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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges facing today's district-level policymakers and educational leaders is helping America's youth avoid adverse outcomes such as school failure, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, and delinquency. This document describes an alternative policy approach to address these problems--the building of resiliency in youth. Rather than identifying the risk factors contributing to failure as traditional prevention efforts have done, some researchers have identified some common "protective factors" that help youth survive risky environments. Their findings argue for the development of policies and programs that aim by design to foster resilience in children and youth. Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary studies have identified the following personal traits commonly associated with children and youth who overcome risks in their lives--social competence, resourcefulness, autonomy, and sense of purpose. These traits are reinforced by the following research-based educational practices that foster resiliency: (1) caring relationships that promote positive expectations and participation; (2) a curriculum that is thematic, experiential, challenging, comprehensive, and inclusive of multiple perspectives; (3) instruction that focuses on a broad range of learning styles, builds from perceptions of student strengths, and is participatory and facilitative; (4) grouping practices that include ensuring inclusionary group practices such as mainstreaming, cooperative learning and peer tutoring; and (5) evaluation that focuses on multiple intelligences, utilizes authentic assessments, and fosters self reflection. The findings from research on resiliency offer a paradigm that relies less on an infusion of money than on changing existing beliefs and practices. One figure is included. (Contains 10 references and additional information on four organizations.) (LMI)

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More Than A Message of Hope: A District-Level Policymaker's Guide to Understanding Resiliency

BethAnn Berliner and Bonnie Benard

One of the greatest challenges facing today's district-level policymakers and educational leaders is helping America's youth avoid adverse outcomes such as school failure, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and delinquency. This document provides a conceptual tool for rethinking the way solutions are framed and thus how these problems are best addressed. At its heart is the notion of *resiliency*: the potential for youth to develop into healthy, productive, competent adults despite experiences of severe stress and adversity.

Traditional prevention efforts have focused almost exclusively on identifying the so-called risk factors in a child's life (poverty, abuse and community violence, for example) and then attempting to provide services that would eliminate or mitigate those conditions. While no one disputes the urgent need to improve conditions for many of America's children, the approach has inherent limitations, chief among them the labeling of children as "at risk," which often results in lowered expectations based on a child's perceived deficits. Moreover, identifying the risks in a child's environment does not necessarily result in introduction of appropriate services or in successful mitigation.

By contrast, the notion of resiliency emerges from a focus on the *positive* aspects of a child's life rather than the negatives. Resiliency has long been associated with surviving trauma and other stressful life events.

To better understand the phenomenon, a number of researchers have opted to look not at why some children succumb to the negative influences of their environments but why other children thrive despite the same general conditions. Rather than identifying the risk factors contributing to failure, researchers have identified some common "protective factors" that help youth survive risky environments.

Their findings argue for the development of policies and programs that *aim by design* to foster resilience in children and youth. In the realm of education, there is emerging consensus that this can best be achieved by enacting policies that build upon the strengths and life experiences of children and youth, their families and their communities.

For decades, scholars and practitioners from psychiatry, anthropology, education, sociology, psychology and, more recently prevention, have described the successful adaptation and transformation of children and youth who confronted high-risk situations and extreme adversity. Their studies, many cross-cultural, have looked at children and youth who have grown up in a variety of adverse conditions, including concentration camp internment; being raised by abusive, criminal, or substance-abusing parents; experiencing poverty; or participating in a violent gang. From these studies, several following youth well into their adult years, emerges one consistent finding: nearly two-

thirds of those studied did *not* develop high risk behaviors. What was unique about these individuals? Collectively, these studies yield an understanding both of the personal traits possessed by these resilient children and youth and of the environmental characteristics that fostered or reinforced those traits well into their adult lives.

The personal traits commonly associated with children and youth who overcome risks in their lives are:

- **social competence** — the ability to establish and sustain positive, caring relationships; to maintain a sense of humor; and to communicate compassion and empathy;
- **resourcefulness** — the ability to critically, creatively, and reflectively make decisions; to seek help from others; and to recognize alternative ways to solve problems and resolve conflict;
- **autonomy** — the ability to act independently and exert some control over one's environment; to have a sense of one's identity; and to detach from others engaged in risk or dysfunctional behaviors;
- **sense of purpose** — the ability to foresee a bright future for oneself; to be optimistic; and to aspire toward educational and personal achievement.

The research shows that these traits — which, together, make up an

individual's resilient nature — are fostered or reinforced by some specific characteristics within a youth's family, community and/or school environment:

- **caring relationships** that are trusting, compassionate, and respectful;
- **positive, high expectations**, which are explicitly communicated, with students receiving adequate support in their efforts to achieve them;
- **meaningful opportunities to participate** in valued family, school and civic activities.

The rationale for formulating educational policy with an eye on resiliency is compelling. Research shows that the link between protective factors in a child's environment and that child's healthy development, social success, and good academic outcomes is stronger than the link between specific risk factors and negative outcomes. Moreover, risk-focused policies label children and youth as deficient, tracking them as consumers of needed services rather than as producers of their own well-being. The emerging understanding of resiliency offers educational policymakers a new paradigm for formulating policies rich in possibilities for America's youth.

Clearly, the greater number of positive relationships or experiences in children's lives — whether in the family, the community or at school — the greater their chances of overcoming adversity. Yet resiliency research reveals that just one positive relationship, whether at home, in the community or at school, can make a major difference for a child whose life is otherwise traumatic. So while district-level policymakers may have little influence on what goes on in a child's home or greater community, they can adopt policies ensuring that a child's school relationships and experiences contribute to his or her resiliency.

What follows is a discussion of some of the many research-based educational practices that foster resiliency. As shown in the diagram on page 3, a new environment is created when schools move from a risk focus to a resiliency focus in teaching, learning, and leadership practices, as well as in the nature of relationships among and between students, parents, and teachers.

1) Foremost in this type of learning environment is educators' recognition that schooling is about caring and respectful relationships. Students' motivation to participate actively in learning activities and to achieve academic success is clearly linked to strong support from teachers, involvement by parents and cooperative activities among students. Schools in your district can foster resiliency through relationships by:

- **Supporting teacher collaboration**; giving teachers the time and opportunity to work collegially correlates directly with student achievement.
- **Limiting the number of students in each class**; smaller class size is associated with establishing close personal and working relationships.
- **Increasing opportunities for parents to be involved in the school community**; this can reduce absenteeism and behavior problems as well as increase school-family communication, student motivation and achievement.
- **Encouraging the use of peer learning activities**; mixed ability and other small cooperative learning groups, including the restructuring of large schools into smaller families of learners, promote relationships among students in which everyone contributes to the learning process.

2) Curriculum should be designed with an understanding of the various ways children and youth learn, and it should build upon what they already know and are interested in. Activities can be integrated across multiple subject areas and can allow students to discover answers through inquiry, experimentation and discussion. Schools in your district can foster resiliency through curriculum by:

- **Supporting curricular enrichment opportunities** such as art, music, vocational training, school-based enterprise, apprenticeship, and community service for all students. Experiential learning encourages students to express their creativity as well as contribute to well being of others.
- **Promoting a curriculum that values racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity and promotes gender and cultural equity**; giving voice and recognition to multiple perspectives is fundamental to sustaining a democratic society.
- **Resisting efforts to "dumb down" learning activities**; expecting that all students will learn to high standards is associated with higher levels of achievement.

3) The instructional strategies teachers use, whether lecture, drill, discussion or discovery, send powerful messages to students about how they are to learn the material and who possesses the knowledge. Schools in your district can foster resiliency through instruction by:

- **Promoting increased opportunities for teachers to facilitate lessons rather than to teach didactically**; facilitative instruction is associated with motivating students to learn and helping them develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

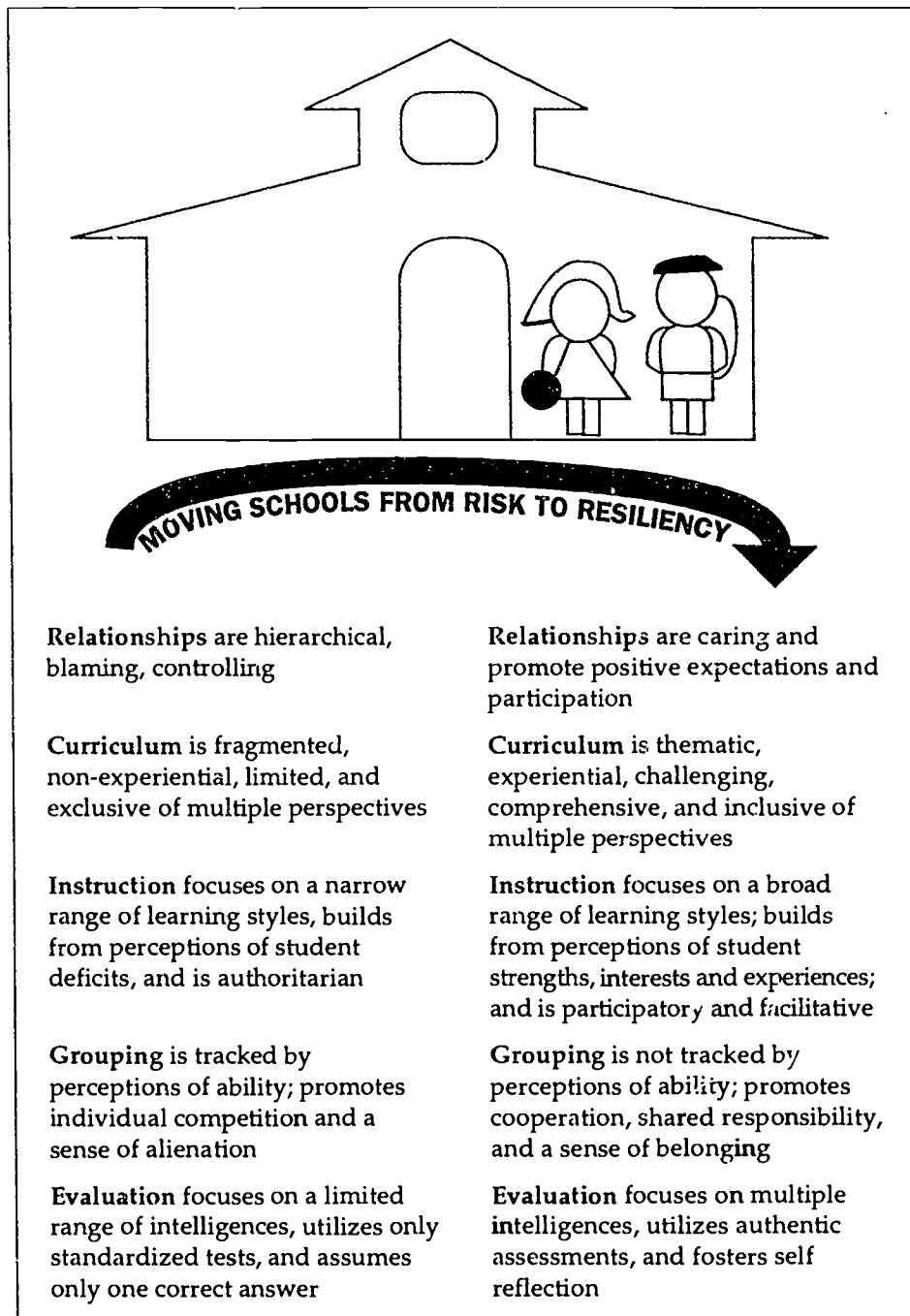
- Supporting teachers' efforts to individualize instructional strategies to accommodate the broad range of student learning styles, life experiences, personal strengths and interests; varying instructional strategies can make learning an engaging and meaningful process that builds upon every child's strengths and fosters every child's success.

4) The way schools track and group students by perceived abilities tells students what's expected of them. Educational practices such as remediation "pull out" sections or homogeneous grouping can create negative labels for students assigned to low-ability groups — labels that often become self-fulfilling prophecies in terms of academic and developmental outcomes. Schools in your district can help foster resilience through grouping practices that include:

- Ensuring inclusionary group practices such as mainstreaming, cooperative learning and peer tutoring; these practices are associated with academic improvement; with social benefits such as lower rates of vandalism, drug/alcohol referrals and school dropouts; and with personal gains in confidence and relationships.

5) Standardized tests usually only assess one or two areas of student knowledge, and they do so imperfectly, relying on decontextualized test items. More authentic assessments link learning and acquisition of knowledge to contexts and experiences that are relevant to students' lives. Schools in your district can foster resilience through evaluation by:

- Supporting teachers' use of various types of performance assessments; teachers may infer more about student knowledge from portfolios or demonstrations than from standardized



tests, and these assessment tools give students opportunities to demonstrate what they learn in meaningful ways.

- Encouraging students to develop personal assessment skills such as self-reflection and to participate in their own performance reviews; including students in the evaluation of their academic accomplishments encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning.

A Policymaker's Imperative

These are troubling times for policymakers. With the electorate clamoring for solutions to seemingly untenable social problems, policymakers must find or develop effective tools for long-lasting solutions. And they must do so in exceptionally tight fiscal times. Approaching the 21st Century, demands upon federal and state budgets continue to outpace revenues, further stretching already thin discretionary budgets

such as education. To meet their imperative, educational policymakers need timely, accurate, objective, and research-based information. Effective educational policies must be comprehensive, practical to implement, promote a combination of strategies, and must contribute to positive developmental and academic outcomes for children and youth.

The findings from resiliency research offer a new paradigm for defining problems and framing solutions, a paradigm that emphasizes caring, support and positive high expectations for youth, as well as opportunities for them to participate in meaningful school and civic activities. It is also a paradigm that relies less on infusing more money into the educational system than on changing existing beliefs and practices. The notion of resiliency brings more than a message of hope; it brings the real possibility for positive developmental and academic outcomes for *all* children and youth.

Resources

During the past half decade there has been a dramatic increase in interest in the notion of resiliency and its application to school improvement efforts.

For additional background information, consult the following documents:

Benard, B. (1991). **Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community.** San Francisco: Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities, Far West Laboratory.

Garbarino, J. et al. (1992). **Children in Danger: Coping with the Consequences of Community Violence.** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gardner, H. (1985). **The Frames of Mind: Theory of Multiple Intelligences.** NY: Basic Books.

Garmez, N. (1991). Resiliency and vulnerability to adverse developmental outcomes associated with poverty. *American Behavioral Scientist* 34, 4, 416-430.

Haggerty, R. et al. (1994). **Stress, Risk, and Resilience in Children and Adolescents.** Rochester, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Meier, D. (1995). **The Power of Their Ideas.** Boston: Beacon Press.

Noddings, N. (1992). **The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education.** NY: Teachers College Press.

Rutter, M., et al. (1979). **Fifteen Thousand Hours.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Wang, M., et al., eds. (1994). **Educational Resilience in Inner-City America: Challenges and Prospects.** Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Werner, E. and Smith, R. (1992). **Overcoming the Odds: High-Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood.** Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.

For additional policy and program information, consult the following organizations:

Western Center for Drug-Free Schools and Communities at Far West Laboratory, 730 Harrison, San Francisco, CA 94107, 415-565-3000; Northwest Laboratory, 101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR 97204, 800-547-6339; the Southwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 4665 Lampson Avenue, Los Alamitos, CA 90720, 310-598-7661.

Research for Better Schools, 444 North Third Street, Philadelphia, PA 19123, 215-574-0133.

CenterSource Systems, 85 Liberty Ship Way, No. 104, Sausalito, CA 94965, 415-289-1700.

WESTERN REGIONAL CENTER FOR DRUG-FREE SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

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National Center on Education in the Inner Cities, Temple University, 933 Ritter Hall Annex, 13th St. and Cecil B. Moore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA 19122, 215-204-3000.

Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, Academy for Educational Development, 1875 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009, 202-884-8000.