

SCHOOL-AGE LEARNING PODS: IDENTIFIED CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The following data was gathered in September 2020 from traditionally after-school programs that became early adopters and implementers of school-age learning pods offered during the school day and out of school time (OST). The providers that participated in this survey have been operating pods since the 2020-21 school year commenced. This brief details common challenges and recommendations identified by these programs. It highlights five areas of greatest concern: Staffing, Daily Operations, Communication, Wraparound Supports, and Technology and Equipment.

1. STAFFING

Programs are expressing need for increased staffing, to maintain lower adult:child ratios, particularly for younger children. Programs are also in need of more training and professional development opportunities for staff.

2. DAILY OPERATIONS

Lack of aligned schedules for children within a learning pod and the need for more movement breaks are the biggest operations challenges identified by providers.

3. COMMUNICATION

Schools' restricting teacher communication solely to parents makes it difficult for learning pod teachers to support children.

4. WRAPAROUND SUPPORT

Provision of wraparound supports, especially nutrition, at learning pod sites is critical.

5. TECHNOLOGY & EQUIPMENT

Providers express common need for increased internet bandwidth, wireless routers, and general technology supplies to support students' ability to participate equitably and seamlessly in virtual learning.



STAFFING

CHALLENGES

- Programs do not have sufficient staff to adequately support children's opportunity to learn. There is substantial need to increase staff capacity, to help with coordinating children's differing schedules.
- Learning pods catering to younger children, particularly in kindergarten and first grade, need multiple pod teachers, in addition to support staff. This age group cannot read yet, so they require substantial support to follow their school schedules and to complete assignments.
- Programs need access to free rapid testing or surveillance testing, to address staff absences due to Covid-19 exposure or symptoms, and to sustain proper staffing ratios for learning pods.



"We have lost over 48 percent of our staff since this started in March, it is a real issue to keep staff right now."

"Can the 'system' find ways to reward these incredible young adults? Credit if they are matriculated? Something for their resume akin to Americorps? An extra stipend?"

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increased staffing to support lower adult:child ratios, especially for pods catering to children in lower grades.
- School provision of individualized support for children with special needs who otherwise would receive these services in their public school setting. Absent this, financial support to hire staff and/or to sustain partnerships with organizations equipped to provide such services.
- Provision of funding to support staff training and professional development opportunities.

CHALLENGES

- Lack of alignment in children's schedules across the different schools they are attending (even when those schools are part of the same district) has created a need for extra staff in order to fully enroll learning pods. Absent additional staff, programs are unable to enroll to full capacity because of coordination barriers: pod teachers are not able to coordinate differing schedules regarding, for example, school start times (which can range anywhere from 7:40am to 9am); to movement breaks (so that one child's movement break does not create a distraction for other children in the pod); to coverage of staff lunch breaks. Maintaining pods of 8-13 children requires lead pod teachers to have multiple support staff.
- Students do not have enough recess time, break time, and movement times built into their schedules, a deficiency that is resulting in increased behavior challenges. Additionally, current schedule variabilities prevent pod teachers from being able to implement best practices for those sensory breaks and movement times that are available, because they need to supervise and support the students in the pod who are not in their scheduled movement segment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage district schools to support greater alignment of school day schedules within districts, certainly within schools. For example, districts/schools should standardize timing for breaks and lunch.
- For younger children, consider scheduling virtual learning only during the morning hours, and include multiple movement breaks within those hours. Lunch time should also be aligned. Pod providers suggest that children should then be released from formal virtual learning, to promote outside time, with extracurricular activities, led by pod teachers and support staff.
- Providers note that synchronous schedules would enable pod teachers to use one large screen, with all children participating in that manner - a preferred method of instruction for pods. Support staff would then be able to provide one-on-one support to those students requiring additional help. Synchronizing schedules would allow programs to more effectively construct pods around singular classrooms or grade-levels.

*"8:30-3:30
everyday in front
of a screen is just
not feasible for
kids. There has
been an uptick in
behavior issues."*

*"Parents report
children crying at
home and not
wanting to come to
'school.'"*

COMMUNICATION

CHALLENGES

- The current required chain of communication is pod teacher to director, director to parent, parent to school teacher and then school teacher to parent, parent to director, director to pod teacher, and, finally, pod teacher to student. Thus, in order to support a child who has questions or needs, pod teachers must go through a highly complicated chain of communication.
- Communication only between school teachers and families has made it challenging for learning pod programs to support students logging into virtual classes and completing necessary assignments. Absent direct communication between school teachers and the learning pod teachers directly, it is difficult for pod programs to track what students need to do with respect to assignments and student schedules.
- Students are often given assignments or tasks that assume an at-home learning environment. There are significant challenges associated with this disconnect between curriculum structures and the reality of learning pod environments.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- In compliance with parents' privacy and confidentiality preferences, allow for direct communication between pod teachers and children's school teachers.
- As appropriate, include pod teachers in written communications between school teachers and parents that regard classroom schedules and assignments.
- Enable learning pod teachers to ask questions directly to school teachers on students' behalf, regarding log-in information and assignments.

"We are having difficulty with communication between the teacher and us. The children are on headphones and we cannot tell what they have missed or haven't done. The children ask us for help and we can't help unless we interrupt a teacher's lesson. We are also having difficulties with teachers thinking that children know how to use all of the Google classroom apps, and how to upload work onto Google Classroom, when many of these kids still can't read."

WRAPAROUND SUPPORT

CHALLENGES

- Lunch from school districts is only accessible if picked up from the school district in person. Many pod programs do not have sufficient staff coverage to make these pick-ups.
- Some children with special needs are not receiving the supports from school districts that they otherwise would have received in a school setting. Filling this void, to provide these children with individualized support, has strained learning pod staff capacity.
- Children with special needs who *are* receiving services from the district do so in a manner that requires them to be logged-off their primary “classroom” and then logged-in to a different “classroom.” Supporting children making this transition also requires additional learning pod staffing.
- Many families with school-aged children do not self-disclose or self-submit IEP’s to learning pod programs. Thus, many programs initially did not - or still do not - have knowledge of these needs.
- Pod teachers and support staff are in need of training to learn appropriate behavioral responses for children who are not adapting well to remote learning environments or who are having trouble concentrating or participating in classes.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- School lunches must be delivered each day to learning pod sites.
- District schools should provide in-person support to children with special needs, at learning pod sites.

"Students' only access to school lunches is if our staff go and pick them up. We don't have enough staff to do so - because who will be supervising and supporting the kids?"

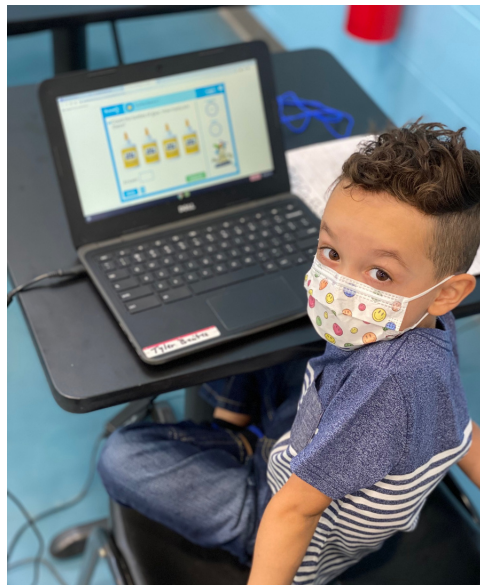
"Children receiving special services are being 'taken out' of the virtual classroom for 'services.' This requires logging them out of one 'classroom' and logging them into another on. This requires another point of contact, another communication plan, and learning another set of platforms and programs."

"Children with special needs receive no in-person services at all when remote."

TECHNOLOGY & EQUIPMENT

CHALLENGES

- Programs express need for increased internet bandwidth and wireless signal in all buildings. This deficiency is especially problematic in older buildings and basements.
- Programs are in need of financial resources for tech support, as the cost of additional internet and routers is high.
- Programs report that they do not have enough equipment to go around, particularly when children leave technology items at home. There is particular need for laptops, laptop cases, materials bins, wireless headphones with microphones, chargers, extension cords, and outlet strips.



"Kids that come only a couple of days a week don't always bring their chargers or headsets. We don't have enough spare items to go around for everyone, when they forget."

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Financially support programs' ability to secure necessary access to internet bandwidth and additional wireless routers.
- Programs would benefit from student ability to access virtual learning from one uniform platform, optimally within districts and, at minimum, within schools.
- Training for both school teachers and pod teachers to become fluent in the different virtual learning platforms that students are being asked to use.
- Financially support pod programs' ability to procure a reserve of technology, including laptops, laptop cases, materials bins, wireless headphones with microphones, chargers, extension cords, and outlet strips.