

# Reversing Gifted Underachievement

An Intervention That Set One Student on the Path to Success

By Jennifer Ritchotte

Like many of my teaching colleagues, I once imagined the gifted classroom as a place where every student sat poised, notebooks open, hands eager to be raised, hungry for new knowledge.

Never had I heard the term  
“gifted underachiever.”

Those two words seem almost oxymoronic. Yet, this past year alone I taught several exceptionally intelligent seventh graders who had decided for various reasons to stop achieving at levels commensurate with their ability. Alex was one of these special students.



### **Alex's Underachievement Profile**

On a humid August afternoon, Alex walked into my language arts classroom in a heavy black winter coat, torn corduroys, and sandals. He carried two lunch boxes, one containing the contents of his lunch and the other, Legos. I would be lying if I said that I did not take an immediate interest in Alex. In a class of 31 gifted students, he definitely stood out, but not just simply because of his appearance. In discussions about literature, Alex would make the most deeply insightful and philosophical comments, comments that one would expect to hear from a 12th-grade Advanced Placement English student, not a 12-year-old boy. Yet, as passionate as Alex was about my class, he never turned in a homework assignment or project, or studied for quizzes. As the first semester neared its end, Alex was on the verge of failing three of his core classes including mine. Countless times I probed Alex after class about his lack of concern for his grade. Each time I was met with complacency in the form of shrugged shoulders. I decided to schedule a meeting with Alex and his mother to discuss his underachievement and ways we might work together to correct it.

### **Determining the Causes**

To prepare for this meeting I read several articles about gifted underachievement. I was desperate to find a miracle intervention that might work for Alex. However, I soon realized that successful interventions are correlated with specific causes. I needed to first uncover the cause(s) of Alex's underachievement. A 2005 article written by Del Siegle and Betsy McCoach, "Making a Difference: Motivating Students Who Are Not Achieving," provided me with valuable insights. The authors contend that there are several different factors contributing to gifted underachievement. These factors include, but are not limited to the following: learning disabilities, a lack of challenging curriculum, negative student self-perception, and a lack of motivation and study skills.

With Alex I was able to quickly rule out a learning disability and a lack of challenging curriculum as potential causes of his underachievement. Alex did not have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or show signs of being twice-exceptional. Furthermore, because he felt that we did "cool things" in my class that were extremely challenging, I came to believe that a lack of challenge was not an issue and, therefore, unlikely to be an underlying cause of his underachievement. In my meeting with Alex and his mother, I decided it would be most beneficial to explore the latter two factors, negative self-perception and lack of motivation, as potential culprits.

At the meeting, I first asked Alex to describe himself. Before he could do so, his mother explained that Alex refused to be like his older sister who flourished as a gifted student. Although she was careful not to draw comparisons

between her two children, she explained that his father constantly did so. He was desperate for his son to just be normal. He hated that Alex still played with Legos even though Alex built the most intricate constructions, butterflies with moveable wings and ships with secret compartments. Alex's mother actually snuck his Legos into a lunchbox each morning so he could work on his constructions at school. As she spoke, I occasionally glanced over at Alex who never said a word, fidgeting with his fingers and smirking only at the mention of his father's expectations. I began to wonder how Alex must feel being labeled abnormal by one his own parents and constantly being compared to the "perfect" sibling.

Next, I asked Alex to describe his motivation or lack thereof when it came to schoolwork and grades. Very articulately, he explained that he did not see any value in grades and did not like the idea of having to conform to his teachers' or parents' expectations. He was more than capable of earning A's, but made a conscious decision not to. His mother rolled her eyes and shook her head in frustration. I could not help but think there was a connection between Alex's act of civil-disobedience and the way he was being made to feel at home. Perhaps, if he could not be the model gifted student like his sister, he thought it better to be the direct opposite. I decided to stage an intervention with Alex that would not only build his self-confidence, but also improve his grades in his core classes.

### **Interventions for Alex**

First, Alex needed to agree to stay after school with me twice a week, not for tutoring, but simply to work on his homework and study for any quizzes and tests. He loved this idea, as I was one of his "favorite" teachers and he no longer had to attend the martial arts classes his father signed him up for. The second part of Alex's intervention involved him simply writing a short paragraph that explained what would motivate him to do better in his classes. Much to my delight, Alex came in not only with this paragraph, but with an entire rewards system that he had personally developed and wanted my help in implementing.

Alex's rewards system was made up of credits. If he earned an A, for example, on one of my homework assignments, a quiz, project, or test, he would receive three credits. However, earning a poor grade like an F would result in a loss of five credits. Once he accumulated 10 grades in my class, he would add up his credits and be able to redeem them for a small reward (a Lego set, for example), or he might choose to save his credits and work toward a bigger reward (1 hour of computer time). Having approved this system, his parents also agreed to provide the rewards. Conversely, if Alex ever found himself with a deficit of credits after the accumulation of 10 grades, he would lose a



## Alex's Credit System

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Grade Earned	Credits earned
A (100–93)	+3
B (92–85)	+2
C (84–77)	+1
D (76–70)	0
F (69–0)	-5

## Alex's Reward System Based on Credits Earned

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Total credits	Reward earned
25	Cheap project item
30	New Lego set
40	1 hour of video games
70	Get to ride the bus home
90	1 hour of computer time

*Note. To be checked after each accumulation of 10 grades.*

## Alex's Punishment System Based on Credits Lost

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Total points	Punishment earned
-10	No leisurely walks
-20	Go to bed 30 minutes earlier
-40	No television
-60	No bus riding
-70	Go to bed by 8 p.m.
-80	Good-bye Legos

*Note. To be checked after each accumulation of 10 grades .*

privilege like being able to take a “leisurely walk.” Once he improved his grades, the lost privilege would be given back to him.

The final piece of Alex’s intervention involved plenty of positive reinforcement on my part and on the part of his other teachers. I wanted school to be a safe place for Alex where he could feel secure in his own skin. His other teachers agreed to offer him plenty of praise, especially given the new effort he was putting forth to succeed in school. I decided to take a special interest in his Lego creations. I displayed several of them all over my classroom and made special requests for new ones; he actually built the butterfly with moveable wings for me. The hobby that once made him “abnormal” now became cool to a number of his classmates. He now had friends who shared his interests. He felt special and admired for the first time in a long time. To say that Alex beamed with pride would be an understatement.

### Alex’s Underachievement Reversal

About 2 weeks into the intervention, Alex had not lost any credits and had actually earned a 93, 100, and 84 on three major assignments for my class. It was apparent to all of his teachers and his parents that he was now more motivated than ever to do better in school. The proudest day for both Alex and me came when it was time for the kids to present their Greek Mythology projects. Alex went above and beyond the project requirements and created a homemade movie about Poseidon. When it was his turn to present, he asked me to play the movie while he waited out in the hallway. The movie was, of course, completely original and uniquely Alex down to the soundtrack music. His classmates thoroughly enjoyed it. As Alex reentered the room, the entire class gave him a standing ovation. For the rest of the year he referred to this day as “the best day of his life.”

With a newly found sense of confidence and motivation, Alex ended the school year on the Honor Roll. He was also awarded the “Most Improved Award” at our grade-level ceremony. Again, his classmates gave him a standing ovation when he accepted his award. Even when he no longer had a need to stay after school with me, he still came to help out around the classroom. Thanks to a simple rewards system and a team of caring professionals, Alex became a gifted achiever.

This article offers one strategy to use with a child displaying underachieving behaviors. Finding what motivated Alex was the key to turning his achievement around, and the success of the strategy also hinged on Alex contributing to the solution and taking control of his own learning. Keep the ideas presented in this article in mind when working with underachievers who may come across your path.

### References

McCoach, D. B., & Siegle, D. (2005). Making a difference: Motivating gifted students who are not achieving. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 38*(1), 22–27.

### Resources

[http://www.prufrock.com/client/client\\_pages/GCT\\_articles/Gifted\\_Underachievement.cfm](http://www.prufrock.com/client/client_pages/GCT_articles/Gifted_Underachievement.cfm)

<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/underachievement.htm>

[http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/browse\\_resources\\_187.aspx](http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/browse_resources_187.aspx)

<http://www.aegus1.org/articles.html>

Ms. Ritchotte has also begun her own blog on underachievement. To find out more, go to <http://giftedunderachievement.wikispaces.com>.

### Author’s Note

Jennifer Ritchotte, M.A.T., earned both her B.A. and M.A.T. from the University of Pittsburgh. This fall she will begin doctoral studies in gifted education at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. She currently teaches seventh-grade Academically or Intellectually Gifted (AIG) English and serves on the AIG Advisory Council for Union County Public Schools.

