

'Pandemic pods': How some parents plan on educating their kids in September ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

TORONTO -- While Canadian families wait to hear plans on returning to school in all provinces across the country, some parents are looking into the idea of 'pandemic pods' instead of having their children go back to the classroom.

Toronto-based educational strategist Dwayne Matthews told CTV's Your Morning that some parents are creating their own private classrooms run by one of the parents, a tutor or a school teacher with a small number of elementary-aged children, establishing their own schooling bubble.

Matthews said Thursday that a pandemic pod "could look like a lot of different things" but creating one requires some planning.

"What some of the folks are talking about is looking at joining Facebook groups and finding out if there is a suitable home? How would they put together about 10 students in a pandemic pod and who teaches the pandemic pod? What's the structure and what [are] the values around social distancing and the like," Matthews said.

"I was actually on the phone late last night speaking to a mom from a mom's group... and they were talking about pandemic pods outside. Creating something outside that could be temporary and eventually moved to someone's home."

He added that the pods may also gather in private rooms rented out of a commercial space.

Matthews said the subjects taught in these pods and the person teaching them can vary.

"Sometimes you may find that it may be a parent that steps up but uses some form of homeschooling program or a collection of programs online," Matthews said. "Or sometimes it may be teachers that are just coming out of teachers college that actually don't have any chances of jobs in September, and now this creates a great opportunity for them."

He also said that some wealthy families may offer substantial sums to lure teachers away from public schools.

While the concept may seem strange to some, Matthews said teaching through a pandemic pod is an opportunity for innovation in education.

For Matthews, one of the main benefits of a pandemic pod is consistency not just for students, but also for parents and teachers. He said more pandemic pods are being organized as provinces reveal their back-to-school plans, with some parents not keen on online learning or part-time classes.

"A lot of parents that I've spoken to, their concern is how do we deal with the consistency of having to work and take care of a child at the same time. That's very hard," Matthews said. He added that he has heard from parents who have had to stay up into the early hours of the morning amid the pandemic, trying to manage work, taking care of the family and teaching their children under one roof.

For teachers worried about being forced back into crowded classrooms, the chance to earn the same or more income at a lower risk of exposure by working in a pod can be enticing.

Matthews said the other benefit is consistency of education, with parents concerned that a second wave of infections may disrupt their children's schooling yet again.

"We know that typically -- anybody in education knows -- that around the end of September beginning of October, a lot of students get very sick from the flu and the flu symptoms are very similar, at least in a parent's [view], to COVID-19 symptoms. A lot of people are very concerned about what that will do for psyche for teachers, psyche for students," Matthews explained.

However, pandemic pods can come with a high price tag, creating concerns among school administrators that these pods will widen gaps between high and low-income families.

Matthews said this is "a really big issue," adding that the pandemic created issues with equity early on when schools switched to online

learning.

"We saw equity sort of really unveil its ugly head in the last six months around education [with] who has a device, who doesn't have a device, how many devices are there in a house, how much time do parents have, who has a parent that is at home," Matthews said.

Matthews said pandemic pods are not cheap and can cost upwards of \$500 per student each month.

"It can be between \$500 and \$1,000 for people willing to pay so that may be a lot for a lot of people in the city, particularly after they've gone through the pandemic and they may not necessarily even have jobs," he said.

To combat the inequalities, Matthews said he has heard of some pandemic pods including families that can't afford this new type of education at no cost.

"A lot of different dimensions to it and this creates a new dimension as well... Although that being said, there is also an opportunity to reshuffle," Matthews said. "It all depends."

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