

The Reality of School Accountability: Why Resilience Is Relevant

Do you work in an accredited school? Have your students met or exceeded the academic standards of your state? These are common topics today. But those of you who are seasoned educators may recall a time in our profession when end-of-year state assessments did not exist. We didn't talk about state tests or accreditation. If a school had great teams, a good music program, happy kids, and happy parents, it was usually considered a *good* school by members of the community. I know this may sound strange to many of you reading this, but the academic achievement of our most vulnerable students was rarely reported a few decades ago.

In 1989, an education summit held by the National Governors' Association resulted in a national commitment to develop academic standards for each core subject area. These standards were developed to clearly articulate what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. Legislation in the 1990s called Goals 2000 required states to create and assess academic standards in core subject areas. Other than integration, this may have been the most significant legislation targeting education in the last hundred years. The assessment requirement gave birth to the end-of-year testing that became the norm.

In the late 1990s, I was a very young administrator in an affluent middle school. Let me give you just one example of what I mean when I say “affluent.” The most popular orthodontist sent *limousines* to pick up our students for their appointments. Get the picture? The National Blue Ribbon Schools Program recognized our school for excellence. Though we were considered a great school, we were never *really* held accountable for the achievement levels of our minority or low-income students. Other than student advocates, no one ever inquired about the academic success of our students with special needs. State testing and accountability hit schools in my district like a ton of bricks in the late nineties. Academic achievement became an integral part of public discourse. The achievement levels of schools were front-page news in our community. When this began to happen, the last place an educator wanted to be was in a *failing* school.

As fate would have it, I was assigned to a failing school in 1999. Within three years, we were able to turn the school around, and our success gained the positive attention of our state’s department of education. This attention was fueled by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Three colleagues and I formed an organization called Urban Learning and Leadership Center, and our journey of helping other struggling schools began.

In the fall of 2002, Dr. Jo Lynne DeMary, superintendent of public instruction for the Virginia Department of Education, requested that the Urban Learning and Leadership Center provide training for schools listed in Governor Mark Warner’s Partnership for Achieving Successful Schools (PASS) initiative. PASS targeted more than one hundred academically warned schools based on the results of the state’s most recent end-of-year exams. Every year, hundreds of thousands of kids in the Commonwealth of Virginia take state assessments, called SOL tests. And no, I am not

making up the name. We really do call them SOL tests. Among several other possible interpretations that may be going through your mind as you smile right now, SOL stands for Standards of Learning.

Like all other states, Virginia has academic standards for K–12 accreditation. This remains the reality of public schools in America today. At the beginning of the PASS initiative, thirty-four of the targeted PASS schools were specifically designated as *priority schools* due to their low performance on state assessments and were strongly encouraged to attend a conference called the Governor’s Urban Learning and Leadership Institute. In my capacity as a founder of Urban Learning and Leadership Center, I was part of the planning, development, and delivery of content for the conference. Keep in mind that schools encouraged to attend events like this are often labeled in the media as failing schools, comprehensive schools, targeted schools, and so on. Some states bypass the labels and simply give A through F grades to schools. This well-intentioned attempt to hold schools accountable overlooked the reality that labeling a school also labels the kids and adults in it. For this very reason, part of my job involves simply motivating students and staff.

Regardless of the state, failing labels or grades are tough pills to swallow for those who work tirelessly in these schools every day. Don’t get me wrong, the public has a right to know the performance levels of publicly funded schools. But I remember how it felt to work in a school with a negative label. The stress of such labels can negatively impact the morale of students and staff if not countered with a firm commitment to achieve excellence. I can clearly remember students saying things like, “We go to a failing school. That means we’re stupid.”

As you might imagine, educators who attended the Governor’s Institute were not exactly happy to be there. Some in attendance even joked that Governor Warner gave teachers a GIFT: Governor’s Institute for Failing Teachers. I can vividly remember a comment made by a somewhat disgruntled participant at one of our training sessions. After expressing resentment that his school was “labeled” a failing school, he then commented, “These children can’t be successful because the deck is stacked against them.” As long as I live, I will never forget these words, mainly because I’ve heard versions of this same statement across the United States in the years since I first heard them. I cannot discount the fact that circumstances can make academic success more difficult. The good news is that although the deck is, in fact, stacked against millions of America’s children, success is still achievable. This is why resilience is relevant in America’s schools.

In a groundbreaking study of the resilience phenomenon, Emmy E. Werner and Ruth S. Smith traced the lives of a cohort of children from birth into adulthood.¹ Most of the parents of children who participated in the study had limited education. Participating children endured a variety of other circumstances that placed them at risk of social failure. Through case studies and the statistical analysis of multiple variables, Werner and Smith found that many of the children were able to overcome life’s challenges and become caring, productive adults.

As early investigators of resilience, the research of Werner and Smith was foundational and helped to clarify key differences between children who successfully navigate adverse circumstances and those who do not. More importantly for the purposes of our discussion, their research clearly established the fact that children can be successful regardless of adverse circumstances. In keeping with the card metaphor mentioned

previously, the problem is not that the deck is stacked against children. In many cases, the problem is that the adults who work with them place too much emphasis on the wrong cards in the deck. In other words, they focus too much of their attention on a child's deficits rather than their assets. The research of Drs. Steve and Sybil Wolin asserts that those who foster resilience in children are able to recognize a child's strengths despite the presence of obvious challenges.²

Listen, I have been there. I know what it's like to feel overwhelmed by circumstances and challenges beyond our control that impact children in our schools each day. I also know that it is easy to become so consumed by these circumstances and challenges that you become blind to the possibility that kids can overcome obstacles. An understanding of resilience can help educators and other practitioners to see beyond circumstances and embrace the possibility of success. In my many years in education, I have found that we often get what we expect from children. When the adults who work with children embrace the realization that success is possible despite adversity, high levels of achievement are more likely to occur.

Education Policy and the Achievement Gap

With so much emphasis on test scores in many of our schools, I feel that it's important to briefly discuss the policies that helped create our current reality. I promise not to venture too far down the policy rabbit hole. However, a brief discussion will enhance your understanding of the relevance of resilience in our efforts to help students achieve academic goals. Those of us who analyze achievement data clearly see that students with certain risk factors struggle to reach desired achievement levels.

Nationally, schools have struggled with a very clear and consistent achievement gap in many urban, suburban, and rural areas. This gap became more glaring after the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed into law on January 8, 2001. No Child Left Behind was the first time in the history of public schools in the United States that school success was measured by the achievement levels of traditionally underserved and underperforming student populations. Under the law, assessment results were categorized and disaggregated according to socioeconomic status, disability, race, and limited English proficiency.

Those who supported the policy believed that it marked the first time in the history of public education that *every child mattered*—really mattered—due to the new wave of accountability. This legislation made sweeping changes to the role of the federal government in educating children and was specifically designed to help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and their more affluent, less challenged peers.

Today's academic standards are even more rigorous, and new federal guidelines continue to hold school districts accountable for the performance of children who are forced to contend with challenges far beyond their control, such as poverty. Those of us who are in the trenches know that the enhanced rigor of state standards and the persistence of challenges that accompany poverty make high academic achievement more difficult. The Every Student Succeeds Act was introduced and signed into law on December 10, 2015. Funding for this law was authorized to last through 2021. The purpose of ESSA was to update No Child Left Behind and continue to hold schools accountable for the success of *all* students.

It is inevitable that newer versions of previous public policies will continue to impact classrooms and schools directly in the foreseeable future. For the individual teacher, these policies mean that the performance of your students will continue to be measured and directly impact the rating of your school. This also means that academic standards for success may become more difficult to achieve. In America's schools, high academic achievement will likely remain our primary goal, regardless of our subject areas or grade levels. In order to reach these higher levels of achievement, we must adopt strategies that help students to fight through adverse circumstances. We cannot discount the harsh reality that the challenges our students face make high academic achievement more difficult to attain. The fundamental connection between student success and resilience is the fact that challenges need not be barriers to success.³ This connection makes an understanding of resilience imperative for those of us who work with America's children. Resilience is relevant and important!