

PODS IN ACTION:

Joanna Rosa-Saenz

HOW A BOOTSTRAPPING PARENT-RUN POD SERVED AT-RISK STUDENTS

By Jennifer Poon

When the pandemic closed schools in Denver, an enterprising parent with community connections stepped in to meet immediate needs—and paved a new path to supporting students and families in the future.

KEY LESSONS:

1

Families across the socioeconomic spectrum self-organized to support their children and one another during the pandemic. This community power presents a strong opportunity for school districts to work in partnership with families and serve students in new ways and outside school buildings beyond the pandemic.

2

Preexisting community ties strengthened families' ability to self-organize and support learning in pods during the pandemic.

3

Access to financial and educational resources were critical to elevating the instructional rigor of family-run pods.

4

Disconnection from district resources made it more difficult for self-organized pods to fully serve all students—including those who required special education services.

KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:
DENVER, CO

14

STUDENTS
SERVED

1

NUMBER OF
STAFF

3-13

AGES
SERVED

STUDENT EXPERIENCE:

IN PERSON, WITH SUPPLEMENTAL INSTRUCTION AND
ENRICHMENT FOR STUDENTS IN REMOTE AND HYBRID LEARNING

On March 13, 2020, the world ground to a sudden halt as the COVID-19 pandemic prompted unprecedented lockdowns across the United States. For Joanna Rosa-Saenz, a Denver community organizer who had just separated from her husband and become a single parent, the broader worries of the wider world were a blur. Her primary concern was her three young children: two in elementary school and one in middle school. The Denver Public Schools district closed its buildings, leaving the children of many essential workers in Rosa-Saenz's predominantly Latinx community with nowhere to go. Then she lost her job.

Rosa-Saenz found herself facing drastically different circumstances at home and in her community. Yet driven by a relentless optimism that she credits to her religious faith, Rosa-Saenz determined to "turn negatives into positives" by using whatever means she had to ensure her children and others in the community had a safe space to continue learning. And that meant stepping up and creating such a space herself. She converted her basement into a classroom, used her car like a school bus, and devoted her time and energy to support a pod that served up to 14 students at a given time. She welcomed them for as long as they needed to stay and charged no tuition.

Pandemic learning pods are often characterized as the elite province of the rich and an example of those with means [hoarding opportunity](#) in times of crisis. But Rosa-Saenz's story illustrates a different sort of pod, one that sprung from the rich tapestry of community connections she had cultivated prior to the pandemic.

A strong foundation for rapid response

Rosa-Saenz had several key building blocks already in place when she launched her learning pod. First, as a longtime community organizer, Rosa-Saenz was well known in her Latinx community and had already established trusting relationships with many of the families that eventually joined her pod. As one parent said, "We have known each other for a long time, and I know she wants the best for my daughter, just like I do."

In addition, through her prior work with constituent services and civil engagement for the Denver City Council District One, she had a network of organizational contacts that proved valuable in forming and sustaining the pod. For example, local education advocacy group

Transform Education Now helped Rosa-Saenz access a \$15,000 grant from the National Parents Union and connected her with curricular resources and training to elevate the pod's instructional rigor.

These overlapping networks—both formal and informal—were critical in helping to establish and nurture Rosa-Saenz's pod, which has continued to evolve along with the changing needs of students and families. Her story demonstrates how building up the “connective tissue” of a community is critical to support student well-being, especially when school districts' efforts fall short. And it shows just how important it is for districts to build relationships and partner with local supporters of youth and families.

Building a basement schoolhouse

During the pandemic, Rosa-Saenz opened the doors of her pod from Monday through Friday, accommodating up to fourteen children ranging from age 3 to 13, including her own. Children arrived whenever their parents needed to drop them off. Sometimes, according to Rosa-Saenz, “some of the students were not ready so the parents would bring their clothes and I would get them dressed, style their hair, brush their teeth, and get them ready.” Students were picked up whenever parents could get them, ranging from noon to 5 p.m. or later.

The pod operated as a multiage one-room classroom. Students came from various schools in Denver Public Schools and surrounding districts. Some followed their school's remote learning programs, and Rosa-Saenz supplemented schools' remote learning programs for younger students with curriculum and materials she found online or borrowed from her children's bilingual, Montessori-style elementary school. Her pod also included other activities that were important to her, such as a daily Pledge of Allegiance, prayer, opportunities for social and emotional learning, and practicing life skills like making homemade tortillas.

Rosa-Saenz charged no fees or tuition, instead operating the pod solely from her own limited savings. In November 2020, Rosa-Saenz was awarded a \$15,000 grant from the National Parents Union, which she received in 2021—nearly a full year after she started her pod. Before the funds arrived, she relied on her own limited savings to cover operating costs, along with parents' spontaneous donations of necessities like a carton of eggs, bag of potatoes, or gas money. Aside from that, Rosa-Saenz had no other source of income.

Early on, one of the parents started volunteering her time to help the pod. She was a cafeteria worker who would join the pod in the afternoon after her shift. According to Rosa-Saenz, she was a phenomenal cook who would help prepare meals for the pod. And as a native Spanish speaker, she also helped reinforce bilingual learning and in general provided an extra set of hands.

Deeper relationships helped students and families to thrive

Rosa-Saenz's pod fostered strong relationships with students and between students that supported their engagement in learning and overall well-being. According to Rosa-Saenz, she was able to devote personalized attention to each child, helping them learn at their own pace. In addition, she focused on group dynamics and building a culture of good manners and mutual respect—something other parents said they noticed and valued. Rosa-Saenz also validated the students' Latinx identities through her bilingual approach to instruction and worked to build students' self-esteem and empowerment. Speaking to the sense of

collaboration that emerged in her pod, Rosa-Saenz said, “We have to follow their different instructors and different teachers that we have to log on to, but we just kind of work together. We just became a big family.”

The positive impact of this unique setting and approach was apparent to a mother of a student with special needs who had been struggling with remote learning. She said that her child used to be “very enthusiastic and she was learning” prior to the pandemic but that she started falling behind when schools turned remote, and “now I see her really quiet.” But once the student started attending Rosa-Saenz’s pod, she “started learning again.” Her mother said that even though Rosa-Saenz was “not prepared or trained for this kind of situation,” the pod “did everything they could to give [my daughter] the support that she needed and make her feel comfortable and not be afraid. ... They gave her a lot of motivation and they encouraged her to keep learning.” According to Rosa-Saenz, this child made so much progress in the pod that her mother was afraid she would regress when returning to her regular school.

Rosa-Saenz also emphasized how much the pod brought participating families closer together. Because her own circumstances required her to be resourceful, she passed along any resources that she found—food banks, clothing, financial vouchers, and mental health services—to the other parents, who would pile into her vehicle to access the resources together. And while other parents expressed their gratitude toward Rosa-Saenz, she felt mutually grateful: As she notes, her pod was instrumental in helping her stay productively focused as she navigated a difficult life transition. She says, “We all needed each other during this time. We were all experiencing the pandemic in addition to our own challenges, and we just worked together and made the best of it.”

Missed opportunities due to missing district supports

Rosa-Saenz stretched her background experience and strengths to support learning in the pod as best as she could, but she and the other parents felt they experienced this in relative isolation, cut off from a broader network of support. Their local school districts had “left behind” and “abandoned” their children, parents said.

Though Rosa-Saenz said she believes every parent is their child’s “first teacher,” she also acknowledged her lack of professional training in education. She wanted greater access to curricular and instructional resources, which she felt could have been more readily provided by local school districts. She wished she knew “a little bit more academic information because I’m not an educator. Like different sites I could have gone to, or what’s the best way to help this student,” she said.

Although a few districts did an excellent job packaging resources for families during the pandemic, others dropped the ball, said Ariel Smith, the cofounder and executive director of Transform Education Now. As a result, families either didn’t know about resources they could give their children to support learning or were drowning in “a deluge of bad resources,” she noted.

Rosa-Saenz did receive advice and curricular resources from Transform Education Now, but still she needed more support and scaffolding to support older students, including how to extend her pod’s supplemental Montessori-style learning model to include them. Rosa-Saenz did offer older students enrichment opportunities like arts and crafts, music, and real-world skills development like cooking and gardening. And true to Montessori-style teaching, she involved them as mentors for younger students. But aside from that—as with most pods CRPE surveyed across the nation—older students mostly followed their school’s remote instruction, with Rosa-Saenz serving in a supervisory role rather than providing direct academic instruction.

The pod's isolation from district resources also affected its ability to support a special education student with an Individualized Education Plan related to speech issues. Compared to remote learning, the personalized attention that the student received in Rosa-Saenz's relatively small pod fueled dramatic improvements in the child's verbal language, the parent and Rosa-Saenz said. Even so, they both also felt that additional services like speech and occupational therapy were needed—services that the child received before the pandemic and that required specialists to provide. Yet Rosa-Saenz struggled to procure these services because anytime she reached out to the school principal or district leadership, they kept “pointing the finger to somebody else.”

Ultimately, the parent felt compelled to send her daughter back to traditional school. She said, “If there was more support [in the pod], I would have preferred to leave her there instead of returning her to school, but she has her special needs, she needs people who are trained so that they can keep helping children with special needs.” In the end, the pod was just too disconnected from these services to make it work for her child long term.

Impact over the longer term

Rosa-Saenz's experience running the pod has inspired her to think creatively about how she and other community members can band together and better meet children's needs. When we interviewed her in April 2021, local schools were beginning to return to in-person learning and her pod had converted to a “come-as-you-need” after-school and hybrid-day learning center. At that time, she was also planning to use her pod for supplemental after-school care during the 2021–22 school year. Rosa-Saenz also indicated she is ready to operate the pod full-time again if there is need, particularly for parents like her who aren't comfortable with schools' health and safety protocols or vaccine requirements for in-person learning.

She also voiced plans to use part of her grant from the National Parents Union to purchase a bus that will bring pod learning to other underserved communities in the area. “I'll set up one hour in one area and we'll do math, and then I'll drive to another location and we're going to offer music,” she imagined. “I want to make this on the go, because there's a lot of families that can't [access this] and they're stuck there. The kids need that.” She added, “It inspired me to become the ‘Magic School Bus.’”

Rosa-Saenz's experience running the pod has also inspired her to run for the local school board to bring greater representation to her community. Three seats on the Denver Board of Education will be up for public vote on November 7, 2023. Whatever comes, it is clear that Rosa-Saenz's experience running a pod has galvanized her purpose to unite her community and elevate its influence over the education of its children.

Implications

District and school leaders must recognize and partner with families and community leaders to maximize the outsized role they already play in student learning.

Self-organized pods like Rosa-Saenz’s demonstrate what can be achieved by resourceful and well-connected community members, even when school districts don’t offer a helping hand. Rosa-Saenz created a safe space for learning and cultivated important connections among families of young children in her community during a harrowing time. In her story, we see much to celebrate—but a missed opportunity as well. The local schools and districts could have been better partners to these bootstrapping families. That could include sharing curriculum tools and resources to enhance supplemental instruction, providing specialized services to students in the context of their pods, and capitalizing on the opportunity such pods present to deepen community relationships and provide new sources for student support. State leaders had a role to play as well, in the form of financial assistance or operational support.

According to several of the families and community members we interviewed throughout our research project on pods, many districts’ attitudes toward pods were decidedly antagonistic. We heard that districts were “worried about financial trouble due to declining enrollment,” which families felt influenced their actions. Some respondents perceived that as “[districts’] own fault for not providing high-quality engaging opportunities” during the pandemic or even before it.

What Rosa-Saenz’s story suggests, and what education leaders often miss, is that greater parent and community involvement can be key to creating more engaging, high-quality learning opportunities, particularly in communities of traditionally underserved students. These can and must work in tandem with what local schools are doing, and districts should find better ways to learn from and partner with families and community leaders. For example, families and community members have unique insight into engaging their children based on their unique strengths, interests, and identities. They have expertise on how to create engaging and reaffirming environments that can augment the more traditional academic strengths of school. In addition, while new families arrive at school every fall with new faces and new names to learn, community-based relationships endure year after year. Districts and schools should consider how they can better invite and integrate this kind of expertise.

One way education leaders and local governments can become more porous is by directly supporting self-organized pods. Smith pointed to some ways this was already happening, whether through direct district sponsorship of pods as in nearby district Adams 12 or childcare tax credits or other direct grants to families to support the formation of small learning communities. CRPE’s [national research on pods](#) similarly highlights bright spots where pods are directly subsidized and supported by districts or local governments.

In addition, state policy can support families to engage in community-driven supplemental learning outside of school time. When we spoke with Smith, her organization was ramping up support for a [statewide ballot initiative](#) that could benefit the efforts of families like Rosa-Saenz’s because it “would give parents a yearly stipend to support their students’ extended learning outside of school time.” The initiative will be up for a vote this November.

Within schools, education leaders can also do a better job “inviting in” family and community expertise beyond current “parent engagement” efforts, which can be notoriously hollow even in the best of times. System leaders can begin by educating themselves on the [assets that](#)

[parents and families bring to learning and development](#), according to the learning sciences; [building deeper partnerships with local out-of-school-time providers](#) to better service whole-child success; and finding routine ways to tune into and learn from family and community insights on how the education system is impacting their children, both good and bad, in more ways than test scores.

Education leaders and institutions should actively promote healthy, well-connected communities as a strategy to support student success and well-being.

Rosa-Saenz's Latinx community in and around Denver was already well connected, thanks in part to her long-time role as a community organizer. Other communities might not be as cohesive, which can hamper their ability to create pods or otherwise unite and share resources to support student learning and development outside of school.

As Smith noted, "Building a pod requires a tremendous amount of trust ... [and] I think that really happened the most with families who already knew each other [like] in Rosa-Saenz's case." But in other communities, Smith noticed that "families were pretty isolated. They didn't have these distinct communities built yet, and I think a lot of them wish they had." Therefore, supporting deeper social connectedness within their communities is an equity play that districts and other local partners can step into.

In addition, Rosa-Saenz had strong connections to organizations prepared to support her community work. This access to external resources and expertise helped make her pod more academically focused and sustainable. Because of her prior advocacy work, Rosa-Saenz was in touch with Transform Education Now, which worked across the Denver area to connect parents with curricular resources and leadership training and shared information about the National Parents Union grant opportunity that ultimately helped fund Rosa-Saenz's pod. As Smith noted, resources like these are essential in elevating pods like Rosa-Saenz's beyond a "childcare situation" to one with explicit focus on student learning and success.

On their own, nonprofit and community-based organizations can help communities access resources and expertise, like how Transform Education Now began curating the highest-quality curricular resources for families and shared it in an open Slack channel during the pandemic, but not at the same scale as can districts or local governments. This raises a critical question for local education leaders: Who are the "[stewards and weavers](#)" that can deepen community connectivity, and what are the mechanisms through which districts and local governments can support them?

Families and communities will continue to self-organize with or without district support.

After experiencing an engaging, personalized, and responsive learning environment that is more tailored to their child's needs, parents like those in Rosa-Saenz's pod may be less willing to settle for something less. As Smith observes, "The consensus in a lot of these pods was, 'We can't rely on our schools to teach our children because they're not. And we see it. We're observing it daily and we want to do something about it.'"

If districts don't heed demand and make changes, it is possible that they will only accelerate drops in public school enrollment as [parent satisfaction with their child's education has decreased](#) and [homeschooling is on the rise](#).



Passionate and committed parents are ready to roll up their sleeves. As Rosa-Saenz said, “I am just a mother who loves her kids, their friends, and the community with all her heart. And during this pandemic, I’m willing to do whatever it takes to support their education. That’s just it, it’s motherly love. I am no better than anybody else. I am just here to help and serve. And be a light for God, that’s it.”

In the end, stirring up grassroots energy for improving schools may be the most durable outcome of the pandemic yet. Districts should tune in and join up.

Photo Credit: Joanna Rosa-Saenz



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JOANNA ROSA-SAENZ
How a Bootstrapping Parent-Run
Pod Served At-Risk Students