we do not see in many areas where you have to fight for [representation], or you still might feel marginalized in larger settings.... It’s been amazing to be able to prioritize what we felt was important.”

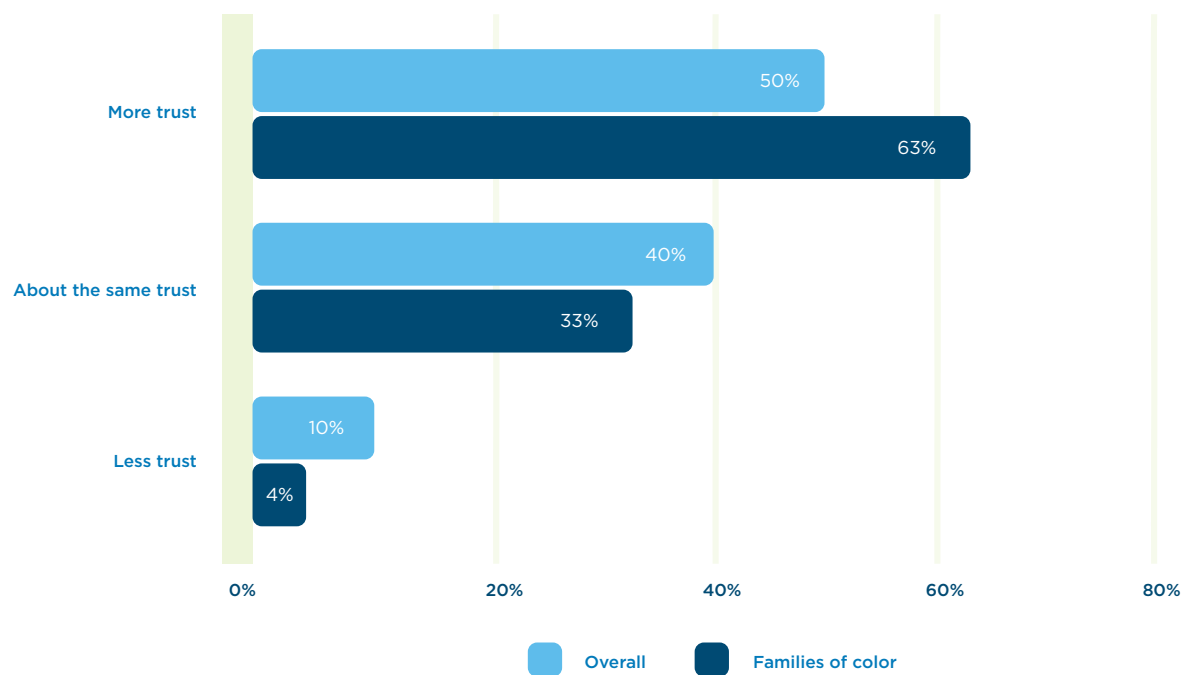
**Figure 2.6. Share of parents who reported more access to information and influence over learning in pods, compared to pre-pandemic school**



Families of color also were more likely to report greater trust in pod instructors compared to teachers in their children’s pre-pandemic schools (Figure 2.7). In the “village pod” focused on the learning experiences of Black children, the same parent quoted above attributed this trust to families’ direct involvement in selecting and supporting their pod’s teacher.

“All of the parents have been so excited at being able to choose who is teaching our children, having that level of control, knowing who this person is, picking somebody from the community, having a relationship with them, building and deepening a relationship with them and knowing that they’re invested in our children as individuals and as people.”

**Figure 2.7. Parents’ trust in the adults who supervise learning in pods, compared to pre-pandemic school**



## Pods placed a premium on relationships between families—often for better, sometimes for worse

Families who podded together often found an unexpected benefit: new social bonds between families that ran deeper than was typical before the pandemic.

Fifty-three percent of parents reported having more supportive relationships with other families around education compared to their experiences before the pandemic. Twelve percent experienced the same amount of supportive relationships, and 35 percent had less. A parent who had only recently moved to her pod’s area said, “it feels like I’m very tied to these families, this community.... In comparison, I think it was lonelier before in terms of parenting...and so this helped.”

These social ties were a benefit of podding that many families did not anticipate, but greatly appreciated. In years past, one parent said, “I never got to know anybody at school because I was always at work.... We would take them to birthday parties and then that would be it.” By contrast, in joining the pod, “we created a little village.... I felt like we became so close, and it was just a really neat experience to really get to know parents.”

Some families formed support networks that show signs of enduring beyond the pandemic. One parent said that, even after the pod disbanded, she relies on that community of families for help with childcare or school pick-ups. Another parent described the close relationships that pod families still share:

“Now, even though we’re not doing the pod, we reach out to each other for questions about school and about [other things]. We actually still have a text channel that we started during the pod. And now we use it all the time just because it’s like they’re like a trusted group of parents that we’ve gotten to know.”

On occasion, conflicts arose when families’ goals or visions for the pod were not universally shared—especially given parents’ elevated expectation of influence over pod learning. In our survey, 42 percent of families cited difficulties navigating other families’ expectations as a key obstacle. In the words of one parent, “there has to be a similar goal because the pod is so small and the parents...expect to have a lot of influence on how the pod is structured. And that can cause some friction.”

For example, more than 20 percent of the families and educators we interviewed described challenges in establishing and enforcing shared health and safety protocols, including some that had established contracts and codes of conduct at the outset. Our interviews also revealed that some pod families struggled to find common ground on curricular issues—for example, how to treat a socially sensitive topic such as race relations in the United States.

For some pods, especially those operated by groups of volunteer parents, the responsibility of working with one another’s children surfaced contentious differences in family expectations for discipline and academic progress. One parent described “dicey” differences in cultural approaches to discipline:

“I think some of the parents were like, ‘That’s fine. You can yell at my kids.... If the kid’s not doing something, you can totally just reprimand them.’ [But] I was like, ‘I don’t want to yell at other people’s kids.’ ”

Other parents confronted differences in how each parent viewed their responsibilities toward instruction. One parent said that, in her cooperative pod, she felt responsible for making sure all students finished their work, but another parent felt that “if they finish it, they do, and if they don’t, they don’t.” A third parent merely felt responsible for making sure the kids were present and alive, but was indifferent to academics. In another pod, parents faced a similar mismatch in expectations. When one mom couldn’t corral the students into completing their work and let them do yoga with her instead, the other parents berated her when they found out and banned the “yoga mom” from further supervision responsibilities.

Communication was key to preventing or, when conflicts occurred, navigating these differences. One parent summed it up:

“We would talk every couple weeks and see, is it still working? Is it too much? What can we change? How can we change it? What can we fix? So I think we just had very good open communication.”



## Families tended to pod with like-minded people, but some sought to increase diversity and inclusion.

The self-organized nature of pods made them susceptible to broader societal tendencies to self-segregate by socioeconomics and other factors of sameness.

“I felt like there was a lot of racial segregation that was happening in a very innocent way because people were definitely...identifying like-minded people as much as possible and trying to go to who they were comfortable with,” one parent said. Said another, “I have to assume this is the nature of most pods...but our pod was definitely all in one socioeconomic class, which is like middle to upper class, mostly white students.”

One parent admitted intentionally “curating” the group of students based on who her daughter was already friends with. Another said the pod organizer had “gone to great lengths to lay out who her family was—not just names and ages but, ‘These are our political beliefs, these are our favorite things, this is our dog, Ruth Bader Dogsborg.’”

Such thorough efforts to ensure like-mindedness among pod families are understandable given the daily intimacy and interdependence pod families experienced. But they also present challenges for individuals and groups whose views or identities aren’t as well-reflected or valued in their communities—and who may find themselves ostracized or excluded as a result.

One parent was deeply concerned with how the expensive tuition of her daughter’s pod limited access to a highly homogenous, privileged group of students. She told of an incident in which the other pod students were touching her six-year-old South Asian daughter and asking her, “Are you Black?” The parent confronted the instructor about the incident only to have the instructor dismiss it as natural curiosity since “your daughter is the only person of color in the classroom.”

“I remember that just really, really catching me unpleasantly,” the parent recalled. “It changed my opinion in 180 degrees, because I suddenly realized, oh, it’s not this nice little cohort with specialized education. What it is, it’s a very elite little community [with] the same beliefs and same knowledge.... And it just made me think like, oh my goodness, we’re going back to the eighteenth century where you have these elite little kids with their governess and they don’t know a lot.”

On the other hand, the ability to form homogenous groups could also provide reprieve from marginalizing social forces often found in larger classrooms. One Black parent said her four-year-old son thrived in the absence of biased teachers who often misinterpreted his behavior and labeled him as a threat at his former school. For another parent, her pod became a safe space from the bullying her daughter experienced in previous schools. Another parent felt relieved to pod with a family whose child shared her son’s food allergies, which made meals easier and helped her son feel like less of an outlier.

While many pods seemed to follow the currents of broader societal splintering, other pods resisted these currents by taking explicit steps to encourage, celebrate, and teach about diversity.

One parent described the diverse families who constituted her pod: “One parent who was an immigrant and one parent who English was their second language, parents who worked, some who had lost their jobs”; they intentionally brought in books and materials that reflected each child’s identity. Another instructor said the relative autonomy of her pod provided freedom to explore “some of those ideas that maybe would feel a little more daunting in just a typical public school classroom,” like studying the roots of the Black Lives Matter movement. Even celebrating students’ cultures through their family traditions and holidays seemed easier in pods.

Pods could support inclusion by bringing people into greater proximity across lines of difference. One parent said she appreciated how the pod helped “normalize” diversity of gender identity by bringing together cisgender and transgender students. She said the pod’s intimacy enabled gender diversity to become “very real and normal.... My daughter was able to form this friendship [with a transgender student] without the influence of an entire classroom deciding whether or not it was cool or uncool.”



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“After doing the pod, I kind of realized I didn’t want to do regular teaching in the classroom [anymore] because the relationships that I had with these seven kids, and I got to see a big difference in their life.”

## PART 3: PODS REDEFINED THE TEACHING EXPERIENCE

In our survey and interviews with instructors who supported pandemic learning pods, we found that many discovered a new professional niche that could differ substantially—and often, positively—from more mainstream notions of what it looks like to be an educator. Pod teachers sometimes felt isolated and wished they had access to supports they’d get in traditional schools. Still, three in four said they preferred teaching in a pod to their prior work.

In particular, we found that:

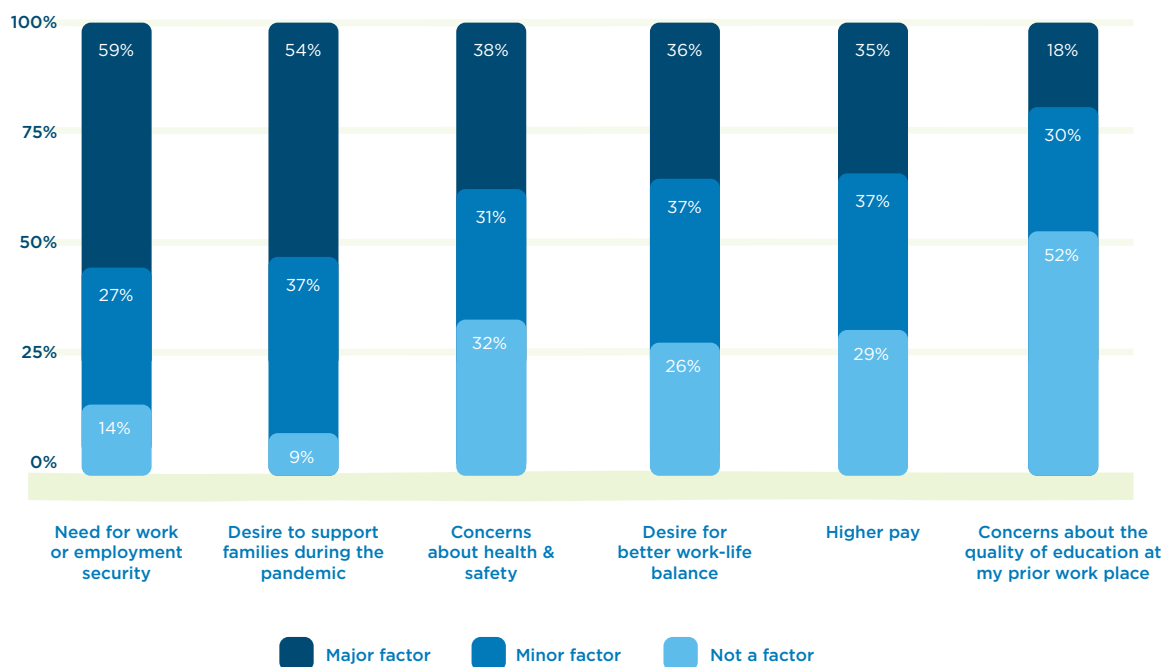
- **Instructors turned to pods to weather a crisis, but many also perceived a career opportunity.** The need for work or employment security was the most common driver leading instructors to work in pods, followed by a desire to support families during the pandemic. But for many instructors, pods also brought opportunity for better working conditions or career advancement, especially for those that came from professions adjacent to teaching.
- **Instructors drew on diverse backgrounds and skill sets.** Pods allowed instructors to tap their interests, hobbies, and prior experiences to support student learning in new ways.
- **Instructors gained freedom in their teaching and opportunity to build close, personal relationships with students.** Autonomy, schedule flexibility, and small group sizes allowed them to form deeper relationships with students and better meet their needs.
- **Compared to school settings, pod instructors were challenged by fewer opportunities for collaboration and support.** While instructors reported a better overall experience in pods than traditional classrooms, their relative autonomy disconnected them from broader supports, safety nets, and opportunities for professional collaboration.

### Instructors turned to pods to weather a crisis, but many also perceived a career opportunity

Most instructors looked to pods as a way to manage personal and communal crises brought about by the pandemic (Figure 3.1). The need for a job was the most commonly cited driver, with several instructors—especially those who had worked in early childhood settings or as school-based paraprofessionals—reporting that their jobs had been cut at the onset of the pandemic. Others who were newly entering the teaching profession or had recently moved to new districts found their way to pod instruction because their local schools weren’t able to provide in-person student teaching options or simply weren’t hiring.



**Figure 3.1. Why instructors chose pods\***



Just over half of instructors cited a “desire to support families during the pandemic” as a major factor in their decision. For example, an architect in Georgia who is Hispanic became a pod instructor because she felt compassion for the English-speaking students in her child’s bilingual charter school. She noticed they were not receiving adequate live instruction and were falling behind in their Spanish language skills. Even though she was still working 40 hours a week, she formed multiple part-time pods to help her son’s peers keep up with the Spanish portions of their schoolwork.

For several instructors, the outgrowth of pods represented a professional opportunity. Nearly three-quarters cited the chance for better work-life balance and about the same amount cited higher pay as reasons they chose pods. “I thought it would be more interesting [and] they were able to offer longer hours, which was convenient because then you can just tutor at one location rather than having to tutor many people,” said a pod instructor who had been a professional tutor, adding, “I would just have that one position which would cover all the hours they need, and it also offered to pay more.”

Career advancement was also on the minds of several instructors we interviewed, particularly those who came from careers adjacent to teaching such as tutors, childcare providers, and other school-based or afterschool professionals. “Although I was officially classified as a private educator and nanny, I didn’t have that much involvement in what was happening with the kids’ education,” one pod instructor said. “Honestly, I was really interested in becoming more involved in that.”

\* The data from all charts in Part 3 of this report come from a CRPE survey of 100 pod educators administered February through April 2021.

Concern about health and safety also factored prominently for pod instructors. The concern was more prominent among those who were former teachers (nearly half of former teachers we interviewed looked into pods because of concerns about health and safety) compared to those with no prior teaching experience (less than one in five shared this concern). One instructor who used to work in a school-based special education setting said she felt the risk of exposure to COVID in her former school was “really high. We’re really intimate...I just was feeling uncomfortable.” Another former teacher who left the classroom to teach in a pod with a colleague said they wanted to “lessen our exposure to other people” by reducing the number of families they came in contact with, “for our own safety and our family’s safety.”

Sour feelings about remote learning seemed to drive at least some former teachers to work in pods. While overall only 18 percent of pod instructors said concerns about the quality of education at their prior workplace was a major factor, instructors who were working as classroom teachers in February 2020 were twice as likely to express this concern as those who were not. “The idea of doing another semester of virtual learning was painful,” one former teacher said. “We did it and the kids were fine when I was finishing in the spring. But at the same time, it was going to be a mental drain to continue to do that virtually.” Another instructor chose a pod because she was so bothered by the amount of time students spent in front of screens. A third instructor said she was drawn to teach in a pod because she wanted to bring back hands-on learning for students who had been suffering in isolation.

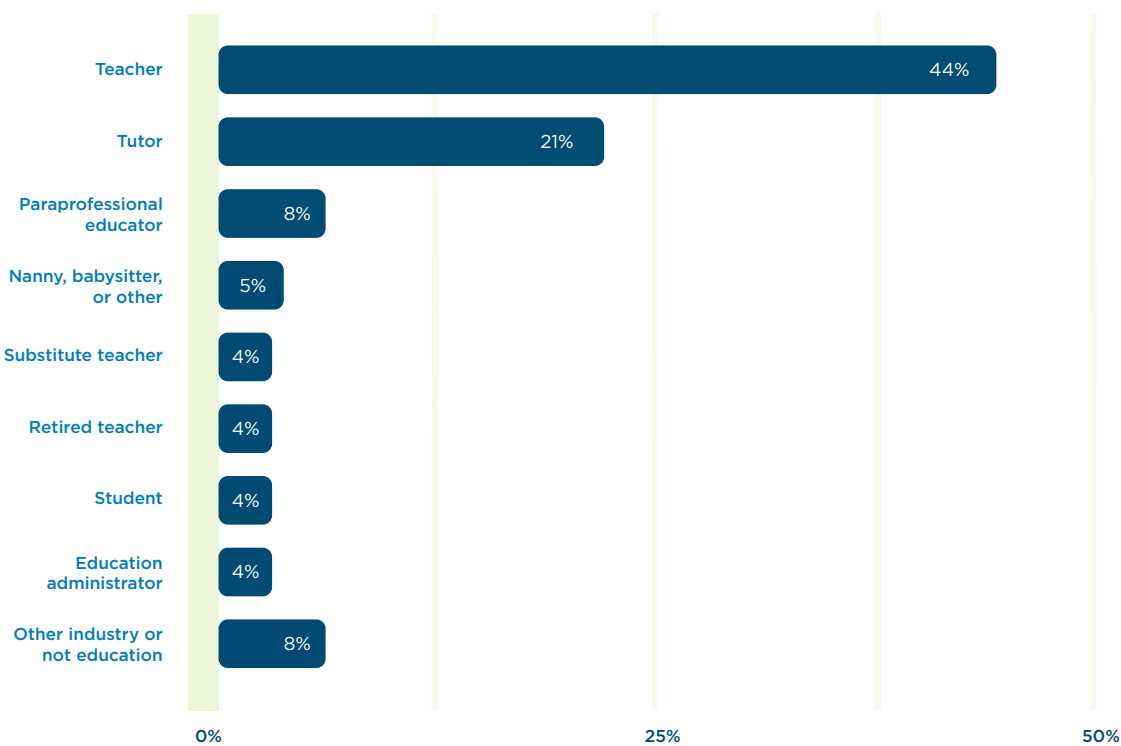
In interviews, some instructors with teaching backgrounds pointed to their frustrations with schools even before the pandemic. One former teacher in a Massachusetts public school said, “Teaching has spread us all very thin. I’m spending more time in meetings and IEP meetings than I was in my classroom, and that’s not what I wanted to do. I was intrigued by the pod idea.” A former preschool teacher in Georgia thought pods would be “more beneficial to me as far as the stress level that I have, because I don’t have to answer really to anyone.” And a former special education teacher in an Illinois public school sought to work in a pod after feeling “frustrated fighting the schools” where teachers “weren’t being supported by the administration.”



## Instructors drew on diverse backgrounds and skill sets

Overwhelmingly, pod instructors in our survey were former classroom teachers or came from other roles related to education. Nearly half reported working as a teacher just before the pandemic (Figure 3.2). Nearly as many had been serving in other education roles, such as a teaching assistant, substitute teacher, or administrator. Few came from roles outside the education field.

**Figure 3.2. Instructors’ roles before pods**



The highly customizable nature of pods enabled instructors to use unique skill sets, especially for the small subset who came from non-teaching backgrounds. For example, one instructor with a background in retail felt her experience as a general manager helped with the many administrative tasks required of pod leaders. Both a former psychologist and a former yoga instructor called on their backgrounds to help teach their pod students’ emotional regulation, mindfulness, and connection to their bodies.

One former homeschooling mom felt her experience gave her great advantage: “Not many of the people willing to be pod teachers, especially those with teaching experience, were willing to deal with multi-age groups. Teachers in the school district, they’re just not set up for that. But when you’re a homeschooler, that’s what you do constantly. You have co-ops of families with all ages of kids, and that’s just the norm. I thought that that might be a good fit for me.”

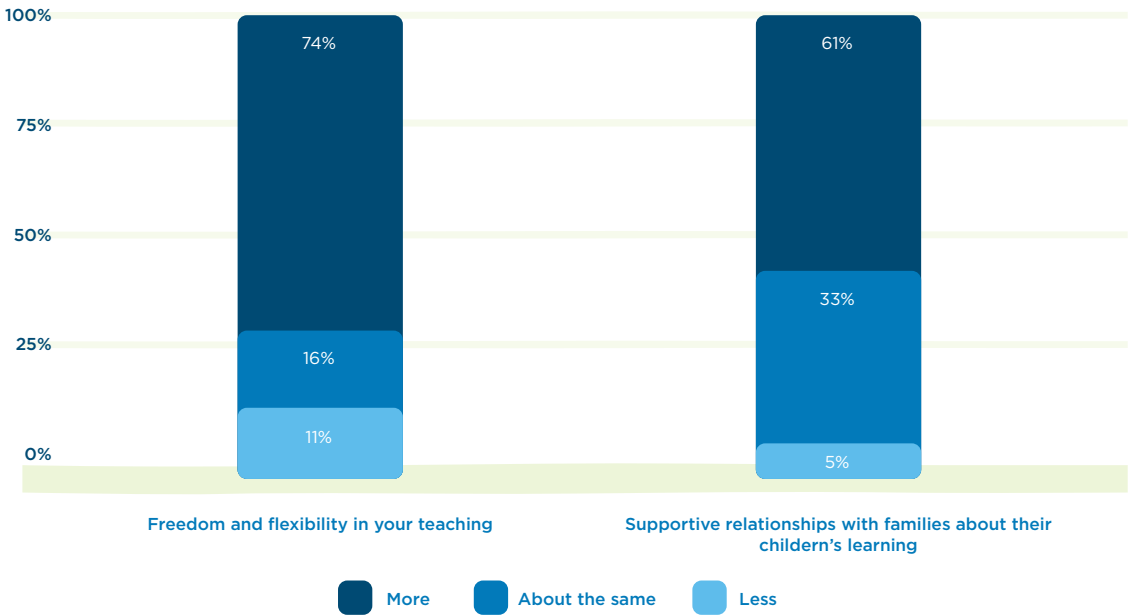
A few parent-run pods made full use of parents’ professional and artistic capabilities through project-based learning. One California-based pod combined the skillsets of an architect parent, a carpenter parent, and another parent with woodworking skills to create a project-based module in which the class erected a treehouse in one of the parents’ backyards. “We decided that as parents, we wanted to all be involved,” one parent said, “so we just utilized all of us and then sought outside help where we needed help.”

A Washington-based parent-led pod similarly created an entire learning ecosystem among the families involved. One father in the group was a firefighter with a home CrossFit gym, so he taught physical education on Monday mornings. Then the students would bike to another house, about a mile away, where another parent, a ceramicist, led pottery lessons. A third parent led writing workshops and novel reading, and her husband led outdoor activities. Another family with a background in music taught band and helped the kids craft custom ukuleles.

### Instructors gained freedom in their teaching and opportunity to build close, personal relationships with students

Overall, educators reported gaining professional freedom as a pod instructor and supportive relationships with families around their child’s learning (Figure 3.3).

**Figure 3.3. Instructors’ views on flexibility and student relationship in a pod, compared to pre-pandemic jobs**





"I think much like the kids, I'm enjoying the freedom of taking things in different directions," one instructor said. "Like, one day we went off on a whole palindrome tangent, and I love word play. And in school, yeah, I might've done that for five minutes, but [in the pod] we were all in.' She added that "it's so nice as a teacher to have that freedom to just have the gift of time." Similarly, another instructor noted that the "freedom to be creative in how I present the material, even what material to present, that's been the most fun for me."

One pod instructor said she felt more empowered than she had been as a public school teacher because the pod gave her greater control over the curriculum and schedule. "Last year in first grade, I found that everything was so regimented," she said. "The schedule was posted on the wall. You had to be doing math at 8:15. You had to be doing recess at 9:35...and if an administrator came into your classroom, you need to be doing whatever was on the wall." In the pod, she could spend time with each child until they mastered the material, "versus moving a whole classroom along and someone gets left behind."

Nearly one-third of the teachers we interviewed voiced satisfaction with the way pods helped them form deep, family-like connections with students, which gave them a closer view of students' progress. One former teacher said that in a pod, "you get to spend more time with each child. They get more attention, and you get to know them better." Another appreciated the opportunity to build relationships not only with students but also their families, providing her "a better view of these students so I feel like I'm making more of a difference."

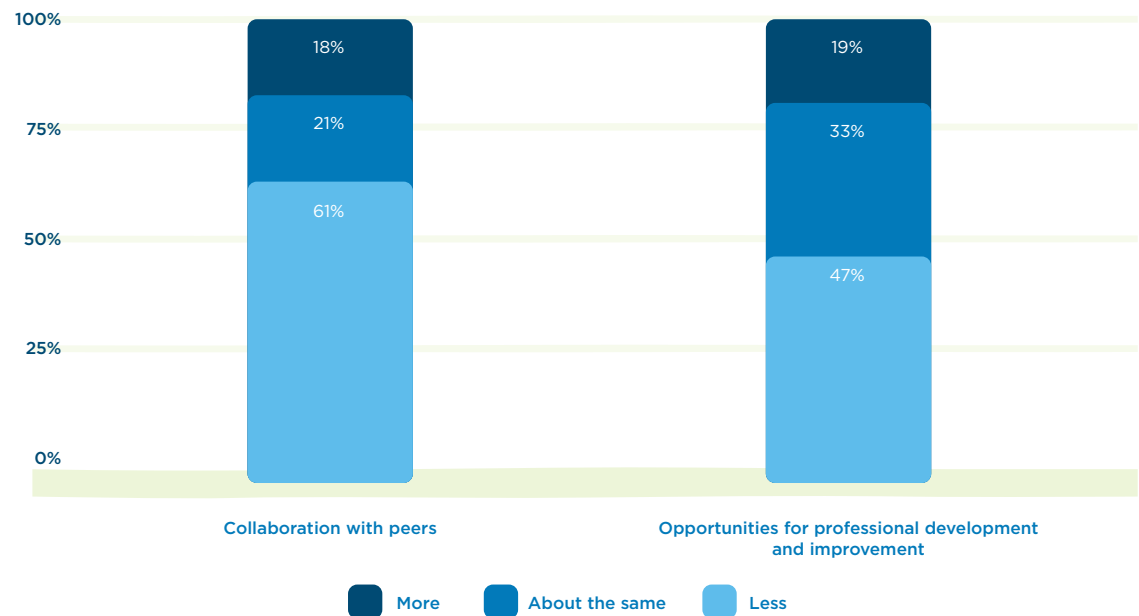
For one instructor, the richness of pod relationships is causing her to question her career as a teacher: "After doing the pod, I kind of realized I didn't want to do regular teaching in the classroom [anymore] because the relationships that I had with these seven kids, and I got to see a big difference in their life. And I really got to know them and the parents. And in [our school district] you'll have 20 or 30 kids, [but] I really like that one-on-one aspect of the pod."



## ‘It’s just me’: Pod instructors lacked opportunities for collaboration and support

Despite its benefits, pod work could also be isolating and left educators with less support and fewer opportunities for collaboration. Most pod instructors surveyed said they experienced less collaboration with peers compared to their pre-pandemic work experiences, and just under half cited fewer opportunities for professional support (Figure 3.4).

**Figure 3.4. Instructors’ opportunities for collaboration and professional growth, compared to pre-pandemic school**



Because most instructors operated independently, they often had no one else to turn to for support. One instructor felt alone in coming up with a game plan each day: “I think I have some good ideas, but I certainly don’t have all the ideas, and I miss having more people to collaborate with.” Another said, as the sole adult in the pod, “I don’t even go to the bathroom during the five hours, let’s just be real. I’m always mindful of like, don’t drink so much water, don’t drink so much coffee...I try to be on as much as possible.”

Some pod instructors struggled with having no higher-up to whom they could escalate problems. One instructor developed new appreciation for traditional school hierarchy. “If a teacher is running into problems, they can appeal higher up and get someone with a different sense of authority to handle it,” she said. In a pod, “there were a couple of times where I was like, uh, if this does not go well, I have no other choices. No one else is going to handle this. It’s just me.”

Sometimes, instructors wished for a third-party arbiter to resolve power struggles with parents. One instructor complained that parents had too much power compared

to a traditional school. She noted that while parental involvement may sound like a positive—indeed, many parents we interviewed appreciated having this influence—it “could be very negative, because parents are not educators, and what a parent could think might be the right thing for the kid, might not be what is best for that kid.” But since her pod had no administrator to help navigate conflict with parents, this instructor had to resolve differences with families on her own, which felt draining.

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 share ideas with and help problem-solve in real time. Several instructors reached out to a Facebook group for pandemic pods to source new ideas for addressing challenges. One instructor even learned on the fly by taking education classes online.

For many pods, though, the lack of structured support or collaboration meant instructors had to rely on their existing skillsets. “I would not necessarily recommend [working in a pod] for somebody who hasn’t had actual classroom teaching experience, but I would for a teacher who has,” said one teacher.

Instructors felt especially ill-equipped to deal with student behavior. For example, one parent who served as a pod instructor decided to limit the size of the pod, saying, “I could really use a course in classroom management...sometimes things do go a little off the rails.”

Another parent sent her child to a center-based pod with two instructors who were young and inexperienced. The new instructors struggled with classroom management to the point where, in an ill-advised attempt to regain control, they “put every kid on a behavior chart” and “sent home this thing that was a billion, giant red X’s on it.” The parent escalated the issue to the center director, who ultimately intervened.

Another educator confessed that with limited experience, when behavioral issues came to a head in the classroom, the only thing she could think to do was call the child’s parents.

The business of running a pod—constructing contracts, considering legal compliance and insurance, creating invoices and collecting payment, and meeting with parents to continually level-set and enforce terms—went beyond what many instructors expected or had experience doing. “I would say that just juggling all of those things on top of all the like planning and organizing that I was already doing was just a lot of work,” said one instructor. Sometimes, to the chagrin of more than one instructor, the time required to complete these tasks went unpaid.

Some pod instructors sought to ease non-instructional burdens by enlisting help from others with professional expertise. “I do have a lawyer friend who actually goes over contracts with clients all the time,” said one pod instructor. “I had him look over [the contract for my pod] to protect myself because I didn’t know what I was doing in the business of teaching.” Another instructor in California partnered with an organization that served as a go-between families and instructors, handling issues like management and payroll.

As privately hired sole practitioners, pod instructors found themselves at the mercy of their employers in ways that were sometimes uncomfortable. Sometimes parents

would ask instructors to take on extra duties, like washing dishes or vacuuming, in addition to teaching. Others experienced abrupt changes in their agreed-upon hours, rates, or instructional content—changes some instructors did not feel empowered to dispute.

The dynamics around compensation could be particularly problematic. Some pod instructors had to wait or badger parents when a family couldn't pay on time. Some instructors also found their weekly compensation constantly fluctuating—for one instructor, by as much as 60 percent—whenever students were absent. When one pod instructor worked in a daycare, families paid “the full week, no matter what.” In the pod, she said, parents didn't pay when they took their children out early.





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“If we don’t continue on with the pod, we have decided most likely we’re going to go a private school route with a small class size. We have learned that [individualized learning] is the most beneficial and key thing for our son.... And the only way to get that at this point is by doing the pod or finding a small private school that offers that.”

## PART 4:

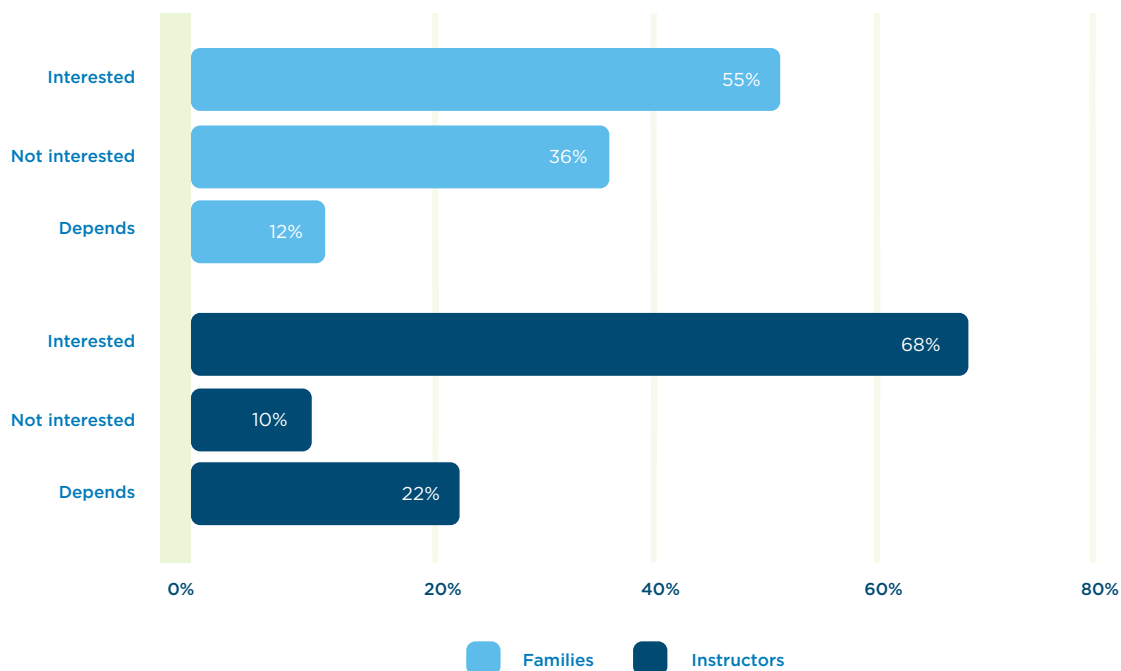
# WILL PANDEMIC PODS ENDURE?

When we surveyed pod families and educators in early 2021, more than half of families and two-thirds of instructors expressed interest in continuing to pod after the pandemic (Figure 4.1). Yet follow-up interviews later that spring suggest that both families and instructors face obstacles to sustaining their pandemic pod experience over the longer term.

One source of pods' strengths may also threaten their sustainability: their independence. In particular:

- **Perceived limitations with podding as an educational model are likely to limit family interest post-pandemic.** While pods were intended to provide students social opportunities and adult support during the pandemic, some families felt these needs could be met more effectively inside schools after in-person instruction resumed.
- **Some families will swap pods for new arrangements that preserve some of the benefits.** Even while many families leave their pods behind, some have been inspired to seek new learning opportunities that preserve the benefits of a more intimate and customized educational experience.
- **For instructors, podding redefined professional expectations and drove some to look beyond traditional teaching roles.** Some instructors found new avenues through which to pursue their passion for education, while others became convinced that they could never return to traditional schools.
- **Pod arrangements were fragile and require systemic support for sustainability.** Often neither pod instructors nor the parents who employed them could feel secure that they would be in the job long-term.
- **Hostile districts undermined pods and denied services to students.** Some districts discouraged parents from forming pods—and refused to provide them and their students with assessments, curriculum resources, or other essential support.
- **Families faced financial barriers to equity and access.** The cost of hiring a pod instructor—on average, \$306 per week—could be prohibitive for many families. Some educators and community groups launched efforts to close this affordability gap, but these efforts were isolated and sporadic.

**Figure 4.1. Interest in sustaining pandemic pods, as of spring 2021**



## Perceived limitations of podding as an educational model is likely to limit interest post-pandemic

As COVID vaccination programs ramped up and schools in several areas of the country began resuming in-person learning, most families we interviewed had already decided to send their child back to school. Their top reasons included wanting their child to interact with more experienced teachers, a desire for more “normal” social experiences, and the perceived logistical burdens associated with podding.

Of the families we interviewed who had decided to return to local schools, nearly one in three expressed concerns about instructional rigor in their pod. This was especially true in pods in which less experienced instructors did little more than supervise remote learning. One parent observed a “lack of oversight” in the pod that made her realize her child “really does need that teacher interaction. Having her doing digital learning with a supervisor is not the best method for her.” Another parent pointed to both the relatively large size of her pod and the inexperience of its instructor as barriers.

“Going forward, it’s important to me that we have teachers that are very invested and focused on our kid,” she said. “And I don’t think the pod did that, but that might’ve been because there’s 12 to 16 kids...In some ways my daughter connected better with her [remote] teachers over Zoom who were confident and trained and experienced than she did with the super young and happy [pod] counselor who can teach but really isn’t an experienced teacher.”

Some parents who pulled double duty as their pod's instructor also yearned to send their child back into more capable hands of an in-person, experienced teacher—like one parent said, “I don't feel like I'm qualified to give them everything they need.”

A desire for more socialization—the same motivator that drove many parents to pods in the first place—was also a primary motivator for roughly one in five of the families we interviewed who were eager to go back to “regular” school. For these parents, pods represented a step up from complete isolation but they still desired broader spheres for social interaction.

“I think this really woke us up about how much the kids need to be with more kids, how much they need to be with more things in their environment, how much [my child] misses having other co-teachers,” one parent said. “Kids need other experiences. There's so much we have withdrawn from her, even though she had the pod, and we need to make it up to her. So, we're just going to try to give her more of a normal life given the circumstances moving forward.”

The logistical strain of podding also compelled some parents to send their child back to school. Especially in parent-run pods, some parents felt it was too mentally and physically draining to manage other peoples' kids in addition to their own. “You have to be really motivated,” said one parent. “If you're really motivated to do it, you can do it...but it's going to really need training and a lot of mental work to keep it.” Another parent said that, by the end, “it was just too much for me, and I was done with it.”

At the same time, our research uncovered some situations in which families felt podding was more logistically manageable or more affordable than their pre-pandemic school options. Some parents voiced appreciation for their ability to customize pod schedules based on their child or their family's specific needs or interests. For one parent, this allowed her son to pursue his passion for golf in the mornings or evenings outside of the constraint of traditional school hours.

In another pod, the families agreed to shift schedules later to allow their children more sleep. One parent noted the agreed-upon schedule, which ran from noon to 4 pm, allowed her son to get as much sleep as he needed. She felt this was vital for his health and development.

“I really love that my son is getting lots of sleep, all the sleep he could possibly need,” she said. “I don't think we'll be able to really measure that benefit, but I know that it's a good thing for him.”

## Some families will swap pods for new arrangements that preserve some of the benefits

Although many pods have disbanded, it is hard to discount the mark they have left on the families and educators who participated in them. About one in four of the parents we interviewed intend to continue participating in their pod for tutoring, afterschool care, or summer programming, while others suggested the community they built through podding will persist long after their children return to school.

Some parents also said that they intend to enroll their child in a different school next year based on their experience with the pod, mostly because they are seeking smaller class sizes. One parent said, “if we don’t continue on with the pod, we have decided most likely we’re going to go a private school route with a small class size. We have learned that [individualized learning] is the most beneficial and key thing for our son.... And the only way to get that at this point is by doing the pod or finding a small private school that offers that.”

Fifteen percent of parents we interviewed will keep their pods going full time for another year. An additional 26 percent said they would like to continue full-time participation if they can financially and logistically support it. Among families desiring to continue pods, one in three said they were motivated by a desire to maintain flexibility and the ability to customize educational experiences for their child.

“I think half of my parents would not be interested in this normally,” one parent said. “It was just more circumstantial because they needed to be able to work. That doesn’t mean that I don’t think they got anything out of it, but I don’t think they’ll hesitate to go back to public school. They’re not trying to reinvent the wheel.”

Other parents, however, did not want to let go of the benefits pods provided, she said, and “I’m definitely going to pursue that for my own kid. I mean, I think she’d be fine to go back to public school. I just think she learned so much more this way and has so much more opportunity this way that I’d hate to see that happen.”

## For instructors, podding redefined professional expectations and drove some to look beyond traditional teaching roles

While none of the instructors we interviewed expected to carry their current positions long-term, many looked toward the future with new professional expectations and career aspirations.

One instructor still wants to continue pod teaching, saying, “I would love to find a group of families that want to do this again, that see the benefit of doing this. I would much prefer to do this...[even if] long-term I may not make as much money. This is the ideal job for me.” Two other instructors were so inspired by their pod experience that they started considering how they can bring it to other kids who weren’t able to access pods during the pandemic.







For others, working in the pod brought professional clarity that is leading them in new directions. Some instructors with teaching backgrounds had the opportunity to discover a new preferred age group to teach. One instructor decided to open her own micro-school, another decided to get a master's in teaching, and another plans to join a private company that would give her the ability to work with small groups of students like she did in the pod. Another pod instructor "changed [her] whole trajectory of being a teacher and being in a classroom to [now] working with this nonprofit and tutoring kids one-on-one."

One instructor had previously experienced several challenging years as a kindergarten teacher, but after working in a pod, she seemed to have new hope for finding the right fit in the education field: "I am definitely trying to figure out how I could continue on this route. Maybe not a pod...but I am trying to look at how I could have a different position within the school and then be a different type of support, versus just the main lead teacher in a classroom of 25 or 30."

Strikingly, for nearly one-third of the pod instructors we interviewed, the professional clarity they gained convinced them that they shouldn't enter or return to teaching in a traditional classroom. Many of these instructors were now unwilling to work in a setting they perceive as more bureaucratic, stifling, and unable to deliver the kind of personalized learning and deep relationships with students they enjoyed in the pod.

"I'm not going back to formal K-12 education," one instructor said. "I can't. You can't. I want to be able to replicate what I had here. You can't do that in public school." Another admitted feeling "a little bit spoiled with my luxury of freedom in what I get to teach" in the pod. She is now second-guessing her decision to become a credentialed teacher because "there have been so many things that I have appreciated about this year that I know will be so different when I go to public school."

Echoing the sentiments of several others, one instructor said she wouldn't trade a pod-like position for public school teaching "unless public school can find some way to replicate it, unless we can find some way to reduce the administrative burdens on teachers and allow us to do what we got into the classroom to do."

## Pod arrangements were fragile and require systemic support for sustainability

While the idea of continuing to pod appealed to some people we interviewed, the reality is more complicated. Because most pods operated as islands without broader support structures, arrangements were susceptible to individual whims in ways that bred uncertainty.

Almost half of pod instructors (46 percent) said inadequate employment security was an obstacle. A change of heart or circumstance from parents or instructors could cause pods to dissolve on the spot, leaving the other parties in a rut. For example, one parent described her pod ending abruptly when their instructor's husband's health deteriorated. Another pod instructor was about to accept her first job offer until she was told there would be no guarantee for work after school buildings reopen. "I know many pods crashed and burned," one instructor said. "Teachers

left. Teachers got sick. The families pulled out. Some families decided, ‘No, this isn’t working. We’re going to go back to school in October with everyone else.’”

Some pods sought greater stability by requiring year-long contracts between families and their instructor. In one case, the pod parents were responsible for paying the instructor for a full year whether or not they remained in the pod. The instructor was also obligated to teach for a full year, with financial ramifications for an early departure stipulated in the contract.

Even so, the impact of constant flux and uncertainty during the pandemic couldn’t be avoided. One parent described feeling trapped at the mercy of other families’ circumstances: “What I think doesn’t work, for me, in this whole thing was being so dependent upon just one or two other families.... If they got ill for a while, or they just needed some family time, because of whatever was going on in their life, or just any reason that you might just not socialize with other people for a while—that makes a big impact on my family, when you’re the only family I’m seeing.”

In rare cases, pods were able to find an instructor whose situation was flexible and who didn’t mind rolling with uncertainty. “[For] the parents involved, and me as a teacher, none of us wanted things to be so formal and rigid and structured,” one instructor said. “And because I didn’t really need the money...I didn’t need to be guaranteed like a minimum of number of days or hours.” She also didn’t mind when the pod ended after running its course. Having paused her decade-long career at the start of the pandemic, she was grateful to “have something a little bit worthwhile to at least do with my time at a time when I didn’t know what to do with myself.”



## Hostile districts undermined pods and denied services to students

School and district resistance cut off pods from critical supports and services. While some parents and instructors shared positive stories of collaboration between the pod and individual teachers who provided remote learning, most stories about pods' relationship with the school district were negative. Pod families described "aggressive emails" and "vengeful" actions implicitly or explicitly discouraging the formation of pods. One district's policy aimed to coerce in-school learning by not counting virtual learning toward attendance. Other policies and practices forced pod students to remain enrolled and tethered to remote learning by cutting off services for students who unenroll or, for selective schools, causing them to lose their spot for future years.

Some district practices discouraged collaboration with pods in quieter ways. Families told of how districts ignored parent or PTA pleas to help organize pods, or to simply share a contact list so parents could organize themselves. And while some schools allowed all students in a pod to have the same hybrid schedule, other districts discouraged schools and teachers from making special accommodations. One pod instructor in Massachusetts described getting clear signals from the school that "they don't want you interfering with the teacher's time...You can help, you can support, but stay in your lane."

Whether because of concerns over funding, politics, or simply lack of leadership and foresight, these practices deprived pod students of critical resources and supports that families felt entitled to whether or not their child attended in person. "How do we get these children to have access to what they deserve?" asked a Pennsylvania parent who implored the district to let her pod use district facilities if they adhered to safety protocols.

Similarly, a parent in Texas was frustrated especially by the lack of access to state testing: "I really resent the fact that I do pay...very high tax dollars. And it just seems wrong to me that I'm completely shut off from using any of the public education in my area whatsoever because I had to withdraw."

A Washington State pod instructor said, "I don't actually have any communication with the school because the schools don't support pods.... The parents were trying to get some [assessments of], just for example, reading levels, but they weren't even able to get that for me. I can test the kids on my own, but...I want to make sure that we're on the same level, that I'm doing the same thing. But even that was pretty difficult for our parents to get that information."

## Families faced financial barriers to equity and access

Because the pods in our research were privately organized and funded, the cost of hosting a pod or hiring an instructor could be prohibitive for many families.

Financial strain also sent some families back to traditional school. Nationally, the average cost to participate in a pod was \$306 per week. The annual burden of

\$11,000 for nine months of podding is on par with the [average cost of private school](#) tuition. One parent didn't want to send his child back to school but didn't see a more viable option: "I don't think we could afford not to send them back, just from a financial perspective."

Yet while pods cost more than a free public education, compared to private schools, some parents found that pods were actually a [more affordable option](#). This could be especially important for families who perceive public schools in their area to be poor quality, like one parent who pronounced pods a "game changer" and "an education equalizer" for this very reason.

"We can save a lot of money if we choose to keep [my son] in the pod and the pod is actually open in the fall," she said. "Because yeah, everyone can't get in a private school, everyone can't afford it. Even with financial aid. And the pod has basically brought in a standard of education—a reasonable standard, an amazing standard—at a reasonable cost."

But affordability remains an issue. Several parents and instructors we spoke to raised concerns about the gap between families who could afford to join a pod and those who couldn't.

While several pod participants acknowledged their relative privilege in being able to pod, some said they didn't know what they could do about it. "I think equity has been a really big concern," one teacher said. "I know not every family can afford to put their kid in a pod and that's something we didn't really come up with an answer for." Another said, "It just seems really complicated to make it equitable and accessible and still keep it small and still pay the teacher well."

One pod instructor told us about passing by the building doorman on her way up to her pod of "wealthy kids with live-in nannies." The doorman would say, "Oh my gosh, Miss...we're seeing the hands-on learning you're doing when we get all these packages arriving to your apartment. We wish we could put our nephews or our kids in your program." She signaled remorse over being unable to help him, but their interactions led her to create a scholarship fund for lower-income students to join her pod the next year.

Indeed, some families and instructors we interviewed tried to make their pods more accessible by charging less money or sponsoring tuition for those who couldn't pay full price. One teacher noticed that no one was applying to her pod from traditionally marginalized groups, so she offered a sliding scale for tuition. Another instructor created a scholarship program asking parents to chip in a little extra so that one in five children in her pod could attend for free. In another case, a group of parents increased access by asking for contributions from local businesses and receiving a grant from the National Parents Union. And another instructor told of similar efforts on the south and west sides of Chicago: "I know for a fact there's groups of single moms and low-income women that have patched together these groups of people to be able to go to work and provide for their families out of necessity."

Still, individual efforts to increase diversity and access only went so far, and the pods that pursued this goal were in the minority of those we interviewed. As one instructor reflected, her pod "brought up all of these issues of access...like, God, how am I participating or complicit in the system that at this very tender, vulnerable time of human existence is helping the privileged...I had a lot of heady thoughts around my own participation in an unequal system."



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“For many families, podding was their first foray into how school can exist outside of the traditional four walls of a classroom. But too many families remain shut out of these opportunities.”

## PART 5:

# CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Pods were spontaneous, unregulated, private responses to a public health crisis, but many of those who participated in them discovered solutions to challenges that have long confronted public education. They fashioned small, independent learning communities that deepened relationships and freed families and instructors to tailor learning experiences to meet the needs of both students and their families. They tapped the strengths and passions of adults typically left on the sidelines of in-school education.

But this same independence also left pods disconnected and vulnerable. Families struggled to access broader supports, such as special education services or benchmark assessments. Instructors felt isolated from opportunities for professional development and peer collaboration. Lack of public funding created significant barriers to access. Both families and instructors had no blanket guarantee that their pod would still exist tomorrow.

If pandemic pods offer a clue to solving education's biggest challenges, sustaining these lessons will require changes both within and outside of traditional school systems.

### Pods suggest ways for school leaders to “build back better,” and challenge basic assumptions about schooling

Pandemic pods sometimes yielded more humane learning environments for students, unlocked new kinds of learning experiences, and created new, more satisfying working conditions for many instructors.

School system leaders can replicate some of the benefits discovered by pod families and educators, such as more humane learning environments for students, more personalized learning experiences, and more satisfying working conditions for instructors. But doing so will require them to break existing assumptions about school, including how they define who is an educator; how educators use time, space, and pedagogy to support students; how they see the role of families; and what success means.

School leaders can:

- **Embrace more flexible staffing structures.** Pandemic pods revealed there are many educational benefits to building deeper relationships with students and their families. But delivering on this in a system that places a single educator in front of a classroom of 25 to 30 students has proven impossible. Pods suggest there may be ways to thoughtfully integrate virtual and in-person supports from

educators with different strengths and roles. For example many pods paired the instructional and pedagogical expertise of remote teachers with different kinds of [professional capabilities](#) they prioritized in their pod instructors, such as strong interpersonal skills. School districts could follow suit by drawing upon the deep bench of adults in communities who, though they lack formal teaching credentials, are well positioned to support students inside and outside of classrooms. [Creative staffing solutions](#) could offer more opportunities for the one-on-one attention that every student deserves.

- **Leverage a more flexible, student-centered school day.** Pod families and educators alike cited the importance of maintaining a flexible schedule in their pursuit of [more student-centered learning experiences](#). Small group sizes and instructor autonomy enabled fluid movement between academic and non-academic activities, outdoor and indoor spaces, or accelerated and decelerated course progression. Flexibility also provided a sense of ownership for educators, who felt empowered to act based on their day-to-day observations of students. Rarely do educators working in traditional school settings enjoy the same opportunities to radically personalize their classrooms, but districts like [Lindsey Unified](#) in California and [Marysville](#) in Ohio demonstrate how districts can design the learning environment to be more fluid and responsive to every student.
- **Provide opportunities for students to shape what and how they learn.** Several pods allowed students to customize their curriculum and activities based on their unique goals and interests. This practice was particularly valued by the families of color we interviewed, many of whom appreciated the opportunity to make the curriculum more reflective of their cultural values and experiences. While systems should be in place to ensure every student engages in rigorous learning that prepares them for future opportunities, school leaders [can cultivate self-directed learning](#) and create more [authentic, real-world learning opportunities—even during a pandemic](#)—that give more space for students to shine.
- **Elevate partnerships between families, educators, and schools.** School systems might take cues from some of the more productive relationships that formed between parents and pod instructors, which empowered families with information and offered them real influence over their children’s education. These relationships were not unidirectional, as is typical of “parent outreach” by school systems; instead they involved two-way partnerships that recognized the [assets that parents and families bring to children’s learning and development](#). Education system leaders can follow suit by practicing deeper ways to [listen and learn](#) alongside families and community members rather than making assumptions about what these stakeholders want for their students, and what they need to get there.

## State and local policymakers can strengthen supports for families and educators who opt out of the traditional system

For many families, podding was their first foray into how school can exist outside of the traditional four walls of a classroom. For more than a few, their experience convinced them to join the [growing numbers of homeschoolers](#) and micro-schoolers across the country.

But too many families remain shut out of these opportunities, which often require intensive efforts on behalf of caregivers or private educators to maintain.

A few states and localities have created mechanisms that could support access to learning experiences outside traditional school systems and create new support systems for families and educators who embrace these approaches. For example, Prenda's partnerships with other schools in Arizona, including statewide virtual schools, allow families to gain access to micro-schooling, supported by a learning guide and Prenda-provided online curriculum. Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy offers in-person instruction and support to families who register as homeschoolers with the state. The program is currently made possible by funding provided by the municipal government of North Las Vegas.

But existing state programs have yet to bring coherence to the system of funding and oversight for these small learning communities, leaving them and the families who take advantage of these options at risk in the long term. Students' schools of record are often divorced from the people or organizations actually supporting instruction. Many of Prenda's Arizona micro-schools, for example, operate under the aegis of online charter schools that technically enroll their students, leaving state and local regulators few tools to vet, oversee, or support micro-school hosts and operators.

Addressing these shortcomings while ensuring low-income families and families of color can access high-quality, equitably resourced learning outside the traditional system will be essential to ensuring all students can benefit from these opportunities.

State and local policymakers could strengthen support for families that opt to continue learning outside the traditional system by:

- **Offering targeted resources to low-income families.** Out-of-system learning currently relies upon either the unpaid labor of caregivers who take on responsibilities for teaching and supervision or privately paid educators, whose expenses can equal the cost of a year's worth of private school tuition. Low-income families, including, disproportionately, families of color, will be shut out from out-of-system options so long as these gaps in resources exist. One remedy to these challenges is to provide funding to support families who choose to learn outside of school. Education savings accounts that operate in eight states could offer families the option of hiring private educators to support pod-like learning communities, though doing so will require careful consideration of how learning vendors are vetted. [Partnerships](#) between local governments, school districts, or philanthropies can also operate [grant programs](#) or other incentives that subsidize pods providing targeted support to low-income families.

- **Allowing out-of-system families to tap resources inside schools.** States and localities could also encourage policies that are, in the words of one parent, less “black and white, you either are a student, or you are not.” By defining more in-between options, school systems and states can ensure families learning primarily outside the system gain access to resources that could improve outcomes for youth in their community. This may include part-time enrollment options for families who want support with instruction in certain subjects or parent-partnership programs, which offer classes, enrichment, and community for homeschooling families. It might also mean making instructional resources like curriculum and assessment available to families who choose to learn at home. It could also include establishing a set of rights that establish all students are entitled to certain educational supports, such as special education evaluations and services, regardless of what type of school they attend, and that public schools receive funding to provide these services to all students—including those that are not enrolled full-time.
- **Addressing regulatory gray areas.** Pandemic pods operated in regulatory gray areas: while childcare and school licensing laws may have applied, few states were actively enforcing these provisions at the time of our study. Over the longer term, states need to rationalize regulatory frameworks to accommodate new models of home-based learning like pods and micro-schools while ensuring some minimum standards for care, guaranteeing families’ access to system-wide resources for students, and allowing providers to access public funding. This should include rules governing insurance and liability, which presents risks to families hosting students at their homes.





## Funders can help seed innovation and infrastructure supports that help families and educators thrive inside and outside the system

Funders have a critical role to play in helping to seed new possibilities both inside and outside the traditional schools. They should consider:

- **Investing in new, creative models for learning both inside and outside school systems.** In upending assumptions about the nature of school, the pandemic created new opportunities for funders to play a role in supporting transformative new learning models. While they commonly invest in [new school designs](#), funders should capitalize on the hunger among parents and educators for models that fundamentally reimagine teaching and learning to embrace promising staffing models, challenge boundaries between “core academics” and “peripheral” learning experiences, and partner with families and communities as collaborators in the work of school.
- **Seeding infrastructure supports that address barriers facing families and educators operating outside the system.** As this report details, families and educators face a number of serious systemic challenges to operating outside or on the periphery of traditional systems. These challenges not only dampen demand for these models but may also lower the quality of experience for students, parents, and teachers. Funders could support work to identify and seed the development of needed systemic supports. This could include [navigator](#) and [parent coaching programs](#) that support families to educate their children, content curation functions that help both families and educators access quality materials regardless of where children go to school, and educator supports that offer administrative support and access to peers and collaboration.
- **Scaling research investments so that the field can learn from successes and failures.** Alongside efforts to create proof points and new possibilities in education, funders also have a critical role to play in supporting research that enables the field to identify the most effective approaches as well as limitations and challenges. This is especially important in an innovation enterprise that aims to test promising but essentially new approaches to education.

Families created pods as emergency backups to in-person school and rarely explicitly set out to improve public education in America. And yet, in the eyes of most participants, that’s precisely what happened. Both families and instructors overwhelmingly desire to continue experiencing the best of what their pods could offer, either inside their current schools or outside the traditional education system, but they face considerable headwinds threatening their ability to do so.

Learning from pandemic pods means creating systemic supports to sustain their benefits in more equitable and widespread ways without sinking new learning options inside new bureaucracies that stifle innovation. Doing so may well yield breakthroughs to some of the thorniest issues plaguing public schools today—[youth disconnection](#), the [mental health crisis](#), [learning loss](#), [declining enrollment](#), and [teacher burnout](#), to name a few—through pods’ knack for forging deeper relationships, building community, personalizing instruction to meet student needs, providing flexibility, increasing professional freedom, and creating joy.

Understanding how to root the best aspects of pandemic podding in the education ecosystem moving forward is a challenge worth wrestling with.

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