CHAPTER 6

Helping Underachievers: Strategies for Individual Students

Jack was worried. He was driving to the high school, where his superintendent was conducting a meeting of elementary school teachers. It was no accident that only the teachers whose students did poorly on the state-mandated exam were required to attend. The meeting started 15 minutes late. This delay added to the pounding in his head. He was certain that this meeting was going to be an ordeal, and he was right.

The superintendent started with the ugly facts—the teachers simply failed to do enough to make the school look good in the latest round of school-by-school comparisons printed in the local newspaper. To Jack’s embarrassment, not only did the superintendent mention how his students did the past year, but she also produced a printout detailing the unwanted information for the last five years. “She is such a —,” Jack thought over and over again, as a wave of nausea swept over him.

For our purposes, there are two kinds of underachievers—those who respond to whole-class strategies and those who don’t. The underachievers who are not helped by the techniques described in Chapter 5 need an individualized approach to self-motivation. No teacher who uses the techniques described in this chapter and Chapter 5 need endure the humiliation that
Jack experienced. Any teacher who uses these techniques will change underachievers into self-motivated students. If the teacher has three or four underachievers who require an individualized approach and he is willing to invest the time, those students will achieve—provided they are willing to make an effort.

Most students who require an individualized approach find a way to fail. They fail in school, and they fail at home. And they don’t respond to traditional techniques. Reluctant learners who are behavior problems can be devastating to a class and to the teacher’s ability to do her job. However, these students can become self-motivated when their teacher uses a positive, individualized approach that satisfies their emotional and academic needs.

At a faculty meeting, a fellow teacher once said, “If only we could get rid of that 5 percent who are a problem, then the kids would be a pleasure to teach.” Basically, he was referring to the nonachievers. We can’t (and shouldn’t) get rid of them, but principals and teachers can help these youngsters change their habit of making inappropriate choices. A new practice of making proper choices may lead to success and a far better school environment for all concerned. Using the Totally Positive Approach, the great teacher—aided by supportive administrators—will be able to end most of the failure in her classes.

It is in the best interest of the teacher to make a concerted attempt to rescue all children from failure. By helping underachievers, a teacher gets in touch with his own enormous power. For example, many nonachievers are serious behavior problems, who can destroy a class. A teacher who disarms these out-of-control students draws them in to the mainstream. Everyone can then enjoy the wonderful, cooperative climate that exists only when virtually all students are successful.
Avoid Retention and Social Promotion

In 1994, more than 2 million students were retained in grade. Research clearly shows that retention results in lower academic achievement and increases the chances of students dropping out of school (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Failing a grade creates negative feelings that usually result in more academic failure as well as a lowering of the child’s self-esteem. My first principal, in the 1960s, told me that his job was as secure as the quality of teaching going on in the classrooms. With content standards, his statement is even more true today. Therefore, principals should develop an interest in strategies that reduce failure and raise students’ self-esteem.

What is the long-term impact of being left back? I know from personal experience that school failure can be devastating. I failed the 5th grade. I didn’t know it at the time, but there was a good reason why I did so poorly in school. It had nothing to do with my ability. My family moved from Ozone Park to Rockville Centre that year. When my friends found out that I was moving, there was an outpouring of genuine affection for me. I had no idea that I was so popular. I resented my parents because they had separated me from my friends. My anger immobilized me and destroyed my interest in school. I was lonely and miserable. Fortunately, I had passed the same work in Ozone Park. When my mother called this fact to the new school’s attention, they were embarrassed to the point of passing me.

In the 6th grade, my school life went from bad to worse. I had a teacher who was unable to control the class. My parents devoted their entire lives to the family, but they never developed good parenting skills. I protested by acting out in class. The teacher passed me because my behavior was so bad that she didn’t want to deal with me another year. Even though I was not retained, the scars of failure burned deep into my psyche.
Years later, when I found out that I had to pass a comprehensive exam to complete my doctorate, I felt that I couldn’t do it. I lacked the confidence. I prematurely ended my education based on a lie that my home life and my schooling (I failed the 5th and 6th grades) had played a crucial part in formulating. How many young lives are harmed because prospective teachers are not taught how to help those students who require special attention?

Social promotions hurt children. According to Newsday (1999), “it is possible for a student [in New York City] to be absent for 57 school days, show up late 31 times, fail every subject except gym, score in the second percentile on the math exam and still move from eighth to ninth grade” (p. A20). However, these students don’t develop needed skills such as reading and writing, can’t pass graduation tests, and usually wind up dropping out of high school.

If the purpose of education is to help children grow academically, socially, and emotionally, then retention and social promotion should not be permitted. Failure is not an acceptable outcome. Extremely low academic performance can be avoided if the teacher has the positive mind-set and the skills to make zero tolerance for failure part of his classroom practice.

You, the teacher, are in control. You can choose how many students you want to help, according to the time you have available. You can also choose whom you help. I placed students who asked for help and students who were serious behavior problems at the top of the list.

Teachers already have more than enough to do! Why should they have to be responsible for a student who is not succeeding? There are many good answers to this question. The best one is the poignant fact that for many youngsters, teachers are the last line of defense. The child’s home and school lives may not be providing the academic nourishment needed to propel the child to a successful education. But the quality of the child’s entire future depends on
his ability to escape the trap that imprisons him—to develop his abilities and become a responsible citizen. He can’t do it on his own. The child’s fate is in the teacher’s hands.

Do you believe that your job is merely to present information and that it is the students’ responsibility to do the work and achieve? In an ideal world, that is how it would be. However, as we saw in Chapter 5, about half of all students are underachieving. Something must be done. If the horse is dead, dismount! Teachers must intervene, with zero tolerance for failure.

Success on Tests

Nonachievers need success on their tests. Potential nonlearners have been beaten down. They expect defeat. They already know the outcome: failure, like last year; humiliation, like the year before; and crushing defeat, like always. If they are to change their self-defeating ways, these students must take substantial risks, and you must convince them that this chance for success is the real thing.

When students enter your classroom, they enter the world of success in academic learning. To help these children, it is not necessary to get into the nature of the obstacles. The teacher is not required to be a psychologist or mind reader. The Totally Positive Approach suggests that underachievers should be guided to success. Success moves children forward, giving them options and hope. Once they experience success, they will work hard and develop internal motivation. These emotionally needy students will cherish their new role—learning, contributing, and performing like everyone else. All that is necessary is for underachievers to make an effort, and the skillful teacher will have a program that is not only effective but also likely to yield a positive outcome.

Potential nonlearners must be identified before they have a chance to fail. According to Ogden and Germinario (1988, p. 13),
“there is considerable evidence to suggest that dysfunctional student behaviors . . . can be identified as early as kindergarten.”

On the first day of school, I asked my students to envision their report card next June. Then I asked them to write down on an index card their final grade in social studies. It was rare for youngsters to write down a failing grade, but I found that students who wrote down a grade of 75 or lower usually lacked confidence and needed help.

I also asked my students about their attitude toward school and social studies, but their opinion wasn’t a good predictor of future performance. I didn’t inquire into their interests and talents, but I would do so now if I were still teaching.

The next step is to make the tests easy early in the school year, so all students should pass, as discussed in Chapter 5. Besides building confidence, this approach will reveal the most academically needy students. Using the information from the index cards and the first three tests, you will be able to identify the students who need help. (You may also want to check their past school records.)

“Zero Tolerance for Failure” Strategies

Early in the school year, all failures must be avoided. Adjusting the difficulty of the tests early in the school year to yield high achievement will help minimize later failures. Later in the year, your response toward test failures should vary according to the student who is doing the unacceptable work. If the student is a low-performing student, the teacher needs to approach test grades with a single-minded goal—to create success for the learner. On the other extreme, a youngster with a well-integrated personality and a history of success might find a failing grade to be a wake-up call that challenges him to greater achievement. Only selective test failures, therefore, must be avoided.
Three strategies will enable teachers to reduce the number of failures on tests—emergency maneuvers, procedures for students who lack confidence, and grading for success in elementary school. These strategies are explained in the following sections.

Emergency Maneuvers

If a student fails a test by fewer than 15 points, you can always use these three emergency maneuvers: extra credit, oral tests, or not counting the test. If you choose extra credit, honesty is important, as the student must feel he earned the passing grade. The extra points must be based on real achievement, such as participation in class or that beautiful artwork that adorns the bulletin board. Second, an oral test—as a make-up test—is perfect because it is subjective; a teacher can give a student any appropriate grade. Third, finding plausible reasons for not counting a test is an option, especially if the failure is more than 15 points. These adjustments are only to be used in emergency situations, and they are the exception rather than the norm. All of these strategies take time, but it is crucial that an academically needy student experience only success on his tests.

Procedures for Overcoming Lack of Confidence

Based on my experience in middle school, I would say that lack of confidence (negative predisposition) is the main reason for test failures. Therefore, teachers should have a routine in place each school year to stop students from failing because of a predisposed attitude. Fortunately, these failures are totally avoidable. Have the at-risk students come to extra-help sessions and spoon-feed them so they will score high on the next test. In most cases I only had to spoon-feed them once, and they gained the confidence required to be successful test takers.

However, in rare cases, test anxiety is pronounced. One teacher’s experience with Judy will illustrate how to deal with such
an unfortunate youngster. Judy shocked her teacher—she had just failed her fourth social studies test with a score of 40. Her teacher gave her extra help. He spoon-fed her. She knew the work better than most students did, yet that didn’t stop her from scoring a 40 on her second, third, and fourth tests. Judy was scared. She tried her best, but it wasn’t good enough. What was going to happen to her? Would her failures in social studies affect her other grades? Would her fear of failure in social studies carry over to the 8th grade and high school? Would she cut short her education because she erroneously believed she was not capable?

These questions can’t be answered because Judy did not fail. When her teacher realized that Judy had painted herself into a corner, he tried a bold idea to rescue her. He placed a piece of paper on her desk during the extra-help session and put a giant 70 on the paper. He told her that she had already demonstrated that she knew more than enough to pass the test. He gave her a passing grade. “Tomorrow, you can obtain higher than a 70, but no lower,” said the teacher. With the fear of failure erased, she earned her first A. The trauma ended because the teacher had zero tolerance for failure. Using this and similar procedures, a teacher can prevent failure due to lack of confidence. Of course, there are other reasons why children fail besides lack of confidence. I singled out this reason because it appears to be a primary cause, and it is so easy to correct.

Grading for Success in Elementary School

The third strategy to avoid failure is grading for success in elementary school. Eliminating failure on tests may be easier in secondary school than in elementary school because there are usually fewer tests. One logical solution at the elementary level is not to grade tests. The teacher could have two possible responses: the work is complete or it needs improvement. The teacher’s goal is to encourage the student. Putting a failing grade on top of a spelling
test, for example, with a comment such as “Get your act together,” is not going to help that child. Instead, the teacher could place check marks next to the right answers and add a comment such as “I will work with you, and you will get a good grade. You are such a good speller, and I know you will succeed.”

The following procedures demonstrate the concept of zero tolerance for failure. When a child fails the first test, the teacher should intervene. The top of the page should read “needs improvement,” and the teacher should not stop intervening until the student improves the work to the point of feeling confident and successful. A teacher’s intervention can take many forms. He could have a student in the class who grasps the material help the youngster in trouble; perhaps an older child could make a better tutor. Some schools have paraprofessionals who are ready and willing to help. Then there are adult volunteers, from parents to retired folks. It may be too much for the teacher to do alone. But there are resources that a teacher can organize into a small army of saviors for the educationally needy youngster.

If a teacher feels compelled to give a grade, then an A, B, or “needs improvement” (or “needs practice”) is a viable option. A young child is so impressionable that a single negative comment or failing grade may have a crushing impact. A child may develop negative beliefs about schoolwork, such as “I can’t read” or “Math is too hard,” and a lifelong struggle is born. A child deserves a chance, and when the teacher turns that chance into hope, and that hope into little successes, then success becomes a habit in the child’s life.

I asked an elementary teacher from North Babylon, Long Island, what she thought of the idea of A, B, or “needs improvement.” She said she liked it, but she raised the problem of preparing students for state-mandated exams. “If you let them slide by, then you are creating a problem.” But a teacher who grades exams in this way is not letting students slide by. The student will do better on
state exams because when he stumbled, he was picked up and supported, nurtured, and helped. The teacher is giving the child a chance to correct his mistakes, to improve, and to benefit from his errors (changing “needs improvement” into a legitimate A or B). The goal is to make the child a willing participant in the academic process, keenly looking forward to his next successful experience. Best of all, the teacher gives the child a genuine opportunity to improve his self-image. This aspect is crucial, because a feeling of being capable is necessary for academic progress. Without it, the child shuts down and failure is certain.

In summary, in elementary and secondary schools, low grades on tests should be addressed as temporary difficulties that will be overcome, while high grades are rewards for work well done. The teacher should guide students to success until they can overcome the negative mind-set that predisposes them to failure.

Success in the Classroom

Teachers must support nonachieving students not only on their tests but also in their classwork. You can use the classroom experience as a vehicle for positive feedback. Positive self-fulfilling prophecies, concentrating on the students’ personalities and interests, discovering students’ strengths through multiple intelligences, and students helping students—all of these strategies can help nonachievers become successful.

Positive Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

The rule of thumb is to find something positive in the academic work of these maladaptive students. I’m not suggesting that it is acceptable for nonlearners to hand in substandard work. Rather, the issue is that these at-risk students are struggling with powerfully negative emotions. A critical response about the quality
of their inferior work may cause them more pain, making the learning process even less desirable in their eyes, and may be yet another negative event that eventually kills initiative and effort. Non-achievers tend to see the world in black-or-white terms. Either you are with them (give them only positive feedback) or you are against them. Encourage them by making schoolwork feel good and leading them in the direction of having a successful experience. When they feel successful, you’ll have students who are eager to learn and eager to please their newly found benefactor, the teacher.

Reality is whatever the teacher says it is. If the teacher tells a faltering student that he can do the work and the teacher supports the child, then the student will eventually be a success. The following anecdote illustrates the power of this approach.

I had a student in a high school driver’s ed class who was so scared of driving that she was unable to keep the car going straight. She unintentionally aimed at every car and tree in sight. I used a 10-step method to teach driving. As students mastered one step, I moved them to a more difficult skill, until they eventually reached parallel parking (step 9) and defensive driving (step 10). With this child, I was faced with a dilemma. As the other students made their way through the steps, she stood still. She couldn’t even accomplish car control (steps 1, 2, and 3), much less right- and left-hand turns (steps 4 and 5).

So I gave her the illusion of success. I took her to an area where there were no other cars, and I let her do right-hand turns, left-hand turns, intersections, three-point turns, and so on, when the other students reached those steps. The only difference was that they mastered the skills and she didn’t. However, I always found something positive to say. With 90 percent of her actions, I said nothing because her driving was indescribably horrible. When she did something that was correct, I gave her abundant praise. I gave her a vision of the future. I told her that in a few months she would be
driving on high-speed superhighways. She said she didn’t believe it. She was doubtful and with good reason, because she was incapable of even basic car control.

After the Christmas vacation, she approached me, very excited. I had never seen her happier. Because of the positive feedback and the skill development from driver’s ed., she took a driving course from a private school over the vacation. She had gone out on the parkway, and she had done fine. My prophecy had come true. I had told her every week that she was doing positive things. She had the option of saying to herself, “I’m a failure” (because the other kids were doing so much better) or “I’m a success” (because I got very excited about her minuscule accomplishments). If the teacher is skillful, he will determine the student’s fate.

Concentrating on Students’ Personalities and Interests

Individual success can be achieved by finding a way to build on the strengths and interests of each emotionally needy student. Besides positive self-fulfilling prophecies, a master teacher will consider a child’s personality and interests, talents, and ability to help others.

Let’s begin with personality. Herman, an industrial arts student, would clumsily drop type cases and trip over his own shoe-laces because they were usually untied. He had limited social skills and never smiled. Charles Mayo, his 8th grade teacher (in Island Trees, New York), found a way to set Herman on the road to achievement. Herman’s most apparent positive attribute was the desire to be helpful. So Charles made Herman his assistant and “gofer.” Herman worked alongside the teacher during shop clean-up, helping his fellow students. This skillful teacher used Herman’s need to be helpful to lead him to the realization that he played an important part in the day-to-day functioning of the class. Herman’s life was enriched by this effective educator.
Another approach is to find a way the child can become interested in the course content. A teacher at an intermediate school in Brooklyn, New York, accomplished this very well. In one of her remedial reading classes, she had a gang leader, who had been retained twice and was reading at the 2nd grade level. When she discovered that he was interested in auto mechanics, she went to a mechanic and got a manual. This was a valuable first step that resulted in the boy's learning how to read. What's more, his ego probably skyrocketed because he understood what the words in the manual meant, whereas his teacher didn't have any idea. It can be a peak experience when a student teaches a subject that he is interested in to his teacher or perhaps to the class.

Technology is an area where a student can outshine his teacher. It is a great equalizer. Because a student may catch on faster than adults and feel at home with this new challenge, technology is an area worth considering when a teacher wants to build on the student's strengths and interests. For example, Maurer and Davidson (1999, pp. 458–460) conducted a journal-writing lesson for 1st graders with an interesting twist. They made two 1st graders “experts” on the word processor and made the rule that only experts could help with the technology part of the lesson. The teacher, of course, would assist with the writing part. Nick, who “gave all the outward signs of giving up on school,” was chosen to be an expert. Nick “appeared angry most of the time. He was frequently withdrawn and stubborn and was becoming a discipline problem.” All at once, Nick was happy and excited about his new job. He related positively with his peers. It turned out that he was bright and capable. What a wonderful outcome! “Most of these children (including Nick) blossomed in the expert role. With minimal guidance, they were helpful, on task, and clearly pleased to carry out their responsibilities.” Maurer
felt that they gave these children real power, and the children relished their new station in life.

What about nonachievers living in poverty areas? Can technology help these students? This is a complex question, but I believe that technology can be useful. For example, Anne Moutsika teaches math and science in Queens, New York City, to 6th graders in a virtually all-black, low-income school. During each period, she put one group of four children on the computer. Their assignment was to complete a lesson, such as learning about the rain forest. By the end of the week, all the students had completed the lesson. The students helped one another with the computer while Anne was busy teaching the rest of the class. They fixed the printer when it broke, and they disciplined a classmate when they caught him stealing a disk.

These two examples suggest that technology can change students’ attitudes toward learning. Students want to learn the computer. It is important to them—a source of power—and they want to help one another. In the upper grades, teachers can use technology even if they don’t have expertise, because students can carry the ball. Technology “expertise creates opportunities for students to become brilliant. Brilliance is the child’s power of the heart” (Maurer & Davidson, 1999, pp. 458–460).

If you cannot determine a child’s interests by using observation or through discourse, you can always ask the guidance department for an interest inventory, or perhaps ask your local resource librarian for a book that contains tests and inventories. The school psychologist might also be helpful.

Every low-achieving child may have a personality trait or interest that can be useful in the classroom. Once a child experiences success, that emotionally needy student is on his way to realizing his true educational potential.
Discovering Strengths Through Multiple Intelligences

An approach that is just as valuable as considering students' interests and personalities is uncovering their strengths and talents. As we saw in Chapter 5, teachers can use Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences to help struggling students see that they do have talents. Let me give three examples of what teachers have done.

Take Pedro, for example. This quiet, isolated child from El Salvador came to school but rarely talked. He didn't speak English very well, and he was painfully shy. He sat in the back of the room and didn't speak to any of the other students. His teacher, Randi Azar, used activities in which all intelligences were employed. One day Pedro found himself in a group that had to make a visual representation of the topic under discussion. He did the drawing, and his group mates marveled at his artistic talent. The other groups wanted Pedro to do the same for them. This skillful teacher had provided Pedro with an opportunity to use his artistic ability to propel himself into the marvelous mainstream. He continued on into high school and became quite popular.

A retired special education teacher told me how she used art to rescue a desperate child. She had a 9-year-old student, Luke, who wouldn't talk and would lie in a fetal position on the floor. She tried music but to no avail. She talked to him all the time, but he didn't respond. She tried everything! Then one day, she gave him crayons. He responded. When the art teacher came in, instead of taking a free period, she worked with him. When Luke graduated from elementary school, he received the school's award for "most improved," and today he is an artist.

At a multiple intelligences workshop I attended, a teacher told a marvelous story about a student who wasn't good in math but had a strong spatial intelligence. One day this child was in a group with
the "smartest kids," but because the activity called for spatial intelligence, he was the only one who could do the task. The child couldn’t believe it. All those smart kids couldn’t do the task, but he could. He had to show them how. What a tremendous experience!

This is what the great teacher does for his academically needy learners—find out what they can do and give them ample opportunities, within and outside the curriculum, to excel. When they can build on their strengths, reluctant learners become increasingly receptive to "regular schoolwork."

The great teacher replaces "How smart are you?" with "How are you smart?" He believes that each child can learn the material, but not in the same way or at the same rate. The master teacher who teaches to multiple intelligences gives a message to each child—"Your talents and abilities are valued in this classroom." Each student feels valued, and the child who once felt stupid has a new lease on his educational life. "When we begin to think of students as diversely intelligent rather than measuring each child against one fixed standard with an outdated instrument, the logical/mathematical IQ test, we will begin to see a true change in the performances of students" (Chapman, 1993, p. 20).

Silver, Strong, and Perini (1997, pp. 22–27) assert that the concept of multiple intelligences "is backed by a rich research base that combines physiology, anthropology, and personal and cultural history." Of course, we all acknowledge the existence of different talents, whether they be musical, linguistic, or spatial, but "Gardner has taken this intrinsic knowledge of human experience and shown us in a lucid, persuasive, and well-researched manner how it is true."

In most schools, spelling is taught using linguistic strategies, such as writing the word, spelling the word out loud, or using the word in a sentence. Those students who have difficulty with spelling should learn in accordance with their talents. For example,
students could sing spelling words if they are musical, draw spelling words in the form of pictures if they are spatial, or trace spelling words in the sand if they are kinesthetic (Chapman, 1993).

You provide a personal growth experience for a child when he becomes aware of how he learns best. Now the student can choose which talent he will use to learn the material. Now the student, in his independent study, will be able to improve his school performance, and a life skill has been learned.

If a teacher needs ideas for addressing multiple intelligences, he can consult the Active Learning Handbook for the Multiple Intelligences Classroom by James Bellanca (1999). This book provides more than 200 active learning lessons for K-12 classrooms, organized according to the eight intelligences.

How does a teacher know what the talents and abilities of her reluctant learners happen to be? A teacher can observe them or ask their parents and other teachers. The teacher can also ask the students themselves. In secondary school, the teacher could ask students to fill out a 3" x 5" index card listing their interests and talents. Students should have an idea of their interests and abilities in areas such as music, social intelligence, and the arts. Having students list their extracurricular activities is also helpful.

When a teacher addresses multiple intelligences, he learns to match up certain talents with certain students. Try devoting a day or two each week to a particular talent. Then give a surprise test. See how the students do. Have them write their evaluation at the end of the test. This approach will give the teacher and his students a clear picture of their talents by the end of the first quarter. Then the students can begin to build on their talents, using an approach that best fits their learning and thinking styles.

In summary, teaching to multiple intelligences builds on underachievers’ talents and strengths. As part of an individualized program, emphasize what the students can do and avoid what they
can't accomplish. Most of the at-risk children with whom I worked witnessed the dawn of a new educational era.

Students Helping Students

What can a teacher do to help a disaffected child who appears to have no talents, no interests, and no personality traits that are useful for drawing the child into the educational enterprise? The teacher can tap the power of peers. She can use peer tutoring, peers as social reinforcers, peer review, and peer mediation. Students helping students can accomplish valuable objectives for a struggling child—guiding him to success in class and satisfying his needs.

The value of peer tutoring is supported by research. Allen and Feldman maintain that the tutor and the tutee both benefit from their interaction (cited in Strain, 1981). Ms. Triolo, a social worker at Smithtown High School (Long Island, New York), accurately points out that "every kid needs to be good at something." She believes that each student has the potential to help a younger student (cross-age tutoring). However, if that arrangement is not possible, then same-age tutoring can help an academically needy youngster become "good at something."

If a reluctant learner has nothing to offer as a tutor, the teacher should teach her something that the other children need to know. By teaching her classmates important information, the underachiever is on her way to making something beautiful out of her school career. I know this is a lot of extra work for the teacher, but the payoff for the child makes it an attractive activity. Not only does the reluctant learner learn some information that she needs to know, but she also makes a valuable contribution to a classmate. She raises her self-concept in the subject being taught. She connects with her peers, and this is especially valuable for a youngster who is
struggling for peer acceptance. The child develops a better attitude toward herself, the school, the teacher, and the educational process.

As a peer coach, a child who is used to getting negative attention finds herself in the role of the teacher and can bask in her newfound glory. The peer coach gives positive feedback to the tutee, and that positive feedback benefits the tutee. Then the teacher praises the peer coach for doing good work with the tutee, and the peer coach feels the warm glow of success from the teacher's positive remarks. She is nurturing and being nurtured in the same desirable process. The child's social, emotional, and academic needs can all be met.

As this next story illustrates, kids helping kids can perform "miracles." How do you stop students from dropping out of school? One effective way is to make them tutors of elementary school children. In 1984, with a grant of $400,000 from Coca-Cola, 550 at-risk, junior high school Puerto Rican students accepted the lofty responsibility of teaching 1,600 elementary school children in San Antonio, Texas. One of the biggest problems that the organizers of the program faced was convincing the San Antonio teachers that potential dropouts should do the tutoring rather than high achievers (Martz, 1992).

This San Antonio program, the Valued Youth Partnership Program, is a great success, and it is expanding nationwide. "All indications are that the tutoring actually helps the smaller children, whose grades and achievement test scores improved dramatically in every subject" (Martz, 1992, p. 70). However, the impact on the older students was truly remarkable. They didn't drop out, their grades went up (their reading grades alone rose more than 30 percent), and there was improved attendance. These junior high school students felt truly valued.

Another example of cross-age tutoring can be found in Smithtown High School, New York. Caryn Iorio, a family and consumer
science teacher at Smithtown, required her students to teach preschool youngsters. At the end of the year, she asked, “What impact did this class have on you?” One girl who was struggling in school wrote, “I developed self-confidence when working with the kids. . . . The children’s smiles always made my heart shine with joy. The class really made me grow up by having responsibilities. . . . I feel so much better about myself by taking this class.” Another at-risk student wrote, “Whenever I’m in a bad mood, I come to this class and the kids put me in a better mood.” This high school student now wants to teach, and she concludes by saying that the experience “has made my future more exciting.” Without a doubt, cross-age tutoring can have a big impact on the lives of all the students involved.

Judy Kurtz, a 3rd grade teacher at Lockhart Elementary in Massapequa, New York, told me that she pairs two students on the computer—one adept student and one struggling student. The adept student improves her socialization skills, while the nonlearner gains peer support for her academics. Both students benefit through personal growth.

Price (cited in Dunn, Beaudry, & Klavas, 1989, p. 53) found that “the higher the grade level, the less teacher-motivated students become.” Although peer tutoring works for all age groups, Price's findings suggest that it is particularly appealing for secondary students because of the importance of peer groups in their lives. Motivating secondary students is a major priority, so the inclusion of peer tutoring in the academic program is a step in the right direction.

Peer tutoring, according to the experts, is a complex process. This is especially true if you are helping nonachievers become tutors. In the Valued Youth Partnership Program, one period was set aside to help these youngsters with their teaching duties. They were taught “how to communicate, how children learn and why they want to [learn]” (Martz, 1992, p. 69). Strain (1981, p. 177) suggests
that the tutor must be familiar with the material, must be able to "discriminate responses," must know how to give appropriate feedback, and must be able to correct faulty responses. Teachers perform these tasks automatically, but for student tutors, learning how to respond is a new experience.

The teacher must be clear what the specific goals are, and they "must be specified in measurable terms" before the tutoring begins (Strain, 1981, p. 175). Also, the teacher should closely monitor the tutoring experience to ensure that the tutor is competent and the children get along. Allen and Feldman (cited in Strain, 1981, p. 22) found that "children prefer to be taught by same-sex children and by older children, and tutors conveniently prefer to teach young children and same-sex children."

In conclusion, peer tutoring can serve a valuable function that no other activity can accomplish as well. The potential is there for reluctant learners to gain confidence, receive abundant positive feedback, and have their emotional needs fulfilled.

Peer tutoring, however, is only one way to help a troubled adolescent through student interaction. Peer socialization, peer review, and peer mediation can also help struggling youngsters. Peers as social reinforcers can perform a valuable service. If a student who improves her behavior hears positive feedback from her peers as well as from her teacher, the improvement is much more likely to last.

Peer review is another helpful approach. In a high school chemistry class, students from the San Francisco Bay area were given an assignment to teach their fellow students about the behavior of gases. The students were divided into groups of four. Each group had to teach the class about a different aspect of the topic, such as the effects of concentration, temperature, and pressure. According to Shulman, the class established a peer-review form with the following five categories:
1. Apparent knowledge of the topic
2. Appropriate use of a demo, lab, skit, or game
3. Use of visual props or musical highlights
4. Ability of the group to answer questions

Upon making their presentation, each group of students was evaluated by four classmates and their teacher. What a wonderful idea! If you want students to listen in class, ask them to evaluate the lesson. For students who have a problem concentrating, this procedure has great potential.

Peer mediation is flourishing in many schools. Peg Calcavecchia, administrative assistant at Pleasant Valley Intermediate School in Pennsylvania, says that peer mediation “changes the manner in which students understand and resolve conflicts in their daily lives.” Peer mediation is student-centered and results in “a win-win situation,” Peg says. According to Caryn Iorio and Rich Hurley, the advisors for this program at Smithtown High School on Long Island, peer mediation works more than 90 percent of the time, for several reasons:

- The students have ownership.
- The mediators receive more than 20 hours of training.
- Everyone benefits, including the administration. They now have students doing part of their job.

At Smithtown, students from across a broad spectrum are selected to take part in peer mediation. Children with weak social skills, children in special education, and underachievers all play a part in resolving conflicts and making the atmosphere of their school more conducive to learning. These struggling students gain strength from their successes as peer mediators, which may have a beneficial impact on their classwork and tests.
In summary, students themselves are a valuable, virtually untapped human resource that can immeasurably improve the quality of education in our schools. Every one of the student-helping-student programs mentioned here can involve underachieving students and give them opportunities to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Peer support is vitally important for nonlearners because it provides many benefits (social, emotional, and academic) that few other programs can engender.

**The Path to Success Starts Here**

Reuven Feuerstein, the cognitive psychologist, has developed ways to help children whom others have labeled “impossible to teach.” What was his secret? “He made them do things that they didn’t know they could do. They loved him for it” (Bellanca, 1999, p. xxv). The purpose of this chapter is to encourage the reader to follow in Feuerstein’s footsteps. You can do this by building on students’ strengths and by not requiring things that they cannot do. (For example, most underachievers have a problem with homework, so I never made an issue of it with these children.) Help these children become a success, and watch the amazement on their faces as they reach academic heights that they never dreamed possible.

So often, all these children have known is failure. They need to see that they are competent and capable. For most underachievers, small doses of success are all that is needed. As their confidence increases, so does their intrinsic motivation. For many of these students, it is their first taste of success, and they relish it. When the student succeeds, so do the teacher and principal. Instead of being humiliated by low scores on mandated tests, like Jack was at the beginning of this chapter, you will bask in the warm glow of success.

Moreover, as a natural by-product of helping underachievers, educators will experience personal growth. As your students
progress, they will develop a better attitude, and you will benefit from a better state of mind. You will develop confidence, a sense of competence, and a positive attitude. Developing the right attitude is a crucial part of maturing. Using the Totally Positive Approach, you can learn these invaluable positive-thinking processes on the job and then transfer them to your personal life. As you guide your students to improve their attitude, you will accomplish the same desirable outcome for yourself, both in school and at home.

You will also find yourself more likely to embrace change. Educators who are willing to make changes in the classroom become more willing to try something new outside the classroom. It is hard to break old habits, and educators must be highly motivated. Personal growth supplies the motivation. One success ensures another attempt. This is how a human being grows. In the end, school professionals—principals and teachers—will open their lives to adventure and progress.

When you try to make changes, you will encounter personal and professional obstacles. Don't give in to the fear. How can you overcome the roadblocks that threaten to stop you from accomplishing your goals? Angelo Senese, superintendent for the Northampton Area School District in Pennsylvania, suggests that you read the book Who Moved My Cheese? (Johnson, 1998). This book may help you cope with the uncertainty that comes from making changes.

Many educators feel that teaching has a spiritual dimension. Educators who are religious will, I hope, find the Totally Positive Approach, with its emphasis on selflessly helping others, in sync with their spiritual lives. To my way of thinking, all educators who uplift students rather than punishing them, and who make children's growth and well-being the focus of their professional lives, are doing God's work on earth.