

# FAMILIES *as* PARTNERS



*Shifting Together Across  
Learning Environments*



TALE Academy   
MODULE 1 - SESSION 8



Tameka Carter and Bliss Requa-Trautz went building to building in the Edenwald housing projects in the Bronx, knocking on doors of families with children in Public School 112. – KARSTEN MORAN/*The New York Times*/Redux

Before the pandemic, parents at Public School (PS) 112 in the Bronx went door-to-door to let families know that their school was becoming a “community school” where they would be able to access medical services, tutoring, and summer programs. The hope was that by turning PS 112 into a community school, more family members would become authentically engaged in their children’s education.

Former principal Susan Barnes discussed the challenge with *The New York Times* in 2015. She explained that while large numbers of family members attended student performances and award ceremonies, far fewer attended events designed to directly engage families in supporting academic work at home, such as workshops on helping with reading or math.

**The reason? “Most of my parents are non-readers. People don’t want you to know that they can’t read or write.”**

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A multi-generational immigrant family of 11 lived and learned together during the pandemic in a modest house in Utica, New York.

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A multi-generational family of 11 lived and learned together during the pandemic in a modest house in Utica, New York. Four of the children attend Utica city schools, while two of the older children were enrolled at Herkimer County Community College. They shared five Chromebooks between them and divided up space in the house with three students sleeping and studying upstairs and three downstairs.

But the tight living and learning quarters weren't the biggest challenge for the family. The family is part of the large refugee community in Utica, including more than 4,000 refugees from their country of origin, Myanmar. The most common first language spoken among the large English language learner population in Utica public schools (approximately 17%) is Karen, which is the language the family speaks (the family does not have a surname, which is in keeping with Karen tradition). Say Kler Paw, who was 16 during the remote learning period, led her younger siblings in their studies, as her parents and grandparents do not speak English. Cousins and family friends reached out to Say Kler Paw to get help, as well. And instead of turning away, she signed up to be a tutor for the Midtown Utica Community Center's virtual tutoring program.

**She explained the impetus: “I had many relatives here that are struggling, and their kids are struggling with all the online stuff...So I wanted to sign up.”**

# Bridging the Gap

## School



While the two scenarios above come from very different geographic regions of New York State, they share and address a common challenge: social and cultural gaps between home and school that lead to low levels of family engagement in traditional formats. From the perspective of teachers, the parents in both scenarios may appear to be disengaged from their children's education. But as the second scenario reveals, this may not actually be the case. In fact, in the second scenario, which was reported by Amy Neff Roth and Alex Cooper of the *Utica Observer-Dispatch*, neither of the parents had the opportunity to be educated themselves because they were displaced by civil war in Myanmar when they were children. Mother Khee Paw expressed her deep commitment to her children's education through her daughters as translators; she is so happy and grateful for the education and opportunities her children are receiving now, no matter what that looks like.

These social and cultural gaps between home and school turned into an abyss during emergency remote teaching (ERT) and made apparent to everyone the specific challenges that both families and teachers face when they work to bridge this gap. ERT brought teachers into the living rooms of our students, giving families and caregivers greater knowledge of the language, expectations, curriculum, and activities of teaching. Teachers developed more awareness of the cultural assets, language, and social dynamics of their families as we taught students in their homes. In the process, both families and teachers learned a lot about each other, but we still have a long way to go if we truly want to be partners in the education of our students and children.

**In this session, we will focus on building partnerships with families, regardless of the learning environment. We will return to the four constants across learning environments that we discussed in Session 2, but from the perspective of building strong partnerships with families.**

## Home





# Building a Strong Foundation on the

# 4 CONSTANTS

## ACROSS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

### Predictability

Trauma creates a profound sense of unpredictability. Teachers can prioritize predictability by

- establishing a routine to build a sense of normalcy,
- responding in predictable ways, and
- planning ahead for dysregulation.

1



### Flexibility

Periods of dissociation and inability to listen are just two trauma responses that can easily be mistaken for behavioral issues. Students need flexibility so that they can deal with trauma responses as they occur. Teachers can prioritize flexibility by

- observing and adjusting targets, approaches, and schedules, and
- allowing for multiple paths towards demonstrating learning.

2

### Connection

Traumatized children need trusting and caring relationships to help them heal. Teachers can prioritize connections by

- investing in relationships with and between others, and
- being deliberately positive instead of neutral.

3



4

### Empowerment

Trauma most often results from events and circumstances outside of the child's control, leaving them feeling powerless in other situations. Teachers can prioritize empowering students by

- providing students with authentic choices,
- practicing and modeling consent,
- establishing opt-in, not opt-out, policies, and
- minimizing compliance for compliance-sake.

Is it too soon to claim that pandemic teaching wasn't all bad for education? Some students thrived. As a profession, we learned how to capture the benefits of remote learning. And something has become very clear: before making any significant changes in the lives of students and families, we have learned that we need to infuse trauma-informed, equity-centered teaching strategies into our daily practice.

If you think back to Session 2 of this module, the four constants that promote resilience for our students across all learning environments are predictability, flexibility, connection, and empowerment. These four constants strengthen and support the capacity of students to respond to change or uncertainty. But why stop at students? If we want to build a community that can move between learning environments, which practices will help us extend predictability, flexibility, connection, and empowerment to our family community? Let's unpack a few strategies that flow naturally out of these priorities.

## Learn More

This infographic is based on Alex Shevrin Venet's book *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education*. A link to her 2021 book on the topic is [here](#).

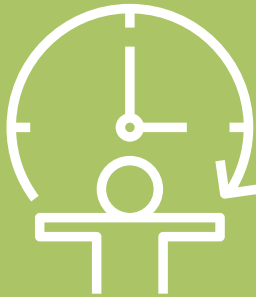
# 4 CONSTANTS ACROSS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

## FAMILIES *as Partners*

### Predictability

Teachers can prioritize predictability by:

- Creating consistent routines for engaging with families.
- Including pathways for more informal connections with families.
- Using translation apps depending on each family's preferences.



Families have made it clear that they need predictability in the way their teachers communicate with them. Part of this work is establishing routines that allow families to plan and engage. Along with the back-to-school nights and regular family-teacher conferences, consider establishing regular but more informal ways to connect with families, such as regular office hours where family members can come either in person or via a video meeting to talk with you one-on-one about their children's progress and experiences.

If you work with communities that predominantly speak a language that you are not fluent in yourself, consider using translation apps such as [iTranslate](#), which supports text translation as well as voice-to-voice conversations. Routines and accessibility tools such as these give families predictable, reliable, and flexible ways to establish two-way communication.

Some families may not engage with the school because of negative experiences engaging with top-down structures in the past. To undo that experience, we have to actively diversify and amplify the voices that get heard and how families can share their voices. For some schools, it looks like taking the conversations to places where people feel comfortable gathering. Anne Henderson, best known for her co-authored book *Beyond the Bake Sale*, recommends a back-to-school community walk.

A community walk is a parent- or student-led tour that highlights the resources and challenges of the school neighborhood. Teachers can use these to learn more about the strengths and challenges of the community in which their students reside. Activities such as a community walk also remove the barriers described in the opening scenarios by putting aside the academic discussions and focusing on building relationships.

### Flexibility

Teachers can prioritize flexibility by:

- Actively amplifying family voices.
- Diversifying the ways in which families can engage and contribute.
- Focusing first on building relationships before focusing on academics.



# 4 CONSTANTS ACROSS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

## FAMILIES *as Partners*

Strong relationships lead to strong outcomes. This is true for student-teacher relationships as well as for parent-teacher relationships. During ERT, the Mohawk Regional Information Center, which serves schools and districts primarily in central New York State, developed comprehensive tools to help educators engage families as partners in at-home learning.



### Connection

Teachers can prioritize connection by:

- Making an explicit commitment to students' social, emotional, and physical well-being.
- Replicating that commitment when it comes to families' well-being.

Let's take a high-level look at one of their strategies for building strong relationships: providing explicit, consistent, and adaptable well-being structures. While many of the structures require schoolwide or district-level support, teachers can make explicit their commitment to the social, emotional, and physical well-being of their students and families through quick activities such as the "fist-to-five" (students/family members in group situations hold up the number of fingers equivalent to how they are feeling across SEL indicators such as stress, rest, and physical health). You can take this [online with polling tools such as Poll Everywhere, PollDaddy, Flisti, and Micropoll](#).

### Empowerment

Teachers can prioritize empowerment by:


- Prioritizing trust and mutual respect when developing partnerships with families.
- Co-creating a Parent's Bill of Rights and clarifying norms for a healthy and engaged social dialogue.



When trust and mutual respect become a prioritized goal, we can expect our families to actively seek equity in their relations with the school, and we can have pathways ready for those requests. We will know we have succeeded in engaging our families when they are not passive recipients. One way of explicitly developing a culture of shared planning and high engagement is to support the creation of a Parent's Bill of Rights. "[Walking Together](#)", an example from the The New Teachers Project, highlights what an equitable school culture would feel like from the family side and makes explicit the norms for a healthy, engaged social dialogue.



**Now it's your turn!**



**In this session, you will have a chance to reflect on how you communicate with families about your partnership. What kinds of support do you expect caregivers to provide their children to support their schoolwork? In what ways are you supporting families in meeting those expectations across learning environments?**



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# About Us

## **The TALE Academy**

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

## **The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project**

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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