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PODS IN ACTION:

Cleveland Metropolitan School District

MAKING THE MOST OF A RICH NETWORK OF DISTRICT PARTNERS

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Cleveland came into the pandemic with a history of collaboration among civic organizations and schools. In summer 2020, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) and partners—community organizations, funders, and out-of-school-time organizations—saw that students were in a crisis and came together to establish full-day remote-learning pods for their most vulnerable students.

KEY LESSONS:

1 By establishing strong connections and shared goals, out-of-school-time program providers and community organizations can collaborate quickly with school districts to support students and create opportunities for greater student engagement and learning during a crisis—and strengthen relationships for long-term collaboration.

2 When learning-pod organizers have support from a mix of robust city-wide coordination and assured operational funding, charitable donations, local and state funding, and an active local philanthropic sector, they can provide learning-pod hosts with guidance and a set of standards for the level of service students will receive—such as supervision for a minimum of eight hours per day for four days a week, staff training, and observance of public-health precautions.

3 Preliminary data suggest that students who attended Cleveland learning pods had higher attendance rates and grades than students who did not.

KEY FACTS:

LOCATION: CLEVELAND, OH	**975** STUDENTS SERVED	**25** LEARNING POD SITES	**K-8** GRADES SERVED

STUDENT EXPERIENCE:
IN PERSON; SUPPLEMENTAL TO SCHOOL

The Cleveland Foundation, a community foundation that provides community endowment, grantmaking, and leadership, and MyCom, the foundation's youth development network, had long worked with CMSD to support Cleveland's wraparound strategy—the district's partnership with neighborhood organizations that provided out-of-school-time support such as after-school and summer programs.

Now, with students facing many weeks, at least, of remote learning, the partners began to hear about wealthy parents in suburbs pulling their students out of school to create learning pods.

Knowing that many students from low-income backgrounds in Cleveland lacked reliable internet connections, quiet places to study, or adults present during the day to supervise and guide schoolwork, they began to envision safe places where these students could go, connecting to the district's remote learning with adult supervision. By using their established connections with neighborhood organizations that had provided after-school and summer support, the district and its community and philanthropic partners could help these organizations fund remote learning pods.

The district, the Cleveland Foundation, and MyCom initially planned for nine weeks of pods, but as the pandemic wore on, the pods continued throughout the 2020–21 school year. The pods supported hundreds of students and connected schools more closely with the after-school providers who operated the pods, who in turn became more familiar with students' academic needs. The partners hope this will open the door to even more coordination and collaboration between after-school organizations and schools to engage students in curricula and meet their learning needs.

A preexisting youth support network proved critical to forming the pods

With many after-school providers requesting support to operate pods, the Cleveland Foundation turned to MyCom for help setting standards tied to funding and providing general pod oversight.

The foundation created MyCom in 2007 to help manage youth program partnerships, including after-school providers, throughout the Cleveland area. Pre-pandemic, MyCom helped organizations that wanted foundation funding to follow a set of tenets for youth programs and provided professional development.

MyCom managed and oversaw the pods but regularly met with the other organizers—the Cleveland Foundation, CMSD, and United Way of Greater Cleveland, which provided some funding and financial management. Due to MyCom's longstanding relationships with Cleveland out-of-school-time providers, the learning pods came together within three weeks.

MyCom put out a request for applications to community organizations and gave a short presentation on why students needed learning pods, pod-provider requirements, and the support providers could expect.

"We were on the call right away," said Judy Willard, the executive director of The Meeting Place Learning Center, an after-school provider that joined the initiative to support students during the school day. "We actually live right where we minister, so we were already seeing what the families were going through in the summertime. It was a no-brainer for us. . . . We're going to be there to help our families and our students."

Knowing how students' home lives would affect their learning drove Oronde East, the executive director of Focus Minds, to apply.

"What led me to the academic learning pods is because I knew that the children would fall tremendously behind due to COVID and not having the ability to be in school," East said. "Many children did not have internet access, or they lived in chaotic environments where they couldn't focus on their academics in a way that they would need. So because of those two reasons, I knew they needed a safe haven, so to speak, to come to a place where they could focus . . . [and] receive love, attention, and the things that they need to be productive young men and women."

Providers had to show they could follow all COVID-19 safety protocols set by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, including mask usage and a six-foot separation in group spaces. They also had to stay within a nine-to-one ratio of students to adults and serve students from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at least four days a week.

In return, pod providers would get funding and regular training from MyCom for pod administrators and facilitators (the adults supervising students while they learned remotely). All instruction would be provided remotely by students' regular school teachers.

Because MyCom staff already knew the after-school providers, they needed just a simple, short application to gauge each applicant's ability to support a learning pod. MyCom used its familiarity with the schools and organizations to gauge the need for remote-learning support and to coordinate locations where students most needed pods.

Given the money available, the organizers funded 25 of the 80 applicants, who worked with schools to quickly enroll students. The schools provided students with laptops, and pod providers were outfitted with other technology—such as Wi-Fi and hotspots—as needed to support their students.

The Cleveland Foundation provided initial funding, with more funding coming through the year from United Way, CMSD, Say Yes to Education, Siesta Education, individual donors, and others. Cuyahoga County contributed some CARES Act funding to the pods, as well. For the initial nine weeks, pods received $1,000 per student. After that, they received $111 per student per week. For 2020–21 overall, the cost came to $2.6 million.

Demand for the pods proved strong; during the pandemic's peak in the fall, many pods had waiting lists, accepting students on a rolling basis when they could. After January, as districts opened to hybrid or fully in-person learning, sites no longer had waiting lists, MyCom leaders said.

Pods blend remote-learning support with after-school activities

Learning pods mainly served students in grades K-8; most came from grades 3-5. Few pods served high schoolers, as they were viewed as more self-sufficient; however, providers served about 50 high schoolers who potentially faced greater challenges with remote learning, such as English language learners.

Pods were not restricted to students from one school; some students attended the pod closest to school, while others chose pods closer to a family workplace or other friends and family. Pods varied in size, from fewer than 10 to more than 60 students.

Although most students came from CMSD, some pods were located in Cleveland's suburbs, serving students who attended other school districts and charter schools. Although pod providers had existing relationships with some neighborhood schools, the pandemic helped create more relationships, because students came from multiple schools. Some schools and principals made extra efforts to connect with pods that hosted their students, but this was not required or formalized.

Staffing the pods

Given the schedule and number of students to serve, many learning-pod providers asked existing staff members to facilitate the pods or hired more facilitators. MyCom required only that facilitators passed a background check and were aged 18 or older; pods set their own criteria beyond that, such as experience working with youth or having a staff representative of the demographics of the pod's students.

Many of the facilitators did not have an education background. Facilitators did not lead curriculum—that was left to classroom teachers interacting with students remotely. However, many helped provide extra guidance or support to students who were struggling.

The Cleveland Foundation hired Luciana Gilmore, a former CMSD teacher and principal, as a consultant. She provided weekly and biweekly training sessions and professional development for pod facilitators. On Wednesdays, professional development focused on issues such as operations, building capacity as a leader, and supporting students with individual education plans. Friday sessions gave facilitators time to collaborate about challenges they faced and successful strategies.

Pod schedules

Most pods ran from Monday to Friday, though they were required to run only four days a week because Wednesdays were a district asynchronous learning day (no live instruction). Because most pods were open on Wednesdays, students used this day to complete homework, and the learning-pod providers could use any extra time for their own programming—such as field trips, visits from community members, art classes, literacy support—usually related to their prepandemic after-school programming.

What worked well

Family satisfaction

Many family members had to work while their child was in school or did not feel equipped to guide their children's learning. In interviews, families expressed gratitude for the pods—not only for having a place students could focus on school but also for the extra support students received from facilitators.

When her son couldn't understand the geometry homework, one mother said, the pod facilitators at Esperanza, a community organization that primarily supports Latino youth, provided help. "A lot of help. If they didn't understand something, they had all the tools they needed to communicate with the teacher."

This mother, whose child receives special education services, saw changes from the socialization her son experienced in the pod,and the support he received that eased the pressures building up when the whole family was isolated at home.

"Putting him there has impacted him positively in a time where a lot is changing around him," she said. "We moved here from Puerto Rico, and he hasn't been able to make many friends. [At his pod,] he was able to meet other students that spoke the same language he did. I've seen him socialize . . . and [have an] instructor that he adores and has great communication with. Of course, I'm very happy."

Another parent, whose child started the year unable to read, was happy to see facilitators at Focus Minds working with her child one-on-one, especially during a time when parents struggled to find programs to support student learning in person.

Likewise, facilitators reported a strengthening of their relationships with families and students through the learning pods. Some pod providers noted that students who attended the learning pods stayed engaged beyond the pods, attending their summer programs, and family members participated in the organization's activities and programming outside of the learning pod, as well.

Academics and attendance

Although pod students did not necessarily receive targeted academic support from their adult supervisors, some indicators reported by MyCom and Cleveland Foundation suggest they had more academic success than their non-pod peers and about the same level of online engagement. The pods helped keep some especially vulnerable students, such as English language learners, from falling further behind.

Darlene Toney, program officer of youth and human services at the Cleveland Foundation, said course completion and engagement data she received from the district met their hopes for students in pods. By the end of the first semester, 67 percent of students in the pods passed all their classes, compared with 48 percent of students not in pods.

"I was sure my kid was not going to be promoted to the next year," one parent said. "I was mentally prepared for him to be held back. And it was thanks to their help . . . that he was able to pass."

According to district statistics, pod students logged into their Schoology platform at about the same rate as than nonpod students—96 percent versus 95 percent of students who logged in at least once (students who never logged in were not counted; MyCom's Alex Leslie notes that pods likely served students who may otherwise have been among those never to log in, given access issues).

Additionally, pod students completed 66 percent of assignments, versus 60 percent for nonpod students during the 2020–21 school year.

Pod facilitators saw signs of progress, as well. One facilitator noted having four students—from six to nine years old—who began at their pod unable to sound out letters; by the end of the year, they were sounding out full words and writing five-letter words on their own.

Relationships with schools

As learning-pod providers, community organizations built stronger connections with schools across Cleveland. Pod facilitators regularly communicated with students' teachers and bridged communication between the school and parents. Facilitators showed a great appreciation for the work teachers do, and schools seem to have gained more respect for the outside providers, as well.

Out-of-school-time providers were "always seen as a 'nice to have' rather than an 'absolutely need to have' in our region," said MyCom's Alex Leslie. "And I think this project has tipped the scales on that towards a 'must-have' and made it a little more indispensable. And I think that's a testament to the great work of the people who have shown up every day to serve students and done work that was outside of their comfort zone. To show up and make sure that they were present for students in a way that they were able to be that schools were not able to be."

The organizations' willingness to help in any way struck a chord with district administrators.

"During this pandemic, our school-time partners stepped up to a level that was just unbelievable," said Lisa Baskin Naylor, CMSD's director of community engagement and wraparound strategy. "They were the first ones that turned around and said, 'OK, district, what do you need? We're here for you.' And I think that lifting the priority around our partnerships, and lifting that priority as important as what we do every day in the classroom—I think that is a really big focus that I want to have moving forward. Getting our people to understand that out-of-school-time isn't just . . . babysitters after school."

The partnerships also opened many eyes to the severity of districts' students' academic struggles. Leaders of the organizing groups and pod providers (accustomed to providing nonacademic enrichments) noted that they had not realized just how far behind some students were, leading community providers to add supports either in their learning pod or to their overall organization.

Pods overcame challenges with tech glitches and coordinating support

Though the pods successfully served students, the providers faced some challenges.

Initially, students, especially younger students, didn't know how to navigate remote-learning platforms and needed significant one-on-one attention that was a challenge with the nine variously aged students for each facilitator (and social distancing, preventing small groups). Facilitators also found it difficult to keep students quiet and on task throughout the day, with common breaks or lunch times difficult to plan because students in one room came from multiple schools and grades, each with their own schedule.

Pods also continually dealt with equipment issues. Laptops and chargers frequently were damaged or malfunctioned, so providers had to quickly find replacements. Students often started the day with uncharged laptops, which made seating arrangements difficult due to limited outlets and social distancing. Some providers found broadband internet wasn't strong enough to reach all their students.

"The tech issues with the district were pretty numerous. If you called for tech support, they weren't helping you. They were basically giving you a ticket number, and then you had to call the school. And most of the time, the answer was, 'OK, we're just going to give you a new laptop,'" one pod administrator said.

Because many facilitators did not have a classroom background, they also found it challenging to manage students' learning and behavior—especially with their multiple grades, schedules, and learning needs, as well as the distractions students could find online. However, facilitators noted how helpful the training and professional development were in improving their classroom management.

Providers also noted the challenge of not interfering with district instruction while still trying to help fill gaps for students when their teachers were out or when students were very far behind academically.

Some pod providers struggled to stretch funding from the project to meet all their needs, with the priority being paying staff. One learning pod that supported English language learners got private funding to open a third classroom because they saw such a high need.

"The funding that came only covered partial costs," the pod's administrator said. "So, we actually did some fundraising on our own, and one of our corporate sponsors fully subsidized one of the learning pods, so then we were able to expand."

Students struggled with feeling discouraged. Some came in with trauma from losing family members and friends, or other family issues that arose due to COVID-19. Along with finding it difficult to focus online all day, students missed being able to interact with their fellow students and educators normally. Some pods were able to bring in social-emotional specialists, social workers, and counselors to support students.

"We had to keep the children in high spirits because many days they would be discouraged; they would express that they didn't feel like getting online," said East, executive director of Focus Minds. "They would fall asleep while in class—just this new style of learning was challenging to many of the children, so we had to keep their spirits up by constantly using affirmations. We would have to use affirmations in the morning just to boost them up, some stretching exercises before we even get into business."

Pandemic response strengthened existing partnerships and built new ones

Pods came to a close at the end of the 2020–21 school year. MyCom reports interest from parents for pods to continue, but funding as of mid-September 2021 was uncertain, so there were no set plans for them to resume.

But pod providers and organizers appreciated how they opened the door to new opportunities for collaboration between after-school providers and the school district.

The Cleveland Foundation's Toney hopes the experience will lead the districts to continue supporting organizations that support students during time out of school, possibly by including "part-time teachers during the summer, co-creating curriculum, so the activities and the expanded learning space align with what they're learning in the classrooms," Toney said.

The district's Baskin Naylor envisioned workshops for partners so they can create engaging, aligned after-school programming—"this fun thing that you do after school and it relates to math, how does it relate to what the kids are doing early first quarter?"

The Cleveland Foundation reported in fall 2021 that district staff and Say Yes, a nonprofit in Cleveland that helps CMSD students access college and scholarships and connects district families to local resources, have turned to MyCom more than in the past to help find and match after-school program providers. Some pod providers, who never worked with the district directly before, have become Say Yes providers for the first time, with one even acting as an anchor provider for a school, to bring in specialized providers. And MyCom was asked to find providers who can help with social-emotional learning in elementary schools and tutoring in high schools.

With strengthened networks from the past year, the district and community providers agree they can better support one another amid ongoing coronavirus uncertainty and beyond.