Students

Resilience—not problem prevention—is the key to student success

Why 'At Risk' Is At Risk

There is a distinct difference between preventing a problem and promoting students' emotional and intellectual development. Today's schools, with their focus on standards and accountability, frequently use a risk-based problem-prevention approach in both policy and practice to address young people's drug use, delinquency, unsafe sex, violence, and academic failure.

But is this the right approach to take? Or would schools and students benefit more by focusing on building skills that lead to educational attainment and social and moral development?

After more than a decade of research, we have found no proof that zero-tolerance policies and other risk-based programs result in student success. And today, we are beginning to see the full range of harm associated with these efforts. At-risk programs increase the very problems they were designed to prevent, result in unfair removal of students from school, and reduce school credibility.

The challenges of risk-based prevention are essential to understand for two reasons. First, the evidence needs to be widely available for boards and administrators to make effective decisions. The National Academy of Sciences has noted, however, that studies showing a program's limited effectiveness often are difficult to publish. Indeed, those studies often remain unpublished.

Second, scientifically sound alternatives to at-risk approaches do exist. They come in the form of strategic, resilience-based school interaction that dramatically bolsters young people's attainment and development.

Problem-prevention education presents a number of challenges that are central to the basic capacity of schools to effectively educate. Their impact is not confined to students' health and safety, but to the schools' ability to educate the leaders of tomorrow.

Why 'at risk' is a failed model

From 1996 to 1998, the most recent years for which national information is available, the Government Accountability Office estimated that "billions" were spent on 117 federal programs identifying and addressing at-risk youth. This does not include substantial additional state and local funding for such services.

While this spending, combined with major reports such as 1983's "A Nation at Risk," popularized and addressed the plight of many young people, evidence regarding the at-risk ideology has come under growing criticism.

In the early 1990s, the California Department of Education designated as many as 36 different risk factors associated with drug use as part of its policy for funding programs. This has proven to be a common practice in many states. The risk factors range from personal attributes (alienation or rebelliousness) to family situations (inconsistent or severe discipline) to community structures (community disorganization). Such factors may be correlated with drug use, dropping out of school, or criminal activity. However, no mixture of risk factors has been shown to reliably cause school failure, violence, or drug abuse.

Starting in the mid '90s, given the

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number of risk factors and students who could be categorized as being "at risk," the specific focus on risk factors translated into a generalized view of young people. This was especially true in the wake of the Columbine shootings and the emergence of a supportive political climate. As one school leader, typical of the more than 300 we interviewed, told us, "It's real hard for me to point out which of our kids are not at risk."

In response to that perception, zero-tolerance, antiviolence, and abstinence-based drug and sex education policies and programs were intensified. To protect students, at-risk youth needed to be clearly addressed or punished.

The National Academy of the Sciences, in reviewing our research, noted that such programs may increase the very problems they are designed to prevent. In its 2001 publication, *Informing America's Policy on Illegal Drugs: What We Don't Know Keeps Hurting Us,* the NAS noted that the "no use" messages "typically conveyed in universal prevention programs actually increase use among those most at risk."

Another reason for the breakdown of the problem-prevention approach is that risk-based education relies on zero-tolerance policies that remove students for a first-time violation of school health or safety policies. In 1998, more than 3.1 million children in America were suspended and another 87,000 were expelled under such policies. These statistics are accompanied by disproportionate removal of minority youth from school, despite a lower rate of drug use than that of non-minority students.

Perhaps the most invisible reason risk-based education fails is that such policies and programs reduce the credibility school districts need to successfully deliver on educational attainment and development. By fifth grade, young people know that they have been labeled as being at risk.

We found that nearly 70 percent of almost 5,000 randomly selected seventh-through 12th-graders in California felt neutral to negative about the adults delivering programs and services. Nearly 25 percent said they disliked their educators "a lot."

When the information and punitive practices students find in school clash with their personal experience or information they get from more trusted sources, they become skeptical of their administrators, teachers, and schools. This student, typical of the more than 200 we interviewed, described how the skepticism compromises the school's ability to educate effectively. "I don't think the schools are for, like, helping," the student told us. "It's just for getting the bad kids out."

As prevention policies and programs grow more central to educational policy, leadership, and practice, it is important for school board members and superintendents to consider these findings. Whether we agree with these students or believe their claims are true, young people often determine whether teachers and administrators are credible based on perceptions drawn from prevention policies and programs. And as the students generalize, the school's ability to educate is compromised.

Effectively addressing standards and accountability is impossible without credibility. In our risk-based world, the problem-prevention approach and accompanying punitive practices compromise the development of our young people and their ability to learn.

A natural resilience?

Considering the challenges of risk-based education, school districts have an important opportunity to enhance the school climate without draining valuable and often scarce resources.

How do you do this in a way that is scientifically sound? One answer is to move away from problem prevention and remediation and toward promoting development. Direct your efforts toward building resilience by using the strengths of your staff and students. Studies have shown that 70 to 80 percent of young people raised in severe hardship develop social competence, personal coping skills, stability, and happiness by midlife.

Once resilience is seen as a "norma-tive" part of human development—a trait existing naturally to some degree in nearly all people—policies and programs can focus on developing resilience as a skill in the school as well as in the classroom. Research by Bonnie Benard, a coauthor of our 2001 book on resilience education and one of the pioneers in our field, has been successful in narrowing down specific "protective factors" that predict student development. These factors are connectedness, opportunities to participate and contribute, and high self-expectations.

In the day-to-day reality of students and schools, resilience manifests itself as reduced drug use, violence, and unsafe sex. A focus on resilience has also produced better grades and increased positive relationships and involvement in school and community activities. We believe these occur because students are encouraged to use their personal interests and strengths to engage in daily activities that promote educational attainment and social and moral development.

Developing resilience at school improves academic performance and strengthens students' abilities to overcome obstacles in all aspects of life. Most important, a resilience focus promotes young people's thriving development—both immediately and in the long term.

The Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD), based in Berkeley, Calif., has developed a resilience education model for schools. Called ResEd, and specifically described in our book *Resilience Education,* the model balances two levels of skill building: a global, holistic one that focuses on establishing a strengths-based learning climate, and specific skill building based on the three protective factors predicting resiliency. On both levels, school personnel can learn how to strategically balance specific information provided during teachable moments, with an overall strengths-building process.

In CERD's consultation and workshops—designed for administrators, educators, and helping professionals—ResEd is discussed *and* experienced. For example, participants learn how to strate-

gically and intentionally provide descriptive rather than evaluative feedback to colleagues and young people alike. Because it allows for the type of relationship building necessary for learning and development, such feedback has a direct connection with the construction of a resilient school community.

By developing the skills of resilience building, participants actually use the model while learning about it. They can begin using their newly acquired skills right away to help colleagues and young people with the challenging professional, learning, and life decisions we all face.

Easy to implement

With the skills developed in these workshops, participants adapt the principles and skills to local needs, go back to their schools, and model and work with their colleagues and students. Based on the fact that this is a "process"—not simply another "program"—the resilience approach is easily implemented even within stringent policy, standards, and accountability requirements.

ResEd is designed to become so much a part of the school's life that it disappears into its fabric. While programs cost more and continue to cost as they are implemented, ResEd's cost to implement is designed to decrease or even zero out as it is implemented.

Early results are encouraging. For example, nearly 90 percent of educational leaders, teachers, and helping professionals who have participated in our program report employing ResEd skills. They are applying this model to bring long-term change in their schools.

While the research on resilience has a more than 40-year legacy, ResEd is in its infancy as a scientifically sound yet viable alternative to the risk-based problem-prevention approach. At its most basic level, it's a positive, specific, and directed advance in educational leadership, school system change, teaching, and learning—one that fosters trust, community, learning, and development. In so doing, Resilience Education provides districts with an opportunity to shift from deficit to development.

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