

PODS IN ACTION:

African Leadership Group

A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING TO SUPPORT IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

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Prepandemic, the Denver-based African Leadership Group helped immigrant families navigate public schooling, finding that districts generally did not respond adequately to immigrant students' and families' needs. Knowing that children from African immigrant families were among those most at risk of falling behind when COVID forced school closures, the African Leadership Group created a learning pod that helped students access remote learning and academic supports.

KEY LESSONS:

1

Existing administrative and financial supports helped a community advocacy group quickly create a learning community for its members' children.

2

Longstanding relationships and intimate knowledge of African immigrant families' educational challenges and needs proved a key element of the pod's success.

3

Firsthand exposure to schooling enhanced the organization's understanding of the challenges immigrant students face in public schools and thus its ability to engage in education advocacy.

KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:
DENVER, CO

12-15

STUDENTS
SERVED

1

NUMBER OF
SITES

STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

IN PERSON; SUPPLEMENTAL TO SCHOOL

GRADES SERVED:

OFFERED TO STUDENTS IN GRADES K-12; PARTICIPANTS RANGED FROM KINDERGARTEN TO TENTH GRADE

Less than a year after Papa Dia, a young Senegalese law student, immigrated to the United States 23 years ago, he found work as a bank teller in Denver, Colorado, where he encountered other African immigrants who recognized him as someone who understood their needs. They saw Dia as someone who could not only help them with banking but also answer their questions about getting jobs, enrolling their children in school, and settling in to U.S. culture. Word spread, and more and more people came to seek his advice.

Dia soon realized that beyond the refugee-resettlement services that a local organization provided, no other supports existed for the people coming to him. So he founded the African Leadership Group, or ALG, in 2006 to help African immigrants integrate into American life in a way that would positively affect themselves and their communities. In 2017, after 18 successful years in banking—working his way from an entry-level job to regional vice president—Dia shifted his focus solely on ALG.

ALG's programs and supports help African immigrants improve their quality of life economically, socially, and educationally. For example, realizing where the districts were unable to meet immigrant students' needs, ALG worked with Aurora Public Schools to incorporate five languages spoken by African students into district communication policies.

COVID school closures threatened the gains families had made in these areas. Children from African immigrant families were among those most at risk of falling behind. Their parents were faced with quitting their jobs to stay home with their children or leaving them at home on their own to fend for themselves. Further, some lacked Internet connectivity at home or the technology knowledge required for remote learning. Their language or educational backgrounds sometimes limited how much they could help with American schoolwork. Though ALG had never contemplated operating anything resembling a school, its leaders stretched their vision and resources to do just that when they opened the doors to a pandemic learning pod in August 2020.

Built from scratch

With a staff of only five full-time employees, ALG implements an array of programs on employment and career advancement, financial planning, home ownership, health and wellness, public speaking, civic engagement, and youth and women empowerment, as well as coordinating K-12 parent education and advocacy initiatives. In addition, ALG hosts a signature annual fundraising event, AfrikImpact, featuring a month of programs and activities that elevate and celebrate the economic, cultural, and civic contributions of African immigrants to Colorado. Colorado governor Jared Polis declared August African Immigrant Month at the fifth annual AfrikImpact in August 2020.

Since its inception, ALG has strived to meet community needs as they arise, springing into action again when COVID hit. Despite its other youth programs, ALG had no experience that would have prepared it to operate a learning pod, and it had no former school leaders or teachers on staff. But it had cultivated a scrappy, “can-do” culture that accepts no excuse for not doing what needs to be done. ALG also had a fiscal sponsor, the Colorado Nonprofit Development Center, that helped it comply with regulations regarding pod staffing, health and safety, transportation, and facilities.

Most important, ALG had financial resources to tap. It stretched its budget to fund the pod, relying on unrestricted dollars from its general fund, for costs that included rent for additional space in its leased facility, enhanced Internet connectivity, materials (including masks and cleaning supplies), food, school supplies, and laptops and headsets for students and tutors. From August 2020 to January 2021, ALG spent an estimated \$30,000 on the pod, including \$10,000 disbursed to pod families through gift cards for subsistence needs and \$6,000 for the time its staff spent to take on the additional responsibility of implementing and supervising the pod.

Based on trust and understanding

ALG had a head start connecting with families and students to participate in the pod. Through its youth empowerment program, the staff already knew many students; through its educational advocacy work with families, it knew the challenges they faced.

Moreover, ALG had a deep understanding of the African immigrant community in Colorado. The community had shifted from predominantly French speakers from West Africa when Papa Dia first arrived in the Denver metro area to non-French speakers. Understanding that the community now reflected the different languages, religions, cultures, and—at times—conflicting interests of Africa’s 54 countries, Dia recognized that ALG offered a platform that could bring diverse immigrant groups together.

Dia acknowledges the ongoing nature of this work, and he draws parallels with ALG’s efforts to serve African Americans, as well. Describing an unspoken tension between African Americans and African immigrants, Dia says that bridge building is especially important for African immigrant youth. “At home, they are raised in their African culture. But at school, they have to live in American culture. So our youth program is designed to take the best of both worlds and create a space for kids to be with others who look and sound like them.”

A safe learning place

Designed to accommodate 15 K-12 students, ALG's pod served an average of 12 students over the course of the pod. By the end of the pod, students represented nine schools, in three districts, in grades 1-10; most were sixth through eighth graders from Denver and Aurora who had participated in ALG's youth-empowerment program. The students were mostly from African immigrant families; three African American families also sent their children to the pod. Two students were recent arrivals to the U.S. who did not speak English.

Students attended Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. in a large space within a church where ALG rents business offices. After temperature and other health screening checks, the students spent the day together in a single room, seated at socially distanced tables in compliance with COVID health and safety guidelines. Each received virtual instruction from their respective schools. Because students were on different class schedules, they all wore headphones to eliminate background noise. During the hour-long lunch break, students remained at their tables to eat meals that were prepared by ALG staff or donated to the pod, then used the rest of the break for recreational time away from their computers.

ALG staff supervised the pod. Ousman Ba, ALG's youth program director, became the primary pod leader, with other staff members stepping in as pod "proctors" in regular intervals. Each week during individual check-ins with students, Ba, whom Dia affectionately dubbed "Mr. Principal," reviewed their PowerSchool accounts to check for any missing assignments and for any changes in their grades. As needed, he shared concerns with parents and facilitated their conferences and other communications with teachers.

Some students needed more help than others. The lone first grader found it difficult to sit at her laptop for long stretches of time, so proctors spent significant time sitting with her. The two students newest to the U.S. required both instructional and translation support to understand their lessons; Ba also helped the family work with the school to get the students placed at the correct math level (Dia noted that the districts asked ALG for other translation help during the pandemic as well, a key support for recent immigrants). ALG and parents agreed that the pod succeeded in providing a space where students could focus on school. Parents appreciated how the staff helped their children understand assignments and tracked their submission.

One student acknowledged what some parents reported: being together motivated students who were easily distracted at home or otherwise less interested in school to complete and submit assignments, and tutors provided one-on-one individual attention that students needed but often did not get in school. And, parents said, even if students were all tied to their laptops for much of the day, being around other children helped counter the isolation their children felt during the pandemic and improved their social well-being.

Meeting students' instructional needs

By early September, Ba and his colleagues had worked out the operational bumps, such as balancing their normal duties with managing the pods and finding lunch providers and transportation for students. However, none of the staff had formal training or experience in education or instruction. If a student had trouble with an assignment, Ba would try to assist or get help from the student's teacher; teachers sometimes contacted him directly. He talked with teachers several times a day, and some gave him their personal phone numbers.

Soon after opening the pods, the ALG team realized that their students would need more expert instructional support to avoid falling behind, so they started a tutoring program after school twice a week and on Saturdays, which was open to pod and nonpod students.

Without a budget to hire tutors, ALG recruited volunteers through social media. Each was carefully screened: ALG ran criminal background checks and checked credentials for teaching experience. An initial group of three volunteers eventually grew to 12, including current and former teachers and a few college students. Two former Teach For America corps members who had spent time in Africa became instrumental in helping the two pod students recently arrived from Africa.

Within a short time, ALG expanded the tutoring program to provide remote support to students who were at home in the afternoons. Each afternoon, two volunteers worked with 20 in-person students (the amount ALG had space for), while other volunteers, including one based in Florida, worked with students online. Though the tutoring program was designed to serve local students, it expanded to include students from other states as news spread among African immigrant community networks, yielding requests for virtual tutoring from families and students outside of Colorado.

Positive learning and social-emotional outcomes

When the pod started, many students were struggling with online school, and some were failing, Ba said. By the time in-person instruction resumed at the students' respective schools in early 2021, no students were behind, he said, and most had improved their grades since the start of the school year. Ba noted that the structure and schedule of the pod, along with tutoring, also helped some develop stronger study habits and become more self-disciplined students.

ALG intends to continue its tutoring program, and that plus its experience leading the pod, Dia said, will enhance its education advocacy and ability to support families as they navigate their relationships with schools and teachers. Though parents want ALG to start a school—noting that the organization knows their children's particular needs and the ways in which local districts are not meeting them—the organization is hesitant to do so, though Dia continues to consider it.

At the least, ALG's pod experience will strengthen how it advocates for and supports the educational needs of the families and students it serves. It remains to be seen whether local districts also enhance the way they engage ALG as a partner in rethinking how they better serve these students, which could influence whether ALG ultimately decides to open its own school.