

# **Resiliency High: A Blueprint for Resiliency-Based Education**

by  
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Resiliency High is a school teens want to attend. The curriculum is exciting and meaningful. The classes are intellectually stimulating. Arts and crafts, music, creative writing, and physical education and health have equal footing with math and English because the faculty realizes that these activities have life long benefits and provide students with “solace when things fell apart in their home lives” (Werner and Smith 205). Students are encouraged to volunteer at hospitals, visit and read to the elderly, and be active participants on boards that plan the community’s future. There is a thirst for knowledge. Questions are respected. Teachers do not back away from topics students want to discuss or study. Student inquiry takes precedence over all else because adults know if a child’s desire to learn is squashed, then it will become harder and harder – maybe even impossible - to reignite that interest. What sets Resiliency High apart from other schools is that its curriculum and environment are based on the findings of resiliency research. Resiliency High is based on the five resiliency factors that are integral to libraries and media centers. These five factors are what Jones calls the “Library Ladder of Resiliency,” and should form the foundation for effective young adult and teen programs and services. The five factors are: mentorship, reading, information and problem-solving skills, social skills, and hobbies and interests. Lutz and Jones based Resiliency High on the “Library Ladder of Resiliency.”

Resiliency High was borne at the South West Florida Library Network's Leadership workshop in March 2003 when two media specialists, Allyson Lutz and Jami Jones partnered to develop a vision for library services in the future. Both Lutz and Jones are media specialists in Florida and have taught as adjuncts in graduate schools of library science and educational media. Lutz is a media specialist at Dunbar High School in Ft. Myers. Jones is a media specialist at Barron Collier High School in Naples.

Resiliency is an important concept that has gained recognition in the past few years. Resiliency is based on the realization that some people are more able to sustain themselves in adverse conditions and situations than others. One of the most respected research studies on resiliency, The Kauai Longitudinal Research Study, was conducted by Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith. In this study, Werner and Smith followed all children born in 1955 on the island of Kauai, the westernmost county in the United States. The purpose of the study was to monitor "the impact of a variety of biological and psychosocial risk factors, stressful life events and protective factors on the development of these individuals" from birth through adulthood (Werner and Smith 1). For over 30 years, Werner and Smith collected data about the lives, education, physical and emotional characteristics, family upheavals, and successes of the cohort members in the study. The findings of the study indicate resiliency is based on internal and external qualities that work together to enable people to "bounce back from adversity" (Benard 44). The more internal and external factors an individual possesses, the more resilient he or she will be.

The internal qualities individuals possess that promote resiliency are:

1. Gives of self in service to others and/or a cause;

2. Uses life skills, including good decision-making, assertiveness, impulse control, and problem-solving;
3. Is sociable and is able to be a friend and form positive relationships;
4. Has a sense of humor;
5. Believes in the ability to influence one's own environment;
6. Is autonomous and independent;
7. Has a positive view of personal future;
8. Is flexible;
9. Has spirituality and believes in a greater power;
10. Can connect to learning;
11. Is self-motivated;
12. Is "good at something," and has personal competence;
13. Has feelings of self-worth and self-confidence (Milstein and Henry 14).

Families, schools, communities, and peer groups promote resiliency when they possess the following external factors:

1. Values and encourages education;
2. Promotes close bonds;
3. Uses high warmth, low criticism style of interaction;
4. Sets and enforces clear boundaries;
5. Encourages supportive relationships with many caring adults;
6. Promotes service to others;

7. Provides access to resources for meeting basic needs of housing, employment, health care, and recreation;
8. Expresses high and realistic expectations for success;
9. Encourages goal setting and mastery;
10. Encourages prosocial development of values and life skills;
11. Provides leadership, decision making, and other opportunities for meaningful participation;
12. Appreciates the unique talents of each individual (Millstein and Henry 14).

Resiliency High's foundation is built on mentoring. According to Werner and Smith, resilient adults remembered one or two teachers who made a difference to them (Krovetz 9). At Resiliency High, teachers are role models and are there to make a difference in the lives of teens. They believe that all students can succeed, are capable of doing intellectually challenging work, and are "using one's mind and heart well" (Krovetz 24). The school's motto, *High Tech/High Touch*, is evident in the warm and caring relationships adults and teens share. In their research, Werner and Smith found that mentoring and "affectional ties with parent substitutes...encouraged trust, autonomy, and initiative" (192) and "most of all, self-esteem and self-efficacy were promoted through supportive relationships" (205).

Now more than ever, mentoring is essential because so many teens are dealing with issues and challenges that are well beyond their coping abilities. Many of these issues and challenges are a result of dysfunctional parenting, a high divorce rate, poverty, mobility, and parental drug and alcohol abuse. According to the Children's Defense Fund, every 11 seconds an American child is abused or neglected and nine children and teens

are killed by gunfire. The federal government estimates one in four children lives in a household with an alcoholic parent. The United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate of any developed country in the world. For many teens, school is their only safety net. It is time to recognize that “as our social institutions have fallen apart...more and more is expected of schools to meet the social and psychological needs of students” (Krovetz 11). Schools must become more supportive of teens and help them develop the skills to live productive lives.

The second building block is reading. At Resiliency High, great efforts will be made to counteract the falling off of reading that typically occurs in high school. Reader’s advisory techniques will be used to help students continue to discover books and magazines that interest them. Because the librarian knows the students, he or she will be able to select and purchase fiction and nonfiction books and magazines teens want to read. The covers of these books will be bright, and the topics will be of interest to teens. In their study, Werner and Smith found “effective reading skills by grade 4 were one of the most potent predictors of successful adult adaptation among high risk children in our study. More than half of the school failures detected by age 10 were due to deficiencies in that skill” (Werner and Smith 205).

As the heart and soul, the mission of the library at Resiliency High is to promote literacy, engage students in books and information, and provide textual and digital resources to support the curriculum. The librarian will be evaluated on his or her ability to promote literacy and design effective learning conditions – not as a network analyst or technology guru for the school. The literature is clear about how to promote adolescent

literacy. It is to provide teens with a variety of books, lots of them, and time within the school day to read.

Textbooks will not be purchased. Instead the budget for textbooks will be transferred to the local school so the library can purchase thousands of books and resources to support the curriculum and meet the recreational needs of students and teachers. More reading will be built into the school day. For example, when students study World War II, they will not do this by reading a chapter in a textbook. Instead, students will read nonfiction books, historical fiction, and biographies about real people who lived and died in World War II. They will read newspaper and magazine accounts written during the conflict. They will read Internet web sites and search databases. Students will read about human nature, how times change and how they stay the same, and survival. They will read about peace and then write a treaty to stop the hostilities. Krashen writes, “there is no literary crisis, at least not the kind of crisis the media has portrayed. There is, however, a problem. Nearly everyone in the United States can read and write. They just don’t read and write very well” (ix). The answer to the teen literacy problem is fairly simple – access to books, and lots of them!

The third building block is information and problem-solving skills. At Resiliency High, students will learn to use books, databases, web sites, and other forms of media to find answers to authentic real-world problems. Students will use information to set life goals and find a career. Werner and Smith found that career and job success was the highest priority on the agenda of the resilient men and women, but the lowest priority for their peers with problems in adolescence” (Krovetz 9). Another way teens can develop

problem-solving skills is by reading, discussing, and improving on the decisions characters make in young adult fiction books and biographies.

The fourth building block is social skills. At Resiliency High, students are taught to share, cooperate, and help others. Students serve on committees and provide input to community organizations. Students have opportunities to practice social skills and develop their leadership potential. One reason gangs exist is that they fill a bonding need for many teens (Milstein and Henry 44). Schools can counteract gang culture by providing strong prosocial bonding opportunities to teens who need support. Extracurricular activities such as art, sports, dances, drama, and service clubs promote social skills and resiliency. For instance, teens can become reading mentors to other teens who do not read well, to elementary school-aged children, and to the elderly. There is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that Alzheimer's patients respond well to children's literature. In an article published in the *Journal of Reading*, Fine and Murphy write that "literature provides a resource for reflection on the personal challenge of growing older and living with Alzheimer's Disease. Reading may also be an escape and a source of pleasure" (408). Any activity that allows teens to practice their social skills is worthwhile.

The fifth building block is hobbies and interests. Werner and Smith found "self-esteem and self-efficacy were derived not only from academic competence. Most of the resilient children in our high risk sample were not unusually talented, but they took great pleasure in interests and hobbies that brought them solace when things fell apart in their home lives" (205). Students attending Resiliency High will discover at least one hobby, interest, or sport they can develop and carry with them throughout life. There will be

opportunities for students to learn Bridge, play board games such as Monopoly and Life, draw and paint, and learn golf or tennis. It is important students develop personal competence by learning to be good at something. Competence and the ability to do something well leads to increased feelings of self-worth and self-esteem.

Resiliency High is a blueprint for a new kind of high school that provides a unique educational paradigm. It is an education that produces strong, resilient teens. Why do we need Resiliency High? It is because “the young people of today represent 100 percent of the human capital on which the future health and success of America rests” (Lerner and Lerner xxxiv). It is up to adults to make sure children and teens receive an education befitting the future leaders of America.

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