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‘Pandemic Pods’ Make Homeschooling Easier for Parents, Profitable for Teachers

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This tumultuous back-to-school season has parents and teachers alike scrambling to make sense of the madness: from ever-changing district directives to COVID-19 response protocols.

Some school systems have announced that the academic year will start with remote learning only. Others are pursuing partial reopening options with both online and in-person instruction. Still others are planning to fully reopen for in-person learning.

Amid this chaos, parents and teachers are increasingly opting out of the conventional classroom entirely to find or create schooling alternatives this fall.

Parents have been vocal about their back-to-school concerns, with growing numbers of them choosing to homeschool this fall rather than contending with remote learning options or confronting viral exposure and dystopian social distancing measures in schools.

But it’s not just parents who have back-to-school worries. Many teachers, too, don’t want to go back and are upset at reopening plans.

Teachers’ unions are now battling districts over these plans. In Florida, where schools are scheduled to fully reopen for in-person learning this month, the state’s largest teachers’ union sued the governor and education commissioner last month. The Florida union is asking for smaller class sizes and more protective gear for teachers.

More parents *and* teachers are choosing to avoid this bureaucratic mess altogether and are pursuing their own educational solutions.

Entrepreneurial Educators Build a Better Way

Some parents are hiring tutors to augment their homeschooling experience this fall, and entrepreneurial teachers are serving that need and cashing in on the opportunity. One high school English teacher in Illinois, who asked to remain anonymous, told me that she made \$49,000 a year teaching 9th grade and AP English, but several families have approached her for private tutoring and she realizes she can make more money as a private tutor, with fewer hours and more flexibility.

In addition to homeschooling, some parents are forming pandemic “pods,” or home-based microschools that allow a handful of families to take turns teaching their children or pool resources to hire a teacher or college student. The Wall Street Journal reports that these pods are sprouting throughout the country, fueled by parental unrest at school reopening plans and facilitated by informal Facebook groups connecting local families.

Recognizing this mounting demand for schooling alternatives this fall, entrepreneurial educators are helping to create more options for families. In Maryland, longtime educators Steven Eno and Ned Courtemanche created Impact Connections, a microschool enabler connecting educators and parents and providing learning support.

“COVID-19 exposed so many of the shortcomings we already knew about in education but also presented new opportunities to step up and help parents and their kids,” Eno told me in a recent interview.

“Microschools offer a powerful, and largely untapped, opportunity to educate our kids in the COVID era and beyond. The best microschools offer highly-personalized instruction that is free of curricular red tape for a fraction of the price,” he says.

The legality of these pandemic pods and microschools is sometimes unclear. As a new model that blends features of homeschool co-ops with small, private schools, regulations in many places haven’t caught up. Additionally, the sheer numbers of parents choosing not to send their kids back to school this fall, and the pandemic’s overall disruption, may make enforcement of any existing regulations more difficult.

This presents an ideal moment for what Adam Thierer calls “evasive entrepreneurship,” where entrepreneurs push boundaries and challenge existing systems. Thierer writes in his book, “Evasive Entrepreneurs”:

“Increasingly today, *evasive entrepreneurs*—innovators who don’t always conform to social or legal norms—are using new technological capabilities to circumvent traditional regulatory systems, or at least to put pressure on public policymakers to reform or selectively enforce laws and regulations that are outmoded, inefficient, or illogical. Evasive entrepreneurs rely on a strategy of permissionless innovation in both the business world and the political arena. They push back against ‘the Permission Society,’ or the convoluted labyrinth of permits and red tape that often encumber entrepreneurial activities. In essence, evasive entrepreneurs live out the adage that ‘it is easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to get permission’ by creating exciting new products and services without necessarily receiving the blessing of public officials before doing so.”

Not Just for the Wealthy

Criticism over these private education options has surged over the past few weeks, as commentators claim that homeschooling and pandemic pods will widen gaps between higher- and lower-income families. An op-ed in The New York Times decried these private pods, saying “they will exacerbate inequities, racial segregation and the opportunity gap within schools.” These criticisms ignore the fact that some parents create no-cost pods in which they take turns educating their children in a co-op format, and as an article in the July 23 New York Times points out, “the population of home-schoolers—before the pandemic—was less affluent than average.” Homeschooling, and its current “podding” variation, are not just for the wealthy.

Moreover, if education funding supported students rather than school bureaucracies, more families would get access to an array of education options—including these new models and ones that have yet to be invented. Taxpayers spend about \$700 billion each year on US K-12 education. If that money was redistributed to families in the form of education savings accounts

(ESAs), vouchers, tax-credit scholarship programs, and other education choice mechanisms, parents would have many more options beyond an assigned district school.

Corey DeAngelis, director of school choice at the Reason Foundation, has written and spoken much about this, stating: “More families would have access to these alternatives if education funding followed children to wherever they receive their educations. Teachers could also benefit from such a system, which would likely offer them smaller class sizes, more autonomy, and higher salaries.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is disrupting many of the systems and structures that have prevented choice and innovation in the past. Frustrated parents, along with entrepreneurial educators, have the opportunity to experiment with new models of teaching and learning, and education choice policies will make these new models accessible to any family that wants them.

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