



INCREASE STUDENT RESILIENCE

Research-based strategies to increase student resilience
and emotional well-being.

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2018

Cultivating Dandelions

Schools are encouraged to implement more comprehensive approaches to improve school climate that incorporate Trauma Informed Care principles, combined with positive psychology.

The objective is to help young people gain greater dandelion-like qualities—the ability to grow and bloom anywhere. There are so many challenges that schools do not have the ability to control when their students are in their homes and communities. What is in their control is ensuring that when students are in school, they feel safe, welcome, and supported. Therefore, it is imperative to improve school climate and increase positive staff-student and student-student connections.

Dandelion-like qualities are the essence of resilience. The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University provides excellent insight on increasing youth resilience. They say:

Research has identified a common set of factors that predispose children to positive outcomes in the face of significant adversity. Individuals who demonstrate resilience in response to one form of adversity may not necessarily do so in response to another. Yet when these positive influences are operating effectively, they “stack the scale” with positive weight and optimize resilience across multiple contexts. These counterbalancing factors include:

1. *facilitating supportive adult-child relationships;*
2. *building a sense of self-efficacy and perceived control;*
3. *providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities; and*
4. *mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions.*¹

Increase Positive Staff-Student Connections

It is essential to ensure that every student has one or more staff members who are committed to maintaining a close connection—being the person who really cares. For students who are identified as being at a higher risk, several staff members should be assigned to be mentors for these students. Schools are advised to use a relationship mapping approach to ensure every student has a staff member assigned to watch out for his or her well-being.²

Increasing positive acknowledgement of students is also important. The ideal is that students regularly receive 5 positive comments to every 1 negative comment or correction. This is especially important for students who are at higher risk. This requires constant focus on positive acknowledgement.

The 2X10 approach is also recommended: spend 2 minutes per day for 10 days in a row talking with an at-risk student about anything she or he wants to talk about.³ The strategy builds a rapport and relationship between teacher and student, and lets the child see that you genuinely care about him or her as a person.

Focused staff attention on increasing positive acknowledgement and connections, especially of those students with greater challenges, will have magical results in improving emotional well-being and resilience of students.

Reduce Hurtful Student-Student Behavior

Bullying and other hurtful behavior is a form of trauma. Schools must implement new approaches to address student hurtful behavior—because the evidence is clear that the current approaches are not having any positive impact.

Schools are advised to ground their approach in trauma informed care, involve students as leaders in the effort, seek to increase students' relationship skills, and ensure that staff responses to hurtful behavior that is witnessed or reported are effective and restorative.⁴

Positive Thinking

Positive thinking is grounded in research insight into positive psychology.⁵ Ask students to respond to statements such as these:

- Something that happened that I am thankful for and why I am thankful.
- Something I did that I am proud of.
- A goal of mine and one action I took to accomplish this goal.
- How I reached out to be kind to someone today.
- Who I connected with today in a positive way and how this made me feel.

- A challenge I faced and how I successfully thought things through.
- How I used a personal strength of mine.

Mindfulness and Self-Regulation

There are many programs that provide excellent guidance on establishing mindfulness practices.⁶ One very simple practice is to simply have students practice mindfulness for several minutes upon coming into class after a transition. A minute of silence for self-calming. Then at any time the students appear to be getting “rambunctious,” a return to just a minute of silence.

All school staff and students should be trained in self-regulation or de-escalation strategies. However, every student likely has different ways that are best for him or her to self-regulate. Have the students determine what the best ways are for them to self-regulate when getting triggered.

When a student starts to trigger or escalate, the teacher can say to this student, “It seems you are getting a bit stressed. What is something you can do to self-regulate?” It is especially important to positively acknowledge the student’s success in self-regulation.

Character Strengths

The VIA Institute on Character has identified 24-character strengths: creativity, curiosity, judgment, love of learning, perspective and wisdom, bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-control, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality.⁷ Research has shown that when people intentionally act to use a known strength, this increases their happiness.

Schools are encouraged to have students complete the VIA character strengths survey. Teachers can help students recognize and celebrate their strengths. When discussing strategies to respond to any hurtful situations or other challenges, students could be asked how they could use different strengths in this situation.

Whenever a teacher is discussing any issue of concern with a student asking that student what his or her strengths are and how he or she might use their personal strengths to find a resolution for this problem situation is advisable.

Problem Solving

Students who know how to engage in problem solving, especially in relation to interpersonal challenges, are more resilient.⁸ The Embrace Civility Think Things Through approach is this:

- What is the situation?
- What do I want to accomplish?
- What strategies could I use?
- Is each in accord with my values and strengths?
- For each, what might happen?

- What is my best choice?
- If that does not work, what else could I do?

In the context of responding to any situation where a student has engaged in misbehavior, engaging that student in Collaborative Problem Solving to decide how to prevent similar challenges in the future and to remedy any harm that was caused is advised.⁹

Social Emotional Growth Mindset

Encouraging a social emotional growth mindset is important for all students, especially those who are being treated badly. Students who have a growth mindset are also less likely to engage in retaliation in response to being treated badly, because they know it is possible for the student who was hurtful to change.

Dweck introduced the concept of Fixed Mindset and Growth Mindset to describe the underlying beliefs people have about learning and intelligence.¹⁰ Students' implicit views of where their ability comes from and whether such abilities are fixed or can grow impacts their learning activities, especially their reaction to failure.

Most of the research and attention associated with Growth Mindset has been directed towards improved academic performance. However, this theory also has significant relevance in the area of social emotional learning, including how students engage in personal relationships with each other and respond when conflict or aggression occurs. In this book, the term Social Emotional Growth Mindset will be used to emphasize the important of expanding the original concept to matters beyond academic performance and intelligence.

Students who have a Growth Mindset believe that they and others can acquire any desired ability if they engage in the effort or study to do so. Students with a Social Emotional Growth Mindset know that they can gain effective skills to maintain positive personal relationships.

Kindness

Encouraging acts of kindness is critically important, especially for any student who is having challenges in fitting in. Encouraging that student to reach out to be kind to someone at least 3 times a day and to record what he or she has done to report back to their teacher/supporter can, based on the research, result in an improvement in this student's level of peer acceptance.

The Random Acts of Kindness Foundation web site has many resources to support kindness activities in schools.¹¹ Beyond Differences encourages programs to reduce student social isolation.¹² GLSEN's No Name Calling Week promotes kindness.¹³

Student Social Emotional Skills

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning has identified five interrelated sets of social emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.¹⁴

Schools must help students gain greater effectiveness in social relationship skills related to hurtful situations, including how to respond if they witness hurtful behavior, have been treated badly, or have been hurtful.¹⁵

Cultural Competence

Increasing the cultural competence of students and staff is necessary to ensure that all students feel welcomed and respected in school.

The National Education Association's Diversity Toolkit focuses on five basic cultural competence skill areas: valuing diversity, being culturally self-aware, understanding the dynamics of difference, knowledge of students' culture, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge and adapting to diversity.¹⁶ Teaching Tolerance has excellent instructional resources.¹⁷

Authentic Student Voice and Leadership

Increasing authentic student voice is essential to the objective of helping all students feel that they are part of the solution in forming a positive school culture. Increased student voice also provides a more effective way for schools to engage in needs assessment and identify concerns that must be addressed.¹⁸

Schools are encouraged to engage a diverse group of kind, compassionate, and inclusive students in leadership roles to promote positive relations and kindness.¹⁹

Effective Investigation and Intervention

It is absolutely imperative to improve the manner in which school leaders respond to reports of hurtful or distressful situation and any other concerns regarding the well-being of students or when a student has engaged in misbehavior.

This area is fraught with challenges for school leaders associated with conflicting directives and insufficient attention to the establishment of effective intervention approaches that avoid exclusionary disciplinary response and, at the same time, resolve the hurtful or challenging situation or address inappropriate behavior.

It is recommended that schools proceed in a manner that:

- Integrates the insight of Multiple Tier System of Supports to ensure that the concerns of students with challenges, have experienced trauma, or are experiencing toxic stress are identified and effectively addressed in an ongoing manner.
- Uses a Restorative Practices approach that requires students who have been hurtful or have engaged in misbehavior to accept personal responsibility and remedy the harm to any individual harmed and the school community.
- Engages students whose behavior was inappropriate in Collaborative Problem Solving so that these students are fully involved in the process of determining how to remedy the harm and prevent further concerns.
- Makes any necessary corrections to the school climate to increase inclusion.
- Ensures ongoing monitoring until it has been established that things have gotten better.

About the Author

Nancy Willard has a M.S. in Special Education from the University of Oregon and a J.D. from Willamette University College of Law. She entered the field of bullying prevention by writing the first book ever published on cyberbullying, *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Cruelty, Threats, and Distress* (2007, Research Press). She is also author of *Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens, Helping Young People Use the Internet Safely and Responsibly* (2007, Jossey Bass). *Cyber Savvy: Embracing Digital Safety and Civility* (2011, Corwin Press).

She is the author of a new book for school leaders and mental health providers, *Engage Students to Embrace Civility*. This book is available on Amazon.

1 <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilience/>.

2 <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/links/relationship-mapping>.

3 Watson, A. (2014) The 2x10 strategy: a miraculous solution for behavior issues? The Cornerstone for Teachers. <https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/the-2x10-strategy-a-miraculous-solution-for-behavior-issues/>.

4 Nancy Willard's book, *Engage Students to Embrace Civility*, provides insight.

5 <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu>.

6 <https://Mindfulnessinschools.org/>; <https://www.mindfulschools.org/>; <https://www.mindfulschools.org/>.

7 <https://www.viacharacter.org/>.

8 <http://www.icanproblemsolve.info/>.

9 <http://www.thinkkids.org/> and <https://www.livesinthebalance.org/>.

¹⁰ Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York: Random House.

11 <https://www.randomactsofkindness.org/>

12 <https://www.beyondifferences.org/>.

13 <https://www.glsen.org/no-name-calling-week>.

14 <https://casel.org/>.

15 Embrace Civility student leadership program, Empowered to Embrace Civility, focuses specifically on increasing these skills.

16 <http://www.nea.org/tools/diversity-toolkit.html>

17 <https://www.tolerance.org/>.

18 <https://soundout.org/>; <https://www.wested.org/resources/speak-out-listen-up-tools-for-using-student-perspectives-and-local-data-for-school-improvement/>; <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/16/08/giving-students-voice>; <https://www.stuvoice.org/>.

19 Embrace Civility in the Digital Age's student leadership program, Embrace Civility, focuses specifically on engaging students as leaders.