

# “The most professionally satisfied I’ve been.” How could the best aspects of learning pod staffing be scaled up?

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By Bryan C. Hassel<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

“Pandemic pods” created new opportunities for adults interested in supporting children’s education. Teachers had the chance to work with much smaller groups of students than usual, specialize in specific aspects of the broader teaching role, work part-time, and play a lead role in deciding or even creating curriculum. Other adults without formal teaching credentials gained the opportunity to play critical roles, as well, such as providing academic tutoring and social and emotional support to students during a time of great need. Many pod staff members found these new roles appealing. In fact, a survey by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) found that “. . . three in four [instructors who supported pods] said they preferred teaching in a pod to their prior work.”<sup>2</sup> Families and staff alike cited pods as enabling personalized learning tailored to each child and fostering strong adult-student relationships—two attributes research has found to produce stronger learning and other valuable outcomes for students.<sup>3</sup>

Pods revealed teachers and other adults are highly interested in playing more varied roles in children’s education. And some pod-like staffing arrangements may continue to exist and grow in out-of-school settings, such as after-school programs. But this report examines a different potential development: is it possible that the experiences staff had in pods could become much more common in the day-to-day operations of U.S. public schools, at scale?

1 The author thanks Public Impact team members Emily Ayscue Hassel for originating and leading the development of the Opportunity Culture school models discussed here, Sharon Kebschull Barrett for her careful editing, Paola Gilliam for conducting research, and the CRPE team for its helpful commentary and the foundational research that informed this piece.

2 See Ashley Jochim and Jennifer Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation: Pandemic Pods and the Future of Education* (Glendale, AZ: Center on Reinventing Public Education, February 2022), <https://crpe.org/crisis-breeds-innovation-pandemic-pods-and-the-future-of-education>

3 Details and citations coming later in this report.

The answer is a qualified “yes.” Even before Covid, moves were afoot to create a range of new staffing arrangements within public schools that hit many of the same themes as pods, which are described in more detail in this report. Some of these arrangements had already begun to show positive impacts on student learning and educator satisfaction, as well as the ability to spread in different school contexts. If the experience of educators with pod staffing arrangements spurs heightened demand for new models in schools, system leaders will be able to build on this prior experience.

The vast majority of public schools still operate with a standard one-teacher-one-classroom staffing model. Pod-inspired interest in new employee arrangements alone will not shift these long-standing patterns. It could, however, contribute to the set of policy and practice changes this report outlines as needed to usher in a new era in which the personalized, relationship-rich arrangements that staff enjoyed in pods become much more widespread and lasting.

## Staffing arrangements in pandemic learning pods

According to different estimates, between 11 percent and 18 percent of students participated in some kind of learning pod during 2020 or 2021.<sup>4</sup> All of these pods were staffed by parents—volunteers or paid—or other adults employed by the pod.

In some cases, certified teachers worked in pods, encountering a learning environment very different from a typical classroom teaching job.<sup>5</sup> Some of the differences pod teachers reported included the following:

- **Much smaller student groups.** Whereas classroom teachers would typically have 20 or more students at a time, pod instructors often had significantly fewer pupils. In CRPE’s survey, the average number of students in a pod in the 2020–21 school year was only six, far below typical teacher “loads.”<sup>6</sup>
- **Part-time working arrangements.** Some instructors worked in pods that met for only part of the school day or concentrated the teachers’ instructional work into part of the day. The result was part-time employment for teachers, where traditional school teaching jobs are overwhelmingly full-time (and according to a recent *Education Week* survey, “full-time” for teachers means an average work week of 54 hours<sup>7</sup>).
- **Differentiated roles.** Some pods, such as Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy, engaged remotely located instructors to broadcast lessons to the pod’s students, while local personnel carried out one-on-one and small-group instruction. As a result, teachers specialized in different parts of the teaching process—in this example, delivering content or personalized follow-up.

4 For links to two surveys that yielded these lower and upper estimates, see Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, p. 9.

5 For survey data and interview notes from research on pod staffing, see Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, part 3.

6 Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, p. 10.

7 Ileana Najarro, “Here’s How Many Hours a Week Teachers Work,” *Education Week*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/heres-how-many-hours-a-week-teachers-work/2022/04>.

In addition to providing different professional settings for certified teachers, pods also opened roles for adults without teacher certifications. Pods hired people with a range of backgrounds: employees of youth-serving nonprofits, AmeriCorps volunteers, parents, and more. These adults played many roles not directly related to instruction, such as providing meals, keeping technology working, managing Covid health protocols, and handling pods' business affairs. At the same time, noncertified staff often played instructional and instruction-adjacent roles, including the following:

- **Tutoring and other academic support.** In 55 percent of the pods surveyed by CRPE, the teachers of record for the pods' students were teachers from the schools in which they were formally enrolled, teaching remotely.<sup>8</sup> For example, a third grader in a pod might spend a portion of the day in a Zoom classroom with Ms. Johnson and the rest of her third-grade class and then need to complete homework from Ms. Johnson. Pod staff often played the essential roles of helping students work through their teacher-assigned schoolwork, whether by directly tutoring on content or by helping students stay organized and on task.
- **Social and emotional support.** In addition to causing unfinished learning, Covid's stresses also dealt a considerable blow to students' social and emotional well-being and mental health.<sup>9</sup> With their small size, pods created an environment in which adults could build nurturing relationships with students to help address these needs.
- **More diverse staff.** Recent research has shown substantial academic benefits when students' teachers share their racial and cultural background.<sup>10</sup> Yet while only 47.6 percent of public school students were white in 2017-18, 79.3 percent of teachers were white that year, according to the latest federal data.<sup>11</sup> Pods often gave students the chance to work every day with staff members with a shared background.

In CRPE surveys of pod participants, educators and families found much to like in these staffing arrangements. They especially highlighted the more personalized learning experiences, tailored to each child's needs. Fully 75 percent of families surveyed by CRPE reported that "individualized instruction that meets their needs" was equally likely or more likely to be provided in pods than in their children's pre-pandemic schools.<sup>12</sup> CRPE's interviews with pod educators reinforced this finding.

8 Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, p. 14.

9 See, for example, this issue brief: Nirmita Panchal, Rabah Kamal, Cynthia Cox, Rachel Garfield, and Priya Chidambaram, "Mental Health and Substance Use Considerations Among Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic," issue brief, Kaiser Family Foundation, May 26, 2021, <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/mental-health-and-substance-use-considerations-among-children-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

10 For one summary, see David Figlio, *The importance of a diverse teaching force*, "Evidence Speaks" series (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, November 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-importance-of-a-diverse-teaching-force>.

11 The student data are from the following source: National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 203.60: Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and level of education: Fall 1999 through fall 2030," Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, September 2021, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21\\_203.60.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_203.60.asp); The teacher data are from the following source: National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 209.10: Number and percentage distribution of teachers in public and private elementary and secondary schools, by selected teacher characteristics: Selected years, 1987-88 through 2017-18," Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, January 2021, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_209.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_209.10.asp).

12 Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, p. 21.

One educator reported that “in the pod, she could spend time with each child until they mastered the material, ‘versus moving a whole classroom along and someone gets left behind.’”<sup>13</sup>

Both groups of respondents also gave high marks to pods for enabling adults to form strong relationships with students. Of the families surveyed by CRPE, 70 percent said pods were equally likely or more likely than their pre-pandemic schools to provide children with “social-emotional supports that meet their needs.”<sup>14</sup> And the ability to form strong relationships featured prominently in CRPE’s interviews with pod staff. “This is probably the most professionally satisfied I’ve been in my entire career,” one interviewee said. “Being able to be one-on-one and form relationships with kids. I can tell you every single one of their strengths, I can tell you their weaknesses. . . . I’ve never been able to do that before in my life, except with my own child, and that’s super powerful.”<sup>15</sup>

## Post-Covid potential for new staffing arrangements

Pod staffing arrangements have the potential to be replicated at a much larger scale and in a way that endures beyond a pandemic emergency. This potential has two parts. The first, which is not the subject of this report, is the potential for these arrangements to persist and spread outside of the public school system, whether that is in ongoing learning pods, out-of-school settings such as afterschool programs, or other learning environments.

The other is the potential for these arrangements to spread throughout public schools, where students and educators spend considerable time during the school year. The potential here is very high. Even before Covid, innovators had begun to propose and implement new staffing arrangements in public schools that sought to create some of the features we saw flourish in pandemic pods, including the following:

- **Advanced roles for expert teachers**, both to reach larger numbers of students with their lessons (remotely or in person) and to expand their impact by leading teams of other teachers and staff.
- **Differentiated roles** among teachers and staff, enabling adults to play different roles in line with their strengths, whether via a subject focus, such as an elementary teacher specializing in math; a concentration on particular roles that contribute to student learning and well-being, such as conveying new content, leading project-based exploration, fostering discussions, or assisting small groups of students in achieving mastery; or forming deep relationships with students through mentoring.
- **Creating new pipelines of talent** into schools—bringing in teacher candidates through paid residencies, hiring tutors and “success coaches” from the ranks of recent graduates, and giving paraprofessionals already in schools the chance to play new roles and (if desired) get on a path to teacher certification.

13 Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, p. 38.

14 Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, p. 21.

15 See Ashley Jochim and Travis Pillow, “Are smaller class sizes without the pitfalls possible? Pandemic pods make the case,” Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2021, <https://crpe.org/are-smaller-class-sizes-without-the-pitfalls-possible-pandemic-pods-make-the-case>; Jochim and Poon, *Crisis Breeds Innovation*, p. 37-38.

These new staffing arrangements have emerged in a variety of contexts. First, innovative schools and school networks have implemented these ideas on a small scale. The Christensen Institute and Public Impact (co-led by this report’s author) profiled and analyzed a set of examples using new staffing models to implement blended and personalized learning.<sup>16</sup> Other innovative school models are featured in compendia such as the Canopy Project and the Innovative Models Exchange.<sup>17</sup>

Second, national initiatives have emerged to develop, test, and scale up school models with innovative staffing arrangements. One example is the Next Education Workforce initiative at Arizona State University’s Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College.<sup>18</sup> Another, which I will focus on here, is the Opportunity Culture initiative in place since 2013, led by my organization, Public Impact.<sup>19</sup>

## Examples of new staffing arrangements in action

Delving into the specifics of the Opportunity Culture initiative can shed light on what is possible in the public school setting. Several features of Opportunity Culture models stand out and reflect the kinds of arrangements that garnered such interest among educators in pandemic pods:

- **Proven excellent teachers reach students in new ways.** The cornerstone role in Opportunity Culture designs is the multi-classroom leader (MCL)—excellent teachers who continue to teach part of the time while leading small instructional teams with intensive coaching and support, for more pay, funded within regular budgets. In their team teachers’ classrooms, this team leader might introduce new content on which the team teacher can follow up, co-teach or model a lesson with the team teacher, and work with small groups of students who can benefit from the support of an expert teacher. With technology, the MCL can reach students in multiple schools, benefitting schools that are too small or talent strapped to include this role on-site. Teachers earn more by taking these leadership roles, with supplements averaging 20 percent of average pay nationally. Because 49 percent of MCLs currently are people of color<sup>20</sup> and they reach five to six times the typical number of students via their teams, this role also provides a way to give many more students of color access to educators who share this aspect of their identity. Two independent research studies show the learning growth of students whose teachers join MCL teams. Taken together, these studies indicate that before joining the teams, team teachers achieve a typical range of student learning growth, at the 50th percentile on average. On the teams, their student growth moves to the 77th percentile of teachers, on average.<sup>21</sup>

16 The Clayton Christensen Institute and Public Impact, *Innovative staffing to personalize learning: How new teaching roles and blended learning help students succeed* (Cambridge, MA: Christensen Institute, 2018), <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/publications/staffing>.

17 The Canopy Project, <https://canopyschools.transcendeducation.org>, and the Innovative Models Exchange, <https://exchange.transcendeducation.org>.

18 Arizona State University, “Next Education Workforce Initiative,” accessed June 26, 2022, <https://workforce.education.asu.edu>.

19 Public Impact, Opportunity Culture Initiative,” accessed June 26, 2022, <http://opportunityculture.org>.

20 Public Impact, “Teacher and Staff Perceptions, Spring 2022,” Opportunity Culture Survey, Opportunity Culture Dashboard 2021–22, Opportunity Culture Initiative, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.opportunityculture.org/dashboard/survey>.

21 Benjamin Backes and Michael Hansen, “Reaching Further and Learning More? Evaluating Public Impact’s

- **Teams make specialization and collaboration a reality.** Once on teams, teachers no longer have to work in one-teacher-one-classroom silos. With their leader’s guidance, teachers can specialize, either in content or in one teaching facet in which they excel. Other options, such as part-time teaching, also become more feasible. Teachers collaborate routinely in team-planning and data-analysis meetings, as well as through increased opportunities for co-teaching, all led by the MCL. These MCLs also become the backbone of a school’s instructional leadership team, giving them collaboration time as well to strengthen the school’s instructional consistency. Teachers and paraprofessionals express strong satisfaction with the new models in annual anonymous surveys.<sup>22</sup> Just as pandemic pod staffing arrangements were regarded by teachers as an upgrade relative to their prior teaching roles, teachers in these new in-school staffing models are reacting positively.
- **New roles for adults open up new pathways for educators and targeted support for students.** Conventional schools have teacher assistants, study hall monitors, volunteers, and other non-teaching staff, but schools rarely capitalize on this talent for the two kinds of activities prevalent in pandemic pods: personalized learning support (such as small-group tutoring) and deep relationship building with students. Opportunity Culture designs include paraprofessional roles with schedules that make these activities much more integral. Many Opportunity Culture schools, for example, create new instructional roles on their teaching teams for advanced paraprofessionals or for aspiring teachers who work in yearlong residencies paid for within school budgets. Students can rotate through learning labs in which the paraprofessionals or residents provide small-group tutoring and form relationships with students that can propel them forward. These labs are also ideal venues for mentors, volunteers, and personnel from community organizations partnering with schools to provide even more support for students. The MCL guides the actions of everyone on the team (including volunteers) to ensure strong instruction. And in a nation where only about 20 percent of teachers are people of color, 56.3 percent of staff currently filling these new roles are people of color.<sup>23</sup>

## How to help new staffing models spread

Despite positive signs from some of these staffing arrangements, the vast majority of educators still work in a traditional one-teacher-one-classroom staffing model. Opportunity Culture designs were in about 500 schools (93 percent Title I) in 2021–22, a significant increase from the model’s first schools in 2013–14 but still a fraction

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Opportunity Culture Initiative” (working paper no. 181, CALDER Center, Arlington, VA, January 2018), <https://caldercenter.org/publications/reaching-further-and-learning-more-evaluating-public-impacts-opportunity-culture>, and Jessie Garcia, Alexander W. Wiseman, Jacob Kirksey, and Jessica Gottlieb, “Opportunity Culture Update and Program Evaluation” (program evaluation; ECISD Talent Development, Public Impact, and Texas Tech University; Lubbock, TX; September 14, 2021), <https://meetings.boardbook.org/Documents/WebViewer/1406?file=85d90391-a392-499f-b02c-e4460df99831>.

<sup>22</sup> Public Impact, “Teacher and Staff Perceptions, Spring 2022.”

<sup>23</sup> Public Impact, “Teacher and Staff Perceptions, Spring 2022.”

of schools nationally.<sup>24</sup> The other models profiled in the Christensen–Public Impact report on innovative staffing collectively appeared in nine schools at the time of the report. What would it take for alternative models to become more widespread?

Three moves seem most important:

- 1. Clear policy barriers.** Although many barriers to shifting staffing structures are barriers of the mind (see below), real policy barriers do exist in many states and districts. Some of the most common include rigid class-size restrictions, limits on paraprofessional roles, and inflexible funding systems that restrict districts' ability to repurpose public dollars attached to specific school staff positions. To be clear, many places do have the flexibility they need to make these moves, and in other places flexibility can be gained via waivers or special status. But in other places, these constraints can slow down progress, reduce the size of supplements that educators can earn, limit the entry of new talent into new roles, and more. State policymakers eager to see new staffing structures would do well to inventory their policies and make changes to open the door to these innovations.<sup>25</sup>
- 2. Promote new mindsets.** Most of us went to schools organized in a one-teacher-one-classroom fashion, and almost all educators have taught in such a system. For almost all education leaders, one-teacher-one-classroom is just “the way it is,” part of Tyack, Tobin, and Cuban’s “grammar of schooling.”<sup>26</sup> Highlighting alternatives, whether emerging from pandemic pods or in schools, could at least help prompt actors in the field to consider different possibilities. Especially when emerging alternatives are achieving positive student learning results, other student outcomes, and educator satisfaction, bringing them to life could smooth the road to change—such as through case studies, videos with educator voices, and other media.
- 3. Support transitions to new structures.** Highlighting new models alone will not create change, however. School systems serious about enacting very different staffing models have a significant job ahead of them. The challenges are technical: How should we design roles? How should compensation work? How will we recruit and select for new positions? And the challenges are adaptive: What change process will engage educators and staff effectively, leading to staffing arrangements that school personnel support? Past experience suggests this process takes investment, either to engage outside help or to employ team members who can lead a change process. State policymakers can help by providing funding for these change efforts at considerable scale, with an eye toward making it possible for all of a state’s school systems—large and small, district and charter—to explore and select new approaches to staffing. States such as North Carolina and Arkansas have led the way in supporting school

24 Public Impact, “Opportunity Culture Schools 2021–22,” Opportunity Culture Survey, Opportunity Culture Dashboard 2021–22, Opportunity Culture Initiative, accessed June 26, 2022, <https://www.opportunityculture.org/dashboard/schools>.

25 For one list of critical policy flexibilities, see Public Impact, “Seizing Opportunity at the Top II: State Policies to Reach Every Student with Excellent Teaching” (brief, Opportunity Culture Initiative, Public Impact, Chapel Hill, NC, =2014). <https://www.opportunityculture.org/2014/10/14/seizing-opportunity-at-the-top>.

26 David Tyack and William Tobin, “The ‘Grammar’ of Schooling: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?” *American Educational Research Journal* 31, no. 3 (1994): 453–79, doi:10.2307/1163222; David B. Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

systems in this fashion.<sup>27</sup> And though existing federal funding streams, such as Title I and the Teacher and School Leader Program, have been used to support these transitions, a dedicated federal funding source inviting applications for ambitious, evidence-based initiatives could make new staffing arrangements more widespread.

In addition to policy change, more research and knowledge building are essential. Although the value of team leadership and small-group tutoring are well established, many questions remain. What are the most effective ways to organize adults' time across the day and week to give students the greatest benefits? When it comes to convincing people to enter new roles (and stay), what is the relative importance of different aspects of these new staffing arrangements (pay, role design, flexibility, advancement opportunity, etc.), and what factors make it easier or more challenging for school systems and schools to put new staffing arrangements into practice and sustain them over time? The nation's schools face a critical moment: students' needs have never been greater, and schools' ability to recruit and retain employees who can meet those needs has never been more challenged. From pandemic pods to new staffing models in schools, the country has a clear opportunity to address that twin challenge by offering educators something radically different.

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27 Business for Educational Success and Transformation in NC, "Advanced Teaching Roles in North Carolina" (policy brief, BEST NC, 2022), <https://www.bestnc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Advanced-Teaching-Roles-in-North-Carolina-Meaningful-Career-Pathways-for-Education-Professionals-1.pdf>; and Arkansas Division of Elementary & Secondary Education, "Opportunity Culture Schools," accessed June 26, 2022, <https://dese.ade.arkansas.gov/Offices/educator-effectiveness/educator-support--development/opportunity-culture-schools>.



## About the Author

**Bryan C. Hassel** is the co-president of Public Impact.

## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive.



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