

Silver Lining: Lessons Learned for Educators During a Pandemic

**AN E-WORKBOOK DESIGNED TO
IDENTIFY, LEVERAGE, AND INCREASE
EXISTING STRENGTHS IN RESILIENT
SCHOOL COMMUNITIES.**



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has swiftly created changes to education. Each state, district, school, and educator is managing these changes in their own ways. There are major challenges that have arisen, yet we are seeing many opportunities to innovate and build resilience. The introduction of virtual learning, homeschooling, and parents/caregivers as teachers has opened our eyes to ways to solve particular challenges that have been ubiquitous across district and state lines. We are talking about topics such as family engagement, student academic engagement, teacher burnout, and more. The wide and varied responses to COVID-19 by educators has allowed for us to gain a new collective perspective on how best to approach these problems. This e-workbook is designed to help you to uncover what some of these things might be. Our hope is that it will provide you with the foundation for being forward thinking in addressing these challenges in new and innovative ways as we continue to move through and beyond this pandemic.

As a result of our intimate work with both families and school systems, we have been able to uncover some common themes that have contributed to the successes of schools and districts who have moved their classrooms and curriculums outside of the school and into students' homes. Five themes have emerged as particularly important factors in successful transition to a virtual format during this pandemic. They are organized into the following parts: 1. Prime Time for Family Engagement, 2. Flexibility, 3. The Art of Communication. 5. Organizing with Families and 5. Being Intentional About Being Trauma Informed.

We will dive into each of these areas and provide the space for you to interact with the material in a way that is specific to you and your community. Here at Pinnacle, we are committed to our role in building the authentic partnerships that are necessary for the social and emotional well being of all members of your school community. We hope that you find this to be helpful.

In Partnership,

Dahyana & Kristi

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Part 1: Prime time for Family Engagement

"Many hands make light work."— Unknown

The opportunity to understand each other is one that we often miss, especially in the hustle and bustle of the school environment. For educators, there are so many competing priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted us quickly into a new way of approaching almost everything we do.

This is a prime time to engage families in new and lasting ways.

Everyone is getting to walk a mile in another person's shoes. Parents are gaining a new found, or perhaps renewed sense of appreciation for the work of teachers and educators. Conversely, teachers now have the opportunity to learn more about the strengths and needs of their students' families from new perspectives. Educators having the opportunity to learn about families from a different vantage point can renew beliefs about the families and communities, or perhaps even push against some deeply held beliefs about families. These beliefs and the actions that follow have played a significant role in educator burnout in the face of behavioral, social, and emotional health challenges. When we have opportunities to learn from one another and collaborate effectively, it makes the work easier for the teacher, the family, and it deeply benefits the student.

Virtual education gives educators a huge opportunity to break down the challenge of teaching only within the walls of the classroom and school building. A tremendous challenge in education is bridging the school environment to that of the home. Often, educators are working with minimal information about the family's home life. This may leave room for assumptions to be made. The introduction to virtual learning creates opportunities for those voids to be filled with factual information instead of assumptions.

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For instance, we may not understand why a parent has not responded to emails with any consistency regarding the student's homework not being completed. With virtual learning, you likely will be able to talk directly to that parent on a video conference.

Engaging families can be easier than it seems. For the family just referred to- imagine you are on a video conference with a student and see the father walk by. You may say "Hi Joe!" and he will likely circle back and say hi. The next step is crucial with families that may have been difficult to engage... don't go right for *your* agenda. Start with something that *engages them*.

Here's an Example:

"Joe- I noticed that plant behind you. It's so beautiful. I wish I had a greenthumb." You are creating a space to enter the family's life in a new way.

His response could be: "Oh yes, my mother recently moved in with us and she always had plants in the house as I was growing up. With my mother moving in, it's been so hectic here and we are off schedule. Plus now with this coronavirus, our whole world is flipped upside down. I've been meaning to get back to you about the homework. Do you have a minute to talk about it now?"

Of course, it's not always going to be that smooth, right? But the point is that the bridge from school to home is only as strong as we make it with our commitment to *genuine connection*. Educators can use this time to strongly partner with families in a new way. Remember- they are in your shoes right now. They are likely seeing their child in a new way as well. Parents everywhere are sharing their newly gained perspectives on how their children learn, their strengths, and their challenges. This all points to the fact that the current climate poses a great opportunity for educators and families to get on the same page about student's needs. This will translate to better academic as well as social and emotional learning related outcomes.



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Activity 1.1: Partnership Practice

<p>List 5 questions about a student that you think would produce a better outcome if you understood the home/family environment.</p>	<p>Brainstorm ways to use virtual family engagement to gain this information.</p>
<p>ie.) Why does Jake seem so unorganized in the mornings, but is quite organized once he settles in?</p>	<p>ie) Scheduling an ongoing virtual student meeting in the morning to learn about the environment, invite the parent to join the meeting, ask curious questions based on observations/conversations. Use empathy. Ask about coming up with solutions together.</p>

Part 2. A Lesson on Flexibility

“The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.” — Albert Einstein

The correlations between flexibility and resilience can be easily found within the stories of those who have overcome hardship and trauma. Before the pandemic, the notions of hardship and trauma were elusive to those who were not intimately familiar with them in their personal lives.

Silver lining moment: this is a hardship we can all say that we’ve experienced. Moreover, we know as a result of the immense amounts of flexibility currently being displayed across systems of care and in educational settings, individual communities and their members will find themselves more resilient than ever. This pandemic has undoubtedly taught us all how to be flexible in the face of uncertainty. As a result of this flexibility schools and districts in particular have already accomplished so much. In the flurry of it all, it is not intuitive for us to stop and take stock of what it really means. However, something we can all probably agree on at this point is that what has happened as a result of this pandemic will change many things, for the better.

The pandemic has forced us to break down our walls and to consider a different way of living life. It has also forced us to bend in ways we never thought we could, or perhaps, ways that we have resisted bending in. For our school systems, the centuries old ways of instruction are no longer an option and we’ve all had to create a new normal for kiddos for the time being and into the future.

The switch to an online learning format for most schools involved the efforts of many people putting their heads together to brainstorm and execute solutions to the many unexpected challenges that emerged rapidly. For example, we have heard of schools distributing ChromeBook laptops to their students in order to ensure they had access to the necessary devices for online learning. Also, there are pockets of educators who have come together in large numbers to share best practices and to lend ideas to those who may be struggling in this time. A true testament of the times is reflected in the fact that teachers are checking in with students and

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Flexibility leads to Resilience

As a result of the immense amounts of flexibility during the pandemic, we are paving the way for what education may look like in the future. For now, we are seeing that this flexibility has allowed for many teachers in school districts to adapt to our ever-changing world. Students are now accessing the curriculum in new and innovative ways. Furthermore, teachers are finding that they can deliver instruction through various mediums with the help of new resources. The early (anecdotal) data shows these changes are perhaps making the curriculum more accessible to children who had previously experienced difficulty with certain aspects of the traditional way of providing education through instruction.



After this pandemic is over, and prior to our return to school, it's going to be instrumental that schools and districts closely evaluate the ways in which these changes have impacted their students- both positively and negatively. Schools and districts should utilize this data and incorporate it as they are formulating what their new normal will be. Pinnacle Partnerships can

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help you to collect and implement this data to help identify, leverage, and increase existing strengths within your resilient school communities.

Part 3. The Art of Communication

The abrupt, but necessary, switch to distance and/or online learning demands an “all hands on deck” approach for many schools and as a result lessons in collaborative communication emerged. Many times an “all hands on deck” situation in schools typically means a response by the faculty and educators in the building. COVID-19 has presented a situation in which families play *even more* of an important role than ever in the day to day education of their child.

Creating opportunities for schools and students with their families to best communicate and collaborate with one another creates the necessary foundation for the level of collaborative partnership that is necessary in resilient school communities.

Here are three ways to start building a foundation of communication with families together:

- I. When asking questions, consider families can be quickly put off by feeling “interrogated,” even when that isn’t the intention.

Try curious and open ended questions or statements for a conversational approach:

- “I’d like to understand more” instead of why questions.
- Stay with families when the conversation is tough vs. changing the subject. While difficult, letting a family express their frustration can create building blocks to success.
- Be open to multiple solutions when discussing challenges. Parents have great ideas! They are the experts in their children.
- Prioritize the family’s values first. Cultural and other considerations matter deeply.
- Reserve judgement when approaching conversations to be fully open to listening.

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- II. Practice Reflective Listening which allows parents and caregivers the space to express themselves and creates the opportunity for families to truly be heard.

Listening is the gateway to positive change & alignment.

Steps to Reflective Listening

- Step 1: Listen Carefully
- Step 2: Repeat back what you think you heard
- Step 3: Listen for confirmation or clarification
- Step 4: Validate

You will know you've been successful in reflective listening when:

1. **Families express feeling heard**
2. You **notice a marked change** in their interactions with you.

Creating opportunities for reflective listening creates clarity at the time of communication which carries over into the future. When families know they have a “partner in their corner,” it makes all the difference in how they approach the education, conversations, and school based relationships.

III. Achieving Outcomes Together:

1. Creating Successful Parental Partnerships
 - When creating strong pathways to communication with families, try these approaches:
 - Prioritize and use the family's identified preferred method of communication.
 - Texting/calling apps can help with privacy factors.
 - Identify the time the family is most available to communicate with the least amount of distractions.

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- Always used strengths-based language. Building on what is going well will always yield greater benefits than deficit-based approaches.

2. Creating Cultural Change in the School/Virtual School Environment

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” — Margaret Mead

- Regard families as the equals they are and ensure other members of the school team hold them with the same regard. One thing COVID-19 has highlighted is that we, as human beings, are having a collective experience that is an equalizer. While our education levels, work experience, socioeconomic status, race, gender, sexuality, and age may not be the same; we are a collective society experiencing an event that has and is changing us all. Now is a beautiful time to remember to love our neighbors and return to times of understanding. Change isn’t easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is.
- Talk about creating communication methods that are forward thinking and beneficial with colleagues and other decision makers.
 - **Find Accountability Partners!** Having a person to partner up with to be accountable to being strengths-based when thinking and talking about families. Make a pact with your best friend at work to keep each other in line with not reverting back to assumptions or deficit-based language.
 - **Learn more about the community you are teaching in.** Where are there places that small adjustments could make significant changes? Assess your own school’s culture. Is it reflective of the community you teach?
 - **Stop stereotypical language around you. *Be the Change!***
 - Speak up when the conversation is negative, unprofessional, or unproductive when related to families. Every voice matters.
 - Maintain strong, intentional silence. There is strength in maintaining silence amidst negative language, laughter, or “jokes” about a family. Actions often speak louder than words.

Part 4. Organizing with Families

An unorganized student may not equal an unorganized parent, however often a parent who struggles with organization may be challenged in instilling organizational skills to their child. In the era of COVID-19, family and student organization in the home is more important than ever. While it may feel like extra work to support a family in getting organized, the dividends it pays both now and into the future to support your work and the student's learning in exponential ways.

Individualizing organization for each student's home life is a nearly impossible task, especially in the manner in which distance learning has been thrust upon educators. However, there are many techniques, building on "The Art of Communication" from above, that can be combined with organizational approaches to support families. Moreover, this will allow you to align your process with the times/ways families are functioning to help ease the burden and adjustments of managing all this information remotely.

In this time, revisiting some basic information is very helpful. Additionally letting families know what they should expect, inquiring if they will need support with what you will be assigning, and expecting from their child in your class. Scaffolding layers of support and organization is critical in these times.



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Activity 4.1: Organizational Partners: A Dual Discovery

This is an example of how to create a form to collect information in order to align with best practices in communication with the families in your school community. Take some time to look it over and think about how you could implement something similar in your school community.

Family Information:

- What is your preferred method of communication?
 - Email
 - Phone
 - Text
 - Video conferencing

- How do we ensure consistent communication?
 - Set up a standing meeting time (Phone/Video)
 - Always schedule our next meeting at the current meeting (Phone/Video)
 - Email communication is best. Choose:
 - Weekly
 - Daily

- Are there other needs that I should be aware of at this time?
 - Yes: _____
 - Yes, I'd prefer to discuss it directly
 - Not at this time

Teacher Information:

Name:

Email:

Phone:

The best ways to contact me are:

Email:

Phone:

Text:

The best times to reach me are:

Morning between:

Afternoons between:

Scheduled office hours (if requested or if designated for parents/students to use)

“Other times” For example, this may include 1 evening a week that you are available for families who cannot meet/talk with you during the day based on their current circumstances.

Pro Tip:

Remember these moments of meeting families where they are, create strong bridges that last!

Other information you should know about me as your child’s teacher:

Our Classroom Partnership:

- With all families, I set up an organizational meeting to help with this huge transition. Would you prefer to have an individual meeting or to have a meeting with other parents from your child's class?
 - Individual
 - With other parents
- Would it be helpful for me to help get your child and family organized at home?
 - Yes
 - By video chat
 - By phone
 - By email
 - Maybe Later
 - No
- Assignments you should be expecting are:
 -
 -
 -
- Times I am scheduled to meet with your child are:
 -
 -

Are there other things you need, would like me to know, or have questions about during this transition?

Part 5. Being Intentional About Being Trauma Informed

“Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives.”— Bessel Van Der Kolk

There are varying perspectives of what constitutes a trauma and when it is appropriate to say that someone had a traumatic experience. For all intents and purposes, let us consider the pandemic of COVID-19 a traumatic experience in the sense that it has caused a major and unexpected change in reality which in turn has caused increased levels of stress and fear in the collective. The silver lining in this is that we all understand on some level the stress that COVID-19 has posed on us mentally, physically, financially, emotionally etc. This understanding will be instrumental as we think about ways to support one another through this difficult time and beyond. This will be especially important as we make the transition to what life, and school will look like post-COVID-19.

Here’s what we know about trauma:

1. **It lives in our bodies-** Traumatic experiences cause a cascade of hormonal and electrical signals in our body that changes the way that it functions. These signals change the way our hearts beat, how we perceive safety, how we perceive danger, and our ability to pay attention among other things. We also know that over time these stress signals take a toll on our health. As a result of our body's chronic exposure to these stress signals, their impact becomes more permanent. The lasting effects can lead to cognitive deficits and ultimately leaves us more susceptible to physical ailments such as heart disease and high blood pressure.

What this means:

We need to be intentional about becoming attuned to how we are feeling in our bodies in order to heal from traumatic experiences.

Let’s dive into what this means for teachers/educators in particular. This is particularly important because we know that when the adults in a child’s life have a keen awareness of how different

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things in life affect them, they have the invaluable opportunity to model how to transmute negative emotions into positive ones. In order for teachers or educators to be able to do that modeling they need the time and space to be able to do so. Schools and districts should explore the ways in which they can be intentional about providing teachers with the support they need to feel empowered to take the steps to heal from the trauma and grief associated with this pandemic. Examples could include more built in breaks for teachers, or health and wellness activities for staff onsite.

Activity 5.1 List two ideas and/or suggestions to address the need for educators to feel empowered to have the space they need for introspection and healing within the educational system.

1.
2.

When educators are having their emotional needs met they will be in a better position to help students to do the same.

2. **Part of our brains and bodies shut down in an attempt to cope with trauma.** This means that we may not fully be able to appreciate the profound effects of COVID-19 on us until we are on the other side of it. Most often, people recognize that an experience has lasting effects on them when “normal” becomes consistently hard to do.

What this means:

We need to be intentional about maintaining flexibility in how we interpret behaviors post COVID-19. Based on what we know about how trauma affects people, we can prepare for different subtypes of behaviors that we may see in children post COVID-19.

These subtypes are:

- The withdrawn child
- The hyperactive/hypervigilant child
- The emotionally charged child
- The quiet child (doesn't showing any outward signs but is struggling internally)

We will dive into further detail about anticipatory interventions in Part 2 of the Silver Lining Series. Ultimately, we know that trauma responses are largely unpredictable but we can start to think about how we can minimize the responses by taking a proactive approach now. Schools and districts are looking for ways to maximize social and emotional support from a distance.

Here are some ways that your school or district can do the same:

- Discuss with parents and include guidance about how to talk to their children about trauma. There are lots of resources available for this on the Pinnacle COVID-19 Resources page.
- Provide Social and Emotional materials to work with. Pinterest is an excellent place to find these. Try keywords: Social and Emotional Learning & Trauma Activities to start.
- Share good news. Including a feel good article or news story in your virtual classroom can help students make the necessary shift from a negative to a positive mind state. This is an excellent way to set the brain up for engaging in learning.
- Make a point to check in with individual students and their families (via their preferred communication, if you can) and make a point to address emotions with an opening

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activity or **morning meeting**. This can be as simple as engaging in a conversation about highs and lows for the week before diving into the academic business.

Pinnacle tip: Use PIES During a Virtual Morning Meeting.

Directions: Simply ask students to express the ways that they feel in the following domains:

Physically

Intellectually

Emotionally

Spiritually

Pro Tip: Take it one step further and ask how you can be helpful if a student identifies a particularly challenging domain.

Activity 5.2 Write down two more ways that educators can virtually address social and emotional learning in a trauma informed way.

1.

2.



About The Authors



Kristi Glenn is shifting the landscape of children’s behavioral health care through raising family driven treatment to the highest elevation. Using her vast professional experience in the mental health field combined with her personal experiences as the parent of a child with significant mental health needs; Kristi has created a platform integrating families, professionals, natural supports, and other stakeholders together. As a leader in family engagement, systemic change, policy development, and culturally competent care; she has worked with government, nonprofit

and for-profit agencies, supporting direct care staff and many others to create communities of care centered on successful outcomes in equal partnership with families. Some of Kristi’s work includes coaching and training related to family centered mental health treatment, creating collaborative teams,

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quality assurance and improvement in the field, and supporting cultural change in agencies. Kristi has presented at multiple conferences, webinars and has served in many volunteer capacities such as board service, committees to reduce risk, restraint and seclusion, faith-based organizations, education advisory committees and many more. Kristi believes professionals with the lived experience of raising children with mental health challenges are the cornerstone to the evolution of children's behavioral healthcare today.



Dahyana Schlosser is a Registered Nurse as well as a Child and Family Therapist. She self identifies as a helper and a healer and has dedicated herself to helping children and families to overcome the challenges brought forth as a result of behavioral health problems. As a Child and Family Therapist, Dahyana is in Private Practice where she provides In Home Therapeutic Services to children and their families in and around Boston as well as on the South Shore. She has also consulted for various School districts across the State of Massachusetts helping to build communities of care and understanding related to children's mental health. As a consultant and trainer, Dahyana has created and delivered Professional Development Programs related to children's mental health, and the implementation of strategies that contributed to more favorable outcomes as a result of true partnership and collaboration with families. As an Adjunct Professor, Dahyana also works to teach and train future Human Services Professionals to be grounded in the ideals of Person Centered and Family Driven Practices. Dahyana's diverse and varied professional experiences in the Mental Health field shape her unique perspective and ability to be a creative problem solver. In 2021, Dahyana will graduate from Massachusetts General Hospital's Institute of Health Professions as a Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner.

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