

Plot to Pod

THOUGH THE IDEA OF MICROSCHOOLING DIDN'T ARISE IN RESPONSE TO THE ACADEMIC NEEDS OF PANDEMIC-AFFECTED STUDENTS, THE CONCEPT HAS GAINED POPULARITY BECAUSE OF IT—AND MANY LOCAL FAMILIES ARE SIGNING UP FOR THE RIDE.

BY ANETTA NOWOSIELSKA



DESIGN DETAILS

Check out interior designer Tamara Magel's picks to turn a spare room into a swanky learning nook.

WEST ELM PARSONS L-SHAPED DESK AND FILE CABINET SET

This functional and stylish desk in white lacquer offers plenty of extra storage. Add hardware to dress it up! westelm.com

GUCCI TIAN PRINT WALLPAPER Use an eye-catching Gucci wallpaper to add color and fun and help kids want to get motivated to start the day. gucci.com

BENJAMIN MOORE CHALKBOARD PAINT Add an accent wall of Benjamin Moore chalkboard paint by painting one wall and adding a white frame. This makes for a great place to keep schedules and notes. Buy lots of colored chalk! benjaminmoore.com

Interior designer Tamara Magel converts a room into a microschool.

In pondering the idea of a learning pod, equal parts home schooling and Nurse Matilda-style nurturing with a socially distant twist, some readers may summon up the image of a governess—a woman employed to teach children in a private household, common in the prewar European countryside where suitable schooling options were scarce. Today, with stakes seemingly higher out East, what used to get done around the dining room table is now taught in bedrooms converted into tricked-out learning environments and led by vetted educators who aim to fill in the gaps left by the uncertainty of the school year ahead.

This pedagogic ambiguity and health concerns have forced many parents to think outside of the proverbial box to dot the i's and cross the t's on the road to their offspring's scholastic greatness. Enter "pandemic pods" or "microschools"—small, in-person groups of students learning supplementally and/or in lieu of a conventional setting with the help of an in-person tutor or teacher at a cost that's tacked on top of school tuition. These pods are taking over many guest houses of sprawling estates across the Hamptons with an unprecedented zeal. "While there is no substitute for children being with their teachers and peers in a school setting," explains Erica Maltz, founder and CEO of WhizKidz

(whizkidztutoring.com), whose local presence has increased by leaps and bounds, "learning pods are a unique way to keep children engaged and learning at a time when many parents are nervous about sending their children to school."

So how effective are these small environments with multiage students and pioneering teaching models against the COVID-19 learning slide? "From a day-to-day perspective, we feel successful if our students have mastered the material and feel excited to learn," explains Hamptons Prep (joinhamptonsprep.com) CEO Angela Mascarenas. "From a long-term perspective, we want our students to feel a sense of normalcy while achieving academic success."

This solution, however, presents some challenges. "Demand for qualified, professional teachers to staff learning pods greatly exceeds the supply," offers Waine Tam, the CEO of Selected (getselected.com), a platform that connects families and teachers, a critical part of the pod formation process. Today's culturally sensitive landscape begs another consideration. "The downside is that the teacher shortage leads to even greater inequity as only those families with the means can afford the most qualified teachers," Tam adds. Time will tell whether these learning bubbles will burst or usher in a new way to school that might be here to stay.