

# Tips for Motivating the UNDER- ACHIEVING STUDENT

By Marilyn G. Parker

**E**very morning Jan entered the classroom amid happy chatter and an air of friendliness. No one could resist her pleasant manner and thoughtful ways. Even the more reserved children found her easy to talk to and fun to be around.

A tall, attractive fifth-grader, Jan was popular with the other students, who often chose her to represent them. The younger children competed with one another to sit near her in the lunch room.

She was also appreciated and enjoyed by the faculty. Her teacher always found her willing to wash the boards or pick up the playground after school.

Jan enthusiastically participated in classroom discussions and studied diligently while her teacher worked with her class or group. However, when Mrs. Smith turned her attention to another class, Jan would work for a short time then become distracted by something else at her desk, begin to daydream, or wander around the room.

Mrs. Smith would ask to see her work, only to find it incomplete. It

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became quite a distraction to the other students, as well as to the teacher, having to frequently stop classes to redirect Jan to her assignments.

At the close of the school day Jan would stuff her homework into her bag and leave the classroom as cheerfully as she had entered. However, the next morning she would return to school with little or none of her homework done, but well armed with excuses and apologies for the incomplete work.

After a few weeks of this behavior, Mrs. Smith felt that she must help Jan change her irresponsible ways. Jan was obviously not performing as well as she could, and she was getting farther and farther behind in her classwork.

Mrs. Smith began by carefully examining Jan's cumulative folder. She surveyed Jan's test scores and read comments by other teachers, who also observed that Jan con-

sistently failed to complete her work, became easily distracted, and made excuses about her homework. Mrs. Smith decided to find a way to help Jan change her under-achieving habits.

## **Defining Underachievement**

When Mrs. Smith described Jan as an "underachiever," what did she mean? After all, scientists tell us that no one uses more than about 10 percent of his or her brain power. Does that make everyone an underachiever?

In general, underachievement in a classroom situation is defined as consistent failure to perform up to reasonable expectations, based on the innate abilities of the student. Since Jan performed well on the classwork she did complete, and scored well on aptitude tests, Mrs. Smith knew that she was quite capable of doing better in school.

## **Characteristics and Identification of Underachievers**

As most teachers and parents are aware, unmotivated and under-achieving students can be identified as those who:

1. Score high on aptitude tests and achievement tests, but do poorly on classroom assignments.
2. Score high on aptitude tests, but have gotten too far behind to

do well at either achievement tests or classroom assignments.

3. Score poorly on tests and do not perform well on classroom assignments.

4. Have too many outside interests that leave no time for schoolwork.

However, both parents and teachers need to watch for those underachievers who are less obvious, such as those who

5. Grasp concepts orally, but do not carry them through to mastery or completion.

6. Have very narrow interests.

Gallagher states that four major underlying traits characterize underachievers and distinguish them from their achieving peers. They (1) think of themselves as being inferior to their peers, (2) lack self-confidence to tackle and complete tasks, (3) do not have the ability to

plan, organize, and work toward a desired goal, and (4) lack perseverance.<sup>1</sup>

Often underachieving students will feel overly anxious and seemingly be unable to control their apprehension. They are the ones who frequently come to the teacher's desk exclaiming, "Mrs. Jones, I can't do this. It's too hard!" Other underachievers make their presence felt in the classroom by becoming the class clown in order to compensate for their lack of self-confidence.

However, other underachievers may go unnoticed in the classroom. These are the "invisible" students who are too shy to ask many questions. They don't cause any trouble, so the teacher "loses" them in the rush of coping with everyday crises. Meanwhile, they quietly fall farther and farther behind their

classmates, and may become so discouraged that they give up altogether.

Teachers cannot rely entirely upon tests and classroom assignments to identify underachievers. They must apply professional judgment to the decision-making process, observing each student carefully, and talking to each child about his or her problems and interests.

But what about children who are too shy to talk about their needs? Sometimes the teacher can get the timid child to open up as they work together to clean out the gerbil

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cage after school, or as they write little notes back and forth about their joys and frustrations.

#### **Contributors to Underachievement**

Lack of motivation has many causes. If the student feels inferior, he or she will probably become perfectionistic and self-critical. This student may not complete assignments because he or she feels incapable of achieving acceptable standards. Often such standards are self-imposed, and quite unrealistic.

Although students should feel a moderate amount of concern about mastering schoolwork, extreme amounts of stress will result in their giving up and becoming underachievers. Such stress is often heightened by impatient or unsympathetic comments made by teachers.

Schools designed for average-achieving students that do not provide for the gifted, learning disabled, or mildly retarded child foster feelings of inferiority and contribute to underachievement. Such schools value conformity and

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allow little opportunity for student choices or initiative. This stifles the gifted student and makes life unnecessarily difficult for learning disabled and retarded students.

Many schools fail to teach students how to organize themselves, their materials, and their time. Simply telling students to "get organized" will not help. The teacher must offer precise, detailed guidance, going through the processes several times until the student can apply the instructions without help. Occasional reminders (perhaps posted on the bulletin board or photocopied and handed out at the beginning of each quarter) will help prevent students from returning to their old habits.

### **What Students Say About Underachieving**

When students were asked what school experiences had contributed to their underachievement, they replied:

1. *A lack of genuine respect for each individual.* The underachieving child is sensitive to the treatment of others, but also perceives himself as the recipient of hostility from both peers and teacher.

2. *A competitive social climate.* This alienates nonconformists and results in social penalties for those who are different.

3. *Inflexibility and rigidity.* Students complained about teachers who allowed no variation in student performance, curriculum choice, sequence of learning experiences, time (deadlines, sequence of work periods), and did not permit students to pursue individual interests. In these classrooms, teachers made all the decisions, and their choices could not be challenged.

4. *Stress on external evaluation.* Children felt they had to meet absolute standards set by the

teacher or district in order to be a "success."

5. *The "failure syndrome."* Children saw that respect and rewards were given only to achievers and those who sought to conform. They believed their worth was judged on the basis of their performance on tests and classroom work.

6. *An unrewarding curriculum.* Little attention was given to the interests and abilities of students. Classroom work consisted mostly of textbook guides, workbooks, and "worksheets," with infrequent opportunity for inquiry, experimentation, or exploration.<sup>2</sup>

### **Teacher Strategies for Motivating Students**

As is clear from the list above, teachers can contribute significantly to creating and perpetuating underachievement. To become part of the solution rather than part of the problem, they need to develop strategies to help students to achieve academically.

Probably the most important way a teacher can motivate students is to accept and respect each one as an individual. Of course, this presupposes that the teacher accepts and respects himself or herself. Communicating a sense of acceptance to each student will help each child feel capable and worth while.

If teachers do this, there will be no more "invisible" students! Each child will be noticed and communicated with regularly and positively. Every child will have a sense of belonging, and teacher and students will share feelings of mutual concern for one another. This does not mean that the teacher "becomes one of the students" but that he or she cares about each one, and shows it.

In contrast, insecure teachers usually feel a need to maintain

superiority and rigid standards. These standards unfairly penalize students who do not fit into the prescribed mold. Insecure teachers often resort to criticism, threats, and ridicule. This only makes matters worse for the underachiever, for it intensifies the child's feelings of inferiority.

A teacher who uses such methods actually contributes to the student's lack of motivation. Teachers need to provide underachievers with an opportunity to succeed. This will help improve their self-esteem.

Some ways to do this are to adjust classwork to the child's ability, help the child discover how he or she learns best, and adapt lesson plans to take advantage of the child's interests.

A teacher who expects identical work from every student on every occasion is seldom if ever motivating. Special students often require adaptations of the usual classwork.

The teacher should encourage the students to take part in the planning process and make choices within acceptable boundaries. This shows confidence in the child's ability to succeed. It also allows the child to use methods that match his or her learning style.

### **Discovering One's Learning Style**

To discover how he or she learns most effectively, the student should make a list of skills he or she performs well and then determine how each skill was acquired. The following questions will help in this analysis:

- Did I learn this by watching a demonstration only?
- Did I learn this by reading directions?
- Did I learn this by being told how to do it?
- Did I learn by reading, then writing?
- Did I learn this by being shown and then doing each step with my hands?
- Did I use a combination of these methods?
- How much repetition did I require to learn this skill?

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run out of almost every town he visited. Yet Paul believed so strongly in his mission that he is recognized today as one of the greatest evangelists of all time. The Bible also says that as we sow, so shall we reap. If we think positively, and work to achieve our goals, we will be rewarded with success.

The difference between a successful principal and a not-so-successful one is that the former believes the school has better teachers and students, but more importantly, he or she *helps* teachers and students believe they are better.

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### **School administrators can influence student achievement without ever entering the classroom.**

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Easier said than done, you're probably thinking. Consider this quote from the dean of positive thinking, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, "When the mental picture is strongly held, it actually seems to control conditions and circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

#### **Goals**

Developing a positive mental outlook in yourself and others is an ongoing process that is not easily accomplished. However, if this attitude is lacking in your school, ask yourself these questions:

"What are my long- and short-term goals for this school? What goals do my teachers and students have?" The goals of these groups must be compatible. Little progress would be made if the principal desired prison-like discipline while the teachers were working for a child-centered atmosphere.

Goals must be written, specific, and internalized. Broad, sweeping goals such as wanting a "good school" are next to worthless. Wanting a good school is an admirable objective, but it is vague and intangible. How will you accomplish this goal? To accomplish an objective it must be made specific.

For example, "I will conduct a series of workshops to help teachers develop better classroom management skills," is a specific goal that can be achieved.

Recently a superintendent of a medium-sized public school district was shocked to discover that only three administrators in his district had specific goals. Little wonder that this district is making slow progress. These administrators have failed to take the first and most basic step in school improvement: developing a set of goals.

Goal setting is especially important in defining a mission statement for a Christian school. Academic achievement can be attained in public as well as private education. So why should parents pay tuition to send their children to a church-sponsored school when public education is free? A sound answer to that question is this:

"We have high expectations here. We expect our students to achieve academically. We practice Christian behavior and expect our students to do so, both in and out of school.

"We believe in our students and take steps to help them develop a positive self-concept.

"If you contact your child's teacher, he/she will be happy to show you the goals that we have established for your child's class."

How can you ensure that your school will be a model school? I believe that emphasis on the three areas listed above—high expectations, positive self-concept, and specific goals—will greatly improve any school program. Student achievement should soar while discipline problems diminish. Teachers and administrators can expect greater parental and constituent support.

If you emphasize the traits mentioned above, your school will be a better place when you leave than when you arrived! □

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1968), pp. 133-147.

<sup>2</sup> Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952), p. 122.

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Comparing several analyses will reveal the methods that require the least amount of repetition. These methods should be used most frequently by the student.

In order to facilitate learning, teachers need to recognize that students learn in different ways, and use a variety of methods to ensure student mastery of the concepts being presented.

#### **Practical Implementation**

The teacher needs to walk a delicate balance between expressing confidence in the student's abilities and monitoring the results of the child's efforts. Usually under-achievers lack the skills and perseverance to organize themselves and do what is necessary to achieve their goals. Therefore, adults have to take the responsibility for teaching them organization and self-discipline. This is the time to enlist the aid of parents.

Involving parents will not only give the teacher more time, but can also reinforce the lessons he or she is trying to convey in the classroom. Parents usually want to help their children, but they sometimes feel inadequate or helpless, even though they are aware that there are problems. They are often happy to receive some kindly suggestions about methods that will help their offspring to succeed in school. *Suggestions*, not criticism! Too often frustrated teachers criticize the offspring of frustrated parents, sparks fly, and nothing positive results.

Let's see how Mrs. Smith used parental participation to help solve the problem of Jan's underachievement.

Mrs. Smith met with Jan and her parents one afternoon. She explained that together they were going to devise a program to help Jan overcome some of the bad

habits that she had developed, such as not doing her homework.

Jan was allowed to choose where to begin. She decided to tackle reading homework first. With her parents' help, Jan set up a schedule for each afternoon. First she would play outside for awhile, do her chores, then complete her reading homework. She would not be allowed to watch TV until her homework was completed. Jan's father was to make sure that the environment was conducive to study.

The next morning Mrs. Smith would grade Jan's homework. If it was 80 percent accurate, she earned a reward—working with a friend for part of the afternoon. This was something Jan wanted very much. She knew, however, that if she did not fulfill her part of the contract she would have to go to another teacher's room to complete her homework during the afternoon.

Mrs. Smith rewarded only behavior she wanted strengthened, ignoring undesirable behavior to make it less appealing. She gave Jan intangible rewards as well, praising her for good work, and smiling whenever she "caught" Jan working. Mrs. Smith recognized that criticism actually draws attention to negative behavior, thus strengthening it. Therefore, she usually avoided comment when Jan did not meet her goals.

In the beginning, Mrs. Smith selected only one academic area for attention. As time went on, she required an entire week's reading homework to be completed correctly in exchange for a larger reward. As Jan's interests changed, the rewards also had to be changed. Eventually, Jan completed all homework for three-week periods in order to earn crafts for the entire classroom to do.

Since she was aware that human beings are not perfect, Mrs. Smith built in a way for Jan to skip homework occasionally. After Jan had completed her homework on time for two weeks, she received a "homework pass." Jan could use the pass anytime she wanted to spend an evening without homework. This allowed Jan to choose when a free evening would be most

beneficial to her weekly plans.

Mrs. Smith found that Jan's parents were very helpful in a general supportive role as well as at specific tasks. Jan's mother often rewarded her for taking responsibility by taking her on a shopping trip. This helped strengthen responsible behavior at home too.

An adaptation of this program continued throughout the rest of that school year. In fact, it was so

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successful with Jan that Mrs. Smith used its principles as the basis for a classroom-wide program the following year.

### **Summary**

How can teachers motivate their students? Probably the best way is by being accepting, respecting, and genuinely caring. As Dr. Clyde Narramore said, "We are wasting our time unless we first establish the good relationship that causes the one we're trying to motivate to want to heed what we are saying."<sup>3</sup>

This accepting and caring attitude, coupled with a program that teaches students to organize and persevere, will help ensure that underachieving students learn how to succeed in the classroom. □

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### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> James J. Gallagher, *Teaching the Gifted Child* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1975), p. 347.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Rand Whitmore, *Giftedness, Conflict, and Underachievement* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1980), pp. 192, 193.

<sup>3</sup> Clyde M. Narramore, *How to Motivate People* (Rosemead, Calif.: Narramore Christian Foundation, 1975), p. 6.

## WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL CHRISTIAN?

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showed me that here was a man who had adopted us as his children.

These men considered the world of work as much a part of Christian education as the Bible class. They knew they were in "the Lord's work." Their education and training may have differed from that of the classroom teacher, but not their dedication, character, or commitment.

Recently school janitor George Brand passed away at the age of 91. At his funeral service it was reported that he considered himself a Christian educator. And so he was. Person after person recalled, during the service and in private conversations that followed, that here was a person who throughout his years as a custodian in Adventist schools, truly reflected the love, joy, peace, and patience of Christ.

I recall his friendly relationships with all of us students when I attended college. However, I was rather surprised that, 30 years later, we instantly recognized each other as old friends when I became principal of the school where he was employed. At Loma Linda Academy, until just before his 90th birthday, he faithfully cleaned the gym floor, cheerfully picking up and laundering dirty towels.

Until the end I considered this prayerful Christian man my superior in the same sense that the pharaoh of Egypt recognized that Jacob's long years of walking with God made him a saint and patriarch superior to kings and princes. As Jacob blessed pharaoh, so George blessed my life and those of all his colleagues.

With such a powerful influence emanating from the work stations of our campuses, we must not carelessly hire workers for these areas. Teaching, preaching, and even supervising may not be everyone's assignment, but on a Christian campus every worker should communicate visible concern for the