

by Steve Barrett, DIRECTOR OF OUTREACH

HARD-WIRED FOR RESILIENCE: INTEGRAL TO THE WILDWOOD WAY

“Must be willing to fail” seems like an odd qualification for a potential job candidate. Yet a recent posting for an open position on a nonprofit website stated just that. In fact, it was listed as a core value of the organization. What, exactly, does that mean? Why is comfort with failure, or resilience, a desirable skill? And how is Wildwood preparing its students to enter a world that values this quality? Let’s explore what resilience looks like through the Wildwood lens.

Fostering resilience in students echoes from the very core of Wildwood’s founding philosophy. From the start, Wildwood’s program was built to support brave thinkers, learners, and doers. Beginning in the Pods and at every step through 12th grade, students are encouraged to push the boundaries of intellectual and personal comfort, in the classroom and beyond. Whether it’s a 5th grader leading an All School Meeting or a 12th grader working through challenging calculus problems, Wildwood’s caring adults watch their students learn from their failures as well as their successes. Through the practice of reflection, students routinely identify what works and how to handle the detours along the way. Those inevitable challenges and victories cultivate the resilience that they will need for success in college and beyond.

Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck’s work over the past few decades confirms the validity of the Wildwood approach. Dweck has found that individuals encountering almost any challenge tend to take one of two approaches: either a fixed

mindset or a growth mindset. Dweck’s research shows that a person with a fixed mindset sees his or her abilities and intelligence as static, inborn, and something that can’t be changed.¹ Dweck also finds that we describe ourselves as either good or bad at something, with little sense of agency. “I’m just bad at math,” for example, or “She’s just a naturally gifted athlete.” Each example cuts off the possibility that our achievement can—and does—vary based on work, practice, or attitude.

Neurological and psychological studies clearly show that when we struggle and stumble, we have the potential to build resilience. The “fails” can positively change our brain structure, building new neural pathways—but only if we acknowledge and learn from our mistakes. As early as the Pods, students learn to approach subjects, projects, and other challenges with an understanding that learning occurs through trial and error and authentic reflection that leads over time to building understanding and confidence. Mastery of this concept ultimately leads to a change in mindset.

HERE’S HOW IT WORKS



MALLORY KONELL: “BAD AT MATH” IS A MINDSET EQUATION

At Wildwood’s elementary campus, resilience is integral to our Life Skills approach. Specifically, the skills of Courage, Effort, and Perseverance track exceptionally well with strategies to help students bounce back from adversity. For example, when decoding words in a book gets challenging for a 3rd grader or a kindergartener can’t quite master writing his or her name, our Wildwood teachers engage students with Life Skills language—helping students access the ideas as a bridge to developing resilience.

For 5th grade math teacher Mallory Konell, instilling a “growth mindset” is essential to helping her students meet math success by building resilience as they learn. An experienced educator with a deep understanding of how students work, Mallory says she has taught plenty of students who approach math with a fixed mindset—and it’s often not positive.



**KATIE K.:
STRENGTH
OR STRETCH?**

"Math is very objective compared to other subjects," Mallory says. "Kids who struggle when there's a single correct answer tend to blame their own abilities if they have trouble arriving at the right numbers." For students who've internalized a "bad at math" mindset, Mallory says she is there to teach and shift the mindset. Everything from word choice to careful framing of her questions can be critical in helping students change their mindsets and build resilience, Mallory explains.

"I ask a lot of questions in class," she says. "Sometimes kids just want the answer, so when I say, 'How did you get that?' and 'How do you know you're right?' it can be frustrating—but it's essential. Questioning forces kids to consider and tap into their own abilities and prior knowledge."

Mallory's approach is consistent with current educational best practice showing that students develop stronger math reasoning abilities when they build on the mathematical knowledge they already have.

She also prompts students to examine their mistakes closely. "I ask students to reflect on what went wrong," Mallory says. "Was it a 'careless' error, or is it a concept that you don't understand?" If it's the former, students need to be more diligent in their work. If it's the latter, it requires students to look deeper at their understanding and be much more open to learning from their mistakes.

In class, Mallory praises students wisely—helping them to make the connection between effort and

achievement. For example, when 5th grader Grace M. explains the strategy she used to solve a problem that involved simplifying fractions, Mallory responds, "You've found a new reducing rule, Grace!" Grace beams and she does a little fist pump—acknowledging her own accomplishment.

"Some kids grow because they start trusting themselves more," Mallory says. "Others respond to my pointing out what they're doing right—commenting on the process."

After students work with each other to review their homework, Mallory's praise helps to reinforce students' ability to grow and learn as mathematicians. "You all knew these a lot better than I thought you would," she says.

Providing a safe space for students to stretch is key. For Mallory's students, an extra "challenge" problem in homework and class work invites a stretch and provides some evidence that resilience is growing. "One of the best indicators I have of when a student's abilities are growing," Mallory says, "is when he or she chooses to do more of the challenge problems."

On Wildwood's middle and upper campus, resilience is required in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades, as each student participates in the Gateway and Exhibition process.

When students Gateway to the next stage of their academic career at Wildwood, they must honestly assess and articulate their strengths and acknowledge their stretches. In the daunting process of coming face to face with what they've done well as well as what they need to do better, each student thoughtfully assembles a portfolio of schoolwork from the previous two years. On Gateway day, students stand before a panel of their teachers, advisor, family, and friends to explain and defend their learning and growth. And if they don't do it well—and honestly—they don't move on to the next grade level.

This spring as 8th grader Katie K. prepared her first Gateway presentation, she realized the process of assessing and acknowledging her strengths and stretches was more challenging than she anticipated. The biggest reveal: Sometimes being honest about yourself can be tough. "I just wasn't being clear and upfront

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KATIE K.



FOR KYLE, 9TH GRADE STARTED WITH A SLUMP.

about my stretches," she recalls. "I was choosing words that really made them sound more positive than they were." For example, Katie really struggled in 7th grade with writing thesis sentences on her essays—but she didn't come out and say it in the first draft of her Gateway presentation. "I remember my humanities teacher, Alex [Cussen], looking at my work last year and saying, 'Well, this thesis is good—for a 6th grader.' That surprised me. So then he worked with me to help me write a good 7th grade thesis."

Katie relates how she aspires to Alex's honesty in her Gateway. "He was clear, set a high expectation for me, then helped me find my own way," she says.

Katie has resolved to call a stretch a stretch in her Gateway. "I'm going to show those early thesis sentences during my Gateway and then show and describe how I've worked this year to improve them," she says. "I really have to face my struggles—otherwise, I won't grow."

KYLE F.: IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Kyle F. is a standout on Wildwood's upper school baseball team, where he brings a growth mindset to the diamond. He knows that hard work and perseverance brings success. "If I go a week without getting a hit, I know that I need to change my approach—and when I set my mind to doing something, I know I can do better," Kyle says.

In fact, Kyle is using the lessons learned on the baseball field as a required metaphor in his upcoming 10th grade Gateway presentation. And for Kyle, 9th grade started with a slump.

"I was new to Wildwood last year in 9th grade," Kyle shares. "I was used to doing really well in school—always being one of the top students." Math, science, humanities—he'd taken these subjects before. He entered high school at Wildwood convinced by his prior experiences that if he put his mind to it, he'd continue his string of successes.

Kyle's growth mindset was put to the test when he set foot in Pilar Cuervo's 9th grade Spanish class. He'd never taken Spanish before, and it was a genuine challenge. "While I didn't 'strike out' in Spanish last year, I came pretty close," Kyle recalls. "I just wasn't doing well in this class. It didn't make sense." When Kyle realized midway through 9th grade that he was barely passing the class, he understood that he wasn't going to swing his way out of this slump all on his own; he'd need a coach to guide and encourage him.

He started meeting regularly with Pilar. "She told me, 'I care as much about you doing better as you do,'" Kyle says. Her encouragement helped restore Kyle's growth mindset—she praised his efforts and helped him realize what he already did know rather than focus on what he didn't. Kyle says his teacher constantly encouraged him. "When I didn't understand something or got frustrated, she would say things like, 'You know this. We learned it last week,' or she would remind me that it was on my homework yesterday."

This year, Kyle's doing exceptionally well in Spanish and Pilar is still helping him to stretch

himself. "She tells me that I should aim to be fluent in Spanish—that I have that ability and the skills to do it," Kyle says.



JAKE M.: SYSTEMS THAT WORK

In middle school, Jake M. would often get dejected when faced with the assignment of writing an essay.

"I would never know where to begin," he says. "So my ideas were all jumbled and I got frustrated because I never did as well as I wanted." Invariably, his struggles would show up on the page. "My writing didn't always make sense because I would write paragraphs that didn't fit together," he recalls.

Jake attributed his troubles with writing to his belief that he was "not a good writer"—a common characteristic of a fixed mindset.

Now, as Jake prepares for his 10th grade Gateway presentation, he's reviewing the past two years at Wildwood and understanding that he has gained important insight about his learning style. "I realized that I am a very systematic learner," he says. "It's not that I'm not good at writing—it's that now I understand that I do my best when I know where the starting point is and have a map of how to get there."

Jake's breakthrough is twofold. First, he identified a stretch that had been holding him back. Second, he also understands the nature of his challenges. "For me, it's more important to know why this has been my main stretch. It implies that I really understand it—it's what motivates me to do better," he says.

Jake's self-awareness pays dividends in the classroom. Given a challenging question on a recent

assignment in humanities class, he applied his systematic thinking. "It was a question about culture during World War I," Jake says. "Before I started writing, I worked out a template for my answer—my own road map. I ended up doing really well."

For Jake, Wildwood's Gateway process is providing a built-in opportunity that encourages learning from one's mistakes.

THE RESEARCH BACKS US UP

A growth mindset is essential to learning and building resilience, and Dweck argues that we should all aspire to a growth mindset that acknowledges our abilities and intelligence are malleable and responsive to development. In other words, when things get tough, use the mistakes and failures as opportunities to learn. One example: With a growth mindset, "I'll never understand how to add fractions" becomes "This is going to take some time but I'll get it" or "I might ask my desk mate to show me how she did it."

Mindset tends to determine level of resiliency. The more fixed our mindsets, the less resilient we'll be when we struggle and vice versa. Most people tend to vacillate between these two mindsets in assessing skills and ability depending on the task or situation.

**FOR JAKE, WILDWOOD'S GATEWAY
PROCESS IS PROVIDING A BUILT-IN
OPPORTUNITY THAT ENCOURAGES LEARNING
FROM ONE'S MISTAKES.**

LEARN MORE

Hear what the experts have to say on building resilience in students.

CAROL DWECK:

YouTube Search: The Power of Yet TEDx

Carol Dweck's TEDx talk summarizing some of her key research on mindset and its applications for students.

YouTube Search: Khan Academy: The Growth Mindset

Carol Dweck talks with Sal Khan on the finer points of growth mindset.

MINDSET WORKS "HALF FULL" SERIES:

Dr. Christine Carter, sociologist and senior fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, Greater Good Science Center, applies Carol Dweck's research to provide tips for parents.

Google Search: Mindset Works Tips for Parents

ANGELA LEE DUCKWORTH:

YouTube Search: Angela Lee Duckworth TED Grit

Angela Lee Duckworth, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has advanced Carol Dweck's work through her research on grit. She describes the formation of her theories on grit and resilience through her experiences as a 7th grade math teacher in the New York City public schools.

To help children develop a growth mindset, Dweck argues that praising a child's learning process is more effective than recognizing the outcome, achievements, or awards. "When we praise their ideas, their strategies, their focus, their perseverance," she says, "then the student learns that these are the ingredients for success. If it gets harder, I'll just do these things."²

THE LANGUAGE OF RESILIENCE

At Wildwood's middle and upper school, the Habits of Mind and Heart serve to develop and nurture a growth mindset. The Habit of Perspective requires that students grapple with ideas that challenge their thinking—sometimes prompting reassessment of their positions and beliefs. The Habit of Service to the Common Good requires students to look beyond themselves and their own needs to consider the needs of others—a process that involves effort, experimentation, negotiation, and, sometimes, failure.

At every grade level, students are encouraged and required to self-reflect—get in touch with what they do well and what they don't, and need to improve on. The latter, called "stretches"—and not because

we seek to buffer our children from the harshness of "weakness" but rather because stretches imply just that—a circumstance that pushes us beyond our regular bounds of comfort. When we stretch, we become more flexible—and we learn.

As a result, students are prepared for the world that awaits them, in ways that matter. Stand in line at a Starbucks in Silicon Beach, and you might hear a kind of boasting about failed startups prior to a successful business venture. It might sound like this: "I built four apps that tanked before I came up with this one that's taking off."

Someday soon, more than your proficient computer software literacy and the number of languages you speak, how you exhibit resilience might just be the most important qualification on your resume. 

¹ Dweck, Carol S. "Introduction." *In Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, 6-7. New York, New York: Ballantine, 2006.

² "The Growth Mindset." YouTube video, 3:06. Posted by "Khan Academy," August 19, 2014. [youtube.com/watch?v=whOOS4MrN3E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whOOS4MrN3E).



CAMERON R.: BOUNCE FORWARD

When 12th grader Cameron R. spoke in May at this year's Senior All School Meeting, he reflected on his experience at Wildwood by highlighting what he's learned through the failures he's experienced. He was essentially speaking about resilience.

FROM CAMERON'S SPEECH:

As kids, we have developed something natural within us: a desire to be perfect. But as Wildwood kids, we've developed something just as important: the value of imperfection. At Wildwood, I have had the opportunity to learn from my mistakes, and find all the benefits of messing up on the first try. As a class, we have been taught to have a willingness to fail, to fall. But for the Wildwood class of 2015, to fall is to pull back the slingshot. You give a kid in our class an "approaches," just wait till you see what comes next.

Some of my "failures" have led to my greatest successes. In fact, this speech doesn't exist without that first draft that was disorganized and striving to say something about a school that I love. Now, four drafts later, I've found what I want to say: It's hard to find a place in the world where failure is accepted. And to find a school that supports and values failure (on the first try), that's near impossible to find.

The moment Landis hands you your diploma, he's suiting you up in a full Michelin Man-style body suit of pads—not to protect you from the world but to bounce you up when you fall. So let me say this very clearly, class of 2015: Bounce up, bounce down, bounce to the side, bounce back, bounce to the other side. All those bounces are only going to lead you one place: forward.

**WHEN WE STRETCH, WE BECOME
MORE FLEXIBLE—AND WE LEARN.**