

From pods to public schools: Bringing the best of pandemic learning to traditional systems

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By **Mark Toner**

For too many families, a return to normalcy following the Covid-19 pandemic has meant a return to feeling marginalized. The community-based learning options such as pandemic pods that emerged while school buildings were closed in 2020 and 2021 did more than meet families' urgent needs for childcare and remote learning support. They showcased the power of learning environments customized for students' academic needs and social-emotional well-being. For historically underserved families, pandemic learning communities offered new opportunities to build learning environments that affirmed students' racial and cultural identities and offered families substantially greater information and influence over the work of schooling. For educators, pods provided opportunities to personalize instruction, build deep relationships with students and families, and attend to students' social and emotional needs in more constructive ways. Small wonder, then, that majorities of families and educators alike reported high levels of satisfaction with pandemic podding compared to pre-pandemic schooling.

For more than two years, the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) has studied the practices and impact of pandemic learning pods in hopes of identifying lessons that can be applied more broadly to improving public education for all students.¹ Unfortunately, we are also now observing that the flexibility and innovation that characterized both traditional and nontraditional learning settings during the pandemic are rapidly receding as traditional classroom learning resumes. For too many students, returning to one-size-fits-all schooling only brings back the inequities and marginalization that have existed in the system all along, impacting them directly and eroding community confidence in their schools—as evinced by declining public school enrollments over the past two years.²

While some out-of-system learning environments emerged stronger from the pandemic, the reality is that the majority of students—including the vast majority of the most vulnerable—will continue to be served by districts and charter schools.

Without a commitment to meaningful change within the existing system, these students will be shut out from the most promising solutions.

To highlight ways in which the most salient lessons from pandemic pods could be applied to help better meet the needs of all students, CRPE convened a cross-sector group of education leaders—practitioners, funders, policymakers, researchers, and community advocates—in June 2022. In recognition of the scope of change we believe is required, we intentionally invited—and listened—to actors from outside of the traditional system, including those carrying diverse perspectives and beliefs about public education. Drawing from examples of successful pandemic learning communities that were the focus of previous CRPE research, participants centered discussions around the most significant impacts of pod learning, including:

- *Pods unlocked new opportunities to explore and redesign the how, what, when and where of learning.*
- *Pods often hired community members adjacent to traditional teaching roles, which brought new competencies into learning environments and supported and validated students' well-being, identity, and belonging.*
- *Pods represented a power shift, providing parents, educators and community-based organizations unprecedented control over learning.*

This report harvests insights from the cross-sector conversation hosted by CRPE to discuss what steps could—and should—be taken to incorporate these experiences of pandemic pod learning. The implications and scope of change are significant, but they could result in an education system that better meets students and families' needs and more fully takes advantage of community assets. As with so much change in public education, putting these aspirations into practice involves an array of interlocking challenges and mutually reinforcing dynamics, including new models for learning, partnerships, staffing, and funding. Our collective charge is to understand how these pieces can fit together in new ways to build a resilient system that meets the needs of more children, families, and communities.



Tammy Slank, a learning guide at the Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy, reviews a novel with a group of third- and fourth-grade students in the second semester of 2020 with the help of Cadence Learning. CRPE [reviewed the microschool's model](#) that year in a March 2022 report. *Source: Nevada Action for School Options*

Lessons learned

Four themes emerged across multiple strands of discussion among participants, highlighting the complexities of making meaningful change at a scale great enough to impact students in traditional school settings.

1. We must widen the aperture of change—and rethink the entire delivery model.

While the pandemic expanded the scope and scale of alternative learning environments, many of its most successful elements drew from past practice, including team teaching, personalization, and more effective support for students' social-emotional well-being. Even the concept of microschoools and the focus on student and community identity have a long history in liberatory and abolitionist education. Even so, we can't presume that simply scaling discrete practices or tinkering with existing delivery models will suffice. Real change will only come by rethinking basic assumptions about traditional K-12 education, including who can be an educator, where and when learning happens, and even the purpose of learning. Failure to take that next step will result in the same limitations, or, as one participant put it, "recreating the system with a new face."

Some traditional schools and districts have found ways to widen the aperture by addressing oft-unquestioned constraints around time and staffing. For example, Edgecombe County Public Schools in North Carolina created a spoke-and-hub model during the pandemic that allowed students to spend anywhere from one to three hours a day in small groups pursuing "passion-based learning" and community projects that were at times not always facilitated by licensed teachers.³ Other public school districts also are planning to bolster post-pandemic engagement with similar models that provide opportunities to pursue personal areas of interest in settings beyond traditional classrooms.

2. As we reinvent systems, we must recognize that most students are—and will remain—in the existing one.

Many learning pods operated well outside of the traditional system, and the continued growth of non-traditional models will likely remain one of the long-reaching implications of the pandemic. For example, the number of students who are homeschooled or enrolled in wholly online programs could rival the total number of students in private schools—reaching 4 million—within five years, one startup leader projected.

But while this represents an opportunity for nontraditional providers to extend and expand microschoooling models, the fact remains that most students will continue to experience education through district and charter schools for the foreseeable future. Maximizing the impact on students—including those with the greatest needs—will require scaling strategies that touch traditional K-12 public schools, not breaking away from them.

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if it wasn’t about public education,” said a policymaker for a large education organization. “We want to see what public education could look like if it’s empowering. That’s not mutually exclusive.”

Instead of providing one-size-fits-all schooling, district and charter schools could more meaningfully partner with students, families, and engaged community partners to develop new models that better meet the needs of all students.

“Most pods come out of existing social networks,” one microschool founder observed, an approach that could be scaled in traditional school settings through more durable partnerships. That this is even a possibility is demonstrated by the complex dynamics that shaped pandemic learning opportunities in cities where community organizers developed new models for engaging with their cities’ large public school districts. In Boston, the Community Learning Collaborative, a coalition of Black and Latino leaders, helped coordinate efforts between Boston Public Schools, three community organizations, and other stakeholders in running a dozen pods during the pandemic.⁴ In Oakland, the parent advocacy group REACH launched an intergenerational approach to literacy education, tapping parents and relatives as paraeducators to support Oakland Unified School District’s literacy efforts that resulted in substantial gains in the number of students at grade level while training and providing jobs for their parents; REACH now plans to replicate the model in math.⁵



Shawnie Bennett, a family liaison with The Oakland REACH in Oakland, CA, reads with her daughter, Xaviar. Bennett coaches families on actions such as navigating online learning, accessing supports and resources, and advocating for quality instruction. *Credit: Oakland REACH*

One community leader at the convening described this evolving dynamic between parent advocates and traditional school systems as an “inside-outside game.”

“We move inside far enough to know exactly what the district can and can’t do for our kids, and then we make a proposal,” the community leader said. “We don’t go in enough to get sucked into it, but to assess it, come back out, and say this is what

we need.” Such an assessment can result in partnerships between districts and community organizations that better leverage each entity’s unique capabilities.

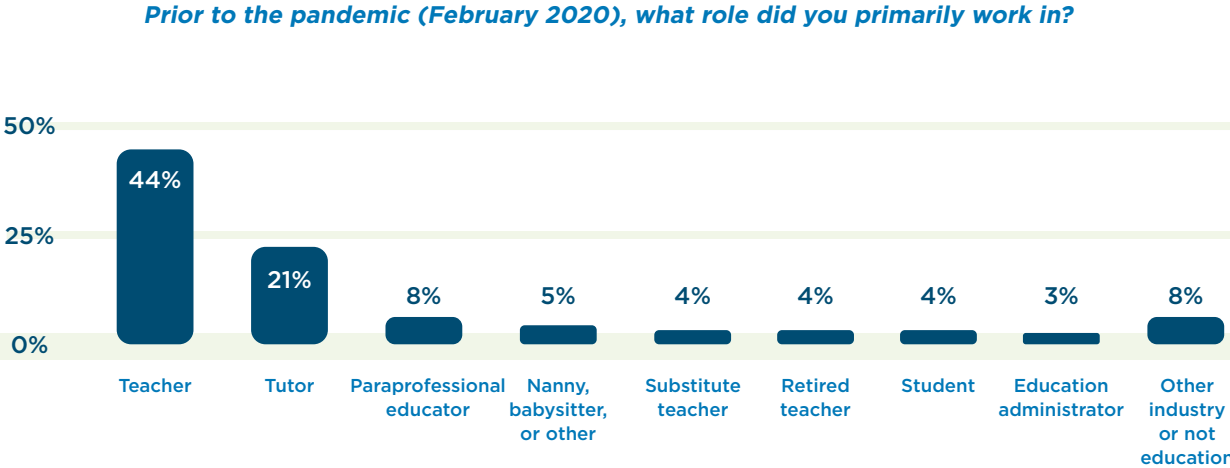
Along with new approaches to engaging with community partners, these dynamics also require change management beyond the central office, as building leaders and classroom educators are essential to the success of collaborative efforts. They also require humility: As one leader of a parent group said, “you don’t get to define what stays in your sphere and what doesn’t.”

3. We must rethink who is—and can be—an educator.

New approaches of teaching and learning will require different ways of staffing classrooms that may look very different, and the experience of pandemic pods suggests that untapped pools of talent within communities may provide opportunities to do just that.

A survey of pod educators conducted by CRPE found that the majority came from fields adjacent to education—including paraprofessionals, tutors, childcare providers, and retired educators (Figure 1). “We’re creating a whole new talent pipeline,” said one community organizer. These nontraditional educators brought with them new skill sets that supported pod learning, including the ability to work with multi-age groups that characterizes homeschooling parents and other community members who had previously formed ad-hoc learning groups.

Figure 1. Pandemic pods opened up educator talent pipelines



Importantly, districts which worked with their communities to support learning during the pandemic found that these kinds of paraeducators can support core instruction, as Oakland REACH did with its “literacy liberators,” who were largely made up of parents and relatives of students. They also played key roles in providing social and emotional support. In Phoenix, the Black Mothers Forum paired learning guides—a teacher and a parent—to provide a combination of instruction and social and emotional support within small-group pod settings, including mothers who provided

“hug therapy” allowing students to reset themselves and return to learning.⁶ “The intersections of customization and affirming and nurturing students’ identities... are intertwined and mutually reinforcing,” one researcher observed.

Cultural identities also were a critical element of pod learning, as some pods serving students of color intentionally hired instructors who mirrored students’ identities and cultural values. “When a child sees a reflection of themselves in the people they are speaking with all day, it makes a difference,” one community-based pod operator said.

“They’re looking into the face of someone who reflects them, understands them, and feels them. They just feel safer.”

To replicate that experience, the Central Falls School District in Rhode Island intentionally focused on hiring members of its community when it created supplemental learning pods following the return to school buildings. Recognizing that its teaching staff didn’t reflect the demographic makeup of its student body, the district worked with two community groups committed to empowering students of color—the Highlander Institute and Freedom Dreams—to hire and train pod leaders who were recruited from the community, leveraging federal stimulus funds and other resources for their salaries and training.⁷

Replicating these mutually reinforcing supports in more traditional school settings means moving away from the one-teacher, one-classroom model in ways that provide more flexible learning opportunities—both in large and small-group settings in which instructional experts are supported by other educators, including community members. These models reflect “the power of multiple adults supporting learners in ways they hadn’t been able to do before,” as the leader of a teacher preparation program put it.

“What it means to be one teacher in one classroom trying to carry the load of all these things... was becoming increasingly unsustainable even before the pandemic,” the leader said. “Now we have even more that educators are trying to carry, and even more students who need support. The opportunities when we break away from that model are just remarkable. All kinds of opportunities open up.”

At the same time, teachers will require training and support to take on new roles as coordinators with community partners and out-of-school learning opportunities and provide a single source of contact for families. “As we move to a more complex teaching system, how do we preserve continuity so parents aren’t building relationships with five adults?” one participant asked.

Rethinking assumptions, and in some cases policy, around who is an educator or teacher of record represents a power shift in its own right. Participants in the convening singled out the irony of regulations requiring certified teachers to lead a wide range of educational activities at a time when many districts are struggling to fill vacancies. “That looks like kids on waiting lists and with substitutes, not getting what they need,” one leader of a community advocacy group said. “How much pain do we need to experience around teacher resignations to allow alternative teaching pathways to happen?”

4. We must give families, communities, and educators meaningful ownership over the design of teaching and learning.

Learning pods gave parents unprecedented control over what and how learning occurred. Their experience with shaping the learning experience of their children has much broader implications for the power dynamic between school systems and the communities they serve.

Parents surveyed by CRPE reported greater trust in pandemic pods, particularly among families of color whose students are more likely to have borne the brunt of the impact of school closings and other inequitable decisions made by district and state leaders. To foster greater trust in traditional systems going forward, their leaders must recognize the inherent contradictions in imposing top-down approaches to replicate the bottom-up solutions that arose during the pandemic. Instead, they must work hand-in-hand with families, community-based organizations, and innovators on solutions.

Districts and their leaders must engage and include parents as co-designers of new models and give them a much greater role in decision-making. Importantly, these models don't have to wade into the "parental control" rhetoric that dominates many of the recent, often politically motivated conversations around public education. Instead, they can embrace a reciprocal partnership between system leadership and the communities they serve that doesn't currently exist, one that is focused on sharing responsibility around the practicalities of teaching and learning. As one parent advocacy group leader said of district leaders, "You've got the expertise, but you're not moving fast enough [and] not making the main thing the main thing, which is the kids. We need to guide you."

If these new models of teaching and learning are to be supported by their communities, districts also need to deepen existing approaches to family and community engagement and look beyond the most vocal organizations "that purport to speak for families" but may not actually do so, as the leader of an education association put it. Nor can they assume that only parents with the ability to be involved should have a voice. "Parent involvement shouldn't dictate whether their kids get a quality education," one advocacy group leader said.

In similar fashion, school leaders need to move beyond superficial approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion and embrace what they may see as more radical approaches to addressing longstanding inequities in the system. "Dismantling white supremacy has to be a theme," said the founder of one education advocacy organization. "You can't do all this good work and skirt around that." Another agreed: "A lot of DEI efforts... do a really good job of changing the makeup of people making decisions, but they're still replicating systems of oppression."

At the same time, shifting power also requires investments in recruiting and developing residents who may not have had a seat at the table before to ensure that parents and community members can play greater roles in delivering academic and social-emotional support. "We've got to get more into the academics," one advocacy group leader says. "Parents can be involved in schools and their kids are still failing while they're there helping with lunch duties."

Shifting power structures to avoid replicating systems that perpetuate inequities will again require reciprocal action. District leaders “have to be connected to the community,” one participant said. At the same time, community leaders must become more intimately involved in district mechanisms; one organizer stressed the importance of getting parents actively involved in seeking transparency and negotiating collective bargaining agreements that, when left unchecked, can become “innovation killers.” Others pointed to certification and credentialing requirements for educators as an example of the system maintaining control through policies based on historical assumptions about who is “fit” to teach and what capabilities should be prioritized.

It’s also important to recognize the need to empower educators and give them the flexibility that their counterparts experienced in pod settings. Sixty-one percent of respondents in a [CRPE survey of pod educators](#) said they were able to forge deeper connections with students. Despite the negatives of the environment, including limited job security and scant opportunities for collaboration and professional development, 75 percent preferred the pod experience to previous work experiences, and 90 percent said they’d consider continuing to work in pods after the pandemic. A smaller but significant number said they wouldn’t return to regular classrooms after the experience.

District leaders must recognize the weight of past decisions and inaction when engaging with community members, who often have justified levels of skepticism and an understanding of what levers need to be pulled for meaningful change. “They’re not going to give [power] to us willingly,” one parent advocate said. A leader of a policy organization added: “Power is funding and decision-making. Anything we do to shift how money flows and decisions are made shifts power.”



Tiffany Dudley, second from left, is a learning guide at the Black Mothers Forum in Phoenix, AZ. Dudley, who previously taught in traditional schools, spoke during the Education Writers conference in Orlando on July 26, 2022 with (from left) Michael Horn, an author; Bree Dusseault, principal at the Center on Reinventing Public Education; and Emmeline Zhao, projects director at The 74. Source: CRPE

Lingering questions: implications for research and policy

The wide-ranging discussions that prompted these findings raised just as many questions and areas for future research. Among them:

- *How can we remove structural constraints?* Participants cited a wide range of barriers, ranging from the Carnegie unit and validating learning outside of the classroom to union contracts and state policies; one participant called credentialing a form of “supremacy” that serves as a “barrier for pathways to teaching, learning, knowing, and caring.” Others noted that innovation zones and other current policies that support flexibility hamper efforts to drive change at scale. However, emerging strategies show that change is possible. For example, one organization is working with a state education agency to develop a “charter teacher-parent compact” in which a certified teacher could enter an agreement to pod with a number of families and retain state benefits.
- *How can we bring new types of educators into the system?* New models must include the contributions of specialized teachers and community-based educators while ensuring that issues around quality and expertise are adequately addressed. “Absent titles, we have people with the skills and talents to contribute,” one college professor said. An advocacy leader emphasized, “The power of a learning community includes the amazing educators in our schools, in our homes, and in our community-based organizations.”
- *What funding models are needed to support new approaches?* At a time when districts are awash in stimulus funding, equity surfaced as a particular concern. One advocacy leader described how a local district was going to distribute grant funding across all of its schools. “Dollars are largely not spent to close any sort of capacity or funding gaps,” the leader said.
- *How can funders best catalyze innovations led by local communities?* Funders also must examine new ways to identify, support, and share promising innovations developed from the ground up in local communities to ensure they have broader impact.
- *How can we measure the effectiveness of new models to ensure students are learning?* Learning outside of traditional classroom settings will require new methods for measuring both program efficacy and student success. Participants stressed the importance of adopting broader definitions of educational success. It will be important “to make sure parents and community members drive the language, because they know what will resolve the issues they are facing better than anyone else,” one participant said. “Parents are quite aligned on the overall skills and competencies but are concerned about not having control over choosing who/how those skills are built,” a think tank leader added. “Flexibility to select the best learning pathways is critical to gaining parents’ trust.”

New measures could also dismantle larger, often unquestioned assumptions about who has the authority to grant credits towards progression and diplomas. “Giving more access to credit for things outside of school that are competency-based and giving community organizations more resources to [provide them] is another way to shift the power,” an education organization leader said.

- *What could collective governance look like?* Participants pointed to alternative collective bargaining agreements and the potential of building on union-district collaboration models focused on teaching and learning. Such steps could better incorporate parent voice and group decision-making.
- *How can educator preparation programs support the new roles needed in emerging models?* One district superintendent noted getting pushback from teachers colleges on not hiring enough “highly qualified” educators. “I don’t see a degree as meaning someone is highly qualified, but our DOE does, as does our university system,” the superintendent said.
- *How can we evaluate potential shifts in models and practice through an equity lens?* “The pandemic created a platform for community-driven innovation and a range of new models that are more responsive to student needs, but weren’t always equitable,” one funder said. “What are the policy conditions that need to be in place to support ongoing community-driven change, and how should funders shift how we fund and evaluate these innovations to test new possibilities, while minimizing access gaps?”
- *How can we avoid the unintended consequences from previous attempts at system change?* “One lingering question is whether limitations of research models being applied will actually negatively impact positive progress and adoption of effective and diverse microschooling models in ways akin to what we saw with the growth of blended and personalized learning models several years back,” one advocacy group leader observed.

Conclusion

While transformational change at scale has long been elusive in public education, the adaptability of communities and schools during the pandemic is reason for optimism. The surprising level of cross-sector engagement—both in and beyond this convening—suggests that real desire and momentum for change continues despite the return to normalcy in schools and communities. But momentum will only come with authentic roles for parents and community members.

“We can’t expect the system to design something radically new without building a strong sense of trust with communities and families and bringing them into the design process,” one convening participant said.

“Trust is central to all these efforts,” another added, “because [these efforts] ask parents and teachers to take a leap together and try something new.”

The findings and research questions in this report represent a starting point for ongoing cross-sector collaboration. But on a more fundamental level, meaningful collaboration between schools and their communities will be essential to sustain the scope of change required to transform teaching and learning for all students.

“It’s a time for humility as we think about the future, listen to each other, push each other, and start to build what we obviously need to build,” said Robin Lake, the director of CRPE. “The question is where we take these conversations going forward.”

References

1. To see a collection of CRPE’s pod research, visit <https://crpe.org/crisis-breeds-innovation/>
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Mark Toner is an education writer and editor and has authored several reports for CRPE.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.



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