

RESILIENCE-BUILDING SCHOOLS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

**Developing the Social, Emotional, and
Motivational Foundations of Academic Success**

**By
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*To Jonathon, for your unwavering love and support—a consistent
source of my own resilience,
To Mom and Dad, for believing in me and showing me the value of persistence,
To Mark, Deborah, and Maxine, for your invaluable encouragement and
assistance at various stages of this book's development,
and of course . . .
To the students and staff at "Resilience-Building High School," for sharing your
inspiring stories and giving life to this book.*

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Foreword

Resilience Building Schools for At-Risk Youth is a timely resource that will be immediately used and is critically important within growing efforts to build on the access advantage that schools afford in implementing a full array of effective, comprehensive health and mental health promotion programs and services. This includes national movements focusing on School Mental Health, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, School-Based Health Centers, Student Assistance, and others. A key theme in the work of all of these initiatives is that implementing the science base that demonstrates what actually improves student outcomes is very hard work. That is, implementing formalized evidence-based practices (EBPs) is highly technological and challenging, and many schools will not have the commitment, staff, resources, or infrastructure to systematically implement these EBPs in multitiered frameworks focusing on population health and prevention (Tier 1), early identification and intervention (Tier 2), and intervention (Tier 3). While acknowledging the overburdened nature of schools and the challenges with transportability of science into real-world school contexts, it remains fundamental to schools' missions to address students' broad social, emotional, and motivational foundations of academic success to reduce barriers to learning.

The resilience-based approach provides a framework and practical approach for school leaders and educators to implement strategies that are cost effective and simple. While the work is very demanding, it is necessary for schools to support all students, especially those at risk, to succeed. *All schools* can and should be embracing the resilience framework to promote positive student adjustment and outcomes as an achievable approach that will have powerful effects on school climate, student behavior, and student achievement. This is supported by the fact that student connectedness to school is such a potent resilience factor contributing to success. And here is the immense contribution of this short book. There is no other volume that so appropriately reviews relevant research literature, presents clear theoretical background, and lays out practical strategies for schools to support resilience enhancement for students. Specifically, *Resilience-Building Schools for At-Risk Youth* integrates science across education, psychology, and public health disciplines, and uses recent advances in practice to advocate for and clearly describe strengths-based approaches to supporting youth. Decades of developmental research are condensed into user-friendly take-home messages for understanding common risk and protective factors that many children face. This is further presented in connection to the ability of schools to impact children and, more importantly, to have great influence on students' health and well-being through reducing or preventing risk and promoting healthy outcomes. This work has distilled the complexity of a wide range of relevant research into a framework that provides a practical roadmap and strategies for schools to achieve improved academic success for all students.

In reviewing specific contributions of the book, the theoretical rationale underlying resilience theory and its application to schools sets the foundation for understanding the importance and relevance of implementing a resilience-based approach for schools. The R-SEA model, as in the acronym, provides schools a step-by-step guidance for reducing risk (R), enhancing social support (S), building emotional support (E), and strengthening academic competence (A). Full chapters are devoted to each of these topics, and strategies are reasonable and actionable for any school. The four

protective components of this model are discussed in relation to their profound influence on school climate, which we know is associated with a number of positive student outcomes valued by schools. This framework will be useful in supporting schools in their efforts to increase student school engagement, attendance, academic self-efficacy, and achievement, as well as reducing problem behaviors and teacher burnout, which are all important for improving the overall quality of school life. Concepts are brought to life in the Portrait of a Resilience-Building School, and appendices provide needed details for a school to move from limited emphasis on resilience to full-fledged adoption of this approach. This latter part of the work is important for illustrating just how this resilience-based framework can be used in the real world by schools. The framework is shown in action and through the voices of students who present the school-based factors that were most influential in their own academic achievement and well-being when protective strategies were implemented to reduce risk exposure and build protective factors within a school.

In addition to being an invaluable resource to schools and the above-mentioned fields, the book will also spur reenergized research on resilience-building schools and serve as an important voice in policy agendas to improve education and community services for children and youth. Dr. Mulloy should be commended, and we extend to her our most heartfelt congratulations.

—Mark Weist and Melissa George
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Introduction

THE ISSUE: HOW CAN SCHOOLS BEST SUPPORT AT-RISK STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT?

How can schools that serve at-risk students build the social, emotional, and motivational foundations of academic success? That is the fundamental question that will be answered by this book.

Many schools that serve at-risk student populations struggle with the question of how best to raise their students' achievement levels. Often, these schools are under pressure to boost students' standardized test scores. As a result, they, understandably, devote much of their attention and resources to increasing students' academic preparedness in key testing areas. However, in this single-minded effort to help students achieve at higher levels, schools can neglect to address the broad range of social, emotional, and motivational factors that provide the essential foundation for improved academic achievement.

A consensus body of research has emerged, which reveals that schools' attention to students' overall developmental needs (including social and emotional as well as academic needs) is a crucial predictor of academic success—especially in schools that serve high-risk student populations. Yet, in schools that are already overburdened with testing demands and overwhelmed by the needs of students, it can be difficult to develop a plan to integrate these research conclusions in a meaningful way. In particular, school administrators might wonder how—in addition to all of the other demands placed on them—schools can possibly have the resources to devote toward building the social, emotional, and motivational foundations of academic success.

THE RESILIENCE-BUILDING SCHOOL APPROACH

The goal of this book is to convince overburdened school leaders and educators of the value of shifting toward a resilience-based approach, which cultivates the broad social, emotional, and motivational foundations of academic success in simple and low-cost ways. The book will demonstrate how this approach dovetails with research conclusions from the fields of education, psychology, and public health regarding the conditions that effectively bring about individuals' achievement, well-being, and positive development. It will also detail the common-sense simplicity (and affordability!) of the resilience-building approach and show how effective such an approach can be in helping at-risk students succeed.

After all, inherent in the definition of "resilience" is that a person has been exposed to adversity and has survived and even thrived despite that exposure. Resilience theory applied to schools directly addresses the risk factors present in many students' lives and offers practical strategies to help students develop the social, emotional, and academic competencies that lead to success. In essence, then, a resilience-building school is one that helps students achieve academic success and well-being despite adversity.

RATIONALE AND ROAD MAP FOR RESILIENCE-BUILDING SCHOOLS

This book empowers school leaders and educators with both the theoretical understanding and practical guidelines to positively impact at-risk students' school success. By

reducing students' exposure to risk while implementing a range of social, emotional, and academic supports, schools help students overcome adversity and become motivated to achieve at higher levels than ever before. Moreover, when schools embrace the simple tenets of resilience-building, they become happier climates in which to learn and work—an outcome that benefits all members of the school community.

GENESIS OF THIS BOOK

This book emerges out of two years of case study research at an inner-city public charter high school that was tailored toward serving “the most at-risk” of at-risk students and by all objective measures (graduation rates, college acceptance rates) has been extremely successful in doing so (Mulloy, 2009, 2011). The engaging voices of its students will be woven throughout the text to illustrate the school-based resilience approach and its effect on students. This inclusion of at-risk students' voices, as they reflect on the school elements most crucial to their academic and behavioral transformations, represents a critical addition to the texts on school-based resilience. Chapter 8, in particular, showcases the story of this real-life school, in order to show how a resilience-based approach can be practically integrated into the day-to-day workings of any typical school.

This book is also informed by my two years of postdoctoral experience with the University of Maryland's National Center for School Mental Health. During this time, I worked both as a researcher on school mental health issues and as a K-8 school mental health counselor in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Baltimore City. In my counseling work at a school that serves many at-risk students, I learned that individual therapy and small-group interventions can be limited in their effectiveness. To positively impact as many students as possible, it was necessary to make changes at the level of the overall school climate.

Galvanized by educational and psychological research showing that school climate changes could bolster students' academic achievement and overall well-being, a group of committed change agents (including the student support team chairperson, school social worker, counseling intern, and myself) met regularly with the approval of the school principal to discuss and plan how to implement positive school changes. These changes—at their heart—revolved around developing more positive relationships among all members of the school community. These organically developed school climate improvement efforts—and the lessons gained through implementing them—are interwoven throughout the practical implementation strategies presented in Chapters 4 through 7.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Part 1 of this book builds a theoretical rationale for implementing a resilience-based approach in schools by describing the origins of resilience theory and its relevance to school environments.

- Chapter 1 outlines the basic tenets of resilience theory, shows how it aligns with the strengths-based research that permeates the social science and public health fields, and presents its relevance to school settings that serve at-risk student populations.
- Chapter 2 expounds on *resilience-building* as a dynamic and interactive process, and explains how schools can implement a variety of social, emotional,

and academic supports to buffer the impact of risk and positively impact students' achievement and well-being.

Part 2 provides a practical road map for achieving significant and lasting academic success among at-risk students. It introduces the *R-SEA Resilience-Building Framework for Schools* (Mulloy, 2009, 2011) and details the role that each section of the framework plays in creating the school-wide conditions to support students' improved academic and developmental outcomes.

- Chapter 3 presents an overview of the R-SEA Resilience-Building Framework for Schools and explores its origins in both research and practice.
- Chapters 4 through 7 are organized around the four developmentally based sections of the R-SEA framework:
 - Chapter 4: *Reduce Risk*: Create a safe and structured environment that reduces students' exposure to in-school and out-of-school risk factors.
 - Chapter 5: *Enhance Social Supports*: Connect students within a caring and supportive network of relationships.
 - Chapter 6: *Enhance Emotional Supports*: Attend to students' social-emotional skills development and address any mental health/behavioral needs.
 - Chapter 7: *Enhance Academic Supports*: Implement high expectations plus a variety of supports to increase students' motivation, self-efficacy, and goal-setting capabilities.

Each chapter outlines the research that connects these four resilience-building steps with students' improved achievement and presents simple and adaptable implementation strategies to build schools' capacities in these four key areas.

- Finally, Chapter 8 presents the experience of a real-life resilience-building high school, in order to show how one school effectively wove supports throughout these four categories to reduce the impact of risk and to improve students' achievement and well-being.

References

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About the Author

Maura Mulloy-Anderson is currently living and working in Ethiopia as an independent researcher, counselor, and mindfulness meditation instructor. She received her B.A. from Yale University and her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from The Catholic University of America. She then completed a two-year postdoctoral fellowship with the University of Maryland's Center for School Mental Health, where she divided her time between conducting research and providing mental health counseling for students in a Baltimore City elementary-middle public school. Her research interests include school-based resilience processes, the social and emotional foundations of academic success, positive psychology and strengths-based education, and the use of mindfulness meditation in a therapeutic context. She is a member of the American Educational Research Association and the American Psychological Association, and earned a dissertation research award from the American Psychological Association's Educational Psychology division in 2007 for her dissertation entitled: *Still I Rise: How an Urban Public Charter High School Fosters Students' Resilient Development in Academic, Social, and Emotional Dimensions*.