



## Resilience and Health Realization: An Administrator's Perspective



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District 742 in St. Cloud, Minnesota, has been receiving ongoing training and technical assistance from the Safe and Drug Free Schools Project at CAREI since 1994. The goal originally was to assess Drug Free Schools programming. Today all buildings are implementing the official Student Assistance process with staff teams at every building. The team is the first point of referral for all students for any need or service. Resilience/health realization has been adopted as the operational philosophy for all teams. Student capacity for well-being is emphasized and labeling discouraged. The District has recently developed its new strategic plan. The first bold initiative calls for a district paradigm shift from focusing on youth the innate strengths and capacity of students for health and well-being. Two pilot training programs are underway with North Junior High and the Early Childhood Program. Community agencies and organizations are also involved.

Those of us that have been around for a long time, have seen initiatives come and go and we often wonder how they relate to the big picture of educational improvement. Resilience/health realization definitely does. We are using it to build on past efforts to better meet student needs.

Approximately eight years ago, District 742 Community Schools held a two day workshop for over 400 staff members. The purpose was to begin to lay the groundwork and establish a vision for how we program for children with severe and profound disabilities. Up to that time, these children were educated in segregated settings throughout the school district. It was the vision of my friend and close associate, Ron Watkins, and his commitment, assistance, and support that led us to examine our approach to providing services to these young people. It was a big step. There were some staff that said it couldn't happen and that it wouldn't happen.

But it did happen, and today these young people are served in inclusive settings in neighborhood schools with age-appropriate peers. There have been bumps along the way and there will continue to be challenges. But the point I want to make is that our effort not only changed the lives of those children with disabilities, but also the lives of hundreds of other children, kids that we call typical or non-disabled.



I think the change in our approach to working with children with disabilities reflects something even more basic. What do we want our world to be like? Do we want our world to be segregated, our children labeled and taught in separate places? Many of our staff who played a major part in creating this change said "No."

Today we are exploring resilience and health realization as an operational philosophy for student services in our school district and I think in some respects what we are beginning today is similar journey. We have a group of people who are very interested and want to learn more. Thanks to the leadership of Jeanne Slingluff, Student Assistance Coordinator, and the support of Kathy Marshall at the University of Minnesota, and the initiative of Dr. Pat Welter at North Junior High and Marj Hawkins in the Early Childhood Program, we have a group of district people who are taking the first step. I believe this is a journey where even more is at stake than in our earlier initiative.

I have worked in Special Education for 25 years. When Superintendent Bruce Thomas, as part of a district restructuring effort, moved the responsibility for Student Assistance to my office, I had the opportunity to look at Special Education from a different vantage point.

I have to say that my experience in Special Education has been wonderful. Many tremendous things have been accomplished for students with disabilities. I would never diminish those accomplishments. But increasingly over the past few years, I have experienced frustration with a system that is built upon creating a negative picture of students.

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Special Education, Title I, Assurance of Mastery—this plethora of systems are all based on making a case that a child is deficient, needs fixing, and requires our services. I am not sure we are going to be able to change these systems in the short run. All are pretty much ingrained in our society and perhaps need to be there to some degree. But I see increasing numbers of students with special needs coming through the system with labels. This troubles me. The one thing we

learned about the inclusion of children who are labeled severely handicapped is that the labels we create don't adequately predict a child's performance or capacity or even what expectations are most appropriate. That of all things has emerged in my mind as the most significant of outcomes. Kids that we thought had limitations in some areas have far surpassed what we had ever anticipated. It is a kind of mind set. I think our training in resilience/health realization, is the first step to meeting an even bigger challenge.

How does resiliency fit the needs of the school district? When I was assigned the responsibility for the Drug Free Schools Student Assistance Programs, two things struck me as critical. We needed to establish a new system to address student needs and plan interventions. This new system must be less stigmatizing, asset oriented, and less costly while maintaining and reinforcing the joint ownership of the total system. Secondly, we needed to change the way we think about the young people we work with. That is what our new initiative is all about. We are moving ahead.

We have set up some processes and some systems related to Student Assistance at all our buildings. Great things are happening at North Junior High and in our Early Childhood Programs. There are a lot of very positive efforts at our other schools, too. But the truth is that the impact of Student Assistance Teams is uneven across the district. We really have to have effective teams in place so we can start to address how people think about children who might enter the Student Assistance system.

Fortunately, the district has also been going through a long term strategic planning process over the past six to eight months. It is a process that those of us who have been around for a while felt was absolutely necessary. We needed to have some kind of direction about where we wanted to go so as to not be whiplashed back and forth by what was happening on any given day. Many school and community representatives were involved in the process of developing critical success factors. Several major initiatives evolved.

One of the major initiatives has been to implement a resilience-based operational philosophy throughout our schools. In fact, this is initiative number one. We also are talking about youth development, focusing on assets, and most important, shifting the paradigm so that we start thinking about kids differently. We are using the concepts of resiliency and health realization to change the way we view children's capacity. One part of the initiative is very directly related to Student Assistance. We are working to imbed the operational philosophy of resilience/health realization into the Student Assistance Team process. This effort is built on the belief that all students have the capacity for well being and successful outcomes.

I fully anticipate that our current systems change training will lead staff and community to some very different feelings about kids, programs, and themselves. This change effort is not just about the children we work with; it is also about our own resilience. I am very, very excited about this initiative. There is so much at stake here; we are entering a new era.