

PODS IN ACTION:

Neighborhood North

A MUSEUM OF PLAY

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KEY LESSONS:

1

A productive collaboration with the local school district—absent in many learning pods elsewhere—proved valuable in recruiting students and providing effective support.

2

A lack of alignment among staff about the mission and purpose of the learning pods hindered operations.

3

An effort to hire staff who shared students' racial and ethnic backgrounds helped the pods provide a welcoming and effective learning environment and ultimately benefited students of all races.

KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:
BEAVER FALLS,
PA

15-20

STUDENTS
SERVED PER SITE

2

NUMBER OF
SITES

Neighborhood North, a play-oriented community museum in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, had just opened when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and schools closed. The museum's mission is to increase educational equity in the community. According to Neighborhood North staff, many students did not have access to Internet connections or computers necessary for online learning and were home alone because their essential-worker parents did not have access to childcare.

Thus, Neighborhood North leaders immediately saw a need to support students at risk of falling behind in school with academic learning and social and emotional development and support families by providing childcare.

“When schools closed down in March, many of our learners actually just did not go to school,” one staff member said. “[Students] didn’t have [Internet] access, they didn’t have computers, and many of our families were working, so we learned that our Kindergarten, first, and second graders might’ve been home alone for that time because their parents were working.”

Inspired by the national trend in small learning communities that sprung up during the pandemic, Neighborhood North staff quickly met with their board and funders, who agreed to rapidly shift existing resources to a learning pod.

Neighborhood North administrators collaborated with the local school district and a local faith-based organization that provided summer and out-of-school-time programming to organize two learning pods for children in grades K-5. The faith-based organization provided staff and physical space to house one of the pods. The second pod was held at Neighborhood North's brick-and-mortar building. Neighborhood North staff and staff from the faith-based organization supervised students' online learning and provided enrichment experiences in the arts, gardening, and creative play. The local school district referred students in need of extra support to the pod, provided access to students' instructional materials and online learning platforms, and helped Neighborhood North staff administer benchmark testing.

According to parents, the pod provided normalcy, academic, and social and emotional support for students and essential childcare that enabled them to work.

Although this approach enabled rapid and low-cost start up in a crisis and may have benefitted students' academic learning, academic confidence, social and emotional development, and other student connections, limited support and training for staff created challenges and may have limited the academic impact. The pod struggled to hire and retain staff and to align on the daily student schedule. Clearly communicating a mission to community partners, pod staff, and families might have mitigated some of these challenges.

Designed to Support Diverse Students

Beaver Falls, PA, is a small rural community where many students are experiencing poverty. Students in the district are 78 percent white, 13 percent black, 1 percent Asian, and 6 percent mixed or other races.¹ About 15 percent of students have a disability and about 80 percent of adults have less than a four-year college degree. According to our interviews with Neighborhood North staff, economic opportunities in the area are limited and the population was declining as a result. Recruiting and retaining teachers was a particular challenge.

The Neighborhood North learning pod was open from spring of 2020 through spring of 2021, when local schools reopened for full-time in-person instruction. The pod was open two to four days per week for four hours per day and served children in grades K-5. There were about

¹ <https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard/4203630>

15–20 children enrolled in each of the two pods at a time; children came and went, and the pod served about 88 children in total during the time it was open.

The pod was more diverse than the surrounding school district. About 45 percent of students identified as Black, about 40 percent as White, and about 15 percent as bi- or multiracial. About one-quarter of pod students were female and about three-quarters were male. Each of the two pods had about two regular staff members (generally one supervisor and one staff person) and a fluctuating number of volunteer staff.

Neighborhood North leaders prioritized hiring staff that reflected the diversity of pod students. Most volunteer staff were college students affiliated with the local faith-based organization, and some were parents of pod students and other community members.

According to most staff, the pods focused on supporting students' academic learning and social and emotional development. This entailed supervising students' online learning, helping them complete classroom and homework assignments in collaboration with their teachers, and age-appropriate enrichment and social activities to enable their social and emotional development. Help with assignments was generally provided by pod staff, while enrichment activities—including gardening, music, science experiments, and visual arts—were provided by other partners (e.g., 4H) and by pod staff.

Implementation and staffing challenges hindered pod operations

In our interviews, it was clear that the vision of the learning pod was not always executed in the way it was intended. Some leaders, staff, and families with whom we spoke believed the pods were intended to supplement school. These individuals told us that they expected that students would focus on completing their school assignments and homework and that staff would provide help with academic content as well as supervision to ensure assignments were completed. They also described a structured daily schedule in which staff were actively involved in helping students master academic content, facilitating structured enrichment activities to support social and emotional development, and supervising free play.

Other families and staff described a much less structured experience in which most of the day focused on free play with limited staff engagement, fewer structured enrichment activities, and less focus on academic learning.

Each of the staff we spoke with discussed the challenges related to this lack of alignment. Some staff felt frustrated that they were putting in the effort to encourage students to complete their assignments, help them learn content they were struggling with, and plan structured activities, while others told students they didn't have to finish their assignments and didn't engage to help students develop social skills during free play. A few staff members mentioned that some parents were frustrated when their child didn't complete all their schoolwork during the pod.

One staff member was particularly concerned about students' slow progress on academic work and worried that the lack of focus on academic learning encouraged by some staff could cause students not to complete essential assignments and to fall even further behind as a result.

According to Neighborhood North leaders, staff composition and experience may have contributed to the variation in schedule, structure, and focus on academic content. Neighborhood North leaders, citing issues of equity and a desire to have staff who looked like the students attending the pod, told us that they envisioned staff with a mix of qualifications and experience. Ideally, some staff would be trained educators and some would be community members not necessarily trained as teachers. In practice, the staff and volunteers

affiliated with the faith-based organization were experts in childcare and out-of-school-time programming, but most were not trained teachers. Pod supervisors, who were responsible for managing the pod operations, schedule, and guiding staff, were trained educators.

Although there were many benefits to a mix of certified and noncertified teaching staff, which we discuss in the next section, there were also many challenges. According to the staff we interviewed, the rapid start up meant that there was little time to align on the purpose of the pods and set consistent expectations for a daily schedule. Staff and volunteers also rotated to the different pod sites almost daily, and the supervisory structure and expected tasks were different at each location. The limited time and resources to train staff on tasks supervisors expected, such as planning a structured enrichment activity or providing academic support, meant that staff who were not trained educators had few resources to draw on.

As one staff member told us,

“The supervisor and I were the only ones that really did a good job at helping the kids with their schoolwork. If they [other staff] weren’t given a specific task to do, they would sit and be on their phone or something. I didn’t have a lot of confidence in their teaching ability. But they were fresh out of the local high school. I don’t know that they understood the importance of the work they were doing, and they weren’t really old enough to know about work ethic.”

In addition, the pods were intended to be temporary, and, due to funding limitations, staff positions were not highly paid. Beaver Falls, PA, is also a small community, in which there were not many certified teachers seeking work. Thus, Neighborhood North had difficulty attracting certified teachers to staff the pods. The nonvolunteer staff we interviewed reported that all of these factors—low pay, fluctuating schedule, mixed messages about the purpose and daily schedule, and varying supervisor expectations—contributed to inconsistent staff attendance, particularly among volunteers.”

Despite these challenges, the leaders and staff we interviewed believed the learning pods were a net positive and helped students and their families.

“I think that there were a lot of problems, and part of it is due to maybe lack of funds, or having to put stuff together last minute, because it’s a pandemic and people are figuring things out. . . . I think the learning pods have done more good than harm.”

Neighborhood North Helped Students Improve Their Academic Confidence and Develop Socially and Emotionally

Neighborhood North staff leveraged a longstanding positive relationship with local school district leaders to recruit students and support student academics. Pod staff accessed student learning platforms and materials and communicated and collaborated with teachers. District staff referred students who were falling behind to the Neighborhood North pod, and pod staff liaised between parents and the school regarding students’ learning needs.

Our superintendent, principals, and teachers were extremely helpful. Digital educators created videos for us so we could navigate the content as best we could,” one staff member told us. “When we decided to run the Learning Pods, [district staff] were very supportive of that. They sent us recommendations of children and worked with us that way.”

According to several Neighborhood North staff who were themselves people of color, participation in the pod also reportedly helped students develop positive racial identities. Although a handful of staff were certified teachers, most staff were noncertified teachers drawn from the community, including college students who volunteered. Many of these staff, like their students, identified as African-American. Staff told us this helped provide an affirming learning environment and ultimately benefited students of all races.

“Even our creative artist who was coming to teach the language and movement, he was an African American male, very strong male with a solid family,” one pod staff member said. “And I feel that made a large effect on the kids. I think that’s important for them to see.”

Given the young age of the children, pod staff reportedly tried to balance structured activities with free play time. The pod was attended by students at a range of grades—Kindergarten to fifth grade—and the multiage groups of students provided opportunities for peer teaching and social interaction, which, according to parents and staff, boosted the academic and social confidence of older students. “I saw a lot of growth in the kids,” one staff member said. “A lot of really beautiful things. . . . One girl became a team leader, and she was so emotionally separated before that.”

The total number of students who attended a pod location on a given day was smaller than most elementary school classrooms in the local district—about 15 to 20 students. The staff was also larger; according to pod staff, on an average day there were about 12 to 15 students and four to five staff. A typical elementary school classroom has about 20 students and one teacher. The large learning-pod staff, combined with the small number of students, meant that there were enough staff to provide students with one-to-one support or lead small-group instruction. For example, students who were not meeting their reading and/or math benchmarks or students with disabilities could work with a teacher individually or in a small group to check for comprehension.

“Neighborhood North can fortify the efforts of the school and the home by assisting with learning; there’s multiple adult staff and we can block off smaller groups for learning,” one staff member said. “We can have one on ones for students who need some additional help because they’re far behind, or they’re struggling in a particular area . . . because there’s more adults available to do that.” Parents and family members saw improvements in their children’s academic engagement, confidence, and social development. In the words of one family member,

“I think without Neighborhood North, I’d have a lost child. He’s found himself, he’s found he needs to push the limits a little bit more. He was so shy and he wasn’t outspoken. Now he’s a lot more outspoken, outgoing. Neighborhood North brought that out of him. . . . Anybody who had a child in the same situation. I would definitely recommend Neighborhood North because they take time. It’s helped me tremendously because I don’t have to worry about him so much.”

Although the learning pods disbanded when the local school district reopened for in-person instruction in spring 2021, Neighborhood North leaders reported that the pod had a positive impact on the community and parents reported a positive impact on their families. Neighborhood North leaders and staff believed that students would not be as behind academically as they might otherwise have been and lauded the many organizations that came together to support families at the beginning of the pandemic.

“Families saw this concerted effort of everyone to do something different during this time. That wasn’t just the school, or it wasn’t just the churches. . . . I think that’s what the Learning Pods were: this mashed-together thing, and that it was successful,” one staff member said. “The kids were all safe, parents . . . everybody was cared for but it wasn’t any one person doing it. It was this amalgam of all these things.”

The parents we interviewed repeatedly mentioned their appreciation for the learning pod and the positive impact it had on their children’s social and emotional well-being and academic confidence. Parents described the ways in which pod staff went “above and beyond,” from dropping off free diapers for a younger sibling to advocating on parents’ behalf to coordinate a learning plan with their classroom teacher.

“My kids love the staff,” one parent said. “They adore them. They have smiles on their face every time they come home [from Neighborhood North].”

Lessons in Community-Led Crisis Response

When education is massively disrupted, community-based organizations (CBOs) can play an important role in crisis response. If school buildings are closed, CBOs can meet critical needs for students and families by providing safe spaces for students to gather in person and continuity of academic support and social and emotional skill development.

The Neighborhood North experience suggests that realizing these benefits requires rapid, flexible funding so CBOs can adjust their staffing and programming to respond to the crisis. It also requires strong partnerships with other organizations that can provide physical space and staff and, with the school district, provide access to online learning platforms and open communications channels with teachers. Even beyond crisis response, strong partnerships between school districts and CBOs can benefit youth and families. CBOs provided key educational and social and emotional supports prior to the pandemic and will continue to do so during pandemic recovery. Neighborhood North’s experience indicates that collaboration between CBOs and districts can help CBOs target services to students most in need.

In addition, CBOs could help school districts build more diverse talent pipelines. Nationally, only about one in five teachers are people of color and recruiting and retaining teachers of color is a challenge in most schools and districts. A diverse teaching workforce benefits all students, particularly students of color. According to our interviewees, Neighborhood North staff were more racially diverse than teaching staff in the local school district. Neighborhood North staff were also more diverse in terms of educational experience, and many did not have formal education training. If CBOs and school districts are to leverage community-based staff, they need intentional strategies to provide training and support and must ensure that programming is coherent and that the goals are clearly communicated.