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Executive Summary

PANDEMIC PODS AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

By Ashley Jochim and Jennifer Poon

In the summer of 2020, it became clear that families would once again face school closures, isolation periods, and public health uncertainties brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents across the country faced difficult decisions about how best to support their children during the upcoming school year.

Some devised their own solution: the pandemic pod. They brought together small groups of students and enlisted adults—either hired instructors or groups of parent volunteers—to supervise students and support their learning. These efforts were born of necessity, but because they formed on the margins of the rules that typically govern how schooling works, families and educators gained a historic opportunity to remake learning based on their own visions.

In partnership with our funders, we launched a national learning agenda on pandemic pods that brought together researchers from around the country to capture lessons from the pandemic pod movement. We sought to learn from the families, educators, and community-based organizations who stepped in during the crisis to solve urgent challenges and, along the way, invented educational solutions that could outlast the pandemic.

This report is one part of that larger effort. It offers the first in-depth look at families' and educators' experiences with pandemic pods, drawing upon a national survey of 152 parents and 101 instructors from across the country who participated in a pod during the pandemic and follow-up interviews with 62 survey respondents.

We found the following:

- **Families created pods in response to the crisis, yet many liked what they created better than prepandemic schools.** Most families in our study formed pods to meet the urgent need for socialization and childcare during the pandemic, but two-thirds of them discovered additional benefits when they compared their pod to their child's school before the pandemic, and nearly three in five families preferred pods overall. The most commonly cited benefit was a heightened sense that their child felt "known, heard, and valued," followed by increased engagement in their learning.

- **Most pods tapped remote learning to some extent, but the more bespoke, the more families felt satisfied with their experience.** A slight majority of pods relied on schools to provide all or most of their child's math and ELA instruction, but families whose pods relied less on "Zoom school" were 2.5 times more likely to cite greater satisfaction with their pod than with their child's prepandemic school. These families were also two to three times more likely to say their child felt more known, heard, and valued; had deeper relationships with instructors and peers; was more engaged in their learning; and received more individualized instruction that met their needs, compared to their prepandemic school experiences.

- **Pods deepened social connections but weren't immune from conflicts and social splintering.** Podding offered many families an opportunity to form new friendships, deepen social bonds, and create mutual support networks. But the heightened intimacy could have drawbacks, as families navigated issues that divide public opinion such as health precautions, parenting philosophies, and teaching about "sensitive topics" like systemic racism. For these reasons, families tended to self-organize into pods with other like-minded families, whether actively or by default. For some, homogenization was a boon, allowing them to celebrate their cultural diversity and find reprieve from marginalizing forces or bullying experienced at their prior schools. But it also left some families feeling ostracized for cultural identities or values that were not widespread in their communities.

- **Pods broadened the pool of educators and redefined the teaching experience.** Nearly half of instructors surveyed were teaching right before the pandemic, and many of them reported increased professional satisfaction and a newfound unwillingness to put up with the bureaucracy of schools. The other half of instructors had previously worked in teaching-adjacent positions—for example, they had been tutors, childcare providers, paraprofessional educators, or former teachers who came out of retirement. Many of these instructors were not pedagogically trained, but they brought other skills to the table—like the former camp counselor with a knack for building relationships, the former homeschooler adept at managing multiage groups, and the architect and carpenter who engaged students in a project-based module to build a treehouse in one family's backyard. Regardless of their background, instructors consistently reported more flexibility in their work and more opportunities to deepen relationships with students and families compared to their prior work experiences.

  But even though three-quarters of instructors preferred pods over their prior work, the job could be isolating and unsteady. Instructors lacked job security and colleagues or "higher ups" who could help mediate conflicts with families. And they were cut off from professional support networks or opportunities for collaboration, even as they were tasked with juggling the responsibilities of teacher, administrator and entrepreneur.

- **Despite the benefits, pods face major sustainability headwinds.** The majority of families and educators we interviewed did not expect to continue with their pandemic pod experiments beyond the 2020–21 school year. For some families, a return to their former schools meant gaining access to additional academic support, special-education services, and expanded opportunities for students to socialize with peers. Other families begrudged a return to school but couldn't sustain their participation financially or logistically. And while pods shifted several instructors' professional trajectories, few perceived enough support to continue their pod indefinitely.

While pandemic pods have been both hailed as creative solutions that will disrupt American education and critiqued as niche arrangements that may widen inequality, our findings suggest something more nuanced. Families and instructors both benefited from intimate learning environments flexible enough to meet the individual needs of each student. Most of them wanted more of it. But their interest wasn't enough to overcome the challenges that came with operating off the grid. In the end, most pods only live on as beloved memories.

Still, those who participated in pods saw benefits they can't unsee, and schools, district leaders, and state policymakers working to recover from the pandemic should find ways to carry forward the fledgling movement's key lessons. Pods demonstrated a knack for forging deeper relationships, building community, personalizing instruction to meet student needs, providing flexibility, drawing in people with diverse talents and skill sets, increasing teachers' professional freedom, and creating joy. But those seeking to sustain these benefits postpandemic through pods, microschools, or school and district innovation must make systemic investments that address the challenges to accessibility, connectedness, and sustainability that ultimately brought most pods to an end.

Doing so may well yield breakthroughs to some of the thorniest issues plaguing public schools today.

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