

Edupreneur Academy

Guide for Parents Forming a Community Learning Pod in Oklahoma®

In-person Support for Virtual Learning

Who Can Lead a Learning Pod?

A community learning pod can be led by a parent or other caring adult with a variety of previous career experiences and skills, but does not necessarily need to have a strong background in education. While this individual could be a trained teacher or other educational professional, formal training or certifications are not necessary. As the pod leader, this adult would serve in a supporting role to students and families. This role is oftentimes referred to as a “learning coach”. While there are many possible structures available, this guide is offered as a reference to help individuals or groups when thinking about considerations for creating or joining a pod learning model.

What Needs Would a Pod Learning Group Fulfill?

Many parents are currently facing a difficult decision about the future of their children’s educational options. Schools are scrambling to decide how and when to open. Many schools are choosing to go full-time online for the beginning of the year while others are offering blended or in-person options. Teachers are equally concerned about their own safety and the safety of the students they serve. Learning pods are one option that allows for smaller groups of students to learn and collaborate together.

Statewide virtual schools understand how to deliver education online but face the challenge of offering regular in-person interaction because students are spread across the entire state. Pods can address this by providing opportunities for local students to interact with each other through science labs, field trips, community events, sports, physical activities, academically focused discussions, and more.

Providing their child with a quality educational experience is a goal for all parents when thinking about school options, both now and in the future. The combination of virtual school and pod learning may be a practical, long term schooling solution for many families.

What Grade Levels and Age Ranges Can Learning Pods Support?

Pod groups can be formed to serve a range of grades and age levels from Pre-K through 12th grade. While there can be some benefit to having older students and younger students work together, pod leaders may want to consider grouping students in similar grade levels or age ranges, such as grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-10, etc. Some pods can utilize time for older students to work with younger students and include activities such as book buddies, tutoring, and crafting time.

How Many Students Should Be in a Pod?

The maximum size of a pod can be up to 35 students at once based on the location, specific learning goals, and age range. Some parents may choose to work together to form small pods of three to ten students in a home location. A bonus room or extra space could be converted into a school room. Larger pod options might consider using a church or community center classroom. A museum, or similar location, may be open to working out a deal allowing a pod to use an onsite classroom. Another consideration could be to find a small business or storefront space in your local area that is available for rent. The idea is to be creative. There are plenty of local options available ranging from free to a reasonable monthly cost.

At some point, a pod may get too large for a single learning coach to manage. It is recommended that, initially, pods should be no bigger than 20 students for grades K-2, 25 students for grades 3-5, 30 students for grades 6-8, and 35 students for grades 9-12.

Curriculum Support vs. Enrichment Time

Pods can serve two primary purposes. The first is to provide virtual learning accountability and support for students. It takes the average student between 12 and 20 hours of study time per week to complete their online course work. While this work can be done independently, there are benefits to doing at least part of the work in a pod with the support of a learning coach. The learning coach might host short two to three hour sessions one to three times per week designed to support students in the following ways:

1. Check in on the current status of asynchronous assignments, quizzes, tests, and projects that have been assigned by the virtual school;
2. Give students a structured time with support for working independently on virtual school assignments, quizzes, and tests, or even monitor their attendance to synchronous sessions with their teachers;
3. Help students with technical issues and finding resources when they get stuck on assigned work from the virtual school provider.

In addition, a learning pod can provide enrichment activities for students beyond the curriculum provided by the virtual school. In this model, the learning coach might offer longer sessions—four or more hours, two to three times per week—to incorporate time for curriculum support and enrichment activities which provide social-emotional learning. Pods may also coordinate with local events and leagues in which students can be involved, such as sports, music, cultural events, etc. The opportunities for enrichment activities are vast with free materials often readily available online. Some ideas for enrichment activities include the following:

1. Science labs
 - Have students bring their supplies from the online school curriculum.
2. Cross-curricular projects
 - Bring in a muralist to explain how she creates stories on long stretches of wall, and guide students in making their own murals on scrolls of art paper. Explore art history by looking at self-portraits from diverse artists through time, then ask the children to paint how they see themselves.
 - Connect science to music.
3. Field trips
 - Take students to natural history, science, and art museums.
 - Go on career-focused field trips.

4. Guest speakers
 - Have someone come to show the carding and spinning of wool for a traditional Navajo blanket.
5. Crime lab class
 - Conduct a workshop in which students get to be forensic investigators and solve a crime. They can learn about crime lab chemistry as they collect fingerprints, examine hair and fiber evidence, and identify other clues.
6. Interactive theater
 - Have students become characters in a partially improvised performance, or have them create scripts that can then be acted out.
7. Writing workshops
8. Multicultural photography
9. Science mystery theater
 - Through an interactive theatrical performance, students can help to solve a mystery using scientific skills including problem-solving, observation and recall, and deductive reasoning.
10. Sports science
 - Demonstrate the biology, physics, and engineering behind athletics. Students can learn about how different types of sports equipment—from footballs to hockey pucks—use friction, elasticity, and shape to their advantage.

Choosing a Virtual School Provider

All students in a pod should use the same virtual school provider. Depending on the district you live in, there may be a local district virtual option available. Due to a wide variation in the district options for implementing a virtual option, each district will be different. Many are offering an online curriculum with support, such as live classes or teacher support. Many districts are providing laptops for students who need them, and some are providing additional assistance if Internet support is needed for low income families.

In addition to the virtual options provided by the student's district, any Oklahoma student has the option of attending one of the state's virtual charter schools. These are public schools that operate statewide under the auspices of the [Oklahoma Virtual Charter School Board](#).

Public virtual schools provide the pod student with free instruction and free curriculum. State certified teachers offer live and recorded sessions to teach and tutor students as needed. In addition to the online curriculum, some options supply physical materials delivered to your home. Some families may also qualify, based on income, for other support such as laptops or hotspots when needed. Several options below also provide support for special education students, including Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), assignment of a state certified special education teacher, speech therapy, or occupational and physical therapy when appropriate.

What Are the Public Virtual School Options Available in Oklahoma?

Epic Charter School

- Free for any student in the state of Oklahoma to enroll in grades Pre-K through 12
- Free online college courses for high school students
- A \$1,000 learning fund to help purchase online curriculum (some options may include physical materials), a laptop, or extracurricular activities through approved vendors
- An Oklahoma state certified teacher who is assigned to each student and can offer instructional support to students (caseloads and grade levels vary)
- Benchmark testing to help track student growth and proficiency
- Special education teachers and services
- Community events
- Parent choice of curriculum material from different approved providers
- Small group physical meet-ups with teachers

E-School Virtual Charter Academy

- Free for any student in the state of Oklahoma to enroll in grades Pre-K through 12
- \$1,000 E-fund
- Parental involvement
- Scheduling flexibility
- Personalization
- Safe learning environment
- Fully-accredited
- Mandatory 4 x 4 high school curriculum
- Full catalog of electives and career tech

[Insight School of Oklahoma](#)

- Free for any student in the state of Oklahoma to enroll in grades 6-12, but recommended for struggling students
- Designated alternative education school
- Offers online curriculum and physical materials (grade 6-8) delivered to each student
- Highly qualified Oklahoma state certified teachers available in each subject and grade level
- Benchmark testing to help track student growth and proficiency
- Live daily and recorded classes available for student instructional support
- Block scheduling and credit recovery options available in high school allowing students who may be behind to catch up
- Additional social-emotional support, like counseling services and support groups
- Curriculum materials from K-12
- Special education teachers and services
- Community family advisors (CFAs) assigned to each family to support local needs
- Scheduling support and optional community events
- Support for low income families that may include a laptop and/or Internet hotspot

[Oklahoma Connections Academy](#)

- Free for any student in the state of Oklahoma to enroll in grades K-12
- Offers online curriculum (physical materials may be available for some grades)
- Highly qualified state certified teachers available in each subject and grade level
- Benchmark testing to help track student growth and proficiency
- Live and recorded classes available for student instructional support
- Special education teachers and services
- Curriculum materials from Connections

Oklahoma Information and Technology School (OITS)

- Free for any student in the state of Oklahoma to enroll in grades 6-7
- Computer science focus
- Technology instruction as a key part of the program to help prepare students for 21st-century career opportunities and lifelong learning
- Flexible pacing
- Social-emotional learning
- Service learning/character
- Empowerment for students through implementing newly acquired knowledge and skills in real-world settings to bring positive change to communities in Oklahoma and beyond
- Individualized learning
- More time for in-depth, hands-on projects and learning tailored to students' specific needs and interests through lower student-to-teacher ratios

Oklahoma Virtual Charter Academy

- Free for any student in the state of Oklahoma to enroll in grades K-12
- Free online college courses for high school students
- Offers online curriculum and physical materials (grades K-8) delivered to student
- Oklahoma state certified teachers available in each subject and grade level
- Benchmark testing to help track student growth and proficiency
- Live daily and recorded classes available for student instructional support
- Special education teachers and services available
- Community family advisors (CFAs) assigned to each family to support local needs
- Scheduling support and optional community events
- Support for low income families that may include a laptop and/or Internet hotspot
- Curriculum materials from K-12

Cost

Cost varies based upon hours per week, the cost of a learning coach, and location. A simple pod would have no cost if it used a rotation of parents serving as learning coaches, providing their homes and time for free.

Equity for Low Income Families and Diversity Awareness

One concern nationally about the surge in pod schools has been a possible increase in the disparity between families who can afford a private option and those that are unable to afford private choices. This is less a concern in Oklahoma because the state has a robust virtual charter school system providing free curriculum and teachers. In Oklahoma, the parent only has to pay the cost of the individual pod. The cost for parents with low incomes can be brought to zero with the participation of churches and other non-profit organizations, and individuals volunteering a few hours a week as learning coaches.

Legal Considerations

Compliance with various school laws and regulations can be complicated, but fortunately, this is generally the responsibility of the school, not the parent. Accordingly, if all students in a pod are enrolled in accredited virtual charter schools, the pod should not incur additional reporting or compliance requirements. Likewise, pods should not be subject to the same restrictions as are public schools since pods are not themselves receiving public money for any of their services. Thus, pods could incorporate additional features as “wrap around” services—religious programming, for example—without running afoul of state or federal law.

If formed as a business venture, usual legal implications should be considered, such as the necessity for premises liability insurance, tax implications, proper business structure (such as an LLC), and whether simple enrollment contracts should be utilized. Organizers of pods should also consider requiring parents to waive any privacy rights under federal or state law to the extent necessary for the organizers to successfully manage the pod. Putting things in writing and utilizing easy-to-understand language that clearly conveys what you are trying to accomplish is always a good practice.

Simple self-help information can be found online to answer many general legal questions. Any particular concerns or special situations should be addressed with an attorney.

Disclaimer

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