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By Julie Winkelstein
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“40 years of resilience research tells us that when the focus is on youth development, most young people, even those challenged by multiple risks and adversities, not only survive, but grow into thriving adults.”

-Bonnie Benard, Power-Point presentation at Albany Youth Health Summit, January 7, 2006

I recently attended the 1st Annual Youth Health Summit, sponsored by the Albany Unified School District (AUSD). Along with students, parents, community members, health-care professionals, teachers and AUSD staff, I listened to speakers and participated in two small group workshops. The focus of this year’s event was resiliency – the ability of a child to prosper regardless of the circumstances. This kind of approach, which emphasizes what is going well, is a relief from the usual and thorough description of all that is going wrong. There is optimism inherent in examining the positive, and from this optimism we can derive ways of being and acting that will help to guide our upcoming generations.

The day started with a brief announcement by Marla Stephenson, who is the assistant superintendent of the Albany Schools. Ms. Stephenson spoke of the “long-term commitment to the well-being of the students

we service in this district” and the workshop’s goal, which was to “talk about what makes a child able to cope.” She then introduced Bonnie Benard, who has spent 24 years working in adolescent health risk behavior prevention and is the author of a new book, *Resiliency: What We Have Learned*.

Ms. Benard’s presentation covered some of the problems with risk focused prevention, such as the fact that it labels youth and it promotes a lack of belief in young people capacities. According to her, one study showed that 2/3 of voters have negative things to say about adolescents. And, all of this, she added, has played into hopelessness. It is important, she told us, to instead look at resilience, which she defined as “healthy development despite challenges, risks and adversity.”

The rest of her presentation gave examples of various studies that have been done on this topic and the link between

resilience and family, community and schools. She discussed ways that schools can participate in providing the kind of caring relationships, high expectations and meaningful participation necessary to help our children become or stay resilient. She also looked at the School External Assets for Albany, which were taken from the Fall 2005 Albany City USD California Health Kids Survey.

The statistics in this report include information about student risk behaviors, as well as the assets. For the assets, students were asked to respond to three statements that relate to school. The first covers the presence of a caring adult; the second, high expectations of an adult; and the third, meaningful participation. Albany scored well on the first two, but – like the rest of the state – not as well on the third.

After the talk, we spent time in small group discussions,

where we were asked to use our own experiences to help understand this idea of resilience and to come up with concrete ideas for ways the schools could help the students.

There are many ways to approach the issue of improving the health and well being of the young people in our city.

To me, the very fact that so many people attended this workshop is a sign that Albany is a community that cares. The room was full of concerned adults and participating teens and the interaction of all of us certainly reinforces Ms. Benard’s quote from Urie Bronfenbrenner (Cornell University professor of Human Development and Psychology until his death in 2005): “The critical test of the worth of any society is the concern of one generation for the next.”