

PODS IN ACTION:

The Boston Community Learning Collaborative

A PANDEMIC RESPONSE OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY TO
PILOT COMMUNITY-LED SCHOOL SYSTEM CHANGE

By Thomas Gold and Melissa Steel King

KEY LESSONS:

1

A group of community-based organizations (CBOs) that had been working to reimagine education before the pandemic capitalized on a window of opportunity during this period to create new microschool-inspired learning environments for Black and Latino youth.

2

The pods' focus on providing social and emotional as well as academic support was well received by students and parents, who felt that such an approach was important to helping students stay on track with academics.

3

Creating learning environments staffed primarily by Black and Latino educators proved beneficial to students who shared their racial, ethnic, and language backgrounds and provided a basis for student engagement and strong communication with parents and families.

4

The low attendance, due in part to the non-mandatory nature of the pods, made it harder to gauge the full potential impact of their approach.

KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:
BOSTON, MA

177

STUDENTS
SERVED

K-8

GRADES
SERVED

12

NUMBER OF LOCATIONS
(11 IN PERSON, 1
VIRTUAL)

25-30

NUMBER OF
ADULTS

Community Groups Come Together in Crisis

During the spring of 2020, two months into the global COVID-19 pandemic, four leading CBOs in Boston—the YMCA of Greater Boston, Latinos For Education (LFE), Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA), and The BASE—came together to discuss what they can do to help underserved children in the city experiencing education disruption.

At the time, students were struggling to adjust to remote learning from home and didn't always have the necessary resources or supervision to provide a proper learning environment. The predictions for the fall were bleak: a continuation of remote learning as the pandemic raged globally.

In response to the challenge, the organizations used their existing partnership, called the Community Learning Collaborative (CLC), to organize a series of in-person learning centers to meet the needs of youth who found themselves facing a whole year outside of physical school buildings.

This case study provides a description of the implementation of the CLC pods during the 2020-21 school year, including initial information on their potential impact.

CLC Origins: Organizing to Address Opportunity Gaps in Boston

This wasn't the first time these four organizations had worked together. The CLC partners had been meeting for roughly seven months when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. With support from the Lynch Foundation, the partners had been working on what they called their "Moonshot" initiative, drawing on their collective expertise as leaders of color in Boston to generate bold and innovative solutions for Black and Latino students in the city's public schools.

The goal was to bring together allies who could “shift the educational paradigm for our children and eliminate the opportunity and achievement gaps that have plagued Boston for many decades.”

In the summer of 2020, the partners convened and realized that they had a unique opportunity to create in-person learning pods, a new idea built on the concept of microschoools, which were growing rapidly during the early months of the pandemic.

Through the pods, they argued, the CLC leaders could implement and test features of a learning environment that they viewed as critical to the success of the students in their communities. Lessons from implementing the pods could inform the development of the “Moonshot” idea in the future.

In September 2020, the four organizations secured funding from the Lynch Foundation and several other local funders and began the work of launching 12 learning pods. All four leaders met every Monday to discuss the status of the pods, address emerging issues, and plan for the following week. The leaders acknowledged that it was challenging to pull together a high-quality program in such a short amount of time, while simultaneously running their separate organizations.

Despite the challenges, the commitment at the highest level of each organization to build the relationship helped consolidate trust among the four leaders, which in turn enabled them to share expertise and resources with little to no competition or conflict among them.

The CLC Learning Pods

The CLC created 12 pods: 11 in-person pods supporting 165 students and a virtual pod that supported an additional 12 students. The in-person pods supported elementary and middle school students, while the virtual pod supported high school students. More than half of all the in-person pods were in one location: at the YMCA in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston. Another three pods were run by IBA and housed at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross. The BASE housed one additional pod at their sports facility, which included access to athletic fields and equipment. Pods that shared a building were positioned in a way that allowed them to maintain separation from the other pods, in order to adhere to social-distancing rules.

Organization	Location	Number of Pods	Number of Students
YMCA Boston	The Roxbury YMCA	7	119
IBA	The Cathedral of the Holy Cross	3	31
The BASE	The BASE	1	15
IBA	Virtual	1	12
<i>Total</i>		<i>12</i>	<i>177</i>

Students came from different parts of Boston to attend the in-person pods, which supported students at all ages from 5 to 14. Of these students, 44 percent were aged 8 to 10, while the rest were evenly split between 5 to 7 and 11 to 14. The students also came from different backgrounds, though 82 percent identified as either Black or Hispanic or Latino, with half of all students identifying as Hispanic or Latino.

- **The YMCA of Greater Boston** is an organization that is dedicated to “improving the health of mind, body, and spirit of individuals and families in their communities.” The Boston Y comprises multiple branches and program centers throughout urban Boston. As the oldest and largest of all four organizations, the YMCA helped the collaborative move faster in setting up the pods because of their existing infrastructure and know-how, from running daily after-school and summer programs to administering the hiring, training, and licensing processes.
- **Inquilinos Boricuas en Acción (IBA)** was established in 1968 as a nonprofit organization with its origins in the Puerto Rican movement to prevent the housing displacement of their community in Boston. Since that time, the organization has grown, managing over 667 affordable housing units and programs in education and the arts. Annually, IBA’s programs serve 1,300 low-income people, while nearly 5,000 people attended IBA arts events last year. IBA is a national model for the integration of affordable housing with comprehensive, culturally responsive and bilingual (English/Spanish) programming strengthened by social support institutions.
- **The BASE** is a CBO that reimagines urban youth success through academics and athletics. Since the 1970s, The BASE has organized high-performing baseball and softball teams that have competed in leagues locally and nationally. Youth from The BASE teams have gone onto college, work and even into the ranks of Major League Baseball. The BASE, which is known for its after-school and summer athletic leagues, brought knowledge in running out of school time programs, with particular strengths in cultivating a team culture and supporting students’ physical and social emotional development.
- **Latinos for Education (LFE)** served as the “backbone” of the CLC and the only organization that did not host a pod. LFE’s mission is to develop, place and connect Latino leaders in the education sector, building an ecosystem of Latino advocates by infusing new talent into positions of influence. LFE believes that Latino leaders should be at the forefront of creating an equitable education for Latino students. Latinos for Education provided administrative and curriculum support for all of the other organizations implementing the pods.

The pods were staffed by a total of 25 to 30 educators. The largest number of staff worked at the pod at the Roxbury YMCA, with 15 to 20 people at any one time. Second was the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, which had five pod staff members. Finally, The Base had three pod staff members, and the virtual pod sponsored by IBA had two full-time pod staff.

The CLC made a concerted effort to hire Black and Latino staff to reflect the communities they serve and the fact that 82 percent of pod students identified as Black or Latino. Led by four leaders of color, the CLC was focused on creating an environment in the pods that would represent the racial and ethnic identities of the participating students. They saw this as an important contrast to Boston Public Schools (BPS), where—like in many school districts across the country—the proportion of teachers of color does not reflect the student body. In BPS, only 63 percent of the workforce identifies as a race or ethnicity other than White, compared to around 75 percent of all students who identify as a race or ethnicity other than White.¹

¹ Andrew J. Rotherham and Thomas Gold, Window of Opportunity: How States and Localities Can Use Federal Rescue Plan Dollars to Diversify Their Teacher Workforce (Washington, D.C.: Bellwether Education Partners, July 2021), https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/Bellwether_%20ARP%20Teacher%20Diversity%20Publication_Final.pdf

Studies have demonstrated that all students benefit when schools employ a diverse teacher workforce. Black and Latino students in particular benefit when they have the opportunity to learn from teachers who come from the same racial and cultural backgrounds. Benefits of shared racial and cultural identity between Black and Latino students and their teachers include stronger academic results, fewer suspensions, and more engagement in school. There are many reasons for these results, including the fact that teachers of color may have more shared life experiences with their students and, in the case of Latino students, a common language. In addition, studies have shown that teachers of color generally have higher expectations of students of color than do White teachers.

The collaborative had to tap into their own networks to identify highly qualified candidates of color, since the typical recruitment channels for after-school educators were not as diverse. Each organization identified potential candidates by utilizing their own staff networks. In the end, 95 percent of all the pod staff identified as either Black or Latino. Since staff were working as counselors, they did not need teaching credentials to work with the children. However, over 50 percent of all staff had either BA or MA degrees. All staff had prior experience in the education or social sectors. A majority spoke Spanish.

The CLC was also intentional in their approach to teaching and learning, seeking to create an environment that focused on comprehensive student development in six key domains: academic, social and emotional, cognitive, physical and identity development. CLC leaders and staff worked hard to incorporate all of these domains into their programming and operations in an effort to address those areas that are often overlooked in school programming and curriculum. The CLC also had the opportunity to utilize the different competencies and skill sets of each organization.

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2 Ibid.

High Trust, Strong Relationships, Positive Experiences— but Low Attendance

Our interviews revealed four core findings: (1) the pods' focus on providing social and emotional as well as academic support was well received by students and parents, and they felt that such an approach was important to helping students stay on track; (2) an emphasis on parent engagement created a critical bridge between student learning and their families; (3) the primarily Black and Latino staff was seen as critical to student and family engagement; and (4) the low attendance at the pods made it harder to gauge the full potential impact of their approach.

Focus on Social and Emotional Needs

The pods provided underserved students with a safe, supportive space for learning and enrichment during COVID-19, with a consistent structure and individualized support to help students stay on track with BPS virtual instruction. The daily schedule included a series of steps to prepare students for a whole day of online learning, starting at 8:00 a.m. with an opening circle after arriving, followed by a technology setup. After this, students would start the virtual learning sessions in their BPS classes, supported by an education coordinator at the local pod site.

After lunch, there was more virtual learning, and after that, students participated in a physical activity. Afterwards, they engaged in an enrichment activity, which may have involved the arts or culture, including a focus on identity. Finally, students participated in a closing circle led by program staff, before leaving for the day at 5:00 p.m.

For many CLC parents, the continuation of online learning in the 2020–2021 school year presented serious challenges. Parents and caregivers did not feel prepared to support their children academically during the year, and those whose jobs took them out of the house were not comfortable leaving their children alone at home. A poll by Care.com in July 2020 found similar concerns nationally: only 17 percent of parents polled felt prepared to support their children in virtual learning for the coming year.³

During interviews and focus groups, parents and students alike remarked on how beneficial the support was for them at this critical time. One parent explained that their five-year-old could not submit remote school assignments without an adult's assistance. As a result, "They were very behind in work when they finally made it into the Y, and I could not be more appreciative of everything they're doing for my kid."

The pods' approach involved putting less pressure on academic achievement and more focus on students' health and wellbeing. If a student didn't finish an assignment or complete a project, the focus of the staff at the pods was not to force the student to get the work done but to address any underlying factors contributing to the student's academic challenges.

This approach, however, did not appear to undermine academic success. A majority of parents reported that their children maintained or improved their grades. Of the parents surveyed, 46 percent thought that their child was getting better grades after enrolling in the program; the rest reported that their child maintained the same grades as before.⁴ Parents and students

³ Editorial Staff, "New survey reveals high level of back-to-school anxiety for parents amid the pandemic," Care.com, July 29, 2020, <https://www.care.com/c/back-to-school-survey-parents>.

⁴ It is possible that in some responses to the survey, parents were suggesting that their children were doing better in the pods than in their normal, prepandemic schools. In fact, in interviews, some parents found the environment in the pods more conducive to learning. For example, one parent described an environment where her child was free of the bullying that existed in his normal school.

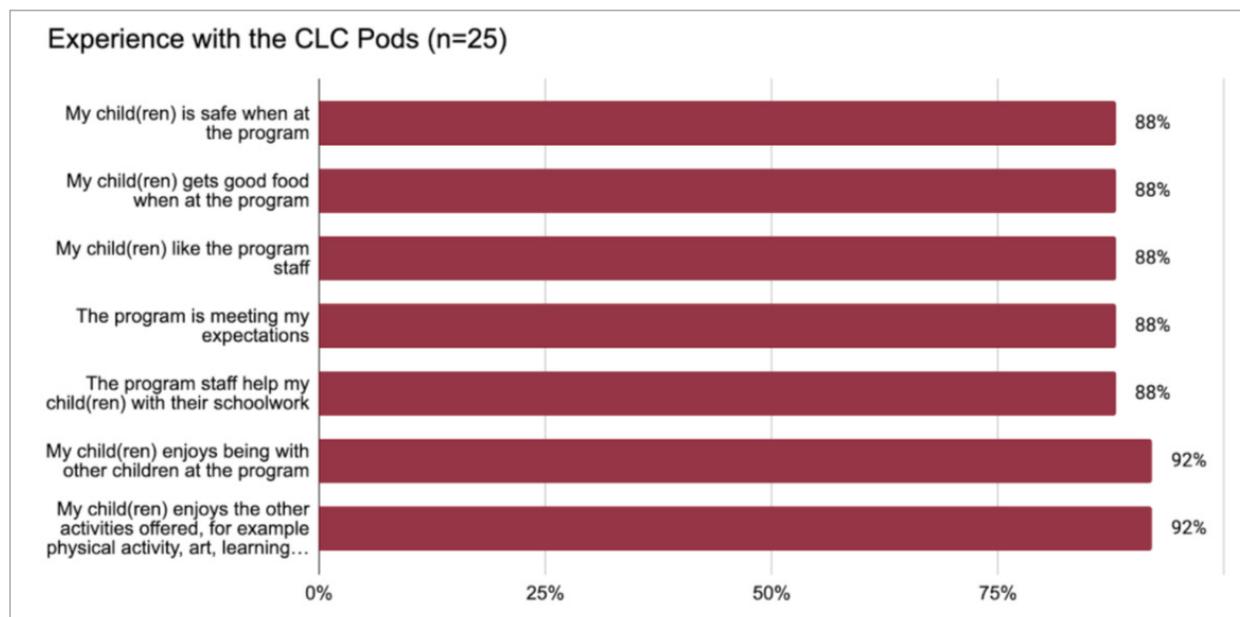
explained that staff were able to provide support and structure for instruction that parents weren't always able to provide at home during the pandemic. Staff used structured flexibility to support students' attention and physical needs during virtual instruction.

The focus on addressing students' mental health occurred at both the in-person pods and the virtual (HS) pod. In the latter, students were offered weekly counseling, both virtually and in person, if they chose that option. This focus on mental health went a long way toward building trust between students and staff at the pods and seemed to be something students lacked at their own schools. "It shows us someone cares," one student said. "I wish that in school we had a counselor or something that we could talk to weekly to see how we're doing and stuff."

In addition to supporting children's academic and cognitive development, CLC leaders developed an enrichment program to nurture growth in areas such as physical health and identity. Staff drew on resources at each site to adapt and implement the activities. For example, students at The BASE were able to use the sports facilities to play basketball and other sports. Staff at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross—which was run by IBA—designed arts and crafts and movement activities that they could do indoors.

The physical programming included strength training and conditioning, dancing, and movement to music. The results of these efforts were positive. Of the surveyed parents, 92 percent agreed that their child(ren) enjoyed "the other activities offered, for example physical activity, art, and learning about their identity" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Parent Survey: Experience with Pods



Identity-focused activities engaged students in their family backgrounds, personal stories, and self-efficacy as leaders. These activities were met positively by students.

"I think that brought us more together," one said in an interview. "I know that the skin is just a color, doesn't change the fact of anything, like who [has] more money or something else like that. And I feel like I learned more about my past and how I can change my future."

They also allowed staff to address current issues of race and equity, something that parents said they appreciated. One mentioned that the pods helped answer students' questions about Black Lives Matter and the social movement for racial justice.

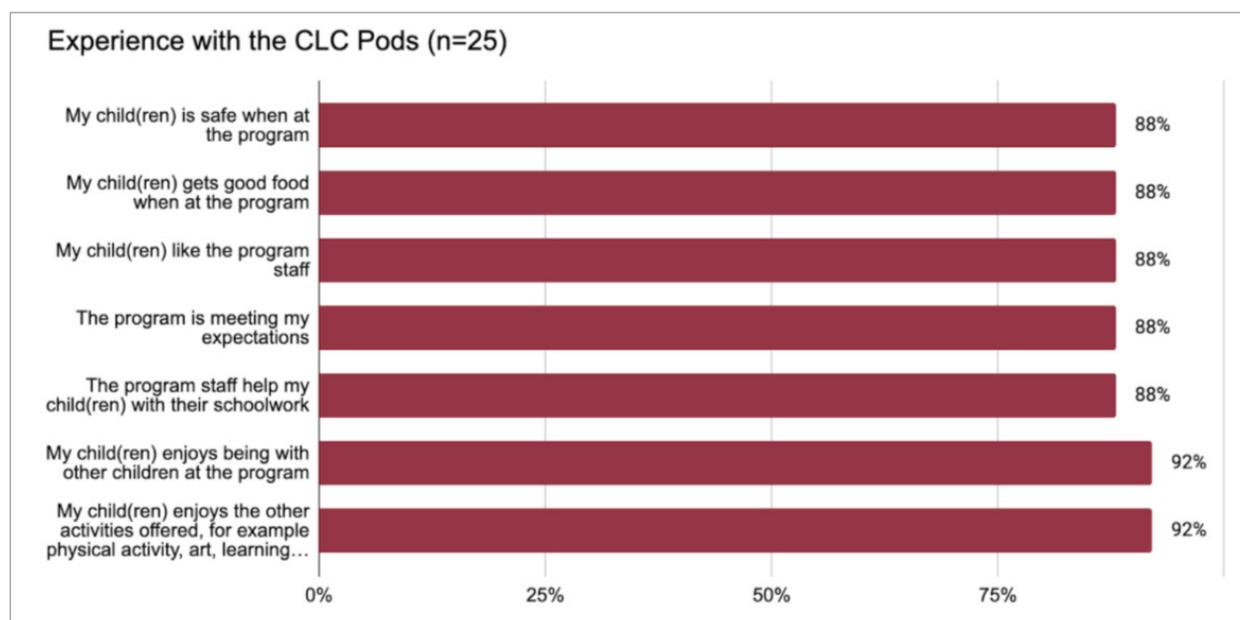
Consistent Parent Engagement

The learning pods provided a bridge between the children's families and their schools, offering parents a connection that is critical for student learning. Research has demonstrated the importance of parental involvement in students' academic and social growth in school. As one study argued, "Children learn best when the significant adults in their lives—parents, teachers, and other family and community members—work together to encourage and support them."⁵

The staff at the pods played a unique role, providing a support system for students and families while the children engaged in remote learning with BPS. Their role gave them visibility into how participating students were engaging with virtual instruction, and they were intentional about serving as another set of eyes and ears for parents, sharing information about how students are doing in school and what additional help they might need. Parents and staff both reported that the two big transition periods—when parents dropped off their children and when they picked them up—offered them opportunities to discuss their child's progress and any academic or social-emotional needs.

In return, parents reported positive and engaging experiences with staff at the pods on surveys and interviews. Ninety-two percent of surveyed parents agreed that the staff at the pods tell them about their child(ren)'s day, "good or bad." The same proportion of parents reported on the survey that they had a "good understanding" of what is happening at the pods. Finally, nearly 70 percent of surveyed parents indicated that they have a stronger relationship with CLC staff than with the teachers at their child's school (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Parent Survey: Relationships



Intentional Staffing with Black and Latino Educators

5 James P. Comer and Norris Haynes, "The Home-School Team: An Emphasis on Parent Involvement," *Edutopia*, July 1, 1997, <https://www.edutopia.org/home-school-team>.

Intentionally staffing the pods with educators who shared the students' racial and ethnic backgrounds helped students and families feel more welcomed and connected. The response to the staffing configuration of the pods from the parents and students was overwhelmingly positive. Within the pods themselves, 96 percent of surveyed parents said that it was important for their children to see themselves in their teacher with respect to race, ethnicity, and language (see Figure 2). Parents and students reported that shared racial identity bolstered self-esteem and strengthened connections between the students and the staff.

"I do think that it is important for [students] to see staff that are also representative of themselves," one parent said.

Students also mentioned that interacting with Black and Latino staff was different from their experience in BPS and something that brought a level of familiarity and comfort.

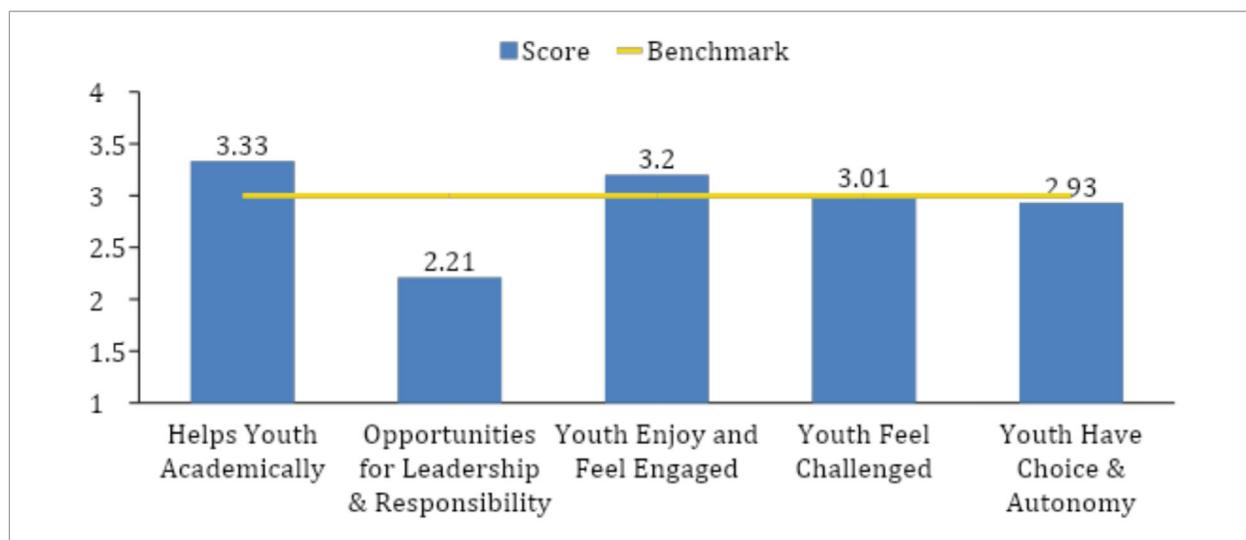
"I feel like I fit in more because even the teachers as well, they're the same ethnicity or they might be the same race or color as me and I feel like that makes me more comfortable," one student said during a focus group.

Hiring staff who spoke Spanish helped instill a deep sense of belonging. One staff member described the impact of greeting a student with a simple Spanish greeting: "Señor, what's up?" The staff member said, "I can just see that sense of comfort. He's comfortable around us, the way he talks, he jokes with us."

Parents also developed deeper connections with pod staff who shared their language. "I've had parents that ask us, 'Do we want to keep the kids here overnight?' or 'They don't want to come home, they love it here,'" another staff member said. "I feel like it's been helpful for those families who don't always have the opportunity to communicate with a person who speaks their language."

In end-of-year surveys, students reported on a four-point scale that the program helped them academically (3.3), made them feel engaged (3.2), or challenged them (3.01; see Figure 3). Lower ratings for opportunities to show leadership may reflect the fact that the pods' schedule was fairly structured around daily virtual instruction, with little time for students to explore different leadership opportunities or take the lead on a project. These results also indicate that the program may have room to improve in giving students more agency.

Figure 3. Engagement in Activities & Learning



Low Attendance

Parents reported in surveys and interviews that they found their children benefited in their academics from the in-person learning and support of the pods. Of the surveyed parents, 60 percent thought their child was attending BPS online classes more than before they had access to the pods.

Despite these positive experiences with the pods, the average daily attendance rate was relatively low. The attendance rate for the pods overall was 48 percent, meaning that students attended their scheduled days at the pods slightly less than half the time.⁶ This rate is well below the 69 percent attendance rate for all 160 full-day and after-school YMCA programs during the same year (for this study, we did not have any comparable data for the other pods alone during the year; Boston After School and Beyond [BASB], the organization that collects and reports this information, did not disaggregate results for pods/school-day programs from after-school programs).

There are a few things to consider when interpreting the attendance data for this study. First, it is important to keep this rate within the context of the voluntary nature of the pods and how parents/caregivers may have used them strategically to support their students. Pod attendance is not the same as BPS attendance, because even if a student was not in the pod, they may still have participated in virtual instruction elsewhere. Because of student privacy laws, CLC staff and researchers were not able to access participating students' BPS attendance records.

Other factors may have also influenced the attendance rate. Some of the students in the pods went to charter or private schools that had hybrid schedules during the 2020–21 school year, which may have taken them out of the pods to attend school. According to the YMCA, sometimes students stayed home to do remote learning because their parents had a day off from work or worked only half a day. In those cases, parents wanted their children home to do remote learning together. Finally, students may have been marked absent if they stayed home because they had contact with someone with COVID-19 and couldn't attend. In addition, according to BASB, some of the students may have been participating in other in-person programs, which may have affected their attendance at the pods.

Conclusion

When learning pods first came into public consciousness across the United States in 2020, they were mostly associated with wealthy families who could afford to hire their own teachers for their children during the pandemic. Organizations like the CLC changed the discourse on pods from an exclusionary benefit to a necessary resource accessible to needy families. In addition, the CLC used the opportunity of the pandemic to provide not only a space to learn but also a space to implement ideas they had discussed in their “Moonshot” conversations, including adding approaches to teaching and learning that would be beneficial specifically to the success of Black and Latino students. This included hiring staff who reflected the student population, which is largely Black and Latino, as well as creating a curriculum with a focus on family engagement and whole-child enrichment.

“This is what we want to see happening in Boston Public Schools in terms of who’s leading the work, who’s in front of kids, the type of curriculum that’s used, the affirmation of identity in the valuing of Black and Latino children and what does that look like, what kinds of activities,

⁶ The daily attendance numbers were calculated by dividing days present by scheduled days. Some students were signed up to attend the pod for five days a week, while others for just a few days a week. In addition, some students started when the pods began in October 2020, while others started later in the year. Thus, if a student was not scheduled for a certain day and did not come to the pod, they were not marked absent.

etc.,” one CLC leader said. “And so I hope there’s a strengthening of how nonprofits, especially those led by leaders of color, can work more collaboratively with the district.”

In addition, the CLC has focused on reenvisioning the relationship between CBOs and the school district. CBOs have trusting relationships with families they serve, as well as deep knowledge about the local community, its challenges, and its resources. As a result, they often find themselves in a strategic position to support local needs and to translate those for the school district. However, they are often left out of the decision-making process in the public school system.

The CLC seeks to change this. One leader described advice they would offer school-system leaders.

“When you’ve got to make a major decision . . . include us in the conversation, because we might be able to bring some resources to support families. And then, be open to sharing with us in the reimagining of what schools might look like as we move forward,” the leader said. “Let’s not be satisfied to get things back to normal. Normal wasn’t that damn good for some of our children.”

The goal for the CLC is to ensure education in Boston does not return to the prepandemic status quo and to use the CLC and the pods as a pilot test of how the four organizations can continue to collaborate to effect change in Boston’s schools. The pandemic didn’t cause the challenges in Boston but only made them much clearer to everyone.

“Our kids didn’t start struggling remotely, they were already struggling before we went remote,” one pod staff member said. “I think it was a lot easier to brush youth to the next grade before it was remote. Now it’s a lot more obvious, I guess, or it’s in our faces, it’s in our homes.”

The future of the CLC is currently in transition. The pods are no longer operating, with in-person school back in full swing in Boston. However, all four organizations are committed to continuing the collaboration to engage the local district in a conversation about change and finding ways to partner and influence education policy, which will most likely involve smaller efforts to bring more enrichment programming to individuals and groups of schools.