Given the pressures and challenges associated with changing economic and social conditions, principals are eager to find programs that offer hope for disadvantaged youth. Logic suggests, and research confirms, that there are certain measures schools, communities, and families can take to foster resilient behavior.

Resiliency refers to an individual’s capacity to overcome difficult circumstances, or “the ability to fall down seven times and get up eight” (Benard 1991). By the time they reach middle school, many young adolescents will have faced barriers and personal setbacks that exceed the imagination of most adults.

**Principles of Resiliency**

Resiliency expert Bonnie Benard has summarized the key findings from the past 20 years of resiliency research into four principles. Taken in turn, they are most relevant to the work of middle-level educators:

1. **Resiliency is a capacity all youth have for healthy development and successful learning.** While many people think that resiliency is an entity or characteristic that some people have and some don’t, Benard reminds us that “experiences of overcoming challenges—whether intellectual or personal, help people recognize their resilience” (Bernard 2004). This is indeed a message of hope for disadvantaged youth, and those who work with them.

   Although it is important to recognize that all young people have the capacity for positive development, this understanding “should never be used to justify social and political inaction on the grounds that, somehow, ’Most kids make it’” (Bernard 2004). Instead, schools, families, and communities must be deliberate in their efforts to provide young people with developmental supports and opportunities.

2. **Certain personal strengths are associated with healthy development and successful learning.** It is important to understand what resiliency looks like in students. (see Table 1) The ideas in the table below can serve as an initial professional development tool to introduce school personnel to the components of resiliency. Conversations about school, team, and classroom practices to foster these personal strengths in students are a natural next step.
3. Certain characteristics of families, schools, and communities are associated with the development of resiliency and, in turn, healthy development and successful learning. Fostering personal strengths in young adolescents is best accomplished when the home, school, and community partner together to develop potential among their youth. The ideal resilient community consists of all three groups working together to change beliefs and provide positive experiences for children. The absence of one partner in this process increases the need for support from the remaining partners. Research on the characteristics of resilient youth offers some specific actions that families, schools, and communities can take to foster the personal strengths of resiliency. (see Table 2)

Table 1: Personal Strengths: What Resilience Looks Like

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL COMPETENCE</th>
<th>PROBLEM SOLVING</th>
<th>AUTONOMY</th>
<th>SENSE OF PURPOSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Positive Identity</td>
<td>Goal Direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Internal Focus</td>
<td>Achievement Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Resourcefulness</td>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>Educational Aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring</td>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Special Interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Insight</td>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>Imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adaptive Distancing</td>
<td>Hope</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From: Resilience: What We Have Learned, published by WestEd.

4. Changing the life trajectories of children and youth from risk to resilience starts with changing the beliefs of the adults in their families, schools, and communities. Improving the capacities of disadvantaged youth is closely related to the beliefs of the adults with whom they interact. A school-based action plan shaped by resiliency beliefs invites change for students and adults alike.

Putting the Principles into Practice
With these principles in mind, there are several middle-level practices that foster resiliency.

Table 2: Interconnecting Supports for High-Risk Youth: Identifying What They Need

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Competence</th>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
<th>Autonomy</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive relationships with significant adults.</td>
<td>Connections with turnaround people and places</td>
<td>Opportunities to understand self in relation to others.</td>
<td>Exposure to hobbies and high interest activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with mixed peer groups</td>
<td>The ability to identify and access resources.</td>
<td>To feel good about their capabilities</td>
<td>To stay focused on a bright future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to care for others</td>
<td>To learn “how they learn.”</td>
<td>To distance themselves from negative circumstances.</td>
<td>High expectations and maximum support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from: Resilience: What We Have Learned, published by WestEd.
Advisory programs. Advisory programs are an excellent way for students to connect with adults. The ability to make connections with “turnaround people and places” is a cornerstone of the research on resilient youth (Werner & Smith 1992). “Throughout the resilience literature, young people talk about teachers who listen, who notice when they are absent, and who seem interested in them” (Benard, 2004). Student perceptions of their school as a caring community have been shown to offset the negative effects of poverty in high poverty schools (Battistich et. al. 1995).

An advisory plan built around activities offers an added benefit. High-interest activities not only support the young adolescent’s tendency toward intense (though not always sustained) special interests, they are also resilient-friendly. As they develop their own capacities in a collegial setting, students of all backgrounds and abilities gain confidence and competence, milestones of both resilience and adolescent development.

Teaming. While some middle schools have scoffed at the notion of team names and identities, others have embraced the possibilities provided by this opportunity. The S.T.A.R. (Strive to Attain Respect) team is a prime example (McElrath 2000). As a two-teacher, seventh grade team in an urban middle school, the S.T.A.R. team engaged their students in the development of their program plan. They used their team name to shape the rules, procedures, and activities for the year. By linking the team name with their purpose, these teachers were able to attach constructs such as the values of getting a good education, being a good person, and demonstrating tolerance into their daily practice. These practices included trust-building exercises, activities that partnered different students, team meetings to solicit input and discuss emerging issues, and service work to help the adults in the community more readily respect young adolescents.

By collectively deciding on a name and using it to develop their team culture and identity, these teachers were acknowledging and supporting the young adolescent desire for autonomy. When students are invited to participate in the decisions that affect them most, they are more likely to adhere to the academic and behavioral expectation of the group. The team’s practices, such as group work and team meetings contribute to students’ social competencies by allowing them to work together in a truly democratic environment that values the input of multiple members.

Exploratory programs. The exploratory program has much to offer from a resiliency perspective. An ideal exploratory curriculum augments existing course content and builds on its application by applying an understanding of, and appreciation for, community resources. Repeated exposure to high school and community programming, and higher education resources can contribute to the “future focus” that is consistent with experiences of resilient youth. A comprehensive exploratory program of this nature could complete the systemic approach to fostering resiliency among young adolescents.

While there are many possible approaches to fostering resiliency in schools, a targeted effort focusing on advisory, teaming, and exploratory programs allows for a comprehensive and developmentally responsive school setting. Given that middle schools have been referred to as the “last best chance to avoid a diminished future” (Carnegie 1989), interventions at the middle level are essential. The challenge for middle-level leaders is to understand the research on students who overcome difficult circumstances, to enact these findings in responsive middle-level practice, and to support these practices with passion and determination.

References


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