

EDUCATION

What is a learning pod? In the Age of COVID, it depends on whom you ask

Nancy Cutler Rockland/Westchester Journal News

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As it became clear that most kids would again be learning virtually at least some of the time in the new school year, Lower Hudson Valley parents started sharing their frustrations on social media about a disastrous spring of distance learning and social isolation and their hope for something better.

Then, the buzzword started flying around social media: pods.

Parents began cobbling together groups of kids who would share a sitter during their remote-learning days for districts on a hybrid schedule; others looked for teachers to manage academic instruction for an all-virtual option; and still others wanted to leave public school behind and create their own curriculum, in effect forming a private "micro school."

While in the world of homeschooling, "pod" stands for parent organized discovery sites; the meaning of "learning pod" in the Age of COVID is hardly static.

Kristen Crowley, an administrator for the Facebook page Pandemic pods - Rockland County NY, said she's seen pods as diverse as the families that craft them. Children's educational needs are different, Crowley said, even between her two daughters. Her 10th-grader is "super independent," and had no issues getting through the spring academically.

A social-based pod could be right for her, said Crowley, a former school administrator who now is working remotely as an IT consultant.

For her middle-schooler, though, "spring was hard. Keeping her engaged, keeping her focused. ... I can't sit next to her and support her and still make my meetings." A tutor or small pod setting may work best.

Crowley lives in Sloatsburg, which is in the Suffern school district.

In Mohegan Lake, Richard Zack's 7-year-old second-grader will be in a pod with a total of six kids enrolled in the Lakeland schools whose parents have chosen an all-remote option for instruction. While the students will be taught the Lakeland curriculum by Lakeland teachers, their families have hired a teacher who will host the group.

Emily Pytell of Pleasantville, a founder and moderator of Pandemic Pods - Westchester County, plans to choose the all-remote option in their Pleasantville district, along with the family of her son's best friend, who lives in the Croton-Harmon district. The two 7-year-olds, one entering second grade and one third, will form a mini-pod.

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"This is not typical experience" for a learning pod, Pytell said. "The main function is social." She said the kids will use headphones for live instruction from school, but can move around together at other points.

The families are figuring out field trips, like hikes and nature walks, to augment what the school is doing, to give them some enrichment and opportunities to get their energy out.

After a pause, she added that there is no typical pod experience. "We're all making it up as we go along."

And that, Crowley said, is the value of pods. Families can choose a method that works for them; find families that have the same needs, desires and standards; and create an experience that fits.

Finding a system

Zack said he ran into all kinds of challenges when figuring out how to set up their local pod. There were legal questions about insurance coverage and ethical questions about how to avoid perpetuating segregation in educational opportunities.

He leveraged that work into a website, pod.mom, that can help with shaping and managing learning pods.

Zack, an internet software entrepreneur, said the website helps manage many aspects of a pod. "These are the exact same concerns schools have but now you have to handle them yourselves as parents instead of school administrators."

"It can be hard, it can be daunting," Zack said of forming a pod. "But now that so many parents have done it, there is a path forward."

There's plenty of space in the business of pods.

Cate Han of Hastings-on-Hudson recently helped launch Learning-pods.com, an offshoot of a group of independent private schools, including Hudson Lab School in Hastings.

Learning-pods.com can help parents find a teacher and other families to create a study group for children who opt into their districts' all-virtual learning option and follow their schools' curriculum.

The other option, Han said, is for children to join a pod, but be enrolled in Hudson Lab or one of their partner schools. It's almost like homeschooling, but with the built-in oversight, curriculum and record-keeping of an established private school.

Han said Hudson Lab and its partner schools came up with the Learning-labs.com option this summer when the schools were hit with a swell of families wanting to enroll for fall. With just 45 students in its lower and middle schools, Hudson Lab simply didn't have the room, Han said, especially with physical distancing requirements.

Han said they have had great interest from both families and prospective staff and could create up to 35 pods this fall for preschool through elementary grades. Preschool classes would have six kids per pod and elementary grades could have up to nine students. Han said a host family for a pod would get a discount on tuition, which is \$10,000 to \$14,000, depending on the grade level, or about half of what Hudson Lab charges.

"We're not financial entrepreneurs," Han said. But her group knew kids needed more than hybrid, or part-time, socially distanced schooling. "One in five kids show signs of depression or regression" after spring schools went all-virtual, Han said. "We really saw a need in our community to help kids and to help parents."

Han said another pandemic-era phenomenon has increased the demand: "There's a huge influx of new families from Brooklyn and Manhattan into the river towns. They don't really know anybody."

Making it safe for everyone

With the range of pods, some worry about a range of risk.

Kids who go to school some days and then join a pod for remote learning days with kids from other cohorts could end up defeating the schools' efforts to restrict interactions among children and reduce spread of COVID-19.

Crowley said pods should take precautions. "If you are vetting your families, your working outside, etc., how is that not better than a bunch of kids getting together after school and hanging out," she said. "Six boys just went skateboarding down the block. The chances that they are in same class are slim."

Zack said his small pod poses less risk of spreading COVID-19 than kids attending hybrid school.

But for Zack and his wife, a psychiatrist, the mental health aspects are important too. "Having kids eat alone by themselves in a plexiglass container ... wearing masks all day" strains mental health, he said. "Obviously COVID has to be taken seriously, but not that there aren't other concerns as well."

Health and safety, and adequate supervision, concern Child Care Resources of Rockland Executive Director Vicki Caramante.

There are reasons child care is regulated, she said. According to the state Office of Children and Family Services, child care is defined as caring for three children for more than three hours a day, for which payment is received.

If a younger person is put in charge of a group of unrelated kids amid the pressures of distance learning, for instance, that's very different than babysitting a few nights a month.

But Caramante said she is well aware that the availability of school-age child care for distance learners is unlikely to match demand. In Rockland, for example, her agency lists 235 licensed child care providers, but only 35 are licensed for school-age care.

"I just worry that while there are so many good intentions and parents are struggling and we haven't figured out all the answers yet, I think people just have to be careful," Caramante said.

There's the potential for a violation, with fines, if the state determines an illegal child care is in operation.

Equity among schools

Creating and paying for pods will only work for families that have a certain level of economic and time flexibility.

"It's a big concern," Zack said.

Pod.mom can help set up scholarships for families seeking a pod. Zack said the need became clear when he was setting up his own kid's pod, which cost about \$1,000 a month.

While it was relatively easy to figure out how to provide scholarships for their pod, Zack said his family is new to the Mahopac area and didn't really know how to connect with families who may need support.

"Could you imagine walking around during a pandemic, asking, 'are you a low-income family?' " The Lakeland pod is now diverse, Zack said.

Han said her Learning-pods.com group is also cognizant of the equity issue surrounding pods — kids from families with fewer educational and economic resources risk falling further behind. "We actually have part of the tuition going to (a) scholarship fund," Han said.

The Learning-pods organization also is looking into forming pods with residents of school districts in high-needs communities. The kids would follow the school curriculum, Han said, but her group would provide learning and social support.

There's a lot to still figure out, Han said, including logistics and regulatory issues.

"The government needs to step in and help out too. These are extraordinary times," Han said. "Everyone needs to figure out what measures are needed that are practical."

Pytell said that pod planning has drawn out a side of social media she hadn't seen in a while.

"Even if you're not all electing to do the same thing, there are others out there, I'm really seeing it in the most positive way social media can be," Pytell said. "There's sharing helpful resources, and the idea of having community in it, how everyone is trying to figure it out on their own. Without the community engagement, this can feel very isolating."

Nancy Cutler writes about People & Policy. Click here for her latest stories. Follow her on Twitter at @nancyrockland. Support local journalism; go to lohud.com/specialoffer to find out how.