CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS RESOURCE PAPER

DEVELOPING RESILIENCY IN TODAY'S STUDENTS

Re-sil-ien-cy (ri-sil'-yen-se). N. 1. The ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune; buoyancy.

Molly knows how to count from one to 10; she can pick out her favorite letters in the alphabet and loves to have stories read to her. She can even recite many of her books from memory and likes to "read" them to her dolls. She comes from a two-parent family, goes to day care three days a week while her mother works a part-time job; her father a full-time job. She lives in Sacramento. She is two years old.

Dustin can count to five; he can write the letter "I" and no others. The court recently placed him in a foster care home because his single mother had lost the will to get out of bed in the morning and she wanted to enroll herself in a 30-day treatment program. She reads at a fifth-grade level. Dustin lives in Sacramento. He is seven years old and is in first grade.

Although Dustin comes from less ideal circumstances than Molly, he can develop the resiliency to overcome the perceived odds and become a productive and successful member of society. At least a part of his future will depend on how the schools he attends meet his needs. Will teachers, administrators, school psychologists, guardians and other social service workers meet to lay out a plan for educating this child both academically and socially? Will he be in need of special education programs to help him "catch up" with others in his age group? Or, will the school program change to accommodate Dustin and the many other children who come from similar situations?

These are among the many options contemplated by school officials as they deal with students whose basic physical and emotional needs are not being met at home. School psychologists can help teachers, administrators and families learn methods for fostering resiliency in these and all students. This is just one way of ensuring success among today's students.

With the arrival of the '90s, came a plethora of kids bringing carloads of emotional baggage to school every day. The word "normal" can't really be used to describe any of today's students. Drug abuse, family violence, divorce, remarriage, poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, absent parents and many other predicaments are part of every day life for many kids. In addition to social problems, teachers are dealing with mainstreamed students who may have physical handicaps, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. And teachers are not just teachers; they are at times counselors, social workers, nurses and parent substitutes.[1]

"For some kids, the teacher is the most stable adult influence in their lives," said Mike Goodman, past president of the California Association of School Psychologists. "Teachers should realize their role in a child's life goes above and beyond dispensing knowledge. It's an awesome burden. In some respects, teachers are taking the place of parents by modeling how well-adjusted adults act."[2]

Despite being filled with society's problems, the classroom is supposed to be a place where children feel safe and secure. Teachers have the Herculean task of educating students and promoting good mental health. The classroom should be a setting where students can both achieve and build self esteem. If a child feels a bond with a teacher, the child will probably do better in school, studies have shown.

Another way to give a child an affirmative view of himself would be to give the child a

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positive view of the future, said Debbie Johnson, of the Primary Health Project at the University of Rochester in New York. But, she says, teachers, administrators, and school psychologists should not use this attitude solely toward "at risk" students, but with all students.

"'*When* you complete high school' and '*when* you go to college' are good ways to reinforce a positive future for all students," Johnson said, adding that no child should hear that he or she does not have a chance to succeed.[3]

The school setting can be made to simulate a family setting where kids get support, encounter limits and learn the consequences of inappropriate behavior. Johnson stresses that there are preventative steps that can be taken to foster resiliency in children. For example, it is easier to ensure that the students are healthy if the teacher is healthy, just like in family life. "The more stress the folks are under, the more stressful it is on the kids," Johnson said.

Others endorse reaching kids before they come to school. Brian Leung, a training and accreditation specialist at Loyola-Marymount University, said there are many preschool programs that help students and their parents get prepared for the first day of school, and the many days after. Among them are parent education classes, readiness testing at kindergarten or pre-kindergarten levels, and remediation.[4]

There are many routes teachers can take to foster good mental health and to build a sense of community in the classroom. Cooperative learning helps foster teamwork rather than competition. Schools are instituting "buddy programs" between older and younger students to instill empathy. And training in conflict resolution skills helps students to learn to work out their own problems while bolstering self-image.

The literature regarding resiliency in youth repeatedly confirms the protective power of firm guidance, challenge and stimulus -- plus loving support of being respected and of having their strengths and abilities recognized. Successful teachers of children who bear emotional baggage refuse to label their students "at risk"; they look at each child and see the gem that is inside and communicate this vision back to the child. These teachers are trained to look for children's strengths and interests, and use these as jump-off points for learning. A relationship that conveys high expectations to students can internalize these beliefs in students and by doing so, develop the self-esteem and self-efficacy found in children who attend successful schools.[5]

While trying to manage an unruly classroom, teachers may want to remember that young children want to please. The most powerful reinforcer a teacher of young children has available is her or his approval, in the form of a smile, hug, praise, positive note or phone call home. "When you want children to listen to you, whisper and the room will quiet immediately," said Linn C. Hairston, a member of the San Diego Association of School Psychologists.[6]

Another trend is teaching younger students "life skills," which is essentially the Golden Rule and then some. "Positive Discipline" is one approach. Instead of asking a disruptive student to write 100 times, "I will not talk in class," that student might have to write an essay on why talking in class is inconsiderate and how it affects others. Launching a lesson on individual differences is another way of dealing with a disruptive student. Judgements about student behavior, its causes and sources, should not be encouraged. Instead, stories with morals and problem solving as a group should be used to discuss standards of behavior.

Some schools have tried a "Go For It Club," to help at-risk children develop self-esteem. Students are asked to work on one thing a week, such as getting homework in on time, not being late for school or keeping one's hands to oneself. They are rewarded with a group cheer: "Go for it, go for it, hey, hey, hey, Michael, Michael, you're on your way!"[7]

Johnson says it is important to look at nurturing students onto a path to wellness by taking the following steps:

- Give students a secure setting. When the school is dilapidated or considered dangerous,

students notice. It is hard to learn in a room with a leaking roof or poor insulation.

- Build positive attitudes. If you tell a students enough times that they can do something, they'll believe it sooner or later.
- Empower students. Let them make some decisions, perhaps regarding some of the classroom rules, for example. Let them know that they can make a difference.
- Build age and ability competencies. Begin with a child's interests. If they appear to have none, enrich their experiences through community visits to the zoo, fire department, local medical clinic, mayor's office, department store, etc. Use these experiences as a springboard for building vocabulary, writing personal experience stories or journals and generating story math problems. Let students share their knowledge by working with younger groups, for example.
- Build skills to handle life's stresses. Allow a time and place for students to talk about problems at home and at school. A school psychologist can help determine an appropriate program for a teacher to use to build resiliency in his or her students.

"I think a school psychologist should be there to support and build resilience for all kids all the time," Johnson said, adding that these specialized workers should not only be available for school crises and evaluating students who may need special education.[8]

Problem-solving teams of teachers, administrators, school psychologists and others who work with students can meet to discuss the best program for particular students. Leung said state law calls for these teams to support each other on ways to deal with at risk students, but they don't always result in a consistent plan. Others support pulling a student out of class for remedial work -- for such subjects and subject areas as English as a second language and reading -- although many teachers and school psychologists endorse this concept only as a last resort.

Pulling children out of their regular classes for special education is an example of a program that could be interpreted as being devised to identify various ways in which the students need to be changed to fit in with the existing school structures. Even more problematic, this early categorization of students often has the effect of simply lowering teachers' expectations of a student's potential. The phrase "what can you expect from these types of students" continues to be heard throughout too many schools and classrooms. Lastly, use of such categorical indicators often places students in the position of being blamed for poor school performance on the basis of characteristics over which they have no control.[9]

Even if problems of at risk students are identified early, the typical intervention involves "pull-out" programs that, in many cases, result in the following: do not promote changes that could accommodate students in the "regular" program; intensify the impact of negative labeling and isolation of less successful students from important peer role models and support systems; and tend to slow down student progress and thereby exacerbate the degree to which students fall behind and further diminish their belief that they will ever "catch up."[10]

School characteristics that have been identified as hindering the academic achievement of many students include: narrow curricula; a priority focus on basic/lower-ordered skills; inappropriate, limited and rigid instructional strategies; old texts and other instructional materials; over-reliance on standardized tests to make instructional and curricular decisions; tracking; isolated pull-out programs; and teacher and administrators' beliefs and attitudes toward both students and their parents.

Some school administrators and teachers are finding that if the students can't "fit in" at school, maybe it's time that the school "fit in" with the students. This has resulted in wholesale changes in the way some schools are run. And, in many cases, the results have been encouraging.

"These programs call for all involved in the school to make changes instead of placing

the focus on changing students who are entering school. If a lot of kids are from one horrible neighborhood, they may all need help. A teacher may be able to help one or two kids, but that's about it," Leung said.

During the last decade, research on successful programs for youth at risk of academic failure has clearly demonstrated that high expectations -- with concomitant support -- is a critical factor in decreasing the number of students who drop out of school and in increasing the number of youth who go on to college. According to Phyllis Hart of the Achievement Council, a California-based advocacy group, when a poor, inner-city school established a college core curriculum, over 65 percent of its graduates went on to higher education -- up from 15 percent before the program began. Several students stated that "having one person who believed I could do it" was a major factor in their decision to attend college. Similarly, the Accelerated Schools Program and Success for All, both described later in this paper, demonstrate that engaging low-achieving students in a challenging, fast-paced (as opposed to slowed-down, remedial) curriculum produces positive academic and social outcomes. These findings are in contrast to the dismal achievement of children whose schools label them slow learners and track them into low-ability classes.[11]

One method found in schools throughout the country is to stop giving letter grades to students in first, second and third grades, and instead use less competitive measures to inform parents about students' progress. Report cards emphasize progress and mastery of tasks rather than comparative performance with letter grades. The results have been extremely positive. Teachers and parents report improved student self-esteem and attitudes toward school, increased attendance and a remarkable enthusiasm for learning.[12]

"Success for All" is a comprehensive schoolwide restructuring program designed to ensure every student succeeds in the regular program, mastering the basic skills, particularly reading. School staff is trained and a family support team is placed in every school to assist with family-based problems that impact a student's progress. The program further provides parenting information, helps set up a home reading plan and establishes opportunities for parents to volunteer within the school. All students in grades 1 through 6 are regrouped daily for a 90-minute reading period. Students have reading partners and learn to grasp sounds, phonics and vocabulary via systematic skills instruction. The program's goal is to have kids master reading as a way to boost both knowledge and self-esteem.

"We have been calling reading instruction 'the key to the kingdom,'" said Kathi Cooper, head of learning and literacy for the Sacramento City Unified School District. "It doesn't matter what you look at -- technology or text books or new programs. Kids who can't read have no access to information, to any kind of learning."[13]

Another program, the Accelerated Schools Project, works with a goal of bringing all students up to grade level by the end of sixth grade by providing a stimulating program which focuses on speeding up the instructional pace for at-risk students and setting high expectations. Teachers are considered the primary agents of change, and are extensively involved in deciding on curriculum, instructional strategies and school organization. Students are assessed at school entry and written contracts that outline the responsibilities of teachers, parents and students are agreed upon. Students are given more responsibility and are actively involved through hands-on activities and open-ended problem solving. Teachers guide students through the exploration and discovery of their school activities and how they connect to their own lives. Community volunteers, such as college students and senior citizens, work with individual students during an extended school day.

Starting with two pilot elementary schools in the 1986-87 school year, the Accelerated Schools movement has grown to more than 1,000 elementary and secondary schools in 40 states, complete with 10 regional centers with more than 200 trainers. The results have been

impressive: improvements in standardized test scores, increased attendance rates, decreased staff turnover, fewer discipline referrals, increased family and community involvement have been noted while grade retentions have dropped substantially.

No matter how hard a teacher tries to create a healthy environment and sense of community in the classroom, some students will continue to react negatively. "Teachers need to understand the reasons kids misbehave," said Goodman. A consultation with a school psychologist can help them understand why a kid acts out and sometimes lead to some kind of solution. "It's frustrating because sometimes you want to believe these kids are bad. But something is usually going on at home," or in some other part of their lives, he said.

Teachers and administrators should try not to give up, even if some students seem hopeless. School psychologists are willing to offer teachers advice, make referrals and intervene in emergency situations. "Kids have remarkable resilience. They can overcome adversity just because of one caring adult in their lives. You can be that person," Goodman said.[14]

California Association of School Psychologists, 1998.

1. "Normal? What's that? What is normal in today's classroom?" California Educator, California School Boards Association, West Sacramento, CA, December 1996, page 7.

2. Ibid. Page 8.

3. Telephone interview with Debbie Johnson, November 24, 1997.

4. Telephone interview with Brian Leung, November 17, 1997.

5. "High Expectations," Pathways Home Page, North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, Oak Brook, Ill., 1995.

6. Notes from Linn C. Hairston, October 21, 1997.

7. "Normal? What's that? What is normal in today's classroom?", page 9.

8. Debbie Johnson interview.

9. J. Hixson and M.B. Trinsmann, "Who are the 'At Risk' Students of the 1990s?", North Central Regional Education Laboratory, Oak Brook, 1990.

10. Ibid.

11. "High Expectations," Pathways Home Page.

12. Research on non-graded classes, Success for All and Accelerated Schools Project was provided by Brian Leung.

13. Engellenner, Jon, "School chooses to put reading first," The Sacramento Bee, November 22, 1997, page B-3.

14. "Normal? What's that? What is normal in today's classroom?" Page 10.