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Closing the Virtual Gap: Resources for At-Home Learning During COVID-19

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Abstract

In this time of COVID-19, at-home learning has become the new normal. In some cases, parents have been thrust into the dual role of at-home worker and at-home teacher. Additionally, disparities arise when you look at education levels of parents and socioeconomic factors. The goal of this project was to identify resources that are available to families to help overcome the many challenges to at-home learning: areas like access to the internet, proper work environments and access to wellness and mental health support, to name just a few. The process was done through collaborating with Learning for Life Charter School (LFLCS) staff, doing online research and calling local sources to identify available resources. Institutions like Monterey County Office of Education (MCOE) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) have created links to resources to assist parents in keeping their children engaged in their academics. Utilizing the knowledge base of the existing staff at LFLCS, and the information gathered from various research, a website was created for the parents of LFLCS students giving them links to various topics such as understanding math in order to assist their student, to “250 activities to do during COVID-19.” A major takeaway during this pandemic is that anything institutions can do to assist parents and students in navigating challenging shifts in educational systems is beneficial to successful outcomes.

Keywords: Students, at-home learning, parental involvement, COVID-19, resources

Agency & Communities Served

Learning for Life Charter School (LFLCS) is a public charter in Marina, California. The school falls under Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) jurisdiction and opened in 2001. The school focuses on grades 7-12, serves students that reside within Monterey County, and utilizes a combination of on campus and at-home learning. The student body is diverse in ethnicity and for reasons for attending. Some students are there for an assortment of disciplinary challenges such as suspensions, expulsion, and delinquency. Sometimes students are there due to developmental delays that keep them from working in a conventional school environment. Regardless of why a student may end up at LFLCS, once there, they all are treated as an individual and their educational plan is catered to the student's ability.

Before opening LFLCS, the founder, Gloria Shaw, worked for another school in Ontario, California, called Options for Youth. It offered an independent learning environment for students at risk of dropping out of school. Ms. Shaw really loved the idea and its impact on youth and the community. When Ms. Shaw and her husband moved to the Monterey area, she set out to open a school to do just the same. The school quickly became busy with students and eventually outgrew its location. In 2014, they moved the school to its new, and current, location off Imjin Road in Marina. She has since stepped down as the Director but continues to teach students at the school.

Problem Description

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the country and drastically changed the way we educate our children. Once California mandated shelter-in-place (SIP) orders, all schools in the state were forced to move to remote learning. While this was not an extreme shift for LFLCS, it still presented problems for the school, the parents, and the children enrolled. Before SIP orders, while a large majority of the student population chose to work from home entirely, several came to campus to learn. This on-site experience addressed many needs for the student and their parent(s). It provided opportunities for the student to get face-to-face support from tutors, counselors, and teachers. It gave the students' parents/guardians a safe place to leave their children while they work. Some of the students also received food through breakfast and lunch programs. Lastly, it provided essential socio-emotional support that children need. Many of the children that attend school nationally rely on mental health services offered at their school. According to a study conducted this year, schools provide “mental health services to 57 percent of adolescents who need care.” (Golberstein, Wen, Miller, 2020) LFLCS is no different. Many of these children depend on the support they receive from on-site experiences.

Contributing Factors

While there are many factors involved in loss of services during COVID-19, three stand out. First, the pandemic and its SIP orders forced kids into their homes for school and all students became homeschooled at this point. In many cases, parents were faced with childcare

issues because they no longer had the campus option. Just as schools and students had to adjust to this new way of doing things, so did parents.

Secondly, access is also a substantial factor to loss of services. Some families have reliable internet and a decent workspace to learn. Others struggle just to find a location in their home to do homework. In some cases, the household is so active that the students cannot focus on schoolwork. Moreover, technology requires the internet to work and sometimes the parents cannot afford internet plans. In addition, some students do not have reliable devices to complete their assignments or attend virtual meetings. These are all things that are quickly remedied on campus.

Thirdly, attendance is difficult when campus is open, and it became even harder when SIP kicked in. One way LFLCS gauges engagement is by assignments completed. For middle school grades it is ten assignments per day, and 15 for high schoolers. As COVID-19 kicked in, activities for some students started to drop off. In the Fall 2020 semester, tutors saw some students drop down to ten assignments per week! Once the school transitioned to solely online learning, tutors at LFLCS reported a decrease in attendance by those students who were traditionally on-campus students. One tutor reported that some students refused to turn on their cameras, some likely due to embarrassment of their home situations. When students stop engaging regularly in curriculum, learning loss can become a concern.

Consequences

Every summer in the United States, most schools close and students get a break from school. Some educators believe that there is a loss of learning that occurs during these prolonged breaks. These last two semesters have been unique because of COVID-19. The initial wave of the pandemic occurred in early spring of 2020. There was an interruption of school by a few weeks in the early stages of the pandemic. Summer came and with it, summer break. The fall semester kicked off with clear direction and students seemed to try to engage. Eventually, students began to not show. If learning loss is a thing, and many educators do believe it is, then the gaps in education are becoming more visible.

With students beginning to check out, graduation becomes a concern. Unmotivated students do not tend to graduate. Low graduation rates are detrimental to more than just the student. Students who do not graduate from high school make considerably less money than people with a high school diploma. Less income is less money spent in their community. Less income also brings along all of the difficulties low-income individuals regularly face like food and housing insecurities, increased health disparities, and exposure to crime. The goal of this project is to provide parents with ways to set their children and themselves, up for success.

Problem Model

| Contributing Factors | Problem | Consequences |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| SIP Lack of access | Loss of Services due to pandemic | Decrease in attendance Learning loss Lower graduation rates |

Capstone Project Description and Justification**Capstone Project & Project Purpose**

This project was born mainly out of necessity. LFLCS has a population of families that already experience lack of access to many services and the pandemic only exacerbated the disparities. As the COVID-19 pandemic continued on, it became obvious that parents and students needed resources to offset the challenges they were facing as a result of the pandemic. It was also necessary to include a focus on wellness as prolonged SIP orders began to take a toll on attendance and mental and physical health. Students began falling off the pace of attendance as the semester wore on. Many factors contributed to this decrease in attendance but mainly, screen fatigue and lack of proper work spaces played heavy roles.

Project Justification

As mentioned before, a necessity for additional resources is the true motivation behind this project. With SIP orders extended, the minimal reopening of the community, and the

subsequent second shutdown, parents and students clearly needed resources. It is easy to assume that if school systems struggled to adjust to at-home learning, families would also face those same challenges. In a recent University of Michigan study of 405 parents, half of the parents reported being overwhelmed by these new responsibilities of being teacher and parent. According to Lee, et al., approximately 40% of the parents interviewed met the criteria for major depression.

Project Implementation

Prior to this project, LFLCS already had a few resources online; however, they mostly utilized the resources either offered through their staff, or what was offered through their educational platform, Edgenuity. This was sufficient for normal times. During a pandemic, though, clearly more resources were necessary to support the entire student population and their parents. The process went as follows:

- Research available resources within LFLCS meant to support families
- Research outside resources meant to support families
- Procure web building platform (LFLCS has Google Suites so the choice was Google Sites)
- Learn Sites interface
- Build website with survey built into the site
- Create announcement email
- Publish website
- Send announcement email to staff, parents & students
- 30 days after website publication, follow-up on survey

Assessment Plan & Expected Outcomes

In order to track success, a survey was created that appears as a link on the website. This will keep parents and students on the website without having to leave to complete a separate survey. The goal is to keep them engaged with the website and allows visitors to answer a couple questions that will identify if the website was useful, what was useful to them, and any comments and suggestions they may have. Expectations are that 20-30% will answer the survey and that responses should be positive. This resource site is focused on providing parents and students information about programs and helpful tips and tricks, if you will, that can help them through this challenging time. We do not anticipate a flurry of negative responses.

Project Results & Recommendations

Since the website only went live recently, there is not enough data to report results. What can be said is how the site helps the parents and students. The site focuses on providing links to resources under a selection of categories. A list of these categories and what can be found follows:

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Activities | Links to hiking trails and many other activities, both indoor and outdoor |
| Wellness | Links to calming techniques and self-care |
| Academics | Links to aids for parents and students that cover direct aid on class topics and adapting to At-Home learning during COVID-19 and beyond. Khan Academy and PBS Learning Media are just a couple of the links |
| Internet | Links to discounted internet access through internet carriers and details about wifi devices available directly through LFLCS |

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Technology | Links to organizations that offer discounted (sometimes free) computers as well as available technology through LFLCS |
| Food | Links to food programs available through Monterey County including food disbursements and farmers markets. Some Farmers Markets accept CalFresh and will match dollars spent |
| Housing | Links to rental assistance and support from multiple agencies |
| Transportation | Links to bus schedules and MST assistance program through LFLCS |

The value of this website is one that can continue on for the life of the school. The site can be adjusted to what the current needs of the school and its population are at the time. At this moment, it is more COVID-19 focused, whereas a year from now it may be focused on a different need. The site lives on for LFLCS as they see fit. This site is easy to maintain and could easily be updated by administration, or even a future intern.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this project was born from an unexpected occurrence. COVID-19 caused the entire world to adjust to new normals. Parents, thrust into the stress of dual roles of parent-educator, need whatever support we can offer to help them set their students up for success. Providing links to resources to aid parents and students is a step in that direction. The door is opened for LFLCS to continue to use this website in the future for whatever they deem necessary.

Personal Reflection

Looking back on this project, a couple of things really stand out for me. First of all, while I was excited about the original project, I wish I had thought about building a website from the get-go. Creating a visually appealing website with a bit more to offer, would have been a challenge in which I would have thrived. I am proud that this is a project that will continue and that I had the opportunity to create it for a school and an employer that I respect. The biggest lesson that I have learned is that I need to do a better job of communicating. This was a tough journey for me during uncertain times, and I could have made it easier on myself and everyone involved if I was a better communicator. I have learned that I am definitely not made for online learning, but am glad I came through and was able to finish this important project.

References

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- Lee, S. J., Ward, K. P., & Chang, O. D. (2020, September 5). *Research Brief: Parents' perceptions of the shift to home-based education during COVID-19 pandemic.* <https://bit.ly/2Ra5Q2R>.

Appendix A
Scope of Work

| Activities | Timeline/Deadlines | Supporting Staff |
|--|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Meet with Mentor to discuss proposal | August 2019 | Kenneth Lawrence-Emanuel (KLE) |
| Create teacher survey | September 2019 | KLE |
| Compile teacher survey data | October 2019 | KLE |
| Meet to discuss data from first surveys | January 2020 | KLE |
| Discuss needs assessment format and verbiage | March 2020* | KLE |
| Adjustment to project due to COVID-19 | September 2020 | KLE |
| Begin development of website | September/October 2020 | KLE |
| Continued website development | October/November 2020 | KLE |
| Website rollout and announcement email | November/December 2020 | KLE |
| Follow up on survey results | January 2021 | KLE |

