

Pandemic Learning Pods and K-12 Education

This fall school leaders across the nation are grappling with tough decisions about how to keep schools open safely in light of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Many parents nationwide are placing their children in so-called pandemic learning pods to offset safety, child care and academic worries about the state of K-12 education.



What is a pandemic learning pod?

Some families are banding together to form [pandemic learning pods](#) to help allay fears about student safety in K-12 education during the COVID-19 pandemic and share child care duties while ensuring students get socio-emotional support. A pandemic learning pod is a small group of students in a learning cohort external to traditional in-person instruction at school. Some parents are paying tutors to help with instruction if their school district has either a hybrid instruction model or remote learning option for fall/winter 2020.

On average, pods can consist of three to ten students. Families that do not opt for a tutor for a pod often take turns with teaching responsibilities and child care efforts. The number one reason for using a learning pod this fall is safety, according to 100 people who responded to a recent [New York Times survey](#). Some parents noted that pods with guided instruction help offset limited

attention spans of children who have a remote learning plan, ensure some structure to the school day and enable working parents to have supervision for their child.

Child care is a big concern for parents since most school districts are not offering in-person instruction five days a week this fall. This struggle is very real across the nation. Southern Tier counties in New York are experiencing this struggle and grappling with ways to accommodate for it, according to an August 2020 article in *The Evening Tribune*. Since K-12 child care programs may not be available now, businesses and non-profits in Chemung and Steuben counties are stepping up to assist families with child care concerns during this time. For example, businesses are surveying families about child care needs and even assisting families in need by creating “parent care pods” which are “small groups of parents whose children attend the same school or are in the same hybrid class schedule – to share supervision duties in order to minimize overall out-of-work time.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Recognize asynchronous learning allows for more flexibility in family schedules.
- ▶ Know student demographics in your school district and how the formation of learning pods may not be inclusive for every student.
- ▶ Understand that learning pods play a multi-functional role for families including child care and the fostering of student academic and socio-emotional development.
- ▶ Identify ways to provide learning hubs for the school community to lessen reliance on learning pods.
- ▶ Understand the range of uses of learning pods from an alternative to K-12 public education to a supplement to a support structure.





How are communities addressing pandemic learning pods?

Parents tend to organize these learning pods, though some school districts across the country are getting involved in the formation of these pods to ensure equity among students and families. Critics of pods say they tend to be popular among families that have the time and money to set up such an arrangement.

For example, the [Alpine Union School District](#) in San Diego, CA is hosting learning pods on the school campus, in part, at the suggestion of families seeking school involvement to ensure learning pods are available to all families who are interested in partaking in them. The district is leaving the formation of pods to families while helping them network with each other, providing space on the district's campus to accommodate these pods, providing substitute teachers to tutor kids and offering child care. Another California school district is also being proactive and outspoken about their stance on learning pods. After parents requested classes for their children to match their learning pods, some Oakland elementary school leaders sent parents a [letter](#) addressing learning pod concerns including inequities that these instructional pods can create for those families with less resources. [Fairfax County Public Schools](#) in Virginia wrote a similar message on the school district website outlining possible equity issues for parents who do not have the resources or availability to have their children participate in learning pods and the district's unwillingness to match students' classes to students' learning pods.

These districts are not alone in taking a stance on pandemic learning pods. The Denver Public Schools [board of education](#) issued a statement on the district's website to families regarding how pandemic learning pods may have negative repercussions for social justice and the future of K-12 public schooling if families choose not to enroll students in public school.

While these stances may seem extreme, some school districts across the nation are experiencing lower enrollments and are concerned about a shift away from public education. Projected [enrollment](#) for Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland was lower than expected, according to the superintendent of schools, Jack R. Smith. The projections seem on [target](#). In North Carolina, eager parents crashed the state's online homeschooling registry the first day it commenced.

Jessica Calarco, associate professor of sociology at Indiana University, explains how pandemic learning pods can take many forms from mere support of the K-12 curriculum to an *alternative* to public education. According to Calarco, "some pods are operating as an alternative to traditional public schooling (essentially a mini private school or a homeschool

appear to be particularly interested in using pods as an alternative or supplement to public schooling."

One independent school in New York is marketing pods to parents concerned about the state of K-12 education. The [Hudson Lab School](#) in Hastings-on-Hudson in New York is offering learning pod services in which a Hudson Lab School educator teaches a small pod of children in a host's home or on a host's property. The lab school is costly. For example, the cost of a full academic year pod for kindergarten through fourth grade is \$125,000. Full-time enrollment in the school necessitates that a student leaves public school and becomes a home-schooler, although students can also stay in public school via remote learning and participate in a pod that the lab school offers "as a supplement" to their public education, according to The New York Times.

"The first thing I would tell districts is to know the diversity of their district and who is likely to be 'left out.'"

– R. L'Heureux Lewis, associate professor of sociology of education at The Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development at New York University

co-op), while others are acting as a *supplement* to the instruction provided by the public school (children get extra instruction/activities on top of the instruction they receive from the public school), and still others are acting as a *support structure* for children engaged in remote learning through their public school (the pod provides a space for children to learn online and an adult provides assistance with getting online and completing school assignments, but does not offer extra instruction or learning-related activities beyond what the school provides)." She notes "privileged families (e.g., middle- and upper-middle-class white families)

What should be considerations for school leaders regarding pandemic learning pods?

Pandemic learning pods have been a ripe topic of study of late for education scholars. R. L'Heureux Lewis, associate professor of sociology of education at The Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development at New York University, explains how equity concerns may arise from the formation of pods. School districts should "know the diversity of their district and who is likely to be 'left out'" in the formation of pandemic learning pods, since "pods are being formed, most often, based out of already segregated



social networks (racial, economic, linguistic, learning ability-wise and geographic),” he notes. Districts should take a “proactive role in recommending best (and worst) practices around the formation of pods,” he told NYSSBA.

- Prioritizing asynchronous learning which allows for more flexibility in schedules for families
- Providing technology access and support to families who need assistance

a child in the [Fayetteville-Manlius School District](#) is matchmaking 150 families in her community with learning pods.

School leaders across New York State seem less preoccupied with learning pods. NYSSBA reached out to several BOCES district superintendents for feedback regarding awareness among area school districts about learning pods and received feedback from one, Dr. Gladys Cruz, district superintendent of Questar III BOCES. Dr. Cruz noted the lack of discussion about pandemic learning pods at a recent meeting of her area superintendents. Only two out of 23 districts talked about the formation of parent-led learning pods in their districts, she told NYSSBA. Moreover, she noted, she initiated the topic discussion.

“From an equity perspective, pods are most problematic when they operate as an alternative to public schooling.”

– Jessica Calarco, associate professor of sociology at Indiana University

“From an equity perspective, pods are most problematic when they operate as an alternative to public schooling,” Calarco told NYSSBA. “This draws money away from public schools that desperately need that funding to support the students left behind,” she said. She also thinks they are “problematic when they serve as a supplement to public schooling, rather than simply as a support structure.” Calarco suggests that school leaders can ensure more equitable outcomes for students via the following:

- Stressing the reopening of primary schools since young students need more support
- Establishing learning hubs which can attend to child care, academic and socio-emotional needs

Pandemic learning pods are a hot topic of discussion among education scholars and communities across the nation including families in New York State. While Southern Tier businesses are aiding families by setting up parent care pods through work connections, one Central New York parent with

Whether there is a lack of understanding about pandemic learning pods among New York school leaders or a decision not to get involved in their formation or hold an opinion about them, it is important that education leaders are aware of the purposes and uses of these pods in their communities and their possible influences on equity, student outcomes and public education.

- Dismissing pod-related requests such as matching student pods to student classes

