

## PODS IN ACTION:

# Community Works

A COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION MAKES THE JUMP FROM SUPPORTING STUDENTS AFTER SCHOOL TO SUPPORTING FAMILIES WHO HOMESCHOOL

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Community Works is located in New Orleans, Louisiana. Before the pandemic, it ran large-group (100- to 200-student) after-school and out-of-school-time programs that integrated enrichment and academics for youth in grades K-8. When school buildings closed in March 2020, Community Works started offering more versatile programming options to meet the needs of their students, inclusive of various virtual programs and some in-person after-school and daytime programs. They then shifted their focus from their virtual programming options to facilitate operation of two learning pods, one funded and located within the local K-8 public school for the children of teachers and one composed of mostly homeschooled students that was housed in their office building and funded by the Vela Education Fund.

The idea for the homeschool pod, which opened in the spring of 2021, came from a survey of families who participated in Community Works programming. Some families with working parents preferred remote learning for their children but did not have the capacity to assist their children during the workday.

### KEY LESSONS:

1

An organization with experience running out-of-school-time programs proved well positioned to support students during the pandemic by providing enrichment that supplemented the remote instruction they received from schools and by prioritizing students' social and emotional well-being.

2

Supporting full-blown school replacement for families new to homeschooling created new challenges for an organization used to supporting supplemental activities, especially because some families did not know they were expected to provide curricula.

## KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:  
NEW ORLEANS

3

STUDENTS  
SERVED

1

NUMBER OF  
STAFF

K-8

GRADES  
SERVED

### STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

IN PERSON; SUPPORT AND ENRICHMENT FOR HOMESCHOOLERS

Students attended the pod six to seven hours per day, five days a week. Two students were not enrolled in a brick-and-mortar school, and one student was enrolled in virtual school through their local elementary school.

## Operating a learning pod for homeschooled students presented new challenges

Community Works' experience providing academic and enrichment activities prior to the pandemic helped it pivot to addressing the needs fueled by building closures, including remote-learning support.

Staff worked to ensure all pod students had the tools needed to be successful at Community Works and in pandemic virtual learning, delivering food and Chromebooks to students who lacked these resources.

However, the Community Works staff we interviewed reported that the learning pod for homeschoolers presented different challenges than the other learning pod that Community Works organized for the children of teachers. Unlike their peers in the other pod, the homeschooled students did not have a curriculum or learning plan to follow or an assigned educator, apart from family members. For two of the homeschooled families with Kindergarteners, the pod was their first experience with schooling, and they weren't aware that they needed to provide a curriculum.

Community Works staff were accustomed to providing supplemental support for students with an assigned teacher who prepared lesson plans and learning activities. In working with homeschooled students, Community Works staff had to quickly shift to serving as the primary educator. In this role, they worked with family members to obtain and provide curricula for their homeschooled students.

“The homeschool regimen definitely threw a curve ball in where we had to ask families to provide some type of learning plan so that the kids weren't coming in there with nothing to do.” - **Community Works staff**

## Community Works staff struggled to keep homeschooled students academically engaged

Learning pod staff were Community Works veterans with experience developing lesson plans for enrichment activities. They transferred this skill, with training from Community Works' Director of Education, into developing academics-focused lesson plans while they waited for the homeschool families to provide formal curricula. Although not certified teachers, Community Works staff said they aimed to develop activities and lesson plans that were consistent with the State Department of Education standards and that integrated social and emotional learning with academic instruction.

Despite their experience and resources, Community Works staff reportedly struggled to develop academic activities for students in the absence of formal curricula. Community Works staff also told us that they experienced significant challenges keeping homeschool students focused on their academic work or given tasks.

One way Community Works staff approached this latter challenge was to keep the homeschooled students to a daily schedule, structuring the day around the schedule of the one student who was enrolled in virtual school.

Once homeschool families provided curricula, the variation in those materials presented new challenges for staff. As a Community Works administrator explained,

“The homeschool curriculum really varies based on the family’s choice. So sometimes the families might be enrolled in a national thing where they’re connecting with other homeschool groups who are across the nation or they can choose to purchase a curriculum that the parents are in charge of administering that’s not as regimented.”

- **Community Works administrator**

## Community Works focused on social and emotional well-being for students

Improving student well-being was the primary mission of the Community Works learning pods. Staff expressed concern about the harmful impacts the pandemic and quarantine may have had on their students and hoped the pod would provide a space for students to socialize and have fun. To this end, staff allotted time for unstructured breaks for students to socialize and play outside of their online school day. They also conducted periodic emotional check-ins—typically in the morning before starting school—and time for free play into the school day.

“It was really about engaging their interest and seeing what they wanted to do and how they felt, and how they wanted to spend their break time. These kids have been quarantined and it’s really important for them to socialize and get back out there in a safe way, so we really tried to focus on letting them do the things that they might want to do.”

- **Community Works staff**

In addition to the brief, unstructured breaks and time for free play, Community Works staff supported students’ well-being with longer enrichment activities that encouraged play and learning, such as building a paper roller coaster, decorating the classroom space, and creating a mural. Staff members prepared lesson plans for these longer enrichment activities, many of which focused on science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math (STEAM) or

sports. Staff members took great pride in their ability to introduce students to new experiences, skills, and potential career paths—such as being a fashion designer or musician—that they would not likely have learned about in school.

“I’m giving students a well-rounded educational experience. So, they’re not just getting the books, but they’re also getting an experience of being creative and being able to think about things and actually produce things that are essential to learning how to grow and to be a part of something when they get older.”

- **Community Works staff**

## Enduring lessons on supporting family-led learning

Community Works administrators said they hope that learning pods could be a productive way for homeschooled children to learn and socialize beyond the pandemic. One administrator suggested that learning pods could purchase accredited lesson plans for staff to implement, partner with organizations that provide such curriculum, and hire teachers to assist with academics. This Community Works leader said,

“I think one market that’s kind of untapped for afterschool programs is the homeschooled kids. We could have an afterschool pod and specifically target kids who are homeschooled to help them kind of build some of that connection that maybe they’re not fully getting during the day with their homeschooling.”

- **Community Works staff**

As the number of families participating in homeschooling continues to climb, the successes and challenges of the Community Works pod may be relevant for other organizations. Community Works staff learned that they may need to provide curricula as a support to families new to homeschooling, at least in the short term. They also discovered that homeschooling curricula vary and that it is largely up to families to select one. Educating families about the different aspects of homeschooling curricula and how to select a curriculum that meets the needs of their child will be imperative for future programs.

Community-based organizations such as Community Works can leverage their organization’s capacity to help homeschooling families vet curriculum materials and learning plans for their children in ways that help them align their materials to standards while also providing supplemental social support for homeschooling families. Community Works’ approach of tying state academic standards to enrichment activities could be a model for other CBOs.