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Resiliency

Promoting Everyone's Potential to Succeed

"It's a funny thing about life. If you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it."

—Somerset Maugham

We believe that it is urgent for schools, families, and communities to come together to provide mutual support and improve the potential for *everyone*—youngsters, adults, and the elderly—to lead positive, meaningful, and healthy lives. In support of this contention, this introductory chapter explores the widespread problems that confront our schools and communities and the reasons our problem-focused thinking is unable to overcome them. It also provides an introduction to resiliency, which is an important and positive shift in the way we think about and respond to our school and community challenges. Fostering resiliency in classrooms, schools, families, volunteer groups, community organizations, and formal governmental agencies can do much to move us along the path to school and community improvement.

WHY THE URGENCY?

Many schools face a rising tide of problems that include bullying, violence, gang-related activities, substance abuse, absenteeism, high dropout rates, suicides, low levels of parental support and involvement, and changing family structures.

Communities are struggling with problems such as growing numbers of its members who are unable to maintain a decent quality of life along with a growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots, a fracturing of acceptance and understanding among individuals and groups, a declining level of participation in civic affairs, and in general, a growing distrust of the intentions or abilities of those in authority positions to function equitably and effectively on behalf of all citizens.

Are these problems that are widespread in your school and community? Responding to Exercise 1.1 can help sharpen the picture of how your community is doing with these issues.

Exercise 1.1: Taking Stock of Your School and Community

An important initial step in making significant improvements is to be sure that everyone understands and agrees about the current state of affairs. Invite others to explore the following questions with you. Remember to focus on perceptions about what the situation is *now*.

1. What problems do you think schools in your community are encountering that hinder their ability to provide an effective education for students?
2. What problems do you think the community is encountering that hinders its ability to provide support needed by its members?
3. Why do you think your schools and community are experiencing these problems?
4. Are these problems being addressed? If so, which ones? In what ways?

Record members' responses on a chalkboard or on a sheet of chart paper. Ask the group to review the responses and identify shared understandings. Underline agreements or rewrite those that might need to be modified so they can serve as the basis for further discussion if the group agrees to continue the conversation, as well as to guide actions if the group decides to pursue ways of promoting resiliency.

Living in stressful times creates the need to develop skills and the knowledge required to cope effectively. This has probably always been a reality, but it has

We live in the midst of alarms; anxiety beclouds the future; we expect some new disaster with each newspaper read.

—Abraham Lincoln

become especially true during the closing decades of the twentieth century and the beginning years of the twenty-first century because of the increasing pace of change that we are experiencing. Accompanying the rapidity of change are breakdowns of institutions such as the church and the family, which have traditionally acted as sources of shared understanding, support, and authority for communities, nations, and the world. With these breakdowns have come endless arrays of problems that appear to be intractable. Some of these problems are listed below. You are encouraged to add others that may be relevant in your setting. Being clear about what is at issue is the first step to remediation and improvement.