

BUILDING ACADEMIC RESILIENCY

OUTSIDE THE BOX, INSIDE THE SCHOOL

Building Academic Resiliency

What We are Not Doing in Public Schools to Increase High School Graduation Rates

Most people involved in education agree that there is an issue with unacceptably low high school graduation rates in U.S. public schools. When studies show that we are graduating just over half of Latino and black students nationally, "there has to be a willingness... to acknowledge this huge sense of crisis, the devastating impact this has on children's lives and on the entire community." (Sec. Arnie Duncan).

Like any crisis involving multiple constituencies, there is great stakeholder debate on why students are dropping out and how to increase graduation rates. While we debate the merits, our public schools, which educate over 90% of American students, are in the position to lose our next generation of students.

Looking at the research and common sense, one obvious immediate measure is to focus attention and resources to collaboratively strengthen the teacher-student relationship in order to help the student develop essential resiliency skills; the inner strength he'll need to stay in school when half of his peers are dropping out.

This research on resiliency demonstrates:

- Critical resiliency skills include academic confidence, connectedness to educators, stress management skills, goal setting skills, intrinsic motivation and a balanced sense of well being.
- There is a direct link between resiliency and a student's ability to academically perform and graduate. (Toldson 2008, Stewart 2007)
- Resiliency skills have been identified as the key differentiator between at-risk students

who persevere and succeed as compared to similarly situated students who struggle and often drop out.

- Resilient students have a meaningful relationship with educators, set and achieve academic goals, and stay motivated despite external factors. (Solberg 1998).
- Resiliency skills are learned skills that can be taught. (Bernard 2006)
- Next to parents themselves, K-12 educators specifically have the greatest ability to teach resiliency.

As front line soldiers, teachers are hardly in the position to dictate curricular efforts which traditionally are purview of the school district and state and federal education policy. Accordingly, they teach what is required to be taught under No Child Left Behind: English, math, science and social studies. Thus a huge paradox: teachers spend more time on core cognitive curriculum, yet, depending on the region, between 1/3 and 2/3 of students are not benefiting from this increased focus because they are dropping out.

Instead of just looking for examples that a student is two grades behind in math, we should be looking at why that student is two grade levels behind at math. Is it that child is cognitively challenged, or more likely, is it that their social situation is compromised? Or is it that they do not see the connection between education and their lives? Or perhaps they are so far behind, they do not have the confidence to succeed? Or maybe it's a combination of all of these reasons. More classroom time, resources and attention needs to be paid to building effective, genu-

ine relationships especially in the transition years between middle and high school.

An Education Week study shows that over 80% of licensed teachers teach because they want to influence students. Yet many of them don't know how to truly reach them or lack the tools they need to help students build resiliency skills. Since my retirement, I have spent a significant amount of time examining these issues, and have found that there are effective tools to build academic resiliency in the classroom through assessment, curriculum and professional development. I've joined the board of ScholarCentric to further their mission of providing resiliency education for urban city schools and have witnessed with my own eyes the impact it has had on students.

Teachers cannot influence students until we give them the tools and time to focus on building resilient, engaged students. Until we do, students are going to drop out in mass numbers...regardless of what educational reforms are imposed.



Reg Weaver,
Past President, National Education Association
Ivory Toldson, Howard University