Adams 12 Five Star Schools
Learning Pods
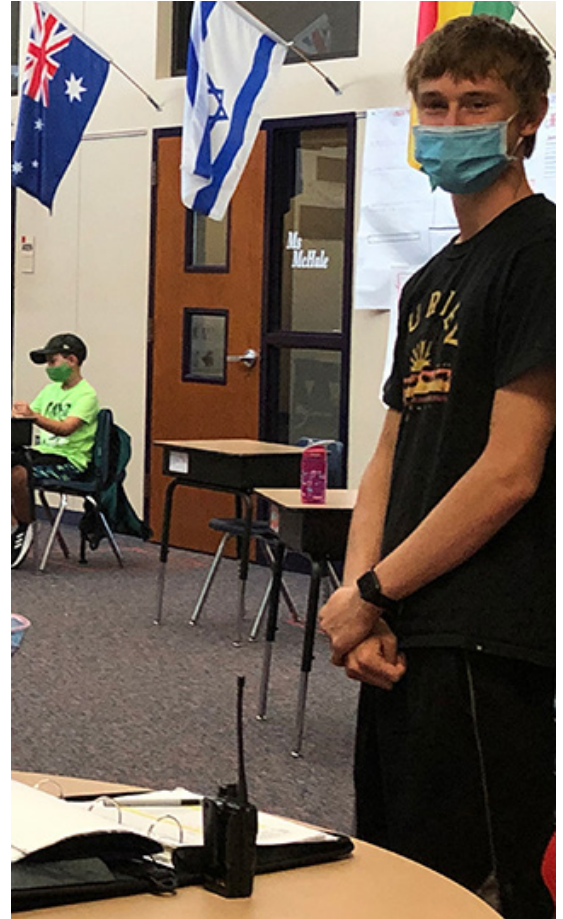
FALL 2020

Contents

Contact info@coloradoedinitiative.org if you have questions about this case study.

> "The expectation is that students in learning pods will be engaged with their online teacher or a small group of friends online, and engaging in their school work, just as they would if they were at home in remote learning–but they're instead in this classroom.
>
> There will be breaks, recess, lunch — times outside of remote lessons built into the schedule. During these times, learning pod coordinators will engage in some direct activities with the students. We are providing training for coordinators so that they have ideas and an understanding of how these times might look."

Tracy Dorland, Deputy Superintendent
Adams 12 Five Star Schools

Introduction

This case study is presented as a model for how districts are thinking about leading through innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The learning pod model provides an example of how to serve families and students who may need extra support when learning in a remote environment.

In Adams 12 Five Star Schools, learning pods are a no-cost, in-person option for students. Learning pod activities are conducted during the standard school day time frame for students who need access to internet connectivity and/or students who need a safe and productive place to engage in remote learning. Substitute teachers and district support staff without other duties during periods of remote learning monitor the learning pods.

Located in the northern part of the Denver Metro area, Adams 12 Five Star Schools is the sixth largest school district in Colorado. The district serves more than 39,000 students.

View District Fact Sheet   **View District Website**

> "We just didn't feel like we could meet the needs of students and families without doing learning pods. These general learning pods are really focused on meeting the needs of the general population, including students with disabilities who need internet access, consistency in terms of five-day-a-week support, and in-person presence."
>
> *Chris Gdowski, Superintendent*
> Adams 12 Five Star Schools

▶ Q & A with Adams 12 Leaders

Prior to the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, Superintendent Chris Gdowski and Deputy Superintendent Tracy Dorland spoke with Alex Carter, Vice President, Implementation at Colorado Education Initiative, about the process to launch learning pods in Adams 12.

Learning Pods Overview

▶ When and Where

Remote learning for all students began in Adams 12 Five Star Schools on August 27, 2020. Some elementary, K-8 and middle school sites have been opened for student access into learning pods, based on the level of interest and staffing availability. Learning pods are projected to operate until at least September 25, 2020.

- ▶ August 27 until (at least) September 25, 2020
- ▶ Monday-Friday, on all regular school days
- ▶ Hours of operation align with normal school day hours
- ▶ Learning pods are located in grade level classrooms

▶ Interest Form and Enrollment

Adams 12 families were invited to complete an interest form indicating their needs during the remote learning period at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. Based on the interest forms, demand and attendance frequency were charted out and Learning Pod groups were established.

Enrollment Criteria

Students must be enrolled in a district-managed school (non-charter) to attend a Learning Pod. Enrollment is completed online via the home school of the student.

- ▶ Priority will be given to employees who are in-person and have children enrolled in Adams 12.
- ▶ Special circumstances may be considered.
- ▶ Students may be moved from their home school to different locations based on space.
- ▶ For families without online access, the Student Engagement Initiatives team will provide assistance.
- ▶ Pods will be grade level and align with online learning schedules.
- ▶ Up to three Learning Pod seats per grade will be kept open for targeted/referred students.

◆NWARD
Navigating the 2020-2021 School Year Together

Adams12
Five Star Schools

Student and Family Intent Form | Fall 2020

The following form allows families to indicate their need and intent on the following:

- Access to a learning device for all children
- Access to reliable internet
- Interest in an in-person Learning Pod (K-8)

Please fill out this form for one child - you will be asked to add additional children at the end of the survey, if applicable.

For further information, visit www.adams12.org/onward

Engagement Script
For phone outreach

Student and Family Intent Form
(English)

Student and Family Intent Form
(Spanish)

Learning Pod Logistics

▶ Staffing and Students

Learning pods are supervised by building administrators with support from other district employees.

School Team Member	Responsibility
Principal, assistant principal or dean	Overall oversight
Before/after school program director	Coordinator and daily operations, including daily schedule
Leadership and office team	Creation of student rosters and supply lists
Office manager	Staff schedules, sub coverage, family communications
Classified staff (cross-departmental)	Facilitate individual learning pod rooms, supervise students, technical assistance

Staff to Student Ratio

Each pod contains a group of 10-15 students. Staff ratios are determined according to grade level.

Grade Level	Staff:Student	
Kindergarten - 2nd Grade	1:10	Elementary schools staff one additional person for every two grade levels served.
3rd - 5th Grade	1:12	
6th - 8th Grade	1:15	Middle schools staff one additional person for every grade level served.

Cohorts

Students are placed in pod cohorts consisting of 10-15 students for the majority of the day. Each cohort is designed to function independently and remain 12 feet away from other cohorts to the greatest extent possible.

Attendance

Standard attendance procedures will be followed to monitor student arrival and attendance.

▶ Attendance will be taken at the beginning of the day and may be repeated several times throughout the day.

▶ Pod staff will conduct daily verification of completed home health screens and ensure that students are not exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms.

▶ Parents are asked to report all absences to their school's attendance line.

Discipline

All school-wide behavior expectations remain in effect, as outlined in the Adams 12 Five Star Schools Code of Conduct.

⬧NWARD
Remote Learning
with Supplemental
In-person
Opportunities

AUGUST 27 - SEPTEMBER 25

Adams12
Five Star Schools

View
Remote Learning Guide

▶ Safety Practices

Daily Health Screen

An at-home COVID-19 Student Health Self-Screening must be completed each day before arriving. The health screen includes questions about symptoms in addition to a body temperature check. Students who are ill, have a fever of 100.4 or above or other COVID-like symptoms will be unable to attend a Learning Pod and must follow Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment guidance:

- ▶ **COVID-like symptoms:** cough, shortness of breath, fever, loss of taste/smell, fatigue, headache, sore throat, muscle or body aches, congestion/runny nose, nausea/vomiting, diarrhea. A person can be contagious two days before they start having symptoms (or two days before they test positive if they don't have symptoms).
- ▶ **Isolation:** students must stay home from school, and/or activities when experiencing COVID-like symptoms, are sick or diagnosed with COVID-19. Isolation will last for at least 10 days after the onset of symptoms, 24 hours+ fever-free without fever reducing medication, and an improvement of symptoms.
- ▶ **Quarantine:** students must stay home from school, and/or activities when a student is in close contact of someone with COVID-19. Quarantine will last for 14 days. Negative testing does not release a person from quarantine.
- ▶ The school must be notifed if a student tests positive for COVID-19.

Face Coverings

Face coverings and masks will be used. Staff are required to wear face masks while working with children. View the Adams 12 2020 Face Mask Protocols.

> "We're going to do some survey work after about the first week of this, and we know that's limited amount of data in terms of day-in and day-out experience — but we're going to survey our staff, our parents, and students early on in this process to see how remote learning is going with learning pod support. "
>
> *Chris Gdowski, Superintendent*
> Adams 12 Five Star Schools

Q & A with District Leadership

The following is a transcript from an interview that took place on August 21, 2020. Adams 12 Superintendent Chris Gdowski and Deputy Superintendent Tracy Dorland spoke with Alex Carter, Vice President, Implementation at Colorado Education Initiative about the process to launch learning pods in Adams 12.

View the interview here

The answers below can be found in the video at the indicated time markers.

Superintendent Chris Gdowski

Deputy Superintendent Tracy Dorland

Introduction

Rebecca Holmes, President and CEO of the Colorado Education Initiative

Thanks for watching this session with Adams 12, where we are highlighting some pretty innovative and important work they are undertaking to meet the needs of families and students.

When I started my career in education, if you had asked me to imagine all that we are going through, I couldn't have. These past six months have been some of the toughest we've ever undertaken as educators and as parents. But since March, we at CEI have been working with districts and state agencies to support important work happening on the ground across Colorado and the region.

In June, we convened 10 districts together to undergo a "design sprint" where they built 90 day reopening plans, anchored in social-emotional development, relationships and community. The result of that process was the Strategic Reopening Collaborative – now hosted online on our website, where you can hear some of the incredible examples of work happening on the ground in districts.

As we move into the start of the school year, we continue to be in dialogue with these districts and many others, which is why we are excited to share the work happening on the ground in Adams 12.

With families, communities, educators, and students struggling to start our school year due to safety and support issues related to COVID-19, we are seeing the real emergence out in the field of new ideas. The best new ideas are grounded in listening to your users – asking families and students what they need. That's where Adams 12 started.

In this interview you will hear Chris Gdowski and Tracy Dorland talk about a survey they administered, in combination with direct outreach between teachers and families. Adams 12 received 16,000 responses addressing a combination of topics – from learning to internet and device needs of families, and what people might want in terms of in-person or remote learning.

What they have designed is what they believe is the right call for their community at this time—based on what they learned, and also what they were able to test this spring and summer to determine what they could feasibly commit to do and do well.

This is not just about a plan for childcare. This is a conversation about how the Adams 12 district and leadership work to proactively meet their community needs and stay relevant—at a time when it is really challenging to do so. The social contract between schools and families is being radically re-negotiated before our eyes.

In the interview, you'll hear the district leadership discuss what they're doing using the term "learning pods."

This new term that has emerged in the last 30 days means a number of different things to different people. It can mean either opting out of public school or staying in. It can mean a paid childcare provider or a parent. It can be to get a small group of kids ahead in their learning, to provide socialization, or to provide childcare for working parents.

Many schools and districts have been wary of the idea, worried about the structural, equity and budget implications. However, some schools and districts have been leaning into the opportunity, sensing a real potential to meet students and families where they are and to address the challenges head on.

Adams 12 is one such district. We are kicking off this part of CEI's Reopening Collaborative with this interview because we know this is a district others can learn from, either because your system is starting virtually or because you want to build a plan in case you have to transition to remote learning later in the year.

In this conversation, we focus with them on the what and the how of what they're doing. You will hear them share information about the nuts and bolts of their model, how they worked to prioritize staff and family interests, what they had to rethink—from roles and relationships to transportation to training—as well as difficult tradeoffs in these decisions.

We have such respect for Adams 12's interest to be a resource, but also in their disposition for learning—their need to continue learning about the successes and challenges of other approaches, such that they have multiple inputs to inform what the next phase looks like for Adams 12 as learning structures evolve into the new year.

As I often suggest when we dig into thorny topics in education, I hope we can put the learning before the advocacy and learn how this district, fueled by strong leadership and nimble, responsive staff, is making new possibilities real during this unprecedented time.

Alex: Thanks for being here Chris and Tracy. We're excited to learn about how Adams 12 is standing up a really innovative solution to meet some needs of the community. Why did Adams 12 leadership think learning pods were an important investment of your time, energy, and resources as you plan to reopen schools in the fall of 2020?

Chris: (05:20) I think the most basic answer is that we just didn't feel like we could meet the needs of students and families without doing learning pods. What we saw last spring was that we had so many students that either didn't have internet connectivity or had poor internet connectivity, and so one of the objectives we can achieve with learning pods is getting kids the right technological support.

> When we made the decision to go remote as our primary way of delivering education, we knew that we had to do something in addition to that to meet those basic needs of families.

We saw a lot of students last spring who might have disabilities, they may be second language learners, there can be other circumstances in their home and a remote-only environment, we know from anecdotal data, from teachers and parents, that many students struggled in a pure remote environment. We heard from lots of families that they just cannot manage the support role around remote learning and also get off to work multiple days per week, and we need to have some child supervision support provided as part of whatever we do this fall. And so those basic factors were a lot of the driver for us as we started to look at options throughout the summer—to say that learning pods, when we made the decision to go remote as our primary way of delivering education, we knew that we had to do something in addition to that to meet those basic needs of families.

Alex: So, it really did solve almost three birds with one stone. It's technological supports for students who need that internet connectivity or technological support. It's also doing some childcare supports for students who don't have the support at home, and, limited instructional support so then students are with an adult and they can maybe get a little help. That's really cool. Which students are going to be supported in learning pods?

Chris: (07:05) We look to serve students throughout our entire system, so we have these general learning pods; they're really focused on meeting the needs of the general population, including students with disabilities who need either internet access, consistency in terms of five-day a week support, and in-person presence, and so these general learning pods will be at all of our schools, with an exception that I'll mention here in a minute, kindergarten through eighth grade.

So in our elementary and middle schools we'll have students in groups of 10 to 12, and up to 15 at some of our middle schools. We look to serve students with disabilities, second language learners, and students without any specialized needs in these learning pods. We are having to consolidate at some of our elementary schools; students from a couple schools into a single location just because we've seen lower numbers of interest in some of our schools, and so there's six paired schools that we have in this model where we'll be putting kids on a bus to go from a school where we're not going to offer that service directly, and then send them to a nearby school and combine kids at the same grade level to have the same service and support then at the middle school level. We have multiple pods—three pods per grade level, so for sixth-grade students we can provide this to roughly 45 students per grade level at the middle school level.

Alex: How many students are you going to serve in total in Adams 12?

Tracy: (09:22) So, I have those numbers Alex, but I will tell you that I got them about 20 minutes ago and they're probably already changed. So total, between elementary our K-8s and our middle schools, we're serving about 4,600 students right now, and we think we will have enough staff to meet that need at those levels. It's about three thousand elementary seven hundred in our K-8s and about 950 in our middle schools. And then we have, we do believe that we'll have a wait list unfortunately. It's been a monumental task to match staffing with requested needs from our community, and so we may have a hundred to two hundred kiddos on a waitlist that we're hoping, as we begin to implement and dial in who's going to come, who's not going to come, which staff are going to show up, who won't show up, that we might be able to also accommodate all of those students; probably once we get into the weeds we'll know more about that.

In addition to what Chris discussed, we are going to have 22 learning pods across our schools that will support special ed students with significant support needs, and so these are students who might be in a wheelchair; they're in our SSN programs. And so we're pretty excited about being able to offer that especially when what we heard from those families in the spring that to be in quarantine and not have support with a student who has significant needs—it's a real challenge for our families. So, for everybody who's asked to be in a pod from that student population, we'll be able to accommodate them in these 22 different classrooms. Those will be staffed a little differently with more supports.

> We're serving about 4,600 students right now... it's been a monumental task to match staffing with requested needs from our community.

Alex: So, the staffing question is the one that I'm really interested in right now. Which adults are coming in to monitor these learning pods?

Tracy: (11:30) We have pulled in all of the classified staff from every building to ask them if they would support a learning pod. That sometimes includes or will include paraprofessionals who work with students mostly in the building. It does not include office staff, so most of our office staff will be in the office supporting the building being open and working with our principals, our APs, and our deans to make sure that the building runs smoothly. But all of our classified staff, outside of custodians and office staff from the various buildings, will be involved in learning pods. We also have about approximately 80 bus drivers who are going to be supporting learning pods—possibly more than that, depending upon how many routes we want to serve for transportation and some of our food nutrition service workers will also support. We need some of them to continue our food service programs but not quite as many, given that we won't have many students on sites.

Chris: (12:39) Beyond what Tracy shared, I would highlight that we have a number of guest teachers, substitute teachers, that will be part of this effort. So we have some dedicated subs that are assigned to a single building in our existing model because there's high needs for subs in those buildings, and it's difficult to sometimes get adequate coverage; so we're going to transition those folks into supporting learning pods instead.

We'll also have folks who are typically involved in our before and after school programs (BASE) focused instead on supporting learning pods, and that's really a tremendous asset. Those individuals often care for large numbers of students in a similar kind of format to learning pods, before and after school, so we're grateful to have them invested in this work. One of the tough decisions we've had to make, and there's been a number along the way, is that we can't provide before and after school care on a fee basis for families and still have enough staff to do learning pods, so we're pulling those BASE staff members in to support learning pods and unfortunately, we're going to be in a spot of announcing that we're not going to be able to do paid child care before and after school like we typically do. But we feel like, all things considered, providing coverage for families eight hours a day, and support for students eight hours a day is the higher priority than just providing a couple hours of after-school care for families.

Alex: I really like the way that you're able to get staff whose core responsibilities are disrupted by virtual remote learning back into a really productive place—so that's exciting. Who's supervising the learning pods at the school base level?

Chris: (14:22) There's a few levels of supervision there. We're going to have our principals, assistant principals, at the secondary level, deans, in our schools on a frequent basis throughout the week and so we'll have those individuals present to be able to problem-solve discipline issues or if you have a medical issue emerge. We'll have that kind of administrative expertise in some buildings, but the primary person who will be making sure that learning pods are functioning the way that we've laid them out will be a learning pod supervisor—but largely someone who isn't a lead supervisory role in our typical before and after school programming, so those individuals are accustomed to being in schools independently after hours, before school, and they're very well equipped at solving things independently on the fly—and so we're glad to have them in that capacity.
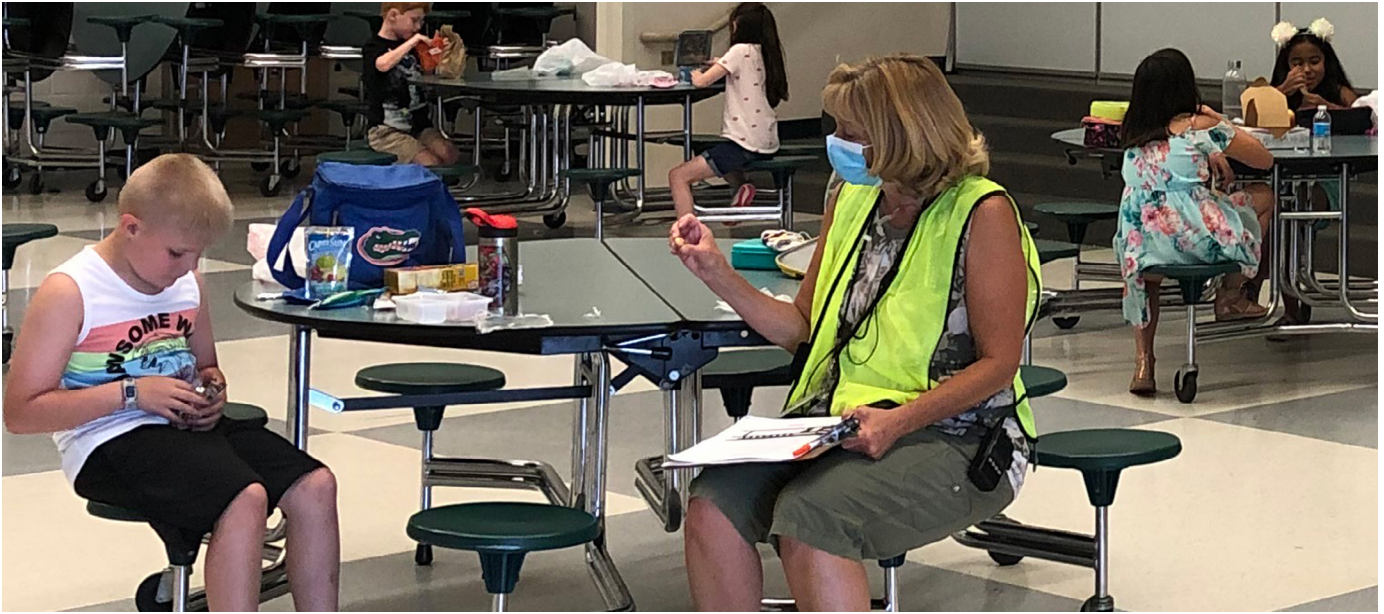
Alex: Well I think we've answered the who, now let's get to the nuts and bolts, the what of learning pods. So I'm just going to throw out a bunch of questions here… What are learning pods going to look and feel like for students, what are the hours, what's the classroom set up, what's the schedule, what are the student to adult ratios, what's the instructional model, and what are students expected to do in these learning pods… how is it compared to a traditional learning environment?

Tracy: (15:51) So, the hours for the learning pods will be normal school hours. They'll begin for elementary when elementary normally starts, middle, K-8 the same, and they will run for the full school day. The schedule for the day will actually follow a remote learning schedule that we've built. We built a grade level remote learning schedule for our schools to follow and for our teachers to follow, partly in the interest of making sure that we can provide services like special education and electives in a consistent way, and that parents and students and teachers have an expected and consistent schedule on a daily basis.

That also then allows a learning pod leader, say you're a second grade learning pod leader and you have 10 to 12 second-graders with you in a classroom in a pod, as a bus driver for example, you know what's happening for all of those second-graders throughout the day. So they'll be following the second grade remote learning schedule within the pod, and the expectation for the learning pod leader would be that they're supporting the students, possibly helping them with some technology challenges, maybe answering a question or two.

But our teachers will be doing more synchronous instruction than we did in the spring, so for most of the students the expectation for them is being online, being engaged with their teacher or a small group of friends online, and engaging in their school work just as they would if they were at home in remote learning, but they're instead in this classroom. There are obviously breaks, recess, lunch, and times when they're not in remote learning built into the schedule, and at that point the expectation is that the learning pod coordinator engage in some sort of activity with the students, and we're providing training to them so that they have ideas and understand how that might look. That's part of the benefit of having our BASE directors as the learning pod coordinators, so they can train their staff at the site on what might you do (the students when they're not engaged, when they have a break, outside of just taking them to recess.

So yeah, we're excited about the opportunity to have a little bit of a systemic approach to remote learning instruction which then, I think, will be a big support to our support staff who are running the pods and aren't necessarily trained or used to running a whole day for kids. They'll have a schedule that they know the students need to follow, that hopefully the students get used to, and hopefully it runs it runs well there.

Alex: It sounds like these kids are going to be in their learning pods, doing the same work that their classmates would be doing at a home environment, but they've got their safe, controlled environment, with a little support. It's a really terrific solution. When we're thinking about the monitors, can we just put a little finer point on what do you expect the monitors to do, and how does a monitor know they're being successful as a learning pod support?

Chris: (19:15) So on the monitor side, I think a core piece is making sure that kids can navigate through technology challenges they may have. Lots of parent feedback from the spring, especially at elementary which is the focus of or the level at which we serve most of the kids in the learning pod model. Parents often said "I can't figure out the technology, my kid can't figure out the technology," and so having a learning pod leader who can help to navigate through, get connected if there's an issue, quickly problem-solve it before there's lots of time wasted or lots of frustration, lots of instruction missed. That's a key responsibility.

> A core piece is making sure that kids can navigate through technology challenges they may have. A second piece is to help manage student discipline to make sure the kids are staying focused.

A second piece is to help manage student discipline to make sure the kids are staying focused, they're not distracted, they're not disturbing their neighbor, running around and creating chaos, so that'll be an important part too. As another person who can really focus on the social emotional needs of kids in that setting to check in on them, to build relationship between adult and student, and also between the students in that pod. So those are three really important responsibilities that we have interest in these leaders supporting.

Alex: It's like the motivator, coach, and the social emotional support, and then that technological troubleshooter. What a great resource for these students. I'm really interested to know A) how did you know what the demand was, and B) how did you get the word out to your community?

Chris: (20:51) We did a survey, as you as you mentioned Alex, that went out both in in English and Spanish, and we left it open for about five days as my recollection, and had tremendous response from about 16,000 various parties in our community, so a lot of interest. It wasn't only about learning pods. We also explored internet connectivity needs and device needs of families, and also did a preliminary touch to see what people might want in terms of in-person and or remote learning as we come to a crossroads and decide whether to continue this path or not in late September. So we had tremendous response there.

One of the things that we've since learned, and we had worried about as we looked at some of these results, is that there's just no substitute with our Spanish-speaking part of our community in particular to have in-person discussion and dialogue with families and our staff to say here's what a learning pod is, and to talk to it more robustly. What we're finding is that our response is pretty thin in terms of the survey response for learning pods in our primarily Spanish-speaking schools. And now we have more staff who have since talked to families about this opportunity, parents are saying, I'd love that, I want that, I need that.

Alex: What do you think was the roadblock there, the barrier?

Chris: I think that the term of learning pod just didn't translate very readily without a lot more description for many of our families. They weren't quite able to figure out what that might mean in terms of nuts and bolts and what does it look like for my child day in and day out, and so having more time to explain what this looks like on the tech support, having somebody in there with your child throughout the day, what are you going to be doing with your time. The survey didn't get into as much detail as as those families seem to have needed to really evaluate this option and make a decision.

Alex: That's really interesting. There could be a lot of district leaders, and maybe even some philanthropy watching this video wondering how much does this cost, how are you paying for it, did you have to make really hard decisions …how are you pulling this off in Adams 12?

Chris: (23:08) The answer in terms of really hard decisions is yes, there are a number of things that we wish we could do more of and we just aren't going to have enough staff at this point to pull it off.

One of the tough choices that we've had to make is around transportation. We had about a thousand families indicate that having transportation provide access to learning pods would be desirable, and we're not going to be able to serve that full amount of need because we don't have enough staff to put transportation folks into learning pods as supervisors and also drive all the routes that would be necessary, so we're going to prioritize transportation for those combined schools—the paired schools that I've talked about, and getting students to a school that's further away from the school where they'll be attending. We'll provide transportation for those, and also provide transportation for students who have transportation identified as a related service in their IEP; that's a pretty small number of kids. We'd like to do more. We just don't have enough capacity.

A second tough choice that I've mentioned is that we're not going to be able to serve all the people who have interest, especially in some of our northern-end schools where there tend to be higher numbers of people with interest. We're going to have to waitlist people unless we can grab more staff in the next week or so who are able to provide support and service.

And then the third tough choice is that we've had to eliminate our before and after school fee-based childcare program, again because of staffing limitations. What we're doing right now is to try to incentivize more people to say yes and to go to full-time because many of our support staff historically are less than full-time. They might work anywhere from two to six hours a day and we're trying to get them to eight hours a day so we can increase capacity at more of our sites. And so we communicated out yesterday that if individuals commit to this full month commitment to full-time work in a learning pod supervisory role, that we'll give them a $500 stipend to say thank you for doing that. And so over the next week we'll figure out whether that incentivizes more people to work full-time. We're hopeful that it will, so we can expand more of our pods to serve more kids and families.

On the cost piece, that $500 first month stipend, if we have roughly 500 staff involved in this effort, which would be a nice number to get to so we can grow our capacity, that's a $250 000 cost. It's a little bit tricky to figure out how much the net cost will be because at the same time we'll be paying more through that stipend and paying more for staff who are usually two hours a day or six hours a day to go to eight hours a day. Those are the cost increases.

At the same time, we expect we're going to have quite a bit less substitute teacher expense through this remote period. We're likely to provide subs to both elementary and middle school only when we have pretty extended absences of the assigned teacher, because bringing subs into this synchronous remote environment is challenging to be high productivity, so we'll save some money on subs and we also expect that we're going to save money for some of our classified staff who won't be working. We have quite a number of folks out there. We're not forcing our classified subs to do this work, and so there are some who aren't custodians, aren't nutrition, aren't otherwise engaged in learning pods, who will say this just isn't the right gig for me, I'd rather just stay home and not be paid for a while. And so, we'll save some money in that space and teasing out all of those increases and decreases we don't have it hashed out yet. I'm sure it will be a net increase.

A lot of the federal funding that we're getting through the CARES Act and through the ESSER allocation would be the ultimate funding source, along with philanthropy, to help us pay for these additional expenses.

Alex: I really appreciate you digging into that for us. I know that's the barrier that a lot of people immediately go to, and it's encouraging that the Adams 12 leadership said "but the payoff is likely to be so much bit bigger than the cost," and it's really brave—thanks for modeling that; thinking about something bigger, like "Let's zoom out a little bit." As you're thinking about the next two months, what will success look like for this first quarter as we're probably all remote, and is there anything you're hoping to learn from this these next two months where we'll be doing learning pods that might even inform how we move forward in the post-COVID era?

Chris: (28:09) It's possible that this whole endeavor that we're setting up will only last for a month. It's tough to predict the future in terms of what the virus will drive us to do in terms of a potential transition to more in-person learning as we get to the end of September, so it could be as short as one month.

We're going to do some survey work after about the first week of this, and we know that's a limited amount of data in terms of day-in and day-out experience, but we're going to survey our staff, our parents, and students early on in this process to ask how is remote learning going with learning pod support. Is it better than the remote-only experience that you had last spring; do you feel like given what you've seen that this would be a satisfactory longer term pathway for us to follow? So we'll have some of that data and a lot of it's going to be driven by parent and student and staff satisfaction. More anecdotal stuff: that I feel like, yeah, I'm better supported; my tech needs are less frustrating; my social emotional needs are getting met more robustly; I have more support to puzzle through and get questions answered if I have them, beyond just relying exclusively on a teacher for that support. So, if we're seeing positive results there, it will be one of the important considerations in deciding what to do after September 25.

Alex: What do you think you we might learn from our working learning pods that could transcend this time where we have to be remote? Is there is there a broader learning agenda?

Chris: (30:01) I think there's a few things that we learn and a few benefits that come through this model beyond the ones we've spoken about. One is I think there's a lot of apprehension with a lot of parents, students, and staff about coming back to an in-person setting, given that they haven't been there for the last five months. Having a return at a smaller scale with more distancing, smaller cohorts, a chance to come back into school and test it out, and maybe have some of those fears diminished, is one of the upsides that I see with this, whether it's been bringing people back to our central office this summer or doing some small scale summer child care, which we did for about 470 kids.

We did a small ESY (extended school year) program for about 53 students this summer. Every time we bring people back in-person we learn things about how it's all going to work, how to manage traffic and logistics within a building in a way that maximizes safety in most cases. We're diminishing some of the fear index that attaches to being away for so long. We also got good insight about how often are we likely to go through quarantine during our summer childcare programming. We had three quarantine experiences where we had a staff member who tested positive because of interactions outside of school, and we had to put those cohorts on quarantines for 14-day periods. Now that we're scaling, that's much larger and we're going to be serving 4,600 plus students instead of 470 like we did this summer. We're really interested to see how often do we have a positive case, most likely with adults, but also possible with students, and how disruptive that is. That's going to be one of the important considerations too, about what do we do after September 25.

A worry that I had and one of the significant drivers to this model that we have in place, is that we would be going into quarantine just constantly if we had 40,000 or close to 40,000 kids back and we had positive cases that were sending 140 high schoolers out at a time or 60 elementary age students at a time. We'll get a sense about how frequent that really is likely playing out during the first month of the year and if it turns out to be less frequent than we thought that's also helpful in terms of looking at some more in-person schooling as we finish September.

Alex: That's a that's a really interesting and important learning agenda there. I'm talking about the health and safety of our schools in this brave new world that we're entering into outside of the learning pod initiative. In addition to that, how is Adams 12 meeting the needs of students who receive special education services, ELL, or gifted education services?

Tracy: (32:50) We have, as I mentioned before, a remote learning schedule that ensures that time with specialized instruction and educators who are qualified to provide that specialized instruction is guaranteed for our students. So that's I think the first the first part of the answer; in the remote setting students will have regularly scheduled time with special ed teachers, English language development, and gifted services opportunities.

> We are working right now to build a schedule on Wednesdays where ELL, special education, and students with advanced learning plans have an opportunity to come in and receive in-person supports.

In addition to the in-person, we are working right now to build a schedule on Wednesdays where ELL, special education, and students with advanced learning plans have an opportunity to come in and receive in-person supports. It most likely won't be for every single student with an IEP or with English language development needs, but it will be for a subset of students where in-person is necessary to meet their goals. We have talked and they're still working on the plan. It's not final—like everything—things are hot off the press right before we implement these things, because everything's just so crazy. But the team's working hard and we have imagined opportunities especially for students like newcomers, our long-term ELL students…our special ed teachers are doing analysis of our IEP goals, where we're really looking at which IEP goal can really be met through the remote learning process, and where are their IEP goals where in-person supports are just absolutely necessary for the students to make progress. Those would be the special education students who would be prioritized to come in and have supports on a Wednesday, in-person, and so I'm sure those details will be ready, at least first draft, soon.

And then, the other thing we've learned through this whole process, Chris mentioned, was through BASE this summer. So much of what we're doing with the learning pods was informed by the few hundred kids that we served this summer in BASE, and I think the minute we begin serving students in-person, specialized populations in-person on Wednesday, is the minute that the plan will change and we'll adjust it and revise it. I think we've learned a lot about how to be nimble and flexible right now.

The other thing I might add in terms of the long term goals of this thing, one of the things that I was really proud of is our team about, and how we pushed hard on was, how we work in this crazy time when everything is topsy-turvy and we're trying to respect the needs and fears and desires of everyone in our community, from teachers to students to parents. How do we maintain relevance and still provide service to our community?

One of the things that we've done is really say, we know we have first responders who are going out there and working every day and how are they going to leave their kids home all the time and not be able to be available for them? So we have a priority list of who has access to the learning pods and that's an example of one of the top priorities and I just think it's a great example of how to try to stay relevant for our community in a time when it's really challenging to do so. I'm just proud of our team for what they've built.

You know we might talk in two weeks and say, 'oh my gosh this this didn't go very well,' and if so, we'll own it and at least we tried, but we're hoping that it does go well and that our community appreciates and sees value in what we're trying to build in terms of what they want from us as a school district.

Alex: I'm sure that your community is going to recognize that and I hope you know that the broader community around Colorado that's working on education is also really inspired by the work you guys are doing there. Chris, I've got a question about governance and working with your board. Was there any policy or any governance that you had to kind of step into to make sure that learning pods were going to be a go in Adams 12?

Chris: (37:14) Our board has been actively involved and checking in with us to see what plans we might develop. They've had a lot of angst and worry about safety issues and concerns and they've been closely watching the virus and transmission rates within Adams county. We are one of the places where transmission rates are the highest and so the thought of bringing kids back fully in person causes angst for them, but given their commitment to equity, this notion of students not having any in-person support or touch because they can't access the internet, they have special needs that aren't best served or well served or adequately served, in an online environment. All of those things weighed heavily on them and so this this spot of landing with learning pods—they were delighted about it. They were delighted to see that it allowed a way for our classified staff to remain actively employed and earning an income and stand as part of our team, so they've been nothing but supportive all the way through and we very much appreciate that.

Alex: Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you feel like you need to get out there into the world?

Chris: (39:42) I'll just say it's been a ton of work; the logistics are complicated, the details are complicated; there are so many parts of making this work in the way that we'd like it to that I don't think I'd envision Tracy may have when we first sat down this path but I hear folks talking about things like taking pictures of our support staff folks who are going to be leaders of learning pods and have them write bios and put that on a website so that students and parents can start to know who they're going to be interacting with and build relationship and connections with them. There are just so many details like that, that I hadn't thought of, that I think are going to make a huge difference in terms of how well this works for our families. I'm just grateful to have a team that's been willing to bust their tails and work really hard in a short amount of time to pull this off. I think in the end it's all going to be very worth all the effort.

Tracy: (40:40) I just want to say thanks for talking to us about this. We're really proud of the work and we're also overwhelmed by it, and you know as Chris said, we all think that the payoff is going to be worth it for sure—just to at least have these 4,600 students have a safe environment to learn in. And at the same time it won't be perfect, and we're keenly aware of some difficult decisions we've had to make where we won't be providing services as Chris has mentioned. So we're hoping it goes well and we're happy to reflect with you later on about the whole thing and keep you up to date about how it's going. I know every single school district is working so hard to do what is best for their community. We've been collaborating with them and I have respect for all the leaders I've been working with across the front range. This is really hard and challenging and complicated for all of us, and so we're happy to talk about what we're doing—we hope it goes really well and we're going to work really hard to try to make sure it does

Alex: On behalf of everyone at CEI and around the state, I just want to thank you for taking time this morning to share some of your thinking and you can bet we're going to reflect with you later to find out how it goes!

Adams 12 Five Star Schools Resources

▶ Videos

- ▶ What to Expect: Learning Pods and In-Person Opportunities
- ▶ Colorado Education Initiative Q & A with Superintendent Chris Gdowski and Deputy Superintendent Tracy Dorland

▶ Adams 12 Website

- ▶ ONWARD: Navigating the 2020-2021 School Year Together
- ▶ Learning Pods
- ▶ Learning Pod Placement Priorities

▶ Adams 12 Documents

- ▶ Engagement Script—for phone outreach
- ▶ Student and Family Intent Form (English)
- ▶ Student and Family Intent Form (Spanish)
- ▶ Learning Pods Informational Handout
- ▶ Remote Learning Guide

Learning Pods — ONWARD | Adams 12 Five Star Schools

Learning Pods are a place for students to independently engage in remote learning in a safe and productive environment during standard school hours. Learning Pods will:

- Provide students with access to reliable internet to participate in synchronous learning.
- Provide students with the appropriate time to connect to their synchronous learning.
- Provide students with caring Adams 12 Five Star Schools staff members to encourage them and connect them with someone should they have technical issues.

How is a Learning Pod different from a regular classroom?

Staff members in these pods **will not** provide instruction to participating students. That responsibility will remain with the student's assigned teacher or teachers.

Student Groupings & School Staff

Students will be assigned to a grade-level pod at their current school.

Pods will be small cohorts (groupings) of students.
Elementary (K-5): Consists of up to 12 students per pod.
Middle (6-8): Consists of up to 15 students per pod.

Students will remain in their individual Learning Pod cohort for the majority of the day. Grade-level cohorts may have recess and lunch at the same time as needed while maintaining physical distancing.

One district staff member will be assigned to each pod.

Schools will be staffed with normal building support staff to include administration, office staff, health aides, student monitors and custodians.

Locations & Hours

Learning Pods will be available Monday through Friday during common bell schedules by school.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS (K-5):
8:05 am - 3:00 pm M, T, Th, F
8:05 am - 1:45 pm W

MIDDLE SCHOOLS (6-8):
9:00 am - 4:15 pm M, T, Th, F
9:00 am - 2:45 pm W

K-8 SCHOOLS:
K-8 schools have unique bell schedules and Learning Pods will follow the schedule unique to the K-8 school where they are located.

*The building will open for student access for breakfast 20 minutes prior to the bell.

Learning Pods — ONWARD | Adams 12 Five Star Schools

Health & Safety
(Read More > Student and Staff Health Onward Guide, pages 24-26; Cleaning & Building Management, page 30)

All students and staff will follow the district's prevention and health management guidelines which are aligned with public health orders and guidance, to provide a safe environment for all students, staff and families. Students and staff will be required to:

- Complete self-health screenings, including temperature checks, prior to arriving at the Learning Pod each day.
- Remain in their small student cohort for the duration of the day.
- Wear face coverings.
- Practice frequent handwashing and use of hand sanitizer.

Verification of student self-health screenings will be completed by building staff on a daily basis.

Parents/Guardians must notify the school if their child tests positive for COVID-19.

Building staff will follow enhanced cleaning protocols including frequent sanitizing of high touched surfaces.

Student Drop-off/Pick-up
(Read More > Onward Guide, page 27)

Parents/guardians will remain in vehicles when dropping off and picking up students.

Parents/guardians who walk their child(ren) to school buildings will be asked to drop them off and pick them up near the front of the school or a preassigned access point.

Parents/guardians are required to wear a face covering when on school property and out of their vehicle.

Parents/guardians will not be permitted in the building to walk their child to/from class.

Student Behavior Expectations

All school-wide behavior expectations and the district's student code of conduct remain in effect for Learning Pods.

Students are expected to come prepared to complete classwork and not disrupt others.

A student whose behavior disrupts the learning environment or who fails to comply with the district's health and safety guidelines may be dismissed from the program.

Attendance

Attendance will be taken twice daily, once in the morning and again after lunch period.

Parents are asked to report all absences to the school's attendance line.

Standard attendance procedures will be followed to monitor student arrival and attendance.

Visitor Management
(Read More > Onward Guide, page 27)

Parent/guardian and visitor building access will be restricted and only permitted for a student in need of medical or social-emotional support, or on an emergency basis.

Parents are strongly encouraged to review the district's Onward Guide for detailed guidelines regarding staff and student health, visitor management, classroom management, building cleaning and ventilation, etc.

www.adams12.org/onward

coloradoedinitiative.org

Contact info@coloradoedinitiative.org if you have questions about this case study.

The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) is at the forefront of improvement, innovation, and change in Colorado's public education system. CEI is a statewide nonprofit organization that invests time, expertise, and dollars in K-12 public education. For more than 10 years, CEI has worked with educators as an inspired and supportive partner on the ground in over 150 urban, suburban, and rural school districts. CEI is known as a visionary organization that fuses best practices with innovation, that is tuned into today's school dynamic and always mindful of what the future demands.