



An At Promise Worldview

By Kathy Marshall Emerson,
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I know with certainty when I first heard the words *at promise*. As University of Minnesota regional director of the U. S. Midwest Regional Center for Drug Free Schools, I attended an early 1990's community prevention meeting in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The local Chief of Police offhandedly commented that we needed to focus on youth as *at promise*. Bingo! For me that opened up all kinds of possibilities. This insight fit my newly developing perspective on resilience in education and youth prevention.

In those early days, in hindsight, I am guessing the Chief probably was familiar with some talk or push inside of youth corrections or juvenile delinquency prevention to explore the idea of youth *at promise*. I never saw anything in print. I began to use that as the focus of what became our National Resilience Resource Center work based at the University of Minnesota.

Labels of all kinds have always been the greatest risk children and youth face. In short kids *at risk*, have been viewed as *problems to be fixed*. Despite previous youth development, education and prevention efforts to characterize youth as resources, to identify strengths and assets, or label who is and is not resilient, an outside-in philosophy has dominated every major system.

My University of Minnesota home base for twenty years naturally encouraged me to hone an entirely different worldview. For me seeing others as *always at promise* became instinctive and natural. Behavior simply did not equal potential or capacity and of course environmental *protective factors* and *internal protective mechanisms* were very important.

My worldview developed as a matter of listening, learning and with my own insight connecting the dots. In 1987 a University colleague, Dr. John Romano, coined and published the ground-breaking phrase *student well-being*. Encouraged by my colleague at the Western Regional Center, Bonnie Benard, I also explored the work of world renowned UM resilience researchers like Drs. Ann Masten, Emmy Werner, and many others. During these early years I had also the very good fortune to be exposed deeply to the Three Principles.

By the time my first website was created we boldly stated: "The National Resilience Resource Center was established to assist school, community, and organizational leaders in learning to tap natural, innate health and resilience in themselves and others. The goal is seeing all students, employees, residents, clients, or organizations as *at promise* rather than as *at risk*."

Seeing individuals as *always at promise* does not happen by switching labels. Learning, living and sharing the principles has been the bedrock gateway for our clients to their own new and life-changing worldview.

In January 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsome signed legislation replacing the words *at risk* with *at promise* in the states' education and penal codes. While I played no role in that legislation, I do believe this is an important step in possibly encouraging adults in corrections and education to relate to young people in a more positive manner. There is a far distance between legal codes and the hearts and minds of professionals, children and youth.

It remains to be seen if adults in California education and corrections will *see all children and youth as truly at promise*. There is a huge difference between legislating a positive new label and *knowing* every person is *at promise within*. Sharing the principles provides a path this worldview.

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