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A School-Based Community of Hope, Not At-Risk: An Evaluation of a District-wide Resiliency Program

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Abstract

In Maricopa County, Arizona, one school district was interested in developing a culture of resilience within and among all its schools. In 2006, the district implemented a resilience training program for all its faculty and staff. It was expected that the program would have positive effects on the students; in short, youth who are provided with critical aspects of a resilient culture will do better in school and be more successful. The results of the evaluation of this effort showed that the school youth had resilience factors strengthened by the end of three years of implementation but older students need constant encouragement to progress in their academics and ability to connect with their schools and teachers. This paper is an examination of student attitudes and behaviors from 2007 through 2009.

Keywords: youth resilience; kids at risk; program evaluation.

A School-Based Community of Hope, Not At-Risk: An Evaluation of a District-wide Resilience Program

Educators have many hats that they must wear when providing learning to our nation's youth. Teachers take on new roles when they have to make sure that state and federal laws, such as No Child Left Behind, are adhered to in the performance of their teaching duties (Davis, 2006; Valli & Buese, 2007). They also have to ensure that schools are safe learning environments and that youth are protected and not victimized (Stephens 1994; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne & Gottfredson, 2005). They can be asked to provide social support to students, particularly if the youth have been victimized or exposed to violence (Loukas & Murphy, 2007; Ozer & Weinstein, 2004). And of course, educators have to educate youth (Hill, Umland, Litke & Kapitula, 2012).

The consequences of teachers wearing multiple hats and attempting to meet sometimes conflicting demands could be a school to prison pipeline (Fowler, 2007; Welch & Payne, 2010). As Noguera (2003) states, schools historically serve three important functions: schools sort children on the basis of their academic aptitude, socialize children and, socially control children in the form of school discipline. According to Noguera (2003), schools have been focusing attention on social control more so than on academic rigor. The consequences of having a disproportionate amount of time spent on the school discipline function can be dire. In Texas, for example, the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University found that the important predictor of a youth serving time in the juvenile justice system was a school disciplinary referral; multiple referrals increased the likelihood of youth serving time but even one referral was a predictor (Fowler, 2007). The American Civil Liberties Union claims that the school to prison pipeline has a disproportionate impact on minority youth, underperforming youth and students with special needs. The ACLU found that these students may be pushed out of schools so that state accountability measures for school performance are met (ACLU, 2012). In the school to prison pipeline, schools will identify problem youth, such youth will believe in the label of being bad and begin acting bad, youth negative behavior will be punished with increasing sanctions, increased sanctions may take youth out of school for prolonged periods of time, such youth will fall behind in their studies and engage in increasingly deviant and criminal behaviors for which they will serve time in juvenile detention and be introduced to the legal process and criminal justice system.

What can be done? To countervail a school to prison pipeline, schools need to provide "basic human and tangible resources" from counselors to hot lunches to books and desks, and rely less on discipline (Noguera, 2003; Tuzzolo and Hewitt, 2006-2007). Resilience research suggests that what helps youth the most are caring adults, both parents and teachers (Ahern, Kiehl, Sole & Byers, 2006; Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Langenkamp, 2010). These adults will set high standards for youth behavior and provide youth with opportunities to succeed (Krovetz, 1999; Miller, 2001; VanderVen, 2004). If adults believe in a child and advocate for the child rather than view children as problems, then it is expected that more children will show high academic success and there will be less disciplinary problems in the schools (Davis, 2006; Noguera, 2003). In creating a resilient school, schools will have to build a school culture around the principles of hope, optimism and youth success by matching caring adults with youth, adults who can provide the youth with a pro-social direction (Bernat, 2009).

Students who perceive their school environment to be safe (low conflict) and supporting (where teachers, school administrators and support personnel have positive attachments to youth) will perform better academically and socially. In such schools, youth attendance rates will be higher; and, as a consequence youth transition out of K-8 or middle schools into high schools will be more successful. Youth will also perform better in their classes and will have less adjustment problems (Bernat, 2009; Davis, 2006; Gottfried, 2009; Loukas & Murphy, 2007; Weiss & Baker-Smith, 2010). Resilient youth have an ability to adapt regardless of psychological or physiological stressors in their life (Ahern et. al, 2006).

School and Community Partnerships

In Maricopa County, Arizona, one school district, PK-8 SD (a pseudo name), was interested in developing a culture of resilience within and among all of its schools. The school district had experienced the common problems associated with a growing population of youth. The area has the following characteristics: a higher crime rate than state and national rates, many families living below the poverty level, and many of the schools were perceived as either not performing well or “average.” In addition, the majority of the youth are bilingual (Spanish-English) and have parents who have not completed high school and/or do not speak English. The District Superintendent decided that a resilience school based on best research practices (noted above) needed to be implemented. He decided that every school in his district must change their culture from one where youth are heavily disciplined for every slip-up to one where positive behaviors for each youth are recognized and rewarded.

Pursuant to the District’s mission to find a method of enabling all youth in the district to achieve success, PK-8 SD contracted with a non-profit organization that aims to achieve youth success in various venues of a child’s life: school, home and family, community service, and hobbies and recreation. This non-profit focuses its training on the adults who work in the schools (teachers, principals, and staff). Since youth spend a significant portion of their day in schools, it is believed that by effectuating positive caring relationships among and between adults and students at all points within the school that youth will perform better both socially and academically. The non-profit uses model of resilience which focuses on the following features: 1) each student in a school needs to be paired with a caring adult/teacher; 2) each student in a school needs to have a caring adult/teacher who sets high expectations and provides multiple opportunities for the youth to succeed; 3) each school needs to develop a connection among teachers and youth so that as youth progress up in school grades, the culture of resilience will be present from class to class and from grade to grade. To measure these features schools are to train their personnel for one to two years by the non-profit, develop trainers of the trainees within each school so that the school can sustain the training over time, engage in various pro-social resilient activities associated with the non-profit’s resilient practices (e.g., a youth pledge of hope and success; a youth success report card that details the positive features of the youth; a youth resilient day of fun).

In the summer of 2006, PK-8 SD and the non-profit agency began training school teachers, administration and staff in the parameters of youth resilience. All schools were directed by the superintendent to implement the resilience program’s belief system immediately. To ensure that all faculty and staff were trained, throughout the 2006-2007 term, every school

sent their administrators, teachers, and staff members to the non-profit agency's school-based resilience program training. In the subsequent academic year, 2007-2008, the resilience program expanded its training within the district. In addition to training newly hired faculty and staff, the program trained before and after school program personnel who came to the school to provide supplementary programs. In the 2008-2009 academic year, the district sought to standardize resilience training and ensure that all parts of the non-profit program's principles were implemented throughout the school district and, within each school at every school grade level. In 2009, newly hired teachers and staff were not trained by the nonprofit agency as it was hoped that existing school teams would help to maintain and extend the culture of resilience in each school. These new staff and teachers were trained within the school by team leaders who went through additional resilient training by the non-profit to carry on the within school training. The District was interested in learning about the impact of the training on school youth. This research project was therefore directed at evaluating youth resilience and attitudes about their school to ascertain the impact, if any, of a developing culture of hope and success within each school.

Method

Participants

PK-8SD's superintendent required all schools to participate in the training and implementation of the youth resilience program. The district has 12 schools and each school participated in the program evaluation. The program evaluation surveyed randomly selected classrooms in each school. Students in the fifth and sixth grades participated in 2007, students in the fifth, sixth and seventh grades participated in 2008, and students in the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grades participated in 2009. The evaluation added new students each year by including new 5th grade classes over the three year period as the prior year's students moved up in grade levels.¹

The demographic characteristics of the students surveyed were consistent with all youth served within the district. Half of the youth surveyed were male (48% in 2007, 49% in 2008, and 50% in 2009) and half were female (52% in 2007, 51% in 2008, and 50% in 2009). The majority of youth indicated that they were Hispanic (61% in both 2007 and 2008, and 58% in 2009). The second largest group of youth indicated that they were White (20% in 2007, 19% in 2008 and 17% in 2009). Smaller percentages of students indicated that they were African American (6% in 2007 and, 8% in 2008 and 2009), Asian (2% in all three years), Native American (2% in all three years), or multi-racial (10% in 2007, 9% in 2008 and 14% in 2009).

Most youth in 2007 and 2008 (80%) indicated that English was their primary language, and 20% stated that their primary language was Spanish. Some of these Spanish speaking youth were bilingual comfortably speaking Spanish at home and English in school. In 2009, the language question was modified to allow students to indicate if their primary language was both

¹ Sometimes cost is a factor in program evaluation. It would have been too costly to study all students in all of the schools. Because the district wanted to see if the resilience program could help youth moving through its doors, the superintendent in conjunction with this author agreed to randomly select classrooms and add a year as the youth moved up in grade into the 7th and then 8th grade classrooms.

Spanish and English². In prior years we had them select the “primary” language as either English or Spanish. In 2009, 61% of students stated that English was their primary language, while 33% said that they are bilingual and spoke both English and Spanish. Another 4% of students said that their primary language was Spanish and 1% said that another language was their primary tongue.

Materials and Procedure

In the spring of 2007, 2008 and 2009, a student survey was administered in each PK-8 SD school. In 2007, we surveyed only 5th and 6th grade classrooms. As youth moved into higher grades in 2008 and 2009, we added the higher grades into our evaluation. Thus, in 2008, we surveyed grades 5 through 7 and, in 2009 we surveyed grades 5 through 8. Most youth stayed in their schools and the district throughout the years of evaluation.

In each PK-8 SD school, two classrooms per grade were randomly selected to participate in a survey. A total of 1082 students participated in 2007, 1715 students in 2008 and 2382 students in 2009. Because the resilience program was considered to a part of the school’s curriculum, a passive consent method was employed. Letters were sent home to each student whose classroom was randomly selected for evaluation and only those students whose parents refused their child’s participation were excluded from the study. No parent during the three years of survey administration declined to allow their child to participate.

Surveys were administered on an assigned day in the schools’ computer lab located within the school’s library. The randomly selected classrooms were each able to come to the lab and all participating students were asked to complete the survey. The students were asked information about themselves, resilience and hope principles, their attitudes and behaviors, and their schools. The youths surveyed were comprised of those in attendance on the day of implementation.

Results

Youth Knowledge about Their Grades and State Testing Scores

In the early years of the survey’s administration many youth did not really know their grades or the results they received on state tests. By 2009, however, 62% of students said that they passed the state’s reading test, 62% said that they passed their state math test and, 59% said they passed the state writing test. Also in 2009, students had generally positive views about their grades. The largest percentages of students indicated that they were getting an “A” or “B” in their various substantive subjects. The largest percentage of students reported getting a “B” in Reading (38%) and Language/Writing (37%). Otherwise, the largest percentage of students reported an “A” grade in Math (31%), Science/Health (31%), and Social Studies (32%). Students who had the following subjects also excelled in Spelling, Art, Music, PE and Band.

² Informally, students told us that they spoke both Spanish and English (Spanish at home and English in school) and did not know how to answer the question as to what is their primary language.

Because some students may be doing very well in one subject and less well in another, we asked students to report how their grades were “overall.” Students could indicate that their grades were “very high,” “good,” “fair,” or “very poor.” In 2009 about 10% of students said that they were doing less well in school than in the earlier years; this change is due to slightly more youth in the 7th and 8th grades who said that they were doing “fair.” In the 7th and 8th grades, youth begin to move from classroom to classroom and have multiple teachers assessing their academic work.

Table 1

2009 Youth Responses: Overall, My grades in school are:

		Very high	Good	Fair	Very poor	Total N
Grade	5 th grade	19%	67%	11%	3%	535
	6 th grade	18%	67%	13%	2%	587
	7 th grade	19%	59%	19%	4%	569
	8 th grade	16%	60%	19%	5%	533
Total		18%	63%	16%	3%	2224

Youth Attitudes on Hope and Success

Resilience Factors in PK-8 SD

In PK-8 SD schools, teachers and school personnel were encouraged to create a culture of resilience. This culture of resilience was based upon known factors of youth success, hope and optimism. School personnel were supposed to utilize specific “High Five” practices. The practices involved youth reciting a pledge of hope, writing out a Passport to the Future that detailed their goals and aspirations, gave youth a “report card” that highlighted positive achievements and indicated something special about the child, and had positive images and pictures dispersed throughout the school. The youth genuinely liked the ideas presented by the resilience program and reacted quite positively to getting positive report cards from their teachers. Having positive, rather than warning posters, was also a positive change in the schools. Youth enjoyed seeing smiling and happy posters images rather than ominous toned messages on a daily basis. Two important tactics suggested for use in the schools (Report Card and Passport to the Future) were not utilized as regularly in some schools and not provided to all youth who progressed into higher grades, if a resilience program is to be effective all teachers and schools need to implement programmatic features in a consistent manner. In schools where youth indicated that they were hopeful, successful and could state clear goals for their future, the teachers, administrators and staff had created a consistent implementation of the non-profit’s programmatic features of resilience. Some of the teachers and principals in these schools had initially said that they were skeptical about the “new program.” They were skeptical about any program that required them to do more when they needed to focus on educating youth and making sure that the youth had passing test scores on statewide exams. Within a short time, however, skeptical personnel became convinced when school disciplinary problems declined, and school climate improved. If the school had resilient High Five features for 7th and 8th grades, then these youth reported better academic and social successes than their counterparts in schools which did not coordinate the resilient program’s features for the older grade levels.

Table 2

Youth Reporting on Program Resilience Practices in their Schools

Kids at Hope Belief Practices: 2007-2009	2007 “Yes”	2008 “Yes”	2009 “Yes”
I am a youth at hope	93% (N=851)	90% (N=1488)	87% (N=1971)
Resilience Pledge recited daily or weekly	88% (N=902)	85% (N=1437)	80% (N=1853)
Given Passport to the Future	69% (N=540)	65% (N=1077)	63% (N=1448)
Given resilience Report Card	52% (N=433)	58% (N=963)	56% (N=1277)
Positive school posters and pictures	86% (N=770)	82% (N=1365)	80% (N=1836)
Resilience Program is good to have	79% (N=785)	83% (N=1385)	78% (N=1792)

Changes in Attitudes and Behaviors from 2007 to 2009

Students were asked two particular questions to determine if they had the basic parameters of resilience. Students were asked if they were “successful” and if they considered themselves to a youth with hope. In 2007, 99% indicated that they were successful; in 2008, 96% indicated that they were successful; and in 2009, 95% indicated that they were successful. In 2007, 93% of students identified themselves as being “at hope,” 90% and 88% identified themselves in this manner in 2008 and 2009 respectively. In addition, students were asked if their school was a “place of hope.” Fewer students reported their school as being a place of hope in 2009 (84%) than in 2008 (85%) and 2007 (92%). In this regard, a lesser percentage of students in both 2008 and 2009 reported having “teachers who care about them” than did students in 2007. Specifically, in 2007, 81% of youth indicated that their teachers cared about them; this percentage dropped to 75% in 2008 and to 73% in 2009. However, in all three years, similar numbers of students felt that their teachers set high expectations for their success: 85% in 2007, 83% in 2008 and 83% in 2009. The drop in the later years of the study was attributed to the changes that occurred within schools as students moved from 5th grade to 8th grade. Although the District is K-8, as youth move out of the 6th grade, they change from having one teacher to multiple teachers. Understandably, “middle school” youth are taught advanced subjects by faculty with more specific knowledge in the humanities, arts, sciences and mathematics. Having multiple teachers throughout a day provides a challenge for teachers and youth to develop close supporting relationships in large urban schools.

Table 3

2009 Positive Student Responses to Important Inquiries by School and Grade

Schools: 2009 PK-8 SD Youth Resilience Factors	I am Successful "YES"	I am a youth with Hope "YES"	My School is a Place of Hope "YES"	I will succeed no matter what "YES"	My teacher cares about me "YES"	My teacher sets high expectations "YES"
A						
5 th grade	100%	97%	81%	94%	73%	87%
6 th grade	98%	88%	74%	98%	53%	80%
7 th grade	94%	74%	69%	81%	56%	72%
8 th grade	81%	62%	66%	85%	52%	56%
B						
5 th grade	94%	97%	89%	98%	85%	83%
6 th grade	88%	82%	70%	82%	61%	76%
7 th grade	97%	90%	71%	89%	53%	85%
8 th grade	94%	86%	69%	92%	46%	62%
C						
5 th grade	84%	91%	84%	90%	80%	81%
6 th grade	95%	95%	88%	84%	76%	82%
7 th grade	94%	89%	85%	87%	61%	83%
8 th grade	96%	80%	83%	91%	69%	73%
D						
5 th grade	98%	100%	94%	98%	92%	84%
6 th grade	91%	79%	81%	85%	66%	82%
7 th grade	94%	75%	84%	87%	61%	76%
8 th grade	100%	68%	73%	81%	65%	84%
E						
5 th grade	98%	88%	88%	91%	78%	91%
6 th grade	91%	81%	98%	94%	88%	100%
7 th grade	97%	81%	100%	94%	81%	94%
8 th grade	91%	89%	87%	91%	87%	96%
F						
5 th grade	97%	92%	91%	95%	79%	90%
6 th grade	100%	92%	90%	88%	88%	86%
7 th grade	93%	86%	81%	91%	71%	81%
8 th grade	100%	94%	83%	98%	69%	82%
G						
5 th grade	98%	90%	90%	98%	81%	83%
6 th grade	98%	100%	87%	98%	95%	100%
7 th grade	98%	85%	64%	96%	66%	82%
8 th grade	100%	82%	78%	93%	57%	70%
H						
5 th grade	92%	94%	96%	98%	81%	88%
6 th grade	95%	89%	86%	91%	77%	83%
7 th grade	95%	89%	85%	91%	73%	71%
8 th grade	87%	75%	72%	82%	68%	85%
I						
5 th grade	97%	97%	89%	98%	85%	88%
6 th grade	97%	97%	91%	95%	92%	83%
7 th grade	100%	91%	91%	100%	94%	87%
8 th grade	96%	89%	89%	91%	94%	94%
J						
5 th grade	100%	100%	94%	100%	78%	78%
6 th grade	98%	98%	85%	100%	77%	91%
7 th grade	100%	95%	90%	95%	88%	93%
8 th grade	96%	87%	87%	91%	87%	96%
K						
5 th grade	95%	98%	95%	90%	76%	93%
6 th grade	92%	87%	76%	97%	83%	73%
7 th grade	96%	86%	84%	96%	70%	86%
8 th grade	96%	76%	74%	96%	58%	81%
L						
5 th grade	95%	95%	93%	88%	88%	100%
6 th grade	100%	98%	90%	96%	77%	98%
7 th grade	94%	80%	90%	92%	54%	86%

8 th grade	90%	78%	76%	88%	56%	98%
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Students’ attitudes and behaviors in regard to their school and their peers were similar in the years 2007 through 2009. Nonetheless, students generally indicated less positive responses in 2009 than in 2007 or 2008. Many of these negative responses were from 8th grade students; although many of the 8th graders had moved up in their schools and the district from year to year, by the 8th grade, the youth were experiencing more strain and were not connecting with teachers and were not as hopeful as their younger peers.

Table 4

2009 Negative Student Responses to Important Inquiries by School and Grade

Schools: 2009 PK-8SD Youth Negative Behaviors and Contacts	I regularly get into trouble at school: Yes	I am in a gang: Yes	I have friends who are in a gang: Yes	I have family members in a gang: Yes
A				
5 th grade	11%	8%	8%	11%
6 th grade	38%	7%	11%	30%
7 th grade	25%	21%	17%	33%
8 th grade	26%	19%	26%	44%
B				
5 th grade	5%	0%	3%	10%
6 th grade	27%	11%	24%	16%
7 th grade	17%	4%	27%	25%
8 th grade	17%	4%	12%	30%
C				
5 th grade	16%	14%	21%	20%
6 th grade	23%	12%	23%	30%
7 th grade	44%	17%	27%	53%
8 th grade	23%	10%	21%	33%
D				
5 th grade	12%	4%	12%	25%
6 th grade	41%	13%	21%	23%
7 th grade	38%	3%	3%	34%
8 th grade	31%	21%	16%	41%
E				
5 th grade	15%	9%	13%	16%
6 th grade	21%	4%	4%	6%
7 th grade	31%	0%	3%	13%
8 th grade	11%	9%	17%	25%
F				
5 th grade	8%	5%	2%	16%
6 th grade	21%	6%	10%	22%
7 th grade	18%	16%	21%	14%
8 th grade	13%	2%	17%	33%
G				
5 th grade	12%	0%	7%	12%
6 th grade	27%	15%	19%	29%
7 th grade	23%	7%	17%	26%
8 th grade	50%	13%	17%	31%
H				
5 th grade	7%	6%	4%	15%
6 th grade	35%	8%	11%	22%
7 th grade	21%	8%	11%	13%
8 th grade	22%	15%	23%	28%
I				
5 th grade	13%	7%	10%	25%
6 th grade	16%	7%	12%	31%
7 th grade	22%	6%	19%	21%
8 th grade	13%	9%	15%	29%
J				
5 th grade	13%	7%	7%	10%

6 th grade	7%	0%	9%	31%
7 th grade	18%	3%	8%	20%
8 th grade	17%	4%	17%	22%
<i>K</i>				
5 th grade	23%	5%	5%	18%
6 th grade	34%	0%	18%	16%
7 th grade	34%	4%	22%	34%
8 th grade	27%	9%	27%	27%
<i>L</i>				
5 th grade	12%	0%	7%	17%
6 th grade	27%	2%	6%	12%
7 th grade	27%	12%	31%	27%
8 th grade	21%	6%	19%	33%

Youth Open Ended Responses

Youth in 2009 had a number of responses to the query “my school is special because” Student responses varied from “it gives me an education” to “it has “great” or “good” teachers to “I have friends here” to “it has programs to help us succeed.” The responses indicated that the students were thoughtful about the needs for a safe, learning environment and the desire to get an education. In this regard, students also stated: “its fun,” “there isn’t drugs like at other schools” and “it is nicer than other schools I’ve been to.” Clearly, the students wanted their school to be both academic and sensitive to their needs; they liked that the school was close to their home and provided an active learning environment. Consistently, students indicated that their schools were special because they help the youth achieve their goals or dreams.

The students in 2009 also are able to clearly articulate their goals and dreams. Most wanted to get good grades, pass state education tests and graduate high school. Many also indicated that they planned to graduate from college and make more friends. Many wanted to have good jobs (be a business person, a lawyer, a nurse, a police officer, a musician for example). Some indicated that they wanted to support their families, have a “house” and a “nice life”. One student wanted to travel the world, another wanted to be “like dad.” A student wanted to work at a community center as a teenager while another student wanted to race BMX bikes. Thus, the youth were able to articulate goals and their dreams for a good future.

Discussion and Conclusions

Preliminary results comparing the data collected in 2009 with years 2007 and 2008 showed that the majority of students in PK-8 SD that youth in the district schools indicated that they were doing well in school and that their schools followed resilient practices. Providing a resilience culture within a school is not an easy enterprise; creating it within an entire district is difficult when different school principals want to maintain their older methods of school management. School personnel (principals and teachers) might be troubled that they have to add one more thing to the list of duties they are to perform. The resilient program that was studied here did not aim to add a new duty to a teacher’s assignments; rather it sought to integrate a culture within the work that teachers perform. Teachers were trained how to inspire youth within their classrooms, encouraged to connect with youth and make sure that each youth is not without a caring adult. When particular schools are reviewed in this study, the schools that embraced the resilient programmatic features and coordinated a developing culture of resilience within the school showed strong measures of success for the large majority of their students. Some schools, for example, created a listing of each student in the school and if a staff member or teacher had a

caring relationship with the youth they would list their name; the idea was not to find out which students had the most connections but to find the youth without one. If a youth was in need of a mentor then the school would attempt to pair a teacher with the youth. Not every adult can form a caring relationship with every child. That is not the goal; the goal is match appropriate adults with each child.

The benefits of the resilience program were seen with the first couple of years in the later years of the study. The most significant benefits of the program were manifested in the lower grades. Fifth and 6th grade students were consistently happy about their schools, engaged in their studies and, overall, felt confident in their abilities to be successful in their lives. Students in the eighth grade did not seem to be fairing as well as their younger peers. These youth have more friends and relations in gangs and may be struggling more academically. Schools may need to pay attention to students as they mature into higher grades. Eighth grade students expressed less optimism and attitudes of resilience than their younger selves and peers. This might have been due to the timing of the survey, we administered the survey in May and eighth graders may have been worried about their transition out of K-8 school into high school. Similar to the findings of Loukas & Murphy (2007), youth in 7th and 8th grades are not necessarily protected from school strains compared to their younger peers.

Understanding youth resilience for these older students is complicated; 7th and 8th youth may also have been more aware of their grades, academic and social expectations to succeed and felt some strain. The youth resided in poor neighborhoods, for the most part, and a good number indicated that they have friends or family members who were involved in gang activity. While schools can be a refuge for youth in the lower grades, eighth grade could be a time when youth begin to make their own decisions, and begin to understand that negative community influences can affect their health and well-being as well as their academic success. To ensure that students who may be in gangs, who have family in gangs or who have friends in gangs are given additional pro-social attention and guidance, schools have to adapt to youth as they progress up the grade levels. Identifying youth who are “in trouble” can be difficult if youth become worried that they will be arrested or prosecuted because of their anti-social ties or behaviors. It is important to understand that the small percentages of youth who do not believe that they have hope are also those who do not exhibit strong pro-social bonds with their teachers or school. In this study, almost all of the youth indicated strong support and caring relationships with their parents, but not all youth have similar experiences in school. As some youth age and enter into the 7th and 8th grades, they faced additional strains and were more prone to turn away from schools and have more difficulties with their peers, teachers, coursework and ability to become resilient.

All youth in the school district were able to articulate their goals and dreams. As youth were promoted to higher grades, the youth continued to dream about home, family, career, school, sports, and having a good life. The non-profit agency’s resilience training is based on the belief that youth need to be successful in many areas of one’s life (home and family, community and service, school and career, hobbies and recreation). To be a well-rounded person requires youth to think clearly, dream big and find strong mentors and adults who can help them find the stepping stones towards a successful life course.

The District Superintendent, when provided with school by school findings was not surprised to see that the schools that integrated the training within various school activities and embraced the resilient model had higher levels of youth self-reporting high grades, strong support for their schools, low levels of deviance and less problems overall. In these schools, the atmosphere of respect and care was evident upon stepping into onto school grounds. These schools had bright colors, clean campuses, and happy children walking the halls and supportive posters on walls. In schools that did not fully implement the resilience model, the youth survey results were not consistent as youth promoted up in grades and youth indicated more deviant behaviors. In the schools with less resilient model implementation, school principals were not as committed to the resilient culture. Teachers in a classroom matter, but the head of the school has to be committed to a culture of resilience. The resilience model that was evaluated in this study had programmatic features that were intended to be a manifestation of a developing culture of hope, optimism and success. Persons can begin with skeptical believe in resilience but it is worth trying. Resilient school cultures can make educating our youth easier; less focus will be devoted to disciplining youth and focusing on educating students.

One limitation of this research is that school parents, administrators and teachers were not evaluated as they attempted to use or implement elements of the program. Training participants did complete a post-training evaluation and gave the training high praise; this is due perhaps to the supportive and encouraging atmosphere of the training. Even participants that were initially skeptical about youth resilience practices said that they learned something new and that the training was useful. Future research will need to assess teacher, staff and administrators over time to determine if they are reporting the same attitudes and impact of the program as their students.

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