The Rapid Rise of Pandemic Pods

Will the parent response to Covid-19 lead to lasting change?

by **MICHAEL B. HORN**

A microschool run by Prenda, where enrollment has quadrupled in the past year.

PRENDA

WITH MORE SCHOOL DISTRICTS around the country announcing that fall classes will consist either of full-time remote learning or hybrid learning where children will spend up to a week at home at a time, increasing numbers of parents are taking matters into their own hands.

Some are forming "pandemic pods." These pods are a do-it-yourself approach to restarting children's academic progress and social lives after the challenging lockdowns of the spring. In these learning pods, families "bubble" together in small, closed groups to provide and share childcare, curriculum, or both.

These fast-growing pods come in a variety of configurations, as families build them out to suit. A similar response is occurring among online education technology providers and platforms, which are adapting in real time to create a dynamic ecosystem to serve parent needs.

Curriculum and Teachers

In some cases, parents are using tools like Facebook—the main "Pandemic Pods" Facebook group had nearly 40,000 members in mid-August—to essentially start their own one-room schoolhouses. Families are recruiting teachers to lead their pods and paying as much as $125,000 under these arrangements—more than most teachers make in an ordinary year. Some teachers are figuring out ways to work with multiple pods to increase their earnings.

In other cases, parents are depending on existing online programs to provide instruction for their pod. For curriculum, some families are remaining enrolled in their district school but following that program in their pod. Others are enrolling their children in virtual schools, such as the public charter and private-school programs run by K12, Inc., Connections Academy, or Laurel Springs School. Although the efficacy of virtual schools, particularly those in the charter sector, has come under attack, families' willingness to try these types of programs appears to be changing. Relative to the remote learning options a traditional district school is cobbling together, the offerings of virtual charters often look quite robust in comparison, as they provide both curriculum and teachers.

Other families are taking nontraditional pathways by enrolling in so-called micro-schools, which function as modern-day one-room schoolhouses and many of which use blended learning in their models (see "School Disruption on the Small Scale," *feature,* spring 2017), such as Prenda Learning and MyTechHigh. Or families are assembling their own curriculum through online providers like Khan Academy, ABCMouse, The Emile School, and Outschool.

Outschool CEO Amir Nathoo said the company's enrollments have soared to more than 300,000, compared to 80,000 total in the three years through mid-March 2020. The company is trying to hire 5,000 new teachers to meet the demand. It has also established Outschool.org to provide free classes to families facing financial hardship.

Prenda Learning, which creates groups of 5 to 10 students in grades K–8, has seen its enrollments quadruple in the past year. Prenda partners with charter schools in its home state of Arizona to provide micro-schools tuition-free. It also accepts education savings account funds through the Empowerment Scholarship Account Program. For learners who live outside of Arizona, Prenda offers a homeschool option called Prenda Family, which offers full curriculum, training, and support for $100 a month per student.

MyTechHigh, which partners with public schools to offer a full curriculum for K–12 learners at no cost to the family, is experiencing similar rapid growth. More than 12,000 students are now enrolled in five states: Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Tennessee, and Arkansas. Founder and CEO Matt Bowman said the company will be able to offer its programming in more states soon.

> **There are elements at play that suggest a meaningful long-term impact beyond school districts simply offering more online courses in the future.**

Tinkergarten, which offers an outdoor-based curriculum and in-person classes for babies, toddlers, and children through age 8, reported 35,000 new signups for its home-based programs since March 15, up from 8,600 in the same period a year ago, according to the *Wall Street Journal.*

Childcare and Community

Families have long relied on the Internet to find reliable childcare. Winnie.com helps families find daycare and preschool options, Care.com helps them find trusted caregivers, and CareVillage connects parents to form everything from PlayPods to SchoolPods and SitterPods, in which families share resources to provide childcare.

Then there are the pivots and new product offerings from existing companies. Wonderschool, which previously paired parents with childcare programs for preschool, is now helping parent-educators and K–12 teachers create learning pods so that students can remain enrolled in their existing school but have childcare. Swing Education, which formerly provided substitute teachers for existing schools, is now using its roster of teachers to help families staff learning pods. SchoolHouse, which matches families with teachers for at-home education and childcare, will help a family customize their offerings to match a variety of philosophies and curricular needs. Togetherschool is looking to form pods of 5 to 10 elementary-age students enrolled in the same school to offer a rich, curated in-person experience.

And finally, several founders of alternative schools have banded together to form Learning Pods, an organization that helps parents develop and operate pods to provide both care and curriculum for preschool and elementary-age children. The goal is to help parents connect with likeminded neighbors to form a pod. The company provides a trained teacher, a social contract between the families, and curriculum that allows learners to "follow their curiosity and learn through discovery and Project-Based Learning."

Looking Over the Longer Run

The short-term trends since the pandemic are clear. In addition to the enrollment increases in virtual schools and online education resources, homeschooling is also poised to grow sharply.

Nationwide, the National Home School Association expects the number of homeschooled students to increase to as much as 10 million in 2020–21, according to executive director J. Allen Weston. This past July, Nebraska's homeschool filings spiked by 21 percent, while in North Carolina, so many parents filed online "notices of intent" to homeschool that the state website crashed. Many millions of students will likely remain enrolled in their districts but still participate in private pods and alternative arrangements.

The question is, will this enthusiasm for micro-schools, homeschools, and learning pods have any lasting impact beyond the pandemic? Or will families rush back to traditional school as soon as they can? It's easy to assume that these changes won't last. In *Disrupting Class,* my co-authors and I conducted research that suggested the maximum number of students who could learn in a home or virtual school environment was around 10 percent—or roughly 5.5 million students nationwide—due to structural limitations such as parents' work obligations.

But there are three elements at play that suggest there could be a more meaningful long-term impact beyond school districts simply offering more online courses in the future.

First, many students and families were not necessarily getting what they want from their children's pre-pandemic school arrangements. These families may have been overserved by their local school's offerings. Some may not have benefited from the school having great football and debate teams or a state-of-the-art planetarium and school-lunch program. Instead, they might get more from a school that has the specific focus that means the most to them.

According to research conducted for the National Association of Independent Schools, many families choose the schools they do so their children can learn in likeminded communi-

what next

ties, whether that means a school that prioritizes social and emotional development or one with a laser focus on academic achievement. These motivations tend to be in tension with each other, and parents will opt out of schools that try to do more than the one thing that matters to them. With micro-schools allowing families to customize their children's education to an even more fine-grained level, some may conclude that's a better fit.

Second, families and organizations pivoting to support pods are moving quickly to address concerns about equity. Many pods have been formed outside of districts. That has alarmed advocates for low-resourced families. Such families may lack the technology or money to enroll in a private program or hire a teacher.

Some groups and educators are trying to create partnerships to level the playing field. For example, Altitude Learning, formerly AltSchool, was serving 300,000 students in districts before the pandemic. CEO Ben Kornell observed that students on its platform were able to continue to learn relatively seamlessly when its partner districts were forced to go remote. Now the company is seeking to partner with entities like Swing Education to create pods in collaboration with school districts and help pods become more accessible and affordable.

Liability concerns may render these efforts dead on arrival in most districts, but any traction in the public sphere—such as what the Adams 12 Five Star Schools district is doing in the Denver metropolitan area by supporting pods—could build support for more customized schooling arrangements in the longer run. In a similar vein, taxpayer-funded education savings accounts could also help level the playing field. Six states have such programs, under which parents who withdraw their children from public or charter schools receive some public funds to pay for alternative educational programming. That could increase demand in the longer run, as would efforts like U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos's goal of providing $5 billion in federal tax credits to help support families opting for homeschool or private schooling arrangements.

Finally, though one of the purported benefits of schools is the custodial care they provide, for many working parents, the coverage is lousy. Childcare that lasts from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. isn't in sync with conventional 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., or longer, office schedules. Any durable changes in our system of education will have to better match a traditional workday. If the pandemic produces more creative options that extend learning and socialization for children while truly meeting parents' needs, there's a better chance that those changes will outlast our eventual return to school.

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school life

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on with the families," Fish said, crediting, "parents that put a strong emphasis on education."

Alpert said that in her era, the students were about 90% Jewish and included many children or grandchildren of immigrants. During the 1930s, because of overcrowding in the high school building, freshman classes met at an "annex" at a nearby Reform synagogue, Temple Ahavath Sholom.

"The parents, the homes that kids came from, education was stressed," Alpert said. "Mostly Jewish parents stressed education, education, education."

> **"There was something very special going on with the families," said Judith Naomi Fish, a 1964 graduate, crediting, "parents that put a strong emphasis on education."**

What would have happened to these students had they gone to another school is a counterfactual experiment the results of which can't be known. We do know, though, the results of the school with a different student and parent population. That is what happened at the school beginning in the late 1960s, when changes both to New York City overall and to the city's high-school-assignment policies meant, as Alpert put it, "the demographics of the school changed."

So too did the achievement level of the graduates. The school maintains a "wall of distinction" for graduates with noteworthy accomplishments. Honorees in addition to those already mentioned include the historian Robert Dallek, the television Judge Judy Sheindlin, the test-preparation company founder Stanley Kaplan, and singer-songwriter Carole King. "We are looking for graduates from the 70s, 80s, and 90s. We are looking for them," Alpert said. "I don't know what it is. It dropped off."

The school still has lively extracurricular activities — the football team won a league championship in 2018, and the mock trial team were state champions in 2010. The city's most recent "school quality snapshot" reports that 82% of students graduated within 4 years, with 57% of graduates continuing their studies at either two-year or four-year programs offered by the City University of New York. Of 819 seniors in the school, 43 successfully completed an Advanced Placement calculus course, and 31 successfully completed an Advanced Placement government course.

Alpert, the president of the school's alumni association, now lives in the suburbs, but returns to the school often as a volunteer. She stresses that she's proud of the school today, too, even after all the change. She said, "I love these kids, but it's very different."

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