



## **BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AND SCHOOL READINESS POST-COVID**

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### **Abstract**

Resilience is both a desired outcome of school readiness and a protective factor that buffers against adversity. In one small rural community, data highlighted that it is strengthened through supportive relationships, consistent expectations, and social emotional skill-building—but undermined by family instability, disengagement, and lack of coping skills. School district leadership cultivated Community Learning Exchanges to create shared understandings of the drivers of school readiness and begin to create thoughtful pathways to heal and strengthen students and community members.

### **Keywords**

Resiliency, School Readiness, Community Learning Exchanges, Rural Community

Conceptually, the term *resilience* may be defined in a number of ways, such as the ability of someone to adapt to stress and adversity, or perhaps even more simply, the ability to bounce back and recover from stressful circumstances (Godera, Silverira, Matthaus, & Singer, 2022). It is likely a drastic understatement to say that the COVID-19 pandemic brought waves of stress and adversity. While we can now largely look back at the experiences of that period of time, including the unsettling fear associated with death counts around the world as reported in the daily news, the sense of personal isolation during shutdowns, and the divisiveness surrounding the use of facial masks in public, Godera, et al. (2022) and other scholars (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020) suggested that repeated and long-lasting stressors erode resiliency within individuals as well as communities. Certainly, living with famine, war, financial insecurity, or growing up in a home with regular emotional or physical trauma qualify as stressors that can take a toll on or even devastate a person's mental health and resiliency. The years of the COVID pandemic and any of these adverse long-term experiences can certainly result in depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, and other mental or physiological burdens (e.g., Sher, 2020).

Many researchers have contended that the impact of COVID-19 affected some already vulnerable groups far more than others, including children, single women, those already struggling with poverty, Latinos, disadvantaged families already suffering the consequences of multigenerational oppression, and “essential workers” like those in grocery stores (Adegboye, et. al., 2021; Benzie, Perry, & Williams, 2021; Boyer, et al., 2023; Godera, et al, 2022; Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Scott, Nguyentran, & Sullivan, 2024). That said, scholars have also pointed to two primary features of resilience that may influence an individual's ability to bounce back from stressful situations: resilience factors and resilience mechanisms (Godera, et al., 2022). *Resilience factors* are perhaps learned predispositions including optimism or resourcefulness that could mediate a person's response to stressors in positive or maladaptive ways. *Resilience mechanisms* are the actual means that enable a person to adapt to a stressful situation through appropriate coping, such as engaging in nature, therapy, or spiritual practices.

Similarly, Masten and Motti-Stefanidi (2020) suggested that a traumatic event or series of repeated traumatic experiences where access is denied (e.g., to community resources, friends, school, church, work, groceries, healthcare) requires adaptive capacities (i.e, mechanisms) to restore a sense of equilibrium in individuals or communities. Further, the cumulative effects of stress and isolation and resultant difficulty in reestablishing equilibrium during the pandemic resulted in children and adults becoming frustrated, depressed, irritable, or sadly, more prone to conflict, maltreatment of others, or even suicidal (Scott, Nguyentran, & Sullivan, 2024; Watts &

Pattnaik, 2022). So, in a system, children depend on families and families depend on communities for creating or recreating a sense of equilibrium or normalcy. Thus, on a community or system level, Masten & Motti-Stefanidi (2020) wrote that resilience is “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to challenges that threaten the function, survival, or development of the system” (p. 98).

### **The Impact of the Pandemic on Children in School**

Clearly, COVID-19 created a health crisis, as well as crises in nearly every area of our lives including finances, work, politics, transportation, mental health, as well as in education (e.g., Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Disruptions to school schedules and services resulted in significant losses in instructional time and student learning. Despite attempts by educators to maintain their instructional hours and provide quality educational opportunities to maintain educational growth, the impact of lost classroom instructional time has been documented in many ways, including lower reading outcomes and significant performance losses in mathematics (Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2022; Sparks, 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2022; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2022; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Report, 2022). In fact, Kuhfeld et al. (2022) estimated effect-size losses in elementary reading of .17 and .10 in middle school reading, as well as .26 in elementary math and .23 in middle school math. Barnum (2022), Kuhfeld & Lewis (2022), Sparks (2022), Kuhfeld et al. (2022), Dillon (2022), and Spector (2021) all came to similar conclusions regarding the serious nature of the effects of COVID on reading and math, including notable losses among adolescent students. Moreover, across almost all demographic areas, all grades, and all subject areas, students were negatively affected by the school disruptions during the pandemic. Impacts were not limited to the United States or even North America, and larger effects were evidenced in middle and low-income countries compared to high-income countries (Betthausen, Bach-Mortensen, & Engzell, 2022).

Researchers have also noted that pandemic effects were not limited to academics. For instance, Benzie, Perry, and Williams (2021) found executive and social skills were impacted, including planning daily living tasks, managing time as well as emotions, keeping track of appointments, and overall self-regulation. Sher (2020) described an increase in drug use during COVID lockdowns. In the review by Viner, et al (2022), the authors reported a plethora of mental and behavioral health consequences of pandemic stress on children and adolescents from restlessness and inattention to anxiety and depression.

Still, analysis of disaggregated data at the state level (e.g., North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2022) regarding subgroups shows disproportionate impact of the pandemic on expected learning growth for Black and Hispanic adolescents in middle grades, students with disabilities, English language learners, migrant students, and rural students. Moreover, Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) researchers (Lewis et al., 2022) concluded that the gap between higher and lower achieving students at the outset of the pandemic actually widened. In attempting to uncover specific variables related to disparities in learning loss, Alejo, Jenkins, and Yao (2023) suggested that the widening of disparities was likely to occur in marginalized children who were, for instance, already behind their peers before the pandemic, experienced longer school closures, had limited access to remote learning, and received less home supervision.

Nevertheless, while data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other researchers provide significant information related to the effects of the pandemic including factors which may relate to disparate pandemic impacts, the reports do not provide specific recommendations for interventions nor how to address specific populations, including those from rural communities and/or those that are culturally and linguistically diverse. The purpose of this report is to offer an example for other rural communities to analyze community resiliency resources and support for school readiness.

### **The Story of One Rural Community**

This is the case of one small rural county in the southeastern part of the United States, and their response to the residual impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The county population is 13,814, including a small city of 4460 residents. Historically, Dr. Martin Luther King visited and spoke in the county in the early 1960s, and that, along with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was eventually followed by factious efforts to begin to integrate schools by the late 1960s. Even today, however, the remains of racial tensions exist as evidenced by years of protest and debate over a Confederate statue in the heart of the small city as well as the recent movement of students to county charter schools in 2023-24 (72% were white).

In 2023-24, the county-city school district enrolled 1719 students, of which over 43% were black, 40% were white, 10% Hispanic, and the balance of a few ethnicities. Students were enrolled in four schools, one PreK-2 elementary school, one 3-5 elementary school, one 6-8 middle school and one 9-12 high school, of which none of the schools were majority white. There were 275 teachers and staff in the district, of which 83% were white, 16% were black, and the balance represented a small number of other ethnicities. In addition, 38% of county residents under 18 lived below the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2023.

While the analysis of learning loss has been a critical topic of much investigation and debate, and the

urgency to address it surely warranted, the ARPA legislation (Public Law 117-2, 2021) and the accompanying Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Fund III (ESSERF III) were an unprecedented effort to address the needs of students and families upended by school closures and various kinds of subsequent reopening in 2020 and 2021. That said, in the case of this small school district, the board of education did not close schools during the pandemic. Instead, the Board allowed choice to parents and families. In other words, families with children enrolled in the public schools were given the option of continuing to send their children to one of the four district schools for in-person instruction, with precautions in place, or to remain home to receive instruction through whatever available web-based video and content platforms. Notably, a disproportionate number of students who received at-home instruction were black while the majority of students who opted for in-school instruction were white.

Through the ESSERF III, the ARPA infused \$123 billion into schools to support a variety of needs related to technology, facilities and operations, staffing, mental and physical health, and learning loss interventions (Loeb & Barone, 2022; DiMarco & Jordan, 2022). The ESSERF included \$28 billion earmarked specifically for learning loss interventions. The nature of these interventions was not clearly defined, but they were to be based in evidence of impact. The statute noted intervention examples “such as” summer programs, extended day activities, and afterschool programs. The legislation also noted that interventions were required to meet academic, social, emotional needs of students, as well as address subgroups disproportionately impacted by COVID learning loss (e.g., students from low-income homes, students of color, students with disabilities, and culturally and linguistically diverse learners). But just how does a small rural community and a school system within that community operationalize a response to the impacts of the pandemic upon schools, particularly in light of the fact that the children in the schools live within a community with a history of racial divide as well as individual and family resilience factors and mechanisms being eroded?

Moreover, if resilience factors mediate a person’s ability to respond to stressful circumstances in adaptive or maladaptive ways, then the district results of the 2024 (post-COVID) state teacher working conditions survey perhaps make sense. Part of the results of that survey indicated that more than 77% of teachers thought that there was disorder in school classrooms and other areas of the school. More than 83% of teachers felt they were disrespected by students. Only about 39% of teachers believed that students arrived at school with their basic needs met and ready to learn, including having necessary school supplies, clean clothes, food, and adequate sleep. Moreover, comparing pre-pandemic (2018-19) to post-pandemic (2022-23) data for all students in all schools in the case district, there was 76% increase in office referrals. In addition, district records indicated post-COVID long term and short term suspension rates were disproportionally higher for students who are black than for whites. The suspensions equated to 6420 hours or 1070 days of instructional time lost by students who were black that year. As then seen through a resiliency lens, students, families, teachers, and the community-as-a-whole appeared to be navigating the post-pandemic world with various resiliency factors, some more adaptive than others.

In response, school district leaders began intentional efforts to engage the teachers and staff, as well as the community, to better understand the nature of family and student post-pandemic needs and build greater resilience regarding current and future challenges.

## District and Community Initiatives

### *School Level Exploration*

Just prior to the pandemic, district, school and community leaders engaged in a book study of *The Deepest Well* by Nadine Burke Harris (2018). The goal was to learn more about adverse childhood experiences – how were they defined and what impact they had on one’s ability to regulate emotions. The culminating event was district-wide staff development focusing on the community resilience model. At the time, it was not foreseen that the community would need to recover from the challenges associated with a global pandemic; instead, the emphasis was on poverty.

Then, when seeing the pandemic as exacerbating the influence of community trauma on school readiness, school district leadership engaged school principals and staff members in a series of in-person and digital conversations, initially addressing the challenges they faced using the term *school readiness*. The concept was framed using five constructs prioritized by district leadership - a student’s physical, mental, emotional, social, and behavioral health. Staff members across all four schools were presented district data related to attendance and disciplinary referrals, and questioned about the potential consequences if the issue was not addressed. Qualitative data in the form of open-ended comments were collected to capture how stakeholders defined each of the five constructs, how they perceived challenges associated with the particular area of readiness, and their ideas regarding action steps. Staff also commented on shared perspectives. Minutes from staff meetings and digital discussion boards (Padlet) were used to collect data for analysis.

### ***Stronger Connections Grant***

On June 25, 2022, then President Biden signed into law the *Bipartisan Safer Communities Act* (BSCA). Through this legislation, the US Congress authorized \$1 billion in formula funding under Title IV, Part A of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA) to state educational agencies (SEAs) to provide students with safer and healthier learning environments. Under the BSCA Stronger Connections grant program, subgrants were available from the state to high need LEAs through a competitive application process. The case school district applied for and was awarded subgrant funds to provide students in the county school district with safer and healthier learning environments.

With grant funds, a community coordinator was eventually hired to serve as a school-community liaison and facilitate the development and implementation of the overall outreach and engagement program, including developing strategies that foster communication and partnerships with agencies and organizations that serve the community. More specifically, the role was designed to support students' personal and social needs via home visits, communicating with school staff and stakeholders, recruiting and connecting community volunteers with schools, attending community meetings, and assist families with some daily needs like transportation for appointments as necessary.

### ***University Partnership***

In 2023, given ESSER III and state funding, a statewide practitioners network was established for sixteen school districts to develop and evaluate school-based interventions that address issues related to pandemic recovery. Case district leaders asked and were welcomed to participate. Subsequently, a number of university professors from across the state also volunteered to partner with the districts to provide technical support. In 2024, district leaders and university partners from across the state network participated in multiple structured meetings to discuss challenges facing districts. With regard to the case district, a university partner and district leadership began to explore, in particular, challenges related to what the district defined as *school readiness* among students.

Part of the funding offered to network districts and university partners included a small amount of money for targeted activities beyond initial meeting discussions. In response, the university partner and district leadership collaboratively developed, submitted, and were awarded a grant that was funded in 2025.

### ***Community Learning Exchanges***

During the first year of activities, the district made an important effort to acquire competencies related to *Community Learning Exchanges* (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016), followed by planning and carrying out the meetings in the county district. Through a grant at a local university, a team of district leaders including administrators, teachers, and school board members, along with the university partner, engaged in a series of meetings around Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs). The team learned about the key axioms of CLEs and authentic community engagement, drew asset maps to demonstrate understanding of local sources of influence, and designed gatherings for community members to engage in two-way dialogue.

Two CLEs were held, drawing approximately 100 community members for the first meeting and about 50 for the second meeting. In each meeting, community members, including parents, local businesspeople, clergy, attorneys, and others participated in small groups where they were asked to define school readiness, state the ideal conditions for readiness, determine deficits in the conditions for readiness, and identify community assets for fostering school readiness. Large posters were used to capture and summarize responses of community members in each meeting and collected by the school district team and university partner for analysis.

## **Outcomes**

Data from district staff meetings and Community Learning Exchanges were qualitatively analyzed for substantive themes or common categories using a *grounded theory* approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). After data were read, they were coded in a search for patterns and similar concepts. Themes were created based on patterns similar to each other and different from other patterns. Themes were then organized into categories. This was followed by member checking with participants from the Community Learning Exchanges and revisions to support credibility of results.

### ***Outcomes from District Staff Meetings***

Based on data from district staff meetings, nine themes emerged from these discussions that demonstrated the significance of the issue. The table below divides the themes into three categories.

Table 1: Consequence Themes by Category

Students	Staff	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of Students</li> <li>• Decreased Student Success</li> <li>• Rise in Mental Illness</li> <li>• Unfair Learning Environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loss of Qualified Staff</li> <li>• Loss of Instructional Time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strain on Community</li> <li>• Loss of Community Trust, Faith, Support</li> <li>• Increased Educational Costs</li> </ul>

The themes related to students included movement to alternative learning settings (e.g., home school, faith-based, charter, private) and limitations to learning due to school distractions and disruptions. A staff member commented that “talented students do not get the same advantages as peer communities because teachers are stretched too thin to offer accelerated learning options.” The themes relating to staff focused on staff leaving, loss of instructional time, and lower test scores. These themes were, as one staff member noted were a “snowball effect” of increased teacher workload and increased job difficulty due to disruptive student behaviors and staff vacancies. Moreover, the staff suggested that the community will suffer long-term consequences of the effect, with one stating “There will be a loss of good, productive citizens that will give back to the community.” Staff members cited drop-out rate, crime, and workforce development. Trust and support were critically noted community-related themes. Constant classroom disruptions “create a disservice to the students and parents that work hard and care about positive outcomes and success.” This leads to “bitterness and loss of [community] support.” Overall, the two themes with the largest number of comments were loss of qualified staff and loss of instructional time, both within the category of staff challenges.

While staff contemplated the consequences associated with deficits in school readiness, they also considered action steps that may address issues. The table below summarizes the resulting themes into three categories.

Table 2: Action Themes by Category

Students	Families	Community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students’ “Bill of Responsibilities”</li> <li>• Cell Phone Policy</li> <li>• Alternative Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define Parent Responsibility and Involvement</li> <li>• Cultural Awareness and Poverty Training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase Community Involvement</li> </ul>

Themes affecting students included a proposed student bill of responsibilities and interest in a cell phone policy. Most comments, however, focused on the importance of using alternative education as a “problem-solving and restorative space.” As an example, one staff member shared that “alternative education doesn’t have to be a place. It can be a student or parent choice in schedule, class size, and start and end times.” The themes pertaining to families centered on parent responsibility and involvement. Staff members expressed that “the school cannot be responsible for everything.” An important consideration for staff was how parents could be expected to “check take home folders, provide discipline, and expose their student to appropriate behaviors.” Cultural awareness and poverty training for staff were noted as essential to support families. The third action theme category received the most comments. Staff wanted to see local government, non-profits, civic organizations, and faith-based groups actively support and promote school readiness in every child. Like comments from families, staff were interested in how community groups could increase their level of involvement.

### ***Outcomes from Community Learning Exchanges***

Following staff discussions in the first year of this effort, Community Learning Exchanges were scheduled, organized, and held. In the first meeting, as noted earlier, community stakeholders met in small groups to define school readiness, consider the ideal conditions for readiness, clarify deficits in the conditions for readiness, and note community assets for fostering school readiness. Responses from community participants were collected on large pieces of chart paper and summarized across all small groups. Data were analyzed for common patterns and themes reported below.

**Defining school readiness.** Several themes emerged for defining school readiness. First is the need for supportive home and school environments for children. This was noted across emotional, physical, and behavioral components of readiness, and included comments such as “calm and orderly atmosphere at home” and “teach expectations.” Second, participants identified the need for managing emotions and behavior, especially in challenging social situations. This was noted across emotional, social, and mental components of readiness, and included comments including “self-regulation,” coping skills,” and “conflict resolution.” Third, community members noted the importance of ethical behavior, empathy, and understanding social norms in school and community. This was noted across mental, behavioral, and social components of readiness, and included comments

such as “respect for others and self,” “moral code,” and “mutual respect.” Fourth, community participants also identified the importance of predictable routines for children. This was noted across mental, behavioral, and physical components of school readiness, and comments included “routines,” “positive habits,” and “modeled behavior.”

**Ideal conditions for readiness.** When analyzing data from Community Learning Exchanges about ideal conditions for readiness, the strongest themes included stable and supportive relationships, emotional and social development, and structure and consistency. Examples of stable and supportive relationships included “supportive home environment,” “active parenting,” “caring adults.” Examples of emotional and social development included “social and emotional learning (SEL) classes,” “encouragement,” and “resilience.” Examples from the theme of structure and consistency included “accountability,” “clear expectations,” and “consistency.”

**Clarifying deficits in the conditions for readiness.** The result of the community conversations about gaps/deficits in conditions for readiness produced the following themes: lack of parent capacity and engagement, weak social-emotional development, and inconsistent values and behavior expectations. Examples of lack of parent capacity and engagement included “young inexperienced parents,” “lack of parent involvement in schools,” “disconnect between parents and children,” and “grandparents raising children.” Examples of weak social-emotional development included “lack of social skills,” “low self-esteem,” “poor coping mechanisms,” and “apathy.” Examples of inconsistent values and behavior expectations included “lack of consequences,” “lack of moral/value teaching,” “children always being ‘right.’”

**Noting community assets for fostering school readiness.** When asked to brainstorm a list of community assets that might be valuable for supporting student readiness, small groups of community members generated a list of thirty resources or agencies related to youth development and mentorship (e.g., boys & girls club), employment and skill development (e.g., Job Corps), mental health and wellness (e.g., local health and rehab facilities), community engagement and volunteerism (e.g., faith-based communities), law enforcement and juvenile justice prevention (e.g., juvenile crime prevention council), basic needs support (e.g., clothes closet and food pantry), parent and family engagement (e.g., parent teacher organizations).

## Conclusions

Resilience is both a **desired outcome** of school readiness and a **protective factor** that buffers against adversity. The data in this case illustrate that it is strengthened through supportive relationships, consistent expectations, and emotional skill-building—but can be undermined by family instability, disengagement, and lack of coping skills. In the Community Learning Exchanges, resilience was highlighted as a critical trait under the themes of emotional and social development, as well as supportive environments and relationships. Community members emphasized self-regulation, coping skills, conflict resolution, and perseverance—all foundational aspects of resilience. Supportive environments and relationships foster resilience by providing children with emotional security and positive adult modeling, helping them bounce back from stress and adversity.

Themes from both staff and community discussions point to obstacles that deteriorate resilience in children, including weak social-emotional development (e.g., poor coping mechanisms, low self-esteem, apathy), unstable home environments, and limited parental engagement, making it harder for children to learn adaptive behaviors, develop internal control, and manage setbacks. In the case of this community, some students who prior to or since the pandemic did not leave the public schools for charter or private schools were the same students who were more likely to stay home during the pandemic. Their protracted time away from school during the pandemic may have impacted or even exacerbated students’ ability to code switch afterwards; thus resulting in undesired behaviors in schools and higher suspension rates (and, by extension, even more lost instructional time). Such an outcome aligns with Alejo, Jenkins, and Yao (2023) who, as noted earlier, suggested that widening of disparities in student performance (i.e., readiness) was likely to occur in marginalized children who were already behind their peers before the pandemic, experienced longer school closures, had limited access to remote learning, and received less home supervision.

Strategic interventions can actively build or restore resilience and by extension student readiness, including alternative education options as restorative spaces that give students a second chance to succeed and learn adaptive behaviors (Freeman, 2023), cultural and poverty awareness training for school leadership and staff to disrupt blame dynamics and strengthen home and school relationships (Hollie, 2017), as well as community partnerships and mentorships to provide youth with additional support networks and positive role models. Many community assets were identified in the Community Learning Exchange meeting.

Resilience in children during and after the pandemic is certainly related to family systems, networks of friendships, as well as resources in schools and communities (Brik, Williams, & Ladd, 2024; Marston & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Indeed, Ashworth, et al. (2022) and Easterbrooks et. al. (2022) maintained that connections to the

community and school provided protective factors or “buffers” for positive mental health in children during the pandemic. Therefore, if resilience is “the capacity of a dynamic system to adapt successfully to challenges that threaten the function, survival, or development of the system” (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020, p. 98), then as Giordano, et al. (2023) suggested, there is a positive “cascading effect” on children in healthy families and communities that mediates the potentially distressing or even damaging effects of trauma like the pandemic and promotes adaptation and resiliency. Unfortunately, however, in less healthy families and communities where resiliency factors and mechanisms are not strong, extended trauma may have detrimental effects that require intentional and collaborative attention to strengthen resilience and support school readiness as this community is beginning to do. This report has offered an example for other rural communities to analyze community resources and support for school readiness, utilize Community Learning Exchanges to embrace community voices, and identify actionable strategies to strengthen resilience and promote readiness.

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