



CCOSA

The Cooperative Council for
Oklahoma School Administration

PANDEMIC PODS, MICRO-SCHOOLS AND EQUITY

**WHAT SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
SHOULD KNOW**

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COVID-19 has opened the door for innovation and creativity in how kids receive an education. Some ideas, however, may be innovative but lack equity. School leaders have the complex task of designing flexible learning opportunities within their schools that serve all students.

At the same time, parents are being drawn to seemingly attractive “alternatives” that have the potential to dismantle the equitable learning opportunities that make our country’s public education different from any system in the world. Indeed, educational equity serves as the very bedrock of our democracy.

WHAT IS A PANDEMIC POD?

Pandemic Pods and Micro-Schools are two relatively new ideas that are gaining popularity among parents who are seeking an educational solution for their child when either:

- they do not feel it is safe to send their child to school or
- when their public school is not open for their child to attend.

These two options consist of a group of parents agreeing to form a “learning pod” for their children at a home, church or other neighborhood facility. Some pods may only meet virtually. This does allow students to have some interaction with peers. The parents either share the cost of a caretaker for the kids to assist them in completing their school’s virtual assignments, or some are even sharing the cost of a teacher.

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EXAMPLE: LEARNING POD

Marissa Leitner, a mother of three and a school psychologist who lives in Culver City, California, where schools have announced they will be entirely remote in the fall, doesn't think an internet-based curriculum would serve her kindergartner well.

“I don't believe that the Zoom experience for that age group is appropriate,” she said. “Kids at this age really need that multimodal sensory learning.”

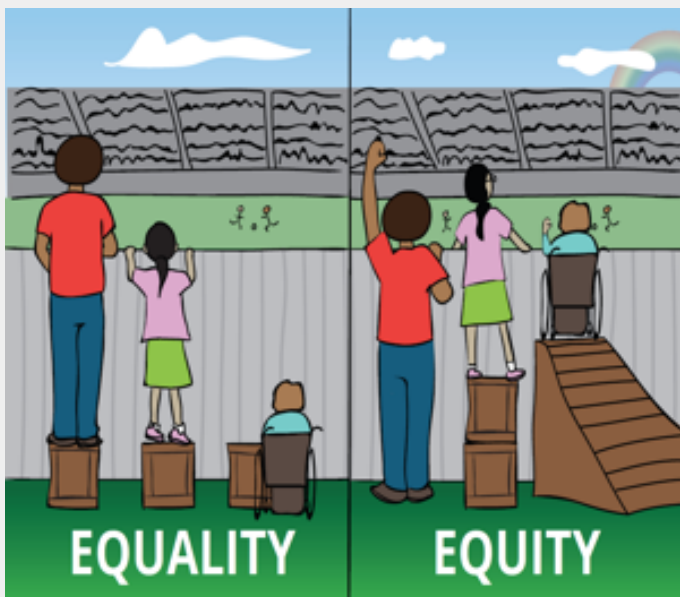
So Leitner and her brother-in-law, Daniel Zakowski, who also has three kids, are organizing a pod involving three or four families in which they will hire a teacher during the mornings and perhaps a college student to help out in the afternoons. (Moyer, 2020)

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EQUITY

Equity is a major concern for public school leaders as parents begin seeking out solutions such as pandemic pods. Students from families with more resources will have advantages over those with fewer resources. Public Schools are designed to ensure equity while pandemic learning pods are less likely to provide learning supports and be inclusive for kids who need those supports.



“What most families do is, they start from a place of self-interest. They say, ‘all right, I’ve got to figure out what’s best for my family, got to figure out what’s best for my child.’ And the families who have greater sets of resources usually use those resources to hoard educational opportunities,” Dr. Lewis-McCoy said. “The truth of the matter is, we’re staring down the barrel at something that is going to divide and widen the gaps between kids.” (Moyer, 2020)

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FUNDING

Funding pandemic pods currently falls on the participating parents. However, most will tap into virtual education opportunities provided by their local school or statewide virtual programs. Some parents share the cost of a teacher to work with their children within their pod.

School choice advocates are already flooding talk radio calling for vouchers and/or tax credits to cover the costs parents incur for curriculum and teachers for their learning pod.

Some parents argue that by pulling their kids out of public schools to join pods, they are doing a public service because they leave more resources for kids who stay in school, but that's "not how education finance works," said L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy, Ph.D., an educational sociologist who studies educational inequality at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development. "The idea that if I pull out my child, it'll be better for the district, is quite the opposite," he said. (Moyer, 2020)



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WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

CCOSA members have been leaders in developing high quality blended learning options for schools in Oklahoma. Oklahoma school leaders and teachers must continue to strive to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. Sitting back is not an option. We must lead through the change.

Here are some ways to get involved and help lead “learning pods” within your district:

- Accept that pods are happening and seize the moment to get them right.
- Identify students who are virtual and meet with interested parents and discuss how the school can facilitate their pod via the school’s virtual education program. Remember that parents read body language and tone.
- Take this opportunity to educate parents about equity, social and emotional learning (SEL), trauma, and considerations for students with special needs.
- Locate key community partners that might be able to safely host an in-person pod and follow school safety protocols.
- Keep in-person pods small (5-9 students).
- Strive to ensure that low-income and special needs students are included in pods.
- Utilize school staff already teaching virtually to facilitate and oversee the instructional program.

In reference to the school’s role in guiding and facilitating emerging learning pods, Tara Peña, Denver Adams 12 Executive Director of Middle Schools notes:

 It’s not “Can we do this? It’s, “we need to do this.”
(Schimke and Aldrich, 2020) 

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