

CONNECTED EDUCATION
EVERY LEADER, EVERY
TEACHER, EVERY LEARNER



BUILDING RESILIENT SCHOOLS

Arista Bouwer



The following document details the framework proposed by Arista Bouwer, from the Institute of Balanced Living, on how to build resilient schools. This framework was presented at the Axis Education Summit 2017.

The word 'resilient' conveys the capacity of an object to bend without being broken, and once bent to spring back. It is often used to describe an individual's ability to face, overcome, and even be strengthened by adversity; but what does resilience mean for schools? Illuminating research, conducted by educationists Pam Christie and Mark Potterton, finds that resilient schools exhibit the following key characteristics:

- A sense of responsibility
- Leadership
- A commitment to teaching and learning
- Safety and organisation
- Authority and discipline
- A culture of concern
- Governance and community relationships
- Parental involvement
- Relationship with the education department

From these characteristics a framework has been created to help build resilience so that schools:

- are solution instead of problem-orientated;
- have a strength-based approach focussing on what they do have and not what they do not have;
- are hardy and have a perspective on the world characterised by a commitment that protects them from harmful effects, and
- can thrive after stressful events.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RESILIENT SCHOOLS

1. A sense of responsibility

Resilient schools need to cultivate a can-do attitude. A resilient school is not one that complains about what it lacks, rather it has a solution and strength focused mindset. A school with a strong sense of responsibility will often exhibit this through small acts, such as: sweeping classrooms instead of waiting for the district to clean classrooms, running projects and asking for community support when facing a lack of resources, or even proactively looking for funding and partnerships to acquire necessary resources. The most important aspect of responsibility within a school is a willingness and preparedness to act. This is done by moving away from the realm of victimhood and passivity towards active agency.

2. Leadership

Strong, transformational leadership is vital to building a resilient school. The leadership of a resilient school is adaptable, flexible in its approach, prepared to consult staff, committed to teaching and learning, and committed to the staff, learners, and the school as a community. A school leader of a resilient school is concerned for the wellbeing of the school, rather than his/her own career, and has a sense of purpose and passion, and the courage and willingness to make unpopular decisions.

3. Commitment to teaching and learning

This may seem obvious, but Pam Christie and Mark Potterton's study indicates that vision-oriented schools are more resilient. To build a resilient school, an institution should have strong educational vision; viewing teaching and learning as its primary focus and structuring all it does around this. This creates a purpose driven attitude within a school, an attitude which can withstand obstacles. There are a number of ways to create and foster a commitment to teaching and learning in schools. These include creating well organised programmes of teaching and learning which ensure everyone knows exactly what must happen when. Additionally, teachers and learners should be able to work inside their classrooms effectively, and learners' movements between classes should be purposeful. Resilient schools should also have little tolerance for lateness and absenteeism without proper cause, and fair but effective school discipline should be enforced. Equally, time must be managed effectively to ensure the maximum amount of teaching and learning.

4. Safety and organisation

In many schools, safety is difficult to ensure because it depends largely on external factors. However, in order for a school to be resilient it must foster some sense of safety for both learners and staff regardless of its location. Resilient schools should exist as safe spaces to ensure that effective learning and teaching can take place. This can be done on a large-scale by maintaining physical boundaries such as fences around the school, but also on a smaller scale by establishing a sense of organisation and orderliness within an institution. Regular routines such as school assemblies and a dress code create a sense of comfort and regularity in schools.

5. Authority and discipline

Resilient schools have a strong link between their educational vision and discipline. Discipline cannot exist just for the sake of discipline, but must be rooted in the school's educational vision. Resilient schools with strong authority and discipline systems have:

- Clear disciplinary actions against lateness, absenteeism, substance abuse which go hand in hand with the school's educational vision
- Consistent disciplinary practice(s)
- Appropriate, accountable, and legitimate discipline (no corporal punishment as it is illegal)
- Person-to-person interaction between learners and teachers and learners and upper management. Ideally, for this to be effective a principal should strive to know the names of every single learner. However, as this is not possible in many cases at the very least each learner must feel like they are known by at least one teacher. The learner must feel like there is someone in the school that cares about them specifically and that they matter to someone so that discipline does not seem cruel and unfair.

6. A culture of concern

A resilient school must cultivate a culture of concern that is demonstrated by:

- Non-authoritarian leadership that considers others views
- Personalised relationships amongst the staff, between learners and staff, and between the school and the wider community
- Disciplinary practices that actively involve parents
- A focus on engaged and engaging teaching and learning
- A sense of agency and freedom within the governing rules and structure for both staff and learners
- A view of the school as a family (this may be observed when former learners visit the school after they have graduated to maintain their bond with the institution)

7. Governance and community relationships

A resilient school has efficient school governing bodies in which parents have the largest numerical representation and learners are represented too. It is important to have a working relationship with the community so that the community feels responsible for the school and is willing to help maintain and support it.

8. Parental involvement

Schools face a number of obstacles to consistent and committed parental involvement. For a school to be resilient it must have some buy-in from the parents. Parental involvement should at the very least be a backstop to reinforce discipline, and ideally a supporting hand in fundraising and governance.

Creative ways to encourage parental involvement include:

- Establishing learner-centered activities, such as choir performances or a gallery of learner art work, during parent meetings so that parents are doubly motivated to attend.
- Rewarding parents that are involved in school affairs (e.g. through a small fee reduction).

It would be helpful to look at how other schools have secured parental buy-in and learn from them.

9. Relationship with the education department

For a school to be resilient it must maintain a healthy, but not overly dependent relationship with the education department. Resilient school shouldn't wait for help, but should rather use the department to access further resources and gain a better understanding of policy.

“Resilience is not something you have once and for all. It can be lost. You must be consistent. It is something you must constantly be developing.”

— Arista Bouwer

HOW TO USE THE FRAMEWORK

A good way to use the framework is to rate your school on a scale of good, okay, and bad in relation to each aforementioned characteristic. Start from your school's strengths and then work down. From there, determine where you need to make improvements and draw up an action plan accordingly. It is important to note that the framework should not be used in an assessment capacity. Rather, it is meant to be a launching point from which improvements can be made.

Characteristics	Good	Ok	Bad	What will I do to improve or maintain this?
<i>A Sense of responsibility</i>				
<i>Leadership</i>				
<i>A commitment to teaching and learning</i>				
<i>Safety and organisation</i>				
<i>Authority and discipline</i>				
<i>A culture of concern</i>				
<i>Governance and community relationships</i>				
<i>Parental involvement</i>				
<i>Relationship with the education department</i>				

