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Resiliency

Promoting Everyone's Potential to Succeed

"It's a funny thing about life. If you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it."
—Somerset Maugham

We believe that it is urgent for schools, families, and communities to come together to provide mutual support and improve the potential for *everyone*—youngsters, adults, and the elderly—to lead positive, meaningful, and healthy lives. In support of this contention, this introductory chapter explores the widespread problems that confront our schools and communities and the reasons our problem-focused thinking is unable to overcome them. It also provides an introduction to resiliency, which is an important and positive shift in the way we think about and respond to our school and community challenges. Fostering resiliency in classrooms, schools, families, volunteer groups, community organizations, and formal governmental agencies can do much to move us along the path to school and community improvement.

WHY THE URGENCY?

Many schools face a rising tide of problems that include bullying, violence, gang-related activities, substance abuse, absenteeism, high dropout rates, suicides, low levels of parental support and involvement, and changing family structures.

Communities are struggling with problems such as growing numbers of its members who are unable to maintain a decent quality of life along with a growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots, a fracturing of acceptance and understanding among individuals and groups, a declining level of participation in civic affairs, and in general, a growing distrust of the intentions or abilities of those in authority positions to function equitably and effectively on behalf of all citizens.

Are these problems that are widespread in your school and community? Responding to Exercise 1.1 can help sharpen the picture of how your community is doing with these issues.

Exercise 1.1: Taking Stock of Your School and Community

An important initial step in making significant improvements is to be sure that everyone understands and agrees about the current state of affairs. Invite others to explore the following questions with you. Remember to focus on perceptions about what the situation is *now*.

1. What problems do you think schools in your community are encountering that hinder their ability to provide an effective education for students?

2. What problems do you think the community is encountering that hinders its ability to provide support needed by its members?

3. Why do you think your schools and community are experiencing these problems?

4. Are these problems being addressed? If so, which ones? In what ways?

Record members' responses on a chalkboard or on a sheet of chart paper. Ask the group to review the responses and identify shared understandings. Underline agreements or rewrite those that might need to be modified so they can serve as the basis for further discussion if the group agrees to continue the conversation, as well as to guide actions if the group decides to pursue ways of promoting resiliency.

Living in stressful times creates the need to develop skills and the knowledge required to cope effectively. This has probably always been a reality, but it has become especially true during the closing decades of the twentieth century and the beginning years of the twenty-first century because of the increasing pace of change that we are experiencing. Accompanying the rapidity of change are breakdowns of institutions such as the church and the family, which have traditionally acted as sources of shared understanding, support, and authority for communities, nations, and the world. With these breakdowns have come endless arrays of problems that appear to be intractable. Some of these problems are listed below. You are encouraged to add others that may be relevant in your setting. Being clear about what is at issue is the first step to remediation and improvement.

> We live in the midst of alarms; anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper read.
>
> —*Abraham Lincoln*

For Children and Adolescents

We are all too familiar with the many negative manifestations that are exhibited by children and adolescents in these trying times. These include

- various forms of antisocial behavior such as vandalism, truancy, and bullying;
- negative peer influence including pressure to join antisocial gangs;
- violence and crime;
- broken families;
- child abuse;
- drug abuse;
- high unemployment rates among teens;
- academic failures and school dropouts;
- premarital teen births; and
- hopelessness and suicide attempts.

Add other factors you think are important for children in your community:

- _____
  _____
- _____
  _____
- _____
  _____

For Schools

Schools, whether rural, small-town, suburban, or urban, are confronted with problems that test their abilities to create effective responses, including

- fear and violence;
- changing student enrollments and, often, large class sizes;
- employment agreement stresses;
- an aging workforce;
- dilapidated and outdated buildings;
- increasing reliance on expensive and complex technologies; and
- increasing criticism and decreasing parental and community involvement.

Add other factors that are important in your situation:

- _____
  _____
- _____
  _____
- _____
  _____

For Families

A major factor in the increasing incidence of youth problems is the breakdown occurring in traditional family structures. For example, there are widespread occurrences of

- marital problems and high divorce rates;
- single-parent families;
- dispersal of extended families across distant locations;
- families with no adult members available during the day, which has exacerbated the growing problems associated with children returning to an empty home after school hours (latchkey children);
- negative adult role modeling regarding addictive behaviors associated with tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs and sexual promiscuity;
- lack of clarity and agreement about family roles and responsibilities;
- lack of close family and friendship ties; and
- lack of home-based motivation for achievement.

Add other factors that you think are important in your situation:

- _____

  _____

- _____

  _____

- _____

  _____

For Communities

Communities provide the frame of reference and the basic orientation that guides behaviors of children, adolescents, and adults. This becomes more difficult to achieve in times of rapid change. We may no longer agree about what we even mean by community. For many it is still defined by geographical space—neighborhoods, towns, and cities—but for others it may be around commonalities such as ethnicity, religion, work connections, or personal interests. However they are defined, communities will be hard pressed to provide the positive guidance that is necessary, unless adequate responses are developed regarding problems such as the following:

- the high rate of mobility which affects people's attachments to communities;
- inequities in earning and housing opportunities;
- lack of meaningful employment opportunities;
- fragmentation of values and norms;
- fear and violence; and
- lack of opportunities to gather, interact, and celebrate together.

Add other factors that you think are important for your community:

- _____

  _____

- _____

  _____

The problems listed are just the tip of the iceberg. The old Chinese curse, "You should live in interesting times," certainly applies to the current reality in most of our communities. One perspective is that we are witnessing community structures that are coming apart at the seams. Another perspective, which is less pessimistic, is that we are living through a major transition that may be confusing, disorienting, and erratic but one that is also natural, necessary, and responsive to changing times.

In either case, many problems do appear to be intractable. These are indeed interesting times. In part, this is because we focus on issues narrowly as student, school, family, or community problems. In reality, they are interconnected and affect each other, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Figure 1.1 illustrates this basic interconnection.

As Figure 1.1 denotes, each subsystem overlaps with the other subsystems. Sometimes, the connections are unilateral such as when schools deal with student-related issues. Sometimes, the connections are multifaceted such as when communities and families interact with schools and students in the process of education. Narrowly focusing on one subsystem does not account for the potential impacts, positive and negative, that can be caused by the other subsystems.

Figure 1.1 The Linkages Between Students, Schools, Families, and Communities
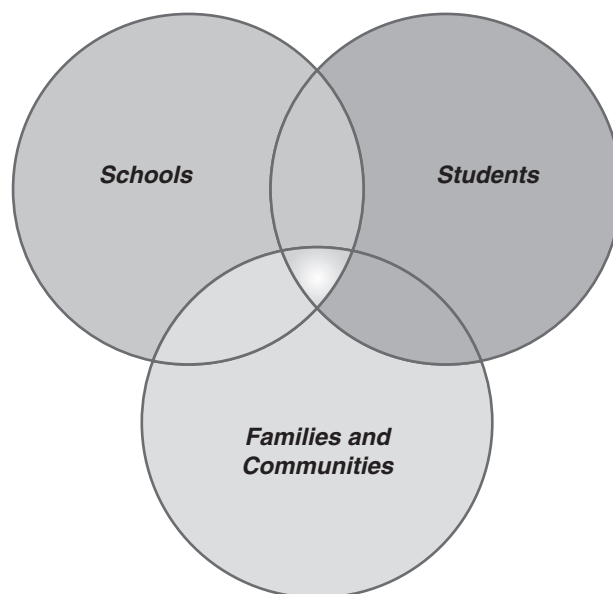
The important thing to realize is that because they are interconnected and affect each other, it is not likely that working to change any one of them without making parallel efforts to change the others will have a lasting impact. We need to develop supportive partnerships across the three subsystems. They are interconnected and problems are frequently shared. Some examples include drug abuse in the schools and in the community, segregated housing and segregated schools, youth who commit suicide, broken homes, and children who exhibit antisocial behaviors in school and in the community. Such problems are not likely to be solved unless our responses take the improvement of all three subsystems into account.

Issues that seem to be unique and limited to any one of the subsystems such as student learning difficulties, educator stress, negative school environment, lack of family support for children's growth and development, or challenges to the well-being of the community itself are, in reality, related and interconnected. Initiating a program here or a project there is not likely to make much of a dent in the problems we ponder. To be effective, we need to create comprehensive responses to complex problems, responses that cut across the different subsystems identified in Figure 1.1. Furthermore, these responses should focus on prevention where possible and on early intervention when it is too late for prevention. The absolute worst option is to wait until problems have become full-blown crises. While a crisis may get everyone's attention, it is likely to be adversarial and polarized, which is neither a reasonable nor an effective way of responding to complex problems.

> What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?
>
> —*Henry David Thoreau*

We are witnessing a major shift toward understanding the connections between schools, families, and communities. We can no longer drift along and hope for the best while preparing for the worst. Certainly, we need to work at understanding our problems, but then we need to formulate positive and effective community-wide structures and processes to respond to them. We need approaches that hold promise of doing this effectively. The fact that you have chosen to read this book indicates that you are exploring these connections and disconnections.

AN INTRODUCTION TO RESILIENCY

Given the many issues that schools and communities are confronted with, it is seductively easy to become obsessed with ways to *solve* them. This thinking can easily become pathological, placing emphasis on behavioral difficulties such as teen pregnancy, bullying, school dropouts, drug abuse, suicides, and criminal behavior. Emphasis is put on patterns such as broken homes, dysfunctional neighborhoods, and poverty in the attempt to be able to predict behaviors. It is only a short step in logic to conclude that anyone, child or adult, whose demographics reflect those of individuals who exhibit such problem behaviors, is highly likely to exhibit similar behaviors at some point in time.

The resiliency approach is a powerful paradigm shift away from the way of thinking that focuses on maladaptation, deficits, illness, and problems. The resiliency perspective focuses on wellness, adaptation, protective factors, capacity building, and improvement. It is a mind map that emphasizes the possible and the belief that things can and will work. It is, in fact, a major psychological reorientation. As Blum's (1998) seminal review in *Psychology Today* pointed out, resiliency represents a way of thinking that is a major change from the victim-and-damage focus that has been promoted by psychology from the 1940s until quite recently.

Throughout life, each of us has many opportunities to become more resilient. From prenatal experience until our dying days, endless challenges foster resiliency, including

- growing from initial inception and an embryo to a full birth delivery;
- mastering basic human survival skills such as walking and communicating;
- expanding connectedness and relationships beyond the family of origin;
- establishing one's own place in the world;
- gaining the knowledge and skills required to be self-supporting;

- taking responsibility for others including caring for spouses and children and assuming formal leadership roles;
- coping with physical and emotional manifestations of aging;
- reflecting on the meaning of life, giving back to our environment, and leaving a legacy; and
- bringing closure to life.

Each of us can expand on this bare-bones list of life's challenges from our own experiences, all of which have the potential to promote and enhance resiliency. For some, the road through life is paved with endless challenges that are environmentally related such as poverty, broken homes, drug and other addictions, or the lack of adequate support systems. Some do not travel such bumpy roads but, for most of us, there are likely to be more than sufficient opportunities to test our resiliency.

> No individual can arrive even at the threshold of his potentialities without a culture in which he participates.
>
> —*Ruth Benedict*

For those with too many safeguards (e.g., wealth, overprotective parents, and being buffered from daily risks) and promises of privileged positions in the future, there may not be sufficient opportunities to develop necessary coping skills and resiliency capabilities. In fact, there may be more danger for those who have too much protection than there is for those who are viewed as being at risk.

> Adversity reveals genius, prosperity conceals it.
>
> —*Horace*

There are many definitions and models of resiliency, but they are quite similar. Four good examples follow:

- "The process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event" (Richardson, Neiger, Jensen, & Krumpfer, 1990, p. 34)
- "The process of self-righting and growth" (Higgins, 1994, p. 1)
- "The capacity to bounce back, to withstand hardship, and to repair yourself" (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 5)
- "The ability to cope well with high levels of ongoing disruptive change; sustain good health and energy when under constant pressure; bounce back easily from setbacks; overcome adversities; change to a new way of working and living when an old way is no longer possible; and do all this without acting in dysfunctional or harmful ways" (Siebert, 2005, p. 5)

These definitions have several things in common—gaining additional protective factors, self-righting, and bouncing back because of life's experiences. All have to do with the capacity to deal with difficulties and become more capable of coping positively in the future. Difficulties are easy to find in our rapidly changing world. Either we respond effectively to these changes or we become victims of them. Some people collapse or barely survive adversity. Some struggle on and learn to cope adequately. Others are more resilient.

We define resiliency as the ability to bounce back from adversity, learn new skills, develop creative ways of coping, and become stronger. Resilient people meet life's challenges, overcome them, and use experiences to improve their ability to deal with the problems that will inevitably come their way in the future.

Exercise 1.2 can help you get a quick sense of your own resiliency. (This exercise is also available in the Resource section as Handout 1.)

Exercise 1.2: How Resilient Are You?

How resilient are you? Here's a little test to help you get a sense of your own resiliency. Circle the choice that is *most true* or *most typical* of you for each of the following questions:

1. When I have difficulties I am more likely to
   a. confront them by taking the initiative.
   b. avoid them in hopes they will pass.

2. Regarding leisure time,
   a. I enjoy reading, learning, and exploring.
   b. I fill the time by pondering my situation and worrying about my future.

3. When faced with challenges,
   a. I enjoy figuring out how to respond to them.
   b. I let others take the lead.

4. My work and home environments are
   a. supportive and energizing.
   b. stressful and exhausting.

5. I believe that
   a. good things are most likely to happen to me.
   b. bad things are most likely to happen to me.

6. I believe that the best years of my life are
   a. yet to come.
   b. behind me.

7. I
   a. have a sense of purpose about life.
   b. find myself drifting from year to year without goals.

8. I am
   a. proud of my accomplishments and my abilities.
   b. not as capable as I could be when coping with challenging situations.

9. When going through life's inevitable transitions, I
   a. feel at ease with them.
   b. feel unsettled and need time to adjust.

10. I believe that I
    a. must earn whatever I get.
    b. am entitled to rewards that I want.

The more *a* responses you selected, the more likely it is that you exhibit resilient behaviors. These responses indicate that you probably feel good about yourself most of the time. You also probably view challenges that come your way as a part of life and try to respond to them effectively.

If you chose *b* responses more often than you chose *a* responses, you might want to consider making some changes: