

Some Pods Will Outlast the Pandemic

Students, parents say they appreciate the support

By MICHAEL B. HORN

IN A HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUM in Newton, Massachusetts, nine children seated at three tables configured in a U-shape are each working on their own online lesson. After their 25-minute “Pomodoro” cycle—a time-management technique designed to optimize one’s ability to focus on a specific task—they break for a variety of outdoor recreational activities, from badminton to Bananagrams.

The children are enrolled in KaiPod Learning, a program that offers small-group learning pods with access to virtual schools, in-person tutoring and support, and a variety of student-driven enrichment activities. The day I visited, many, but not all, of the students planned to join a yoga session in the afternoon.

KaiPod is among the startup pods that emerged from the height of the pandemic and that have so far survived.

In the summer of 2020, the frenzy around learning

Pods—also called microschoools and pandemic pods—was high. As described in “The Rapid Rise of Pandemic Pods” (*What Next*, Winter 2021), families—including mine—were frenetically assembling or joining them out of a desire to preserve some in-person support, community, and normalcy in an otherwise abnormal year.

At the same time, equity concerns and parent shaming ran rampant. Educators, researchers, and the media worried about who would have access to these pods and whether low-income families would be left out of them.

A year later, the scene looks different. While the Delta variant has kept plans changing, people seem more interested in a return to in-person schooling. The conversation around pods hasn’t vanished, but it has quieted. Many families, including my own, pulled out of their pods last year because they found



At the KaiPod Learning pod in Newton, Massachusetts, students are taught one on one or in small groups by former school teachers. Students often work outdoors or while listening to music, and KaiPod provides enrichment activities tailored to students’ interests.

them unsustainable for any number of reasons.

And yet many pods that have an institutional structure behind them, rather than being fully parent-run, have survived. They are finding their niches and growing. Despite fears that pods would benefit only people in prosperous suburbs such as Newton, some of the most robust pod experiments have taken place in school districts disproportionately serving low-income and minority students. According to the Center for Reinventing Public Education, which collected information on 372 different learning pods during the pandemic, 36 percent of the largest urban school districts operated or sponsored learning pods during the pandemic, for example, with the majority of these focused on explicitly serving the most vulnerable students. According to CRPE, nearly 39 percent of these pods operated throughout the 2020–21 year. Only 12 percent definitively closed; it was unclear what happened to the remainder.

Some districts are seeking to continue to make use of pods to create alternative schooling arrangements that better support those children who need it the most. It's worth monitoring to see if something more durable persists from this movement as the nation moves through a third year of interrupted schooling. Case studies from Cleveland and Boston, as well as DeKalb County in Georgia, Edgecombe County in North Carolina, and Guilford County in North Carolina, help give a deeper sense of how the pods performed and what they may facilitate in the years ahead.

Cleveland

When Cleveland declared in July of 2020 that the school year would begin remotely, community organizations—including the Cleveland Foundation, MyCom, Say Yes Cleveland, and the United Way of Cleveland—sprang into action alongside the Cleveland Municipal School District. As documented in a report, “Building Community-based Academic Learning Pods for Cleveland’s Children,” the organizations worked to open 24 pods that served 808 of Cleveland’s most vulnerable students, all but 32 of whom were enrolled in kindergarten through 8th grade. The funds were largely from philanthropic sources, although federal CARES Act funds also supported the effort.

The top reason for which parents and guardians reported enrolling students in the pods was educational support, followed by needing safe care while they worked. For some students, the pods served as an option of last resort, without which they would not have been able to attend classes online, despite the district’s distribution of computers and internet hotspots. This is because many students lived exclusively with their grandparents, who were unable to help them log on. Students in grades K–5 were particularly in need of such assistance. Other students were challenged by homelessness or utilities that were disconnected at home. Attendance at the pods was relatively high at 75 percent overall and 85 percent among the K–5 students.

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Students and parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with the pod experience, with 98 percent of parents expressing appreciation. At the same time, 55 percent of parents said the pods didn’t meet students’ academic needs, but it’s hard to know how that compares to expectations or the counterfactual of what students’ academic experience would have been without the pods. Academic data from the pods hasn’t been released yet to shed light on this topic, but there are a few preliminary bright spots. The district’s data, for example,

showed that the pod students logged into the district’s learning-management system more and completed more assignments than the non-pod students. Judy Willard, one of the staff members at one of the pods, reported that students were on track with their academic learning despite

many having started the year 65 lessons behind.

The pods in Cleveland are not in operation for this 2021–22 school year, but the district is exploring using a pod-like structure to facilitate student-led peer-tutoring efforts.

Boston

In Boston, as in Cleveland, a group of community organizations—the YMCA of Greater Boston, Latinos for Education, Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción, and the BASE—came together through philanthropic funding to stand up 12 pods that enrolled over 165 students, 82 percent of whom identified as Black or Latinx. Eleven of the pods were in person for K–8 students, and one was virtual for high school students.

The organizations had been coordinating prior to Covid to reimagine schooling to close the opportunity gap for Boston students of color. When they launched their pods in September 2020, they had four principal goals: to offer a safe and supportive environment; create a daily structure to help students stay on track; demonstrate the benefits of students working with Black and Latinx staff; and set up a broader infrastructure to support students.

Bellwether Education, an education consultancy, studied and advised the intervention relative to those goals. There were positives and negatives. Attendance was lower than expected, and Bellwether’s forthcoming report doesn’t provide quantitative academic outcomes. On the other hand, with 95 percent of the staff identifying as Black or Latinx and 100 percent holding previous educational experience, 76 percent of parents said their child’s connection was stronger with the pod staff than with their regular school teacher. Ninety-two percent of parents further reported that they were informed by staff about their child’s day. This kind of family engagement could be a harbinger of greater academic connection and progress, although it’s hard to know given the limited data released so far.

Given the lack of a virtual schooling option in Boston for the 2021–22 school year, the pods are not continuing, but the leaders of the community organizations are seeking to find novel ways to partner with the local schools to continue

providing the full set of child supports that, based on the survey data, parents appreciated.

The Future of Pods

Unlike Boston and Cleveland, some districts are actively continuing their pods.

Along with TNTF, a nonprofit education consultancy, CRPE created more in-depth partnerships with six school districts to try to create something more lasting and transformational out of the pods movement. DeKalb County School District in Georgia, for example, is using the pods to reinvent alternative schools. Alternative schools, which serve students who have dropped out or transferred from traditional schools, have historically struggled to show the value they add for students.

Edgecombe County Public Schools in North Carolina launched learning hubs last fall to help students connect to online classes and get in-person support. District leaders discovered that families valued increased flexibility around where and when learning happened, so they worked with students and teachers to design a “spoke-and-hub model.” Long-term, the district hopes this model will offer a new approach to school that builds stronger connections between school and community. In this more hybrid future of schooling, students would enroll in a brick-and-mortar or virtual school for the “hub” of their experience and then elementary and middle school students will join “spokes”—or interest-based

groups—for the other time. High school students will receive tutor-like support and work at paid positions or internships.

Guildford County Public Schools, also in North Carolina, is looking to craft school days in which high school students learn for three hours in person and then have more flexible time out of school to engage in a variety of activities, including completing assignments, working, or receiving tutoring or other enrichment opportunities. The district envisions this as part of a greater overhaul of their high schools that weren’t serving many students effectively, even before Covid.

It seems unlikely that pods will be a dominant force in American schooling anytime soon. They will likely fade in influence relative to the 2020–21 school year. Yet many parents and district leaders remain intrigued by the possibilities pods create—enough so that this option will persist in some localities as one schooling choice in a broader set. Indeed, Tyton Partners, an education advisory firm, estimates that 1.5 million children are enrolled in microschoools this fall. Based on the reported parent satisfaction, the pods seeded in some of these localities may continue to grow.

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