

# The Demand Side of Alternative Education Products

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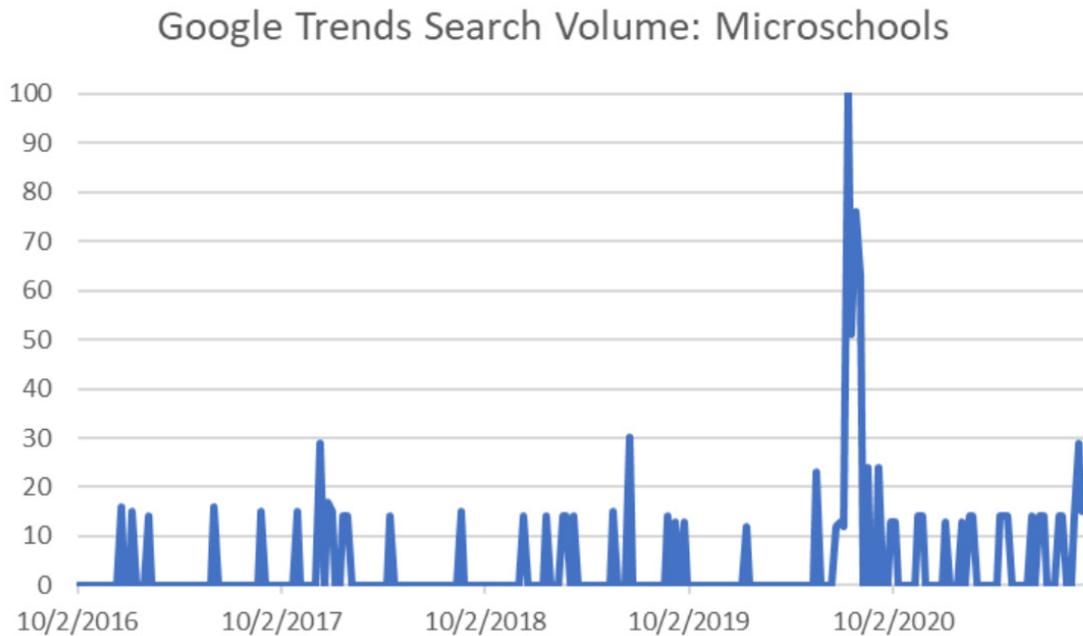
## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic introduced new terms into our lexicon. “Social distancing,” “testing and tracing,” “essential worker,” and “Zoom happy hour,” all represented new phenomena. Education saw the same with terms like “pandemic pods” and “hybrid schooling” becoming household terms, at least in households with school-age children. They were definitely talked about during socially distanced Zoom happy hours.

Many of the new educational models that grew during the pandemic already existed in some form before the coronavirus made its way across our shores. There were hybrid homeschools (schools where children attend formal classes in a brick-and-mortar school for part of the week and learn from home for the rest of the week) since at least the early 1990s, and even much further back depending on how plastic you’d like to make the definition of the term. Ditto for “pods,” though they were generally known as “homeschool co-ops” or didn’t have a formal name at all, they were just small collections of families choosing to work together to create a school for their children. Microschools (schools limited to 15 students or fewer) existed before the pandemic, as did regular old homeschooling.

But it is true that interest in new school models increased during the pandemic. Looking at Google Trends data, we see a spike in interest in “microschools” during back-to-school time in the fall of 2020 (Figure 1). (The y-axis of the graph is an index of search volume expressing searches relative to the peak.)

Figure 1: Google Trends: Microschooling



Clearly, these new educational models became more familiar to people as media coverage of them ramped up and as more and more people experimented with them. But just because people are searching for something doesn't mean that they think it is good or bad, useful or useless. It simply shows people are interested.

To better understand demand for alternative educational models during the coronavirus pandemic, we would need a regular poll of a nationally representative sample of Americans that asks detailed questions about these models. It would be even more helpful if that survey made sure that there were plenty of parents surveyed to understand what they think and value.

We at EdChoice have, since the beginning of 2020, done just that. In partnership with Morning Consult, we have polled a nationally representative sample of Americans on a suite of education-related questions every month, with an oversample of school parents (n=700) starting in September of 2020. We have also surveyed a nationally representative sample of teachers every quarter. We have, on three occasions, surveyed a nationally representative sample of teenagers.

Across all of our surveys, we have found interest in alternative educational models. The pandemic has made families more supportive of homeschooling. At various times, a plurality of parents have expressed desire for a hybrid-style school schedule. Parents have also expressed a willingness to spend hundreds of dollars a month on pandemic pod services, and teachers have expressed a desire to teach in them and named their price as well.

Our surveys found growing interest in learning arrangements that allow children to do more of their learning at home. Roughly six in ten say their views toward homeschooling have grown more favorable during the pandemic. Nearly half are interested in their children learning from home between one and four days per week. Black and Hispanic parents view these arrangements more favorably than white parents.

While most parents said they did not participate in learning pods, about a third of parents said they either participated in a pod or were looking to form one. Roughly three quarters of participating parents said they treated pods as a supplement to their child’s schooling. In addition, our surveys suggest parents are willing to pay roughly \$400-\$500 per month for pods—a range that matches what teachers said they would charge families for their students to participate.

Taken together, our survey results show there is potentially a robust market for learning pods, or similar arrangements such as microschoools, hybrid homeschools, and homeschool cooperatives, and that this market could include large numbers of Black, Hispanic, and lower-income families. Cost remains an issue, but not an insurmountable one. Regulatory hurdles may pose a substantial challenge.

In the paper that follows, we will first spell out our survey methodology and then walk through what information our surveys have yielded.

## Polling Methodology

In early 2020, EdChoice initiated a partnership with Morning Consult, a self-described “data intelligence” company that conducts a wide variety of market research surveys and public opinion polls throughout the United States. The first iteration of the general population poll went into the field at the end of January 2020. Since then, Morning Consult has conducted the general population polls online, among a national sample of adults living in the United States using non-probability sampling every month. For each survey, Morning Consult draws a stratified sample from the Lucid and PureSpectrum sample exchanges based on age and gender quota targets derived from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 Current Population Survey. For the general population poll approximately 2,200 adults are interviewed in English each month with a field period of 2-5 days.

Morning Consult also oversamples roughly 700 K-12 school parents. Like with the general population survey, they draw from the Lucid and PureSpectrum sample exchanges based on race and ethnicity quota targets derived from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 Current Population Survey. Morning Consult then uses a technique called iterative proportional fitting (known also as “raking” in survey research) to weight survey responses to the 2017 Current Population Survey with respect to age, gender, region, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment.<sup>1</sup>

We also field a quarterly poll of roughly 1,000 teachers. The sample is collected in similar ways to the general population poll, using stratified sampling from the Lucid and PureSpectrum exchanges. Instead of the Current Population Survey, Morning Consult uses the 2017-18 National Teacher and Principal Survey and sets targets based on gender and years of teaching experience to generate a representative sample. Like with the general population survey, Morning Consult uses iterative proportional fitting to weight survey responses by age, gender, race/ethnicity, and teaching experience.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of iterative proportional fitting, see W. Edwards Deming and Frederick F. Stephan (1940) “On a Least Squares Adjustment of a Sampled Frequency Table When the Expected Marginal Totals are Known” *The Annals of Mathematical Statistics*. Vol. 11, No. 4. Pp 427-444.

We have also conducted polls of teens (Age 13-17) in August 2020, February 2021, and September 2021. As with the general population, parents, and teachers, Morning Consult draws the sample using stratified sampling from the Lucid and PureSpectrum sample exchanges. The results are weighted according to 2019 American Community Survey with respect to age, gender, race/ethnicity, region.<sup>2</sup>

## Key Lessons

So what can we make of all of this polling data, and what can it tell us about what parents want out of a post-pandemic education system? We think that four key lessons are worth highlighting. The first lesson is that demand for new, flexible options is there. The second is that there are huge equity opportunities given the demographic differences in demand for new educational models. The third lesson is that, like with all things in life, cost is a factor, but it might not be as big a deal as one might think. And the fourth and final lesson is that there are severe supply constraints that might render all of this pent-up demand moot.

Let's walk through each in turn.

### Lesson #1: Demand is there

Both inside and outside of the education policy world, a narrative started to emerge during the 2020-21 school year that children and parents hated the various pandemic-related changes to schooling. Social media memes about parents now thinking that teachers need to get paid a million dollars a year after having to homeschool their own children, or seemingly constant griping about hybrid schedules and the chaos that they caused would lead observers to conclude that both homeschooling and hybrid schedules were going to only go on as long as the pandemic required them.

Media coverage of homeschooling grew tremendously during the pandemic. When the US Census Bureau reported massive gains in the numbers of families homeschooling from its Household Pulse Survey, and particularly the gains amongst Black families, news outlets large and small talked about it. "They Rage-Quit the School System—and They're Not Going Back" read a headline in WIRED magazine,<sup>3</sup> The New Yorker documented "The Rise of Black Homeschooling" in June of 2021.<sup>4</sup> NBC News' story was titled "Why more Black families are choosing to home-school their children this fall."<sup>5</sup> The Economist concluded "Covid-19 has persuaded some parents that home-schooling is better."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Both Morning Consult and EdChoice use a variety of techniques for both quality control and ethical administration of the surveys. EdChoice has been a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative since 2015, requiring us to abide by rigorous standards of disclosure. We report full survey specifications including dates, median survey times, sample sizes, measures of precision, and participation rates for individual polls according to AAPOR guidelines for non-probability internet panels. Prior to seeing the full questionnaire teens are shown a statement asking if their parents have given them permission to take the survey and must respond 'yes' in order to continue through the questionnaire. For all surveys, Morning Consult includes a set of attentiveness tests including simple, open-ended questions and addition or subtraction tests. Respondents who complete the survey too quickly or show suspicious response patterns are removed from the results before weighting and do not count towards the total sample size.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/pandemic-homeschoolers-who-are-not-going-back/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/06/21/the-rise-of-black-homeschooling>

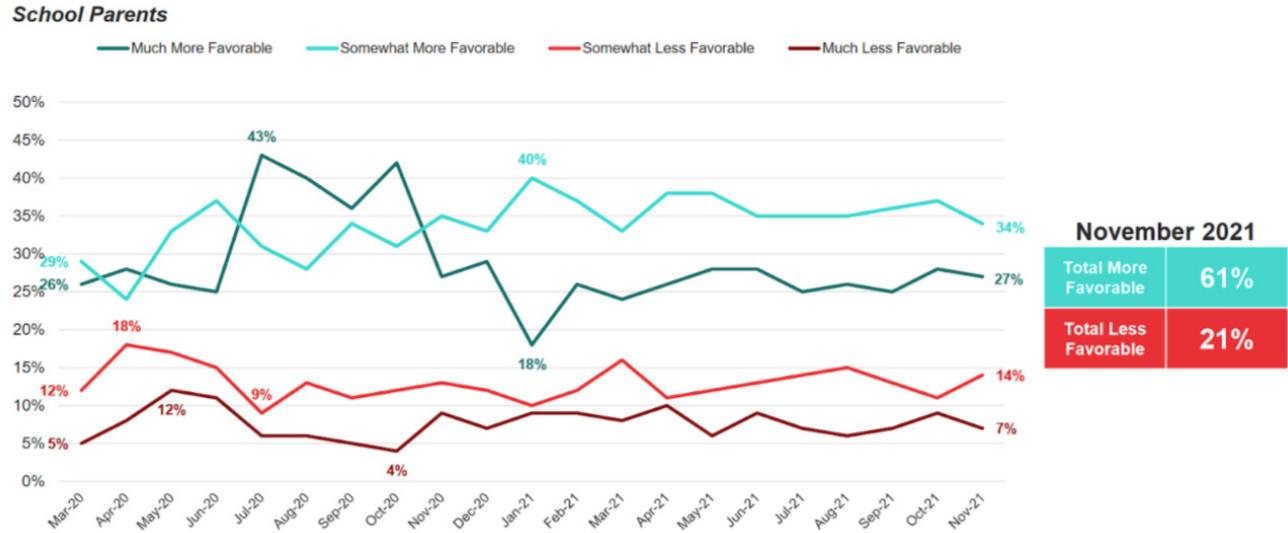
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/black-families-are-choosing-home-school-children-fall-rcna1869>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.economist.com/international/2021/02/22/covid-19-has-persuaded-some-parents-that-home-schooling-is-better>

To get a baseline understanding of parent opinions on homeschooling, we have asked a simple question every month, “How have your opinions on homeschooling changed as a result of the coronavirus?” The results are displayed in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Homeschooling Opinions**

How have your opinions on homeschooling changed as a result of the coronavirus?



Overwhelmingly, the pandemic has made school parents more favorable to homeschooling. While the exact makeup of the subset of parents who are more favorable has changed, with strong peaks of those saying that they were “much more” favorable climbing above 40 percent in July of 2020 and again in October of 2020 before decreasing to less than 20 percent in January of 2021, the combined percentages of those who said that they were “much” and “somewhat” more favorable have consistently doubled or even tripled those who were less favorable.

Looking at our data, it turns out that stories of upset parents were not necessarily representative of the national population of school parents. This is an important point when it comes to thinking about education innovation and parental opinions about it. The American education system is absolutely massive. More than 50 million children attend our schools. That means that even if 20 or 30 percent of families are interested in a new schooling type or support particular changes to a school model, that is millions if not tens of millions of people. It might not be a majority, so changing laws might be a challenge, but it certainly is a market, and innovative and entrepreneurial school leaders can see plenty of people to purchase their products.

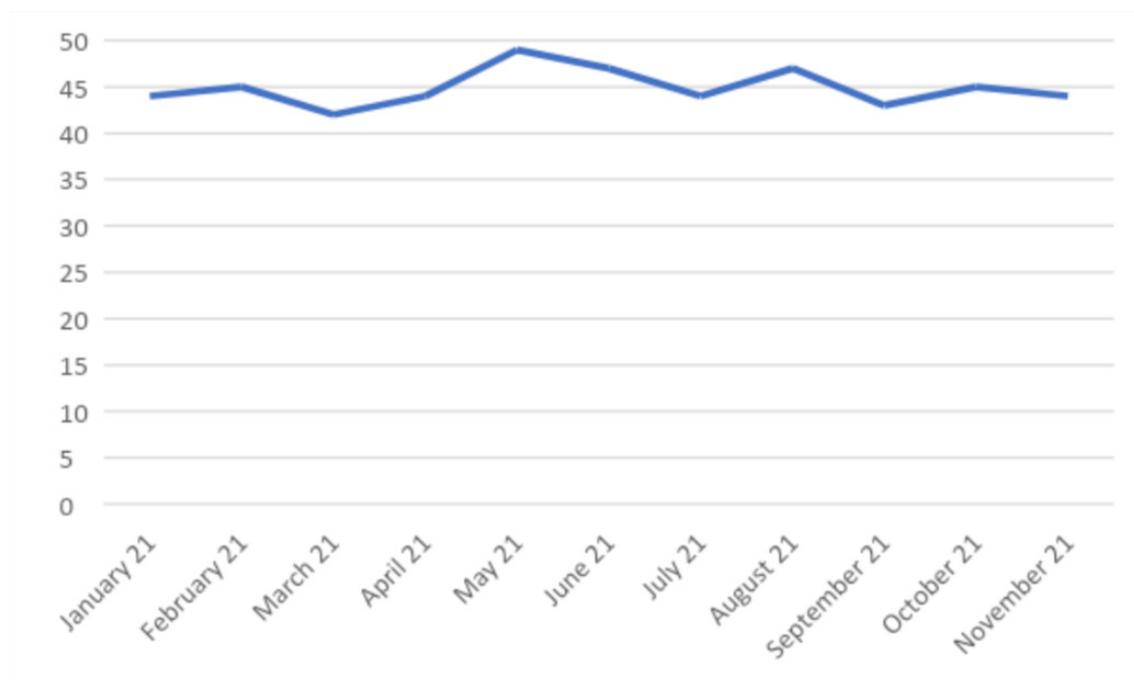
But it isn't just traditional homeschooling. Social distancing strategies introduced Americans to the term “hybrid schooling,” with students attending some days of formal classes in a traditional school building and spending the other days learning from home. Hybrid homeschooling long predates the pandemic, and both traditional public, public charter, and private schools across the country have been providing part at home and part at school learning to thousands of students, in some cases for almost three decades.<sup>7</sup> But the concept

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.amazon.com/Hybrid-Homeschooling-Michael-McShane-dp-1475857977/dp/1475857977/ref=mt\\_other?\\_encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=](https://www.amazon.com/Hybrid-Homeschooling-Michael-McShane-dp-1475857977/dp/1475857977/ref=mt_other?_encoding=UTF8&me=&qid=)

did not hit the mainstream until reducing the number of students in school in a given day became a coronavirus-related priority.

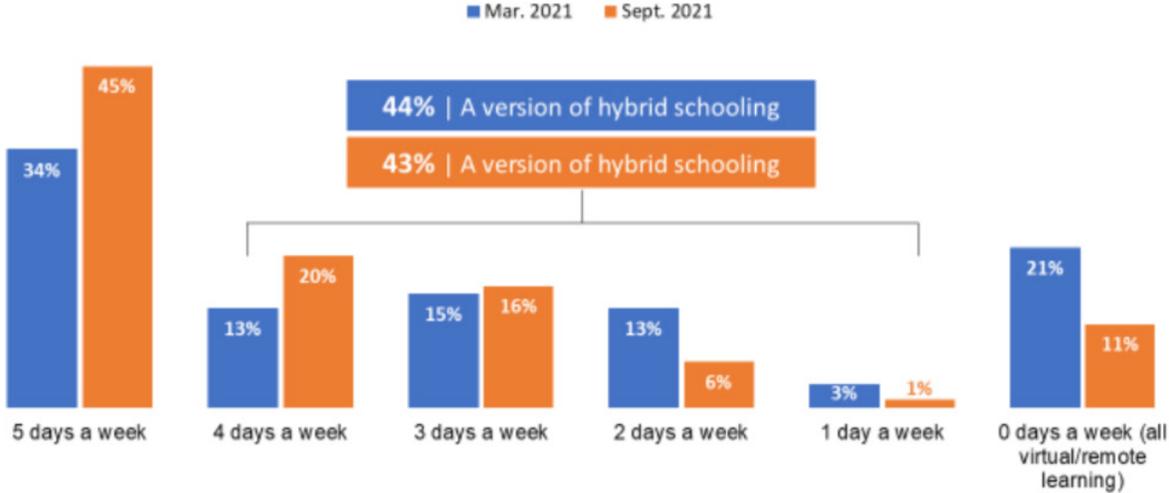
So what did parents think of this? Is it something they would like to continue after the pandemic? Since the beginning of 2021, we have asked parents the question “After the pandemic, if given the option, to what extent would you prefer schooling to be scheduled each week at home with a parent or tutor to provide the best education for your child?” We then give parents the option to select the number of days that they would like at home, from every day to zero days. Figure 3 combines all of the responses that select between one and four days. Between 40 and 50 percent of parents have said that they would like to have students learn from home between one and four days per week (this number excludes those who would want their children totally at home or totally at school).

**Figure 3: Openness to Hybrid Homeschooling**



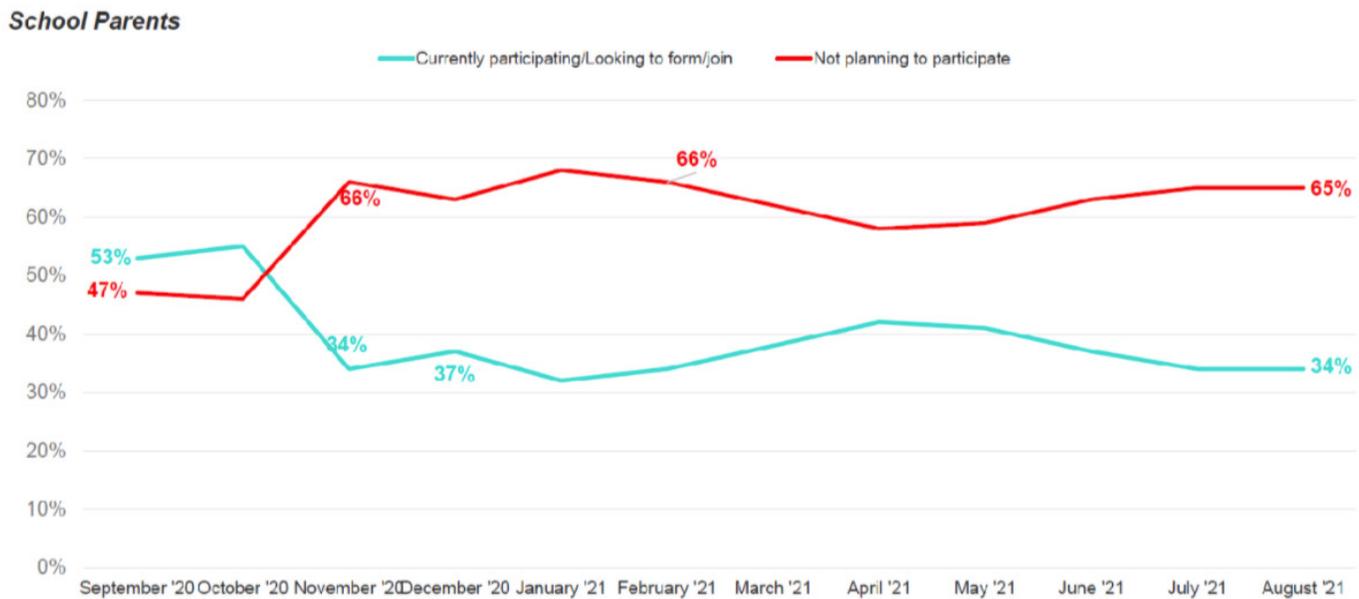
Finally, it might be interesting to know what students themselves would like. In Figure 4, we show the results from our teen polls in February 2021 and September 2021, when students were asked a version of the question that we asked parents, “After the pandemic, if given the option, how many days per week would you like to attend classes in-person?” Both surveys consistently returned a similar number of students wanting a hybrid approach, with 44 percent wanting it in March and 43 percent wanting it in September. Perhaps interestingly, while the number of students choosing each day per week were pretty stable between the two administrations of the survey, the number of students who want full-time, 5-day-per-week schooling increased 11 points, from 34 percent in March to 45 percent in September, and the number who want full-time home-based schooling dropped 10 points from 21 percent to 11 percent.

Figure 4: Teen Opinions on Hybrid Homeschooling



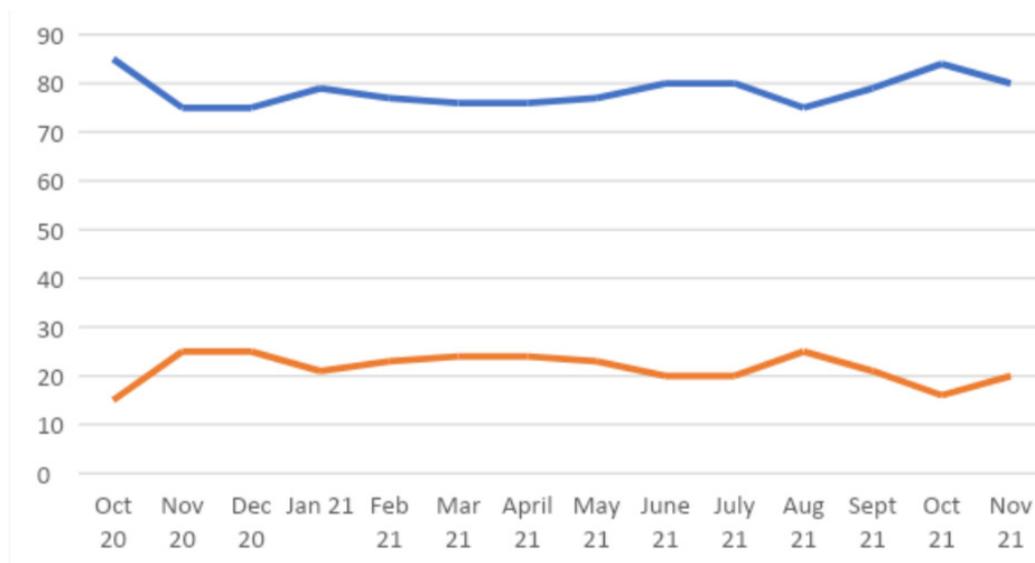
We have also asked a series of questions about pandemic pods. The first is straightforward, “As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, are you currently participating in a “pod” with other families?” We also provide a definition, prompting survey takers with “‘Learning pods’ or ‘pandemic pods’ are small groups of children, organized by parents, gathering to learn together. Parents either hire a private teacher to facilitate or take turns supervising.” Figure 5 displays responses in two categories. The blue-green line reflects the proportion of those parents who said that they were either currently participating in a pod or interested in joining one. The red line shows those who were not interested. Earlier in the pandemic, parents were more open to joining a pod, but by late 2020, the trends had flipped, with fewer families open to pods than not interested. By early 2021, the groups had basically stabilized, with around two-thirds of parents not interested to one third of parents interested.

### Figure 5: Openness to Joining a “Pod”



The term “pandemic pod” can be confusing. When we initially saw substantial percentages of parents saying that they were participating in pandemic pods at the start of the 2020-21 school year, we were skeptical. If the numbers were right, that would mean millions if not tens of millions of families had joined pods. It seemed implausible. So, starting in October of 2020, we added a question to our poll to ask what parents were doing in their pods. Were they doing what many people in education policy think of when it comes to pods, that is, replacing their traditional schooling model with one? Or, were they using the pod to supplement the traditional education that their child was receiving? Figure 6 shows that for the majority of families, pods were used to supplement traditional schooling, not replace it.

### Figure 6: What Pod Users are Doing



Consistently, three quarters of respondents stated that they were using pods to supplement the education that their child’s school was providing, while only one quarter used it to replace. So, if around 12 to 15 percent of parents said that they were participating in a pod (with the rest in Figure 7 coming from the group saying that they were open or looking to join a pod but hadn’t yet) we can take one quarter of that to estimate that something around 3 to 4 percent of families participating in pods as full-bore replacement of their child’s typical school environment.

As a sense of perspective, Catholic schools enroll around 1.6 million students in total,<sup>8</sup> and most people would consider Catholic schools to be a large sector in the American education system. Charter schools enroll around 3.3 million students,<sup>9</sup> and magnet schools enroll around 2.5 million.<sup>10</sup> If over the course of a year or two a new school type or school sector emerged that was the size of the charter schooling sector, or the magnet schooling sector, or even the Catholic schooling sector (which took decades and centuries, respectively, to reach that point) that would be a big deal. Given the demand numbers, that might be possible for homeschooling, hybrid homeschooling, or pandemic pods.

The numbers are worth revisiting. With respect to homeschooling, 61 percent of American parents said that they had a more favorable opinion as a result of the pandemic. That is 58 percent of white parents, 69 percent of Hispanic parents, and 68 percent of Black parents. As for hybrid homeschooling, 44 percent of American parents said that they would prefer some kind of hybrid schedule post-pandemic. That is 39 percent of white parents, 56 percent of Hispanic parents, and 53 percent of Black parents. We can throw 44 percent of teens into that mix as well. And, when it comes to pandemic pods, 34 percent of American parents stated that they were either already in a pod or wanted to join one. That includes 28 percent of white parents, 50 percent of Hispanic parents and 36 percent of Black parents. Simply multiplying these percentages by the total number of schoolchildren in America yields massive numbers. In fact, even if these numbers overstate demand by a factor or two or three, that still suggests that there is a potential Catholic- or Magnet-sector sized market out there waiting to be tapped.

## Lesson #2: Huge equity opportunities are available

Many observers of the surge of innovations that emerged during the coronavirus pandemic offered a fair and important critique, “what if all of this only happens for wealthy and white students.”<sup>11</sup> Ample evidence is piling up that the pandemic hit low income and minority students the worst, with some estimates placing the learning loss at six months in majority Black schools and seven months in majority low-income schools, compared to “only” 4 or 5 months on average for all students.<sup>12</sup> If the harm to closed schools and subpar remote learning redound to low income and minority students and the benefits to new innovations benefit wealthier and white students, the gaps we already see between the outcomes of these groups will widen.

It doesn’t have to be that way.

8 [https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Who\\_We\\_Are/About\\_Catholic\\_Schools/NCEA/Who\\_We\\_Are/About\\_Catholic\\_Schools/Catholic\\_School\\_Data/Catholic\\_School\\_Data.aspx?hkey=86ec3eb1-b329-4e98-9f0e-f271dc6b8d50](https://www.ncea.org/NCEA/Who_We_Are/About_Catholic_Schools/NCEA/Who_We_Are/About_Catholic_Schools/Catholic_School_Data/Catholic_School_Data.aspx?hkey=86ec3eb1-b329-4e98-9f0e-f271dc6b8d50)

9 <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/how-many-charter-schools-and-students-are-there/>

10 [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16\\_216.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_216.20.asp)

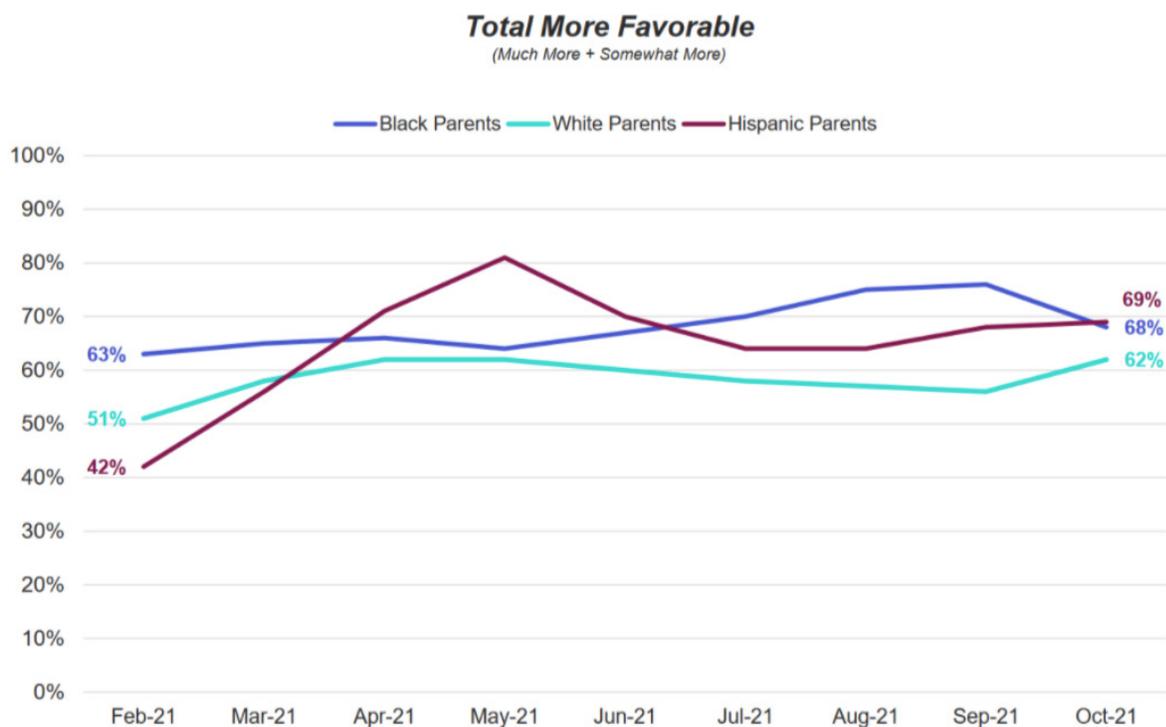
11 <https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2020/08/10/pandemic-pods-for-all-kate-manning-kennedy-liam-kerr>

12 <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>

Our research shows that with respect to homeschooling, hybrid homeschooling, and pandemic pods, minority parents are more interested in pursuing them than white parents.

When broken down by the race of the parent answering the question, we see that both Black and Hispanic parents regularly report that they are more favorable to homeschooling than white parents. Figure 7 shows that from February of 2021 to October of 2021, Black parent support for homeschooling has increased with occasional ebbing, from 63 percent to 68 percent. Hispanic opinion was a bit more volatile (perhaps because of a smaller sample size), with a large peak in support May of 2021, but looking at the trend as a whole shows substantial growth from 42 percent to 69 percent. White parent support has increased as well, but at a much slower rate, and at ultimately a lower level than both Black and Hispanic parents, rising from 51 percent in February of 2021 to 62 percent in October of 2021.

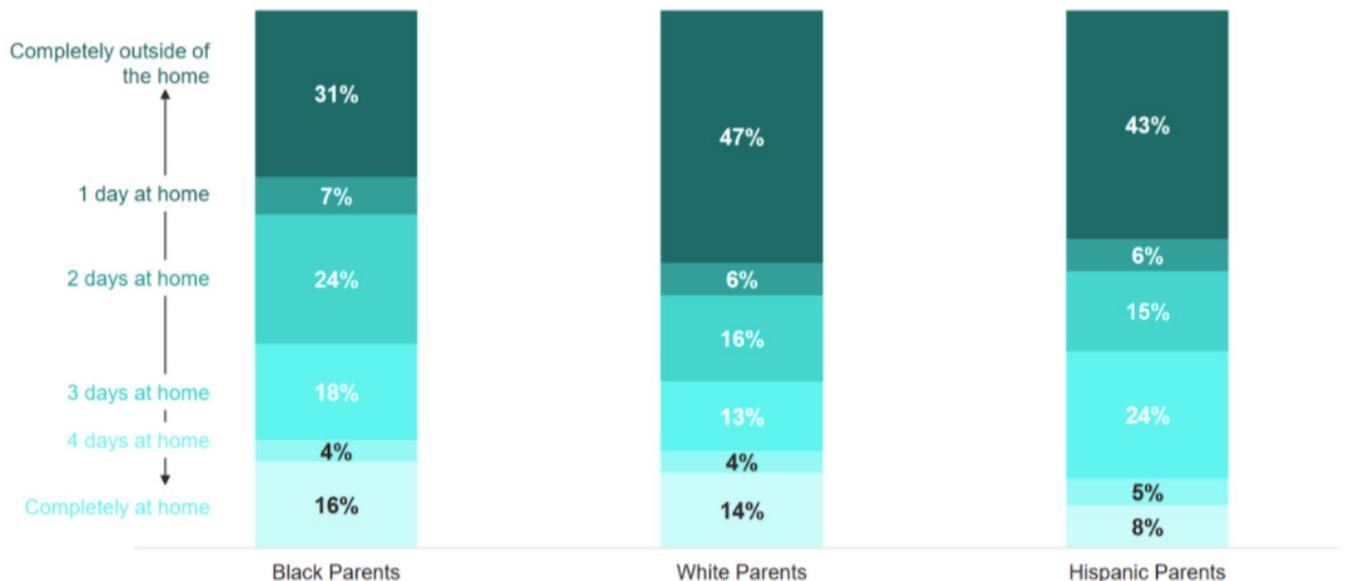
**Figure 7: Homeschooling Opinion by Race of Parent**



The demographic breakdowns for hybrid homeschooling question are interesting as well. We can look at the October 2021 administration of the survey to see how different groups of parents respond. Figure 8 displays preferences for the different day combination choices for Black, white, and Hispanic parents.

## Figure 8: Hybrid Homeschooling Preference by Parent Race, October 2021

After the pandemic, if given the option, to what extent would you prefer schooling to be scheduled each week at home with a parent or tutor to provide the best education for your child?



As we saw with earlier questions, both Black and Hispanic parents are more favorable to full-time homeschooling (or full-time education in the home, at least), but they are also both more interested in some kind of hybrid model. While 39 percent of White parents would like some kind of hybrid schedule, 53 percent of Black parents and 50 percent of Hispanic families would. There is a stark difference in the percentages of parents wanting full-time traditional school as well, with almost half of white parents preferring a 5-day-per-week school model, while only a third of Black parents and about four out of ten Hispanic parents preferring it.

The demographics of pod preferences are interesting as well. To just take our October 2021 survey numbers, Black and Hispanic parents were both more likely to say that they had joined or were interested in joining a pod than white parents. While 26 percent of white parents indicated their interest, 36 percent of black parents did and 34 percent of Hispanic parents did as well. The income distribution was perhaps surprising, with low-income families (those earning less than \$35k per year) more interested than both middle- (\$35k-\$75k) and upper-income (more than \$75k) families. In total, 39 percent of low-income families were interested, while 37 percent of high income and 35 percent of middle-income families were.

Black parents stated that the pandemic had improved their views of homeschooling at a level six points higher than white parents. For Hispanic parents, it was seven points higher. Black parents were also more likely to be favorable to hybrid homeschooling, outscoring white parents by 14 points. Hispanic families were nearly as positive, outscoring white parents by 11 points. This pattern held for pandemic pods as well, with Black parents registering their desire to pod at a rate eight points higher than white families and Hispanic parents doing so at a rate 22 points higher.

We have observed responses by household income have fluctuated month to month. Most recently in November 2021, high-income families were more likely to participate and have interest in pods than families with lower incomes. In total, 41 percent of high-income families experiences interest, while 30 percent of middle-income families and 28 percent of low-income families were showing interest. Homeschooling favorability followed a similar pattern. In the October 2021 administration of the survey 63 percent of high-income parents said that they were more favorable to homeschooling as a result of the pandemic. It was 65 percent for low income parents and 67 percent for middle-income parents.

These are clearly not boutique options for only the wealthy and privileged. There is serious knowledge of, and demand for, these alternative models in other communities. Policymakers and advocates should disabuse themselves of their own stereotypes and expectations of who might be most interested in homeschooling, or hybrid homeschooling, or joining a pandemic pod. Our polling consistently shows that large numbers of lower income and minority families want more and different options.

Should this surprise us? Probably not. As we stated at the outset, low income and minority families bore more of the brunt of the pandemic than wealthier and whiter families. The school districts that serve more low income and minority families were more likely to close for lengthy periods of time. It should not surprise us when the parents from those schools start looking for other options. We are also already seeing some preliminary evidence that homeschooling rates are increasing amongst Black and Hispanic families, neatly tracking changes in public opinion.<sup>13</sup>

### **Lesson #3: Cost is a factor, but perhaps not as much as we think**

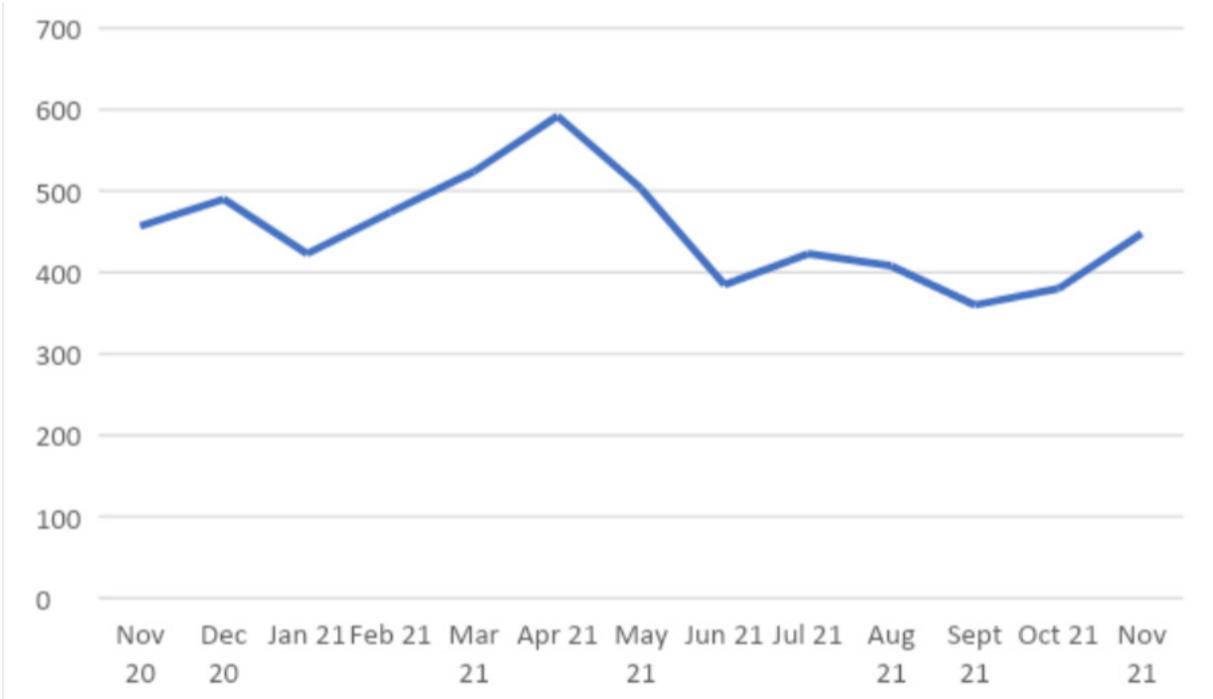
As we work our way through some common objections to new educational models (“they’re not popular,” “ok, they might be popular, but they are only popular amongst wealthier and white families”) we come to a third objection: cost. Traditionally arranged schools benefit from certain economies of scale, the argument goes, and scattering children into homes and pods severs those and ramps up the cost. As cost goes up, lower income families are squeezed out.

Our polling data complicates, but does not totally dismiss, that narrative.

Pods can be expensive to put together, potentially limiting the pool of pod parents. We asked parents how much they would be willing to spend per month to enroll their child in a pod. Figure 9 shows an average between \$400-\$500. There were times when it peaked above that range, and it did go below in a couple recent administrations of the survey, but in aggregate it appears that the \$400-\$500 range is a good estimate for how much parents are willing to spend. That means that a pod of 5 students could generate between \$2000 to \$2500 per month and a pod of 8 students \$3200 to \$4000.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>

**Figure 9: Average Amount Parents Report They are Willing to Spend on a Pod**

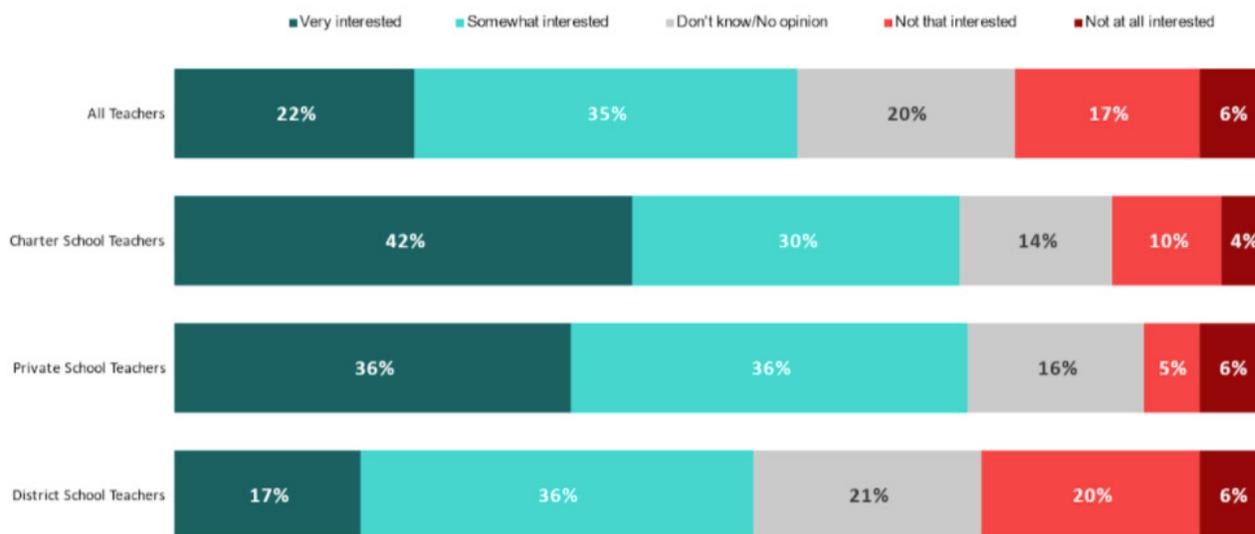


In terms of complication, one thing that we found is that teachers are willing to charge and parents are willing to pay roughly commensurate figures for participating in learning pods.

To understand the other side of the pod coin, we asked teachers about their desire to teach in a pod. Figure 10 shows responses, broken down by school sector in September of 2021. The exact question posed to teachers was, “‘Learning pods’ or ‘pandemic pods’ are small groups of children, organized by parents, gathering to learn together. Parents either hire a private teacher or tutor to facilitate instruction in-person but outside of the school or classroom – usually in someone’s home. How interested are you in facilitating instruction for a learning pod?” A majority of teachers and a majority of teachers in each sector stated that they would be interested in teaching in a learning pod. Traditional public school teachers were the least interested, but still 53 percent expressed interest. Charter school and private school teachers tied as the most interested with 72 percent of respondents stating that they would be interested.

## Figure 9: Interest in Learning Pods by Teaching Sector

### All Teachers



Starting in March of 2021, we added a mirrored question to the one we have been asking parents about how much they would spend to put their child in a learning pod to teachers, asking them “how much would you ask parents to pay per child per month for you to facilitate a learning pod.” In March of 2021, the average teacher response was \$248 per student per month. By July of 2021, it had risen to \$550, only to crest and fall to \$480 by September of 2021. Interestingly, this is right in the range of what parents are willing to spend (and in the case of March 2021, much lower). As we will discuss later, this presents an interesting match for a market to emerge.

It would be a problem if, for example, when we ask teachers how much per student they would charge to teach in a pod and they say \$700 per month and when we ask parents how much they are willing to pay per month and they say \$150. But the numbers are quite close. Generally both teachers and parents set the price at between \$400 and \$500. While certainly not cheap, it is worth putting those figures in context. Annualized to a 10-month school year, that looks like spending between \$4,000 and \$5,000, a price point that competes with some of the lowest-cost Catholic schools and comes in at a fraction of most private schools. It is also less than the \$750 per month parents pay on average for childcare.<sup>14</sup>

That said, \$4,000 to \$5,000 is still a bridge too far for too many families who state that they would be interested. It is also true that we have found that, perhaps unsurprisingly, wealthier families are willing to pay more than lower income families. In our November 2021 survey, high income parents said that they were willing to pay \$556 per month, while middle income parents were only willing to spend \$389 and low income parents \$329. Public policy can help bridge these gaps, and allowing some fraction of the money already spent on students to follow them wherever they choose to learn could cover the costs of pods or other alternative schooling options while still leaving money in traditional schools to provide for students who stay behind.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bankrate.com/finance/credit-cards/summer-childcare-survey/>

## Lesson #4: People want flexible options, but regulatory barriers loom large

So these options are popular, have the ability to reach more traditionally underserved populations, and are not as expensive as one might think, but are they legal? Can families, even if they want to participate in them, actually do so. Here is where our polling data runs into harsh realities. There are many regulations that apply in these situations, but we'd just like to highlight three in order to prove a broader point: the current regulatory structure of education is out of whack with the desires of American school parents.<sup>15</sup>

### Homeschooling regulations

America has a hodgepodge of homeschooling regulations. In some places, as the homeschooling advocacy group HSLDA points out, there are little to no requirements for families wishing to homeschool their children.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, states like New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Rhode Island, make it very difficult for parents to homeschool. In Pennsylvania, for example, parents must file a notarized affidavit with the local superintendent, teach 180 days or 900 hours in specific courses prescribed by the state, maintain portfolios of student work and test students via a standardized test, and have their children evaluated by a qualified educator every year.<sup>17</sup> This is an incredibly onerous and expensive process that makes it extremely challenging for parents to homeschool. Also, depending on how strict the interpretation of school days and hours, families using non-traditional school schedules or calendars could run afoul of these regulations. And, in places like North Carolina, homeschooling arrangements cannot be larger than two families, effectively banning pods.<sup>18</sup>

### Zoning restrictions

Families starting pods or homeschool co-ops in their homes might run afoul of neighborhood zoning regulations. Most states have some threshold where an informal get-together of parents becomes a formal, organized school either regulated as a home-based daycare provider or as a private school. Those regulations are complicated enough, and states have had to issue guidance during the pandemic as to how different organizations should be categorized.

But once people start offering services out of their home and charging people for it, zoning laws can start to become a problem. In areas that are solely zoned to be residential, families could violate restrictions around what activities are and are not allowed. As parents drive up and drop their kids off in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon, neighbors (whether nosy, litigious, or both) can start to ask questions. Now, as has happened throughout the pandemic, families have applied for variances or for local authorities to change the relevant laws, but that again is something that takes time, money, and know-how to get done. Policymakers could pre-emptively protect pods, co-ops, and other gatherings of homeschooling families by explicitly carving their behavior out from zoning regulations.

15 <https://spn.org/blog/protecting-learning-pods/#polling>

16 <https://hslida.org/legal>

17 <https://hslida.org/post/how-to-comply-with-pennsylvanias-homeschool-law>

18 <https://ncadmin.nc.gov/public/home-school-information/home-school-requirements-recommendations>

## Seat time requirements

While rare for homeschoolers, seat time requirements are not uncommon for private schools and are quite common for traditional public and charter schools. As their name implies, they are requirements by the state for students to sit in a desk and learn for a specific number of instructional days or hours in a year. Many of the alternatives that we talked about, and that parents want, would run afoul of seat-time requirements. Hybrid homeschools, for example, only have students in formal classes for part of the week, and the rest they are working from home, which does not usually count towards instructional days or hours. How do we honestly track homeschooling instructional hours? Where is the line between schoolwork and homework? The same is true with pods, though they do have enough of a formal structure that they might be able to satisfy requirements with rigorous recordkeeping.

All in all, though, seat time requirements hold back any innovation in any sector that is looking to play with the instructional day, week, or year. To give parents the flexibility they want, policymakers are going to have to either create waivers for schools to apply to not be held by seat time requirements or simply eliminate them altogether.

## Conclusion

The polling data presented here clearly demonstrates an opportunity for educational innovation post-pandemic. Families across the country are open to different educational options. Large pluralities, if not outright majorities, actually state that they would prefer a non-traditional school model for their children. The children agree. What's more, teachers are open to teaching in them. All of the ducks are in a row.

But it might not work out. It is possible that families and entrepreneurs will not be able to get past the obstacles that we identified. The money might not be there. The regulations might stifle things. There are a hundred little things that might gum up the works. In five years time, pandemic pods and hybrid homeschools might be things we look back on like face masks and 6 feet of distance.

Shy of a complete flameout, educational entrepreneurs and providers might simply go back to what they were often doing pre-pandemic—seeing school districts as easier, low-hanging fruit for their innovations, services, tech, and other products. Sure, we might see examples of school-within-school learning pods or districts offering hybrid homeschooling programs, but they will always exist in an attenuated form at the whims of school districts. They will not fully rise to meet the demand (even if emergent) among families looking for something different.

The question for policymakers, philanthropists, advocates, and researchers moving forward is whether or not supply will rise to meet demand. It is a big ask to expect teachers to quit their stable, predictable jobs and take a leap into something new. Asking parents to do the same is a big ask as well. And then there are the school founders who might need to put their own money on the line to launch a new venture. There is a lot of risk there. What's more, there are several serious hurdles to starting new ventures in the education space, and it remains to be seen if entrepreneurial educators will be able to surmount them. If the next decade is not ten years of educational innovations, it won't be because there wasn't demand for it, it will be because there are too many obstacles for change and innovation in American K-12 education.

## About the Authors

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## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center affiliated with Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. 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.



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