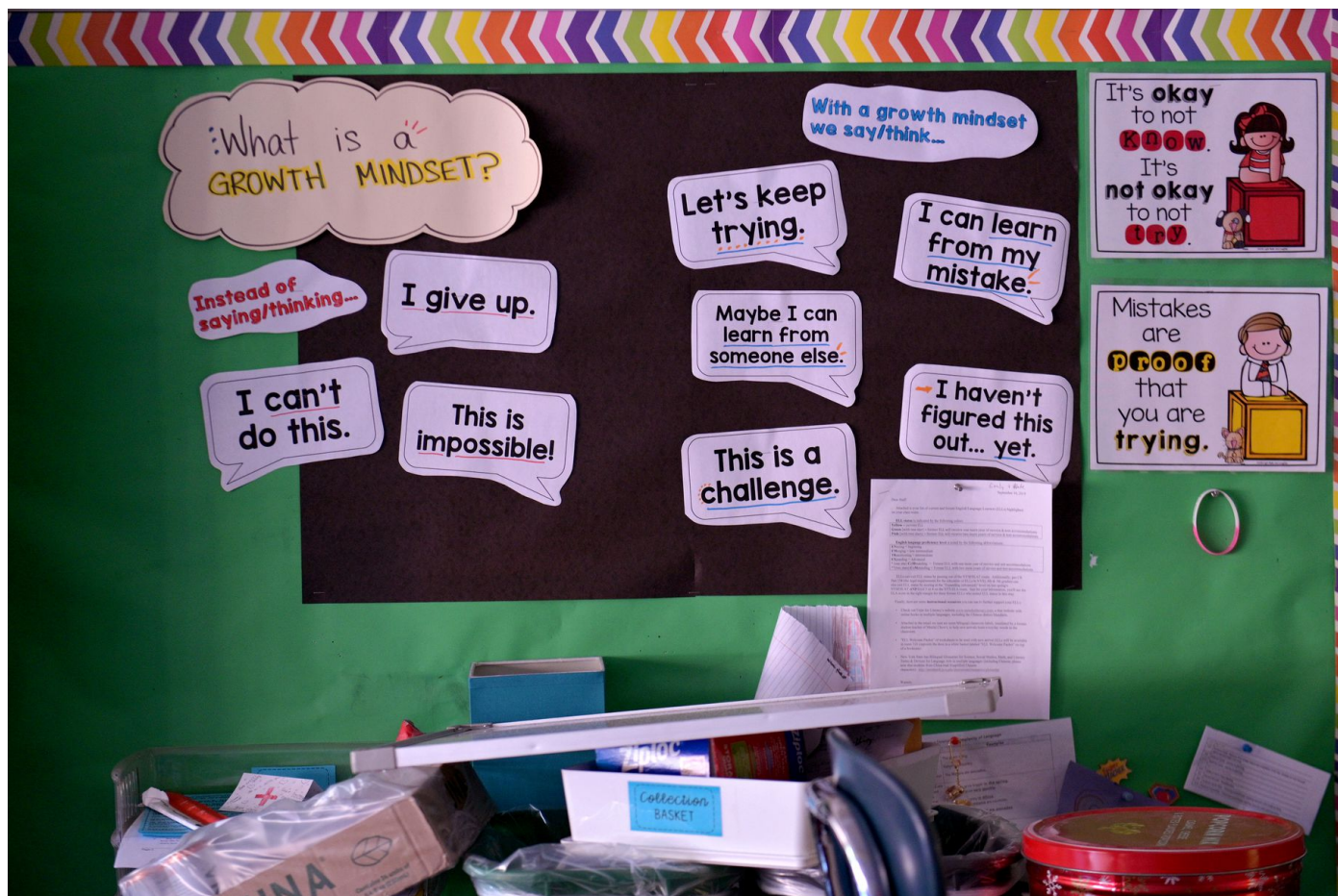


Pandemic learning “pods” don’t have to be just for the rich

How to make education more equitable during the Covid-19 crisis.

[Anna North](#) Jul 28, 2020, 3:00pm EDT



A poster board in a classroom shows traces of teaching, lessons and projects before school was closed to students at Yung Wing School P.S. 124 in New York City due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Michael Loccisano/Getty Images

It’s almost August. School starts in many parts of the country in less than a month. And the [coronavirus pandemic](#) is still raging, with [Florida hospitals full](#) and [18 states setting single-day records](#) last week.

The result is that [many schools can’t open safely](#), and many districts have

announced that they will be continuing remote learning into the fall. That's left parents — many of whom are worried about their kids' ability to learn online, not to mention their own ability to keep their jobs with no child care — scrambling for solutions.

One that's gotten a lot of attention in recent days is the idea of "pods," in which families bring their kids together in small groups to get some of the socialization and other benefits of in-person instruction. The idea is appealing to a lot of parents, who have been signing up for neighborhood pods on Facebook and elsewhere, but it also raises concerns about equity, especially as some parents with disposable income are [hiring private tutors](#) to lead their pods and even considering renting out private space for them.

In ordinary times, at least, "every child has an equal opportunity to go to school," Ty Lewis, CEO of the Educationally Speaking Center for Learning, an Atlanta nonprofit, told Vox. But now not every child has an equal opportunity to be in a pod — low-income parents can't afford to pay a tutor or rent a space, and if pods form mostly among neighbors, they risk further amplifying the kinds of residential segregation that already exist in the American school system.

However, there may be ways to extend the benefits of small-group, in-person instruction beyond those families with the money to pay for a private pod. At least one public school, for example, the Rooftop School in San Francisco, is organizing its own pods in an effort to ensure equity. "We want our kids spending their time in cohorts that reflect Rooftop's whole student body," Rooftop principal Nancy Bui told Vox in an email.

Some school districts, including San Francisco, are planning ways to implement pod-like instruction on a larger scale. And some nonprofits are stepping in with resources to help low-income kids get more individualized attention — and help parents get child care. But many say that to succeed on a broader scale, these efforts will need government money behind them.

“In order to do a lot of the practices that are going to most help our vulnerable students, schools and states and districts are gonna need more funding,” Terra Wallin, associate director for P-12 accountability and special projects at the Education Trust, told Vox. And so far, Congress hasn’t been willing to provide it — leaving many families, as so often during this pandemic, to figure things out on their own.

Some well-to-do families are forming “pods” and hiring outside teachers

Parents have been talking among themselves about pods for weeks, if not months, with some [joining Facebook groups](#) specifically devoted to pod formation. But the idea got more public attention in mid-July when [Washington Post reporters Laura Meckler and Hannah Natanson](#) reported on affluent parents’ efforts to “import teachers to their homes.” One Manhattan mother who spoke to the Post said her group of parents was considering renting a studio apartment and hiring a private teacher to instruct their children in the fall. “Everything is on the table,” she said.

Such an approach raises concerns about educational inequality, as Meckler and Natanson note. The [shift to online learning during the pandemic](#) has already taken a disproportionate toll on students living in low-income neighborhoods, and the creation of pods with paid teachers threatens to widen that gap, since lower-income families are unlikely to be able to afford to pitch in for a teacher — a cost that some parents expect to run more than \$1,000 per month.

If some students get the benefit of private tutoring while others are still struggling to even get internet access or a quiet place to study, “we are going to see a multiplying effect” on educational inequality, L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy, a professor of the sociology of education at New York University, told Vox. “Certain sets of families are going to get a hyper boost,” while for others, “their ability to learn and grow is going to be

dampened more and more."

Moreover, some parents are reportedly pulling kids out of public school to put them in private pods, which could decrease public school funding since [many schools are funded based on enrollment](#). That could leave even less money for public schools to educate students whose families can't afford to leave for pods, an especially problematic outcome during a pandemic when local budgets are being slashed and schools are facing new costs, from additional cleaning to providing devices and other programs to help with distance learning. "Your school may be planning things that are supplemental resources for all kids that they're not able to actually meet because now they have fewer families there," Lewis-McCoy said.

But wealthy families aren't the only ones thinking about pods

Due to concerns like these, pods have become a subject of national controversy, with many painting them as yet another way for white, wealthy families to segregate themselves from the school system. One mom told the Post she would quit her job before hiring someone to teach her child, saying, "It just seems really privileged."

Hiring an outside teacher is indeed out of reach for most families, even if they pool resources. But coming together to share child care and education duties isn't a new idea, or one unique to white, privileged families. Parents who are essential workers have been sharing care among family, friends, and neighbors since the pandemic began so they can work outside the home, Lewis-McCoy said. These workers have "been using communities of care to try to work with their kids to make sure homework got done."

And even among parents who can work from home, not everyone is thinking of a pod as a substitute for public school. Prudence Carter, the dean of the Graduate School of Education at UC Berkeley, began discussing the idea

earlier this year with a neighbor whose daughter usually takes the bus with Carter's son. But she wasn't planning on pulling her child out of school, or hiring a tutor.

"My version was actually parents supporting each other," she said. That's what families did in the working-class and lower-middle-class neighborhoods where she grew up: "You drew on your network."

Still, not everyone has access to a network of other parents who have the time and flexibility to share care and schooling. And if parents get together in pods with their neighbors, "because of economic and racial segregation, those pods won't be very diverse," Carter said.

The question, then, becomes about how to make sure the benefits that pods provide, from shared child care to socialization for kids, are accessible to all, and that pods don't end up intensifying the existing inequalities in American education.

The answer, many say, is public support — from schools, districts, and state and local governments.

Some schools are already organizing their own pods or other small-group solutions. "When a group of parents approached me, suggesting that the school divide kids into pods rather than letting them form haphazardly, my assistant principal and I thought that made a lot more sense from an equity perspective," Bui, the Rooftop School principal, told Vox. "We want all our kids to benefit from any sort of pod program."

The school is still working out the logistics, but Bui says that staff are dividing up class lists into groups of three or four students based on a variety of considerations: "We're looking at the gender that the student identifies, parental involvement level, and a host of other factors necessary to create groupings that reflect our whole student body."

Some cities are setting up programs on a larger scale. For example, San Francisco, where public schools will start remote-only in the fall, is [setting up 40 “learning hubs”](#) at libraries and recreation centers where low-income kids, those in foster care, and those learning English as a second language can come to get in-person instruction and support. New York City, where schools are slated to open on a hybrid model, will open child care centers for 100,000 of the city’s 1.1 million students in the fall, [Mayor Bill de Blasio announced earlier this month](#).

Elsewhere, such as in [Culver City, California](#), parents are pressing school districts for assistance in setting up pods in the fairest way possible, Lewis-McCoy said. “They’re saying, ‘We know families are going to do pods — how can you actually help us address some of the equity questions we have?’”

Though they are not without risk, pods can make sense from a public health perspective, too — and some experts are advising schools to use a version of the system even when kids go back to class. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, for example, recently recommended that students at school be kept together in small groups. “This helps reduce exposure to large groups of people and allows for better social distancing,” as well as making it easier for teachers to work with students on hand-washing and mask use, Saskia Popescu, an infectious disease epidemiologist in Arizona, told Vox in an email.

Outside the school system, meanwhile, nonprofits are stepping in to offer in-person instruction and child care. The YMCA, which has operated emergency child care centers for the kids of essential workers throughout the pandemic, is now expanding its offerings in places where school will be virtual in the fall. YMCAs in Houston, Charlotte, Kansas City, and elsewhere are setting up learning labs, where students can go during the day while parents work, Heidi Brasher, senior director of innovation for YMCA of the USA, told Vox. There, staff will supervise them and help them with their

schoolwork, with some YMCAs hiring additional teachers and other education professionals for the effort.

The cost to parents will likely vary by location, but the YMCA will provide financial aid based on parents' income and other family circumstances to make sure that low-income students have access to the programs. "Equity is a lens that we use every day, but even more so now because of the disparities that have been really exacerbated during this time," Brasher said.

In order to truly address those disparities, districts and policymakers will have to look beyond individual choices families are making and at larger structural changes that can help the students most vulnerable to learning loss in the pandemic, Wallin of the Education Trust told Vox.

Larger initiatives districts and localities have tried include a program in Tennessee in which college students provide one-on-one remote tutoring for K-12 students. Such programs could be offered remotely elsewhere, or in person individually or in small groups, to students in need, Wallin said.

"There are ways to think more innovatively about how to get supports, but you can't do those if you don't keep in the forefront of your mind that what you're trying to do is get supports to the students who need it the most," she explained. "If you're planning around those who already have access to resources, you're going to miss a lot of opportunities to actually help close some of the opportunity gaps that we know are getting even larger."

But all these solutions will cost money

But whether it's one-on-one tutoring, child care at a YMCA or other center, or even just administrative help setting up pods in a more equitable way, all these solutions require one thing: money.

"There's a great need for federal funding," Wallin said. And that funding needs to target schools and districts with large numbers of low-income

students and others who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Many such districts still haven't seen their funding bounce back from the 2008 recession, Wallin said, and will need proactive attention to make sure they don't see further cuts in the current economic crisis.

The YMCA also receives federal and local funding, and has joined with other child care providers in calls for additional funding to the child care industry. Child care is "needed for our parents, it's needed for our kids, and so we're all sharing that message together," Brasher said.

But so far, Congress has not responded to the calls of schools or child care advocates for more support. Proposals for a [\\$50 billion bailout for the child care industry](#) — the amount experts say is needed to keep child care providers going through the pandemic and into the future — have yet to pass. And the money [schools say they need to reopen safely](#), let alone close the gaps in learning that have widened as a result of the pandemic, hasn't been forthcoming either.

The result could be that while many schools, districts, and nonprofits are doing what they can, too many low-income families could be left with just as little support in the fall as they had in the spring — while wealthier families have the resources to set up their own private schools in apartments across town.

And leaving families to go it alone is exactly the wrong approach, experts say. "We are, as a community, all in a really tough space," Brasher said, "and it's going to take a communal effort really to solve some of these issues."

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