

# Shifting the Paradigm from Deficit Oriented Schools to Asset Based Models: Why Leaders Need to Promote an Asset Orientation in our Schools

Shannon Renkly

*South Dakota State University*, [shannon.renkly@k12.sd.us](mailto:shannon.renkly@k12.sd.us)

Katherine Bertolini

[katherine.bertolini@sdstate.edu](mailto:katherine.bertolini@sdstate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/ere>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Secondary Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Renkly, Shannon and Bertolini, Katherine () "Shifting the Paradigm from Deficit Oriented Schools to Asset Based Models: Why Leaders Need to Promote an Asset Orientation in our Schools," *Empowering Research for Educators*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 4. Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/ere/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Teaching, Learning and Leadership at Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Empowering Research for Educators by an authorized editor of Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange. For more information, please contact [michael.biondo@sdstate.edu](mailto:michael.biondo@sdstate.edu).

# Shifting the Paradigm from Deficit Oriented Schools to Asset Based Models: Why Leaders Need to Promote an Asset Orientation in our Schools

SHANNON RENKLY

KATHERINE BERTOLINI

South Dakota State University

## Abstract

*Schools often focus solely on risky behaviors exhibited by students, causing the school to act reactively rather than proactively. Student learning and growth must be the top priority of a school, and this can only be done by deliberately identifying and building up student assets. This asset model becomes even more important during the middle years of education. Introducing supportive adults into students' lives is an effective method of building assets, while creating the potential for community involvement at the same time. School leaders must take charge of promoting asset-building in their school while also modelling asset development with their staff.*

## Introduction

In our world, it is common practice for people to focus their attention on what is broken and how to fix it. This causes people to work in a system utilizing a deficit model. While other businesses may thrive with the deficit model, education is not one of them. When schools focus solely on at-risk behaviors exhibited by students, they tend to work reactively rather than proactivity. Within a school, where the ultimate goal must be student learning and growth, this method is wildly unsuccessful. Rather, schools must focus on identifying and building up students' assets to create positive development. This "positive development emphasizes strengths over weaknesses, resilience over risk, and assets over deficits" (Rose, 2006, p.236).

### Deficit vs. Asset Model

According to Rose (2006), a deficit model is one that focuses on what students cannot do. If a student is underachieving, those that work from a deficit model believe the failure is because that student is not trying hard enough (Lombardi, 2016). When working from a deficit perspective, the practices and assumptions that emerge tend to cover up the abilities of students and teachers (Weiner, 2006). On the other hand, an asset model, or abundance model, focuses on what a student can do: their strengths, skills, talents, interests, and competencies (Alber, 2013; Rose, 2006). As Weiner (2006) suggests, it is extremely important that schools encourage all educators to examine and challenge tacit assumptions. "We can make powerful changes when we break through the pervasive influence of the deficit paradigm and recognize the untapped strengths of students and teachers" (Weiner, 2006, p.70).

### Leadership

We promote an asset model for both students and staff. Touching on multiple Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, the asset model fits nicely into the framework of successful leadership (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2011). In order for an entire school to work toward an asset model for student and teacher success, it must be included in the shared vision, mission, and goals of the school, which is the context of the first ELCC standard. An asset model addresses ELCC standard 2 in two key areas. The asset model "promotes the success of every student by sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning through collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment with high expectations for students" (NPBEA, 2011, p.9). When the asset model is utilized through teacher evaluation, it also helps in "developing and supervising the instructional and leadership capacity of school staff" (NPBEA, 2011, p.9). Additionally, when an entire community supports an asset model, there are numerous possibilities for community-parent-school partnerships as stated in ELCC standard 4 (NPBEA, 2011).

We envision asset models emerging from the transformational leadership model shared by Lunenburg and Ornstein (2012). We believe leaders must passionately share this vision to help transform stakeholders' thinking from a deficit approach to an asset-based approach. Encouraging faculty creativity to foster students' assets and work proactively is a first step in shifting this paradigm. Asset focused expectations must be modelled with faculty and staff by identifying *their* assets to determine how they can contribute to the school and community.

## Analysis

### Importance of Assets

Students' problems that are induced by risky behaviors and choices are known to be related to each other. When one at-risk behavior shows up, there are typically multiple related at-risk behaviors to follow (Scales, 1999). Even so, it seems the education field is focusing too heavily on reducing risks, when a higher emphasis should be placed on building up student strengths. The

Search Institute has been a leading force in focusing research on the positives we want to see in our youth (Scales, 1999). Through their research they have compiled a list of 40 assets students may have, categorized into what they call internal and external assets. The external assets such as support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time rely on the relationships formed by adults in their lives. The internal assets, on the other hand, are skills that students develop to guide themselves. These include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity. Through multiple studies of over one million students in grades 6-12 performed by Search Institute, they have proven repeatedly that the more assets a student possesses, the more thriving behaviors the student showcases and the less likely that student will exhibit risky behaviors (Rose, 2006; Scales, 1999; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). So why wouldn't schools want to focus on building up those assets to prepare students for a brighter and safer future? As Scales (1999) points out, it is unrealistic to ignore at-risk behaviors altogether. However, a school that focuses most of their energy on asset development will naturally be working toward risk reduction as well.

### **Asset-Building Communities**

Not only do students build positive traits when schools place an emphasis on asset building, but this new way of thinking naturally allows for high levels of community-parent-school partnerships as well (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 2012; Scales, 1999; Scales et al., 2000; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). According to Scales (1999), when schools shed their deficit model, it becomes easier for the community to become involved. Often times, community members become overwhelmed when all they hear are the problems that adolescents have. When the focus shifts to assets, community members can easily work together to build up and nurture positive attributes in youth. This creates what Benson, Leffert, Scales, and Blyth (2012) call healthy communities. "Healthy communities for children and adolescents are places with a shared commitment. They are distinguished as relational and intergenerational places that emphasize support, empowerment, boundaries, and opportunities and a shared commitment to developing internal assets" (Benson et al., 2012, p.16). In addition, according to Bryan (2005), resilience can be fostered in our youth when families, communities, and schools work together to provide opportunities for kids to be involved in the community and build relationships with positive adults in their lives. In fact, Scales et al. (2000) note that student time spent in youth programs is one of the most predictive elements to a child's thriving outcomes. Good youth programs are tied tightly with the community and provide students with access to caring adults, while also instilling the importance of leadership, helping others, and maintaining good health. As Woolley and Bowen (2007) point out, "the present research directly reveals the importance of supportive and caring adults in the lives of youth at risk and stresses the need to create programs and policies to promote adults' in the home, school, and community to be more available to youth" (p.101).

### **Importance of Building Assets in Middle Schools**

According to Scales (1999) and his Search Institute data, the average adolescent possesses only 18 of the 40 listed assets, and this number tends to decrease as the students get older. The data show that the average sixth grader possesses 22 assets and this number decreases continually until eleventh grade, with the largest drops occurring in seventh and eighth grade. Unfortunately, as Scales (1999) also points out, schools tend to provide fewer asset-building resources or opportunities for students as they progress through the grades, beginning in middle school. With these statistics, it is not surprising that success factors in middle school highly determine a student's high school success and likelihood of graduation (Balfanz, 2009). "It is during the middle grades that students either launch toward achievement and attainment, or slide off track and placed on a path of frustration, failure, and, ultimately, early exit from the only secure path to adult success" (Balfanz, 2009, p.13). Therefore, it is essential for educators to build

up belief, effort, and behaviors in middle schools by focusing on their assets. As explained here, this can most easily be done by creating more contact time with positive adults and strengthening family-community-school partnerships (Balfanz, 2009). Building off of that, Woolley and Bowen (2007) suggest mentoring programs to connect students with the community, school activities to create stronger student-teacher bonds, and even a community-wide recognition of businesses to allow parents some time off to be present at school functions in order to create stronger student-parent bonds.

Even without school and community-wide initiatives, teachers play a large role in building students' assets. In fact, as stated by Lombardi (2016), "according to a National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) study, teachers' expectations impact student success more than a student's own motivation" (para. 3). Lombardi continues by providing helpful strategies teachers can use in their classroom to highlight student strengths. These include having high expectations for your students, convincing them that these expectations are attainable, helping them remove their fear of failure by encouraging them to fail forward, setting small and attainable goals, and celebrating successes when those goals are met before moving forward further. According to Alber (2013), personalized instruction in the classroom can build students' assets even further. This can be done by first identifying each child's jewels (skills, talents, and interests) and using these to help the student grow from where they are currently academically, socially, and emotionally. She suggests goal setting, creating learning inventories, allowing students to teach what they know well, and celebrating any positive takeaways.

### **Critical Questions**

While there is an abundant amount of research on how the number of assets a student has correlates to their thriving outcomes, there is still more research to be done. Future research should examine what effects, if any, teaming in a middle school has on implementing an asset model. We also recommend study regarding the sustained effects on students, if any, in a comprehensive K-12 asset model. It would be beneficial to examine how the asset model affects student lives beyond the K-12 system.

### **Conclusion**

We promote research in schools that successfully focus their vision around this model in an attempt to visualize how other schools can make this transition. Advocacy for more frequent positive interactions with adults for every student- whether it be with their teachers, their parents, or community members is another critical element to include in this model. An examination of the research has shown that adolescents are largely influenced by all of the adults in their life (Balfanz, 2009; Benson et al., 2012; Lombardi, 2016; Rose, 2006; Scales, 1999; Scales et al., 2000; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Scales (1999) sums up the vision of asset focused schools by stating, "If we surround young people with respect and love, help them safely explore their talents, interests, and values, give them chances to make a difference in their families, schools, and communities, we're metaphorically letting them jump into our arms" (p.119). No matter how old a child is, they all need adults that are willing to mentor them, catch them if they fall, and encourage them to get back up and try again. This can only be done with an asset model.

### **References**

- Alber, R. (2013, April 2). Tools for teaching: Ditching the deficit model. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/teaching-tool-ditching-deficit-model-rebecca-alber>
- Balfanz, R. (2009, June). Putting middle grades students on the graduation path: A policy and practice brief. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

- Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., Scales, P. C., & Blyth, D. A. (2012). Beyond the “village” rhetoric: Creating healthy communities for children and adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science, 16*(1), 3-23. doi:10.1080/10888691.2012.642771
- Bryan, J. (2005, February). Fostering educational resilience and achievement in urban schools through school-family community partnerships. *Professional School Counseling, 8*(3), 219-227. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=slcepartnerships>
- Lombardi, J. D. (2016, June 14). The deficit model is harming your students. *Edutopia*. Retrieved from <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/deficit-model-is-harming-students-janice-lombardi>
- Lunenburg, F. C., & Ornstein, A. C. (2012). *Educational administration: Concepts and practices* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2011, November). *Educational leadership program standards: Building level*. Retrieved from <http://www.npbea.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ELCC-Building-Level-Standards-2011.pdf>
- Rose, H. (2006, Winter). Asset-based development for child and youth care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth, 14*(4), 236-240. Retrieved from [http://www.iicrd.org/sites/default/files/resources/Asset-based\\_Development\\_for\\_child\\_and\\_youthcare\\_0.pdf](http://www.iicrd.org/sites/default/files/resources/Asset-based_Development_for_child_and_youthcare_0.pdf)
- Scales, P. C. (1999, March). Reducing risks and building developmental assets: Essential actions from promoting adolescent health. *Journal of School Health, 69*(3), 113-119. doi: 10.1111/j.1746-1561
- Scales, P. C., Benson, P. L., Leffert, N., & Blyth, D. A. (2000). Contribution of developmental assets to the prediction of thriving among adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science, 4*(1), 27-46. doi: 10.1207/S1532480XADS0401\_3
- Weiner, L. (2006). Challenging deficit thinking. In A. Canestrari & B. Marlowe (Eds.), *Educational foundations: An anthology of critical readings* (pp. 64-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Woolley, M. E., & Bowen, G. L. (2007, January). In the context of risk: Supportive adults and the school engagement of middle school students. *Family Relations, 56*(1), 92-104. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2007.00442.x