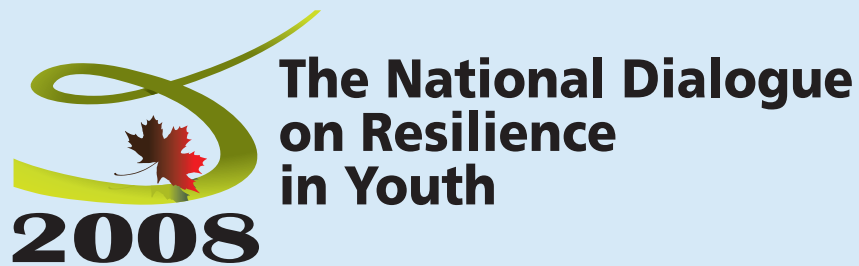




**THE LEARNING PARTNERSHIP**  
Champions of Public Education Across Canada

## FROM RISK TO RESILIENCE

### FINAL REPORT FOR THE CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING



Submitted by  
The Learning Partnership

February 2009

CANADIAN COUNCIL ON LEARNING **CCL CCA** CONSEIL CANADIEN SUR L'APPRENTISSAGE



Yukon • British Columbia • Alberta • Saskatchewan • Nunavut • Manitoba • Ontario • Newfoundland/Labrador

The Learning Partnership is grateful to the Canadian Council on Learning for its ongoing support and for the opportunity to contribute to the well being and success of vulnerable youth. The Learning Partnership thanks the eight provinces and territories for their participation and leadership in this project, without whom it would not have been possible. Manitoba's Ministry of Education is especially noted for its tremendous support and for being such a generous host. The Learning Partnership is also grateful to Dr. Ben Levin, Dr. Michael Unger and Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl for their ongoing advice throughout the development and implementation of this project.

A special note of appreciation to the National Conference Steering Committee Members who, along with their staff, contributed greatly to the shape of the National Dialogue, and to its success:

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**What are the three conditions children need for development of resilience?**

**Relationship, relationship, relationship...**

Dr. Ann Masden

## Executive Summary

Fostering youth who are resilient is important for our young people individually and for the future of Canadian society in general. Young people who are valued, safe, connected and engaged are the core foundation of a population that is healthy and productive. As parents, educators, community members, business people and politicians, it is what we all wish for our children. But in order to reach those markers, our youth must be resilient, especially when their difficulties are of such magnitude that the youth are vulnerable or at risk.

The National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth produced an invaluable snapshot of what we know, what we need to know and what can be done to foster resilience in youth across Canada. The most compelling findings from the National Dialogue contained the seeds of future action for all stakeholders and partners, from parents to political leaders. The policy recommendations are detailed on page 19 and are summarized as follows:

- The National Dialogue identified the protective value of focusing on strengths and assets of young people and their families as a general operating principle rather than focusing on their difficulties and deficits. With regard to 'youth at risk' this paradigm shift has significant implications for educators, parents, mental health professionals and for all who work with children and young people.
- Ensuring optimal development in the early years is possibly the most effective way to foster healthy, resilient children. Facilitating positive early childhood development is a socio-economic imperative. Parents who are nurturing and healthy provide the basis for early development. When parents are unable to provide a nurturing environment that promotes childhood well-being, society (schools, communities and governments) must develop strategies and provide programs to assist vulnerable parents. Such programs include affordable and high quality early development and learning opportunities that give children the tools to be resilient and to succeed in school and beyond.
- Despite the foundational role of genes in early child development, researchers are uncovering new information on the ability of the brain to change throughout life's course. Resilient behaviour can therefore be learned at all stages. When asked what constitutes the most important factor in the promotion of resilience in youth, conference speakers and participants unequivocally identified the presence of a positive relationship with a caring and nurturing adult. The relationships children and young people have with significant adults in their lives can be transformative. Initiatives that foster positive relationships with strong role models should be paramount, be they at the individual level or at the broad policy level.
- Promoting youth resilience as a means to helping young people succeed in school and beyond requires the combined efforts of parents and families, schools, communities, researchers, policy-makers, governments and the youth themselves. Specifically, approaches include: Developing partnerships throughout the education and social services system; more knowledge mobilization that enables diverse partners to share ideas and learn from each other; including evaluation of programs and outcomes in order to provide relevant data and evidence to build the case and foster the political will to promote the necessary initiatives. A National Summit on Youth Resiliency involving all partners should meet to develop strategies and to form coalitions to put the strategies in place. Civil society must be drawn into the discussion to help Canadians understand why they have a shared interest in fostering resilience and to ensure that politicians will listen.

The National Dialogue on Youth Resilience, which took place in Winnipeg in November, 2008, was the culmination of a partnership between The Learning Partnership (TLP) and eight provinces and territories with funding from the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL). The initiative was part of a knowledge mobilization and engagement strategy across the country and successfully achieved key objectives including knowledge exchange, developing organizational capacity to engage in knowledge exchange through dialogue and fostering relationships among partners.

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# 1) Introduction:

In spite of severely adverse circumstances such as poverty, fragmented family life, illness, stress and other social and physical challenges some children are able to function well and develop into successful learners and productive citizens. They are resilient. What makes a child resilient is a question that is crucial for educators, health and social service providers, and for decision-makers across the spectrum of governments in Canada. Understanding youth resilience can help policy decision-makers, practitioners and parents develop approaches to young people at risk that can help them overcome adversity and, ultimately, succeed.

As an organization that is committed to the successful education of Canada's youth, The Learning Partnership (TLP) has long been interested in youth resilience. TLP's 2006 Conference on Youth at Risk, which was co-sponsored by the Canadian Council on Learning, identified resilience as an important component in understanding youth at risk. Interest in the topic continued to gather momentum and it became clear that a national dialogue would enable senior decision-makers, educators and researchers to delve into the elements of resilience and how to promote it among the nation's vulnerable youth. In response, TLP, together with eight provinces and territories with funding from the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) developed a knowledge mobilization and engagement strategy that involved regional roundtables across the country and culminated in the National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth in Winnipeg in November, 2008.

The project successfully achieved the following three key objectives:

- **Knowledge exchange:** An important goal was to provide regional and national opportunities for knowledge exchange among relevant partners on youth resilience. Through eight regional dialogues on specific resilience topics important to that region, and through the innovative format of the national dialogue, practitioners, policy decision-makers and researchers had the opportunity to discuss with experts the knowledge and best practices that foster resilience in young people at risk and help improve their learning and life outcomes.
- **Developing organizational capacity to engage in knowledge exchange:** Bringing together researchers, policy-makers and practitioners in a format which fostered discussion and dialogue and developed organizational capacity on this subject for TLP and for the participants.
- **Fostering relationships:** The significant body of research on resilience is valuable for all sectors to understand its application. This project brought together youth, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from the fields of mental health, education, community and social services to learn about different perspectives and approaches and to foster relationships among sectors and stakeholders that would not otherwise have the opportunity to share knowledge, ideas and practices.

## 2) Methodology – the nature of the project

Although this project set out to meet the objectives described above, an equally important goal was to establish a new benchmark for national engagement of researchers, decision makers, education sectors and community foundations. Previous work on youth at-risk had identified a need to address resilience through a format which would encourage dialogue, moving away from structured conference presentations. In order to achieve this goal, the methodology was designed with four key elements:

- a. **National leadership:** A national steering committee of Assistant Deputy Ministers, supported by a working committee of Directors and senior policy staff, from eight provinces and territories, met monthly from January to October, 2008 to guide the project. The jurisdictions represented were Yukon, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nunavut, Manitoba, Ontario, Newfoundland/Labrador.
- b. **Research based expert advice:** To establish a common ground on “what is youth resilience” for the regional and conference discussions, two background discussion papers were prepared by Dr. Michael Unger, Dalhousie University, and Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl, University of British Columbia, in consultation with Dr. Ben Levin. They were widely circulated to more than 150 participants of the round tables and the 220 participants at the National Dialogue.
- c. **Local and regional stakeholder input (in person and online):** It was important to seek local input on issues and best practices related to resilience. Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland hosted regional roundtables that included the participation of a wide variety of stakeholders (Nunavut was unable to hold a roundtable as it had just completed a similar event on literacy, although they participated in the conference.) The roundtables addressed programs, strategies, gaps, and other details relating to youth resilience specific to their regions.

Each province/territory submitted a roundtable report with information on participants, methodologies, findings, next steps and a sample of ‘best practices’ – successful programs in their regions aimed at increasing resilience in youth by various stakeholders. The Learning Partnership summarized the reports in a ‘foundation’ document which served as the basis for discussion at the national conference. Conference participants received the document as part of a resource binder, which also included a generous roster of background research, best practices, and papers relevant to each session.

- d. **Facilitated interactive dialogue:** The *National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth* took place in Winnipeg, November 17 – 19, 2008. The Dialogue was ‘by invitation only’, and included 230 senior policy-makers, educators, social service, health and mental health practitioners and academics.

The Learning Partnership developed a unique approach for the conference to deliver two key objectives for CCL: **“Knowledge exchange”** and **“Fostering relationships”**

- i. Unlike traditional conferences, this event was organized as an interactive dialogue between experts and the audience. TLP engaged Maria LeRose, award-winning television personality and graduate student at U.B.C., to ensure interaction between audience and experts.
- ii. Eight international experts on youth resilience formed the roster of speakers. They participated in interactive plenary dialogues (in the format of fireside chats) and in smaller interactive breakout sessions to drill deep and share their thoughts on a range of issues affecting resilience.
- iii. TLP partnered with the Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement to include the youth perspective. The Centre gathered perspectives from youth across Canada through a consultation process. Three youth representatives, nominated by a peer panel, discussed the results of their consultation and shared their personal stories at the conference.
- iv. Although the two day program was very full, there were two opportunities for informal networking in the evening, with musical accompaniment by local students.

### 3) The Current Situation: What We Know About Resilience

Knowledge of resilience has grown rapidly in recent decades. Researchers, academics, medical practitioners, social workers and educators have contributed to an understanding of resilience in Canada, the United States, Britain and elsewhere. The *National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth* brought together leading researchers and policy-makers from Canada, as well as some from the U.S., who provided a valuable portrait of current knowledge and practice in the area of resilience. The following provides the context for that knowledge, highlighting a number of research trends and initiatives (international, national and provincial).

#### The International Context:

Serious investigations into resilience began in the mental health field in the 1960s when Norman Garmezy looked into why some children of schizophrenics fared better than others. Over the past 20 years, the application of this research to other areas of human development and society has grown to encompass modern neurobiology and genetics as they affect individual development as well as approaches that rely on broader environmental factors including socio-economic determinants, human interaction and strength-based pedagogy and intervention.

Scientific research shows that resilience can be understood as the interplay between an individual's genes and environment. Internationally, Sir Michael Rutter, a British psychiatrist with long-standing expertise in the area of resilience, determined that particular genetic variations can help promote resilience, acting as buffers against adversity. Genes are understood to play a major role in influencing individuals' responses to adverse environments, while also being influenced by environmental factors. Recent research by husband and wife team, Avshalom Caspi and Terri Moffitt has involved the relationship between the gene, 5-HTT, and childhood maltreatment in causing depression. The 5-HTT gene is critical for the regulation of serotonin to the brain, which helps promote well-being and protects against depression in response to trauma or stress. Their research suggests that people with at least one short 5-HTT allele (as opposed to two long ones) are more prone to depression when adverse circumstances are present.

Despite the recent focus on the biological underpinnings of youth resilience, researchers such as Dr. Suniya Luthar, Professor of Psychology and Education, Columbia University Teacher's College and Dr. Ann Masten, Distinguished University Professor Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, have focused on "the processes that account for positive adaptation in the context of risk, with the ultimate objective of learning how best to promote resilience in human development."<sup>1</sup> Using a holistic approach that draws on "four decades of research on resilience", Dr. Masten has addressed the role of schools in the reduction of risk and the promotion of healthy child development in the fostering of resilience. She is attempting to, "forge a more comprehensive understanding of resilience in children" by integrating biological, neuroscience, behavioral, and socio-contextual approaches. She links the breadth of knowledge on resilience to the capacity of professionals within the school context to play instrumental roles in the formulation of the emerging models of resilience.

Social psychologist Martin Seligman, University of Pennsylvania, has contributed to the practical application of thinking on resilience. He and others have focused on the value of teaching children, adolescents and adults accurate, positive and flexible thinking patterns as a way to optimize the development of resilience. The Penn Resilience Program (PRP) trains teachers and adolescent children in the use of cognitive skills that promote resilience in the face of adversity. This approach supports the notion that skills that help develop resilience can be learned, especially by young children. This approach also provides a valuable tool for teachers and others who work with young children and adolescents.

<sup>1</sup> From [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/30/magazine/30abuse.html?\\_r=1&fta=y&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/30/magazine/30abuse.html?_r=1&fta=y&pagewanted=all)

Strength-based approaches, which have grown out of the positive psychology movement, have also contributed to understanding the psychosocial needs of youth. Rather than focus on risk factors and individual deficits, there has been a growing movement that promotes assessing and treating youth at risk on the basis of their strengths and assets. This asset-based model of intervention has been widely promoted by a number of predominantly American organizations including the SEARCH Institute, with its list of 40 developmental assets, and The Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD). Canadian proponents of the asset-based approach to youth at risk such as Dr. Michael Ungar, Dalhousie University and Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl, University of British Columbia, have also contributed internationally to the promotion of this approach.

*"We cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults nor can we wait until they reach school – a time when it may be too late to intervene."*

Dr. James Heckman,  
Nobel Laureate in Economics

The RAND Corporation, a nonprofit policy and research institution, the Brookings Institute, Nobel Laureate James Heckman and others have focused on the economic benefits of promoting resilience through early development and learning programs. Their studies demonstrate the presence of a high rate of return on investment in early learning programs, particularly when high quality programs reach the children most at risk. Early development and learning are considered to be a foundation for resilience in later life. RAND reports identify economic benefits for individuals ranging from \$1.26 to \$17 for every \$1 invested in high quality early learning programs. The benefits of high quality early learning programs also have implications for government spending and society at large. Economist James Heckman's research indicates that public investment in early learning yields the highest economic return compared to investment later in the education lifecycle.<sup>2</sup> He computes the return on investment in early childhood programs at 8:1, compared to a 3:1 return for primary and secondary education and 1:1 for adult training.<sup>3</sup>

## The National Context:

Canada's jurisdictional structure has inhibited the formulation of a national approach to areas of provincial responsibility involving vulnerable or at risk youth in the areas of education, health, mental health and social services. It has not, however, hindered the emergence of a significant body of research from across the country, be it scientific, educational, psychological or sociological, on the factors that contribute to vulnerability and health for youth at risk. This section deals with the current situation in Canada from a cross section of approaches including neuroscience, mental health, psychology and social work.

Scientific research in the area of brain development has had an impact on understanding resilience in Canada. The work of Dr. Fraser Mustard, The Founders Network, on early child development has shaped our understanding of the age-old 'nature-nurture' debate and, by extension, our understanding of the relationship between development and resilience of young people. His research establishes the connection between neurological development and the earliest experiences of young children. His findings establish the importance of the early years in developing the building blocks for later ability, mental health, resilience, learning and success. Understanding the centrality of the early years in the development of children and youth has spawned a reinvigorated effort in the advocacy of a national early learning strategy.

Neuroscientists have also been concentrating on the plasticity of the brain, throughout the life and learning cycles. Their findings reveal that the brain can change structurally and functionally with experience, treatment and learning. This concept holds enormous potential for the promotion of resilience in young people faced with adversity and risk. Canadian psychiatrist Norman Doidge has approached the issue from

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.issuespa.net/articles/21544>

<sup>3</sup> F. Cunha, J. Heckman et al. (2005). Interpreting the Evidence of Life-Cycle Skill Formation: IZA Discussion Paper Series (Report No. 1575). Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labour.



a clinical perspective, bringing the concept to the public arena in his recent book *The Brain That Changes Itself*.

Canadian efforts in the application of social science research to practice have also yielded significant results in the promotion of resilience. Dr. Michael Ungar, School of Social Work, Dalhousie University, has contributed to a practical understanding of resilience. His definition of resilience focuses on the interaction between the individual and the environment. "The fit between the individual's capacity to cope (strengths), the risks he faces, and the context in which the adaptation takes place (Is the environment supportive or does it burden the child?) are all integral to whether resilience can be expected or not." Challenging approaches that focus primarily on the internal strengths or biogenetics of the child, his understanding of resilience is: "The capacity of individuals to navigate to resources that sustain well-being; the capacity of individuals' environments to provide resources; and the capacity of individuals, their families and communities to negotiate culturally meaningful ways for resources to be shared."

According to Dr. Ungar, shifting the focus from the individual to the interaction between the individual, the values of the individual (and family and community) and the environment, allows for better interventions. His work as principal investigator of the Resiliency Research Centre has included the International Resilience Project (IRP) - a collaborative, global project examining the aspects of young people's lives that help them cope with challenges. A pilot phase of a comprehensive study by IRP was conducted in 11 countries on five continents, with participation from youth and adults who were interviewed and asked a series of common questions. The study identified a range of factors that contribute significantly to youth resilience, including:<sup>4</sup>

**Individual factors:** Assertiveness; ability to solve problems; self-awareness; empathy for others; having goals and aspirations; sense of humour

**Relationship factors:** Positive mentors and role models; perceived social support; appropriate emotional expression and parental monitoring within the family; peer group acceptance

**Community contexts:** Avoidance of exposure to violence among family, community, and peers; government provision for children's safety, recreation, housing, and jobs when older; access to school and education, information, and learning resources; safety and security

**Cultural factors:** Tolerance of differing ideologies, beliefs; having a life philosophy; cultural and/or spiritual identification; being culturally grounded.

Resiliency Canada, lead by Dr. Wayne Hammond, is a national organization based in Calgary, Alberta, and has contributed to the current state of practical knowledge on resilience in Canada. "Resiliency Canada strives to advance the well-being of children, youth and their families by generating knowledge about and the ability to assess the resiliency factors and developmental strengths that are essential to the well-being of individuals and the communities they live in." The organization has developed a resiliency assessment and evaluation protocol to understand the strengths related to long-term resiliency. Results from the protocol provide the basis for early identification and the development of strategic action plans as well as a way to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions provided by any community or treatment agency.

Approaches to developing and enhancing resilience, with a specific focus on Aboriginal youth have also contributed to the understanding of the building blocks of resilience for youth in Canada. Circle of Courage is a treatment / intervention approach designed to build self-determination, self-sufficiency and empowerment using the values and models of indigenous peoples. Circle of Courage is based on four primary components necessary to build resilience: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity, which form the basis of intervention and programs for each individual. The approach has been applied in programs and initiatives throughout the country.

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<sup>4</sup> Summary of findings adapted from <http://www.redcross.ca/article.asp?id=19246&tid=001>

## The Provincial/Territorial Contexts:

Despite the absence of national education and mental health policies in Canada, the awareness of the need to build youth resilience is notably similar across the country. This is facilitated by a general commitment in all jurisdictions to the success and well-being of Canada's youth and a national recognition that the country's future depends on the success of all young people.

As an organization dedicated to the promotion of public education in Canada, The Learning Partnership recognizes the education sector as the focal point for promoting resilience among Canadian youth. As such, this project was designed as a partnership between TLP and provinces and territories across Canada, largely through ministries of education, with funding from The Canadian Council on Learning. The provinces and territories included Nunavut, the Yukon, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador. The process leading up to the conference provided an original and comprehensive portrait of provincial initiatives and approaches to resilience involving education as well as health, social services and Aboriginal services.

Most regions had policy frameworks that included resilience, and had undertaken previous work in this area. In many cases, strategies for youth success were treated concurrently with those designed to promote youth resilience. Whether in the form of programs or awards available to youth, policies supporting youth at risk, or school strategies that aim to 'teach' resilience to the students, the initiative revealed that resilience has become part of the educational agenda of Canadian provinces and territories in recent years. Despite varying regional approaches, common themes emerged from the roundtables. The themes, together with related determinants, are listed as follows:

- i. Cross - Government responsibilities
  - a. Need for collaboration and co-ordination
  - b. Possible need for an overarching "youth services" ministry or agency (although a differential perspective argued that a total re-organization would not yield sufficient improvement).
- ii. Roles and responsibilities involved in developing youth resilience:

A range of players and factors have a significant role in promoting resilience. They include: Parents; families (extended); schools; communities; culture/religion; youth; and governments.
- iii. Introducing resilience skills and qualities in schools
  - a. Teacher education programs
  - b. Revised curriculum
  - c. Revised roles and responsibilities of teachers (of limited value)
  - d. Need to create a culture of attachment in schools.
- iv. Characteristics of resilient youth
  - a. Internal assets
  - b. External assets
  - c. Attached to at least one significant, caring adult.
- v. Role of 'key people' in youth resilience
  - a. Important relationships
  - b. Mentors

## 4) Knowledge from the Conference:

The National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth took place within the international, national and provincial contexts described above. Despite the significant body of knowledge that predated the National Dialogue, there had been no comprehensive initiative in Canada. An impressive roster of experts spoke at the Dialogue. The interactive dialogues focused on a number of themes: Bio-genetics; the socio-economic imperative; risk and protective factors; attachment and relationships; evaluation and measurement of success. The major findings and implications of the Dialogue are summarized as follows:

### A) The Basis for Resilience: Bio-genetics and the Socio-economic Imperative

**Dr. Fraser Mustard**, *Physician, Founding Chairman, Council for Early Child Development, head of The Founders' Network*

**The Hon. Tim Sale**, *former Manitoba Minister of Family Services and Housing; Science, Energy and Technology; and Health (established Healthy Child Manitoba)*

**Dr. Charles Ungerleider**, *Director of Research and Knowledge Mobilization, Canadian Council on Learning*

**Dr. Robert Westbury**, *Executive Chairman, Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research*

Dr. Mustard, a physician who spent much of his research career in the field of cardiovascular disease, was an early proponent of interdisciplinary research and is an expert in developmental neurobiological science and resilience. His remarks on epigenetics - the process by which normal gene expression is altered by experience – and the biogenetic underpinnings of resilience framed the opening discussion. Dr. Mustard brought together current research with implication for policy and practice.

Citing Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl's definition of resilience, "the capacity of children and youth to face stress without being incapacitated", he argued that much of that capacity is a direct result of an individual's genetic make-up, which affects, among other things, how individuals respond to stress. As genes are affected by early experience, particularly sensory experience, research on resilience is focusing increasingly on the interplay between genes and experience.

Early experiences can turn some genes 'on' and 'off.' A particular variation of the gene 5-HTT, can protect against the negative effects of adverse experience. But simply carrying the 'short' or 'long' version of this gene, or pairs of it, is not enough to influence outcomes on its own. Environment is critical. When an individual is not subjected to an adverse experience, the gene does not express itself in the same way – it does not play the protective role. Only difficult circumstances appear to trigger the gene. Even more importantly, new research concludes that experiences that alter genetic structure can actually pass those changes on to offspring which means that experience, such as human attachment and the way we demonstrate that attachment, through touch, for example, is critical to fostering resilience.

According to Dr. Mustard higher level brain circuits depend on reliable information from lower level circuits to accomplish their function. Development of the lower-level circuits ends early in life – one of the reasons that early intervention programs are critical. Nevertheless, new research is also finding that higher-level circuits in the brain remain plastic for much longer than originally thought, providing a basis for hope in our ability to influence behaviour and mitigate against adverse life experience.

In summary, Dr. Mustard argued that early experience combined with brain architecture and function:

- Affects gene expression and neural pathways
- Shapes emotion, regulates temperament and social development

- Shapes perceptual and cognitive ability
- Shapes physical and mental health and behaviour in adult life
- Shapes physical activity (skiing, swimming etc.)
- Shapes language and literacy capability.

In Canada today, 30 percent of children are vulnerable: at risk of dropping out of high school, becoming teen parents or ending up on social assistance. Dr. Mustard emphasized the extent to which this statistic touches everyone, and is affecting all parts of our society.

He indicated that the cost to individual Canadians and to our society of poor early child development is \$120 billion a year in crime and violence and another \$100 billion in mental health, behaviour and drug use. By contrast, a universal early childhood education program with associated centres in Canada would cost \$18 billion a year to serve 2.1 million children aged 0 to 6 years. A high quality universal program would involve spending 1.5 percent of our GDP while currently Canada spends only 0.25 percent of GDP. Calling for “equity from the start,” Dr. Mustard indicated that “early human development programs reduce the number of vulnerable children in all social classes.”

Investing in early childhood development programs works and produces a high return on investment. Some countries are embracing the results of this evidence:

- In Jamaica, a study on the mental development of undersized children (low height for age) indicated that by the time they were two children given stimulation and supplements (additional food) caught up with the control group.
- In Western Australia, three years after early childhood programs were introduced, the percentage of children deemed vulnerable fell to 14.3 percent in the Floreat district, compared to 47.2 percent three years earlier. In the Wembley district, 11.8 percent of children were deemed vulnerable in 2006, compared to 47.1 percent in 2003, before the early childhood programs.
- In Cuba, programs begin when women are pregnant and continue until children enter the school system. The programs also involve home visits. As a result, Cuban children’s reading scores are two standard deviations higher than the overall mean for all other Latin American countries, and the children’s health is near the top of Latin American countries.

## B) Risk factors / Protective factors

**Dr. Ann Masten**, *Associate Director and Associate Professor, University of Minnesota, Institute of Child Development*

**Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl**, *Developmental Psychologist, Associate Professor, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology and Special Education, University of British Columbia*

A pioneer in the field of resilience, Dr. Masten, is involved in long-term studies on children who are homeless, poor, and have survived wars to determine why some children do well in unexpected circumstances. She defined resilience as “doing well, even though you’ve experienced a lot of adversity and risk,” and explained that resilience occurs when there are enough threats to an individual that those threats could derail their development. She indicated that on an individual level resilience relates to competence and meeting developmental milestones.

Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl works in schools to evaluate programs that support resilience, such as the “Roots of Empathy” program. Dr. Schonert-Reichl stated that resilience can be a characteristic of any system that is challenged and adapts positively to that challenge: a family, a political system, a community, a school.

According to Dr. Schonert-Reichl, some children have an innate, biological sensitivity to grow and thrive, with a calm temperament, lower stress reactivity and the ability to manage well wherever they are. Other

children are wired to be highly sensitive to their environment, and their outcomes will be worse if they are placed in high-risk situations. “The orchids will, however, out-perform the dandelions if they are placed in nurturing contexts.” Although we do not yet know how much these innate sensitivities can be manipulated, we can change the contexts. Dr. Masten also focused on personality which, she said, is the result of many different interactions. If a child is neglected, innate adaptive systems and positive personality will be undermined.

Attachment to a caregiver in the first years of life sets the stage for resilience. Dr. Schonert-Reichl argued that caring relationships are the most important protective factors and they help children gain the skills and mastery necessary to meet their potential. Children who had two or more caring adults in their early lives did even better in school than those with fewer significant adults. Other important protective factors in children that facilitate resilience include: good problem-solving skills; hopefulness about the future and good self-control skills. Effective schools can also provide protective factors as can connections to religious organizations, and the faith or belief that life has meaning.

*Resilience does not simply reside in a child; it is born through a process involving a child’s characteristics and the dynamic involved in relationships. Every child needs someone in his or her life “who is absolutely crazy about them.”*

Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl

While the early years of a child’s life are a crucial time to nurture resilience, Dr. Schonert-Reichl indicated that other effective opportunities include periods of transition, such as pre-adolescence and early adolescence (when young people learn to regulate emotions, build self-awareness, relationship skills and self-management) and the transition from childhood to adulthood (which is especially important since brain development, particularly the development of executive functions, continues from 18-25).

Dr. Masten also discussed recent findings that it may be possible to correct or re-program adaptive systems within the brain. She cited Dr. Adele Diamond’s research (University of British Columbia’s Brain Centre) on a preschool curriculum that focuses on improving executive function and the attention skills of high-risk children. The research has observed demonstrable results in improving the brain’s adaptive function. Dr. Diamond’s work has also demonstrated that what is genetic may not be “fixed’ for life.

Drs. Masten and Schonert-Reichl emphasized the need for society to support the circumstances and tools that foster children’s competence including children’s social, political and economic situations; child protection legislation; the way children are viewed and treated in their communities; the way communities are organized; the way schools and families relate, and the relationships within them. The following identifies specific approaches that were discussed:

### **i) Parents**

Dr. Masten focused on the critical need for good prenatal care, post-natal care that is sensitive to potential depression, and support for young parents. In addition, paid paternal and maternal leave demonstrates society’s support for the importance of attachment and building resilience.

### **ii) Schools**

Kids do better, and achieve more, when they are happy and have a sense that they are cared for in their school, said Dr. Schonert-Reichl. Youth who were asked about how they know that an adult at their school cares about them cited adults who check back with them, who call them by name, and who are supportive and nurturing.

Schools that create a sense of autonomy in their students help to make them more competent and help them bond to their school communities. Dr. Schonert-Reichl cited the example of **The Breakfast Club** at a B.C. Elementary school, where a group of eighth graders, initially anonymously, did good deeds for teachers and others in the school, raised money and collected items for a breakfast club, fuelling their sense

of accomplishment, responsibility and caring for others. The same eighth graders went on to do well as they made the transition to high school. The skills and sense of mastery gave them a protective factor to weather their new environment.

Schools as well as religious and cultural communities have helped to foster effective parents and teachers, who in turn foster resilience in children. Resilience must also be nurtured deliberately. Children are not born with good self-control skills, for example, which is one of the predictors of resilience. Teachers need support, through strong leadership, that enables them to create an environment that promotes competence.

### iii) Communities

Dr. Masten identified the need to pay more attention to cultural strengths and protective systems embedded in different cultures in order to mobilize their knowledge and wisdom in the promotion of resilience.

### iv) Government

Dr. Schonert-Reichl recommended more financial support (e.g. subsidies) for after-school programs, a direction in which the United States is moving.

Despite the extent of the knowledge of risk and protective factors for young people, a number of other potential risk factors are becoming apparent. Educators are just beginning to explore the implications of new technologies such as video games, on-line messaging, texting, social networks, and others. The imbalance families face between their home life and their work is also a potentially growing risk factor for young people. The potential for risk and resilience regarding these phenomena requires further study.

*"The one critical thing we can do to promote and foster resilience is to make sure every child grows up having a positive relationship with a competent, caring caregiver. Making sure every child has a supportive, positive relationship with at least one adult is the most powerful protective factor we can provide. The bottom-line conclusion ... is that resilience is about relationships."*

Dr. Ann Masten

## C) Linking Resilience, Mental Health and Drug Addiction:

Dr. Gabor Mate, a physician and author, works with drug addicts in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. Thirty percent of his clients are members of First Nations. Dr. Mate has written books on drug addiction, parenting and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), among other topics.

The discussion with Dr. Mate centred on a number of questions, including: What does the field of 'addictions' teach us about resilience in youth? What role do relationships play in the development of resilience? How can we apply what we know about attachment theory to promoting resilience in youth?

His theory of resilience connects attachment – or lack thereof – to addiction. Like Dr. Mustard, he placed great importance on the interaction between genes and the environment, and on the relationship between stress and physiology. He also advocated the need to understand how parents' trauma and stress can affect their children, even physiologically. Trauma is multi-generational, he indicated, citing both Holocaust victims and First Nations' families affected by residential schools.

Addiction, Dr. Mate said, flows from a lack of resilience. His patients have turned to narcotics to blunt their pain and regulate their stress. All of his addicted clients have been sexually abused in the past and often abandoned. Adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, a parent who is addicted, a parent who is in jail and family violence influence a child's chances of becoming an intravenous drug user. If a

child has experienced any of these adverse factors, his or her chance of becoming an intravenous drug user is 46 percent greater than if these factors were not present. He noted, as an example, that the drug addiction suffered by many Aboriginal people in Canada has nothing to do with genetics and everything to do with the massive social dislocation they have experienced.

He indicated that ADHD and addiction have common characteristics. Children with ADHD and drug addicts are unable to regulate their emotions.

*Dr. Gabor Mate has defined resilience as adaptation: the capacity to learn from and grow with negative experience.*

People with ADHD often self-medicate, seeking the calming effect that dopamine produces. ADHD could also be called RDD – Resilience Deficit Disorder, Dr. Mate said. Parents are under increasing amounts of stress, which prevents them from being the calm, caring, nurturing individuals that children need to develop resilience.

Just as ducklings imprint on anything that moves in the absence of a mother duck, human beings also fill their attachment void. Human instinct requires people to be physically close with those to whom they are attaching, and to emulate them. In contemporary society, both parents generally work, grandparents tend to live far from their grandchildren, and the village full of nurturing adults is largely gone. As a result, when parents are not present for their kids, the children will attach to their peers. What gives a healthy parent authority with a child is that the child tries to attach to the parent and wants to please. According to Dr. Mate, once children become peer-oriented, life becomes dangerous because the peer group is not designed by nature to give unconditional love and acceptance. Children thus protect themselves by becoming cruel and by seeking out risky behaviours (such as extreme sports or activities that provide hyper stimulation).

Despite the many societal pressures on young people, especially those at risk of addiction, Dr. Mate provided suggestions to promote resilience. He acknowledged the importance of early identification of potential risk by supporting teenage mothers and argued that drug prevention needs to begin in the crib. Simple interventions such as nurses visiting young mothers are significant. Parental support is vital. In addition, all adults who deal with kids – teachers, daycare workers, physicians, police, social workers – must become attachment figures, not just role models, said Dr. Mate.

Dr. Mate explained that the Roots of Empathy program in schools works so well, as do programs that involve children in seniors' homes, because it is wonderful for both generations, mirroring how life used to be naturally in the multi-generational village.

Dr. Mate argued that parents should not become the school's gendarmes in the home, enforcing homework requirements. Constant nagging and fighting with children over homework undermines the nurturing relationship. He also addressed the role of the community, indicating that we must recreate the attachment village. Attachment relationships need to form between teachers and parents, as much as between teachers and students, so students experience themselves in an attachment network. Although our culture undermines these messages, by telling us that peers are the most important thing for our kids, young people need to be with adults – a message that we can learn from Aboriginal communities.

*“Schools, especially at the pre-school and kindergarten level, need to be not just pedagogical units but also places of attachment and relationship. All adults who deal with kids have to be nurturing adults. Schools need to promote long-term development goals, rather than just short-term behavioural goals.”*

Dr. Gabor Mate

## D) Drilling Deeper into Resilience

Participants had the opportunity to attend three of seven different “break-out” sessions exploring approaches to building resilience in different contexts. The format of the sessions included an expert on the topic and a provincial/territorial representative from the National Conference Steering Committee who served as facilitator. Following the format of the plenary sessions, the ‘breakouts’ were structured as ‘fireside chats’ in order to promote an atmosphere conducive to dialogue. The following identifies a few key messages/approaches that emerged from each of these sessions:

### i) Resilience in Conditions of Poverty:

**“We are more than just our brain.”** *Dr. Anthony Hutchinson, CEO, Brampton Neighbourhood Resources Centre.*

Dr. Hutchinson believes that people can change later in life, although the interventions required are longer and more expensive than developing appropriate tools early. As such, resilience goes beyond biogenetic factors; it also involves managing one’s own resources to address adversity. The social determinants of health, such as social supports, communication and leadership skills, and the propensity for learning, interact with an individual’s predisposition towards resilience. Social determinants of health can be used to foster resilience, he says. But fostering resilience requires intervention. Additionally, to foster resilience in an individual, it is useful to frame a point of reference (by focusing on athletic ability or leadership/communication skills for example). Educators and others can reframe characteristics that others have labeled negative.

### ii) Fostering Resilience in Circumstances of Neglect and Abuse:

**“Child abuse and neglect is a public health issue that affects everyone. It interrupts normal development in unpredictable ways.”** *Dr. David Wolfe, clinical psychologist, RBC Chair in Children’s Mental Health, CAMH, head, CAMH Centre for Prevention Science in London, ON.*

We need to shift our focus from targeting at-risk individuals to universal intervention, because every child needs to know how to develop healthy relationships. We should introduce the topic of healthy relationships in kindergarten, and we should teach media literacy, to help kids understand that violence is not entertainment. Teaching about healthy relationships is “about teaching kids respect.”

### iii) Indigenous Knowledge in the Discussion of Resilience

**“I understand what resiliency is just because of what I look like and who I am, because I am First Nations.”** - *Darren McKee, Assistant Deputy Minister, Saskatchewan Ministry of Education.*

First Nations’ people believe children are sacred beings and that the success of children is seen in the continuity of a successful future. Residential schools, reserves and discrimination have eroded resilience among First Nations people. The current challenge in Canada is how to better treat our indigenous people and how to promote resilience to move forward as a country. Darren McKee indicated that, “We need to recognize and explore the culture of our youth, which is important to validate who we are.”

### iv) A Strength-based Paradigm for Children in Care

**“We need to perceive youth in care based on their potential, rather than seeing them as youth at risk.”** *Dr. Wayne Hammond, President and CEO, Resiliency Initiatives Canada, Calgary, AB.*

Professionals working with youth need to focus on the strengths they bring to the table, not their deficits, says Dr. Hammond. By understanding their strengths and helping them to navigate and negotiate, they will be able to generalize what they learn. We need to prepare young people in the care of the child welfare system to tell their story so others can understand. He also emphasized the importance of relationships for youth. “We need to give kids multiple invitations to relationships at all stages of a kid’s life...Kids change their value systems because they want to be like someone else. We need to invite them into safety,



acceptance.” He believes you can rewrite the effect of experiences as neurological pathways can be changed.

#### **v) Times of Transition: Risk or Possibility?**

**“Schools need to value creativity, and social emotional learning, like self-regulation, rather than focusing primarily on academic achievement or athletic achievement.”** *Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl, applied developmental psychologist, associate professor, University of British Columbia.*

We should support parents and help them understand that during adolescence, young people need a strong connection to their parents, even though they are renegotiating the relationship. It is important to ask young people what they think and engage them in a meaningful way. “We need to learn from each other, and create a broader policy platform to address resilience – a platform that includes community organizations, coalitions, and partnerships. Governments need to promote collaboration.”

#### **vi) Mental health and Substance Use**

**“Messages like “don’t do drugs” don’t work.”** *Dr. Gabor Mate, physician and author, Vancouver*

“The kids who are listening to their parents are not the ones at risk, and the kids who are at risk do not listen to the adults anyway.” Children learn to regulate their emotions through their relationship with a nurturing, caring adult. He cited the issue of sex as an example: “The reason kids have sex is not because they don’t know about it, it’s if their attachment needs are not met. They will move to fulfill them any way they can.”

#### **vii) Business Education Partnerships for Youth Resilience**

*Jean Courtney, Education Officer, Implementation and Training Unit, Ontario Ministry of Education*  
*Kelly Hoey, Executive Director, Halton Industry Education Council*

“Business and education partnerships expand the possibilities for young people through opportunities to gain workplace experience and connect with adult mentors. Strong relationships emerge which foster resilience, strengthen knowledge and skill development leading to increased student learning and achievement, reduced gaps in student achievement and increased public confidence in publicly funded education.”

## **E) Youth Perspectives on Resilience**

**Ronza Jairy**, *grade 12 co-op student at The Toronto Students’ Commission*

**Desmond Merasty**, *high school student, Sandy Bay, Saskatchewan; member of Sandy Bay Youth Council*

**Marilyn Nateways**, *high school student, Sandy Bay, Saskatchewan; member of Sandy Bay Youth Council*

**Bonnie Heilman**, *Saskatchewan office, The Students Commission, Centre for excellence in Youth Engagement*

Three youth panelists spoke at the National Dialogue during an interactive session with moderator Maria LeRose. They were accompanied by Bonnie Heilman from the Saskatchewan office of The Students Commission, a member of the Centre for Excellence in Youth Engagement, which coordinated the surveys and youth discussions of resilience that preceded the Dialogue. Although the panelists were charged with reporting the results of discussions they facilitated with youth in their communities about resilience, the three young people articulated their own feelings about resilience, their personal struggles and the importance of relationships in their lives.

Desmond Merasty, 20, and Marilyn Natewayes, 16, both come from Sandy Bay, Saskatchewan, a Cree community of about 1000 people on the Churchill River. Ronza Jairy, 16, is from Toronto. Despite the difference in their locations and their experiences, all three youths confirmed the importance of relationships with significant adults, either for helping them to survive trauma and difficulties, in the cases of Desmond and Marilyn, or for making them feel secure enough that they could overcome any potentially overwhelming situation (Ronza).

In Sandy Bay, as Desmond and Marilyn indicated, 'resilience' was an unfamiliar concept to many of the young people they surveyed. Once Desmond and Marilyn defined it, the young people responded to the notion of 'bouncing back' from traumatic events and being able to cope with their lives. Many of the youth they surveyed in Sandy Bay did not know what would make them more resilient or what they wanted, in part, as Marilyn indicated, because they were not used to being asked for their input. They found it difficult to articulate their wants and needs. Some did speak about the need for services, such as recreational activities or community centres - places to hang out. Others talked about safety, such as the need for better lighting in their community. Still others called for a return to a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle that relied on the land.

In Victoria, according to Bonnie, youth cited the need for counseling and for an eating disorder clinic. In Toronto, where young people have more services and opportunities, students Ronza talked to focused on the need for adults to be 'real' in order for kids to want to talk to them. They also cited a need for an efficient gang exit program and for a gay/lesbian/straight alliance.

After reporting their findings, the panelists moved, in response to questions, into a discussion of the factors that helped them become resilient despite the stresses and adversity in their lives. In her early teens, Marilyn had difficulty with the transition from elementary school to high school, and she struggled with friendships. Marilyn was so depressed that, for a time, she did not get out of bed. Her community also struggles with a high rate of alcoholism and youth suicide. (In 2007, five members of the community aged 15-31 hanged themselves.) She said that her grandmother - her Kokum (Cree) - helped her through that time. "She told me to get out and do something - don't be sad all the time - live your life," Marilyn said. "I'm a better person now."

Desmond has also struggled with his anger at being unable to live with his alcoholic parents and with feeling suicidal. He too credits his grandmother, who adopted him, as well as a teacher who listened to him at a critical point in his life, with enabling him to survive. By becoming involved in student politics, helping other young people find their voice and writing poetry Desmond found the protective factors that have fostered his resilience. Peer relationships, respecting elders and school are all important for resilience, he told the Dialogue.

Asked what adults can do to help young people, Marilyn stressed the importance of listening to, and acting on what young people say. Desmond and Ronza emphasized the need for adults to see past attitude and behaviour to understand what young people really need. It is important to understand that adolescence is complicated, and youth often don't know how they feel. So when they tell you to go away, don't go far - and check up on them, Ronza and Desmond urged. No matter how angry they appear.

"An adult's role is really never to give up on anybody - it doesn't matter how much you can't get through to this person," said Desmond. "Never, ever give up on your students or your children or your friends' children. Just be there. Even if something occurs when you can't control the situation, just be there. Be that father or the parent they don't have - be that friend."

All three young people were captured by what Dr. Gabor Mate had told the Dialogue about the effects of parental stress on children. That hit home. Desmond and Marilyn urged adults to display more positive emotion - to smile, to be happy, and to remember why they had children in the first place, rather than letting their worries distract them from what is important. Ronza urged parents to be open and honest, and take care of themselves. "You guys are here for us, but you guys have to be okay, for us to be okay," she reminded the adults. Desmond's advice was even more direct: "Just get loose, and remember life. You're supposed to enjoy life."

## F) What Works - Common Attributes of Exemplary Practices:

**Dr. Anthony Hutchinson**, CEO, Brampton Neighbourhood Resources Centre (BNRC)

**The Hon. Tim Sale**, former Manitoba Minister of Family Services and Housing; Science, Energy and Technology; and Health (established Healthy Child Manitoba)

**Dr. David Wolfe**, clinical psychologist, RBC Chair in Children's Mental Health and head of the Centre for Prevention Science, CAMH.

Discussing common attributes of successful practices, policies and programs, the speakers agreed that in the promotion of resilience there is no one model 'that works'. Nevertheless, successful practices tend to have common attributes that help them succeed. They identified four important attributes that are common to successful practices:

### i) Community-centric:

Having a "community-centric" approach involves using a community engagement model of program design and implementation -- people working collaboratively, through "inspired action and learning, to create and realize bold visions for the common future" of their youth at risk. The major attributes of community engagement are:

- A broad representation of the community, such as the health care sector, youth justice, community foundations, education, government, and youth themselves, will help root programs in the community
- Cultural sensitivity in policies and programs (e.g. inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, immigrant community perspectives)
- Identification of passionate champions and predominant community leaders

### ii) Child and youth-centred:

Child and youth-centred public policy and programs place the best interests of children and youth first. Financial resources and community-based supports are necessary to foster children and youth who are "healthy, safe and secure, successful at learning, and socially engaged and responsible"<sup>5</sup>. Important aspects of such policies and programs include:

- A focus on youth-driven programs across ministries, agencies and community foundations
- Listening to the youth for whom the programs are being created
- Helping youth learn to interact and solve their own problems

### iii) Applying a positive approach:

To see all individuals as "at promise" rather than "at risk" is a fundamental shift that means facilitating rather than fixing, pointing to health rather than dysfunction, turning away from limiting labels and diagnosis to wholeness and well-being<sup>6</sup>. Policies and programs should be focused on:

- Holistic development
- Building relationships across boundaries and barriers
- Fostering healthy social and emotional skills to prevent risk behaviours
- Fostering behavioural skills through practice and motivation
- Focusing on the individual and the peer culture
- Preparation rather than intimidation
- Building on the strengths of families and of individual youth

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild/about/index.html#childcentred>

<sup>6</sup> A Strength-Based Approach To Assessing and Building Resiliency in High Risk Youth, Dr. Wayne Hammond, Resiliency Canada, November 21, 2006

#### iv) Governance Structure and Integrated Funding:

Leadership on youth resilience needs to be formalized through a governance structure which mandates collaboration. The formal structure is supported by co-ordinated planning, integrated service delivery and long-term funding across sectors to provide the best possible integration of supports to youth. It is important that there is:

- Recognition for the time it takes for programs to work (more than 18 months)
- Continuous improvement, raising the bar and closing the gap, towards decreasing inequities through targeted initiatives and, at the same time, increasing outcomes for the entire population.
- Flexible and adaptable policy and program delivery models to accommodate varying needs

#### v) Foundation of evidence-based research and evaluation

Decision-making, whether at the government, community or school level, is best supported by the appropriate balance of sound theory and relevant empirical evidence. It is important that youth resilience policies and programs:

- Are based on sound theory and outcome evidence
- Are implemented within a culture of evaluation that allows for 'on-the-ground' ongoing improvement
- Generate accurate information to allow for monitoring and evaluation

## G) Evaluating Success:

**Dr. Wayne Hammond**, *President and CEO, Resiliency Canada*

**Dr. Ben Levin**, *Professor and Canada Research Chair in Education Leadership and Policy, and former Deputy Minister of Education, Ontario*

**Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl**, *Psychologist, Associate Professor, Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia*

Schools, governments, businesses, parents and other community partners are increasingly interested in data to support program improvement, accountability for results and impact and a return on investment. While researchers, policy makers and the public appreciate that evaluation is necessary to understand the impact of policies, programs and initiatives, conducting evaluation can be challenging and costly. Panel participants and the audience discussed the complexities of evaluation. Issues included collecting and disseminating research evidence, evaluation metrics for treatment and program delivery and knowledge mobilization.

*Listen to the stories people tell as the point of departure for understanding what might work. In order to successfully evaluate what works, it is necessary to be prepared to listen to what people think.*

#### Collecting the Evidence:

Dr. Ben Levin addressed the issue of evaluating programs through a 'resiliency lens,' focusing on the importance of evidence. He explained that in the policy / political world evidence that supports the benefit and success of programs matters a lot. Although collecting evidence through evaluation takes time it is necessary for the accuracy of the evaluation. As the evidence accumulates its significance increases. Single studies are also not reliable. Conducting multiple studies leads to a gradual convergence of results, which means they can be trusted.

Discussion also centred on the importance of conducting evaluation at the appropriate point in order to give programs time to work before they get evaluated. The quality of the measurement affects the outcome of the evaluation. (While a randomized controlled approach is regarded as the 'gold standard', it is not necessarily the most viable option. The choice of evaluation should take into account the goal of the evaluation and the target audience for the intervention). Finally, it is important to get funding for evaluation to ensure that the evaluation is included in the process.

Discussion also centred on the need to make a connection between the knowledge that research generates and what we do in our institutions every day. It is time to stop funding pilot projects and start changing mainstream projects and institutions. We must do a better job at evaluating the pilot projects and programs that already exist in order to gather the evidence that will produce real effects.

### **A Strength-Based Model of Assessment and Evaluation:**

In dealing with youth 'at risk' Dr. Wayne Hammond emphasized the importance of focusing on potential resilience and protective factors rather than on the negative behaviours of children and youth in the evaluation of young people in high needs communities.<sup>7</sup> He has developed a child and youth resilience framework (Donnon & Hammond, 2007) that is grounded in research on child and adolescent development in resilience, risk prevention and protective factors. These factors include, for example, parental support, parental experiences, peer relationships, community cohesiveness, and commitment to learning at school, school culture, and self concept. The more resilience factors or developmental strengths young people have, the more likely they are to make healthier choices and avoid risk-taking behaviours. The framework includes intrinsic and extrinsic strengths. The strength-based paradigm for evaluation of resilience "offers a different language to describe children's and families' difficulties and struggles. The new paradigm avoids labeling and assumes power to children and families to help themselves as well as casting service providers as partners rather than as experts, authorities, initiators and directors of the change process."

### **Evidence-Based Evaluation:**

Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl discussed evidence of program effectiveness in the area of resilience promotion. She dealt with the importance of evaluation, the different types of evaluation that are warranted for specific programs at specific points in the program's implementation and criteria for determining evidence of a program's effectiveness.

She viewed the shift from "focusing on kids who have faced adversity" to a model based on "positive youth development" as a better approach as it includes a broader spectrum of young people. With a focus on issues concerning evaluation of programs that help young people develop resilience, she warned that there is pressure to jump to outcomes evaluation too early in a program's progress, resulting in "death by evaluation" for the program. It is therefore important to address the different phases of evaluation. She indicated that it is also important to evaluate program implementation, particularly because of the possibility of variation in implementation by the teacher or the person who delivers the program.

She also identified elements necessary for good program evaluation: Participation of the program in the evaluation (university participation can be a barrier and can marginalize the groups to be evaluated); a representative sample size; psychometrically strong tools; inclusion of the voices of young people in the evaluation; a focus on how to change a process or system as opposed to an individual.

Programs that foster resilience have enormous potential. Resilience as a construct is not hampered by a single theory. It is based, instead on the idea of focusing on 'positive youth development' such that if a child faces adversity, he or she will be able to bounce back. Dr. Schonert-Reichl is involved in the Cooperative for Academic, Social and Cooperative Learning (CASEL), an organization that works to advance the evidence-based practice of social and emotional learning (SEL) in schools. They have developed valuable rubrics for schools in the area of research and training in implementation and assessment.

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<sup>7</sup> Hammond, W. "A Strength-Based Model of Assessment and Evaluation", The National Dialogue on Resilience and Youth, 2009, Winnipeg.

### **Knowledge Transfer and Mobilization:**

Communicating evidence and results to decision makers and to the public is essential to ensure that valuable programs receive funding. Comments by Dr. Levin and by Dr. Schonert-Reichl addressed the importance of communication. Effective knowledge mobilization requires creativity. In some circles, researchers are developing two-page summary reports instead of 25 page journal articles. Although short reports are a valuable tool for educators and researchers, academics are not trained in brief knowledge translation. Writing journal reports is not likely to result in wide public reception. Consideration should include how people might want to receive information including multiple forms of written materials and conversations.

It is important to listen to the people bringing together knowledge. It is also important to listen to unique ideas, step back, and rewrite positions based on what people say. The voices of young people must also be included. Having different perspectives helps to make research credible. People want (and need) data and numbers, but they also remember stories of human interest that engage the heart. Stories can be the key ingredient for political communication. The communication task is to shift to a more holistic message.

The most neglected part of the process involves the 'third parties who communicate to the public' (e.g. the media). Political communication requires an emotionally charged focus. Youth at risk is a focus because it engages people. It is essential to connect with people in order to convey the importance of an issue. The term 'resilience' may need to be supported with other concepts, such as poverty, or youth at risk to engage. An effective strategy for knowledge mobilization and public engagement is to talk to people in the community as they can be powerful messengers of the research message.

## 5) Policy Implications – Moving Forward

A myriad of policy implications and recommendations for moving forward came out of the national dialogue. To ensure that the focus remains on the most significant suggestions and to promote the greatest possibility for future action, the following identifies four of the most compelling findings from the conference.

### Recommendation 1: Focus on strengths and assets to grow resilience

Recent findings suggest that focusing on strengths and assets of vulnerable youth can be more effective than focusing on their deficits. Evidence also indicates that this is especially relevant for periods of transition for youth. Children understand strengths; they need to develop the confidence to express those traits. The implications for pedagogical, therapeutic and community approaches to building resilience in youth are enormous. Teacher training and development, guidance approaches and school and community programs would benefit from understanding and implementing such an approach. Initiatives that foster positive relationships with strong role models should be paramount.

*“The resiliency paradigm seeks to identify protective factors or developmental strengths in the lives of those who would otherwise be expected to be at risk ...”*

Dr. Wayne Hammond

### Recommendation 2: Emphasize early learning as a foundation for resilience

*“It is absolutely necessary for this country to invest in early intervention. Otherwise, our financial future is at risk – not just our human capital, but our financial capital. These are the kids who are going to lead our world, and if we’re not helping them cope with that world, we are going to be in trouble.”*

Dr. Robert Westbury

Ensuring optimal nurturing and development in the early years of a child’s life is arguably the most effective way to foster healthy, resilient children. This requires healthy and nurturing parents at the pre-natal and post-natal stages; the promotion of strong parenting skills; providing opportunities for early learning and healthy early development. Facilitating positive early childhood development is good for children, for families and for society at large from a societal, cultural and economic perspective. Children ‘are the future’ and it is essential that they be prepared to succeed.

Not all parents, however, are able to provide a nurturing environment that promotes childhood well-being. As a society we (schools, communities and governments) need to provide programs to assist vulnerable parents; we need public policies to help nurture infants; we need a national strategy that provides for affordable and high quality early learning opportunities that provide all children with the tools to be resilient in life and to succeed in school and beyond.

### Recommendation 3: Build programs and strategies on a foundation of mentorship

*"It is amazing to me that some of the wealthiest countries in the world like the United States (and Canada) are not providing the fundamental nutrition and support for child development, and we're paying a huge price for it in terms of not just mental health problems and children dropping out of high school, but vast amounts of lost capacity."*

Dr. Ann Masten

Despite the foundational role of genes and their relationship to early experience and the early years of a child's development, researchers, scientists, and mental health professionals are uncovering new information on the ability of the brain to change throughout life's course. Because of the flexibility of the brain, resilient behaviour can be learned at all stages. The relationships children and young people have with significant adults in their lives can be transformative. When asked what constitutes the most important factor in the promotion of resilience in youth, conference speakers and participants unequivocally identified the presence of a positive relationship with a caring and nurturing adult.

The implications of this are clear. Programs that increase the potential for young people to come into contact with mentors, be they guidance councilors, teachers, coaches, youth workers or others, are crucial. In addition, people who work with children should view themselves as being responsible for the outcomes of children and youth. Every adult that touches a child is responsible for their social and emotional outcomes.

Implications of the importance of mentors are not restricted to the policy milieu. Individual responses are also crucial. For example:

- Ten by two (10x2) provides a useful technique for teachers. The teacher makes a commitment to talk to a student with whom the relationship is poor about something of interest to that young person for two minutes a day, over the course of 10 days. The results can be outstanding.
- Change in a school can be initiated through the conversations of the staff room, rather than just through staff meetings. In the staff room, teachers can talk about students from the perspective of being their parents.
- High schools may require more attention in this area than elementary schools as it tends to be easier for adults to develop relationships with younger children.
- Teenagers tend to listen to peers more than to adults. Peer coaches are an effective tool for engaging those who are able to help other students and for the students needing help.

### Recommendation 4: Mandate partnerships across governments and communities to promote resilience in youth

Promoting resilience in youth, as a means to helping young people succeed in school, in work and in life, requires the combined efforts of parents and families, schools, communities, researchers, governments and the youth themselves. Speakers and participants identified elements necessary for partnerships to succeed in the promotion of resilience in youth:

- **Involve youth:** Policy-makers, educators and others who work with youth need to involve youth. It is essential to get their perspective on what is important to them and about what they need and want. Talk to youth, request feedback about what educators are doing, be prepared to listen



and take them seriously. Bring the youth voice to the table and do not dismiss them if they don't know how to express themselves or articulate their needs accurately. Instead, teach them how to use their voices well.

- **Connect communities and schools:** Communities and schools can both own the work of promoting resilience. We need to return to how we support children and families and find a balance between what institutions need to do and what people need to do in their own lives. Coordination and developing partnerships throughout the education and social services system is essential. A major systemic restructuring is not necessary to establish workable and effective relationships with multiple partners.
- **Maximize existing networks:** People that are committed to building resilience can work with existing networks and coalitions – healthy schools, safe schools, school/law enforcement partnerships. Resilience is relevant to all three – to mobilize the structures that already exist.

We need a better process of mutual learning – bringing people together as this Dialogue has done to share ideas and learn from each other. A National Summit on Youth Resilience, involving educators, parents, youth, youth justice advocates, mental health professionals, immigrants, anti-poverty organizers, business people, policy-makers, politicians and community leaders, should meet to develop and endorse strategies, and form coalitions to put those strategies in place.

Draw civil society into the discussion – make others understand why they have shared interest and how fostering resilience affects them. Get diverse people and organizations speaking the same language of resilience.

- **Lobby government / politicians:** “Research doesn't vote – politics works by mobilizing people.” Once people, including parents, are talking politicians will listen.

*“Schools can only do what schools can do with the resources they are given. Schools do not do a great job with children who come in with great disadvantages in language and affect. A tiny proportion of those coming in who are high risk graduate as expected. That's a public policy failure – it' not a knock on education.”*

The Hon. Tim Sale

**Cortney participated in the National Dialogue. This is her story:**

*Cortney will never forget standing rooted in her father's kitchen, terrified that the schizophrenic man's screams would escalate until he hit her.*

*Cortney was 12. Child welfare workers had placed Cortney and her younger brother with their father after a rocky six years of women's shelters, not enough food and inadequate clothing under the care of her mother, who struggled with depression. When her mother left the family, children's services was called in.*

*But no one asked Cortney and her brother if they wanted to live with their father, or investigated their new living situation. The nightmare lasted a year. It only ended when Cortney told a teacher at school about her situation. The school called The Children's Aid Society and Cortney was taken into care. Her brother followed a few months later.*

*Cortney was placed in a foster family that had all the superficial attributes of a healthy upper middle-class family. There were nine foster kids in the home – mostly teenage boys. The foster mother collected them. But the foster home did more damage in three years than Cortney's parents did in 13 years, she says.*

*Cortney's salvation came in the form of a gruff high school teacher whose home she passed as she walked to school every day. Often, he would give her a ride. One particularly bad day, she was contemplating suicide. He asked her what was wrong. And he listened.*

*"Thank God, he just sat there and listened to me as I poured my heart out. Just listened," Cortney says. She made it through the day because he said he was there to help.*

*Today, Cortney is an example of resiliency embodied. She is a human resources coordinator in Alberta, who attends university part-time in the evenings, and has worked with the Alberta Children's Services Ministry.*

*She credits that teacher who listened as the beginning of her ability to change her life.*

*With the teacher's help, Cortney began to get counselling. She used the counselling sessions to 'plan an escape,' she says.*

*At 16, Cortney moved out and stayed with a cousin and older brother. She convinced her social worker to help her find some supports in Alberta, and took a train to Calgary - as far away as she could get. She finished high school while living on her own, with support from the province's child welfare department. She graduated from Grade 12 with Honours and got scholarships to go to university.*

**Cortney's message:**

*Policymakers and people who work with youth need to think about how to involve youth in the process. Ask the youth what they need. Ask them for feedback on what we are already doing. Talk to youth in care. And if you ask the question, be prepared to listen to the answer.*

## 6) Appendices

### Appendix A: Costs

#### The Learning Partnership Statement of Revenue and Expenses

National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth  
May 1, 2008- Dec 15, 2008

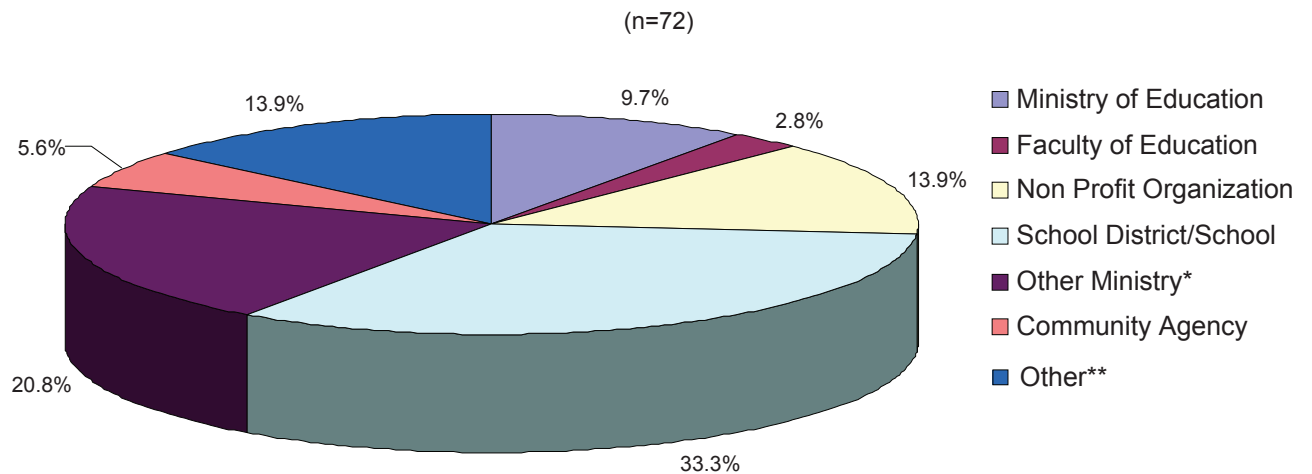
<b>Revenues:</b>	<b>Total</b>
CCL	200,000.00
Agencies and Ministries	27,500.00
Participants Fees	19,875.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>247,375.00</b>
<b>Expenses:</b>	
Salaries/benefits allocation	85,177.16
Direct Conference Cost	92,734.68
Printing	16,295.74
Postage & Courier	2,607.91
Translation	1,427.54
Travel	15,101.45
Administration & O/H Allocation	42,921.39
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>256,265.87</b>
<b>Deficit</b>	<b>(8,890.87)</b>

## Appendix B: Evaluation Report

Conference participants were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire designed to assess the value and success of the conference. This evaluation report provides data on the participants (delegates) and summarizes the results of the evaluation questionnaires.

### 1. Participant Data:

Figure 1: Participant Affiliation (as identified on the evaluation surveys)



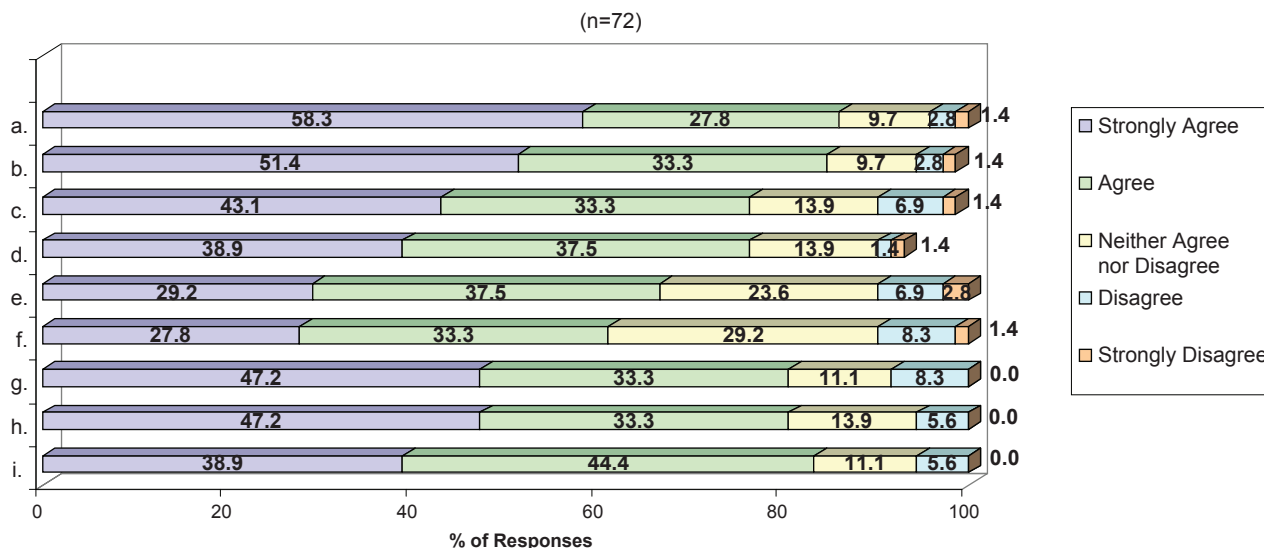
\* Child and Youth Services (2), Family Services and Housing (1), Health (6), Justice/Public Safety (4), Labour (1), Labour and Immigration (1)

\*\* Health (4), Post-Secondary Institution (2), Social Services (2), Teachers' Federation (1), N/A (1)

### 2) Evaluation Results

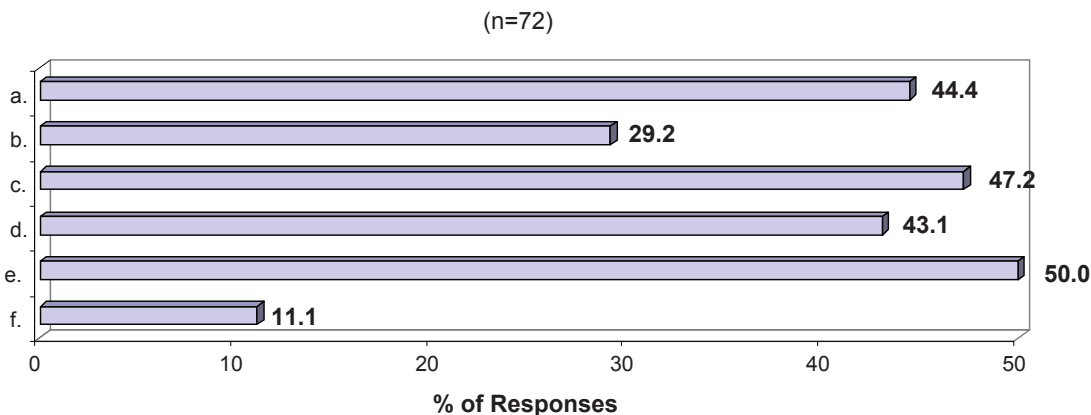
#### i) The National Dialogue.....

- was a successful forum for learning more about resilience
- identified important research on resilience
- involved the right mix of participants, range of stimulating speakers/facilitators
- met the objectives
- provided me with an opportunity to express my views
- examined practical strategies
- will be of value to me and my work
- made me think about what I can do differently
- allowed me an opportunity to network and meet key people



**ii) In your opinion, what should be the next steps after this National Dialogue?**

- a. Another National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth
- b. Another National Dialogue on a different topic
- c. Smaller local conferences
- d. An opportunity for online dialogue
- e. Some form of regular communication, e.g. newsletter
- f. Other



**iii) What would be the most important follow-up that could be done after this conference? Would you like to participate in any follow-up work?**

The overwhelming theme of these responses focused on the need to maintain a dialogue and bring greater attention and understanding to the topic of resilience.

*"Dialogue is so important and helps us mobilize to take action individually and collectively."*

*"We need to bring understanding of developmental factors (Dr. Mustard) and risk factors (Dr. Maté) to teachers and principals and to young parents. Basically more education for people who work directly with children."*

Delegates indicated that they would like to receive information on the findings of the event as well as notifications on research and initiatives in this area. They would also like to continue building relationships with other participants.

*"A plan to follow-up this conference is to stay connected with all participants and uncover their resilience/community connections; report on how effective they feel their work is in their community."*

*"The dialogue created an opportunity for participants to talk about resilience. To follow up it would be useful to see programs which build on youth resilience in their work – in action. Learn from their experiences, successes, learning."*

Respondents felt that more and stronger partnerships need to be built between sectors and specific communities (i.e. Aboriginal, youth, low-income, etc.)

*"... a great deal of the resilience work and research is in health care and many of the youth at greatest risk are not in school but do interact with health care – you need to broaden the inclusion to tap other expertise."*

#### **iv) How will this National Dialogue influence what you do in your work?**

Most respondents expressed that the National Dialogue provided them with new strategies, tools and perspectives towards their work and how it relates to resilience.

*"As a relatively new research(er) in this area, I have a much better understanding of what resilience is and how it can be measured."*

*"It put words to many of my values. Values are the basis of how the work gets done. Now that my values are better articulated, I can rally others around making changes."*

Delegates stated that they would share this knowledge with colleagues and clients to build a better understanding of resilience within their networks.

*"I (sic) will help me talk to my staff, community and school division about the importance of resiliency and understanding what it is and how it is developed. It further helps me understand my students – all children better."*

A few participants felt that the event revitalized their commitment to their current work.

*"It gives energy to go home and keep doing the training work of nurturing/loving/guiding our youth."*

#### **v) Please provide any other comments and/or suggestions about the National Dialogue.**

Participants praised the conference, particularly the speakers and format, and were pleased with the level of organization and knowledge shared during the event.

*"This was an interesting and important learning opportunity. Collectively we can utilize this knowledge to improve services to youth. The organizers and volunteers did an outstanding job. Great presenters / panels. Thank you."*

*"Although retiring after 39 years as an educator, 29 as an elementary principal, this conference gave me renewed motivation to stay involved in education at a different level – one which will have an impact on more of our "at promise" kids."*

Of those who provided suggestions, most indicated that they would have liked to see more diversity in the experts and participants. This applied to both the sectors as well as the populations present.

A small representation of respondents felt that the agenda was too full. Another grouping noted that they would have liked more time during the event to hold further discussions with speakers and other participants.

*“There was a lot of information and activity packed into a short time. I believe more time with smaller groups would allow more dialogue and create more input from more diverse participants.”*

**vi) Please explain the type of the type of follow-up that would be of most value.**

The most common comment addressed the wish to maintain communication with conference participants. Respondents stated that they wanted to receive updates on resilience work (e.g. research, programs, etc.) as well as have the opportunity to connect with delegates in the future.

*“Please continue to have more dialogue on this topic!! Please don’t make this a one-shot intervention.”*

*“...determine what groups / agencies have attempted to do re: resilience. Maybe online newsletter would suffice, with contributions on ‘what’s happening’.”*

Another dominant comment emphasized the importance of sharing this information with stakeholders who did not attend the National Dialogue. This would include outreach to groups such as decision-makers, educators, parents, etc.

*“Any further dialogue needs to include decision makers and representatives of the ‘influences’ behind the decision makers – the reach/needs to be extended.”*

*“Addressing the gap between policymakers and practitioners convincing the government that addressing resiliency is fundamental to improving student learning and youth development.”*

One group requested that The Learning Partnership (TLP) host future dialogues, particularly at the local level, to further discuss resilience.

*“National Dialogue to work toward developing a broad-based strategy that can later be translated to regions/communities.”*

*“I think that a smaller local conference would help solidify resiliency at the grassroots levels where it needs to be promoted.”*

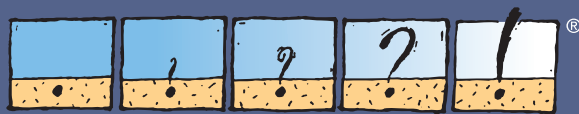
A few respondents intended to follow-up on resilience action plans.

*“In my conversations with my peers as a result of this dialogue we are already developing action plans in how to educate educational leaders on the topic of resilience. This is both local and provincial levels.”*

**Conclusion**

Overall, the comments shared in the National Dialogue on Resilience in Youth evaluation surveys were extremely positive. Participants were especially complimentary with regard to the contributing speakers as well as the format of the event.

Delegates indicated that resilience is a critical concept in working with youth and feel that it needs to be explored on a deeper level by a broader audience. They would like to continue communicating with The Learning Partnership and other participants. While the primary venue for further contact would be electronic, many expressed the need for future events as well.



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