

Governance Brief

Building the Resiliency of At-Risk Students

Introduction

Students who are resilient are able to overcome difficult or devastating circumstances that might otherwise prevent their personal and school success. Fortunately, all students can learn skills to enhance their resiliency. This governance brief: (1) offers research support for the importance of student resiliency; (2) discusses the educational practices—called Transformational Resiliency—that provide students with opportunities to foster resiliency; (3) identifies state legislation that impacts school districts and county offices of education with regard to mental health instruction, a concept and set of practices related to building resiliency, and (4) suggests an approach by which governing boards and county offices of education (COEs) can work to provide educational environments that promote Transformational Resiliency.

Research background

Resiliency has been identified as an important contributor to student success. Children who are resilient are described as those who, despite exposure to “significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing.”¹

Conversely, for the many students who face significant challenges in their lives, a lack of resiliency can contribute to a cycle of one negative educational outcome leading to another—a negative success trajectory—resulting ultimately in significant costs to the student and society. Costs to the student include school failure, dropping out, poorer physical health and greater mental health challenges.² Costs to society include lower employment,

Resiliency is, “That quality in children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to the school failure, substance abuse, mental health, and juvenile delinquency problems they are at greater risk of experiencing” (Linquanti, 1992).

Transformational Resiliency is, “The growth, development and strengthening of a child’s personal resiliency as a result of being provided an engaging, positive, thoughtful, supportive, educational environment.” (Martinez, R. 2013).

less robust mental and physical health and a greater rate of incarceration among those who experience these poor education outcomes.³ Fortunately, educators can help students develop greater resiliency. This intentional work in classrooms and schools to foster students’ resiliency is Transformational Resiliency instruction.

Research indicates that programs designed to build students’ resiliency can improve their school success as well as their self-image, overall mental health and the positive impression they make on others as successful students.⁴ Such programs do this by providing:

- » An overall “engaging, positive, thoughtful and supportive educational environment”⁵
- » Targeted curriculum to support each child’s development
- » Trained educators who are focused on acting in purposeful, actionable ways to provide positive mental health instruction
- » Resiliency strategies that can be learned and practiced until they become internalized strengths.⁶

Moreover, these programs intentionally equip students with skills such as responsibility development and relationship building, both of which contribute to resiliency as described below.

Responsibility development research

Becoming responsible individuals, acquiring thoughtful processes which lead to becoming productive citizens and developing a moral compass are important steps in students' personal development. Programs that focus on assisting students to grow physically, intellectually, psychologically, and to develop pro-social skills can be the catalyst to powerful changes in students' lives that propel them toward success.⁷ Responsibility building increases students' resiliency and ultimately contributes to their sound mental health development.⁸

Relationship building skills research

Healthy human beings tend to engage with their local surroundings in a positive manner and interact in the give and take of life. Moreover, society often judges individuals by how well they are able to establish and maintain relationships.⁹ Researchers have found that engaging with families of at-risk students (and families of all students) as a means of expanding the supportive network necessary for students to become and remain resilient, can significantly improve students' school persistence.¹⁰ Further, the importance for educators to connect and engage with multi-faceted diverse families cannot be overstated as a strategy to sustain connectedness to students.¹¹

Summary

It is not an easy task to transform schools into environments that foster students' resiliency and thereby, their overall positive mental health, personal growth and academic achievement. However, there is evidence to support a conclusion that when schools have programs that intentionally help children acquire and demonstrate more resilient behaviors, develop more assets to advance and sustain their personal responsibility skills, have opportunities to engage in positive relationship building, and see their families becoming connected to schools, significant opportunities for student growth and academic success result.¹²

Legislation

Resiliency is related to students' mental health and recently passed and signed legislation opens an important door for mental health education. School districts are required to prepare comprehensive health education plans in accordance with rules and regulations adopted by the State Board of Education (SBE). Currently these plans, which are part of the Health Framework for California Public Schools, are not required to include any specific targeted focus on mental health instruction, nor are experts in the mental health field required to provide input into the design and development of the Health Framework.

SB 330 (Padilla) made an important change, adding Education Code Section 58900.5 to current law (Education Code 51900.5. (a)). The law now indicates that: during

Transformational resiliency in action

These schools (and others) in the Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District implement strategies to enhance students' Transformational Resiliency.

At the Matt Garcia Learning Center the entire instructional staff implements interventions and strategies to support the development of each student's skills in personal responsibility, resiliency development, and relationship-building. Through intentional and purposeful actions to connect with students, thoughtful communication with students and their families about student successes, and by implementing strategies that build effective routines for students, they are seeing success for students who have historically been marginalized, identified as "at-risk" and who are in dire need of educational environments that support positive mental health development.

At David A. Weir K-8 Preparatory Academy, all staff implement multiple daily strategies to support students' development of Transformational Resiliency. They take time to connect with students by making eye contact, through verbal engagement, and by appreciating each child's positive efforts. Teachers embed positive mental health instruction into all lessons: whether focusing on character trait development, social responsibility, or collaboration skills during math, they build both student's academic and Transformational Resiliency skills. They regularly communicate their desire for each student's success to parents and the community, sending the message that their students are important and they include parents and the community in every event from movie night to sharing information about college.

the next revision of the Health Framework for California Public Schools (which will take place in 2015), “the Instructional Quality Commission shall consider developing, and recommending for adoption by the state board, a distinct category on mental health instruction to educate pupils about all aspects of mental health.” The bill would also modify existing education code to include a range of issues and factors in mental health instruction including: the importance of mental health and its connection to physical health; academic success and co-occurring conditions such as chemical dependence and substance abuse; mental health challenges and stigma across cultural groups; how to access mental health services; practices promoting wellness, resiliency, and connectedness; warning signs of common mental health problems and other issues. In addition, the legislation would require that the Instructional Quality Commission of the SBE ensure that experts in the mental health and educational fields provide input in the development of the mental health instruction in the health framework.

District policy implications

In order to ensure district policies that support adequate attention to issues of students’ mental health and programs that effectively build students’ resiliency, governance teams need to commit to a shared mission, vision and beliefs for their organization with regard to these issues. Then, they should work to ensure that board policies and administrative regulations related to the state’s health framework, mental health instruction and issues associated with students’ positive mental health development are regularly reviewed and revised. Ensuring that district policies are in compliance with legal mandates is required of course. Moreover, the importance for governance teams to develop policies that assist all educators and employees to support the positive development of each student’s resiliency is critical in order to prevent the negative success trajectory into which too many of our students fall.

Questions for school governance teams

Given the new legislation, it is important for governance teams to be aware of and plan to enhance their focus on providing more comprehensive mental health instruction in public school settings from kindergarten to 12th grade. As governing boards seek to address the advancement of resiliency skills and positive mental health for all students, and as they seek to modify board policies to

align with the changes in the mental health framework, asking questions of their district’s leadership teams will be important. Such questions include:

Implementation procedures:

- » What are we doing as a district to review, modify and create essential board policies to align with the new law?
- » What actions and programs do we have in place, need to consider and should we initiate as we work to comply with the new education code?

Educational structure to support changes:

- » What improvements or enhancements to our curriculum and professional development are required to support Transformational Resiliency?

Building capacity for all educators:

- » What are we doing as a district to ensure that all of our educators are advised of the importance of providing environments where Transformational Resiliency can flourish?

Ensuring funding allocation for materials and services:

- » Have we allocated sufficient resources in our Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) and targeted these resources in the state priority areas of basic services, student engagement, school climate and other student outcomes with identified goals of improving student’s Transformational Resiliency skills?

Ensuring alignment and collaboration with community resources and agencies:

- » How are we engaging, aligning efforts and partnering with community resources, and both public and private agencies to support the advancement of Transformational Resiliency across our school neighborhoods and communities?

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Additional resources

The California School Boards Association provides sample board policies, policy briefs and other topics related to student achievement, the conditions of children and closing the achievement gap. <http://www.csba.org/>

The National Education Policy Center provides policy and legislative briefs, research based reviews on programs and initiatives and reviews of educational research and publications. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/>

Endnotes

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- 2 Martinez, R. (2013). Healthy schools: The power of resiliency, *Leadership Magazine*, Association of California School Administrators, September/October 2013, 43(1), p. 12.
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- 4 Castro, V., & Johnson, M. (2008). Self-reported behaviors of seventh and eighth grade students enrolled in an emotional intelligence based program. *Journal of School Counseling*, 6(27). Retrieved from ERIC Database. (EJ894798)
- 5 Martinez, R. (2013). (See endnote 2)
- 6 Meyer, K., Licklider, B., & Wiersma J. (2009). My life in a bag and other stories: On the road to resiliency. *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 9(1), 118-133.
- 7 Escartí, A., Gutiérrez, M., Pascual, C., & Marín, D. (2010). Application of Hellison's Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility Model in physical education to improve self-efficacy for adolescents at risk of dropping-out of school. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 13, 667-676.
- 8 Schusler, T., & Krasney, M. (2010). Environmental action as a context for youth development. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 41(4), 208-223.

- 9 Martinez, R. (2013). A phenomenological perspective of educating students at the Matt Garcia Learning Center: Resiliency development, responsibility development and relationship building development skills <http://idea.library.drexel.edu/handle/1860/4101>
- 10 Lachuk, A., & Gomez, M. (2011). Listening carefully to the narrative of young adolescent youth of color. *Middle School Journal*, January, 6-14.
- 11 Norris, K. (2010). Beyond the textbook: building relationships between teachers and diversely-structured families. *Multicultural Education*, Fall, 48-50.
- 12 Martinez, R. (2013). (See endnote 9)