

Foreword

All of us have met individuals who overcame staggering challenges growing up. As their stories unfold before us, it is difficult not to wonder how they managed to become such positive and productive adults. So much of what we are asked to believe about young people facing similar challenges would have predicted their failure. But that is what Bonnie Benard's new book and, indeed, her whole career are about — letting the rest of us know that we human beings are all remarkable, that we have the capacity to thrive, and that we can all use a little help.

Bonnie Benard lives and breathes the belief that all people, particularly all children and youth, have enormous strengths. She also embodies the belief that as adults we are charged with helping young people build upon those assets, and so support them in becoming the adults they aspire to be, regardless of the conditions and challenges they encounter.

In *Resiliency: What We Have Learned*, Bonnie captures what she has learned throughout a career dedicated to seeking the positive, even when cultural forces and intellectual models have pointed others in her field to a more negative approach. She speaks of assets; others may identify deficits. She affirms and builds; many of us criticize and inadvertently tear down. I recently heard her tell the story of an after-school high school program that she considered excellent, yet to participate students were required to pass into a classroom labeled “At-Risk Youth,” proclaiming an expectation not of success but of failure.

Bonnie's book sensitizes us to the implications of building up rather than tearing down. Like labels with their unintended messages, Bonnie asks us to look carefully at our approach to testing in this country — and whether our rhetoric that no child be left behind might be at odds with testing and retesting our children with a focus on what each child lacks. The unintended consequences for hundreds of thousands of students could be an experience of themselves as endlessly deficient rather than full of potential.

In synthesizing the resilience research of the last decade and more, and in analyzing key approaches for supporting young people, Bonnie

illuminates a vision that I hope will be carefully explored by all educators and human service providers. It is also one for all parents to consider. The daily stresses and strains for children and youth are enormous, even for those who live in what appear to be the most positive of conditions. For me as a parent, Bonnie's work and coaching have been a mainstay as I seek to put aside the deficit model I internalized early on and instead find ways to support the unique strengths and magic that my two children possess. In reading this book, I have found renewed optimism and hope, together with concrete ways that I and others can make a difference for children and youth, our own and those whom our policies, practices, and initiatives can affect.

There is always a danger in highlighting research about how children in enormously challenging conditions may nevertheless survive and even thrive. Inevitably, some policymakers and practitioners interpret such findings as evidence that interventions, resources, and support are not necessary. That is not the message of *Resiliency: What We Have Learned*. This is not a "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" model. To the contrary. We all have roles to play and the responsibility to play them. Children are born with remarkable and unique gifts, qualities, and potential. As adults we need to rededicate ourselves to cherishing, nurturing, and supporting each child we can. The opportunity exists to make a difference in a child's life every time we make that small effort.

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