

Progress and potential: The innovations of pandemic learning communities led by leaders of color

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Pandemic-fueled school closures exposed an urgent need for childcare and remote learning support. In response to this crisis, families, educators, and community-based organizations (CBOs) stepped up to devise their own solutions. Pandemic pods, community-based “learning hubs,” and support for families new to homeschooling were largely devised by people and actors long relegated to the periphery of decision-making about K-12 schooling. In so doing, the pandemic created an opportunity for new voices and perspectives to emerge.

In 2020, CRPE launched a research project to explore these pandemic-era experiments and identify lessons that can last beyond the crisis as education systems work to rebuild to be more just, equitable, and responsive to individual student needs.

[In partnership with researchers around the country](#), CRPE conducted 22 case studies of community-based pandemic learning communities to learn more about the experiences of those who participated. This paper synthesizes lessons from seven initiatives that were led by community leaders of color to assess what they may cumulatively teach us about advancing racial justice in K-12 educational spaces.

The parents of color who participated in the programs were largely satisfied and reported their children had positive experiences in these nontraditional educational settings. The experiences of stakeholders in these pods stood in stark contrast to the often-negative experiences of marginalized communities in traditional public and charter schools¹ and hold important lessons for policy makers and educators to keep in mind in the search for more just, equitable, and responsive educational offerings.

¹ Ann M. Ishimaru, *Just Schools: Building Equitable Collaborations with Families and Communities* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2019).

Specifically we found the following:

- **COVID-19 created a window of opportunity for leadership and innovation in communities of color.** While many leaders' work in education predated the pandemic, leaders leveraged the moment to radically reimagine how they could best achieve their goals related to improved educational opportunity for marginalized students and families.
- **Leaders of color drew on similar practices when designing the programs.** The learning environments leaders of color created intentionally sought to address shortcomings in traditional schools that reinforce educational inequality. This includes hiring staff of color, avoiding punitive discipline practices, adopting culturally relevant pedagogy, and supporting student and family well-being.
- **Leaders saw programs as a way to put advocacy proposals into action.** Many leaders of color had previously advocated for better support for students and families of color at school board meetings and in the legislative process. Their work during the pandemic offered them the flexibility to put these ideas into action without seeking independent approvals.
- **Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the programming.** Families of color consistently pointed to the benefits they and their children experienced attending pandemic-era learning environments led by leaders and staff of color, in contrast to prepandemic schooling.
- **Funding, expertise, and school reopenings challenge the future of these programs.** These initiatives, led by people of color, depend on continued access to funding, staff recruitment and development, and demand from families, none of which are guaranteed as the pandemic begins to fade from view.

The pandemic-era efforts of leaders of color suggest there's enormous demand for culturally and linguistically affirming educational experiences for students of color and that CBOs can be critical partners in delivering the educational experiences families want. School districts and charter schools can learn from the examples they set and, in so doing, may yet gain traction in addressing the age-old racial inequalities that have plagued our public education system.

Profiles of pandemic learning communities created by leaders of color

Black Mothers Forum: Founded by mothers long concerned about the safety and welfare of their Black children, Black Mothers Forum (BMF) is an Arizona-based education advocacy group that launched two microschools for Black families in Phoenix, Arizona, in January 2021. BMF partnered with Prenda, a well-known microschool provider, but adapted its model to better meet the needs of Black families.

Boston CLC: During the spring of 2020, two months into the global COVID-19 pandemic, four leading community organizations in Boston jointly launched a series of in-person learning centers to meet the needs of youth and families learning remotely. The Community Learning Collaborative was supported by the YMCA of Greater Boston, Latinos for Education (LFE), Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion (IBA), and The BASE.

Engaged Detroit: Bernita Bradley, a social entrepreneur and education-reform advocate, helped Black families take control of their children’s learning through homeschooling. Her organization, Engaged Detroit, offered personal coaching on selecting curriculum, establishing learning goals and securing enrichment opportunities.

Equity Pods: Founded during the pandemic to bridge gaps between white families and families of color, Equity Pods supported K-12 educators with culturally specific online resources and curriculum for Black and brown children. Equity Pods collaborated with Treehouse Books and the Brooklyn Children’s Museum to support the implementation of learning pods and with Youth Power Coalition to support youth advocacy efforts.

Joanna Rosa-Saenz: An enterprising parent with community connections in Denver launched a pandemic pod that grew to serve 14 students ages 3 to 13 when school buildings closed. Operating out of her basement, which served as its own “one-room schoolhouse,” the pod operated a multiage classroom that supported students’ learning virtually.

My Reflection Matters: My Reflection Matters (MRM) Village is a nationwide, virtual network of parents, students, and educators, formed with a mission to “cultivate a space that provides the supports, conversations, and healing required to decolonize adults’ beliefs and practices around learning and parenting in order to raise free people.” Initially meeting in person, MRM launched its virtual “Village” platform in August 2020 and amassed a membership of more than 600 parents, students, and educators by 2021.

The Oakland REACH: The Oakland REACH is a community-based parent advocacy organization that rapidly pivoted during the pandemic to meet student and family needs. This includes offering a parent empowerment program, running a virtual K-8 summer program called the “hub,” and operating push-in academic support for Oakland Unified School District’s ongoing virtual school.

COVID-19 created a window of opportunity for Black and brown leadership and innovation to lead in the K-12 education space

The leaders of color who started pods were all long-time observers of inequality in their communities. While the pods gave them an avenue to lead, they were also clear that their goals stretched far beyond the pandemic. Rather, the pandemic was an opportunity to step in and take charge of a situation they had long been advocating needed to change. For instance, a leader of the Boston CLC stated,

The inequities were happening before COVID. So we could all wake up and stop thinking COVID created inequities. Equities were before COVID. We weren’t feeding people before COVID. Black and brown kids and the quality of education sucked anyway, but what COVID did is it brought it more to light.

Building on previous knowledge and relationships

In Brooklyn, the director of Equity Pods spoke of her early response to the crisis but defined the crisis in far broader terms than the pandemic: “I think about how Equity Pods respond[ed] to a crisis, and the crisis was the growing educational achievement gap.” Across the cases, leaders felt compelled to mediate the impact of COVID-19 on the educational trajectories of students of color, and they knew well what kind of obstacles they would face and how best to address them.

A subset of the seven organizations pivoted from previous service and advocacy work to provide students a direct service during the pandemic. For instance, before the pandemic, the Boston CLC leaders—each a prominent leader of a CBO— were convening to discuss the potential of partnerships and collaboration with each other to better support Boston youth and families. In the spring of 2020, the leaders utilized these preexisting relationships and quickly created pods to support virtual student learning. As one of the leaders of the Boston CLC shared,

When the pandemic hit it was like, we’ve got to do something. And to be honest, we have to do something where we’re going to ensure that our young folks and their families are going to have access to resources and education.

These organizations also keenly understood the challenges school systems would face in meeting student and family needs. Another organization, The Oakland REACH, was also involved in community organizing and policy advocacy work prior to March 2020. However, when the organization heard about its community’s struggle with virtual education, it stepped up to provide quality programming for Oakland students. As the executive director shared,

So obviously we’re hearing just the learning loss—concerns around learning loss, right? We’re hearing about the disconnect from teachers, not having the technology infrastructure. . . . We’re not going to turn around and try to force a system that already wasn’t really serving us—wasn’t serving us well, and now they’re crippled, and now we’re expecting them—like they’re hobbling on one leg, and now we’re going to expect them to do more, right?

Not expecting the system to do more, The Oakland REACH stepped into the void and offered technological assistance, parental support, and student enrichment classes.

In two cases, individuals with activist roots started pods in direct response to COVID-19 educational issues in the community. Denver-based Latina community organizer Joanna Rosa-Saenz saw that many of the parents in her community were struggling with the demands of being essential workers and pandemic education. She created a pod in her home for 14 students, knowing the students and their families would need support and believing she could figure out how to meet their needs. Joanna shared the origins of the pod:

So when schools were closed, this pandemic hit, a lot of friends and just people in the community, because I’ve organized, asked what I was going to do. I had let them know I had started this little classroom in my basement. . . . I just opened my home and said, “Bring your kids. I’m not a teacher but I can try my best.” I went to Dollar Tree and bought a bunch of materials to help support them.

The director of Equity Pods created the organization when she realized that children of color would have less access to pods than their wealthy and white counterparts. One of the administrators of Equity Pods shared, “More affluent students [were] forming independent pods.” The organization provided a resource bank of books and projects for educators who were providing “decolonized or racially supportive and culturally relevant classwork.” As a result, Equity Pods helped local community leaders of color to develop pods and provided resources (including funding) to promote culturally relevant pods.

Increased demand for alternative solutions during the pandemic

Three organizations, BMF, MRM, and Engaged Detroit, saw increased interest in their programming during the early stages of the pandemic. The director of Engaged Detroit shared that parents felt lost and abandoned with the move toward virtual learning.

Parents were just like scrambling for answers. So, to get them those answers, they needed to know how they could possibly do this at home. . . . And parents were crying out saying like, my child cannot do this, like why is my child forced to be online for six hours with a teacher who barely shows up or [is just] just yelling at them or whatever.

BMF, MRM, and Engaged Detroit found that parents were more open to their nontraditional learning environments due to the disruptions of COVID-19. For instance, one mother from MRM described that although she thought about homeschooling for a while, she decided to take the leap during the pandemic. The mother explains, “So right when the first week of school started, I pulled him out and I decided that this [is] the route that we were going to be taking as a family.” This mother and other parents like her reached out to MRM to supplement their homeschooling journey.

Communities of color saving themselves

Across the cases, there was a sentiment among the leaders that no one was coming to save their communities. Therefore, these leaders needed to step up and provide support to their communities. Whether the programs existed before the pandemic or were created in response to the pandemic, the leaders’ deep knowledge of the communities allowed them to create programming targeted for their communities’ unique needs. One leader of the Boston CLC stated,

Well, I think the one thing that’s special about us is we’re all leaders of color; I think that matters. I think that every one of us has been doing this work for some time, so it’s not like any of us are Johnny-come-latelys; we’ve been at this work for a while.

COVID-19 created an opportunity for organizations led by people of color, which had long served their communities, to become embedded in students’ daily education.

Leaders of color drew on similar practices when designing the programs

Across the seven cases, leaders implemented many of the same design elements when creating their programs. In particular, the programs emphasized hiring staff of color, implementing culturally relevant pedagogy and mindful discipline, and focusing on the social-emotional health of students and families. These practices are ones traditional school systems have struggled to implement.²

Hiring staff of color

The four programs that met in person made a concerted effort to hire teachers and facilitators of color. Leaders pointed to the programs' focus on hiring staff whose racial backgrounds were similar to the students they served as a key strength of the programs. For instance, the director of Treehouse Books Equity Pods explained the impact of having a Black staff working with her Black students:

I say this because we have a 95 percent retention rate with our students mainly it's because of [me a] Black woman but also the work of the Black women around me that work tirelessly to make it happen. That's one thing I think I want to make clear, is that Black educators and educators that are looking for equity are really the ones who are shaping the next generation, especially through this pandemic.

Across the cases, parents were appreciative of the programs' intentionality with staffing. For example, a Latina mother in the Boston CLC pod shared that her son was bullied in school for his darker skin and curly hair. She explained that having two teachers of color in the Boston CLC pod significantly impacted her son's self-esteem and feelings of connection to his class. The mother stated, "The fact that his teacher is actually his skin color . . . for him, it has made a big difference." In another example, a mother with BMF's microschoools contrasted her son's positive experience in the microschoool to his less favorable time in a predominantly white school. The mother explained,

And it also makes a huge difference to have Black teachers and have Black kids all around. And not be the only one, not be singled out for whatever you might do, like speak too loud or be too excited or jump around too much. And as the only Black child in a white school, that makes a huge difference compared to where he is now.

Many leaders intentionally hired staff who spoke the same language as their students. For example, The Oakland REACH prioritized matching Spanish-speaking families with Spanish-speaking community liaisons. Indeed, as their enrollment of Spanish-speaking families increased, the organization specifically hired more Spanish-speaking family liaisons. In Boston, the CLC leaders intentionally hired Spanish-speaking facilitators for their pods serving Spanish-speaking communities. In Joanna's pod, the director brought in another parent to help with the Spanish-speaking students. The parent explained the importance of language match:

² Rita Kohli, Marcos Pizarro, and Arturo Nevárez, "The 'New Racism' of K-12 Schools: Centering Critical Research on Racism," *Review of Research in Education* 41, no. 1 (2017): 182–202, doi:10.3102/0091732X16686949.

I could read to them in Spanish because [Joanna] used to help the children in the language that they speak. This is something very sweet and important, because if the child doesn't feel comfortable with the language, then that is a barrier.

Prioritizing racial and language matches was not necessarily easy. For example, a Spanish-speaking family liaison from The Oakland REACH pointed out the extra time it took to translate all program materials accurately. The liaison explained, “We always have to translate [information] if parents can't. They need a lot of support, and it takes time.” However, despite the extra effort entailed, the organizations prioritized hiring staff of color who matched in racial identities and the home languages of their communities.

Culturally relevant pedagogy

Across the cases, leaders sought to create an experience where students of color could bring their full selves to schooling. For instance, Engaged Detroit leaders shared how the organization intended to center and normalize Blackness in the homeschooling community. She explained,

[At] traditional schools what you find is that there is sometimes a . . . notion that Blackness needs to be tempered down, so that you can fit into schools. With Engaged Detroit, there isn't that. There's an acceptance [that] people are who they are. And we get to, as parents, allow our kids to be; that's been really, really affirming.

A set of the organizations affirmed students' racial identities through the curriculum. For instance, The Oakland REACH offered enrichment classes, such as creative writing and Chicano cultural studies, that drew on students' identities. As an enrichment partner of The Oakland REACH shared,

But what REACH [asked us] would you be willing to create some classes and some experiences for young people within the REACH families where Latino kids or any kid that's interested in learning Latino culture, history, would be a part of it. And so we developed five classes just for REACH.

In another example, the purpose of Equity Pods was to connect pods run by leaders of color with “racially affirming classwork and antiracist education,” according to the program leader. Likewise, the leader of Engaged Detroit helped Black homeschooling families to supplement their curricula with Black history lessons. The director explained,

So while children are learning traditional history that they're supposed to be learning online, we put an aspect of learn your own history, learn African Diaspora, learn how drums were incorporated into America. We had a drum class on a Saturday also. But learn how the slave trade came here, learn that you were not a slave, your ancestors were not slaves, they were humans who were enslaved, just all these different things, right?

Other groups integrated culturally relevant pedagogy into their programs by making space for students to discuss and grapple with current events. All of these programs were implemented in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and protests against police brutality in the summer of 2020. Staff and leaders did not shy away

from these topics. Instead, they allowed students to process current events in a safe environment. One parent with the Boston CLC appreciated the pod leading challenging conversations with students. The parent shared: “I remember they were talking about Black Lives Matter. And [my sons] had a lot of questions, they all got answered, which was great.”

Mindful discipline

Across the cases, parents, especially the parents of Black boys, expressed the challenges of dealing with school discipline policies in traditional K-12 environments. For instance, one of the parents involved in the Engaged Detroit shared that Black students are often punished for normal childhood behavior. She explained,

A little Black boy having a tantrum, being upset, maybe he has some things going on at home. Maybe he wasn't having a good day. He's going to be looked at as bad, but you have the same little Caucasian child that's acting out, oh, he's expressing himself. . . . We just automatically stigmatized our little Black boys and little Black girls in America.

The mother's comments are supported by research that shows Black children behave no worse than white children³ but are instead singled out for subjective behaviors.⁴

The leaders and staff of the four in-person programs discussed taking mindful and nonpunitive approaches to student discipline. For instance, rather than suspension, leaders would discuss discipline issues with parents and create and monitor student-specific behavior plans. Leaders detailed how these approaches took more time. However, the policies allowed programs to support students fully. For example, one of the BMF microschoo teachers discussed how new mindful approaches to discipline required a perspective shift for teachers and parents. The teacher explained that the microschoo staff had to convince a parent that the schoo would not suspend or expel students who displayed disruptive behavior. The teacher shared,

So then obviously with his mom, when there were issues in the beginning, she was very frustrated and fearful that we were going to be the next people to kick him out. We reassured her, “No, that's not what we're doing. We're here to help.”

The teacher explained that after patiently working with the mother and student, the behaviors improved. At the time of the study, the students' disruptive behaviors had significantly subsided.

The parents in the program took notice of these practices. For example, one of the mothers at the Boston CLC discussed how she was amazed at the program's disciplinary practices. The mother shared,

I've never seen [restorative discipline] before, ever . . . I've never before, ever seen a teacher or a director take their time to teach a child that what you did is

3 Nathan Barrett, Andrew McEachin, Jonathan N. Mills, and Jon Valant, “What Are the Sources of School Discipline Disparities by Student Race and Family Income?” policy brief, Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, November 20, 2017, <https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/111417-Barrett-McEachin-Mills-Valant-What-Are-the-Sources-of-School-Discipline-Disparities-by-Student-Race-and-Family-Income.pdf>.

4 Richard O. Welsh and Safiqua Little, “School Discipline Dilemma: A Comprehensive Review of Disparities and Alternative Approaches,” *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 5 (2018): 752–94, doi:10.3102/0034654318791582.

wrong and to learn how to take that responsibility and teach them that you own your mistakes. I never ever had somebody help a kid do that. And they're doing that for them. And that's one thing that I will . . . it will stick with me forever.

Another parent from BMF shared that dealing with her son's discipline issues in school used to make her feel "consumed by survival and dealing with trauma responses." However, now that her son was in the microschoools, her mental health and home life had improved. She shared,

We have a more happier home life [now that my son is enrolled in the microschoool]. And we relate better. I'm less stressed, I'm less triggered and stressed from kids' experiences because he's no longer having behavioral issues or feeling unseen or hurt or feeling unsafe.

The relatively small number of students enrolled in these programs may have shaped the programs' ability to implement mindful discipline practices with fidelity. However, these programs also committed to implementing these strategies even when there were simpler or quicker approaches.

Focus on the social-emotional health of families

One of the coaches from Engaged Detroit argued that traditional schools do not attend to the social-emotional needs of all students:

One of the things that schools don't provide space for is, I tell people all the time they don't create spaces for kids who are maybe necessarily more sensitive, who need space and time to process things and sit with their emotions.

Across the cases, leaders and staff in the programs prioritized the social and emotional health of students. For the in-person programs, it seemed that just being able to meet in person with their peers and a caring adult was helpful for students' mental and emotional development. For example, one of the parents from the Boston CLC shared,

But it seems like [my son is] a little bit happier because he gets to talk to more people. He's not just home, talking to himself. I think that's the main thing, that he gets to talk to someone else. So he doesn't have to figure it out on his own.

These four organizations offered students in-person socialization for free throughout the pandemic.

Programs like BMF and the Treehouse Books Equity Pod also supplemented traditional curriculums with social and emotional support, such as community circles and frequent one-on-one check-ins. As a Treehouse teacher explained,

We're also supporting people in their emotional growth and having crushes and having to do papers and changing schools, just different things like that. And also coping with a pandemic and racial injustices and things like that.

It seems that these nontraditional formats provided leaders and staff the flexibility to respond to students' social-emotional needs.

Notably, many of these programs also prioritized the mental health of parents. For instance, The Oakland REACH provided each enrolled family a family liaison. The executive director discussed the importance of the role:

So your family liaison is almost like your educational social worker. They're by your side through all of it. And that could be anything from helping you get into emails, calling you because your child—because your child's not in class, right? After you just take attendance or just talking you off the ledge because, you know, our families are not just dealing with trying to make sure that their kids are staying on track for college, but our families are the ones who are most economically impacted, right? By a lot of it. So they just—people just need a listening ear, somebody to be supportive.

Family liaisons, all Black and Latino parents and grandparents, supported parents with all aspects of their virtual school journeys.

The two organizations that supported homeschooling families—MRM and Engaged Detroit—focused on assisting parents who wished to homeschool their children. For example, one of the mothers involved with MRM shared the impact of monthly community conversations:

MRM also emphasizes support for caregivers, or educators, or adults in the community, and I think that that was one of the reasons why I was so . . . it was a community for myself as much as it is for my young people. So the participation has been . . . I just love how we have the village chat once a month, where we talk about anything that we want to. Lots of times we have topics, and we touch on lots of things, and being able to share our challenges, being able to share our small victories, and being able to share the things that, no matter how big or small, sharing it with each other, and just building community through that.

The COVID-19 period has been challenging for parents, especially moms. Many parents who participated in these programs were facing steep challenges before the pandemic, including the ongoing stress of racial discrimination and generational poverty. The pandemic added to that stress. These organizations stepped into the void and provided support to parents. A parent from The Oakland REACH shared the impact of having consistent assistance:

[The program] was just wonderful. There wasn't ever a "well sorry, I don't know what to tell you" or "we'll get back to you." There was always an answer and helpful and just so much support. When you're in a pandemic with kids and going through so much, to have somebody that really has your back, especially with academics and programs, it's so nice.

Participants made connections between other design elements, such as staff of color, culturally responsive pedagogy, and families' mental health, across the cases. It seems that simply being in affirming spaces was positive for families of color. For example, one mother involved in Engaged Detroit shared why the program had been so great for her family:

The first thing is just—Black. Just being surrounded by your own. So therefore that is what's attractive to me is being a resident of Detroit, being in a Black city but having had so many non-Black experiences or environments that I've been in. I am excited about the fact of being in a community where there are Black people who are intentionally homeschooling their children.

Putting advocacy proposals into action

Many of the practices these groups implemented, such as hiring staff of color, mindful discipline, and culturally relevant pedagogy, were those for which the groups had been advocating. For instance, The Oakland REACH was part of a “literacy for all” campaign before the pandemic. Through their hub, the organization implemented the literacy curriculum at the center of their campaign. The executive director shared that the hub’s goal was to “build the models and the vision and build the resources” to provide students of color with quality instruction.

In another example, one of the goals of the BMF microschoools was to create a model for local school districts of holistic education for Black students. As the director of the program stated,

So we started looking for other modes of educational institutions and other ways to get our children educated while we’re working with these districts in trying to fix these things, but that our children are safe and supported. The suburb [we were advocating in], no one seems to know what to do. So we were like, “let’s show them better than we can tell them.”

Across the cases, multiple leaders hoped their work would be a model for traditional education systems. For instance, one of the leaders of the Boston CLC collaborative discussed how they recruited educators of color even though it was challenging to do in a short amount of time. She shared that she hoped their efforts could be an example to the local school districts and that the district would no longer make excuses when looking for candidates of color. The director shared,

I told you it was great, but it was also a challenge, ramping up such operation, recruitment, and hiring in such [a] short period of time. But at the same time, that tells you that it is possible. If we were able to accomplish it in zero time, in very little time, it is possible for the district to really create a plan for the recruitment of qualified, certified, licensed teachers that are black and Latinx. This excuse like, “We cannot find them,” is no longer a viable excuse because we were able to find them.

Overall, leaders of these programs used the pandemic to put their advocacy into action and to show traditional education systems what is possible.

Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the programming

Across all seven cases, parents of color shared the alienating and harmful experiences they or their children had frequently experienced in traditional schools. Parents often expressed feeling ignored or disregarded by their child’s school. For instance, a mother from Boston CLC explained that when her son was being racially bullied, the school failed to act. Here the mother shared her story:

He was being verbally abused because of his color. And he got hit a lot of times because of his color. And I try really hard to fix the problem. I talked to the principals, the teachers. I did everything I could.

The mother explained that although she advocated for her son, the school did little to address the issue. She eventually had to transfer her son to another school. In another example, a mother from Engaged Detroit expressed that when she brought up a racialized incident which had upset her daughter to her daughter's former teacher, the teacher dismissed her perspective. The mother shared: "So, [the teacher] downplayed [the issue]. And her email, she was just like, 'You're making a big deal out of nothing.'"

Many of these parents involved in pods or hubs shared that they wished these programs would last beyond the pandemic. For instance, one mother with a student enrolled in the Boston CLC shared, "There's not much I can say that they can improve, to be honest. I just wish that they were there forever. That's something I can tell you."

Parents involved in homeschooling reported huge changes in their children since they started homeschooling. In particular, parents who homeschool their children shared the experience helped spark their children's passion for school and autonomy. As one of the Engaged Detroit parents explained,

My daughter's commitment to the things that we do at home and in education [has improved]. Just recognizing her as an autonomous being as opposed to really holding onto power over ways of thinking and doing things.

The homeschooling parents also appreciated support in navigating homeschooling—especially as families of color. Parents from Engaged Detroit and MRM explained that the homeschooling world was extremely white. The parents appreciated having community and resources centered on Black and other people of color on their homeschooling journey.

Overall, these seven programs allowed parents to experience high-quality educational programming geared toward children of color. Many parents, across the studies, suggested that the strength of these programs was their roots in the community. For example, one father involved with Engaged Detroit shared the issue of white actors coming in and implementing programming without deep knowledge of the community. The father states, "Because you can have somebody not of color come into our community and they try to change everything that we've been building for, for years. And they come in, and they get it approved." Rather than having new programs coming in, the parents across the seven studies encouraged community-based solutions.

Funding, expertise, and reopenings provide challenges for the future of these programs

COVID-19 was an opportunity window for leadership, innovation, and intervention in educational spaces. However, questions arise about the future of these programs as the country starts to exit the pandemic and return to more traditional in-person schooling. When considering the longevity and sustainability of these programs, there are three major areas to consider.

Funding

Across the cases, program leaders discussed funding as a critical factor in the continuation of their work. Primarily, these programs relied on philanthropic dollars. For instance, when asked if Engaged Detroit would continue beyond the pandemic, the director responded, “Yes. The goal is to have continuous funding to do it.” In another example, leaders at Equity Pods were supporting local pod leaders in fundraising efforts. As one of the Equity Pods leaders explained, “And then recently, I’ve been trying to help with funding because that’s always what everyone needs in this stage and in this area, unfortunately. There’s just not enough funding.”

Leaders discussed their hope that philanthropy would shift its lens to be more community based and long-term. For example, one of the leaders of the Boston CLC shared,

I hope there could be something around philanthropy thinking. How do I get closer and deeper to [the] community, and how am I investing in leadership and change? And not for one year, thinking if I give you a one-year grant you’re going to save the world. It doesn’t happen.

An outlier in terms of funding was BMF. The program had Arizona’s school-choice-friendly laws to help fund the program. However, even with this state funding, the program required fundraising for programmatic elements. For instance, BMF placed two learning guides in each classroom to implement its mindful discipline model, rather than one learning guide, which was more common in other microschools. The organization paid for the extra learning guide through fundraising.

Outside of BMF, all of the organizations relied on fundraising. Overall, there are questions of how the philanthropic community will view the work of these organizations and how it will fund community-based programs led by people of color in the future. In order to continue their work, these groups require continuous and dependable funding sources.

Capacity

The majority of the programs in the study were born out of a need to provide intensive and immediate support for virtual pandemic learning. Although these leaders were passionate and created thoughtful and effective programming, they were not trained educators. As a result, the programs experienced gaps in expertise that could limit the growth of the programs outside the COVID-19 period.

Many of the programs did not have staff to fully support these new and ambitious initiatives. For instance, Equity Pods relied on volunteer administrators to assist with communication and fundraising. In another example, MRM grew quickly, and the executive director did not have the support staff to streamline communications. As one parent with MRM observed,

It’s the way we communicate, a little bit more organized. Whether that’s using Google Drive and having a compilation of resources on there. We talked for a moment about going to WhatsApp or something that’s not this text message popping off every two seconds. I just would say that it’s a little bit overwhelming at times, and I’m unsure whether or not I want to plugin.

The director of MRM—and many of the leaders across the cases— were not full-time employees of the organization. It is not surprising that areas like communication strategies were under addressed.

The growth and longevity of these programs require staff to streamline communication, assist with raising funds, and implement general administrative tasks. For example, since the advent of The Oakland REACH's hub, the organization has hired a chief programs officer and a chief business office, as well as an executive assistant for the executive director. Such investments in staff may be crucial to sustainability; however, they require a great deal of funding.

Furthermore, it does not appear that all students had equal access or service in the programs. In particular, programs lacked the expertise to best serve students with special education services. For instance, one of the students enrolled in Joanna's pod required specialized services. Although the student's mother liked the affirming environment of the pod, she did not feel like the pod was a viable option long-term. The mother described her reasoning for reenrolling her child in a public school: "She used to have her speech therapist, obviously she didn't have this in the pod. She also had an occupational therapy teacher, but this also wasn't in the pod."

Other pods, such as the Treehouse Books Equity Pod, reported 0 percent of their student enrollment had individual education plans (IEPs). Perhaps, this indicated that parents of students with disabilities did not think pods could offer the full support their children required.

One organization, BMF microschoools, troubleshot this issue. Leveraging their partnership with the outside organization Prenda, the microschoools were able to provide services for students with disabilities. As these programs consider the future of their work, it might be essential to build expertise in serving students with disabilities and other diverse learners.

Demand

It is unclear what the roles of these programs will be moving forward. Indeed, pods such as the Boston CLC and Joanna's pod saw a decline in enrollment in the spring of 2021 when schools reopened for in-person learning. At the time of data collection, some organizations, such as the Boston CLC, The Oakland REACH, and Treehouse Books Equity Pod, were pivoting to summer enrichment opportunities. Joanna's experience during the pandemic showed her the need for tutoring. She shared that she was hoping to provide tutoring services in the future and that homeschooling and microschoools would remain an option for parents. [However, interest in the programs might wane with in-person options widely available.](#)

Across the cases, there were concerns about when schools returned to "normal." For instance, one of the Treehouse Books Equity Pod teachers discussed her fears about students returning to school full time in the fall of 2021. She explained,

One of my fears is them going back to school because the school system has repeatedly not taken the steps that they need to take. That's across the board, it's across the country. Many school systems within predominantly Black communities have not taken the same precautions to do antiracist training on their staff, to figure out why wasn't it working when we went virtual, or it's not

working virtual, it's not working in person, what does that mean, is that a sign? Since they're not doing the work, I don't want my children to feel like their work was in vain. That's one of the fears that we've talked about, them going back to school and not being able to advocate for themselves against a microaggression.

Yet, while these programs may not have shifted school systems, data suggest they have shifted the views and perspectives of parents. Across the cases, parents explained how they used their time in these programs to assess their experiences in the traditional school system. For instance, one mother with The Oakland REACH said she compared the high quality of the hub programming to her son's traditional school. The mother explained,

Now don't get me wrong, he likes some of his teachers and there are some classes he really likes, but he can't say that for all of them. So [The Oakland REACH] is doing something different that maybe the district needs to adopt and execute.

Before her involvement in The Oakland REACH, this mother might not have noticed the quality of her child's virtual school.

Indeed, the director of The Oakland REACH shared that one of the hub's purposes was to show parents what quality education looked like so they could advocate for it in the future. She discussed how often parents of color are asked to advocate for equitable policy and practices. However, they may not have experienced a quality education themselves. The executive director explained, "Most of [the parents] have never seen quality. So they're fighting for something that they've never really had access to, right? And doesn't—and don't necessarily know what it looks like."

Across the cases, parents saw that nonpunitive and racially and linguistically affirming educational spaces were indeed possible.

Perhaps, time in these programs will shape parents' expectations of educational systems and how they advocate in the future. Supporting this idea was the perspective of a homeschooling mother from MRM. The mother shared that her daughter wished to return to traditional school in the fall of 2021. However, while the mother was allowing her daughter to return, she shared that her perspective on her role in her child's education had changed:

So it's going to be different. I think it's really my role as an advocate, when she decides to go back to school, if she does still, that it will look different. That I'm going to expect them to stand up for what they believe in, to stand up for what they want and direct themselves. And that I am going to be the person to be the buffer, to let them be able to do that.

The mother shared that she now saw her role as an advocate for her child rather than the school.

Perhaps the legacy of these programs will be a generation of parents of color who feel equipped and empowered to advocate for quality education for their students.

Implications

This study's data suggest a hunger for culturally and linguistically affirming educational experiences for students of color. Perhaps this is a moment where school and system leaders can take a moment to reflect and act.

For instance, leaders might consider developing asset-based and racially aware perspectives of parents of color. Multiple resources are available for educators to develop asset-based views of communities for themselves and their staff. For instance, the *University of Washington's Equitable Parent-School Collaboration* research project has many [publicly available resources](#) for leaders embarking on family-centered and asset-based community engagement.

Leaders might also consider engaging in the practice of community-based equity audits⁵ (CBEAs). CBEAs encourage leaders to collaborate with community stakeholders (i.e., parents, CBO leaders, and faith organizations) and assess school data from an equity lens. Engaging in CBEAs may help districts evaluate their treatment of the different racialized communities. Further, the process of equity audits also help school leaders in developing strong relationships with their communities and building trust.

Philanthropic leaders interested in school improvement might think about making investments in schools systems' ability to reflect on racial justice and equity. For instance, school districts and charter management organizations might hire consultants to facilitate CBEA processes. With all that school leaders have on their plates, leaders may require inducements to focus on these critical issues.

As this paper has detailed, CBOs can help school systems deliver the learning experiences families of color say they want and that research shows benefits students. As one of the leaders of the Boston CLC stated, "Learning happens both in schools and in the community." Schools might consider bringing in CBOs as true partners. For example, school leaders could partner with organizations such as Equity Pods to lead professional development on culturally relevant pedagogy. Or schools could create a pipeline from schools to programs like Treehouse Books. Another idea might be enlisting local leaders of color to help with the recruitment and hiring of staff of color. But doing so will require school systems to recognize CBOs as full partners in the work of educating children and overcome the systemic barriers to deeper collaboration. It will also require a commitment from the philanthropic community to invest in and nurture efforts like the ones detailed in this report.

As the pandemic recedes from view, there is much to gain from learning from leaders of color who sought to support students and families when school building closed. Sustaining their lessons may help public education address racial injustices that predated the pandemic.

5 Green, T. L. (2017). "Community-Based Equity Audits: A Practical Approach for Educational Leaders to Support Equitable Community-School Improvements." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2017): 3-39, doi:10.1177/0013161X16672513.

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