

# San Benito Superintendent sees the silver lining in disruption caused by the pandemic

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**N**ot a single aspect of life was left untouched by the impact of COVID-19 by the end of the 2019-20 school year, causing enormous hardship and heartache. But rather than focus solely on the difficulties, San Benito High School District Superintendent Shawn Tennenbaum is looking forward to how his community can reimagine schooling in a way that will set students up for success.

While the final semester last year was tough, Tennenbaum says he is proud of the resiliency demonstrated by his students, educators and broader school community. Now, with what he calls the 'new normal' a bit more established, this is the perfect time to reinvent public education as we've known it.

"We have to develop new routines, new ways of connecting and new ways of delivering instruction, and I think that in and of itself is the greatest challenge for all educational leaders and educators right now—2020-21 will not be a routine year," he explains. "There was a lot of things about traditional education that was excellent, but you know what? We're using technology now in different ways, and we're engaging learning in different ways, we're trying to assess students differently, and we're asking students to become more proficient in skills that are going to help them be successful in life.

"The pandemic forced us to do things differently. It has flipped the paradigm now and I'm excited by the changes," Tennenbaum says. "We're coaching educators, we're learning as we go, we're seeing creative things happening. We don't want to go back to the way it was."

Central to Tennenbaum's leadership is the way he



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embraces and adapts to change, and perhaps even more importantly, makes those around him feel confident in the change — a quality which has proven critical in a time when nothing is certain from one minute to the next.

And in a district that has served over five generations of families and traditions are well established, Tennenbaum has managed to balance a respect for the time honored history of San Benito families, while ushering in new initiatives that will set students up for success.

The district provided students with a Chromebook and provided anyone without home internet access with a hotspot to ensure that everyone can participate in fully remote or hybrid

learning instruction—all of which the district will implement again in the coming school year. Students will be able to build skills including independence, collaboration and communication over different mediums.

In order to accomplish a smooth transition into the coming year, Tennenbaum says the district will continue to emphasize something else that has long informed his leadership: open and regular communication.

During the school closures, San Benito HSD made it a priority to send continuous updates to its more than 3,000 students focusing on topics such as where to access meals, technology for distance learning and mental health resources, as well as the importance of positive attendance. "The most important thing that our students need to understand is that half of the challenge is just showing up—whether that's virtually or not, they need to be here," Tennenbaum says. "That's what is going to give them the opportunity to succeed."