

COVID-19 Revealed New Roles for Cities to Create a Continuum of Support for Youth and Families. They Shouldn't End with the Pandemic

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During the pandemic city leaders have had to address unprecedented challenges—from housing insecurity to public health—to support city residents. Some have taken a more holistic and creative approach to addressing their residents' needs during the pandemic. For some local governments, this includes an offering that would have been thought impossible in the past: providing school-day programming directly to children and families through learning pods.

As part of CRPE's ongoing exploration of [learning pods](#), we wanted to understand cities' involvement in this new model of learning. We searched city websites to identify learning pods either operated, supported, or promoted by city agencies in the 100 largest cities in the U.S., and analyzed themes across the examples we found.

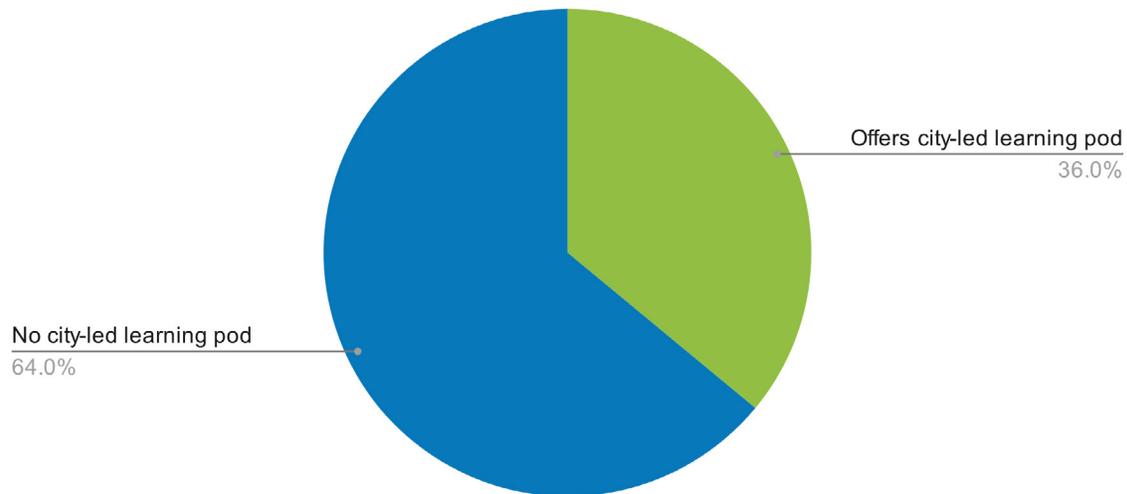
We found about one-third of the largest U.S. cities created or supported learning pods, and most that did focused on addressing critical needs for child care and remote learning support. But a few cities went further, seeding new collaborations with trusted community organizations, offering a coordinated web of services, and expanding the portfolio of learning opportunities available to students. Their actions suggest cities are uniquely positioned to support K-12 recovery by building a stronger, more connected, and resilient education ecosystem.

Only about one-third of the largest cities invested in learning pods during the pandemic

Of the 100 largest U.S. cities, 36 percent operated or sponsored learning pods. Larger cities were more likely than smaller cities to take an active role in supporting learning during the pandemic. Of the 38 cities with populations over 500,000 people, just over half had a city-supported learning pod, compared with only 25 percent of those cities with populations under 500,000.

Figure 1. Over One-Third of Cities Had a City Government-Led Learning Pod

City-led learning pods in the 100 largest cities



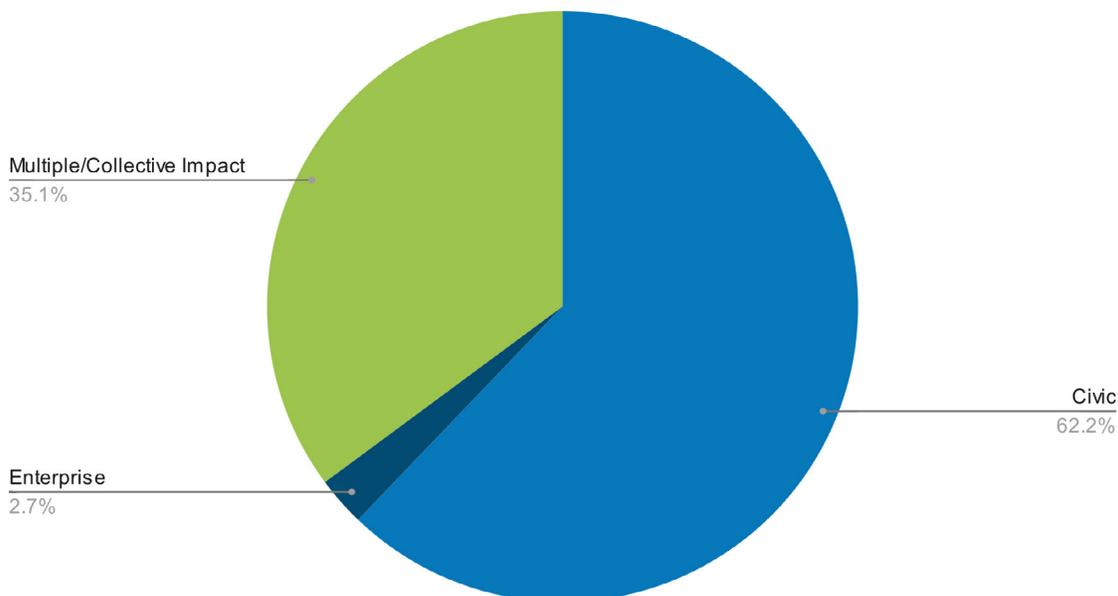
These city government-led efforts were not the only option available to families: communities often had other public and private sector offerings, many of which are listed in [our pods database](#). Some cities also have county government-sponsored learning pods. For example, Ohio’s Cuyahoga County is providing funding support to [Cleveland’s learning pod effort](#), and New York’s Erie County government funded [pods across the Buffalo region](#). All of these providers contributed to a more diverse learning ecosystem during the pandemic response, offering a glimpse into new roles for city- and community-based agencies moving forward.

The majority of city-led pods are run independently by city agencies, but more than a third are collective impact models

Most cities offering learning pods (62 percent) built upon their own existing resources to take on this new role. But some cities rallied partners to fill gaps: just over a third of the city-led hubs were run in partnership with community-based organizations or businesses.

Figure 2. Of Learning Pods Supported or Led by City Government, Over a Third Were Operated in Partnership with Other Institutions

Operators of city-led learning pods



The most common model of city-led learning pods were full-day childcare programs operated by parks and recreation departments. These programs typically include virtual learning support and afterschool enrichment programming, and are often an extension of the afterschool or summer programming that the departments operated before the pandemic. Twenty-four of the cities in our database had parks and recreation-operated programs, including [Dallas](#) and [Oklahoma City](#). [New Orleans](#) officials also offered city-led hubs through their public libraries.

However, 14 of the city-led hubs were examples of partnership or collective impact models. These cities either partnered with community-based organizations (CBOs), school districts, or businesses to fill the childcare gap in a variety of settings. These types of partnerships allowed cities to leverage the community ties—and sometimes trust—of community-based efforts; they also made it possible for cities to quickly set up new options for families without having to create entirely new programs or hire staff.

Some cities partnered with CBOs to expand their own capacity. For example, [San Francisco's Community Learning Hubs](#) effort and Philadelphia's [Access Centers](#) operated hubs at city recreation centers, as well as at nonprofit sites. Other cities, like [El Paso](#), delegated CARES Act funding to CBOs like the YWCA, which had systems already in place to quickly launch and operate the hubs on their own. Pods initiated by mayor's offices or other departments without pre-existing childcare staffing were more likely to be run in coordination with CBOs or school districts.

The collective impact programs were also more likely to focus on specific students or families, typically students from low-income households, students of first responders, students with no or limited internet access at home, or students experiencing housing instability. This may be

because they were fully new programs created out of necessity during the pandemic, rather than extensions of previous fee-for-service afterschool childcare programs run directly by city agencies. Of the 14 collective impact models, 11 were targeted at or limited to students from specific groups, compared with 9 of 22 city-operated sites. Most of the city-operated learning pods, often held at parks and recreation centers, were first-come, first-served. This was also reflected in costs: about half of the programs operated directly by cities charged a fee, whereas all but two of the collective impact programs were free.

Most learning pods are focused on childcare and remote learning support, but some go further

Similar to the learning pods profiled in our [initial](#) scan, most of the learning pods led or organized by city governments were created to provide supervision and help students navigate their school's remote learning during the day; they typically provided these services along with sports or activities after the school day ended. As such, most were also targeted toward younger students who most needed daytime supervision: 64 percent of the programs in these cities were only for students in elementary or middle school.

However, a few cities took more creative and targeted approaches to fill gaps they observed in student and family supports, demonstrating how cities can use the varied resources available to create more innovative programs. The city of North Las Vegas, a suburb of Las Vegas, opened the innovative [Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy](#), an in-person microschool that provides learning guides and personalized instruction, as well as enrichment for homeschooled students in elementary and middle school. The Seattle Parks and Recreation department launched programming specifically for teens at seven [Teen Resource Hubs](#), which provide support for virtual learning, as well as access to physical and mental health supports and mentorship.

Some cities are already planning to use these collaborative strategies to provide comprehensive programming for students beyond the current school year: New York City is combining forces to create a well-rounded summer experience for students, based on the Community Schools model. The city's Department of Education has teamed up with the Department of Youth and Community Development, as well as various CBOs, to provide [both academics and enrichment activities](#) for students across the city. Using this collaborative strategy, the city is able to connect many resources at its disposal rather than placing the responsibility for summer programming on the school system alone.

Washington, D.C., is combatting lost learning time by offering an [“earn and learn” summer program](#) for high school students. The city's [Summer Youth Employment Program](#)—run by the city's Department of Employment Services—is offering an option this year where students spend the first half of the day in DCPS schools to focus on learning, followed by a half-day of job experience. Knowing the importance of providing wage-earning opportunities and job experience for many students—but faced with making up crucial lost learning time—again, the city is pairing existing resources to meet the needs of teens this summer.

These are promising examples of ways cities can go beyond just school-day childcare to integrate different programs and services to create comprehensive learning opportunities. Both of the summer programs shared above are from cities with mayoral control of the education system,

which likely facilitated these cross-department collaborations. But city government programs could create similar partnerships with school districts elsewhere.

Summer learning, free from the constraints of the traditional school year, is an easier place to test such cross-sector partnerships. But city leaders should think beyond the summer, building on these new roles as traditional school buildings reopen their doors in fall 2021.

What should city-led education support look like post-pandemic?

As the majority of school districts move toward in-person learning in the fall, the need for school-day childcare will diminish. But the flexibility of remote learning or learning from different providers worked for some families, and many will likely [want to pursue alternative options](#). Some [school districts are already planning](#) for ways to continue offering more flexibility through remote learning options. Yet providing for all aspects of significantly expanded learning opportunities is a tall order for school districts alone—especially when [we know](#) that there are city- and community-based resources ready to pitch in.

The rapid deployment of city-led learning pods shows that cities can act with urgency and agility to identify needs and weave together community-based assets to support students and families. Cities should build on the [expanded options](#) begun during the pandemic to play a more active role in seeding and sponsoring learning opportunities that fill gaps or work alongside district programming. In this way, city governments could become sponsors of a portfolio of learning opportunities.

In the recovery after the pandemic and beyond, city governments could:

- **Act as a sponsor to build quality, connected out-of-school programming across the city.** Cities could analyze the landscape of out-of-school and enrichment programming and step up to create connections and fill gaps. Cities might support CBOs to expand programs to neighborhoods without good options, seed responsive new models with start-up funding, and create a fund for affordable access to out-of-school learning for low-income families. City governments can [consolidate and redirect funds](#) to support new programs and providers, and take on the role of coordinating a system and strategy for quality out-of-school and enrichment programs, and helping families access those programs by creating [navigation tools](#). Cities can also forge further connections with school districts—like New York City and Washington, D.C.’s summer programs as described above—to ensure that citywide programming is filling important gaps.
- **Leverage relationships with local industries to support quality career-connected learning opportunities.** Preparing graduates to be college- and career-ready is a priority for many [states](#), and some cities already offer summer youth internship programs. But city governments could build on these efforts by setting priorities and coordinating across K-12, higher education, and industry, like [New York City](#) has. City government can also act as an [intermediary](#) with school districts and local businesses to create quality, industry-aligned learning opportunities throughout the school year.

- **Build city- or CBO-led learning pods as a long-term option.** Cities could work with school districts or states to provide support for students and families who opt to remain virtual, in homeschool, or desire an educational alternative not otherwise available, as in the model of [Southern Nevada Urban Micro Academy's](#) microschool. Students who prefer the more individualized attention and small-group nature of pods may want to continue in this model full- or part-time, with the support of adults. Parks and recreation departments or city-supported CBOs could create interest group learning pods, where students' projects, extracurriculars or other resources are focused on art, STEM, outdoor learning, or other topics, while students still learn from state- or district-provided remote learning.

In the recovery of a long-term crisis like COVID-19, the solutions will [take a city](#). Local governments and nimble, trusted community-based organizations found new ways during the pandemic to use their resources to complement the work of schools. Cities should continue to lead in the recovery and reinvention beyond the pandemic to build stronger, more interconnected education ecosystems for their children.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.