

Building  
**RESILIENT  
STUDENTS**  
FROM THE INSIDE OUT



[ 5 proven ways to help students  
build self-efficacy and resilience ]

**JC POHL**  
WITH RYAN MCKERNAN

## WHAT EDUCATORS & EXPERTS ARE SAYING!

"As long as I have known JC Pohl he has always pioneered the most direct path to building resilient students. I can't wait to see the impact that this book makes in our schools, in the lives of our students, and across our country. A must read for anyone who works with teenagers!"

**- Vance Morris, Principal -  
Burkburnett High School**

*"This book is FANTASTIC! Some of the stories literally gave me chills. As a current public school administrator, I think JC's 5 keys to building resilient students would be easy to implement and would go a long way toward improving students' resilience/ability to cope with adversity."*

**- Valerie Pope, Assistant Principal -  
Keller Middle School**

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TEEN TRUTH is an educational services company focused on empowering student voice, enhancing school culture, and building student resilience. Developed from the success of an award-winning student-shot film series, TEEN TRUTH boasts North America's premiere motivational assemblies, leadership summits, and SEL curriculum.

Published by Horizon Entertainment, LLC

*"This book came at such a perfect time. I've been working so hard on building school culture and JC gave me some really great ideas. I'm putting a survey together (as we speak) about finding out which students have a charismatic adult on campus."*

**- Brandy Nez, Assistant Principal -  
Castaic Middle School**

*"School culture is more important today than ever before. The focus on standardized tests, the competition to get into the best colleges and universities and the ever-growing use of social media has put an enormous amount of stress on our students. This is a stress that their educators and parents simply don't understand because they did not experience this time of life the same way. This book outlines the key points in addressing those stressors and provides realistic solutions to implement in any school that wholeheartedly wants to help each student become resilient."*

**- Karie Wimberly, School Counselor -  
Golaid High School**

*"This book is a MUST read for anyone who is wanting to better understand how students and adolescents are impacted by their school environment, their peers, and the adults in their lives. JC Pohl is an engaging writer who does a phenomenal job of sharing first-hand, real life stories that lead perfectly into a step by step process of how to build resilient students. His findings are accurate, practical, and easy to implement. If you are wanting to have a strong, positive influence in a young student's life and school experience, this is the book for you!"*

**- Brittany Neece, LMFT-S, LPC -**

*The stories in this book are included  
to help illustrate our points.  
Some names have been changed  
to protect those involved.*

### **Also By JC Pohl**

*Building School Culture From the Inside Out*

*TEEN TRUTH: Why Youth Have  
Something to Hide*

*RISING UP: Coaching Program -  
Curriculum Handbook*



## Dedications

**JCP:** This book is dedicated to my loving wife. She is one of the most resilient people that I have ever met. She might tell you different, but I know when I am on the road, gone for days on end, it is her will power and grit that keep our two boys (Austin and Avery) happy, our house still standing, and her sanity in check. I love you Callie! Thanks so much for all your support and faith.

**RM:** This book is dedicated to the many teachers who cultivated and directed the humor and creativity of a rebellious and outspoken young man.

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## Foreword

BY **THOMAS MANGLOÑA II**

I met JCPohl the day after I tried to take my own life.

It was total coincidence that TEEN TRUTH decided to visit my isolated village on the island of Rota in the Northern Marianas. He talked in depth about bullying and self-esteem that day.

I was in 7th grade. I remember not wanting to go to school that day very vividly. I had lost my sense of purpose in life. Having moved around most of my life, with my siblings and I practically raising ourselves, motivations were hard for me to come by. However, with my sisters' encouragement, I went along dragging myself through the day. I sat through the assembly inspired by the speakers, especially JC, but it was a sour time, as my mind was eating at itself from my attempt



at suicide the night before. I did not expect to get much out of it. I thought to myself, "This is just another useless school assembly." As time went on, the speakers' personal narratives and those that they told of other students across the U.S. pulled me in.

I started not to feel alone any more. When we reached the end of the assembly, my life was changed -- I felt a renewed sense of purpose after hearing how JC, in particular, has overcome his own adversities and how other students were facing similar situations. At the very end, JC gave away two TEEN TRUTH dog tags, and, as fate would have it, I was given one of those dog tags! I thought I would never see JC again after that day, but he asked more about me and my story and I felt comfortable enough to open up about growing up in a single parent household and working to support myself through school.

He listened. He genuinely cared.

We've kept in touch through the years and he has provided expert counseling to me that supported my journey through high school. And right before I graduated high school, JC returned to my home islands to speak to the students again!

This time, we went out for dinner to talk about my college options. Each and every time I spoke to JC, or when JC spoke to a group of students, the bond and solidarity in the room could be felt. I would not be on a full ride scholarship at UC Berkeley without his involvement in my life as well as in the school system of the Mariana Islands. He helped me find the purpose that always existed inside of me. He helped me find my truth.

To this day, JC's work continues to touch the lives of countless students around the globe. His desire to empower student voice is so important. Similar to my development, his intentional approaches helped me fight off negative thoughts and find growth through my experience in his programs. Just as importantly, JC knows that the work does not rest on students alone. The training of staff, counselors, and long-time educators serves as another example of how holistic his programs truly are.

JC's new book brings to light approaches which not only support identity formation, but also inspire students to be empowered by them. He has helped me see the value in resiliency, and I am sure that his words in this book can help your



students as well. If nothing else, they will learn to...

Tell their truth.  
Find their voice.  
And be the difference.

Just like I did!

## Introduction

It breaks my heart when students tell me they hate school. Even many of the adults I speak with remember their school experience as something awful. "School sucks" has tragically become a national motto here in the U.S., and as I explained in my book *Building School Culture From the Inside Out*, mantras and mottos have a powerful impact on culture and on our perspective.

So when I hear someone regurgitating that sentiment, it really stings. It stings because it isn't productive. It stings because it hurts our perspective on education. It stings because it prevents us from moving forward into a world where "school rocks."

School can rock---it should rock! I loved school.

To this day I look back on it as one of the best times of my life, which is why I've spent the past seventeen years trying to figure out why the

experience was so much different for me than it was and is for such a large group of students. Why did young JC ride his bike to school as quickly as he could every morning while some of his peers faked stomach bugs to stay home? What makes one student engage in every extracurricular activity under the sun while the other schemes up convoluted excuses to avoid them? How come some kids are happy to bump into their teachers at the grocery store, but others pretend not to see them?

If there's a pattern, that means we can unlock the reasons behind that pattern.

My ego might try to tell me that I was just a particularly great kid, but as I reflect on my youth and learn about the experiences of others, several patterns begin to emerge, which is the best news you could possibly hear as an educator.

If there's a pattern, that means we can unlock the reasons behind that pattern. Ultimately, we can build a method for ensuring students will be more likely to jump out of their beds on Monday morning ready to go, rather than hit the snooze

button dreading each school day. We can change the student experience. School doesn't have to "suck." We can make it rock!

We can flip the culture.

Right now, you and I have an opportunity to change school culture in America. That might sound like a lofty claim, but it's true. For the first time ever, we have a method - a series of actionable steps - which can shift the way our young people perceive their school experience.

Imagine what it would be like if every student loved school. Attendance would skyrocket! Extracurricular activities could explode into groups big and powerful enough to leave a lasting mark on your community. Young men and women would start connecting to their peers, their teachers, and their administrators.

One thing I've learned from the years I've spent with all of you teachers, administrators, and counselors is that there is no shortage of willpower, fortitude, or grit amongst education professionals. Make no mistake; it will take work.

This book will help you with that work by presenting a blueprint.



## My Story

I've spent the past decade establishing myself as an authority on school culture. It's been a fantastic journey, full of ups and downs. I've met amazing people, traveled all over the world, and made dozens of true friends. I've seen kids on the brink of dropping out turn their lives 180 degrees and become phenomenal leaders.

However, life hasn't always been a positive experience.

My 20's and 30's were turbulent. Even hellacious. I was laid off twice, both times at the worst possible moments. I also went through not one, but two divorces.

In my mind, I was failing completely. I didn't see any hope. Everywhere I turned, I saw nothing but loss. How could I expect things to get better? Young adulthood is supposed to be a great



time, and there I was with two ruined marriages, a series of dead end stops in my career, and no prospects. My direction in life was evaporating. Even small things went horribly wrong: my truck would break down halfway through an otherwise productive day. A stomach bug would pop up as soon as I'd plan to get back into the gym. Appliances would break out of nowhere on the few days when I'd resolved to gain a little traction. All the while a mountain of bills was piling up.

Brutal honesty time: I thought about giving up completely.

Brutal honesty time: I thought about giving up completely. When you think you're failing, and you let that feeling define you, it's difficult to see any alternative. You begin to think of "failure" as a permanent condition instead of a temporary event. It's a heavy label, and the weight of it was a lot to carry. Eventually I started to think that maybe it would be better to just give up.

Even if giving up didn't mean the extreme of taking my own life, there were a handful of other poor choices I strongly considered. I thought

about just phoning it in at a low stress, low impact, low value job where I could do the least amount of work possible to get by, but the prospect of looking back on my life having accomplished nothing only made me more miserable. I considered alleviating my pain with alcohol or some kind of drug, but the idea of rotting away from the inside out was terrifying.

Where had I gone wrong? How did I go from a child who knew he could do anything in the world to a grumpy adult who only focused on his problems?

At my lowest point - miserable, broke, hopeless, aimless, jobless, loveless, isolated, and afraid - something came into my life. Something simple, but effective. Something small, but powerful: a book.

I flipped it open, figuring I'd scan through it. After all, I'd read self help books before, and none of them had ever really helped. But the very first sentence stopped me in my tracks. It changed the course of my life and ignited a revolution in my soul.

It read, "Life is difficult."

Three words. How can three words be such a game changer?



It led to a realization: I had spent most of my life trying to *escape* difficulty, and that tactic wasn't working. If it had been working, I wouldn't have been in such intense and constant pain. I was approaching everything in my entire life with the wrong mentality. Up until that point, my strategy had been, "The universe is out to get me and I've got to escape the misery it keeps sending my way!"

But here were three words, telling me the exact opposite.

ADVERSITY is not the problem, it is an opportunity to build resiliency.

I realized, NO, the universe is not out to get me. Everyone faces difficulty because life itself is difficult.

ADVERSITY is not the problem, it is an opportunity to build resiliency.

YES, life is tough, but we can rise against those trials, and we can choose how we react to hardship. We can choose to be happy instead of miserable.

There isn't a breaking point we hit where things get easy. What really happens is we get better, and we build up into stronger, more resilient people. I needed to hear that message in that moment, and now I see that almost everyone else on the planet needs to hear it, too.

I read the rest of that book, *The Road Less Traveled* by M. Scott Peck, as quickly as I could. I couldn't put it down. As I navigated through page after page, digesting this new philosophy, I began to find a new direction in life. I had found a map for living!

I spent a lot of time alone, journaling, reflecting, and trying to unravel the mystery of *how* to rebuild my life around those simple concepts.

It took years to find and develop the best practices for building resiliency. A lot of brilliant people had been working on this problem for a long time, and I was hungry to learn more. Eventually, that path led me to graduate school to become a marriage and family therapist. I started sharing what I had learned with students through programs like TEEN TRUTH and RISING UP. It didn't happen overnight, and I'm glad it didn't! The trials I faced were the most important part of my journey. The lessons I learned

from them helped to make those programs even more effective.

This book contains the very best resiliency-building tools and techniques I've ever found. These are the things I wish someone had told me early on in life. I know it will help your students. Maybe it will help you, too.

This book contains the very best resiliency-building tools and techniques I've ever found.

I did the math recently. TEEN TRUTH and RISING UP have reached nearly 10 million students. That's 10 million kids who might never have found a platform to tell their truth, and may have gone years or even their whole lives without learning the lessons we teach on self-efficacy and resilience through adversity. This fact alone has made it easy for me to say that I am sincerely thankful for every broken down truck, poorly-timed flu, brutal rejection letter, silly mistake, and unforeseen misstep that I've endured over the years.

## Key #1: ONE CHARISMATIC ADULT

During my time as a counselor at Camp Phoenix (a camp specifically designed to accommodate and provide care for children with behavioral issues,) I met a student who was going through a really hard time. Let's call him Josh.

Josh came from an abusive household. His dad was in and out of jail, his mom was never around, and his two big brothers fought constantly. The three of them were always at each other's throats, and ready to jump into a kicking, punching, scratching, biting, free-for-all the moment anyone even looked at them in a way they didn't like.

At camp, Josh's behavior wasn't any better. He didn't respect our energy or time. He scared the other kids. He screamed and yelled and tried to run away from the group constantly.

I was warned by several people, “Don’t let him be alone. He needs a counselor at all times. And be careful, he may try to bite you.”

Obviously, he had a lot of behavioral challenges to overcome, and I won’t lie...it was a struggle.

Usually the first few days were a challenge for some of them, but after that they’d settle into it and have a great time. We’d see countless children make major behavioral adjustments first, and fulfilling friendships second. It was incredibly rewarding to witness them all relaxing into themselves and their routine.

But after two days of this camp, I was exhausted. I spent so much time trying to prevent Josh from tackling other kids that I felt more like a bouncer than a counselor! Bags were forming under my eyes, because he didn’t want to sleep at night, and couldn’t get up early enough in the morning. I usually don’t get headaches from noise, but I sure did that weekend.

Late into the second day, Josh forgot to take his sunscreen and we had to head back to the treehouse to get it. Wanting to hurry the process along, and without thinking much of it I asked, “Want a piggyback ride?”

Josh thought it was the coolest thing in the world! He jumped up on my back and didn’t let go for the rest of the day!

His demeanor changed almost instantly. He even fell asleep clinging to my back while we were on a canyon hike. If I hadn’t seen the transition myself, I wouldn’t have believed it. He stopped fighting with other kids, he didn’t yell or scream or get upset nearly as often, and he didn’t try to scratch or bite anyone for the rest of his time at camp.

He even started engaging other kids in a positive way.

I didn’t know it at the time, but I learned later that forming that particular type of attachment was the best thing I could have possibly done. I had essentially sent him the message: “Hey, don’t worry. I can carry you. You don’t have to be afraid anymore, because I’m looking out for you.”

By the end of the camp, he was going to sleep on time and investing a genuine effort into the camp’s therapy sessions. He even seemed to get along (for the most part) with his brothers!

His brothers’ behavior began to shift as well. According to their clinical director, the three of them made big strides over the next few months.



Of course, they still faced challenges, but they were much more open and willing to interact. By creating a tiny attachment, they had developed the ability to be a little more open and receptive. Josh had learned through a simple gesture that other people were willing to help carry the weight.

So did Josh just need a piggyback ride to get started in the right direction? Or was there more to it? Clearly a change had taken place...but why? And, most importantly, can we intentionally replicate it?

Josh had learned through a simple gesture that other people were willing to help carry the weight.

## Key #1: Principle

If you take away only one lesson from this book, make sure it is this one: the single greatest factor in a student's school experience is whether or not they have a connection with one charismatic adult.

It only takes one, and it makes all the difference in the world. If we accomplished this and this alone, virtually every other aspect of education - attendance, grades, interest in extracurricular activities, behavioral issues - would certainly improve.

Dr. Robert Brooks has done fantastic research on this, and I highly recommend investigating his work. If you are interested in reading his article, visit this website for a download link:

[www.teentruth.net/  
resilientstudentsbook-resourcelist](http://www.teentruth.net/resilientstudentsbook-resourcelist)

Dr. Brooks has shown that having a single charismatic adult in a student's life is one of the biggest factors in determining future success. Simply





## About the Authors

**JC Pohl** is an award-winning producer and nationally certified counselor who has reached nearly 10 million people in 7,000+ schools.

His work with TEEN TRUTH has sent him around the world, inspiring students, educators, and parents to tell their truth and be the difference. He has keynoted conferences for CADA, TASC, BOOST, NASC, COSA, OASC, LEAD, NCSA, GAEL, NCASA, OSTI-CON, the Texas School Safety Center, and the PTA.

His RISING UP: Coaching Program has reached students across the U.S. and consists of an SEL curriculum used by school counselors, the Texas Department of State Health Services, 21st Century ACE Centers, and Communities in Schools.

Pohl is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in the state of Texas. When not on the road speaking, he offers counseling services to select

## BUILDING RESILIENT STUDENTS FROM THE INSIDE OUT

clients through Austin Divorce Recovery and his private practice. He holds a Masters Degree in Professional Counseling from Texas State University, San Marcos, and has sat on the board of the Austin AMFT.

You can find him on Facebook and LinkedIn or connect directly at [www.jcpohl.com](http://www.jcpohl.com).

**Ryan McKernan** is a comedian, writer, and editor. He resides in Austin, Texas and has convinced himself that he can indeed tell the difference between gourmet and gas station coffee. It is rumored he can hold his breath for five minutes.

An overview of his portfolio can be found at [www.clippings.me/ryanisawesome](http://www.clippings.me/ryanisawesome).

School shootings occur every year. Teens die by suicide each week. Thousands of students are crushed by bullying every day.

Why can some work through the adversity while others can't?

JC Pohl offers a direct pathway to one singular solution: resiliency. It's the ability to take the hits and keep moving forward. It's the fortitude to get knocked down and get back up. In this book, JC offers a blueprint that is guaranteed to unleash the powers of resilience within your students.

Don't wait another minute to read this book! JC's keys to building resilient students might stop the next potential school shooter, save a suicidal student, or remind every bullied child that brighter days lie ahead.

"This book is the perfect recipe for creating successful, healthy, and happy students."

*Brittney Neece,*  
**LMFT-S, LPC-S**

"This book is FANTASTIC! Some of the stories literally gave me chills."

*Valerie Pope*  
**ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL, KELLER MIDDLE SCHOOL**

"JC brings to light student-centered approaches that will support every teenager."

*Thomas Mangloña II*  
**STUDENT, MT. CARMEL HIGH SCHOOL**

### FEATURING

Proven tactics that build resilient students  
In-depth stories that will inspire both teens and adults  
A step-by-step guide to building school culture



JC Pohl is the President & CEO of TEEN TRUTH, a licensed marriage and family therapist, and a producer with over 15 years experience empowering student voice and building school culture in 7,000+ schools.

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