



THE ROLE OF RESILIENCE IN LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Resilience is a popular concept, particularly in times of crisis such as the years during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, resilience is rarely defined and is often confused with complementary mindsets such as grit, perseverance, and self-efficacy.¹ Additionally, educational leaders have been called on to display resilient leadership with limited tools into how to develop this leadership approach. The following report reviews the empirical literature on resilience to help educational leaders understand the attitude and skill and ultimately impact district culture.

To support their mission of developing school leader capacity and building support for mental health, AASA, The School Superintendent's Association, has partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to prepare a series of reports on the role of resilience for district and school leaders. Hanover will follow this report, the first in a series of resilience for educational leaders, with a toolkit of actionable strategies to build resilient leadership. Synthesizing empirical literature on resilience in education and related industries, this report includes the following sections:

- **Section I: Understanding Resilience** defines resilience, examines the types of resilience and the relationship between resilience and related positive psychology concepts, and discusses factors that contribute to building resilience.
- **Section II: The Role of Resilience in Leadership** examines the literature on resilient leadership and explores the impacts of educational leaders' resilience on teachers, students, and school culture.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Based on our findings, Hanover presents the following practical applications of this research for school and district leaders.



Build on your personal understanding of what resilience is and is not and how to identify resilience in both your personal and professional life. There are many overstated definitions and misuses of resilience that intersect with other concepts such as growth mindset and perseverance. Engage in reflection on areas of your professional life where you may display or need to build resilience based on this new or re-affirmed understanding of the term. Leverage this self-reflection in your work to build resilience among your staff.



Identify potential protective factors in your background, personal community, district community, and professional networks that may contribute to your own resilience in different situations. During traumatic times, it is important to have protective factors that support your own resilience. Evaluate areas of your personal and professional life where you may have gaps in protective factors and consider ways to fill these gaps. Leaders can prepare for future challenges as well as position their district to better absorb hardship by identifying and building a network of protective factors.



Model resilience in interactions with community members in order to proactively foster resilience among teachers, students, and families. Leaders who demonstrate resilience have been shown to foster more positive environments and stronger relationships during stressful periods.

KEY FINDINGS



The literature generally defines resilience as having positive functioning and mental health despite experiences of adversity, trauma, or extreme stress, though definitions vary by author and industry. Most definitions of resilience include both exposure to adversity or trauma and a positive outcome or adaptation, while some definitions also include growth. There are many sub-types of resilience that reflect individuals' experiences with facing and overcoming adversity in different contexts and ways, such as psychological and emotional resilience, academic resilience, physical resilience, and leadership resilience.

- Resilience is distinct from positive psychology terms such as hardiness, self-efficacy, growth mindset, perseverance, and grit. While these concepts may relate to the understanding, development, and expression of resilience, they are unique, separate concepts.



Protective factors, which impact an individual's resilience development and ability to overcome adversity, vary by type and form and can include biological, psychological, and dispositional attributes; social supports; and attributes of social systems (e.g., family, school, friends, and community). Protective factors interact in different ways depending on the situation to build resiliency and protect an individual against adverse experiences.



Leaders who possess resilience overcome challenges and adversity to maintain their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their organization. As such, resilient educational leaders have the ability to overcome the impacts of adversity personally while also handling challenging conditions at work and avoiding disruption to their career. Resilient educational leaders also help their school districts overcome challenges and adverse experiences and work to build the resilience of their organization and employees.



Resilient educational leaders model resilience and have a responsibility to foster it in others, including teachers and students, and the school community. Enabling resilience among teachers is paramount to promoting effective teaching, supporting teacher retention, and contributing to educational success. Resilience can protect students from the negative developmental and psychological impacts of trauma and positively impact students' academic achievement, participation, and self-esteem. Resilient leaders also impact school climate by contributing to positive school environments and building strong relationships with staff and students.

SECTION I: UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCE

The following section defines resilience, examines the types of resilience and the relationship between resilience and related positive psychology concepts, and discusses factors that contribute to building resilience.

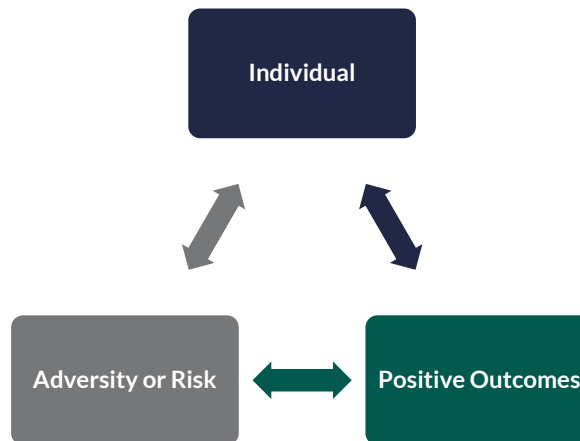
DEFINING RESILIENCE

While resilience has a range of definitions and conceptualizations across the psychology and healthcare literature, researchers generally define resilience as overcoming and experiencing positive functioning and mental health despite experiences of adversity, trauma, or extreme stress.² Definitions of resilience include both exposure to adversity or trauma, and a positive outcome or adaptation.³ Most resilience definitions focus on adaptation, while some also include growth, as following the experience of adversity, individuals may adapt by “bouncing back” to their pre-adversity “normal” state or by developing and growing to a better state.⁴ Schoon (2006), building on seminal literature on resilience by Masten (2001), identifies the following key assumptions in resilience research:⁵

- A positive outcome despite adversity;
- Continued positive or effective functioning in adverse circumstances; and
- Recovery after significant trauma.

However, the experience of adversity and understanding of a positive outcome vary according to an individual’s characteristics, as “what equates to an adverse situation or risk for one individual may be different to another individual...the individual also brings certain individual factors and predispositions both positive and negative that interact with both the adversity and the propensity for a positive outcome.”⁶ In the *Archives of Medicine and Health Sciences*, Vella and Pai (2019) define adversity “as negative life events or circumstances that are quantitatively associated with adjustment issues,” and positive outcomes and adaptation (within the context of resilience) as “an individual retaining their mental health and not succumbing to a mental illness after being challenged by adversity or risk.”⁷ Figure 1.1, on the following page, visualizes resilience as the relationship between the individual, their unique experience of adversity, and their individual positive outcomes following the adversity. In both cases, the individual’s characteristics and context impact how they experience both the adversity and the recovery.

Figure 1.1: The Interaction Between the Individual, Adversity, and Outcomes in Resilience



Source: *Archives of Medicine and Health Sciences*⁸

Some researchers emphasize the experience of adversity in the definition of resilience, positing that one must experience some type of adversity or risk in order to overcome and be resilient.⁹ For example, in her seminal 2001 *American Psychologist* article, "Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development," Masten notes that resilience requires two "judgments:"¹⁰

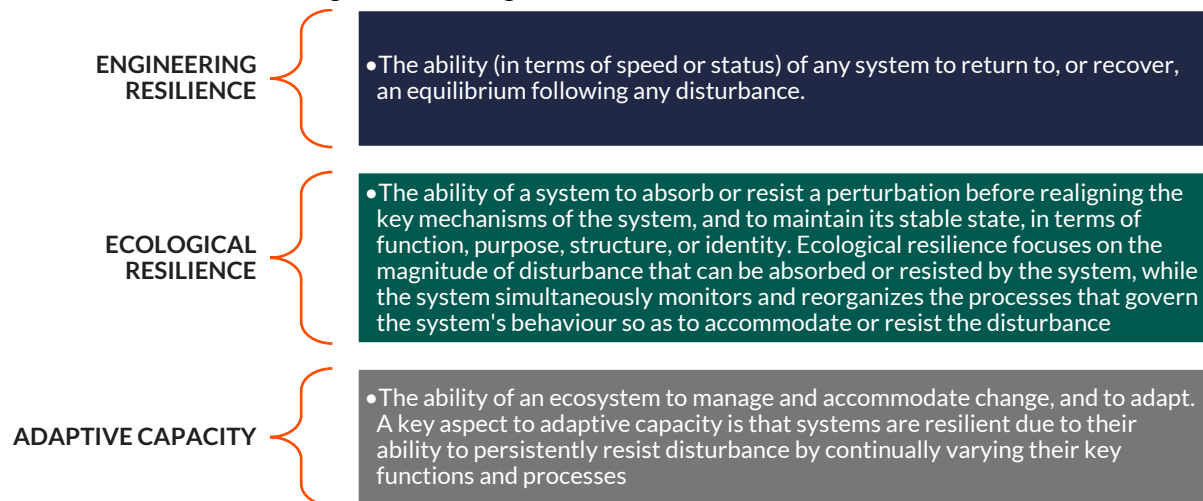
- The first judgment addresses the threat side of the inference, individuals are not considered resilient if there has never been a significant threat to their development; there must be current or past hazards judged to have the potential to derail normative development. In other words, there must be demonstrable risk.
- The second judgment involved in an inference about resilience is the criteria by which the quality of adaptation or developmental outcome is assessed or evaluated as "good" or "OK."

RESILIENCE AS A PROCESS AND A TRAIT

The scholarly literature discusses resilience as a trait or as a process. **Trait resilience** defines resiliency as one's ability to avoid experiencing long-term negative outcomes from trauma, while **process resilience** views reliance as a dynamic process of "how specific psychological characteristics or processes interact with particular negative events as resilience buffers to reduce their impact."¹¹

A proponent of operationalizing resilience as a trait, Maltby et al. (2015) developed an ecological system approach to assessing trait resiliency (Figure 1.2, on the following page). Maltby et al.'s Ecological Framework of Resilience conceptualizes reliance in three forms: engineering resilience, ecological resilience, and adaptive capacity. This broad framework is applicable to individuals, systems, and organizations.¹²

Figure 1.2: Ecological Framework of Resilience



Source: *Youth and Society*¹³









Alternatively, the study of resilience as a process examines how individuals react to hardship and their associated well-being over time. While not all individuals will react to adversity, even similar or the same adversity, in the same manner, researchers theorize common patterns of reaction. Three general patterns that reflect resilience include:¹⁴



TYPES OF RESILIENCE

Resilience is a complex concept that represents the relationship between how an individual experiences adversity and overcomes it. There are multiple types of resilience within this broader concept. Different types of resilience reflect various forms of adversity and the ways in which an individual or group may experience and recover from the adversity.¹⁵ Sample types of resilience, which all relate to how an individual responds to major life stressors, are presented in Figure 1.3. Notably, this list is not exhaustive of all types of resilience but presents those most relevant to the field of education.

Figure 1.3: Sample Types of Resilience

TYPE OF RESILIENCE	DEFINITION
 <p>Psychological/Mental Resilience</p>	An individual's ability to psychologically recover and mentally cope with a mental health disturbance stemming from adversity. ¹⁶
 <p>Emotional Resilience</p>	The ability to "generate positive emotions and recover quickly from negative emotional experiences." Notably, emotional resilience can be a component of psychological resilience. ¹⁷
 <p>Social Resilience</p>	The ability of individuals, organizations, or communities to "tolerate, absorb, cope with, and adjust to environmental and social threats of various kinds." ¹⁸
 <p>Academic/Educational Resilience</p>	A student's ability to maintain high levels of academic performance and motivation despite experiencing adversity within an academic setting that could negatively impact their academic success. ¹⁹
 <p>Physical/Health Resilience</p>	The ability of an individual to "respond to stressors that acutely disrupt normal physiological homeostasis" and adapt and recover. ²⁰
 <p>Leadership Resilience</p>	The ability to help "organizations bounce forward into new realities in the face of adversity and change" ²¹
 <p>Career Resilience</p>	An individual's "resistance to career disruption in a less than optimal environment and the ability to handle poor working conditions while one is aware that these conditions exist." ²²
 <p>Organizational Resilience</p>	The ability of an organization "to create an environment that enhances career resiliency of their employees." ²³

Source: Multiple, cited in figure

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESILIENCE AND SIMILAR POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY CONCEPTS

While concepts such as mindset, grit, and self-efficacy may connect to the understanding, development, and expression of resiliency, they are unique, separate concepts.²⁴ The early study of resilience occurred at a time when deficit-focused psychology models of human behavior were popular and helped turn the field towards more positive approaches and the development of similar concepts such as mindset, self-efficacy, and grit. In her book "Coping and the Challenge of Resilience," Frydenberg argues that resilience and concepts

similar to, and often mistaken for, resilience, all reflect different facets of positive approaches to human behavior. She states:²⁵

“It is the positive approaches to human pursuit that the work of Seligman on positive psychology (2011), Maddi on hardiness (2002), Mayer and Salovey on emotional intelligence (1995), Lazarus (1993) and Hobfoll (1989) on coping, Dweck (2006, 2015) on mindset, and Duckworth and Eskreis-Winkler (2015) on grit, each capture from a different perspective.”

When framed by positive psychology, concepts such as mindset, self-efficacy, and hardiness can also interact to help individuals develop resilience throughout their lifespan.²⁶ Figure 1.4 examines concepts similar to yet unique from resilience.

Figure 1.4: Distinguishing Between Resilience and Related Concepts

CONCEPT	DESCRIPTION IN RELATION TO RESILIENCE
Hardiness	<p>Hardy individuals directly address challenges and are “unshakeable.” Three characteristics of hardiness include:²⁷</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Control: the degree to which one believes that they have a high level of influence over their lives; ▪ Commitment: the tendency or ability to find purpose in one’s life or to attach meaning to one’s efforts; and ▪ Challenge: the “tendency to see difficult circumstances as an opportunity for growth as opposed to nuisances or threats. <p>While hardiness is conceptually similar to resilience, “the primary difference between resilience and hardiness at the measurement level is that hardiness has a very concrete theoretical model both in terms of structure and rationale. Resilience models have not yet arrived at a consensus as to what should be included in the measures and what the specific antecedents are.”²⁸</p>
Self-Efficacy	<p>“The belief that one can perform novel or difficult tasks and attain desired outcomes”²⁹ While definitions of resilience require adversity or significant stressors, individuals can exercise self-efficacy without the occurrence of stressors, such as in planning long-term goals without knowledge of adverse experiences.³⁰</p>
Psychological Capital	<p>“A set of four psychological factors associated with overcoming obstacles that together form a higher-order construct...self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience.”³¹</p>
Growth Mindset	<p>“A growth mindset is the belief that personal characteristics, such as intellectual abilities, can be developed.”³²</p>
Perseverance	<p>“Sustained effort toward long-term goals despite the presence of setbacks and distress.”³³</p>
Grit	<p>“Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress.”³⁴ There is limited evidence for its relationship to resilience.³⁵</p>

Source: Multiple, cited in figure

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO RESILIENCE

Researchers often discuss resilience in terms of the resources that facilitate an individual's ability to overcome adversity. Indeed, in a 2008 article in the *British Journal of Social Work*, Ungar uses the following definition of resilience that incorporates a foundation of these factors:³⁶

"In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided and experienced in culturally meaningful ways."

Resilience builds on a foundation of protective factors, or "resources that an individual can draw on to overcome adversity."³⁷ Protective factors vary by type and form, such as biological, psychological, and dispositional attributes; social support; and other attributes of social systems (family, school, friends, and community), but interact in different ways to build resiliency and protect an individual against adverse experiences.³⁸ Accordingly, Herman et al. (2011) posit that an individual's resilience could vary by context and time, and may not be equally present or strong at all times or across different life domains.³⁹ Figure 1.5 below describes protective factors at the individual, social, and community levels. While interventions to improve resilience often target a single level of analysis, protective factors at all three levels interact to contribute to resilience.⁴⁰

Figure 1.5: Protective Factors that Contribute to Resilience

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS	SOCIAL FACTORS	COMMUNITY FACTORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resilience involves the psychological and neurobiological factors that can play a role in maintaining and recovering well-being after traumatic events or setbacks. This level of resilience typically involves investigations of personality and coping styles that mediate the relationship between adversity and well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• These factors concern the social relationships one has and whether an individual can call on and expect support in times of crisis. These can involve family, friends, coworkers, or really anyone in one's social network who could provide social, emotional, and even financial support to the individual.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The discussion of resilience has even moved beyond the realm of individual-focused psychology to include resilience at the community or national level. This type of resilience goes beyond individual capacities and takes into account economic, institutional, ecological, and infrastructure capacities when evaluating which communities are most likely to be resilient in the face of tragedies such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, or even economic downturns.

Source: Harms et al.⁴¹

SECTION II: THE ROLE OF RESILIENCE IN LEADERSHIP

The following section examines the literature on resilient leadership and explores the impacts of resilience for educational leaders on teachers, students, and school culture.

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENT LEADERSHIP

Effectively leading an organization, including educational organizations, requires leaders to nimbly handle numerous challenges in an unpredictable environment.⁴² Sample challenges that leaders across industries experience include:⁴³

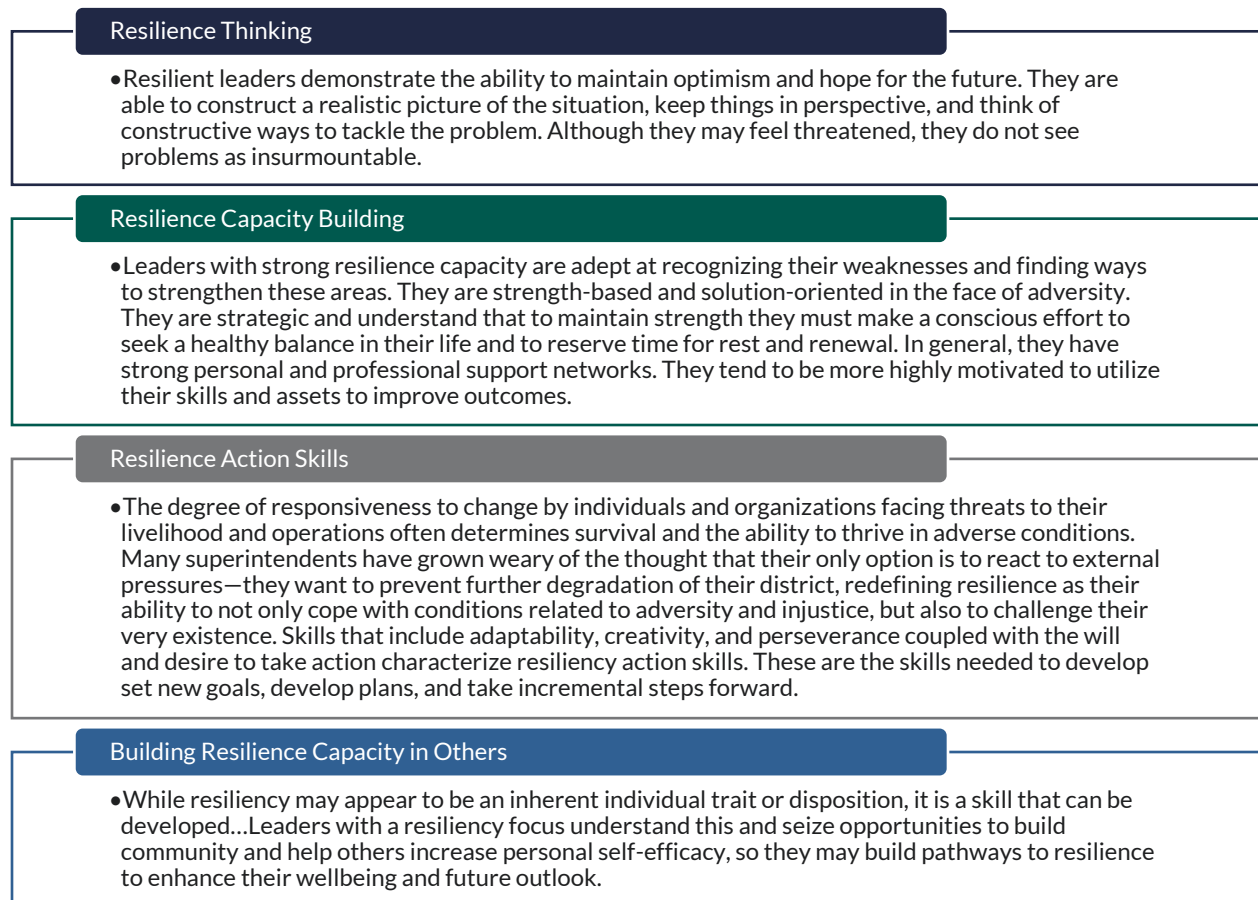
- Managing stakeholders;
- Competition for resources;
- Fluctuations in the economy;
- Changes in regulations;
- Technology and data security; and
- Hiring and retaining skilled and dedicated employees.

However, leaders who possess resilience overcome these challenges and greater adversity to maintain their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their organization. Resilience helps determine why “leaders and organizations not only survive, but also thrive in these situations while others falter or collapse under the stress of change.”⁴⁴ Indeed, resilient educational leaders possess both psychological and career resilience, as they have the ability to bounce back both personally from adversity as well as handle challenging work conditions and avoid disruption to their career.⁴⁵ Resilient educational leaders may also develop resilient leadership and help their school districts overcome challenges and adverse experiences.⁴⁶ Accordingly, resilient leaders not only possess individual resilience, but work to build the resilience of their organization and employees.⁴⁷ In describing the resilience of superintendents, Kirby and Klocko (2014), emphasize:⁴⁸

“Resilient leaders understand the need to provide support systems, build partnerships, and ask for help when encountering conflict. These individuals generally have a strong sense of self-efficacy and are confident in their abilities to persevere and overcome challenges. Resilient leaders have strong coping skills and are more effective in dealing with disruptive events. They are flexible, adaptive, and often possess a can-do attitude when it comes to addressing problems and seeking solutions.”

Additionally, resilient leaders display four key resilience skills that enable them to lead through adversity: thinking resilience, resilience capacity building, resilience action skills, and building resiliency capacity in others. Originally described by Patterson et al. in “Resilient Leadership for Turbulent Times: A Guide to Thriving in the Face of Adversity,” these four skills form a framework (Figure 2.1) for considering resiliency in school leaders.⁴⁹

Figure 2.1: Resilience Leadership Skills Framework



Source: *Journal of Social Sciences Research*⁵⁰

THE INFLUENCE OF RESILIENT EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Resilient leaders impact school climate, as educational leaders have a statistically significant impact on student achievement and play a key role in building school culture and positive school environments.⁵¹ In a 2012 article in the *Journal of Leadership Studies*, Maulding argues that an educational leader’s level of resilience can impact school culture both positively and negatively, as the myriad of skills required by today’s superintendents and principals amidst times of unrest and challenge require a significant degree of resilience, which, if lacking, could negatively impact school culture.⁵² Strong leadership is a critical factor in developing both a school culture of resilience and student resilience to intense stress and challenge.⁵³ Furthermore, one way that resilient leaders impact school climate in part is by prioritizing building relationships to create supportive school climates, as building relationships contributes to the development of resilience. Indeed, “caring and supportive school environments demonstrate a greater resiliency as a whole when faced with turbulent conditions.”⁵⁴

Resilient educational leaders also model resilience and work to build it in others, including teachers and students.⁵⁵ According to Kirby and Klocko (2014), educational “leaders with a resiliency focus understand [that resilience can be developed] and seize opportunities to build community and help others increase personal self-efficacy, so they may build pathways to resilience to enhance their wellbeing and future outlook.”⁵⁶ As part of their role, educational leaders have a responsibility to foster resilience in schools, teachers, and students.⁵⁷

Enabling resilience among teachers is paramount to promoting effective teachers, supporting teacher retention, and contributing to educational success; and building teachers' resilience also supports the resilience development of students and the school community as a whole.⁵⁸ Resilient teachers can overcome extreme stress and challenge without long-term negative impacts to their mental health or ability to fulfill their job, and enabling teachers' psychosocial wellbeing, particularly through challenging times, is critical to their ability to support students.⁵⁹ Resilience is also associated with morale, wellbeing, motivation, job satisfaction, efficacy, and retention among teachers.⁶⁰ Thus, teachers must possess and showcase resilience in order to effectively teach through challenging times, such as through the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶¹

For educational leaders, part of fostering the resilience of those around them includes developing students' resilience to personal and academic hardship, as research shows that students can lean on educational institutions in times of adversity.⁶³ Resilience protects students from experiencing negative developmental or psychological impacts from trauma and toxic stress, and academic resilience in particular is associated with students' academic achievement, participation, motivation, and self-esteem.⁶⁴ Additionally, resilient school cultures can "serve as a 'protective shield' for all students and a beacon of light for youth from troubled homes and impoverished communities."⁶⁵

Educational leaders can further support the resilience and associated positive outcomes for students by developing positive relationships with students.⁶⁶ The presence of supportive, resilient adults within schools is critical to the development of students' resilience, as research indicates that the most important factor for developing resilience in children is having at least one supportive, committed, and stable relationship with a supportive adult, as "these relationships provide the personalized responsiveness, scaffolding, and protection that buffer children from developmental disruption [and...] build key capacities—such as the ability to plan, monitor, and regulate behavior—that enable children to respond adaptively to adversity and thrive."⁶⁷



"Due to the many challenges that teachers face in today's classrooms to facilitate the academic success of all children and to meet federal and state accountability standards, having both the competence and the ability to adjust to meet these challenges are required."

- Taylor (2013)⁶²

ENDNOTES

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- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Figure reproduced verbatim from: Ibid., p. 234.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 244.
- ¹⁰ Bullet points quoted from: Masten, Op. cit., p. 228.
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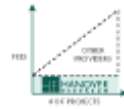
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