

PODS IN ACTION:

Hyde Park Neighborhood Club

A COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION TREATS STUDENTS AS INDIVIDUALS

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Hyde Park Neighborhood Club (HPNC) is a small, hyper-local community-based organization that, before the pandemic, provided after-school care and enrichment to children living in the South Side of Chicago. During the pandemic, HPNC created a learning pod for children in grades K-8 to provide parents in the community with childcare and students with online learning support. HPNC staff supervised students' online learning and provided social experiences that were designed to mimic those that students would experience in school in a normal year.

Of the available seats in the pod, 40 percent were reserved for families with financial need. Tuition varied based on family resources and need—an approach sometimes called “sliding scale” payment. Families who were refugees or eligible for state childcare subsidies attended the pod for free, while families who were ineligible for state funds but were unable to afford the full tuition paid a percentage of the fee.

KEY LESSONS:

1

A community organization that provided after-school programs overcame scheduling challenges and competing parent demands to provide in-person support and enrichment to students in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood when school buildings closed during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020.

2

The organization hopes to provide more structured individual support to students after the pandemic, but faces logistical barriers and, more critically, a shortage of clear funding sources.

KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:
CHICAGO, IL

36

STUDENTS
SERVED

17

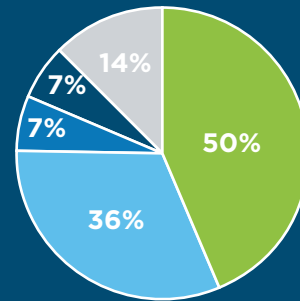
NUMBER OF
STAFF

K-8

GRADES
SERVED

RACE AND ETHNICITY OF STUDENTS:

- AFRICAN-AMERICAN/BLACK
- WHITE
- LATINO
- ASIAN
- WERE REFUGEES



STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

IN PERSON; SUPPLEMENTAL TO SCHOOL

Needs, hopes, and complications.

Chicago has a decentralized public school system in which each school determines its own class schedule and learning objectives. HPNC students came from several different schools in the area, all of which had different schedules.

Some were required to be on screen for up to seven and a half hours per day. These long hours on screen were particularly challenging for elementary school students, unfamiliar with how to use computers and online learning platforms and unaccustomed to sitting still for long periods of time.

HPNC staff and some parents were worried that long hours of virtual learning would negatively impact students' mental health and that students did not have enough physical play time to develop social and motor skills.

To address this concern, HPNC originally planned an extensive program of daily large-group recreational and enrichment activities, such as martial arts and art classes, that would give students breaks from virtual learning. However, there was no time when all students could participate in a group activity. Students' schedules, one staff member said, "were all over the place. Having a unified set of breaks, lunch breaks, the time school started, the time school ended, there was just very little overlap from student to student. [It] was a real feasibility challenge."

Parents had different goals for the program. Some wanted their children to socialize, others prioritized completing assignments. HPNC responded by working with families to accommodate their priorities and sorted students into social activities based on their school schedules. Students with similar schedules worked with the same instructor and participated in virtual learning and social activities together.

Rapid, flexible funding helped HPNC staff up quickly

HPNC's pivot from after-school programs to a full-time learning pod required more staff to supervise online learning and enrichment activities, which required more funding.

HPNC accessed funding from a variety of sources, including the National Parent Union, the State of Illinois childcare grants, individual donors, and private-pay participants. Some of that money had minimal application requirements and was available more quickly than funding that HPNC received before the pandemic. However, the "patchwork" of funding sources may have added to the administrative burdens on HPNC staff.

Small class sizes enabled flexible and individualized learning environments

Although HPNC did not originally plan to place students into small groups for online learning and enrichment, the organization soon discovered that smaller classes allowed for more flexible and personalized learning environments and enabled HPNC staff to incorporate more movement into the learning space. Students could choose where to sit or stand and were allowed to move about the room or leave to get snacks or go to the bathroom without asking. According to HPNC staff, this less-structured environment was particularly helpful for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) who struggled with long hours of virtual learning. "Staring at a screen for many hours at a time is not developmentally appropriate for a child," a staff member said. "Our bodies are meant to move. . . . I think that we need to extend more grace in the normal course of the day for people to be in their bodies as it flows naturally."

Students also had the flexibility to choose how they approached assignments. Students chose which assignments to tackle first and asked staff for individual help when they needed it. Such flexibility might be infeasible and chaotic in larger classrooms.

HPNC learned that some children thrive in less physically structured environments. Students with extra energy, short attention spans, or developmental disorders benefited from the movement and choice that a smaller class size afforded, staying more engaged with their schoolwork.

Deeper collaboration is desired— but is it possible?

Historically, public schools have provided both childcare and instructional services to students, with little help from outside sources. During the pandemic, community-based organizations like HPNC shared some of these responsibilities with the school district and became more involved in the day-to-day operations of education.

There may be opportunities for these roles to continue beyond the pandemic. School districts often struggle to provide students with flexibility and individual attention. Collaborating with community-based organizations could be one way to provide these benefits.

HPNC's experience suggests that there are structural obstacles that will need to be overcome, including the different schedules of students from different schools. Expanding the role of community-based organizations will also take more money. HPNC administrators hope that more flexible funding options will remain available post-pandemic.

HPNC's long-term goal is to have the time and resources to curate educational programs that provide a combination of academic support and structured small-group enrichment activities based on individual students' interests. HPNC's learning pod demonstrates the feasibility of this concept and the possibility of future collaborations with the school districts.

"If we had an ideal world, we would be able to curate educational programs for individual children based on interest, based on aptitude, based on energy level, and based on the diverse resources in our local communities," HPNC's director said.

However, limited financial resources and the structural barriers to collaboration with public schools, especially in large, decentralized systems, present challenges to organizations seeking to play a larger supporting role in children's education.