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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

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## For parents who can afford it, a solution for fall: Bring the teachers to them

By **Laura Meckler** and **Hannah Natanson**

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Fed up with remote education, parents who can pay have a new plan for fall: import teachers to their homes.

This goes beyond tutoring. In some cases, families are teaming up to form “pandemic pods,” where clusters of students receive professional instruction for several hours each day. It’s a 2020 version of the one-room schoolhouse, privately funded.

Weeks before the new school year will start, the trend is a stark sign of how the pandemic will continue to drive inequity in the nation’s education system. But the parents planning or considering this say it’s an extreme answer to an extreme situation.

With novel coronavirus infections rising in large swaths of the country, school districts in many big cities and suburbs are planning to start the fall with distance learning, either every day or for part of the week.

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President Trump has implored schools to resume in full, and many health experts agree, partly because remote learning went so poorly for so many in the spring. But many local leaders say the health risks are too great. Children do not get particularly sick from covid-19, but less is known about whether they can spread it to others. School officials also worry about the health of teachers, and districts are daunted by the logistics of keeping students and staff from coming into close contact with one another while indoors.

Parents are worried about health risks, too. But they are also worried their children will fall behind. And they fear they will be unable to work, even from home, while supervising children.

“We had lots of family discussions about what we wanted to do, and is it worth it to pay extra, and we said yes,” said Katie Franklin, who has a 7-year-old daughter and lives in Herndon, in northern Virginia. She is in talks with a few other families to hire a teacher to share. The estimated cost for her family: at least \$500 per month.

## 'This is a thing now'

Across the country, families are gathering with strangers in Facebook groups and friends over text messages to make matches. Teachers are being recruited, sometimes furtively, to work with small clusters of children. A Facebook group dedicated to helping families connect and learn how to do this drew 3,400 members in nine days, with at least seven local groups already spun off.

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“This is a thing now,” said Phil Higgins, a psychotherapist in Salem, Mass., who joined with two other families to hire a woman to create a “pseudo summer camp” for their four children this summer. They are now considering hiring this woman, who normally works as a school-based behavioral specialist, as a teacher for 40 hours per week during the school year. She would help the kids work through their school-offered remote learning.

“We wanted someone who could do a better job at home-schooling than any of us felt like we did,” Higgins said. He said the cost would be about \$1,300 per child per month.

In Lower Merion Township, a suburb of Philadelphia, Carrie Pestronk and her two sons struggled through remote learning in the spring. If it continues into fall, she wants to make school-from-home as normal as possible. She’s trying to recruit a handful of other children and a teacher — perhaps someone finishing college or graduate school — to teach from her basement. She’s particularly worried about her second-grader.

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“I want him to know at 10 o’clock, he’s got a teacher who is downstairs,” she said. “It’s not me who is forcing him to do it. That was the problem.”

Alexandra Marshak, who lives in Manhattan with her husband and two young sons, is exploring a learning pod with three other families. The original idea was that parents would take turns teaching, rotating hosting duties. But then one parent suggested they rent a studio apartment for the venture. They are also now considering hiring a professional to do the teaching. Marshak, who is out of work, said she's concerned about spiraling costs. But at this point, she said, "Everything is on the table."

## Widening the gap

Not everyone can afford truly private education, and these arrangements are raising concerns that this is just another way that the pandemic is exacerbating inequities that course through the educational system. Already low-income children struggle for access to computers and WiFi service and face pressures at home that wealthy families do not. Now this.

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These arrangements will allow children with affluent parents and connections to get ahead even as the system makes it harder for other children, said L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy, a sociology of education professor at New York University. He calls it a fresh example of "opportunity hoarding."

He wishes that parents would also work with their schools to find solutions for all children, by pooling resources, for instance.

"Most parents will act in the interest of their child and you can't tell them not to," he said. "I

say, ‘Act in the interest of your child, and add some equity to it.’ ”

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Marshak, in Manhattan, said she thinks about the equity issues. Her son’s elementary school has many low-income families, and she knows they probably cannot afford supplemental help. She would be open to working together, she said, but she doesn’t know them.

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“We have a very small group of friends. . . . We settled on these friends when our kid was in nursery school,” she said. “That raises a whole other slew of questions about how do we expand our general social bubble.”

These questions have also been raised on the [Facebook group](#) called Pandemic Pods and Microschools, which is mostly being used to facilitate these arrangements.

“The frantic activity I am witnessing of families soliciting private tutors for their children at the tune of hundreds to thousands of dollars to ‘home-school’ their children is frightening to many Black parents and parents of color,” one woman wrote.

Another person asked parents to consider inviting in, without charge, children whose parents cannot afford private schooling. She added: “Demand your schools are also working on helping with this. This is a concrete way we can and must use our privilege to prevent worsening inequality.”

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In Portland, Ore., Laura Sutherland came upon a new Facebook group called “Portland Micro-Schools,” with nearly 1,000 members, and could not believe what she saw.

She thinks sending her 6-year-old daughter back to school would be unsafe, and she knows her daughter will need supervision while learning from home. But Sutherland said she would quit her job — and struggle financially — to help her daughter before she would hire someone from the outside.

“It just seems really privileged,” she said.

Franklin, in Fairfax, said she’s mindful of these concerns but is not letting them stop her. “We can pay,” she said. “We know others can’t, and there will be a gap, and that’s unfortunate.”

## **A cottage industry**

It’s not all ad hoc parent organizing. An industry normally focused on providing tutors has seized this moment and is working to connect families with educators.

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Jennifer Shemtob, owner of Teacher Time to Go, a small company working in the Philadelphia suburbs, said demand is intense. She is offering a package of three hours of tutoring, four days a week. For one family, the cost is \$480 per week. If two families join, with up to six children, it's \$720 a week total.

“What I’m seeing is families just wanting that reassurance that their kid is going to get support one way or another,” she said.

Colleen Ganjian, an education consultant, works with high-schoolers in the D.C. area. She said she has received inquiries from more than 20 families asking whether they should participate in arrangements she likened to “nanny share on steroids.” As mother to a third-grader and a preschooler, she is also seeing chatter every day on Facebook groups and in group texts. “It’s all anybody is talking about,” she said.

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She said the prices start at \$25 or \$30 an hour for a college or graduate student. A trained tutor would cost \$50 to \$100 per hour. The premium option — poaching a teacher from a public school — could cost as much as \$100,000 for a year, she said.

Two Fairfax County teachers each said they had been approached by multiple families asking them to take over the education of their children. Both spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of retribution from the school system.

The first teacher has requested a leave of absence from the district because she fears contracting covid-19 if she returns to the classroom. She was considering taking one of these jobs until learning that it could put her permanent job in jeopardy. Now she probably won't do it.

The second teacher has not yet decided what to do. She said one father made clear to her that money was no object, offering to pay whatever she'd like.

In Broward County, Fla., Christy Kian, who used to teach at a private school, said she will make more money this school year educating four children in two families — one in the morning and one in the afternoon. After setting this up, she said, she was contacted by five other families seeking similar arrangements.

“While it's benefiting me, it's also benefiting them,” she said. “They are having individual private education.”

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