

## PODS IN ACTION:

# KaiPod Learning

**“THE BEST GIG IN EDUCATION RIGHT NOW.” A NEW COMPANY SUSTAINING THE PANDEMIC POD MODEL OFFERS FLEXIBILITY TO TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND PARENTS**

**By Steven Weiner**

KaiPod Learning provides students enrolled in full-time virtual schools with a place to receive in-person academic support, along with the opportunity to socialize with peers and take part in hands-on, active learning activities. Inspired by pandemic learning pods, KaiPod aims to address many of the long-standing challenges of online education, including delayed feedback on academic work, the social isolation of learning at home, an unstructured daily schedule, and the passivity of screen-based learning. Critical to the model is KaiPod’s on-site staff, called learning coaches, who—unlike traditional teachers—are not responsible for delivering academic content and instead focus on providing individualized academic support and curating extracurricular activities based on students’ needs and interests. KaiPod’s first year of operation suggests promise for the company’s unique learning model, while also raising questions about its ability to be sustained and replicated, as well as open to more students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### KEY LESSONS:

**1**

KaiPod Learning is a for-profit company offering students enrolled in online schools the opportunity to learn in a physical location with adult supervision, academic support, and extracurricular enrichment. Tuition is attendance based, with the option of students going two, three, or five days per week.

**2**

The small-group “learning pod” configuration and the division of teaching responsibilities into two roles—content development/delivery and student engagement—may be desirable for educators frustrated by large class sizes and traditional teaching roles.

**3**

As a small company hoping to expand nationally to improve and support online learning experiences, KaiPod Learning will have to develop new strategies for financial sustainability, for being open to all children regardless of income, and for meeting government oversight obligations should they receive public funding.

## KEY FACTS:



LOCATION:  
MA, PA

5

SITES (AS  
OF SPRING  
2022)

42

STUDENTS  
SERVED

3-12

GRADES  
SERVED

## Finding opportunity in crisis and inspiration from necessity

It was during the summer of 2020 when Amar Kumar, a veteran developer of educational software and curriculum, realized that a pandemic learning trend may have accidentally solved some of online schooling's most challenging and persistent problems.

As schools closed and districts shifted to virtual learning in March 2020, millions of students were suddenly socially isolated, disengaged from their coursework, fatigued by screens, and bereft of high-quality academic support. Meanwhile, parents struggled to juggle work responsibilities with their new roles as long-term substitute teachers, tech-support providers, and tutors.

Desperate to address the problems caused by closure of school buildings, many families devised their own solution: the pandemic pod, which engaged small groups of students with the support of hired instructors or parent volunteers. Pandemic pods allowed students to socialize with peers while receiving virtual schooling support. Many also provided technology assistance, academic support, and structured schedules with "screen breaks." Some pods organized extracurricular activities, from nature walks to engineering projects.

As the pandemic pod movement gained momentum, Kumar wondered if it held the key to a new educational model, one that integrated the benefits of in-person instruction while taking advantage of the flexibility and self-direction of online education. With more parents considering alternatives to traditional schooling, Kumar launched KaiPod Learning, an education company that provides students enrolled full-time in virtual schools the chance to receive in-person academic support, peer interaction, and opportunities for hands-on, experiential, and collaborative learning.

## Online education: The potential, the pitfalls, and the pandemic

For decades, education innovators have seen great promise in online learning. Its proponents have long argued that it could radically democratize access to high-quality curricula while giving students the freedom to choose when, where, and what they study. In the 2010s, enthusiasm and financial support for projects like Khan Academy and Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs) prompted the slow but steady expansion of online schooling options

for K-12 students. Although national data are scarce, it's clear that millions of K-12 students engaged in some form of online education in the decade before the pandemic, with upwards of [300,000 U.S. students attending online schools full-time](#) during the 2017-18 school year alone.

As online education's momentum grew, so too did the awareness that it had serious drawbacks. Students engaged in online learning frequently had [lower academic outcomes](#) than those attending traditional schools, displayed less motivation to complete their coursework, and [reported feeling disconnected from both their teachers and peers](#). The version of online education that dominated during the pandemic, sometimes called "[emergency remote schooling](#)," highlighted such shortcomings while eschewing potential advantages. Unlike prior online schooling models, many districts required students to "attend" courses at specific times, switching from one video conference room to another as if they were in a physical building. Students could not self-pace their studies and were forced to sit in front of their computer screens in isolation for hours each day.

Despite this poor implementation, Kumar saw parents had been jolted from the status quo, and some of them might be open to trying new educational models as pandemic-era disruptions faded from view. Kumar thought pandemic pods may hold the key to preserving the flexibility and choice that are hallmarks of online learning while addressing its pitfalls. By providing students already enrolled in online educational programs with in-person academic support and opportunities for social engagement, KaiPod Learning hoped to retain the best of both virtual and brick-and-mortar education.

## **KaiPod Learning: The best of both worlds?**

In June 2021, KaiPod Learning launched with a summer pilot program for eight students ranging from sixth to ninth grade. The students enrolled in two courses of their choosing through Pearson Online Academy and, for six weeks, met in a storefront space in Newton, MA, along with two learning coaches. When they opened for the 2021-22 school year, they had a total of 15 students across sites in Boston and Harrisburg.

The KaiPod Learning model combines elements of a tutoring center, one-room schoolhouse, and computer lab. One pod serves no more than 10 students, each of whom spend three to four hours of the day working independently on online courses and another three to four hours collaborating on projects and engaging in active, hands-on learning. KaiPod Learning's in-person staff, called learning coaches, provide academic guidance and curate enrichment activities.

Kumar believes that this kind of hybrid model of online and real-world education can meet the needs of parents who want more control over their children's learning environments, educators who want to focus on building relationships and curating experiences, and students who want more social and hands-on activities to accompany their online learning. KaiPod Learning's first year of operation provides insight into how the aspirations of this model translate into practice.

### ***Giving back control: Choice, flexibility, and customization***

Choice and customization have always been foundational in attracting families to online schooling. While online courses may be structured similarly to those in brick-and-mortar classrooms with standardized learning goals and assignment deadlines, they still allow for significant variation in how students choose to engage: for example, a geometry student may opt to work on a subject for 45 minutes a day, similar to a traditional class period, another could decide to complete all of a course's

assignments for the week in one day, and a third might like to immerse themselves in one course at a time, completing a semester's worth of work in three to four weeks.

Kumar sought to meet families' desire for more customization by making KaiPod Learning as adaptable as possible. Parents chose how many days their child would attend each week and even how long they would stay each day. Students choose what courses to take, how fast they move through them, and what enrichment activities accompany their learning.

"We give you choice on how you consume the product of school and how you put it together in a way that works for your child and works for your family," Kumar explained. He hopes KaiPod Learning centers will proliferate and differentiate to provide communities with a range of different learning-environment options, from more traditional classroom spaces to outdoor gardens.

Even within the daily structure, student choice is foregrounded. A normal day at a KaiPod Learning center is organized into focused blocks of time, with no activity lasting more than an hour and a half and with the students given breaks every 25 minutes. In academic blocks, students log into their individual online learning platforms and engage in the coursework of their choosing. Unlike a regular school, one student could be working on geometry proofs, while another may be watching a history lecture. During these blocks, learning coaches help maintain student engagement in their online coursework, as well as addressing technology issues, test-prep strategies, or any other challenges students face. Students also have dedicated blocks of free time in which they can unwind, chat with friends, or play games and enrichment blocks for engaging in creative, hands-on, and/or social learning experiences. Learning coaches are empowered to flex and shift the schedule day to day, based on student needs and availability as well as the availability of external partners who provide specific enrichment content.

While choice is still core to Kumar's vision, he is still learning how much—and what kinds—of choice families really want. For example, during the summer pilot, parents were given the option to drop off and pick up their children at any time throughout the day. Despite this flexibility, most parents still opted for a traditional school start time, between 8 and 9 a.m. In trying to be accessible to a variety of different budgets and needs, KaiPod has already iterated through several pricing structures, slicing costs by the amount of time a student was on-site, what kinds of services they received, and if they took part in enrichment activities. Eventually, most of these options were dropped in favor of a simple model that was based on attendance: two, three, or five days per week.

"I think there were like 15 options and then we realized that's going to be a mess to manage," Kumar said. "It's confusing to families. So we decided to simplify dramatically to say there's three options. And we did that by thinking . . . 'What student experience do we want?'"

## Unbundling teaching

Traditionally, the role of a teacher encompasses an overwhelming number of responsibilities. Core tasks include designing daily lessons, providing feedback on student work, monitoring and managing the behavior of 25–35 students, orchestrating standardized-testing schedules, communicating with parents, holding after-school tutoring sessions, and often running clubs or coaching sports. Kumar saw KaiPod as an opportunity to “unbundle” these responsibilities by leaving the bulk of academic work to online teachers and creating a new in-person role that was focused on providing personalized academic support and facilitating engaging, hands-on enrichment activities; this position is that of the learning coach.

A key feature of its model is that KaiPod Learning does not produce its own educational content. Instead, students who participate in KaiPod must be enrolled in a separate online education program of their choice.<sup>1</sup> By relying on existing online schools to handle curriculum development, content delivery, and assessment, KaiPod positions learning coaches to focus on providing students with personalized academic support as well as facilitating extracurricular activities based on student interests.

To Kumar, unbundling content delivery from other teacher roles has enormous potential. As he said, “What if we could . . . find the best teachers in every state to deliver the content online to every kid, and then on-site in the school were these coaches who were just great human beings, who just wanted to get to know their kids really well?”

Learning coaches do not plan lessons, grade papers, or lecture. Instead, they hold daily one-on-one meetings with each student to discuss challenges or problems encountered in their online classes. They also have access to each student’s online learning platform and can see how they are performing on assessments, whether they are submitting assignments on time, and how far they are progressing in each course. If necessary, coaches can communicate with the online instructors directly, although they also give students guidance and encouragement to reach out to their teachers on their own. In this way, learning coaches aim to provide valuable social skills necessary for succeeding in an online environment.

“It’s a triangle where the school, the parent, and KaiPod coexists, all supporting the other, all supporting the student,” Kumar said.

Learning coaches also design activities to encourage student socialization and plan enrichment activities based on the interests of students in the pod. With such a small number of students, learning coaches are able to devote significant effort to curating each week’s schedule, often taking into account student availability. One coach noted that “if we knew . . . one kid is really into engineering but he’s not going to be here Thursday and Friday, we want to make sure that we have that engineer on a day that he’s going to be here.”

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<sup>1</sup> KaiPod Learning is currently partnered with more than 20 online schools, which vary widely in their accreditation, grade range, cost, and national availability. For example, Sora Schools is a tuition-based online school available nationwide for students in grades 7–12, while CoLearn Academy is a free K–12 charter school open only to students located in Arizona.

During the summer pilot in Massachusetts, learning coaches reported high satisfaction with their roles. One said, “I was really impressed by . . . how sustainable this job seemed, while still making a huge impact and still getting to do the things that I really enjoyed about teaching, like interacting with the students, making those relationships and those connections.”

It is no surprise that [other similar models of “unbundled teaching”](#) are emerging. KaiPod learning coaches can provide students with personalized, one-on-one support while maintaining a more humane workload than a traditional teacher—and Kumar has sought to match learning coach salaries with those of local teachers, making the role even more attractive. One learning coach put it as follows:

Even though I’m not doing the lesson planning and the grading—I hated the grading but I loved the lesson planning—I still really feel like a teacher, which is really nice. . . . Even if I’m not working in a traditional school building, I still want to feel like an educator. I still want to feel like I’m in an educational space, and I still feel that and still get that same fulfillment out of the work I’m doing with KaiPod. I don’t do any work outside of that 8:00 to 5:30 range . . . It really does feel like the best gig in education right now.

### *Learning beyond screens*

The same features of online learning that give students the freedom to decide what, when, and where they learn can also make the experience isolating and monotonous. By design, most online courses are based on individualized assignments with little opportunity to work with peers and require students to spend considerable time working at a computer. In order to address these deficits, KaiPod Learning seeks to provide students with opportunities to socialize and engage in a variety of real-world enrichment activities.

During the summer pilot, KaiPod engaged a wide range of nontraditional educators, including a sculptor, local historian, engineer, and yoga instructor, who offered students hands-on learning activities during daily enrichment blocks. Often these individuals were invited based on the interest of the students in the pod. One learning coach described this as breaking down the barrier between learning inside and outside the classroom, saying that KaiPod aimed to “make learning student friendly, student facing, accessible, and relatable so that students don’t just see these things happening in a vacuum. Let’s see how we can really bring their education into the real world and bring the real world to them.”

Providing this kind of content during a summer program, in which students only take two online courses, may be comparatively easier than when students have a full course load. Yet, Kumar argues that it is possible to still provide several hours of enrichment each day precisely because students can learn core content more efficiently in an online school than in a traditional one. “It’s arguably one of the most important parts of the pod, because . . . you’re engaging at your learning frontier. You are doing the next most important thing for yourself. It could be math, it could be social studies . . . and online learning makes that possible.”

Kumar concedes that there are times when it is necessary to “dial up the online learning” and focus more on online coursework and less on enrichment activities—for example, before big tests or when major assignments are due. Thanks to the small size of the pods, learning coaches can adjust schedules on the fly to accommodate the specific needs and situations of their students.

## The future of KaiPod Learning: Opportunities and challenges

While still small, Kumar has plans for KaiPod Learning’s nationwide expansion and has [attracted over \\$1 million in private investments](#). His current strategy is to focus on opening pods in states that have favorable policy conditions for nontraditional educational models. By the end of the year, Kumar hopes to have 12 pods open in four states—Arizona, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Georgia—supporting more than 120 students.

There are reasons to be optimistic about KaiPod Learning’s future. [Many parents, teachers, and students thrived in the pandemic learning pod environment and were sad to see them disband. Declining public school enrollment numbers](#) suggest that families are still interested in alternative schooling options. Kumar is also exploring ways to package KaiPod services as a supplement to [homeschooling, which is on the rise](#). Additionally, more states are offering Education Savings Accounts and similar programs, which allow qualified families to redirect public school funds toward approved educational resources, such as tutoring or private school. KaiPod Learning has already become “ESA approved” in Arizona, potentially broadening access to families who couldn’t otherwise afford the additional expense.

In order for KaiPod Learning to achieve the scale and impact that Kumar envisions, it will have to overcome a host of complex challenges, including financial sustainability. Finding a business model in which KaiPod remains affordable to families while being able to fairly compensate staff remains a puzzle. Currently, KaiPod is not cheap: while prices vary widely between locations and enrollment plans, even the low-end options cost parents several hundred dollars per month (the monthly fee for attending three days per week at the original location in Newton, MA, is currently \$620). While this is considerably less than the typical cost of a private school, it could limit access for families who aren’t able to take advantage of a state ESA program. Even at these rates, KaiPod is currently far from profitable.

“Just like any venture-backed model, we’re going to lose some money in the beginning because we want to get the model right,” Kumar said. He added the company may incorporate summer camps or weekend activities into each center’s offerings, to boost financial viability.

Kumar does not foresee KaiPod becoming a large chain operator. “I don’t want to set up hundreds of pods myself, I want teachers to do it. I want educators to do it,” he said. “If we can then provide the infrastructure to make it super easy for them to set up their own pods, then [KaiPod] becomes what resembles more of a software company or maybe a franchise model.”

Yet finding a path toward financial viability will be a small victory if that path only serves a small, economically advantaged subset of the student population. For this reason, Kumar is exploring strategies for working with the public education sector, including partnering with districts that already run their own public virtual schools. Should such partnerships come to fruition, KaiPod could face heightened scrutiny from education regulators and greater exposure to rules around assessment, accountability, and student privacy. But because KaiPod defies easy categorization—not exactly a school, aftercare service, content provider, or tutoring center—deciding how it is regulated could be tricky, especially given that decisions on regulation may vary widely between states or districts.

Perhaps the most critical challenge will be to validate the fundamental assumption of the model: that students can meet or exceed traditional academic goals through the combination of online learning and in-person support. Currently, that remains to be seen.

Regardless of what happens next, KaiPod Learning has already presented a compelling alternative vision of education. Pandemic pods helped inspire a new learning model that may be an improvement over not just online learning but traditional in-person schooling, as well. Students and families may be able to customize their educational experiences, while also being part of a tight-knit learning community. Unbundling the many responsibilities of teachers may result in the creation of new, more satisfying educator roles. Leveraging the challenges of the pandemic into such hopeful possibilities is certainly reason enough to warrant paying close attention to KaiPod Learning.

## About the Author

**Steven Weiner** is a research analyst at the Center on Reinventing Public Education, where he brings an interdisciplinary lens to understanding transformative change within educational systems.



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