

I Run a Tutoring Company. I Get Dozens of Calls a Day About Learning Pods.

This is what the scramble to teach from home looks like.

[Brian Platzer](#) 8:00 AM ET



Elementary-school students learn outdoors in Berlin, Germany. Maja Hitij / Getty

"I can't imagine not sending my kids to school, but how can I possibly send them?"

I've spoken with well over 100 parents in the past week, and every single one has expressed some version of this dilemma. They come to me

because my business partner and I run [New York City's only tutoring company where all of the tutors are classroom teachers](#). People used to call me with a specific question. "My kid's really struggling with French. Do you have a great French teacher, please? Twice a week? In the East Village." We were able to help, and the student would improve at French (if he worked hard enough), and the kid, the tutor, and the parents would be happy. But now, as a new school year looms during a global pandemic, the parents don't know what they want.

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How could they? These parents have read some articles demanding that schools ["must"](#) reopen, and others arguing that [reopening is doomed to fail](#). With school just a couple of weeks away, many parents still don't know which days or times their kids will be attending, and many teachers haven't yet been told which days they'll need to be physically present in the classroom. Some parents are planning for the same all-virtual schooling they dealt with in the spring; others must choose between that and sending their kids to face the risks of physical classrooms. The parents who call me every day want to help their children, but they don't know how.

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Starting a couple of weeks ago, suddenly all that parents wanted to talk about were pods, hopeful that here was the solution to their problems. They have been hearing about private, parent-curated learning [pods](#) on the [radio](#). In [newspapers](#). In their local Facebook group. In much of the media coverage, pods are presented as the answer rich people have found to the dilemma of sending kids to school without actually sending kids to school. Some parents I speak with are in the .1 percent. But most are not. Lately I've spoken with speech pathologists, dental hygienists, and architects, as well as a good number of parents who are themselves teachers. They're all searching for a way to support their kids academically, or at least to make what's been intolerable a little bit less so. Thus, they ask me how pods work, and whether my company can help set one up.

Pod has become a magic word, even though its meaning is not always clear. Some public schools are ["podding"](#) their students into smaller groups. Private companies are popping up with ["microschools."](#) But for the most

part, the word *pod* refers to unofficial learning collectives organized by parents, sometimes with the help of a professional teacher or tutor.

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This is far easier said than done. Scheduling a pod is all but impossible. Parents might want to alternate pod days with school days, if their district is at least partially educating in person. If their district is on an alternating-week schedule, they might want daily pod meetings every other week. They might prefer mornings, or afternoons. And then there's the parents' work schedules to consider, as well as those of the teachers or tutors they may be hiring to run lessons. And, of course, the pod needs to be safe. But what is safe enough? Outside learning, in a yard or on an apartment rooftop, is less risky than inside, but what if it rains? If teachers are spending some time in a classroom and potentially using public transportation, does that count as safe?

Then there's the question of which families can afford or access a pod structure. It's expensive to employ an experienced educator for multiple hours, multiple days a week. In my local Bedford-Stuyvesant Facebook group, parents put out calls for "equitable pods." The idea is that when organizing a pod, parents should reach out to members of different races and economic classes, with the goal of providing access to individualized education for children from various backgrounds, and establishing lasting relationships among the families in the pods.

But the social-justice educator and writer Shayla Griffin [has written that she doesn't expect many equitable pods to come to fruition](#). Once white, middle-class parents ask themselves, *Am I willing to let my child spend the day at the home of a person I do not know well who is in a lower-class position than my family?* or *Am I willing to let my child spend the day at the*

home of a person who is an essential worker being exposed to COVID-19 at much higher levels than me?, she argues that the answer is likely to be "no," and that even when parents are willing to give it a try, a scattering of equitable pods does nothing to fix the underlying structural inequities.

Many of the mothers and fathers I've spoken with in recent weeks start to choke up a little at some point during the conversation. And sometimes I do too. I still don't know whether or not my wife and I will send our sons into the school building, or what we'll do if we choose not to. Everyone is looking for a road map, or even a hint of guidance. "What should we do?" they ask. "What's everyone else doing?"

What everyone else is doing is trying to reinvent what effective education might look like under conditions unlike any in the past century. And then to implement it immediately. It's a daunting task, and one I never expected to be faced with when we started this tutoring company.

Still, I do my best to answer. I say that though certain students may thrive online, most will benefit from some in-person work, especially if school itself is taught remotely. In-person sessions also allow for problem-solving with peers, which is hard to replicate via Zoom. Students need practice putting pencil to paper and not just fingers to keyboard. They need space and attention to talk through their thinking. They need dynamic face-to-face interactions (and mask-to-mask will suffice). So finding a few hours a week for in-person education with other kids is a good idea, if at all possible. It may not always be.

When safety concerns or budgetary constraints preclude in-person podding, virtual pods are considerably more effective than regular online teaching. Having five or fewer 6-year-olds in a Zoom room versus the typical 20 is often the difference between a happy, interactive child and a

frustrated, disengaged one. Fewer kids means more opportunity for each one to participate in discussions. And whenever possible, synchronous learning is preferable to asynchronous learning. When kids know that no one's watching them, they're much more likely to zone out, whereas active learning with a live teacher—even one on a screen—holds their attention and makes them that much more accountable. Finally, virtual pods remove many of the barriers that make podding inequitable. Though they still rely on access to the internet and a laptop or a tablet, virtual pods avoid obstacles such as the risks of commuting and the mixing of families who have different levels of exposure to COVID-19.

"So when can we start?" parents inevitably ask at the end of our call, and I respond that we can't yet know for sure. I plan to touch base again with the parents who want my help setting up a pod once their kids and our teachers receive preliminary schedules. I hope they leave our conversations feeling like they have a better sense of their options, but I know I haven't been able to fully reassure any of them. Because all any of us wants is certainty, and at this moment, there's no such thing.

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