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Thank you, Sen. Martin, and members of the committee. I am Grant Gulibon, Deputy State Director with Americans for Prosperity-Pennsylvania, the Commonwealth's largest grassroots network. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about the concept of "learning pods" and how those can help Pennsylvania students reach their full academic potential, especially in the current climate of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted the development of so many of the Commonwealth's children over the past year.

It is common in a traditional classroom setting for teachers to break their students up into smaller groups from time to time in order to promote greater communication, encourage them to share ideas, and learn to work together as a team. Indeed, this practice persists into adulthood, as many of us here today have undoubtedly participated in seminars and training events in which a facilitator divides the attendees into "breakout groups" to generate greater conversation and collaboration.

The pandemic has shown the need for families to be creative with shared childcare and continued education support when schools close. The various forms of hybrid education which started during the recent pandemic will likely be a feature of the education landscape in our state moving forward. For this reason, families should have the ability and freedom to explore ways to facilitate that type of learning.

Over the past year, though, the disruptions to the traditional model of K-12 education caused by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic have created the opportunity for a much more thorough experiment with small group, or "pod" learning due to the need to continue to educate children while minimizing the necessity of having them gather in large groups.

A learning pod can be thought of, as described by the international academic publisher Igi-global, as "a small geographically oriented team working on an individual project as a self-directed community." Through the combination of new technology and the established concept of in-person meetings, learning pods can help students develop skills that they will need as they move into modern professional life.

Local pods have generally consisted of a small number of families with existing connections and interests grouped together, often geographically close to each other, in order to share in learning support, costs, enrichment, and social experiences. Some pods may have formed in order to help facilitate continued educational experiences, socialization, and adult supervision at a time when



many families had that taken away from them. Others may have been created to minimize additional educational, childcare, or other related costs for families. Still others may do so because they believe that their children learn best in a small group setting. And there are undoubtedly families who favor learning pods due to a combination of the previously described factors.

While no two pods form for exactly the same reasons, the concept is sufficiently flexible as to allow families with similar educational goals and needs for their children to get together and accelerate their child's development. The pods can serve both the short- and long-term needs of families and children in numerous ways, such as by hiring teachers, tutors, and caregivers, or by bringing in individuals with professional expertise in each discipline to provide additional "real-world" instruction to students.

Some critics of learning pods have argued that they are largely a tool for wealthy parents, and that they are not a viable option for families of more modest means. But while money is an important resource, it is not the only one that a family can contribute. From facilities, meals, supplies and transportation to personal skills and experiences that can be used to augment students' learning, families forming learning pods are contributing both tangible and intangible assets to the cause, and investing the time, effort, and creativity necessary to find a mix that works for their children.

In truth, above all else, the growing popularity of learning pods demonstrates that for families of all socio-economic backgrounds, the past year has brought about a recognition that for many students, the "traditional" model of K-12 education is not working well enough for many students. It shows the care and commitment of those families to ensuring that their children have the best possible opportunity to grow and develop academically and socially. For those families, forming a learning pod is a demonstration of an innovative spirit that is needed to foster multiple, flexible solutions to the challenges inherent in providing every child access to a quality educational environment that fulfills that child's individual needs.

Indeed, polling conducted by Heart+Mind Strategies on October 28-29, 2020, shows growing support for these education options. Furthermore, there is increasing favor for minimal regulations to avoid burdening families.

- 41% agree that state officials should not impose new pupil-staff ratios specific to learning pods. Waivers to existing childcare requirements should be made permanent for pod families. (20% disagree)
- 49% agree that state officials should allow multi-family learning pods to operate as multi-family homeschool arrangements. (16% disagree)
- 47% agree that if there are deadlines by which homeschool families must register to educate their children at home, state lawmakers should waive such deadlines when public schools are only offering virtual or hybrid instruction. (19% disagree)



- 35% agree that state lawmakers should not allow agencies such as the Department of Education or Department of Health to conduct at-home visits of families participating in learning pods. (31% disagree)
- 39% agree that policymakers should not apply at-home daycare regulations such as pupil-staff ratios, zoning requirements, emergency plan requirements, or similar rules to learning pods. (24% disagree)

Unfortunately, current Pennsylvania laws and regulations threaten the ability of parents to form learning pods. According to the State Policy Network (SPN), Pennsylvania is one of the ten states with the most concerning regulations or statements made by public officials during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding learning pods.

As state policymakers consider proposals that would affect learning pod arrangements, we encourage them to consider that one of the main benefits of learning pods is that they are bottom-up solutions and are innovating in a permissionless environment. Parents are discovering solutions that can better meet their needs and those of their children. The legislature should identify areas where there is regulatory overreach and exempt this sort of activity from statutes that can hinder the ability of families to come together and address the unique educational needs of their children.

Specifically, there are five steps that Pennsylvania should consider to protect learning pods and allow parents to create quality options for their children in a setting where parents can limit health risks by having their children meet with others in small groups:

1. State officials should not impose new pupil-staff ratios specific to learning pods. Waivers to existing childcare requirements should be made permanent for pod families.
2. State officials should allow multi-family learning pods to operate as multi-family homeschool arrangements.
3. If there are deadlines by which homeschool families must register to educate their children at home, state lawmakers should waive such deadlines when public schools are only offering virtual or hybrid instruction.
4. State lawmakers should not allow agencies such as the Department of Education or Department of Health to conduct at-home visits of families participating in learning pods.
5. Policymakers should not apply at-home daycare regulations such as pupil-staff ratios, zoning requirements, emergency plan requirements, or similar rules to learning pods.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify today.