

We Can't Stop Pandemic Pods. But We Can Fight For All Kids To Be Included

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- [Kate Manning Kennedy](#)
- [Liam Kerr](#)



Nola Eaton, 6, and her brother Cam, 9, take part in home schooling on March 18, 2020 in New Rochelle, New York. (John Moore/Getty Images)

Parents coming to terms with remote learning this fall are facing a new conundrum: the pandemic pod. These private “pods” could be a way to save the school year — that is, if you can afford it.

Justifiably, pandemic pods are inspiring outrage. Headlines are blaring that pods will [increase inequality](#) by creating solutions that are unavailable to all students. While the pod phenomenon will likely deepen the inequities that plague our education system, it would be a fruitless effort to try to prevent them. The more important question is: What do we do for the pod-less?

Pods can solve four major problems for families: childcare, health risk mitigation, social and emotional support and academic advancement. By putting together private pods for school-aged children, wealthy families are not only paying for this essential quartet of services, they are purchasing predictability. Families offering low-income students a “pod scholarship” is a noble effort, but it isn’t a realistic fix.

Rather than shame families for creating pods, the public sector needs to replicate their most valuable aspects and make them accessible to all families, no matter their income. And fast.

First, the basics. Low-income families should have access to the tools that make remote learning viable: high-speed internet, home computers, language services for non-native English speakers and assurance that children who regularly eat at school, will continue to receive meals. Putting the infrastructure in place to mitigate the failure of remote learning for low-income and minority students will help enable participation and make academic advancement possible.

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Second, a child bonus. Directing cash to families would make it more realistic for parents to afford childcare, potentially in a small pod of siblings or in conjunction with a consistent group of classmates who live in the neighborhood. This allows children to participate in remote learning and also allows for parents to work. Research suggests that women have largely [shouldered the burden](#) of childcare during the pandemic, and they may be forced to further reduce their work hours, if they haven’t already.

Even in normal times, [cash assistance](#) to families boosts student outcomes. A few thousand dollars adds two months of academic learning with benefits that persist through college and into adulthood; studies show it can also aid mental health.

Massachusetts cannot print money or incur debt for such expenses, but Congress already gave qualifying families \$500 per child and future federal stimulus packages could direct billions more to families and government bodies in the commonwealth. The Democratic-led House passed a relief package in mid-May that proposes an additional [\\$3 trillion in spending](#), while the Republican-led [Senate's plan](#), unveiled in late July, calls for about a third of that. Any eventual package should direct some funds to parents in the form of direct payments.

Finally, we should borrow from proven programs. Districts can look to tested models that have boosted student wellbeing and academic achievement, and show promise in helping students adapt them to this new environment. Massachusetts is home to several such programs.

Lawrence Public Schools demonstrated more gains than any district in the state on several measures between 2011 and 2016, and Harvard researchers attributed much of the academic improvement to “Acceleration Academies.” These focused week-long sessions are taught by teachers who receive extra compensation and recognition to work with students performing below grade level, as many students will be this year. The flexibilities inherent in this model can be adapted to either remote learning or to meet the need to make large gains during a shorter period of in-school time.

The Brighton-born MATCH Corps pioneered a consistent, small-group tutoring model with such outstanding results that it was recruited into [other cities](#) and is currently being adapted by other states to combat pandemic learning loss. Massachusetts has the [best educated population](#) in the country — we also have the [highest rate of unemployment](#). We're primed to deploy such a program at significant scale. After all, AmeriCorps was modeled after the City Year program begun in Boston, and one of its founders has been advocating for 500,000 [new positions](#) through the pending Pandemic Response and Opportunity Through National Service Act.

Pods are a symptom of systemic problems that the pandemic has laid bare.

Last spring, at the onset of the pandemic, a [lack of consistency and connection](#) in education led to increased inequality. Public school students were already less than half as likely to report daily communication or video conferencing with teachers compared to private school students. A representative [survey](#) of 3,300 teens found that during the pandemic, 3 in 10 didn't feel connected at all to school adults, and 4 in 10 reported no adult from school had offered social or emotional support. Consistent, personalized connections are essential to combat the challenges we're facing now.

The way pandemic pods are being implemented currently — by and for those with the financial resources to create them — only exacerbates the most extreme inequities in our society. Parents who can't work from home and teach their children, or pay someone to do it for them, will lose out in the short- and long-term. Meanwhile, children in pandemic pods are poised to return to school ahead of their peers. Pods are a symptom of systemic problems that the pandemic has laid bare.

It's not too late to implement solutions to meet the challenges remote learning imposes on all families in Massachusetts. A universal response will build a stronger bridge to an eventual return to the classroom, and will light a path for a more equitable future, this school year and beyond.

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