Research Note

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The Rise of Learning Pods: Civil Society’s Expanding Role in K-12 Education in the United States

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Abstract: This research note illuminates the ascent of so-called “learning pods”, a concept and phenomenon with close connections to civil society that rose to prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. We begin by characterizing and positioning learning pods in the diverse U.S. K-12 educational landscape. Next, participation in, and intent to form/join, learning pods are depicted by reporting on secondary data from a population poll among a national sample of U.S. adults since the start of the 2020 academic school year to December 2021. The second half of the research note discusses how learning pods can help garner useful insights to existing nonprofit research and theory.

Keywords: civil society; voluntary action; K-12 education; learning pods

1 Introduction

One of the most noticeable and vivid effects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the closing of schools, which created an unfamiliar and exigent situation for millions of parents who needed to quickly adapt to new roles and expectations in order to support their children and their learning (Garbe et al. 2020). The principal response to the pandemic from many public (and private) educational providers was a switch to remote virtual learning. The effectiveness of this response is currently being evaluated, but early empirical research indicates mixed results (e.g. Roy et al. 2022).

However, the remote virtual learning option was not the only route by which society responded to the educational needs of K-12 children. As the 2020 academic...
school year commenced, storylines started to emerge indicating families across the U.S. had decided to take their children’s education into their own hands by starting up small community-based schooling arrangements with neighbors, family members, and/or friends. These arrangements became known as learning pods (or pandemic pods) (Burke 2020; Natanson 2020; Zimmerman 2020). The purpose of this research note is to empirically illustrate the emergence and scope of learning pods since the beginning of the 2020 academic school year to the end 2021 and discuss how learning pods provide opportunities to help advance existing nonprofit theory and research.

2 What is a Learning Pod?

Learning pods defy easy generalizations, and to date there is no consensus how to define these entities. According to Watson (2020, 595), a learning pod can be described as a form of “grassroots education innovation” that emerges when families in a neighborhood or vicinity bring children similar in age together to organize and participate in educational activity. Hence, at first glance, learning pods appear to resemble and have close ties to homeschooling i.e. the parent-controlled undertaking of educating one’s own children rather than attending formal schooling (Ray 2000). However, there are two key distinctions to recognize.

First, learning pods assemble groups of local children together into clusters with participating families pooling resources and collaborating to educate the children (Bedrick and Ladner 2020). While homeschooling parents sometimes adopt such collaborations, partaking in so-called cooperative homeschooling, pre-pandemic data suggests only about 30 % of homeschoolers participate in some form of cooperative arrangements (Valiente et al. 2022). In other words, most homeschooling is confined to single family units whereas learning pods are characterized by broader local community participation.

Second, as noted earlier, homeschooling implies parental control, which is established by un-enrolling children from their existing public (or private) school, making the parents solely responsible for determining the curriculum, lesson plans, and methods of instruction, in accordance with existing state laws and regulations. According to McShane (2020), some families elected to go this route by organizing autonomous learning pods to replace their children’s public or private school. However, most families creating and joining learning pods kept their children enrolled in a public or private school. The benefit of doing so is that the learning pod could receive additional support from existing public or private schools. Hence, most learning pods are best depicted as hybrid entities or collaborations (we will showcase autonomous as well as support pods in the subsequent empirical section).
Although it is difficult to provide common definition that fully captures all facets of learning pods, they undoubtedly made an impression when they first appeared (Horn 2021). Natanson (2020), for example, interviewed an experienced elementary school principal saying the growth and scope of learning pods had “shocked her beyond anything else in her 30 years as an educator.” They were also a scholarly blind spot, as Watson (2020, 597) observes, “[e]mpirical research on learning pods, participation rates, demographics, and efficacy are nonexistent. They are simply too new for empirical research to exist.”

3 Learning Pods: Descriptive Results from Monthly Polling Data

Although learning pods have received a significant amount of media attention, the early information and reporting about pods emanated from anecdotal evidence or highly limited localized data. This segment presents empirical findings using secondary data from a monthly online population poll among a national sample of adults (age 18+) living in the United States. The polls were conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of EdChoice, an Indianapolis-based nonprofit organization conducting research, training, and support focused on a variety of matters related to educational choice. Each population poll includes approximately 2200 adults interviewed in English each month with a field period of 2–5 days, including an oversampling of K-12 parents, and is summarized in a set of reports (EdChoice 2020 2021a). The data presented here only report the responses from K-12 parents and was drawn directly from the EdChoice reports ranging from August 2020 to December 2021, with regard to the following question “Are you currently participating in a ‘pod’ with other families?”. Three answer options were available: yes, no, and no, but we are looking to form or join a pod.

Though the main pod polling question above has been the same since August 2020, some questions were added to provide more nuance. However, it was not until the October 2020 poll that respondents were also asked what type of learning pod (support/hybrid or fully autonomous) they participated in or were looking to form/join.

The results displayed in Table 1 illuminate two main points: (i) learning pods were not a fringe phenomenon, and (ii) the interest in forming or joining learning pods remained rather consistent among U.S. parents. Participation in learning pods started out above 30 % at the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year. At the end of the 2020/2021 academic year, the participation numbers descended yet still hovered
Table 1: Learning pod participation by month and type (August 2020 to December 2021).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>n (Parents)</th>
<th>Currently participating in a pod (%)</th>
<th>Pod type among pod participants: Autonomous (%)</th>
<th>Pod type among pod participants: Support (%)</th>
<th>Looking to form/join pod (%)</th>
<th>Pod type among participants looking to form/join: Autonomous (%)</th>
<th>Pod type among participants looking to form/join: Support (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2020</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>33 (n/a)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>14 (n/a)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 2020</td>
<td>1261</td>
<td>35 (n/a)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>18 (n/a)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 2020</td>
<td>1278</td>
<td>31 (15)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>18 (33)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2020</td>
<td>1246</td>
<td>15 (25)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>19 (38)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 2020</td>
<td>1290</td>
<td>18 (25)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>19 (33)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan 2021</td>
<td>1154</td>
<td>14 (21)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>18 (34)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feb 2021</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>19 (23)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>15 (33)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mar 2021</td>
<td>1164</td>
<td>19 (24)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>19 (30)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 2021</td>
<td>1134</td>
<td>22 (24)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>20 (30)</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2021</td>
<td>1166</td>
<td>23 (23)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>18 (33)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jun 2021</td>
<td>1228</td>
<td>18 (20)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>19 (27)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jul 2021</td>
<td>1228</td>
<td>16 (20)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>18 (27)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug 2021</td>
<td>1273</td>
<td>13 (25)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>21 (33)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sep 2021</td>
<td>1207</td>
<td>13 (16)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>21 (38)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oct 2021</td>
<td>1121</td>
<td>12 (21)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>20 (29)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nov 2021</td>
<td>1199</td>
<td>16 (20)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>18 (29)</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec 2021</td>
<td>1325</td>
<td>18 (11)</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>21 (31)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bold values are the percentage of parents (respondents) either partaking in a learning pod or looking to join or form a learning pod.
around 15%. However, Table 1 also offers some additional nuance, showing a substantial majority of parents participating in a pod are using the support/hybrid type rather than being in a fully autonomous pod. Put differently, pods appear to mostly function as a supplement to a child’s school rather than as a replacement.

A subsequent EdChoice (2021b) report drawing information from the December 2021 poll, brings additional information about the parents participating in, and those displaying intent in forming or joining, learning pods. Specifically, younger parents (age 18–34) are more likely to participate in learning pods, and more interested in forming or joining pods, compared to older parents (age 35–55). Learning pods are more common in urban areas (31%) compared to suburban (10%) and rural areas (10%), and even though high-income households are ($75K+) are more likely to participate in learning pods (27%) compared to low-income households (<$35K) (8%), parents in low-income households display approximately the same level of interest in forming or joining pods as high-income households. The report also shows that those identifying as democrat are more likely to participate in (27%) learning pods compared to those identifying as republican (12%) or independent (9%).

Considering the overall racial and ethnic makeup of the U.S. population, and the relative size of each group, minority parents are much more likely to participate in learning pods. Parents identifying as Hispanic have the highest level of participation (22%), followed by parents identifying as Black (17%) and Asian (11%). Among white parents the participation rate was 17%. In addition, minority parents display significantly more interest in forming or joining learning pods (Hispanic, 29%; Black, 21%; Asian, 34%) compared to white parents (18%). Furthermore, parents identifying as special needs parents are considerably more likely to have their children in a learning pod (31%) compared to non-special needs parents (14%).

Finally, parents with younger children (Kindergarten to 4th grade, 21%; 5th to 8th grade, 24%) tend to participate more in learning pods compared to parents with older children (9th to 12th grade, 14%), and parents of younger children also display greater interest in forming or joining learning pods (Kindergarten to 4th grade, 27%; 9th to 12th grade, 16%).

Having presented an empirical snapshot, ranging from August 2020 to December 2021, of participation in learning pods among U.S. parents, the next section will discuss how the learning pod phenomenon connects to, and subsequently can support and further develop, nonprofit scholarship.

### 4 Discussion

So far this research note has illustrated how learning pods emerged as an appealing choice for many U.S. parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for parents
with younger children, and among minority parents and parents of children with special needs. Interestingly, even as many public and private K-12 schools returned to a more conventional schooling mode of five full days per week in a standardized classroom setting, learning pods appear to have remained an alluring option for many U.S. families. EdChoice (2022), for example, surveyed U.S. parents at the start of the 2022/23 academic year and reported 20% of parents were still looking to join or form a learning pod. Likewise, education researchers have noted there are several factors in the U.S. educational landscape converging to cause parents to seek new and/or different options for schooling (Dee 2023; Watson 2020). According to Watson (2023), the number of children being schooled from home (entirely or partially) has not only increased significantly over the past three years, but remains at a much higher level even as the pandemic started to wane, and schools were reopened.

So, why should nonprofit researchers pay attention to the dynamics of the educational landscape in general, and learning pods in particular? Firstly, the nonprofit sector has long played a pivotal part in the U.S. K-12 education system (Salamon 1992). For example, there is a sizable number of private, predominantly religious, nonprofit schools serving a substantial number of students across the U.S. Moreover, since the start of the 21st century the number and influence of so-called education- or school-supporting nonprofits such as parent–teacher organizations, alumni associations, local education foundations, and volunteer-led booster clubs have grown significantly (Nelson and Gazley 2014). These entities provide a set of structures and channels for groups and individuals to not only communicate collectively with schools and school leaders, but also functions as an avenue for parents (and local communities) to contribute to their children’s schools more directly (Good and Nelson 2021). In other words, key aspects of K-12 education are, directly and indirectly, linked to the nonprofit sector, meaning nonprofit researchers (and policymakers) cannot be bystanders as the pandemic upended, altered, and reconnected these linkages. We believe learning pods provide an additional facet, and distinct example, of how civil society is expanding its role into the evolving educational landscape further, which in turn generates new research opportunities and ways to advance current nonprofit scholarship.

### 4.1 Social Entrepreneurship

One area where the learning pods phenomenon can contribute and help build new knowledge is social entrepreneurship, a topic of growing interest and importance for nonprofit researchers and practitioners. A key task of social entrepreneurship scholarship is to study how new social ventures emerge, and learning pods, as
observed by Bedrick and Ladner (2020, 12), can be described as an emergent “permissionless innovation” i.e. a form of spontaneous and voluntary action and organizing where the families did not ask anyone’s permission to create a pod. Hence, researchers could look to nonprofit supply-side arguments, which posit a variety of reasons and non-economic incentives for the creation of nonprofit organizations (Young 1983), to explore and unpack what motivated so many parents to establish, or join, learning pods, and if there are any differences in motives and/or intentions among parents creating autonomous pods versus support pods.

Furthermore, the emergence of learning pods occurred in a highly localized context, predominantly at the neighborhood level. This type of confined new social venture, rooted in voluntary action and undertaken by parents involving a relatively limited number of beneficiaries, often tends to be overlooked as it lacks the grand and magnetism of the kind of social entrepreneurship associated with heroic individuals changing the world, catalytic transformational change, and/or high growth and high impact social enterprises. Instead, learning pods illustrate and draw attention to what Welter et al. (2017, 312–313) denote “everyday entrepreneurship”:

[...] much of our research continues the highly skewed quest to develop our understanding of entrepreneurship by studying a tiny group of outliers, while frequently ignoring the vast bulk and diversity of what we label ‘everyday’ entrepreneurship. Not only are the gazelles and unicorns perhaps not as important as we have presumed, but by implicitly defining everyday entrepreneurship as neither important nor interesting we have failed to understand its rich variety and importance.

Investigating learning pods is not just an opportunity for researchers to empirically capture everyday social entrepreneurship, a deeply needed element for the development of social entrepreneurship theory, but also connects social entrepreneurship with the study of grassroots civil society organizations. Such grassroots entities typically entail a locally based voluntary group working towards the goal of improving and develop their own community. They also yield significant autonomy, are usually considered small-scaled and geographically bound, and are frequently dependent on direct in-person relationships (Smith 2000). At the same time, they are deemed essential for engaging individuals in collective efforts, and consequently a key to civic engagement. Learning pods undoubtedly share many of these characteristics making them part of the sizeable, but often overlooked, undercurrent of the American organizational landscape that Smith (2000) refers to the “dark matter” of the nonprofit universe. Empirical research focusing on learning pods therefore has the potential to help overcome and address a noteworthy shortcoming in both social entrepreneurship and nonprofit organizational studies: the under-coverage of the smallest social ventures in our communities.
4.2 Government Failure

Another basic, yet central, feature to explore is the role or function of learning pods from a multi-sector conception of society. One option for examining this topic is to look to the economic theories of the nonprofit sector in general (Hansmann 1987), and government failure theory in particular (Weisbrod 1991). A central starting point for government failure theory is that in societies with great population diversity, such as the United States, the demands for public goods will be equally diverse. As a result, it can be difficult for the government to provide and satisfy all the public good demands that various citizens have. If this occurs, government failure theory posits, nonprofits will take on the role as gap fillers responding to the private demands not provided by government (or from for-profit providers). Based on this perspective, learning pods can be seen as a response to the inefficient provision of public education during the pandemic with learning pods filling the niches left unserved by remote learning or closed schools. Furthermore, government failure theory also posits nonprofits fulfill an important role for satisfying the demands and service needs of minorities, which offers a possible explanation as to why learning pods, relatively speaking, became such an alluring option for many U.S. minority parents and parents of children with special needs. Future research on learning pods ought to further explore and elaborate the minority-aspect, recognizing every community has some degree of diversity along a variety of dimensions e.g. race/ethnicity, income, language etc., and investigate how such diversity affects the formation and function of learning pods.

The government failure perspective is also an entryway for nonprofit researchers to comprehend and study learning pods as a source of non-formal education (NFE). NFE is different from informal education, which encompasses all acquisitions of knowledge, skills, experiences, and attitudes from everyday situations and interactions with friends, neighbors, co-workers etc. However, it is also different from formal education as NFE is not a part of the mainstream educational system typified by most public or private schools with high levels of standardization and regulation when it comes to learning goals, evaluation, accreditation, and certification. Yet, unlike informal education, NFE still take place in a more structured way and is organized with specific individual and/or societal learning goals as a starting point (La Belle 1982). Government failure theory help explicate why NFE will manifest in civil society, where it can be organized and actively managed to provide for a variety of educational solutions addressing tangible problems or situations that government, via the public school system, cannot provide but citizens still demand. Thus, NFE can be seen as the actively organized learning for competencies and values
that are not sufficiently transmitted through formal and informal education (Willem and Andersson 2022).

As noted earlier, government failure theory indicates one function of learning pods is to fill in the gaps caused by the inefficient provision of formal public education. However, the NFE perspective expands this function to also include the instruction and diffusion of education that the government, via formal public schools, cannot or will not provide. For example, Black families have acknowledged how learning pods offer them a chance to teach about experiences and values that are not provided via formal education (e.g. Jacobsen 2022).

4.3 Co-Production

As illustrated in Table 1, most learning pods are support pods, that is, they maintain some sort of connection with an existing public (or private) school. According to Salamon and Toepler (2015), one weakness with government failure theory is that it struggles to explain situations where a government institution and a nonprofit co-operates. Thus, given the dominance of support pods in our data, nonprofit researchers seeking to explain the role and function of learning pods might also benefit from looking at the so-called third-party government perspective, where nonprofits functions as partners (rather than as gap fillers) with government in providing public services (Ibid.). One example of such a partnership from the world of K-12 education is charter schools.

However, to date we have little robust research depicting how the “partnership” between a learning pod and a school is organized, governed, or supported, but based on what has been reported in the popular press it appears many parents have taken on multiple key responsibilities as instructors, tutors, and resource providers. This, in turn, indicates that learning pods are different from most education- or school-supporting nonprofits (Nelson and Gazley 2014) as parents creating learning pods deliberately elect to contribute time, energy, and resources directly into the production of educational efforts that previously were the responsibility of schools and certified teachers alone. Hence, in addition to the third-party government perspective we also consider co-production theory as highly potent lens for research learning pods (Verschuere, Brandsen, and Pestoff 2012). Learning pod initiatives are clearly situated within the context of professionalized educational service delivery, and it directly concerns and involves (in this case) parents and their children rather than being undertaken for the benefit of others. Hence, support learning pods appreciably elevate the direct involvement of the nonprofit sector in the production of public education, as the education taking place in pods is no longer solely delivered
by professional and managerial staff in public agencies but co-produced in conjunction with civil society-based users.

Still, in order to foster and ensure effective co-production in the field of K-12 education, the nonprofit sector must take on and fulfill a vital capacity building role. For example, beyond strong motivations and sweat-equity, which may be important initial factors to help start up learning pods, these factors may be insufficient to sustain these initiatives over time. According to Verschuere, Brandsen, and Pestoff (2012), to build robust co-production in the education field, the users must be given additional skills, marshal financial and/or psychical resources, and set up structures to help connect teachers, parents, students, peers, and the local community. Although the public sector can help provide some of these pieces, the nonprofit sector will be an equally, if not more, crucial actor for the future evolution and success of learning pods. This includes the already existing population of school-supporting nonprofits as they are strategically well-positioned to facilitate communication and establish connections between pods and public schools. Moreover, these nonprofits are likely to be critical providers of financial resources. As noted by Nelson and Gazley (2014), while there are many national and/or regional foundations with an interest in basic education, school-supporting nonprofits are distinct in that they specifically target and financially support K-12 public education at the local level. In addition, as observed by Carlson (2020), there is a nonprofit homeschooling association in all U.S. states, and a significant number of capacity-building nonprofits focusing on schooling from home, that provide a smorgasbord of support and resources ranging from curricula- and lesson plans to regulatory guidance.

Thus, beyond being a source for financial support and an avenue for building relationships, the nonprofit sector is also the home of many education-related services, and retain specific competences, that parents operating learning pods are likely to search for and demand. One such example is tutoring (Mozolic and Shuster 2016), often considered to be one of the most adaptable and potentially transformative educational tools available (Nickow, Oreopoulos, and Quan 2020). Tutoring has also been highlighted as an essential strategy for remediating learning losses during the pandemic (Kane 2022). Other key services to help support and strengthen learning pods include after school programming, transportation, and services based on specific pedagogical, academic/curricular, or technical skills. The main point is that co-production significantly raises the role and stakes of nonprofits oriented toward educational ends. Whereas interactions and communication in the traditional public school systems often tend to only flow in one direction, learning pods have the opportunity of becoming a conduit connecting various nonprofit and public actors (e.g. organizations/agencies, teachers, administrators/staff, volunteers, parents etc.) closer together in education.
Future research, empirical and comparative, is thus needed to test and explore the assumptions attributed to co-production in K-12 education, such as the generation of new relations, greater cooperation between nonprofit and public actors, and if the co-production leads to greater quality of education, possibly reduced costs, and greater benefits for those involved.

4.4 Learning Pods and Family

Learning pods also open opportunities for nonprofit organizational and policy research to extend into areas having received limited attention in the past. One such area is the role and function of family. For example, Steinberg, Brown and Taylor (forthcoming) recently critiqued the so-called “three failures theory” approach frequently utilized by nonprofit scholars for overlooking the essential productive activities taking place within families and households (e.g. pooling and sharing resources, nurturing and socializing children), and the many meaningful ways in which family interacts with the market, nonprofit- and public sectors. Yet, family remains a contested construct in the civil society literature, and to some “[...] the family is not only outside but even antithetical to civil society.” (Power et al. 2018, 204).

We concur with Steinberg et al. (forthcoming), as well as Power et al. (2018), that greater attention to the family may indeed help expand our understanding of the nonprofit sector. For example, the family is clearly a focal point for the welfare of family members, but as the learning pods example illustrates, families can also be significant entities for the provision of welfare within the wider yet localized community e.g. a neighborhood. After all, it would be difficult to comprehend or analyze learning pods as civil society-based social ventures without recognizing the critical role of families and family members in the founding, supporting, and operating of those ventures. Power et al. (2018, 202) further substantiate this notion of an expanded role for families in providing community welfare by pointing to research on local neighborhoods in the U.K. illustrating the weight and magnitude of “between-family and between-household networks in the provision of support.”

Power et al. (2018) also underscore the overlooked role of family when it comes to civic activism and civil society engagement and observe how the concepts of family or pro-family are often assumed to be the territory of the political right, and thus fundamentally conservative in character, whereas civil society tends to be considered the territory, even property, of the political left. But, as Power et al. observe, such a simplistic positioning conceals there are many forms of civil society activism and engagement in relation to the family that cannot easily be classified as politically right or left issues. The growth, scope, and diversity of families across the U.S. engaging in voluntary action to form and operate civil-society-based learning pods
can thus serve a reminder that nonprofit scholars and policymakers (204) “[…] that the relationship between the family and civil society needs more than the largely superficial consideration it has had so far.”

5 Conclusions

The pandemic was challenging time for U.S. K-12 public education, and many vexing and persistent post-pandemic educational problems still lingers. The goal of this research note was illuminated how families across the U.S. responded to this extraordinary and disruptive event via voluntary action and a grassroots entrepreneurial effort resulting in the emergence and growth of a particular form of social venture: learning pods. Though there is a long and rich tradition of nonprofits in the education sector, the rapid emergence and ascent learning pods gained significant public visibility as a form of permissionless innovation that would reshape how we organize and produce public education. Even though learning pods may not become a dominant force in U.S. K-12 education, our research finds many parents remain intrigued by the opportunities and prospects generated by learning pods, and thus they warrant our attention.

Assuming public policy makers, as well as nonprofit researchers and practitioners, are all eager to find ways to ensure that every student is given access to a rigorous learning experience preparing them for the future, how will the respond to the reports about backsliding and “educations long Covid” (Lewis and Kuhfeld 2023)? If learning pods are an innovation that is here to stay, which appears to be the case among certain groups in the U.S., how will or can policy makers and nonprofit actors leverage their potential and remedy their shortcomings? Will they embrace more co-production in public education, augmenting the influence of parents and civil society, or will they perceive learning pods as a threat undermining the vitality of public schools and/or further aggravating educational inequality (Natanson 2020)?

Clearly this is an area for future inquiry, and the perceptions and responses from different policy makers and nonprofit stakeholders are likely to be varied. One factor we believe will have a significant impact moving forward is the type of regulatory framework being applied to learning pods, because formal institutions, and the policies that shape them, are essential determinants of entrepreneurial undertakings, encouraging certain activities while discouraging others. Currently, many learning pods across America appear to be governed by homeschooling regulations, and while homeschooling polices can look different in different states, they provide a lot of autonomy for parents and erects few barriers to entry. As noted by Carlson (2020, 17), “[h]omeschooling remains a viable option for parents to pursue, and its regulation by state entities often is minimal and flexible, allowing parents considerable latitude in structuring the education of their children.” However, policy
makers could opt to consider learning pods a form of “microschool,” thereby viewing pod students as private school students and the pod a private school. In this case, the regulatory burden and barriers to entry would be considerably greater, and likely have a chilling effect on the number of learning pods starting up and/or surviving.

Clearly there is much that remain unknown when it comes to learning pods and their role and impact as civil society actors. We hope this research note will stimulate new and additional research focusing on learning pods and other means by which civil society and nonprofit organizations will shape and reshape K-12 education.

References


