HOW TO
GET FAILING STUDENTS
HOOKED ON SUCCESS

by Suzanne H. Stevens

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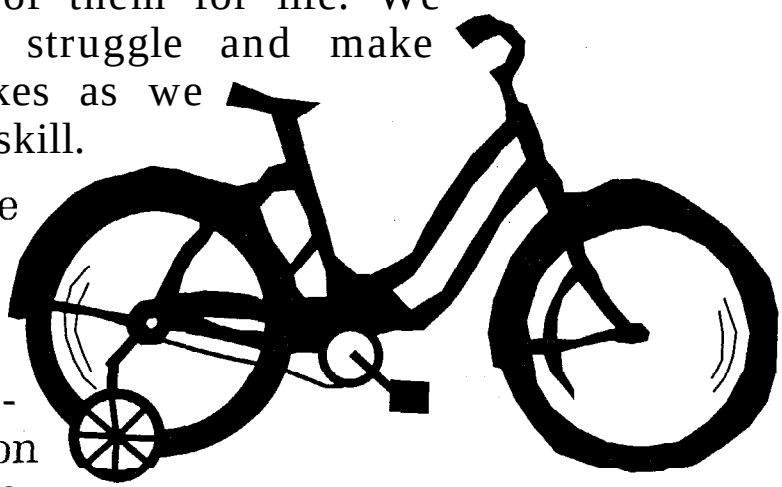
HOW TO RESCUE AT-RISK STUDENTS

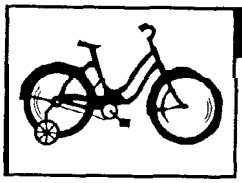
Train students to succeed.

The human animal forms habits very quickly. We get used to doing something in a certain way and tend to stick with the familiar pattern. We develop routine methods for doing everyday tasks, and keep many of them for life. We fumble and struggle and make many mistakes as we learn a new skill.



When we put training wheels on a child's first bike, we create a situation where a new activity can be practiced without much risk. After repeated experience in the controlled environment, we expect the skill to make a lasting imprint on the memory. Then it can be performed independently in any setting. Once mastered, our minds and bodies perform the task automatically.

That is what we're trying to achieve here. And the new skill we want to teach is how to succeed academically. We want to lead failing students to develop new patterns of behavior that will enable them to learn successfully. We want to help high-risk youngsters before they become



academic failures. We want to put training wheels on the thoughts and actions of at-risk students so that while they're still learning, they can't "fall over." The human brain habituates. That's the way it's made. At-risk students soon make a habit of failure. Once caught in that trap, they become helpless victims. We're going to rescue these youngsters, then give them a chance to make academic success a habit.

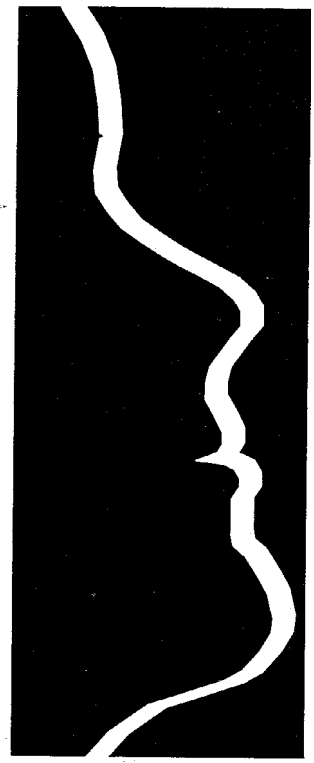
Get children to act and think in ways that lead to academic success. Then give them a chance to make success a habit.

We want to lead students to develop new patterns of behavior that will enable them to learn successfully.

PART I
JOYOUS
EXPECTATIONS

Chapter I
Expect Success-And Get It

When my daughter, Liz, was thirteen our family went through the upheaval of divorce. We moved. I returned to teaching. It was a very difficult time. The stress took a heavy toll on Liz. She was caught stealing at school and got into some really serious trouble. The principal insisted that counseling was necessary. Liz refused to cooperate. With a heavy heart I enrolled her in a different school. The situation looked bleak.



The new school didn't seem to make much difference. Liz's attitude didn't improve.

To help me deal with the stress that my daughter's behavior was creating, I started working with a counselor. She provided encouragement and guidance. And she taught me to make a "mental movie." In my imagination I watched Liz come home from school smiling. With my inner ear I heard her telling me how happy she was with her life. It was a short scene that lasted only about a minute. It felt wonderful. I used it every week in my counselling session. I watched it every night before drifting off to sleep. I knew the visualized scene was not even similar to the present reality.

But "seeing it" made me feel better, so I continued to use it.

Gradually the situation improved. I used the mental movie less and less. After a year or so, I forgot about it.

In the eleventh grade Liz transferred to an art school. In addition to a full schedule of regular academic classes, she took six art courses every semester. She was a very busy teenager.

One day Liz came home from school with something she had made in pottery class. It was a big,

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.
Eleanor Roosevelt

bumpy, brown blob with a huge open mouth and two bulging eyes. It looked like the head of a very ugly fish. Liz explained, "The teacher told us to make an animal that represented ourselves. And this is me."

My heart sank. If that ugly brown thing represented what my daughter thought of herself, we were in deep trouble.

She held the nasty-looking thing out and offered it to me. As I reached to take it, Liz laughed, "Yep, that's me. Happy as a clam!"

I nearly dropped the wondrous work of art.

Then, to my surprise, Liz told me how much she loved school. Word for word, gesture for gesture,

she stood by our front door and played out the exact scene I'd created in my imagination years before.

I stood there in stunned silence. It was an amazing experience. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected my mental movie actually to take place in the real world.

Such an event didn't fit with my view of the way the world works. I couldn't force myself to believe that mental imagery alone could bring such dramatic results. So I looked for research that could explain my daughter's miraculous

Believe that life is worth living and your belief will create the fact.

William James

change of attitude. As an LD teacher, I had many students who needed a similar transformation. If there was scientific evidence to prove that visualization could make a big difference in my classroom, I was willing to try it.

I quickly discovered that many studies have shown that expectations determine outcomes. One that is particularly well known was done by efficiency experts at Western Electric. In a series of experiments at a factory in Hawthorne, Illinois, every attempt to increase productivity achieved positive results. Turning the lights up increased

productivity. So did turning the lights down. Such puzzling conflicts led to the realization that researchers tend to get the results they expect. That phenomenon is now known as the "Hawthorne Effect."

In the 1960s a huge government-funded project tried to determine the best method for teaching reading. Classrooms were equipped with the best of everything so that teachers could test a variety of techniques and materials. Some classes made more progress than others, but no one instructional approach stood out as the most effective. A method that worked well for one teacher didn't necessarily work well for others. The key factor turned out to be the teacher's expectations. The project, called the "Twenty-seven Studies," led to a simple but fascinating conclusion: If the teacher believes in the method she is using, it will work for her.

Then, in the 1970s, Robert Rosenthal, a developmental psychologist at Harvard University, studied expectations that are based on faulty information. He selected a group of average students and told their teacher they were gifted. Although the youngsters were no different from their classmates, their teacher expected them to do superior work. And they did just that. They performed at a significantly higher level than the others in their class. They did as their teacher expected.

Throughout the 1980s this topic was investigated extensively. Always the results were the same: Expectations determine outcomes.

It is frightening to know that we teachers have such a powerful effect on students-especially

when no one ever tells us how to control our expectations.

This is the day of "at-risk" students. Large numbers of children are ***expected*** to *fail.* We may fight their problems with determination. We may have some hopes for their success. But always we know that these students are likely to become dropouts, not graduates.

Two questions arise: How do you look at a student who has all the signs of continued failure—poor grades, lack of basic skills, bad attitude-and

> If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.
>
> *Henry David Thoreau*

expect success? And how can the student himself expect to succeed?

Teachers need a simple way to gain control over their own attitudes. For those who intend to rescue high-risk students, a reliable method for building positive expectations is essential.

Most techniques of mental imagery require study, practice, and discipline. Whether through books, tapes, or personal instruction, they are best learned with the guidance of an expert. The results are worth the effort. But there is an easier way.

For the beginner, a very effective method of visualization is available through collage-making. Whether you focus on your entire class or just one or two students, the whole process takes only a couple of hours. You can do it at home alone. It is both pleasant and inexpensive. It offers an extremely easy way to replace expectations of failure with pictures of success.

Attempts to help at-risk students are pointless if continued failure is expected. Don't let the simplicity of collage-making fool you. Try it. Consider it the first step in the rescue process.

PICTURING SUCCESS

PREPARE

★ Gather your materials, including colorful magazines with lots of pictures, glue, scissors, and a 22-by-28-inch sheet of posterboard. Other supplies like ribbon, sequins, and buttons, might be useful, but are not necessary.

★ Schedule two hours in a quiet environment for the activity.

GATHER

★ Go through the magazines and cut out pictures of what successful students look like. Find words and scenes that make you think of good grades, enthusiastic learners, peaceful classrooms, happy children. Collect illustrations that represent you and your class having a fabulous school year.

★ Do not show problems, limitations, or handicaps. Be sure the finished project only uses pictures that illustrate what you and your students would look like if your dreams came true.

★ When you have enough pictures to fill the piece of posterboard, arrange them the way they look best to you and glue them into place.

EXPLAIN

★ On the back of the completed collage, write a brief description of what each picture represents. Just a few words or phrases will do. Don't skip over this step. It's very important that this wished-for success be described in words as well as pictures.

★ Give your collage a title, and write it on the back.

★ As a final touch, sign your work and date it.

DISPLAY

★ Hang the collage where you will see it daily.

★ Don't try to explain it to others. When your students or family members ask about it, tell them it's a picture of some of your current goals.

★ Look at the collage often, and feel the warm glow of success you would experience if all the pictures came true.

★ Use the collage for at least three months.

At the beginning of the next school year or semester, make a collage representing the success of your whole class. Then, if faced with a student who simply won't cooperate and allow your picture to become reality, use this technique to form a separate picture showing a change in his attitude. As pupils encounter problems you can't solve, collage making can create the positive expectations that open the door to success.

Once I accomplish the things I decide I'm going to, then I want to get into other things. I like to write my goals and plans down and keep them in a secret place . . . I just mark 'em off as they come true.

Dolly Parton

After you make a few collages and see how they work, adjust the procedure and teach the process to your whole class. Show your students how to take charge of their expectations. It could be the most important thing they ever learn in school.

If you are planning for a year, plant rice.

If you are planning for a decade, plant trees.

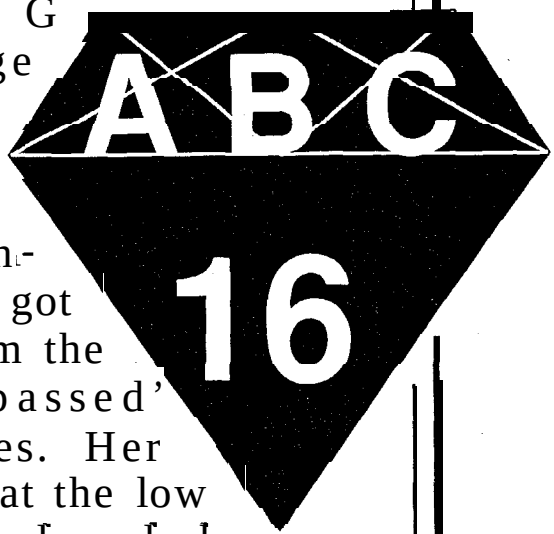
If you are planning for a lifetime, educate a person.

Chinese Proverb

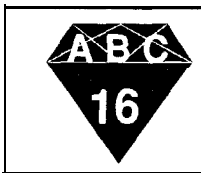
Chapter 2

Create a Picture of Success.

Karen was brought to our clinic for LD therapy when she was eighteen. Although her IQ was in the average range and she was normal in appearance, she could only say the alphabet to G and used large printed capital letters for all writing. She read fluently at fourth-grade level, but got no meaning from the words that passed before her eyes. Her spelling tested at the low second-grade level, and she had no math skills at all. Karen's academic problems were so severe that I agreed to work with her one-to-one three hours a day, five days a week.



My new student's school records indicated that her learning disability had been diagnosed when she was ten years old. She dropped out at sixteen. Six years of LD classes hadn't helped her. Each of her previous LD teachers explained away the lack of progress by saying that



Create a Picture of Success.

Karen had an attitude problem. Year after year, she was labeled "uncooperative" and "unmotivated."

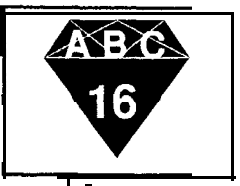
In planning our work together, quick success was my first concern. I knew that from the first hour of the first lesson Karen had to taste success, or I'd lose her like everyone else had.

Immediate achievement was essential for me, as well. Seeing my student actually learning would help me maintain a positive attitude about my ability to teach her. I had to expect her to succeed. I had to show her that success was possible.

They can because they think they can.

Vergil

I decided to start with the alphabet and cursive writing. With Scrabble letters, three sheets of fill-in-the-missing-letter exercises, a stack of handwriting paper, and a blackboard, I was absolutely sure I could teach her those. If Karen could say the alphabet through *G* today and get up to *J* tomorrow, it would be obvious that learning had taken place.

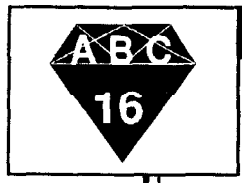


She and I could then begin to create a mental picture of her mastering the entire series of twenty-six. Developing skill at cursive writing offered the same type of opportunity to make progress that could be seen and charted.

Our first goal was to learn to write the alphabet, in cursive, in sixteen seconds or less. When Karen was first told about the objective, she nodded her head and made no comment. During the first three lessons we made gradual, steady gains. Karen was cooperative, pleasant, and very quiet. I had no idea what she was thinking. Then, in our fourth session, something strange happened: Karen got to Y before running out of time. I was amazed. She'd only made it to *M* the day before. After congratulating her on her progress, I teased, "You've been practicing."

Karen's blond curls hid her face as she stared at the floor and whispered, "Yes, Ma'am".

After a little prodding, Karen confessed that she had talked her dad into timing her as she raced against the sixteen-second limit. She also admitted that she had been practicing writing cursive letters in the steam on the bathroom mirror.



Create a Picture of Success.

In just three days Karen had decided success was possible. And she was willing to work to make that picture become real. From then on, Karen was eager to learn.

It only took Karen twelve lessons to master the sequence of the alphabet and all the lowercase letters of cursive handwriting. That first miracle opened the door for many others that would follow.

What was the secret of Karen's tremendous success? The goal was something she could easily imagine herself achieving. She wasn't allowed to choose an objective that was too big and vague such as, "I want to learn to read." She was assigned a project that was small, specific, and very challenging. Consequently, the chances for failure were almost non-existent. Given enough time and repetition and practice, any student with an IQ over seventy could master this task.

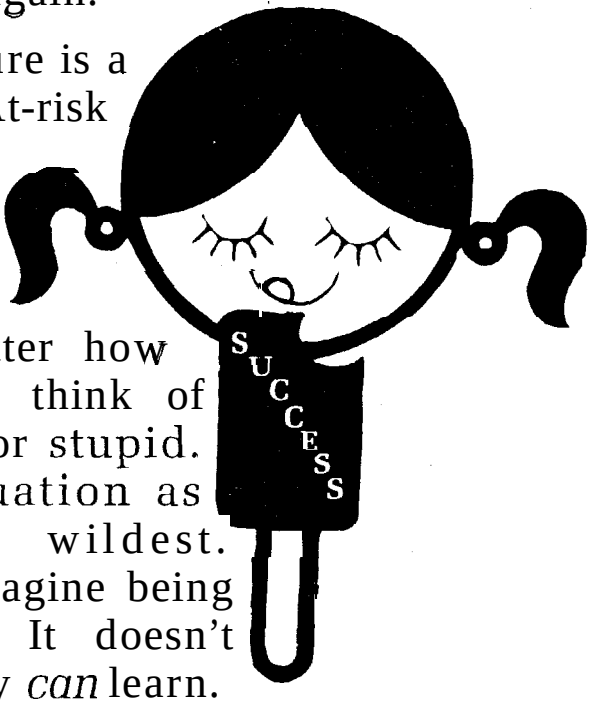
No attempt was made to convince Karen that she could succeed. Pep talks were avoided. Instead of ***telling*** her she could learn, she was allowed to discover the truth about her abilities by ***seeing*** learning taking place. When faced with clear evidence of her growing success, she caught a glimpse of what was possible for her. With that picture in her mind, another success was possible.

The most powerful thing a teacher can do for students is to give them a picture of success-then follow up immediately by giving them a taste of success. Success feels good. It is addictive.

Chapter 3

Give Students a Taste of Success

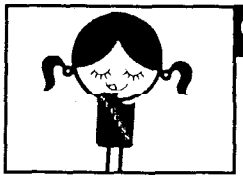
If at first you don't succeed, you lose. Once they've gotten bogged down in failure, at-risk students might try once, but if they don't immediately succeed, don't expect to talk them into trying again.



That's because failure is a pattern. It is a habit. At-risk students come to think and act in wavs that are self-defeating. They believe they are going to fail no matter how hard they try. They think of themselves as lazv, 'or stupid. They see their situation as hopeless. In their wildest. dreams, they can't imagine being successful in school. It doesn't occur to them that they *can* learn.

To reverse their failure patterns, we have to change their thoughts as well as their actions. They have to believe themselves capable of learning. They have to get a whole new view of themselves that includes the possibility of success.

Just as failure is a habit, so is success. Students who do their work usually pass. Those who take the time to study usually get satis-



factory grades. It's an attitude. For the students who believe work pays off, it usually does. For those who think effort is pointless, failure is inevitable — until someone tricks them into their first success.

Bob had a mild learning disability. He was disorganized, and absent-minded, and he had trouble getting his ideas down on paper. He came to my resource room three times a week to work on spelling and written expression. The rest of the time he was an average student doing satisfactory work in a regular fourth-grade class.

However, there was one slight problem. Bob rarely managed to succeed with homework. If he didn't just forget about it completely, he'd leave his book on the bus, or lose the slip of paper that told him the page number of the assignment. Even with, elaborate systems of safeguards and rewards, Bob showed no sign of developing independent study habits.

By mid-February, Bob's teacher and I were frantic. We were constantly discussing the problem. During one of our conversations, the fourth-grade teacher threw her hands in the air and sighed heavily, "The only thing that child can be trusted to carry back and forth are all those darn arithmetic papers. And I don't even care about them."

The remark made no sense to me. Trying not to sound rude, I asked, "What are you talking about?"

She explained, "Bob's been doing really well in math this year. I think it's the first time he's ever made all A's and B's." She shrugged casually. "And he takes his papers home to show them off to his family."

Just as failure is a habit, so is success.

"Does he get them signed or get some kind of reward?" I asked.

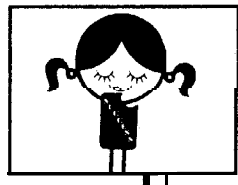
"No. He just takes them home, shows them to his folks, and brings them back."

"But Bob is so scatter-brained," I protested.

"With everything else, he is. With this, he has the memory of an elephant. I guess he's just proud of his progress in arithmetic." Bob's teacher looked at me and grinned. "If he had math homework every night he'd change his ways quick."

We looked at each other with sudden insight dancing in our eyes.

Bob's teacher and I felt like conspirators. We soon cooked up a



scheme, and on the first of March Bob's class was introduced to the Spring Bonus Project. It offered extra credit in math. Bob's passionate interest in arithmetic made him snap at the chance for a higher grade. At the end of each school day, special worksheets were handed out at the door. Every afternoon Bob took a bonus sheet. Every morning he brought it back. He wanted those math points badly enough to develop some new habits.

Come to the edge,
he said.

They said: We are afraid.

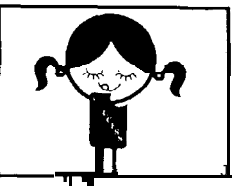
Come to the edge, he said.

They came.

He pushed them . . . and
they flew.

Guillaume Apollinaire

By the end of the month, Bob had raised his math grade to a solid A. And, next to his name on the homework page of the teacher's grade book, following all the zeros, was a



a neat row of checks. When shown his column in the record book, Bob's mouth drew up into a wide grin. With a gulp, he said, "Wow, I'm on a roll."

Bob's teacher took a report card form out of her desk drawer. Pointing to the space labeled "Home Assignments," she said/There's a good chance that your next report card might have a nice big S in this box."

Bob stared at the little rectangle. He'd never seen anything but a *U* in that spot.

"The marking period ends in two weeks." Bob's teacher paused to calculate, then announced, "Ten more checks."

"Just ten?" Bob seemed surprised.

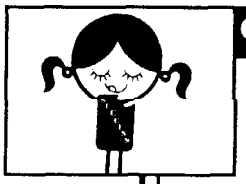
"You already have twenty," his teacher explained.

"What would I have to do to get them?" he asked.

"Whatever homework is assigned."

Bob glanced back and forth between the checks in the grade book and the blank place on the report card. "Ten, huh . . ." he muttered, Then, with a decisive nod of the head, he said, "Yeah. I can do that."

Bob had to be tricked into earning those first twenty checks. But seeing



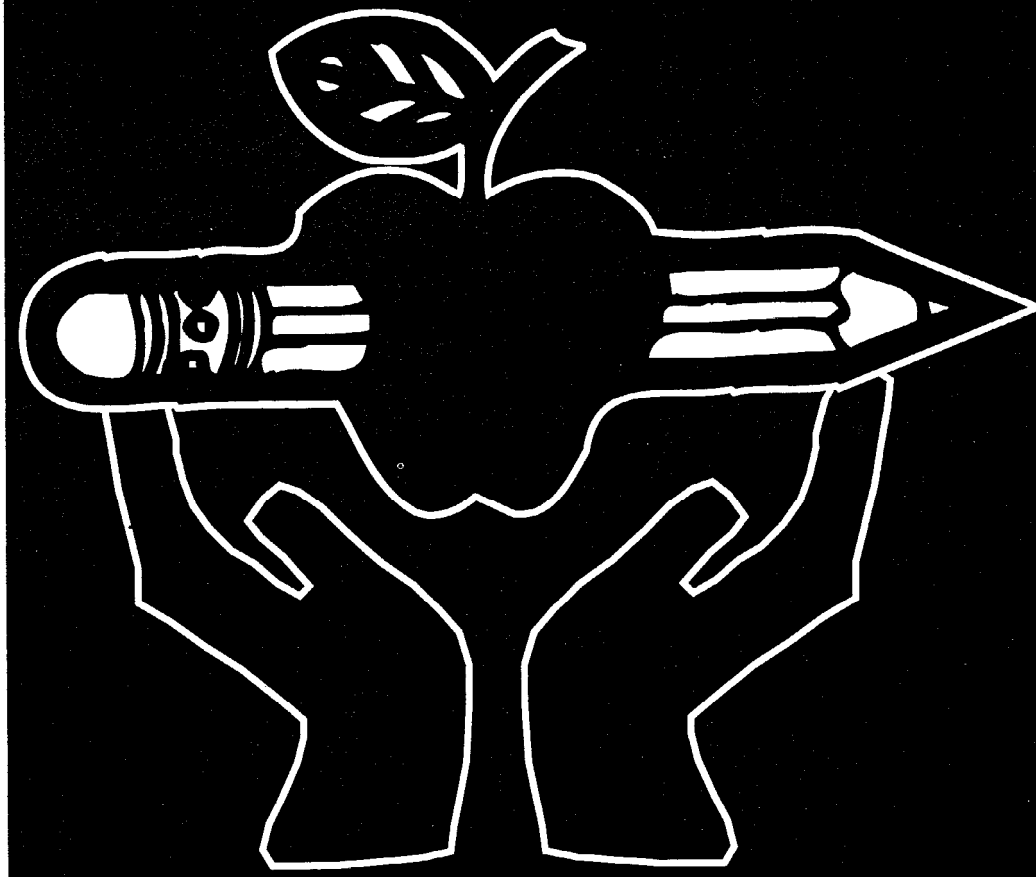
them made him realize he could get more. And once Bob got started, he kept right on rolling. He got his S. It was the first of many. As with most students, Bob found success to be habit-forming.

When dealing with at-risk students, the first goal is to show them they can learn. Teach them something; Give them a taste of success. To make that happen, the teacher has to be observant, persistent, compassionate, and clever.

High-risk students resist rescues. Smart teachers know how to catch them off guard and teach them something anyway. The suggestions in Part II can provide some general guidelines.

To reverse their failure patterns, we have to change their thoughts as well as their actions.

PART II

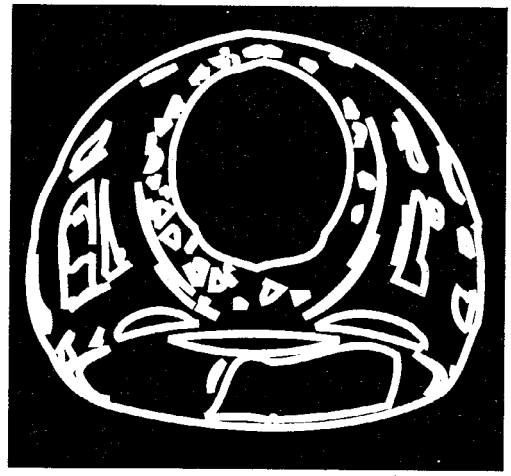


TECHNIQUES TO RESCUE AT-RISK STUDENTS

Chapter 4

Choose a Topic That is Sure to Hold the Student's Interest.

There are a number of special strategies which teachers can employ in the classroom to rescue at-risk students. When combined, they create a charged atmosphere in which high-risk youngsters are almost certain to succeed.



The first rescue method is actually the beginning step in a process. It forms the foundation for all other techniques. Its importance cannot be overestimated. The basic tenet goes like this: At every possible opportunity— when selecting topics for special projects, when making choices about which skills to stress, when deciding on materials to introduce a new concept, when determining which aspect of a subject to emphasize, when creating examples to use in a demonstration-choose a topic that is guaranteed to hold the student's interest.

Sometimes that's easy to do.

Fifteen-year-old Harvey was in a special program for youths with severe emotional problems.

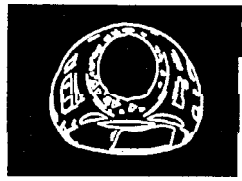
He had a long history of school failure, a low IQ, and no reading or writing skills. When he asked tc be taught to read, we decided tc ignore his weaknesses and give him a chance.

Harvey's enthusiasm was short-lived. Keeping him on task was impossible -except when he had a pencil in his hand. Then he was cooperative and eager to learn.

I soon realized that handwriting! not reading, was the aspect of our work that held real interest for Harvey. He thought he could use elegant penmanship to impress the ladies, In his mind, the ability to write a romantic little note would give him an advantage over less sophisticated competitors.

Harvey quit coming to me long before he learned to read. But he did stick with it long enough to gain a skill he believed was useful. He mastered cursive writing. Somebody has to help him with the spelling, but he can write gorgeous love letters. And, with beautiful flowing script, he can sign his own name.

Harvey's passionate interest in learning to write gave him the motivation he needed to benefit from one part of our work together. Like most teenagers,



he wanted to look "cool" among his peers. He was willing to put considerable effort into learning something that would impress his friends and help attract the opposite sex.

Students who have never tasted academic success are seldom as highly motivated as Harvey was. Those trapped in the failure pattern think of all schoolwork as "boring" and "stupid." Since their attitude is part of their problem, they aren't going to put any effort into some task they view as just another "dumb" assignment.

At-risk students rarely see any relationship between schoolwork and their personal lives. They don't see how learning something in school gains them anything of value in the real world outside the classroom. They don't believe academic accomplishments are useful. These are the attitudes of defeat. Lack of desire to learn goes along with lack of motivation and lack of success.

When a student has no basic interest in the subject at hand, the teacher must use strong motivating measures before attempting any serious program of instruction. In the world outside the classroom, the technique is called salesmanship.

> A teacher in southern Georgia used this concept to rescue an at-risk teenager just as he was about to drop out of high school. She knew the boy would not be swayed by a logical explanation of the advantages of a high school diploma. Instead she pointed out what his life would be like if he passed all his classes and

got promoted to the eleventh grade.

"You'd be a junior," she said. To make sure he got the full meaning of that lofty status, she added, "We're talking class ring."

The teacher never mentioned the fact that he had F's in all his courses. She kept him focused on the rewards available through staying in school. To be sure he was getting her message, she helped him picture the

Whether you believe you can do something, or you believe you can't, you're right.

Old Adage

details. "We're talking prom," she said. Then she helped him imagine how lovely his girlfriend would look: "Can't you just see Carol Anne all dressed up for the prom? With a pretty new dress, a corsage, and your class ring on a gold chain around her neck?"

This young man really wanted all the pleasures his teacher described. He stayed in school, got serious about his studies, and became eligible to rejoin the football team.

Now we're talking letter sweater. This boy found that success in school can be fun!

Sometimes students have their own reasons for wanting to learn something. Sometimes the teacher deliberately has to provide a picture of the benefits available through mastery of a task. Either way, the amount of progress the student makes is very closely re-lated to how much genuine interest he has in learning the skill assigned. The at-risk student, in particular, has to be convinced that an accomplishment is important to his personal life before he can be expected to master it.

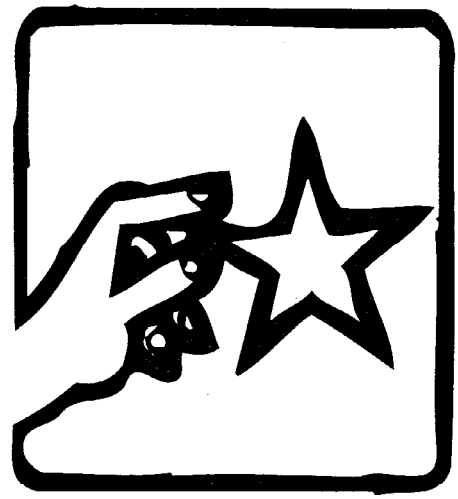
When a student is convinced that an accomplishment is important to his personal life, he'll figure out a way to master it.

Before starting, be absolutely certain the student will succeed.

Chapter **5**

Offer a Real Challenge.

Make sure the work you assign offers a real challenge to your students. At-risk youngsters are almost always assigned tasks that are pointless. Their motivation has been killed by busy-work that serves no purpose other than keeping them quiet and in their seats. Either their schoolwork is so difficult that failure is inevitable, or it's so easy that no learning can take place. Failing students are rarely given a fair chance for honest success. They are not accustomed to real challenges.



Failing students often appear to be lazy. To the casual observer-and sometimes even to their teachers and parents-it looks like they'll do anything to get out of doing their work. What they're reallv trying to avoid is pointless activity.

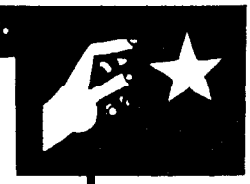
The headmaster of a fine boarding school in the Midwest is well known for his strict discipline. Even the most difficult adolescents stay out of trouble when faced with Dr. Mitchell's idea of just rewards. For minor infractions, he uses the standard loss-of-privileges approach. For major offenses, he has

a unique penalty he calls "an exercise in futility." With lowered voices full of dread: students refer to it as "the hole."

When sentenced to this ultimate punishment, the offender must create a hole that is 6 feet long, 6 feet wide, and 6 feet deep. A pick, a shovel, and a tape measure are the only equipment provided. For days the guilty party goes to classes, eats, sleeps, studies, and digs. Seasonal hazards like hordes of mosquitoes or mountains of snow can make the endeavor extremely unpleasant. But the worst part is what happens when the hole is completed.

At-risk students are almost always assigned tasks that are pointless. Their motivation has been killed.

No wall is made with the unearthed stones. No vegetables are planted in the freshly turned soil. No trash is buried in the pit. Without comment, Dr. Mitchell measures the hole, then nods to the groundskeeper standing by with a back hoe.



As the exhausted digger watches, all the dirt is pushed back into the hole and tamped into place. All the hard work of digging has accomplished nothing.

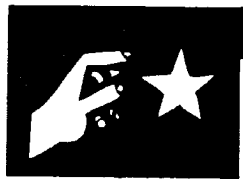
No student has ever had to go through the experience more than once. In fact, the punishment is so feared that it's seldom needed at all. The hole has become more of a legend than a reality.

Dr. Mitchell believes his method works because it's based on human nature. As he says, "The human spirit totally detests meaningless activity. "

To love what you do and feel that it matters— **how could anything be more fun?**

Katharine Graham

To break the pattern of hopelessness, teachers need to be sure all assignments make sense to the student. Every task must be seen as a step toward a desirable goal. Even the dullest drill will be done cheerfully if it is viewed as part of the process of mastering a skill which is important to the student.



Offer a Real Challenge.

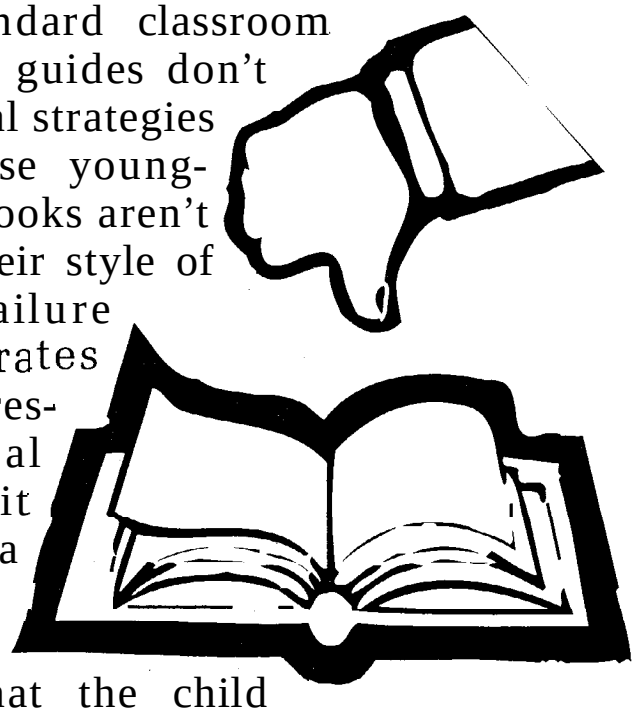
Work doesn't have to be difficult to be challenging. Even a small amount of real effort should give the student a genuine chance for success. But failure must also be possible. Success has no meaning if it's attained too easily. When good grades and high praise are just given away, students are robbed of the satisfaction of real achievement.

To break the pattern of hopelessness, teachers need to be sure all assignments make sense to the student. Every task must be seen as a step toward a desirable goal.

Chapter 6

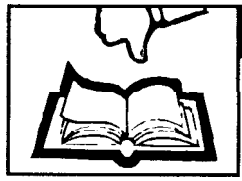
Adjust Your Methods and Materials.

If you are going to rescue at-risk students, you must select the methods and materials that are most likelv to work, and be ready to revise them if they don't.



At-risk students don't learn successfully with standard classroom methods. Teachers' guides don't suggest instructional strategies that work for these youngsters. Regular textbooks aren't compatible with their style of learning. Their failure clearly demonstrates these facts. For a rescue to have a real chance to work, it must be based on a fresh new approach. It can be safely assumed that the child can learn. It's up to the teacher to determine how he learns, then use methods that are well suited to his preferences, interests, and abilities.

Multi-sensory techniques are almost always effective with at-risk students. By teaching to all the sensory channels, the chances for success are tremendously increased.

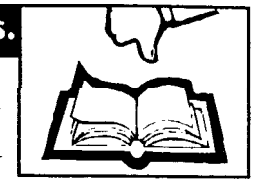


Adjust Your Methods and Materials.

As much as possible, get the student's entire body involved in the learning process. Provide practice that puts hands to use drawing, building, writing, or manipulating something. Explore body positions other than sitting. Standing up to work at the chalkboard can be helpful. Kneeling on the floor to write on newsprint or posterboard often enhances concentration and increases recall. Some students think better when on their knees. As long as they don't disturb classmates, alternative postures should be allowed.

> I can't memorize the words by themselves. I have to memorize the feelings.
>
> *Marilyn Monroe*

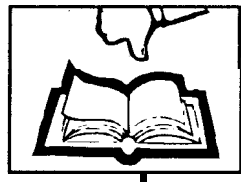
Adding a touch of color to written material can supply the kind of visual interest that makes information easier to understand and remember. Instead of underlining the subject once and the verb twice, write the nouns in blue and the action words in red. When putting math problems on the board, make the signs and process symbols in a bright color that stands out from the white or yellow of the numbers. Encourage students to take notes in different colors, or underline texts with several different highlighters. Every time color is introduced, it makes material more multi-sensory.



Some students need to talk their way through thought processing. They shouldn't be discouraged from moving their lips while reading or discussing things with themselves subvocally when thinking. Verbal cues can help get facts efficiently stored in memory. Mnemonic devices almost always include a strong verbal element. Rhymes, jingles, songs, and chants help most children fix difficult sequences in memory. Many people never learn to do alphabetizing without using the ABC song. And all of us remember "Thirty days hath September . . ."and "I before e except after ***c***." [For detailed guidance in using multi-sensory techniques, see Shifters: A Whole-*Brain Approach to Classroom Choreography* by Suzanne H. Stevens.]

Multi-sensory techniques will give at-risk students a learning boost. But adjustments in materials may be needed as well. Be sensitive to the student's feelings about the materials being used. Doing alphabetizing with a dictionary or phone book feels grown up and important. Doing the same practice with lists in a third-grade spelling book would be degrading to most older students. Young people will not succeed when forced to use materials they hate, or are ashamed to be seen using.

> One summer I took a course in remedial reading. In it we were introduced to all the latest, materials. One particular book seemed ideal for a junior high class I was to teach in the fall. Written by a well-known expert, it employed all the tech-



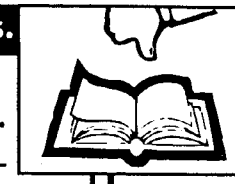
niques considered appropriate for eighth graders. It used excerpts from various textbooks to teach reading skills. Its approach to study skills was designed to get teenagers highly motivated.

The books were very expensive. But, as my principal said, "We'll be using them for years. Good textbooks are a wise investment."

With great optimism I introduced the new books to my students and we launched into our studies. We focused on serious issues like "college preparation" and "the SAT?' Every lesson was difficult, challenging. With grim determination, we kept a steady pace.

By early November we were starting on unit three. It was our third time through the cycle of instructional passages from math books, science workbooks, social studies texts, grammar lessons, and literary selections. It was like teaching study hall. I was finding the routine deadly dull. But I was determined to continue. I was absolutely convinced that this program was exactly what these junior high students needed.

One gray November Monday we got our books out and read the introduction to the day's lesson. I looked



up at the faces of my students. Stars of the soccer team, cheerleaders, the class president, a champion tennis player-these were neat kids. But I rarely got to see them smile.

I closed my book, cocked my head, and sighed heavily. The whole class was looking right at me as I quietly stated, "This book is boring."

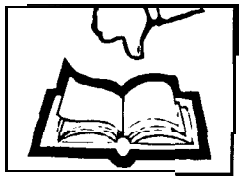
Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.

Doro thy

With a wonderful light laugh and a flash of her dimples, Cheryl asked, "Are you just now finding that out?"

Gently, respectfully, other students chimed in with their opinion of the text. Ted made loud snoring noises. Andy broadly gestured thumbs down. Even Kathy, a quiet one, wrinkled her nose in disgust and nodded her head in agreement. It was more enthusiasm than I'd seen in that classroom in months.

In a sudden moment of clarity I realized why we weren't getting anywhere. Students don't make good progress when using materials they

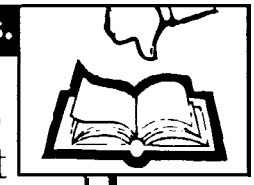


despise. And there was no doubt about it: my eighth graders hated their fancy new text.

We closed our books right then and there. One of the boys collected them and piled them in the corner. We never touched them again.

For the rest of the class period the students talked about the skills they needed and how we could develop them without spending any money. It was the liveliest discussion we'd had all fall. But it was only the beginning.

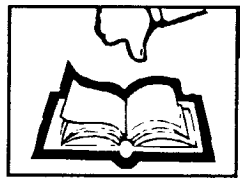
By retiring that book, our class was transformed. From November to June those eighth graders approached our work with exuberance. They cheerfully tackled even the most demanding assignments. One month I had them write an essay every single night. They moaned and groaned, but not one single zero went into the grade book. In the spring we spent six weeks on massive amounts of independent reading. They spent so much time with their noses stuck in books that parents began calling to find out what had come over their children. Those youngsters had a fabulous year. They made remarkable progress.



I never did figure out a way to tell the principal that we quit using our new textbooks. All year long they sat in the corner of our room as a grim reminder of just how dull and lifeless a class can be.

In addition to choosing a topic that is sure to hold the student's interest, and selecting methods and materials that are most likely to work, it is essential that the teacher keep focused on the idea of "rescue." Don't look on this as a standard instructional situation. A rescue is not an attempt to teach something about a particular subject. The goal is to start a chain reaction with success. That requires extraordinary measures.

The goal is to start a chain reaction with success.



Rhymes

A punter is a kicker,
a clock is a ticker.

A teacher is a yeller,
a banker is a teller.

A mother is a woman
a father is a man.

A fastee is a speeder,
a bird is a creeper.

A snooper is a scooper,
a tooter is a rooter.

A watcher is a looker,
a cheater is a rooker.

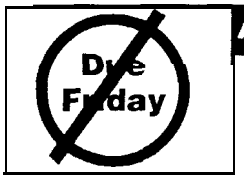
Bilvang

Chapter 7

Avoid Time Limits.

Avoid time limits when working with at-risk students. Don't make success dependent on learning something by a specific date. Allow weeks or even months for students to master the material used to create that first taste of success. Missed deadlines have been a part of the high-risk student's pattern of failure. In this new approach, the goal is competence. As long as progress is being made, it doesn't matter how long it takes to reach mastery.

This is a radical departure from the normal approach to instruction where the pace and sequence of teaching are usually controlled by the text. Textbooks are written in chapters and units. They usually jump around from one topic to another. Students aren't allowed to stick with one concept until they really get the idea. Math books usually present a week of addition, a week of subtraction, a few lessons on weights and measures, then a page or two of geometry. It might be more than a month before work on addition is resumed. For successful students, that's fine. They seem to learn no matter what we do to them. But for those at risk of failure, the little-dab-at-a-time approach is deadly.



Avoid Time Limits

If you don't want your at-risk students to fail, the rate at which thev learn must be taken into consideration. They must be taught at their own speed. This can be accomplished by presenting a concept, then keeping the student supplied with materials until he masters it and is ready to move on. This type of instructional approach is called "conceptual teaching."

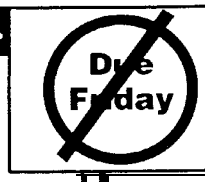
Scientific studies have shown that the human brain learns in a conceptual format. It takes in related pieces of information until it catches on to the pattern and recognizes the overall concept. That's

> I am not a teacher, but an awakener.
>
> *Robert Frost*

when the student says, "Oh, now I get it!" This usually takes place after repetition and practice. To get the new knowledge into long-term memory requires even more repetition and practice.

I have never seen a textbook that provides enough material for high-risk students to master any one topic. To do conceptual teaching, a good assortment of supplementary materials is essential.

> I once taught a regular fourth-grade homeroom class in which I had five reading groups. This arrangement allowed each of my thirty-four students



to get some conceptual teaching every day. And it sent me scrambling to pull together a huge supply of workbooks and ditto masters.

In language arts I devoted ten minutes a day to a project on dictionary skills. Each of the five groups worked at a different skill level. Four or five students had never learned to say the sequence of the alphabet. They completed the easiest book in one series and, when they still hadn't mastered the skill, went on to the same material in the beginner's book of another series. These at-risk youngsters often required material from three or four different sources in order to get enough work on one concept. The good readers breezed through alphabetizing, syllabication, and diacritical markings. They rarely needed more repetition than that provided by one or two workbooks.

It took me a few weeks to get our daily dictionary work organized. But once I developed a system, I had no trouble keeping the students supplied with appropriate materials.

All the students learned as fast as they could. They checked their own papers, charted their own progress, and found great satisfaction in the steady gains they were making. No

one failed because I didn't expect them all to master the material by a specific date. There was no deadline and I didn't allow textbooks to "set a deadline." If a student hadn't mastered the material by the end of the unit, I simply provided another book.

The opening ten minutes of language arts became the best part of the school day. It was one of the few times in my career as a classroom teacher that I could honestly say all my students were learning satisfactorily. Total success felt great.

Deadlines cause pressure. For at-risk students, pressure can create the kind of anxiety that leads to mental shutdown. It's not unusual for failing students to become school-phobic. The least little bit of pressure makes them nauseated or gives them sweaty palms. One of my former students went through weeks of insomnia and diarrhea when he took some adult education courses at a community college. Years of failure made him panic every time he entered a classroom.

Teachers who focus on competence instead of deadlines create an atmosphere of calm. Their attitude eases tension and eliminates anxiety. It helps the student develop a quiet poise that allows him to tell himself, "If I don't get it today, I'll get it tomorrow. If I do get it today, I'll still have to do it again tomorrow." Freeing students from deadlines makes learning a natural process similar to growth.

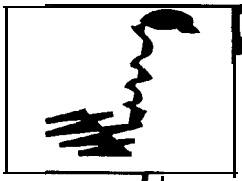
Chapter 8

Define Success Clearly.

Students need to know what constitutes success in any given task, They need to know exactly what they're learning to do. Teachers should be verv specific and define success clearly. There must be no room for disagreement later. It must be possible to give a definite yes or no response to these questions: "Are we getting anywhere?" and "Has the goal been reached?" In order to do this, organize work and projects so that there is a definite ending point at which it can be said that the material has been mastered. From the very beginning, set it up so that success can be recognized.

I play keyboard with a small group that provides music for Episcopal folk masses. My job is to join in with two autoharps, two guitars, and a banjo as back-up for singing. A wonderful flute player takes the lead and acts as our main solo instrument.

One Sunday I used my keyboard to substitute for our absent flute player. I had been given plenty of



time to prepare for the series of tricky trills I had to play with the lead guitar. It was only a-little one-finger melody, but I found the rhythm difficult. Everybody in our group knew I was very nervous.

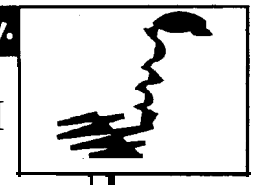
We got through the introduction beautifully. My part worked out just

The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it.

John Ruskin

right between verses. On the second time through we were really with it. And on the finale, with just me and the lead guitar playing, 1 blew it. My splashy finish turned out all wrong. I came in at the wrong time, hit mostly wrong notes, and didn't finish with the guitar. It was awful.

The minister's last amen still hung in the air as my fellow musicians jumped up with words of reassurance. Several of them said, "Great! Sue, you did just great." I didn't think that was true. But they're my friends and they love me. I figured they just wanted me to feel better about the ending. Or



Or maybe they really thought I did fine.

One of our group members sympathized with, "Oh, too bad." The honesty was welcome, but it sounded like I'd messed up the song completely. Had the last eight notes ruined the whole piece?

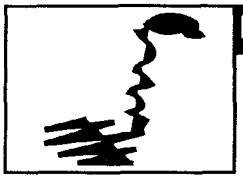
Several found it best to say nothing. That was easy and made perfect sense to me. It's probably what I'd have done if I'd been in their position.

Our alto is a talented special education teacher and is accustomed to such awkward situations. Her comment caught me by surprise and made me laugh out loud. Bobbing her head, she looked me straight in the eye, winked, clucked her tongue, and said, "Almost."

In this instance, there was no way to come up with a clear-cut distinction between success and failure. It was all a matter of interpretation.

Even though I was disappointed that my performance hadn't been note-perfect, I was amused by all the reactions. I had never seen such a variety of responses to one event.

It is important, however, that teachers avoid such ambiguity. How can you tell when a skill has been mastered? How good is good enough? That



has to be determined in advance. Goals need to be described precisely-before work starts.

Remember that at-risk students tend to see themselves as losers. This means that even when things work out right for them, they usually shrug success off as just luck. That's part of the self-de-

How good is good enough? That has to be determined in advance.

feating thought pattern that keeps them bogged down in failure. But it's vital that the academic success they achieve through a rescue doesn't look like it was just a fluke. Providing a clear description of the desired goal will enable students to see their own successes.

Failing students need more than academic achievement. They need to recognize their own accomplishments and feel that they earned them. They have to come to see themselves as people who have the power to create success.

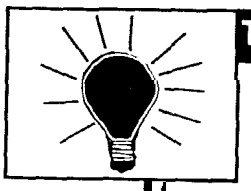
Chapter 9

Teach Students *How* to Learn.

Failing students have not developed effective study skills. They have no idea what techniques will enable them to learn. They think their lack of success can be blamed on the fact that they are "dumb" or didn't try hard enough. It never occurs to them that they don't know what to do to make learning happen.

At-risk students don't learn by standard classroom methods. For them to benefit from all the energy they devote to study and practice, they must be taught study techniques that are certain to lead them toward success. It's up to the teacher to figure out a method that will make it possible for each student to reach his goal. Sometimes it's necessary to experiment with several alternative approaches until the most effective technique is found. Never ask a child to practice until you've shown him how.

> Eighteen-year-old Karen had a serious problem with reading comprehension. She could figure out the words, but she never got the message. Her comprehension wasn't poor. It was nonexistent.



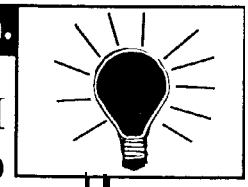
We had found methods that let her master the alnhabet, cursive writing, and basic math. In those areas she was making great progress. But, no matter what we tried, we couldn't produce any improvement in her reading comprehension.

It was very discouraging.

I wanted Karen reading newspapers and magazines. It was important for her to experience the benefits and pleasures of reading. If she was going to incorporate her new skills into her life, she needed to be using them. But until her comprehension improved, reading on her own was pointless.

None of my special tricks helped. And we tried them all. I even had Karen read paragraphs a sentence at a time, stopping after each one to explain and discuss it. On those tiny five- and six-word passages, she still had no idea what she'd read.

It was amazing. I'd never seen anything like it. Karen had been tested by dozens of doctors. None of them had any idea why reading was so hard for her. They had no suggestions on how to help her. The only thing I knew to do was to keep trying to find a method that would unlock the secret of learning for her.

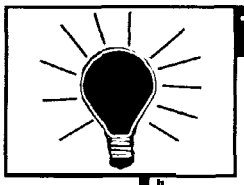


Day after day Karen and I searched for a way to teach her to read with understanding. We experimented with all sorts of techniques. Every time I had a brainstorm or read something in some educational journal, we'd try it.

One of my inspirations was based on the fact that Karen did her best learning when standing up, a study trick we had stumbled on earlier. I thought it might help her comprehension improve if she read while on her feet. To test out the theory, I pulled a story out of an old workbook and taped it on the blackboard, level with Karen's nose. She managed to read accurately, but it was so hard for her that beads of sweat popped out on her forehead and her voice quavered. Her anxiety level got so high that she kept rubbing the palm of her hand against her jeans to ease the tension.

It was tough not to be able to keep up in school and not know why. I didn't learn to read until I was eighteen.

Cher



The experience was so grueling, I made her **stop.** As soon as Karen turned her eyes away from the page in front of her, her breathing returned to normal and all the nervous movements ceased.

I gave her a minute to regain her composure, then asked, "What do you think?"

"Awful." That one word was all she said.

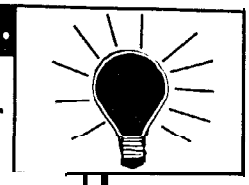
Yet again, we had not found our answer. I suggested that she quit.

Karen's response was an emphatic: "No." By sheer force of will, she went on to finish the story. After all that agony, Karen's comprehension was nil. She remembered nothing of what she'd read.

We'd been through dozens of such scenes. All to no avail.

I hated it.

In mid-March I attended a conference in California. One of the speakers had some creative ideas about reading comprehension. Her research showed that good readers visualize what's being presented in the text. She believed, therefore, that improving comprehension was simply a matter of teaching students to use their imaginations to create mental pictures of what



they read. I was fascinated. Her theory made sense. I could hardly wait to get home and try out her ideas on Karen.

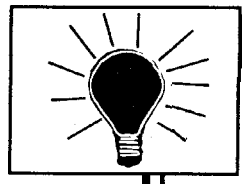
At our next lesson, I grabbed a one-page story about the ghost ship *Mary Celeste,* laid a pencil and paper beside it, and told Karen to read the first sentence. That was accomplished easily. But instead of asking the usual questions, I pushed the paper and pencil toward her and said, "Draw that."

Karen protested that she had no artistic talent, that she couldn't draw a straight line. But in the face of my determination, she gave in. She went back through the sentence word by word and slowly drew simple shapes and stick figures to show what it said. Her heart wasn't in it. It was obvious, she hated to draw.

Karen plodded along sentence by sentence. She had no real faith in the new technique. We'd been disappointed so many times before.

When she finally finished I stuck the comprehension test in front of her and asked her to give it a try. Without referring to her sketches, she quickly answered the questions and handed the paper to me.

I didn't know what to expect. When the first three answers turned



out to be correct, I knew we were on to something. My red pencil flashed down the rest of the paper as our eyes grew wide in amazement. Not a single error! Karen's comprehension had gone from 0 percent to 100 percent instantly. We were ecstatic.

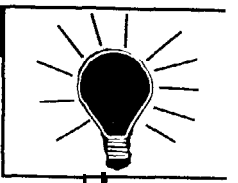
We grabbed the book and tried another story immediately. Maybe our miracle was just a fluke. But, on the second story, Karen again answered all of the comprehension questions correctly.

For the rest of the day we read and read and read. Karen doodled out her

Failing students have no idea what techniques will enable them to learn.

crude little stick-figure illustrations with increasing enthusiasm and speed. Her comprehension held at 90 to 100 percent.

We had a ball. It was magic. We had discovered a fantastic new delight. When it was time to go home, neither of us wanted to quit. It was as though we were secretly afraid we would come back the next day and



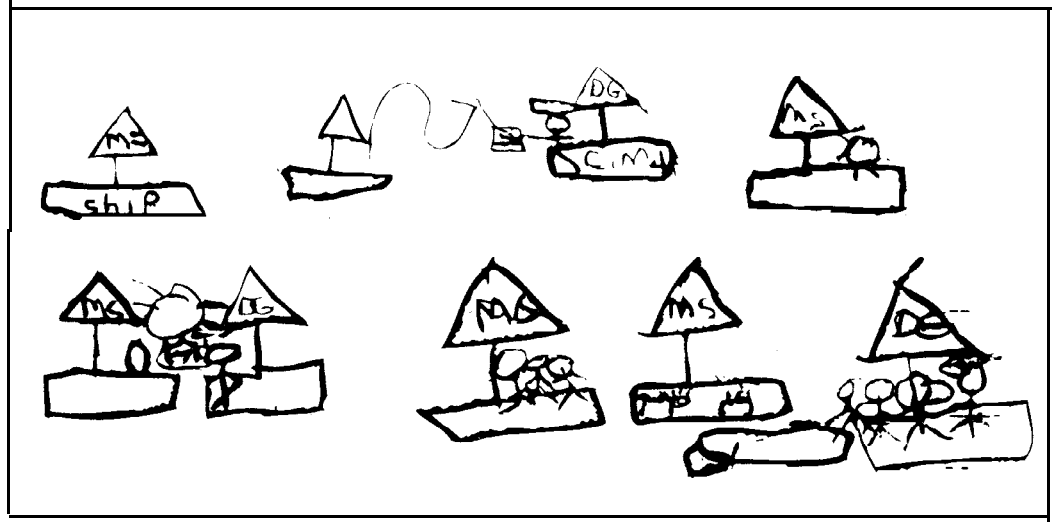
find it had all been just a dream. We wanted to enjoy it while it lasted.

But it did last. In fact, it got better and better. Karen became so skillful she could zip off a line of illustrations as fast as most people can jot down a few notes. After about a week it was clear that the method worked well enough for her to use it alone with confidence. At last, she was ready for independent reading.

The day before Easter vacation I gave Karen a brand-new steno pad and the autobiography of Helen Keller. Line by line she lovingly illustrated every word. It was the first book Karen ever read.

As this story shows, it's not always easy to teach a student how to learn. But teachers must take the lead, first in creating the belief that the student can learn, and then in finding the method which best fosters that learning. This doesn't mean the student's input should be ignored. Pupils who have known nothing but failure are very quick to recognize study tricks which work well for them.

At-risk youngsters almost always get trapped in their own failure patterns. They tend to try the same unsuccessful methods over and over. When left to their own devices, they rarely figure out a technique that makes it possible for them to learn. Unless the teacher finds a way out of this academic dead end, they will fail.



GHOST SHIP

The Mary Celeste was first sighted in the morning of December 5, 1872. *It was moving strangely and had no one at the wheel steering.*

From his ship, the Dei Gratia, Captain Morehouse signalled to offer help. There was no response.

In mid-afternoon the Captain pulled his ship along side the Mary Celeste and shouted, "Do you need help?" When there was no reply, he sent three ***of*** *his crew aboard to investigate.*

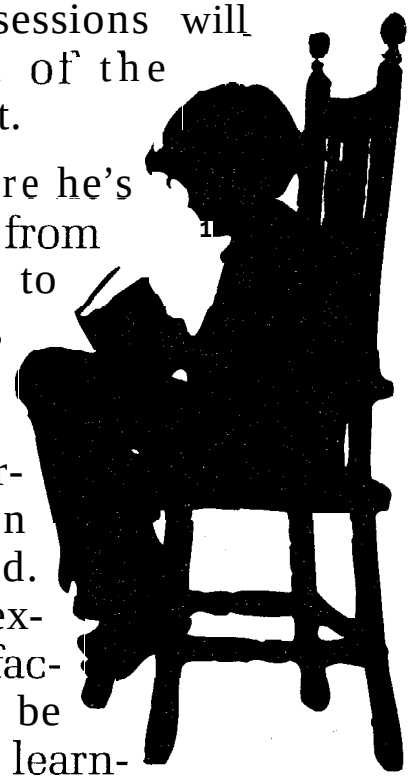
Everything on the Mary Celeste was in good order. Some food was frying on the stove. Breakfast was on the table. The tea had been poured and was still warm. But there was no one on board the ship!

No one has ever figured out what happened to the crew. The story ***of*** *the ghost ship Mary Celeste is one* ***of*** *the unsolved mysteries* ***of*** *the sea.*

Chapter 10

Provide an Appropriate Study Environment.

In order to guarantee success, a practice routine must be established. The effectiveness of the practice sessions will depend on careful control of the schedule and the environment.



Give the pupil a place where he's comfortable, secure, and free from distractions. Encourage him to think of it as his special spot, the place where he thinks and studies. As much as possible, let the student's preferences determine the location and type of seating provided. No two students learn in exactly the same way. Certain factors, however, should always be taken into consideration. The learning styles research of Doctors Rita and Kenneth Dunn has led us to recognize five environmental factors that must be considered when choosing an appropriate study locale for each individual learner.

1. Noise. The noise level is of primary importance. For many pupils, deep concentration is possible almost anywhere. They easily stay engrossed in their work despite even the loudest sounds in their environment. Very few at-risk youngsters have the ability to do this. Distractibility is more

common to them. Because these youngsters have poorly developed inner self-talk, they need a very quiet atmosphere in order to hear themselves think. It's sometimes hard to provide the degree of quietness they need when there are other students nearby. Fortunately, the depth of quiet they require can be achieved with sound-insulating earmuffs, regular earmuffs, ear plugs, or a stereo headset playing white noise.

We now know that there are many learners who actually need noise in order to concentrate. Background sounds from a radio, stereo, or television actually help them learn. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that certain types of music can make all students into super-learners. (See *Accelerated Learning* by Colin Rose [New York: Dell, 1987] and The Brain Book by Peter Russell [New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979] for additional reading.) For those high-risk students who find music helpful during study sessions, a small portable cassette tape player with a headset can be useful.

2. *Light.* The amount of light in the work area is of great importance. Many students can't concentrate in class unless there is very bright light. Some even feel they need real daylight rather than the glow created by bulbs and fixtures. For these youngsters, dim lighting makes them feel sleepy and sluggish. Bright light helps them stay alert.

Others find that low light helps them feel calm and focused, while bright light makes them fidgety and nervous. For them, dim lighting increases concentration. Several studies have shown that poor readers and right-brain thinkers tend to prefer dim

light for study. As you might expect, many at-risk students also find it easier to learn in a room with lighting of low intensity.

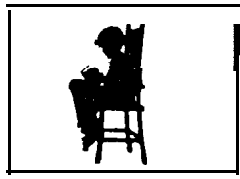
3. ***Temperature.*** Personal preferences concerning room temperature vary widely. Some students fan themselves and complain of the heat while those seated nearby shiver. Our own experiences tell us that it is impossible to concentrate when we are either too hot or too cold. High-risk youngsters seem to be especially susceptible to the attention problems caused by extremes of cold or heat. Consequently, your own comfort level shouldn't

Don't find fault, find a remedy.

Henry Ford

dictate what's right for an entire classroom. Instead, show children how to adjust their clothing or their environment to maintain a comfortable temperature level. And monitor room temperature on a daily basis.

4. ***Seating.*** Standard formal classroom seating isn't ideal for all pupils. Mozart wrote his music standing up at a high table. Others do their best thinking stretched out on the floor. Some can't concentrate unless they're in motion. While it's more convenient for the teacher to have the entire class seated in chairs, at-risk students should be encouraged to explore alternative postures.



5. *Oral Stimulation,* Many people find that the machinery of thinking works best when accompanied by movements of the mouth. When concentrating, they will chew on a pencil, smoke a pipe, eat, drink, chew gum, or bite their fingernails. Some experts believe that such activity "integrates" the nervous system. Although food and drink aren't normally available in classrooms, many high-risk youngsters could benefit from such intake.

A former student of mine recently waited on me in the glove department of a local department store. As we briefly exchanged news, Rose said, "You know, it's because of you that I graduated from college. "

Poor readers and right-brain thinkers tend to prefer dim light for study.

I was both surprised and delighted. As a fifth grader Rose had experienced major problems with reading comprehension. I assumed she was going to have trouble just getting out of high school. It hadn't occurred to me then that she would actually make it through college. Eager to hear about my great skill as a teacher, I asked, "What did I do that was so helpful?"

Rose's head bobbed with enthusiasm as she replied, "You were right. That one trick you taught me made all the difference. I haven't had any more trouble understanding what I read."

Trying not to let my face show my confusion, I wondered what trick I'd taught her so many years earlier. But there was nothing in my memory to give me a clue.

Fortunately, Rose continued. "Yep," she said, "as long as I chew gum when I read, I have no trouble with comprehension."

I don't recall recommending that technique. It must have been something I heard about at a conference, passed on to just that one student, and then forgot.

Mozart wrote his music standing up at a high table.

Before the roof fell in everybody was happy.

Before the roof fell in there were smiling faces everywhere.

Before the roof fell in my grandfather was alive.

Before the roof fell in my mother was getting ready to take a bath.

Before the roof fell in
The world was not coming to an end.
There was enough oil, gas and money
But one day it will stop.

Before the roof fell in it was a better world
and there was not very much pollution
and there were not any wars and shortages of gas.

Neal said why don't we ride bikes?

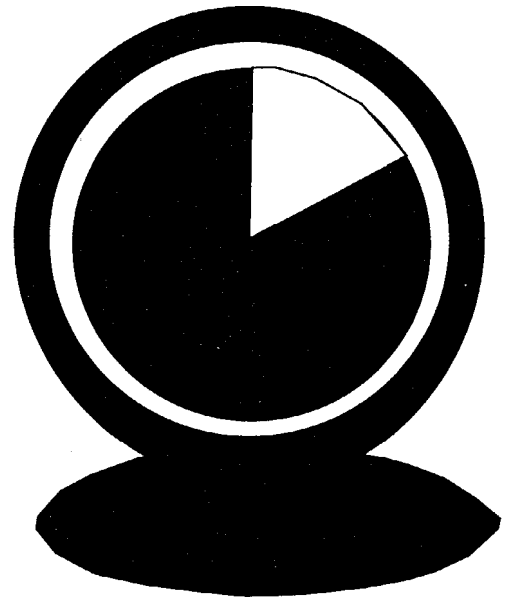
Bilvang


PART III
The Special
Rescue Project

Chapter 11

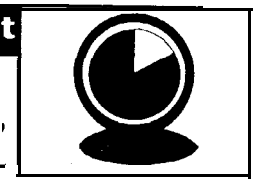
Develop a Special Project.

One excellent way to carry out an at-risk rescue is through a special project in which the entire class participates. At first glance, it may seem that this technique helps the poorer students at the expense of their more successful classmates. But teachers who choose their project topic carefully find this is not the case. A small special project done over a long period of time can provide excellent students with meaningful enrichment at the same time that it offers at-risk youngsters a real chance for success.



When done at the beginning of a period, a ten-minute routine of drilling, testing, and charting progress serves as a warm-up exercise for the entire class. And it gives teachers an opportunity to teach those skills and concepts that are so often neglected due to lack of time.

Most teachers have several topics they would like to cover if only they could find a way to squeeze them in. First, second, and third graders rarely get enough practice on addition facts to allow any but the quickest learners to achieve full mas-



tery. For fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, the same is true of the multiplication tables. Dealing with clocks and calendars presents endless opportunities for special projects.

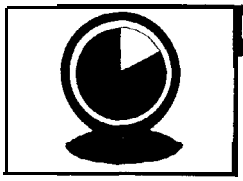
I used to do a special calendar project every February. Sometimes we would work on learning to say the months of the year in order. Some classes had already mastered that and were ready to work on correctly spelling the names of the months.

One year my group of sixth graders learned to apply the rhyme, "Thirty days hath September.. ." I had the full poem written on the bulletin board. For the first week they read it aloud together, practiced saying it several times to themselves, then wrote out the twelve months of the year and the number of days in each. During the second week, many of my students were able to close their eyes and recite from memory as we all said the verse aloud. By the third week everybody had mastered the rhyme, but some were still struggling to apply it.

Sometime during the fourth week it became obvious that the entire class had mastered the skill. On the last day I changed the bulletin board to read:

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and no wonder,
All the rest eat peanut butter,
Except Grandmother,
She drives the Buick.

The kids loved it. At the beginning of February they wouldn't have seen the humor in it. After getting the real poem stamped onto their brain, they

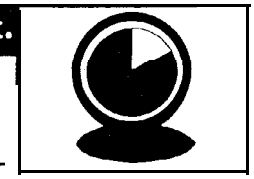


thought the alternative version was hysterical.

Special projects have a very important feature. They allow serious energy to go into the rescue attempt while confining the activity to no more than ten or' fifteen minutes per class. This enables teachers to reach out to those students who really need a hand, while still leaving plenty of time for a thorough presentation of the regular curriculum.

> Progress always involves risk; you can't steal second base and keep your foot on first.
>
> *Frederick Wilcox*

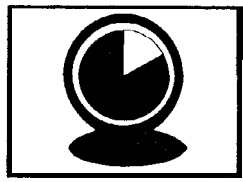
Projects are by no means new to the classroom. Many teachers have always included them as a normal part of their routine. I used to work with a second-grade teacher who liked to start the fall semester with a project on weights and measures. Every morning Mrs. Bergstrom herded her little flock up to the measuring corner where they used scales, rulers, and an assortment of cups and jars. By Halloween they all knew how many inches are in a yard, how many pints are in a quart, and how much each one of them weighed. When asked why she was so fond of special projects, Mrs. Bergstrom would explain, "They make me take time to teach some of the really important things I wouldn't get around to otherwise. And they give my poorer students a chance to shine."



A number of teachers have told me about the surprising results they've gotten with this rescue technique. A sixth-grade teacher in Michigan teaches songs from the various historical periods her class studies. A third-grade teacher in a huge inner-city school devotes ten minutes a day to songs about work and occupations. A junior high teacher in Iowa told me about the success she's had with political jingles and slogans. Her civics classes have gotten a lot livelier since she started including the musical side of American politics.

Ms. DeWitt teaches biology in a rural area of Georgia. She wanted to teach students to recognize plants common to the region. She thought that was much more practical than the material in the text. Several years ago she devised a project to expose all her pupils to this useful information.

Every month Ms. DeWitt introduces her students to ten local plants. They might be flowers, vegetables, trees; or even weeds. Samples are kept in containers in the back of the room. Each one has a laminated sheet of facts displayed right beside it. Students are provided with simplified botanical description forms where they fill in the name of the plant, then check off the words that describe its characteristics. Sketches are done on the back to illustrate leaves, flowers, seeds, and other features. To demonstrate mastery, pupils have to recognize the plant from a sample of the leaf, flower, and seed; give its common name (spelling doesn't count); and know three facts about it.

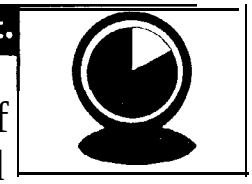


Develop a Special Project.

This garden plant project is so popular that it has to be saved for the last ten minutes of the class period; otherwise the teenagers get carried away and don't want to quit. These high school students are so excited about learning that they have to be forced to leave at the end of the class. Their grades are up, their standardized test scores are up, and they are very rarely absent. This kind of success feels good to everybody.

> If you are not the lead dog on the sled team, the scenery never changes.
>
> *Alaskan Proverb*

After taking one of my workshops, a high school teacher in North Carolina took the rescue project idea to heart. It had always bothered her that her English literature students never had time to recite poetry. She devised a method for memorizing poems and set up a special project. Ten minutes a day, at the beginning of class, the students worked individually with poetry. Some students wrote poems or created song lyrics. Others memorized speeches or small passages from plays. One group of students came to her with a one-act play they wanted to produce. She helped them work out a performance of one scene as their ten-minute-a-day activity. At the end of the time allotted to the special rescue project, standard instructional



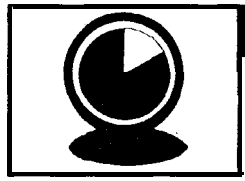
practices were resumed, For the rest of the class period, the teacher followed the same procedures she'd been using for more than twenty years. But they felt different because of the new enthusiasm in her students-and in her.

As a fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Johnston introduces his students to their first formal study of American history. Over the years he has found that many youngsters have trouble with this subject because it seems so unrelated to their own experiences. He has also observed that poor readers find the subject particularly difficult. Dealing with the demands of a challenging textbook places a tremendous strain on their limited skills. Along with their first taste of American history, many ten-year-olds get their first taste of academic failure.

To solve some of these problems, Mr. Johnston designed three different projects based on United States geography: (1) read post office abbreviations for each state, (2) spell each of the fifty two-letter abbreviations, and (3) name the largest city in each state.

All of these projects give every student a chance to set a goal and see themselves reach it. To keep track of progress, a graph records the number already known and the number to be learned.

Mr. Johnston provides the class with plenty of maps. He teaches them a study method based on illustrations, shapes of the states, and mnemonic devices. The pupils participate in quiz shows and games for practice and testing. For teacher and pupils alike, the only hard part of the activity is limiting it to no more than fifteen minutes a day.



Develop a Special Project.

Using this special project, Mr. Johnston converts an intimidating subject -geography-into a unique opportunity for success. He helps all his pupils build a body of knowledge upon which they will draw for the rest of their lives. He also helps high-risk youngsters develop the habits and attitudes that are likely to lead to academic achievement. Mr. Johnston's Zip. Code Project allows all his students to build expectations of further success. That's a great gift to give any child.

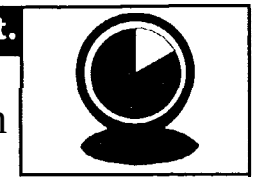
There is nothing in the world that will take the chip off one's shoulder like a feeling of success.

Thomas Wolfe

Rescue projects can also be done in a larger block of time on a weekly rather than a daily basis. One of my most successful special class activities was of this type.

One summer Ms. Patterson, our school's librarian, took a course in children's poetry. When we came back in the fall she was eager to get her hands on a class so she could try out her new ideas. Since my fifth-grade reading group was small, she approached me first.

I definitely wasn't interested. My students all had trouble with reading. They couldn't afford to



give up class time to fool around with poetry.

Ms. Patterson didn't take my hasty refusal to heart. She persisted. Finally, as a personal favor, I agreed to let her have my fifth graders one hour a week for six weeks. I would come with them and participate, but all teaching was her responsibility.

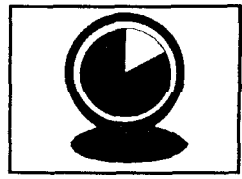
She was delighted. So were the students. An hour in the media center offered them a welcome break from the structured routine of our daily classes.

Guided by Kenneth Koch's Wishes, Lies, and *Dreams*,[1] Ms. Patterson provided the first half of a line of poetry and asked each child to write the second part. Spelling and handwriting were of no importance whatever. All they had to do was use their imaginations.

For these youngsters, that turned out to be no problem. Much to my amazement, every one of them came up with a delightfully fanciful idea. They took turns sharing the lines they had created, then they helped Ms. Patterson arrange them into one large group poem. Before returning to our classroom, each of the children was given a typed copy of the poem they had created in their first poetry session together. To sign their work, the group adopted the pen name "Bilvang".

These children had ideas and they were eager to express them. Over the six-week trial period, a whole new world opened up to me and my

[1] ***'Wishes, Lies & Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry.*** Kenneth Koch and the Students of P.S. 61 in New York City. Chelsea House Publishers, 1970, New York



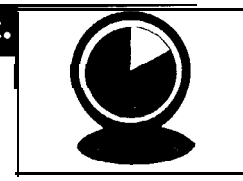
eleven- and twelve-year-old students. They discovered unexpected pleasures and insights in written language. They showed sensitivity and wisdom they'd never revealed before. They developed new skills that went far beyond the ability to put words on paper. Ms. Patterson had made no claims about the benefits of her project. I think she was as amazed as I was by the transformation taking place in my students.

I had hoped my pupils would learn something about the beauty of a well-turned phrase. They got that. But their new interest in poetry was having a positive effect that carried over into all areas of their schoolwork. They were motivated. They were eager to learn. They'd found something they could do well, and it put a new lilt in their steps.

We did a second six weeks, then a third. By the end of the first semester it was obvious that something very unusual was happening to my fifth-grade reading group. The members of Bilvang were making progress unlike anything I'd ever seen before. It was logical that their spelling and writing improved. But they were also showing unusual improvement in reading speed, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Ms. Patterson agreed to do poetry with us throughout the second semester.

In May, standardized achievement tests confirmed what I'd suspected-and then some. Never had I seen a whole class make so much progress in one year. Gains of two to three years were typical! [Clinics might get that kind of progress, but it's certainly not common in the classroom.)



Those youngsters more than made up for the time they "frittered away on poetry. "

The fabulous success of this fifth-grade class opened my eyes to a powerful rescue technique. At the beginning of the year I'd thought I couldn't afford to let my students devote 20 percent of our class time to a frivolous project. But the results I saw at the end of the year in terms of grades, test scores, motivation, and attitudes made me see the

Take a walk. Take a walk.
Then fly, fly, fly.

Take a yawn. Take a yawn.
Then sleep, sleep, sleep.

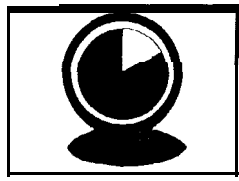
Take a ride. Take a ride.
Then drive, drive, drive.

Fly a kite. Fly a kite.
Then let it dive, dive, dive.

Bilvang

issue from a different perspective. Special projects were something I couldn't afford not to do.

Sometimes rescue projects are done on an even grander scale. A friend of mine is a professor at a large state university. She deliberately designs courses for students who would normally have



with college-level literature classes. Students find her offerings totally irresistible. In "Crime, Murder, and Mayhem" Dr. Murphy introduces contemporary and classic mysteries. "Ye Gods and Little Fishes" focuses on sea stories. "They Went Thataway" deals with Westerns. At the moment she is creating a serious study of the devil in American literature. It will be titled "What the Hell." Dr. Murphy's rescue courses give many young people their first real chance to succeed in an English class. She gets them to do something many have never done before-actually read a book.

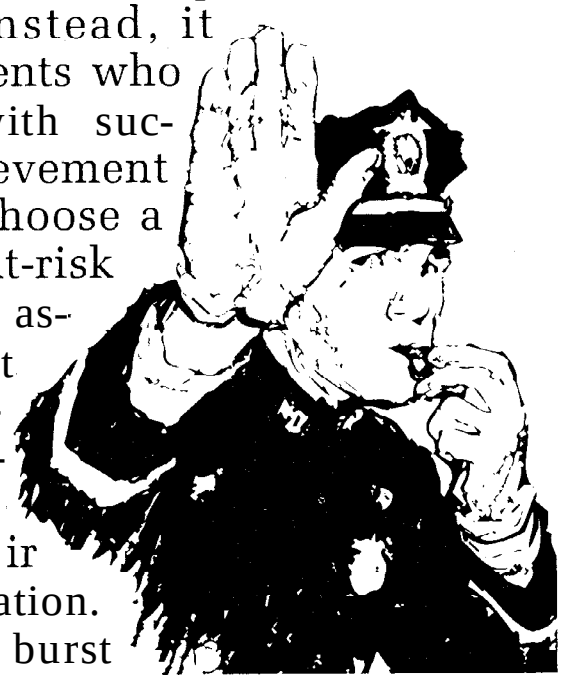
From the little ten-minute-a-day routines to the large semester chunks, rescue projects offer all students a real opportunity to build enthusiasm through successful learning.

A small special project done over a long period of time can provide excellent students with meaningful enrichment at the same time that it offers at-risk youngsters a real chance for success.

Chapter 12

Take Full Charge of the Project.

When setting up a project, avoid the temptation to make topic selection a democratic process. Letting students pick their project topics doesn't produce higher motivation. Instead, it leads to disaster. Students who have no experience with successful academic achievement can't be expected to choose a goal that is realistic. At-risk pupils try to take on assignments they can't possibly complete successfully. They overestimate their capabilities. They misjudge their own level of determination. They think their initial burst of enthusiasm will see them through to the end. It's up to the teacher to determine what is practical, what is possible, what makes sense. When a project must be guaranteed to succeed, at-risk youngsters don't have the background necessary for making wise choices.



In fact, with all decisions concerning the special rescue project, it must be obvious at all times that the teacher is the one in charge. We usually hold the student re-

sponsible for at least some aspects of his own failure. That cannot be the case in a rescue project. In order to change the attitude of youngsters who have lost interest in learning, the teacher must take responsibility for everything. The pupils' bad habits must not be allowed to deprive them of success again.

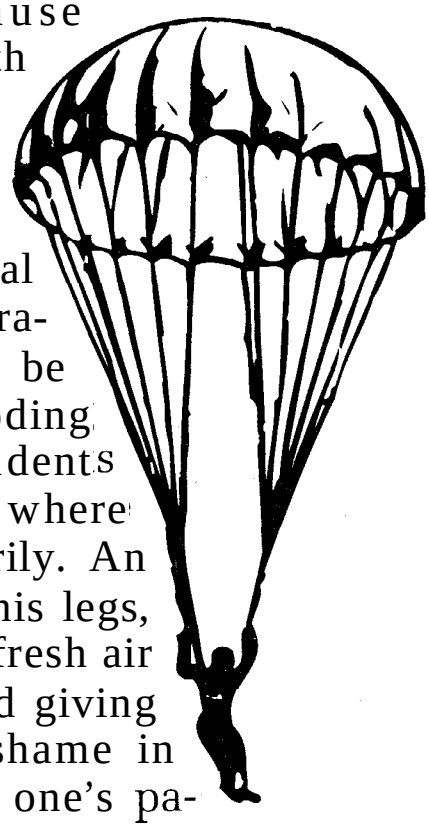
Absences, lost books, lack of materials, forgotten assignments, ignored homework-expect these problems and guard against them. Keep paper, pencils, and other materials available in the classroom. Have all work on the project done under your own personal supervision. Don't assign practice on the project as homework. For this one part of the class period, the teacher must keep complete control. Don't try to make the student change his behavior. See to it that he succeeds despite all the things he does to assure failure. Don't let the at-risk student snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory.

When setting up a project, avoid the temptation to make topic selection a democratic process.

Chapter 13

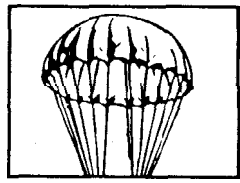
Give Students a Bail-Out Option.

Even when teachers take every possible precaution to select the perfect project, there will be times when a student cannot successfully complete the task as designed. A bail-out clause makes it possible to deal with those situations without damaging the chances for future success.



All of us have an occasional off day. The mounting frustration of such times -must not be allowed to build to the exploding point. It's important thatstudents learn to recognize situations where it's best to back off temporarily. An upset student can go stretch his legs, get a drink, or get a breath of fresh air before going back to work and giving it another try. There is no shame in this. Recognizing the limits of one's patience is part of wisdom and maturity.

The pupil's eagerness to complete his project shouldn't be allowed to cause tension, stress, or anxiety. These can contaminate his attitude in other areas. If the desire to succeed becomes so all-consuming that he takes no interest in anything else, it's time to ease up.



Give Students a Bail-Out Option.

Occasionally, a project cannot be completed within the given parameters. When success is impossible until some kind of change takes place, a postponement becomes necessary. In choosing to postpone or abandon, the decision should be based upon whether or not there is a realistic chance for success. It is perfectly legitimate to delay further action in order to gather information, find a technique that assures

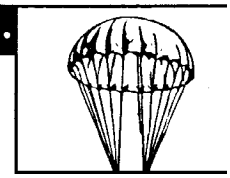
Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.

Goethe

success, revise the schedule or procedure, await an inspiration.

Postponements, however, are temporary and need specific limits. Don't ever let special projects just drift. Either work on them actively or terminate them. Never help the student pretend that things are going along just fine when they're not. And never allow the student to use a bail-out clause as an excuse to quit.

When used properly, a bail-out clause can actually improve overall student performance. Pain studies have shown the benefits of such an escape

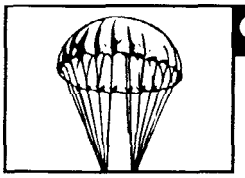


agreement. When patients are allowed to have medication any time they request it, they tend to require drugs less frequently and in smaller dosages. Doctors believe that the tolerance for pain is increased by knowing it can be stopped on demand.

The same principle applies to students who are attempting to learn difficult tasks. Their ability to endure frustration and boredom increases when they have control over the situation that's causing it.

When the bail-out option is made available, there will be times when students choose to use it. Their right to do so must be respected.

It's important that students learn to recognize situations where it's best to back off temporarily.



A Dead Bird in a Grave Yard

As we wandered among time worn stones
Marking the final resting places of those
Unseen and unknown of the past,
The recent death of a small bird,
His feathers still shimmering iridescent blue,
Touched us —

A dead Blue Jay in a grave yard
Means more to us than the grave stones.
We see the bird,
But we don't see the people.
The bird was there, in front of us, although we
Didn't see the people.

I feel sorry for a Blue Jay that has no place to go.
Someone has come and killed him.
There is no place for him to go.

The bird was dead and so were the people.
The bird was alive to us but not to God.
The people are dead to us but not to God.
Why is this?

The dead Blue Jay in the grave yard
Gave me a sorrowful feeling.
It meant a lot to me
To see a small bird dead.
In a way it depressed me —
A dead bird in a grave yard.
But then it didn't surprise
Because there isn't a better place to die
Than a grave yard.

Bilvang

Chapter 14

Provide Time for Daily Practice.

Part of the rescue process involves helping the pupil discover a study system that works for him. At-risk students rarely understand that repetition and routine are essential elements- in learning. They have no idea what regular practice can accomplish. They've never tried it.

The special rescue project provides high-risk youngsters with an example of an efficient and realistic study schedule. The ideal pattern provides a small amount of quality time daily. As an opening activity done at the beginning of each class, these special projects act as warm-up exercises similar to those used by athletes. They set the tone for the instruction that follows and get everyone's mind focused on the business at hand.

Right along with attendance, lunch count, and announcements, regular daily practice must get a top priority. If the class meets, the practice takes place. An effective study routine allows the student time to practice, test his skill, check his test paper, and record the results on a

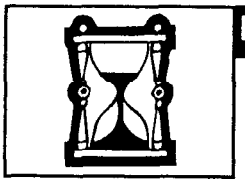


chart that keeps track of his progress—all in ten minutes or less. Each activitv is essential in creating successful learning. And it's up to the teacher to provide them.

At-risk youngsters don't believe those who tell them they can learn. A taste of honest academic success demonstrates their own ability to them. By providing a regular time and place for practice, the

There is only one history of importance and it is the history of what you once believed in and the history of what you came to believe in.

Kay Boyle

teacher leads the student through the process of developing new study habits. And, upon completion of a project, there is clear proof that, when using appropriate study methods, real learning will take place.

Each practice session must give the student an opportunity to apply his developing skill. One of my former supervisors had a pet peeve about "carry-over." Dr. Kline insisted that making loops and circles is not the same as doing handwriting; breaking words into syllables is not the same as reading. She believed that students must be taught

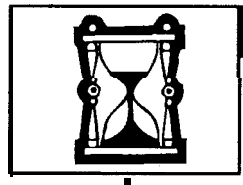
to apply new skills as they learn them. She'd say, "Carry-over doesn't happen automat&ally. It-has to be taught." That simple concept can prevent many teaching failures.

Richard was a very bright sixth grader who was reading at second-grade level. He had no trouble with reading comprehension. If he could figure out what a passage said, he knew exactly what it meant. All Richard needed was word-attack skills. And that's all we worked on, each day, one-on-one, for a semester.

I loved being able to tailor my instruction to fit the needs of just one pupil. Without other students to distract him, Richard worked well. Our lessons were always pleasant and very productive. We made rapid progress. Syllabication rules, prefixes, suffixes, contractions, and Latin derivatives were mastered quickly. Richard was soon working from word lists and workbooks designed for high school students. He took great pride in the fact that he could figure out such difficult words with ease.

By the end of the semester, Richard could decode anything. We were both delighted. We thought his reading problems were over.

Post-testing proved otherwise. On a standardized reading test, Richard's



score wasn't even up to fourth-grade level. Both of us were stunned.

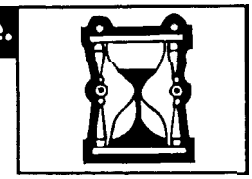
We spent an hour analyzing what had gone wrong. For the first time in months, I had Richard read to me. He sounded awful. He knew all the rules and all the tricks, but he couldn't apply them to actual reading situations. I had taught him to read lists of words, not sentences or paragraphs.

I felt terrible. Richard was very upset. We promised each other to "straighten out the mess next year." But we never got the chance. Over the summer Richard's family moved away.

Thoughts of Richard still cause me pangs of guilt. I taught that boy a long list of reading skills. Too bad he couldn't use them.

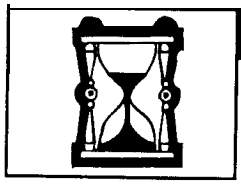
As an opening activity done at the beginning of each class, these special projects act as warm-up exercises similar to those used by athletes.

Provide Time for Daily Practice.



Testing provides an ideal opportunity to apply a new skill. It gives the learner a chance to try out his growing knowledge in a realistic setting. Athletes run laps, lift weights, and do calisthenics as part of their training. But that's not the same as running a race or playing the game. It's in trial runs that all the drill and practice is put to work. As much as possible students need opportunities to apply their skills to real-life situations. Tests help learners turn practice into preparation for real performance.

At-risk students must be taught to learn independently. Routine testing gives them the facts they need to take charge of their own learning process. Test scores allow the student to measure his progress to see where he stands in relation to the goal. By giving a clear picture of the skill development that is taking place, testing allows the student to monitor his own advancement. A decrease in the rate of mastery could signal the need to adjust the study methods or revise the schedule. A sudden increase in the amount gained could lead to discovering some change in the environment or routine that has greatly enhanced learning efficiency. Tests are like yardsticks that allow us to watch a plant grow. They enable us to see development actually taking place.



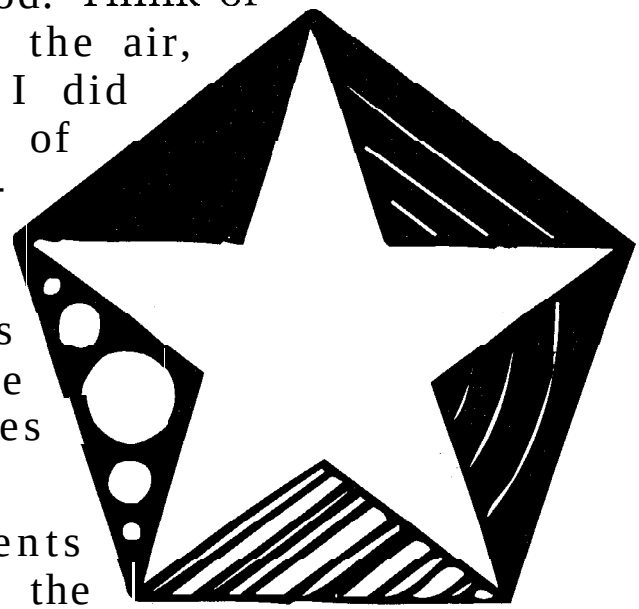
Provide Time for Daily Practice.

At the age of 42, Sylvester Stallone has acted in 19 films, directed 5 movies, and written 13 screenplays. Yet, as a youngster his future did not look promising. When Sly was in his early teens his father told him, "You weren't born with much of a brain, so you better start using your body."

Chapter 15

Chart Progress Daily.

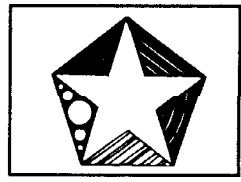
By charting daily test scores, teachers have the opportunity to give students a taste of success. All the preparation and study leads up to this point. Just by looking at the record of his scores, the student sees that learning is taking place and he feels the joy of achievement.



Success feels good. Think of an athlete, fist in the air, shouting, "Wow! I did it." That moment of triumph feels wonderful no matter when it happens. Every time success takes place the whole body smiles with pleasure.

At-risk students need to experience the "wow" of success repeatedly. It's not enough to wait for the huge surge of emotion that comes when a major goal has been reached. To break the old attitudes and habits of failure, success must be frequent and it must be noticed.

Daily tests give youngsters regular opportunities to triumph. Marking scores on a chart or graph gives students a chance to savor their success. It makes them take

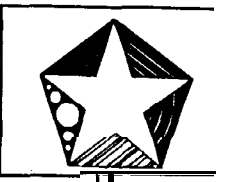


time to see and acknowledge their own achievement. On days when there have been no new gains, the graph still acts as a record of the continuing progress that is taking place. By keeping a daily record of his growing skill, the student increases his chances for experiencing the delightful burst of joy that comes with victory.

When eighteen-year-old Karen first started working with me, her attitude about herself and her ability to learn was almost totally negative. She was constantly putting herself down with comments like, "I'm too dumb to do math."

> In order to see I have to be willing to be seen. If a man takes off his sunglasses I can hear him better.
>
> *Hugh Prather*

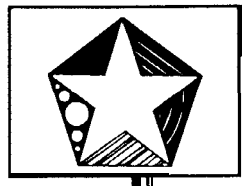
At first I patiently contradicted all of her self-condemning statements. Every time Karen called herself a "retard," I firmly replied, "That is not true." Then I'd add a sentence or two about her intelligence, determination, and good work habits. She never argued about it, but it was obvious she didn't believe me.



Karen needed concrete evidence to prove that she was able to learn. The charts of her progress on a variety of projects provided that. We always had at least four rescue projects going. I saw to it that strong gains were continuously made in all of them. As the evidence of her success mounted, Karen's negative comments were easily countered. Every time she called herself a dummy, I'd shove one of the graphs under her nose and say, "That's not what this shows." Nothing else was necessary. The evidence was irrefutable.

After two months of success bordering on the miraculous, this young woman was still clinging to her old failure attitudes. All those years of defeat had crushed her self-esteem. I wasn't at all sure we could bring it back. Every day I hoped to see the realization dawn in her that she could learn-that she was learning. By Christmas she had quit calling herself names. But there was still no sign of real confidence or belief in her own abilities.

In February, when all our attempts to improve Karen's reading comprehension had failed, her progress charts gave us the courage to continue. We had stacks of papers and walls full of graphs to prove that Karen could learn when taught by the right methods.



Most of her learning problems had been solved. There had to be a solution for this one as well.

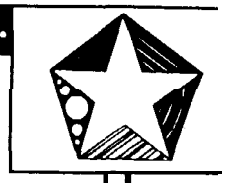
I read everything I could get my hands on; I called every expert in the immediate area. Karen was cheerfully cooperative as I dragged her from one specialist to another. We tried a psychologist, a neuropsychologist, a neurologist, and a Jewish mystic who did accupressure on her hands.

When none of the experts helped, I got disgusted. I didn't know how to teach Karen to read with understanding. And I told her so.

Without even looking up at me, Karen tapped the book we'd been trying to read and said, "I know I can learn to do this." She was talking to herself, or perhaps to the universe. She jabbed the book a second time and said in a much firmer voice, "I know I can learn."

In that moment, all the tests and charts paid off. Karen had a whole new attitude about herself and her abilities. She'd had a lot of success and fully expected more.

I'd been ready to give up. But when Karen asked me to stick with her, I couldn't refuse. We pressed on in our search for an answer.



Just a few days later the doors of literacy burst open for Karen, And her world was transformed.

Karen and I only worked together for only seven months. In that time, she mastered all the skills taught in six years of arithmetic. Her gains in language arts were equally impressive. Through an accumulation of small, daily triumphs we built great academic success and a new set of positive attitudes. In the time we shared together, Karen and I gained a whole new concept of confidence, determination, and optimism. The process made a profound change in both of us.

At-risk students have very little experience with success. They usually fail to recognize their own academic achievement when they see it. Daily scores and records help them notice that they are moving toward their goal-and gives them cause for celebration at each step of the process.

The main point of this rescue technique is to get at-risk students to discover that successful learning feels good. By arranging matters so that they experience the delights of success, we hope they will begin seeking it on their own.

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
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