Key to Reversing Underachievement

Underachievement is defined as a discrepancy between a child’s school performance and some ability index such as an IQ score. It is a learned behavior that can be reversed over time.

Strategies for reversing underachievement:

- Underachievement is a complex web of behaviors that can be reversed by educators and parents who focus on the many strengths and talents of these students.

- Labeling a child as an “underachiever” disregards any positive outcomes or behaviors. It is better to label the behavior than the child. For example “You have chosen not to turn in your homework” rather that “You are a poor student.”

- Underachievement is tied to self-concept. Children who learn to see themselves in terms of failure eventually will lose their motivation to learn. For learning to continue students must believe hard work is required and hard work will result in success.

- Establish values of honesty, trust, and truth with the child. Your role is to help underachievers reach their goals, not to punish or reward.

- Interventions should focus on the underachieving behaviors. Underachieving students need encouragement with emphases on effort.

- Help the child make concrete plans to solve the achievement problem. Ask him/her to develop a long-term goal with corresponding short-term goals. DO NOT supply solutions of your own as that only creates learned helplessness.

- Redefine success and failure. Success is following your plan and attaining short-term goals. Failure is represented as a learning experience with the focus of attention on learning, not punishment or guilt.

- Analyze specific decisions that led to success or failure. Establish clear linkage of today’s excuse with tomorrow’s outcome. Help the underachiever to see how he/she defeats what he/she values.

- Celebrate successful attainment of short-term goals and build on success.