



Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis: Establishing Learning Pods

DRAFT Prepared for Discussion and Development

PRACTICE BRIEF #7

THE PROBLEM

During the summer of 2020, in the midst of the COVID pandemic — and with no end in sight — parents and caregivers increasingly began to realize that a return to a “normal” school year in the fall, including in-person learning at school, would likely be impossible.

Concerns mounted as they recalled the confusion and uncertainty in the spring over school closings and reopenings. They remembered all too well the stresses associated with monitoring online instruction and supervising children during the workday while working from home — or the scramble to line up care and support for their children while on the job in the workplace. Many younger children were left in the care of older siblings, who themselves were expected to be logged in for classes. Worries about mounting learning losses weighed heavily on the minds of parents as the new school year 2020–21 approached.

As parents/caregivers considered their options and began to adopt solutions that were variously accessible, depending on family income, location and social networks, a growing number of community leaders became increasingly concerned about ensuring equitable access to promising models of instructional support for economically challenged children and families. How could robust alternatives to school-based instruction be developed to mitigate the widening of gaps in learning opportunities that would in turn avoid exacerbating gaps in student achievement based on family income?

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FEATURED SOLUTION: LEARNING PODS (Also referred to variously as Pandemic Pods or Micro-Schools)

Learning pods have offered a solution for parents/caregivers who looked for a way to support their children’s instructional needs as an alternative to providing instructional supervision and support themselves during the workday while schools are closed. A recent survey of a nationally representative sample of parents found that 6% of K–12 children in the United States are participating in some type of learning pod, representing more than 3 million students nationwide. (Marketplace, February 25, 2021, Minnesota Public Radio).

A learning pod typically consists of a relatively small number of the same children, usually 10 or fewer, who meet for in-person learning during the school day. Children in a pod are typically relatively close in age/grade level. One recent study found that a majority of pods serve elementary and middle school age children; fewer pods are available to adolescents.

A pod is led and managed by a designated adult leader who provides direct instruction and/or instructional supervision, monitoring and support. Typically, the same adult leader works with the same group of children each day during the week.

The adult leader may be one of the participating children’s parents/caregivers or a weekly rotation of those parents. Pod parents/caregivers may choose to hire a certified teacher or paraprofessional or choose to contract for a teacher or paid caregiver via a for-profit pod provider. In many cases, pod leaders are on the staff of a local nonprofit or city/county agency that is hosting the pod.

Pods may be hosted at the home of one of the participating children’s parents or at a location provided by or associated with the pod leader, such as at a child-care center, a child/youth-serving nonprofit, a church, other community-based organization or agency, etc.

Pod participants enjoy the benefit of decreased risk of COVID transmission as a result of limiting daily in-person contact to the same small group of children with the same adult leader. Due to the small number of participants, the pod leader can relatively easily manage COVID social distancing guidelines, use of PPE and adherence to other health guidelines intended to mitigate the risk of infection. Moreover, some pods have created explicit expectations for participating children to adhere to recommended health guidelines outside of the school day, as well as during pod time.

In addition to deriving academic benefits, pod participants enjoy the socioemotional benefit of face-to-face interaction with the adult leader and other pod participants. Pods therefore establish a “social bubble” intended to mitigate safely the negative impacts of COVID-related social isolation.

Some pods offer free enrollment, while many charge a fee.

Depending on the particular design of the learning pod, the following supports may be provided to participating children:

- Help accessing online learning platforms and other internet resources;
- Help logging into scheduled synchronous learning sessions and check-in meetings with their classroom teacher in their assigned school;
- Engagement with academic content that either replaces or supplements the remote learning offered by the children’s assigned school/teacher;
- Assistance with technology issues;
- Monitoring to help them stay on task;
- Just-in-time individualized support for learning (including homework help);
- Supervision of playtime to promote physical and mental health; and
- Enrichment learning opportunities beyond assigned classwork.

While learning pods operate primarily during the school day, they may provide extended coverage beyond the school day to support working parents. During this extended time children may receive tutoring and homework assistance, as well as supervised enrichment programming, similar to what may be offered by afterschool programs sponsored by 21st Century Community Learning Centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, Y’s and the like.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

The Children’s Opportunity Fund (local GLR lead organization) in Montgomery County, MD, led a local effort to organize learning pods for low-income children. Dubbed Educational Equity and Enrichment Hubs, these pods have provided child care and distance learning support from 8:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. for nearly 1,400 K–6 students during the 2020–21 school year.

In each hub, children are provided with the support needed to succeed in a virtual learning environment, including professional supervision, access to healthy meals, outdoor play options and opportunities for social engagement. The program meets all COVID-19 health requirements through enhanced health, safety and cleaning measures.

As a public-private partnership, the Children’s Opportunity Fund secured and coordinated \$8.2 million in funding to support the initiative through the spring 2021, including special appropriations totaling \$7.2 million from the Montgomery County Council and the Montgomery County Public Schools, as well

as \$1 million in private dollars. Twelve local providers have received funding to operate hubs at a total of 40 sites across the county.

The COF created a dedicated website, www.equityhubs.org, to provide a centralized location for information, registration and donations. A hot line is also available to parents/caregivers who need just-in-time responses to questions.

As Montgomery County Public Schools proceeds with reopening this spring (2021), Equity Hubs are transitioning to provide support for before-school and after-school care, as well as full-day supports for children while they are out of school on Wednesdays (for school cleaning) and when they are out in conjunction with alternative weekly in-school/virtual schedules.

BROWARD COUNTY, FLORIDA

When the Broward County Schools announced that students would resume learning in a fully remote environment in the fall, the Children’s Services Council (local GLR lead organization) convened a meeting of funders (including private philanthropy and the United Way) and local community service providers in early August 2020. The purpose of the meeting was to explore the possibility of offering learning pods to children from low-income families as safe places to learn while schools remained closed.

As a result, 48 community agencies were funded to establish learning pods at 63 sites across the county, including 28 child care centers in high-risk ZIP codes. A total of 242 pods were created serving nearly 2,200 children (approximately 9 children per pod).

These pods operated until the initiative was discontinued in October, when children returned to in-person instruction in schools. The CSC has continued its long-standing support for before-school care and after-school programs to support extended learning for children whose parents/caregivers need child care while on the job.

CHEMUNG COUNTY, NEW YORK

The United Way of the Southern Tier (the lead organization for GLR Network member Chemung County, NY) led an “all-hands-on-deck” effort in the late summer 2020 to provide full-day child care and learning supports during the upcoming school year for low-income families living in a two-county (Chemung and Steuben) rural region of New York state. The United Way engaged community-based organizations, school districts, unions, and local businesses and corporations in the planning process to address an array of

challenges particular to providing services in rural communities, including limited or no internet access and a small population spread over a large geographic area.

Registration opened in October for slots at eight pod sites across the two counties. Virtually all slots were taken within a few weeks, as parents grew more comfortable with the idea of leaving their children in a group setting for the day in the midst of the pandemic.

One site was organized as a stand-alone pod, enrolling seven children. The other sites offered slots to as many as 50 children each. At the seven larger sites, the children were organized (a) by cohort — those children who were assigned to the same 2 days on/3 days off schedule were consistently grouped together; (b) by age/grade level; and (c) in keeping with social distancing guidelines.

Participating children received supervision and tutoring assistance in a safe space that was compliant with Department of Health regulations. They were also provided with reliable internet connectivity, computer hardware and access to instructional software.

To provide these supports, local stakeholder organizations set aside traditional roles, turf and boundaries, and partners agreed to repurpose staff and space as needed. This has led local leaders to consider how to sustain the nimbleness, innovation, and collaboration among stakeholder organizations that responded so well to the needs of children and families in the midst of the crisis.

DELAWARE (NEW CASTLE COUNTY, SUSSEX COUNTY, KENT COUNTY)

The United Way of Delaware (UWDE) is leading an initiative to provide learning pods in all three counties in the state. Twenty-one community-based organizations are involved in hosting full-day instructional support and supervision for children in 27 pods serving over 700 students statewide.

The pods are organized to offer adult supervision for 8–12 students each. Students can access their school-based remote learning lessons using devices supplied through the initiative. In addition to supervision, the pods offer supplemental academic assistance and virtual tutors. Included in the day-long experience are opportunities for physical activity, engagement with the creative arts, as well as peer socialization. Additionally, the pods provide health and vision screening services.

The UWDE has also organized a virtual “learning community” for pod providers to network and share best practices. Included in the learning community are representatives of the Delaware Department of Education, the state charter school authority and city/community representatives.

Current plans are to continue to provide services during the upcoming summer 2021 and possibly expand services for the 2021–22 school year.

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA

The City of Las Vegas (the local GLR Network lead organization) moved quickly during the summer 2020 to provide full-day child care and educational supports to children from low-income families while the Clark County Schools were closed for in-person instruction. Several city departments collaborated in the effort, including the Department of Youth Development and Social Innovation, Department of Parks and Recreation and Office of Cultural Affairs, in partnership with the Las Vegas-Clark County Library District.

The city created the “Vegas Strong Academy” to provide these supports for students in grades K–8 at 10 sites across the city, including 6 community centers and 4 library locations. Each site offers age- and grade-appropriate virtual learning assistance, recreational opportunities, as well as arts enrichment programming. Health screenings have also been incorporated into the suite of supports provided to participants. Over 1,400 students have been served this year in a ratio of 2–3 children per adult.

Through the process of providing learning pods in the form of Vegas Strong Academies, the City of Las Vegas learned from both parents and students that there is an ongoing need and demand for small schools. While not feasible or even necessarily appropriate for all students, these smaller schools encourage and help some students to blossom and thrive in a more personalized environment, in contrast to their experience in the much larger schools operated within the Clark County School District, the fifth largest school district in the United States with over 300,000 students. In response, the City of Las Vegas will be applying to open three charter schools, to be operated by the city, that will serve children in underserved communities during the upcoming 2021–22 school year.

FRANKLIN COUNTY (COLUMBUS), OHIO

When schools shifted to a virtual learning model in the spring of 2020, the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) surveyed residents to assess their preparedness to accommodate this shift. The survey revealed the challenges that families were having with lack of access to digital devices and internet connectivity and also with the use video conferencing platforms such as Zoom.

The CMHA joined a partnership with other community- and faith-based organizations to establish 150 Learning Extension Centers across the county for the 2020–21 school year. Through its commitment to this initiative, the CMHA transitioned 8 community rooms that were available in CMHA-owned developments into Learning Extension Centers (LECs) for children of residents.

These Learning Extension Centers provided access to laptops, internet-ready spaces, free meals and PPE. The CMHA developed partnerships with local community-based organizations to run the LECs and provide children with technical assistance to navigate virtual schooling.

Children and youth could enroll in the program at no cost. The LECs were open and available from 8 a.m.–8 p.m. Younger children were served during the earlier part of the day, while older youth could attend later in the day.

At many of the sites, volunteers were recruited to assist with tutoring and lunches. Students were also provided health and wellness checkups via Children’s Hospital. Nearly 150 children participated across the 8 CMHA communities.

The CMHA plans to continue to promote digital equity and to provide internet services to all CMHA residents at no cost or a reduced rate. Additionally, the community rooms will continue to serve as digital learning environments, in which residents can access digital literacy training, workforce development training and access to telehealth services.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

In response to the COVID pandemic, the mayor of San Francisco announced on July 23, 2020, the launch of the Community Hubs for Youth Initiative to support the education needs of children from marginalized families during the 2020–21 school year. This initiative represented an extension of an emergency response effort mounted by the city in the spring to support children of hospital staff and frontline workers when public schools were first shut down due to the pandemic.

Hubs were established across the city at 91 sites, drawing on relationships with a wide variety of partners, including the San Francisco Public Library, Recreation and Parks Department, Department of Public Health, nonprofit organizations, churches, hotels and private corporate offices.

The hubs were open from 8:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. during the work week to accommodate the needs of working families for child care. In accordance with local health guidelines, each space was limited to a stable cohort of 14 children and 2 adults (i.e., there was no mixing of children and adults between spaces from day to day or week to week).

The hubs were designed to provide a safe space for academic learning by connecting students via Zoom with their actual classroom teachers during the morning hours. Youth development professionals employed by local community-based child- and youth-serving organizations served as staff at each hub, providing academic assistance and technical support and ensuring attention to participants’ socioemotional needs.

Nearly 2,500 children and youth participated in the initiative during the 2020–21 school year. The city plans to extend these supports by offering a “Summer Together” initiative during the summer 2021 to help children recover lost ground. The initiative will provide services to as many as 20,000 children at 120 sites and will incorporate enrichment activities that infuse academic curriculum, along with mental health supports.

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

When COVID closed schools in Oakland in March 2020, Oakland REACH, a community-based education advocacy organization, began planning a parent-centered, grassroots initiative to support the education needs of children and families from underserved communities. The organization launched its Virtual Family Hub initiative in June 2020.

Designed to integrate academic and socioeconomic family supports to address the needs of the whole child, the Hub initiative served over 200 children in grades K–8 during the summer 2020. It operated 5 days a week for 5 weeks and offered students 75 hours of instruction, along with additional opportunities for social and emotional enrichment.

The Hub was composed of three virtual centers: a Literacy Liberation Center for K–2 students; a center for students in grades 3–8 affiliated with the National Summer School Initiative; and a Family Sustainability Center, dedicated helping families not only survive the pandemic but emerge stronger. REACH’s team of community organizers pivoted to become “family liaisons” to assist families with access to remote instruction, promote “attendance” and help them learn how to be better, stronger advocates for services from their schools.

When school started in the fall 2020, REACH extended its existing suite of supports in order to provide afterschool programming for low-income children every afternoon from 3–5 p.m., including tutoring and enrichment activities.

By the end of 2020, the Hub was serving 400 students, and REACH was actively engaged in negotiations with the Oakland City Schools to expand the Hub with the support of a private funder. A targeted expansion effort during the winter/spring has resulted in bringing the Hub to students and their families in 6 schools, along with the original group of families involved in the REACH citywide Hub.

Plans are in the works to launch another summer Hub in 2021, and REACH is working with the district to continue Hub support for students who opt out of in-person schooling for the 2021–22 school year.

As students have the opportunity to resume in-person schooling in the spring 2021, and as parents and caregivers assess the local landscape of schooling options for the fall 2021, the jury is out regarding the legacy of learning pods. To what extent might they remain a permanent and significant part of the changed landscape of schooling in the United States?

- Will there be sufficient demand from parents/caregivers for community-based organizations, city agencies and others to continue to offer learning pods during the day as alternatives to school? While many parents and children will welcome a return to a traditional school setting, for some parents the small group size and personal attention afforded to their children by learning pods are features that they may not want to relinquish. This may give pods true staying power.
- If pods are maintained on any type of community-level scale, will community-based nonprofits and public agencies hire credentialed (certified) pod leaders who can provide direct and supplemental high-quality instruction, and/or will they rely on existing or new non-certified staff simply to monitor and support online instruction offered via “virtual schools” established by districts and/or states?
- How will learning pods change the relationship of community-based organizations to schools — especially those organizations that themselves incorporate an explicit learning function (such as museums)? Instead of only providing afterschool enrichment or serving as a special field trip destination, will these organizations evolve as places where comprehensive, theme-focused schooling is provided for a consistent group of children during the school day throughout the school year?
- If learning pods are continued as a schooling option, how will they be funded? Will they live on primarily as a boutique, fee-based solution for the relatively affluent, or will they be more widely available to children from families of more limited means?
- Will a learning pod strategy remain as a quick, contingency solution for parents if schools are closed again due to another surge of COVID infections? Pods could serve as “swing space” for schools who need to close down or increase social distancing. How/To what extent will pods be able to coordinate instructional support with that provided by children’s regular classroom teachers?