

Closing Academic Achievement and Opportunity Gaps

Grant in Action: Supporting Free Learning Pods in City Libraries

A new program launched in October 2020 for Rochester children ages 4 to 12 to meet safely in small groups and be supervised by experienced teaching assistants and paraprofessionals who will support each student's distance learning.

ROC City Learning Pods opened initially at the Phillis Wheatley Library and Lincoln Library for free to 24 city students who are enrolled in the Rochester City School District, parochial, or charter schools and whose parents are working and cannot be home to supervise their children's remote learning. Two other pods opened for 24 additional children at the Charlotte and Lyell branch libraries a few months later.



Plans are to expand this small-group program to other spaces in the city, such as local churches, to accommodate a total of 108 students.

The program, which runs from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on weekdays, is free to participants because of a \$55,000 grant from Rochester Area Community Foundation. It is the first grant from a recently established Racial Equity Growth Fund to support innovative ideas to form BIPOC-led nonprofits, invest in BIPOC nonprofit leaders and their career development, and provide funding for racial equity education and training, primarily for small businesses.

“When the pandemic closed schools in the spring, remote learning from home was tough for many families in the city because parents found themselves having to choose between working and staying home to help teach their kids,” says Brittany Rumph, project director of ROC City Learning Pods.

Then the Rochester City School District and charter schools opted for remote learning for the first 10 weeks of the 2020-21 school year. That decision again left families scrambling for solutions and an estimated 28,000 city children without a safe place to engage in their school’s distance learning if parents or other adults could not be home with them.

Some organizations are offering space and supervision to students to join learning pods for a fee. More informally, families have gotten together to create their own pods and jointly hire teaching assistants.

“We knew we had to do something,” says Rumph, who is also lead founder of Rochester Excellence Academy charter school. “Remote learning instantly became an equity issue. Not every family can afford to pay for educators to support their children during a remote learning day and it was up to us to create something quickly.”

Rumph and others focused on finding funding as well as safe, supportive and easily accessible spaces for children to learn – and the Rochester Public Libraries were ideal locations

because they have adequate space and furnishings in their community meeting rooms and access to stable WiFi.

“It is a perfect opportunity. Why not use our space for the community, our families, and the kids?” says Tolley Reeves, former assistant director of the Rochester Public Library.

She hopes that hosting these Learning Pods will help the city branches develop more long-term relationships with families, make them aware of all the resources available, and turn youngsters into lifelong learners.

Each learning cluster has 12 students and two or three education professionals and is managed by one program coordinator. Many of those hired had been laid off in August by the City School District as part of a cost-cutting effort. They are being paid \$11 to \$13 an hour for 30 hours each week.

“We know that the teaching assistants and paraprofessionals are the glue of many classrooms because they develop meaningful relationships with their students and provide one-on-one support during the school day,” says Maya Crane, program officer for equity at the Community Foundation. “These jobs provide an opportunity to use their experience and expertise to help children get the most out of their remote learning.”



A secondary benefit is that working directly with children will allow these essential educators to hone their instructional, professional, and entrepreneurial skills to help further their own careers. Professional development opportunities also will be offered.

ROC City Learning Pods, which is overseen by an advisory committee, include safety protocols instituted as a result of the pandemic. Students and staff complete daily health assessments before entering the shared space, wear masks, and bring their own technology devices provided by their schools. Rooms will be cleaned using CDC- and New York State-approved materials.

Breakfast, lunch and a snack are provided daily by Foodlink and the educators on site handle the food distribution.

The Learning Pods success has attracted additional funding, including a grant from the Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation. The Pods also have partnered with Generation 2 to offer virtual play sessions to all of their K-2 students, during their down time.

ROC City Learning Pods are unable to accept any more applications until more sites are open and the needs of students on the waiting list are met.

TO DONATE to the Racial Equity Growth Fund and boost the Community Foundation's effort to create a more equitable community, [click here](#).