

## Why We Must Consciously Work to Build Student Resiliency

By Katherine Larson, Ph.D.

Almost all school dropouts face adversity. Although students drop out for a wide variety of reasons tied to personal stories, most students who drop out experience a great deal of adversity and hardship because of risk factors related to poverty, being from a single parent household, being a minority, being male, having limited English ability, having learning or emotional disabilities, moving frequently or being overage.

The question is - how can we help students cope more successfully with the adversity they experience? I see three compelling reasons why we must, and why we can build student resiliency and help our students cope more effectively with adversity.

### **1. Successful people who face adversity or hardship have specific self-protective characteristics known as resiliency.**

Much research, over time and across a wide variety of disciplines, has found that some individuals succeed even when experiencing highly challenging or adverse circumstances<sup>1</sup>. Research has shown that these "succeeders against the odds" have developed self-protective characteristics that limit negative behaviors associated with stress, and result in adaptive behavior despite hardship or adversity<sup>2</sup>. These self-protective characteristics are the social and family support, financial and educational opportunities, and personal qualities that young people need to avoid risks and to thrive.

The amount of assets a person has is associated with how resilient they are. Resilience boosts success for everyone, and it serves as a protection for those individuals who face great challenges. The question is - does building a student's assets, building their resiliency help youth do better in school? Turns out the answer is yes, developing a student's assets is directly related to helping them succeed in school - despite circumstances or innate ability.

### **2. At-risk students who are successful have more personal assets, and therefore more resiliency, than at-risk students who are not successful.**

By comparing at-risk students who are successful with at-risk students who are failing, researchers have determined that resilience is very important. A student's personal and social assets determine their school success over and above innate ability. Assets have positive power and build resilience in all young people, regardless of their gender, economic status, family, or race/ethnicity. Assets are better predictors of achievement and thriving than poverty or being from a single-parent family.

Researchers have come up with a list of various resiliency traits or personal assets that differentiate successful at-risk students. Motivation, optimism, self-directedness are very important personal assets.

One study found that resilient students display four personal assets: social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. Self-efficacy, goal oriented behavior, a sense of personal responsibility, a sense of optimism, coping strategies, and handling stress have also been found to characterize at-risk successful students.

The Search Institute reports<sup>3</sup> that "studies of more than 2.2 million young people in the United States consistently show that the more assets young people have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to thrive." The question is - can we increase a student's resiliency? Again, the answer is yes.

### **3. Resiliency skills can be taught.**

Fortunately, studies show that innate ability does not appear to be correlated with resiliency<sup>4</sup>. The good news is that resiliency skills or personal assets can be taught to at-risk students and/ or provided in the school and classroom environment.

Educators have little control over such issues such as family characteristics, or community demographics. Consequently, educational impact is more profound when educators focus on alterable assets of the school environment or building a student's personal assets<sup>5</sup>. Building a student's personal or social assets builds a student's resiliency. Building student resiliency by developing a student's personal assets is key to preventing dropout in at-risk students. Personal assets have been shown to improve a student's social skills, self-control and school engagement.

In summary, research shows that a student's personal and social assets are critically important for educational success when the student faces hardship or adverse life circumstances such as poverty, family challenges, and disabilities. Building a student's assets significantly helps compensate for adverse social and family conditions and increase a student's resiliency. Usually it is very difficult to build a student's social assets. However, building personal assets is a legitimate and achievable goal for schools. Personal assets can be taught to students and can be expected to enhance the student's social behavior and school engagement.

It should be noted, however, that to prevent school dropout, highest-risk students generally need additional school support that provides some social assets for a student through adult-student relationship building, continuous monitoring and personalization of the school environment for the student

1 Masten, A., Best, K., and Garmezy, N. (1990). "Resilience and development: Contributions from the study of children who overcome adversity." *Development and Psychopathology*, 2. 425-444.

2 Waxman, H., Gray, J., and Padron, Y. (2003). "Review of Research on Educational Resilience." Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence, Research Report/rr\_11. (Berkeley, CA: Authors). Available online at [http://repositories.edlib.org/crede/rsrchrpts/rr\\_11](http://repositories.edlib.org/crede/rsrchrpts/rr_11).



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3 See ALAS Dropout Prevention website for updated references to the Search Institute and their free materials.

4 Waxman et al. 2003

5 Jerald, C. (2007). "Keeping kids in school: What research says about preventing dropouts." (Alexandria, VA: Center for Public Education).