

Underperforming Student Success Strategies

Nov 15, 2016 by Eric Jensen, Ph.D.



Some low-income schools are wildly successful while others continue to struggle. Dr. Eric Jensen has researched this phenomenon, studying what makes one Title I school a place where students are as successful as their high-income peers, whereas others continue to be low-performing. Following is a transcript of a portion of his *Underperforming Student Success Strategies* webinar, in which he outlines some game-changing, yet simple tips..

7 Secrets to Accelerate Underperforming Students

We've got lots to do, so let's roll up our sleeves and get started. First things first; here's an overview of what we're going to cover:

1. **Relationships matter the most.** Learn how you can create relationships with struggling students.
2. **Understand the REAL problem.** Part of succeeding with struggling students is learning how to hear what people are *not* saying. Sometimes it looks like there's one problem you're solving but it's really a different problem altogether.

3. **Shift mindsets and expectations.** Learn what kind of expectations are realistic with the struggling student.
4. **Build cognitive capacity relentlessly.** How do you build cognitive capacity? And why is this important? [Hint: Dr. Jensen recommends Fast ForWord!]
5. **Teach grittiness for the long haul.** Learn how you can teach grittiness.
6. **Work on social and emotional skills.** How do you teach social emotional skills?
7. **Coaching for life.** How do you become a coach for your students to be successful in life?

I've worked with many underperforming students and of course, you can come up with a different list of seven but I think this list is solid gold, so let's get started.

Be Conscious of How You Start Your Day

One suggestion is every time you begin working with your students, always ask yourself:

- What's the posture your students are in?
- What's their metabolic state?
- How are they feeling at the moment?

You and I know when we feel tired, we feel grumpy, we aren't very excited about what's coming up next. At the end of a long day of work, sometimes, you and I would go, "Aah, I don't feel like going out tonight." When you're psyched up, it's different.

*Classroom Activity: Attitude of Gratitude and Skills of Optimism

A first activity I would always offer to your struggling students is to write the answers to these two questions in ten words or less:

- **What's the attitude of gratitude?**
- **What are the skills of optimism?**

Ask them to find a partner and partner up and do an activity like this. If you do this with your students just once or twice, it will probably be treated by their brains as sort of a novelty like, "Oh okay, I did it" but you won't get any lasting change in the brain. The mantra you're going to hear over and over from me is this: steady consistency that pushes the envelope is what is going to get you changes.

Meaning, it's got to be a little bit uncomfortable, a little bit hard but every single day keep pushing, keep pushing. This should be a hard thing for them to do, which means you're going to need to create a little bit of buy-in before you ask them to do that. You'll maybe give them some ideas for it. Initially they just won't have the mindset, they won't have the ideas, they won't have the thoughts and they won't even know how to verbalize it or what to write down. You know differently.

Get your students in a good state for learning.

How you can do that is... get them up and moving around! Use a quick energizer. I like to have students be the ones that generate it. Help them start to get into a better thinking frame of mind. Now that they are ready to learn, life is good. You're going to get better results.

Become the Go-To Adult

Let's begin with relationships and how important they are. You and I know that most students care more about if you care about them (vs. your content). What are the things you can do to kind of bump this up? First of all, many

of the students that struggle have been let down by adults, so they've lost hope. Many feel alone. They don't have a partner, a brother, a sister, a parent. Many have been misdiagnosed. What students need is an ally, a go-to adult. You become that person. This means starting and building relationships has to be number one or else they're not going to even go to the next stage. How do you actually do that? There are many ways.

Start with simple things to build relationships:

- Do you call them by name?
- Do you notice when they come and go?
- Do you ask them questions?
- Could they use someone to listen just for a few moments?
- Do you know their hobbies?
- Do you know about what their challenges are?

Many people hear that relationships are important and then they go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, heard that before." Actually good relationships diffuse stress. Good relationships provide hope. That's important to you because without good relationships, not much good is going to happen.

When you make eye contact with your student and they contribute something, do you say thank you with eye contact? Do you smile at them? I had a person in one of my trainings stay at the end of the training and she sat near the front row and she said, "Can I talk to you about something for a second?" Everyone had left the room and I said, "Of course." Well then she said, "I get the feeling that you don't like me." She said, "When you looked towards me you didn't acknowledge me or smile or anything." I realized this was amazing feedback for me and I felt terrible and I went, "Wow, everybody notices." The answer was no, I didn't have any dislike of her but this shows you how perceptive people can be. Make sure you know your students' family situation and visit their neighborhood.

These are all the beginnings of building the relationships that you want. Never blow it off. To students these are a big deal. The effect size 0.72 which is almost a year and a half worth of gains. Remember, they work harder for you when they know you're on their side.

***Classroom Activity: Share something personal about yourself once a week for a year.**

Sometimes you forget how much they care about you -- how much they would like to care about you. That's why the first tip on the list is to share something personal about yourself once a week for the whole year. Do a favor at the beginning of the year that's so strong that people remember it. Listen for a couple minutes a day. Make it a goal. Learn three things for thirty weeks of the year about a student other than their name.

These are the kinds of things that you can use to build up your own relationships skills. First on that list is build the relationships. As I said, without those nothing is going to work. The students are everything. When they come to school every day, here's their question: are you on my side or not? Are you a friend or a foe? You're an ally or adversary. They have to feel that you are an ally.

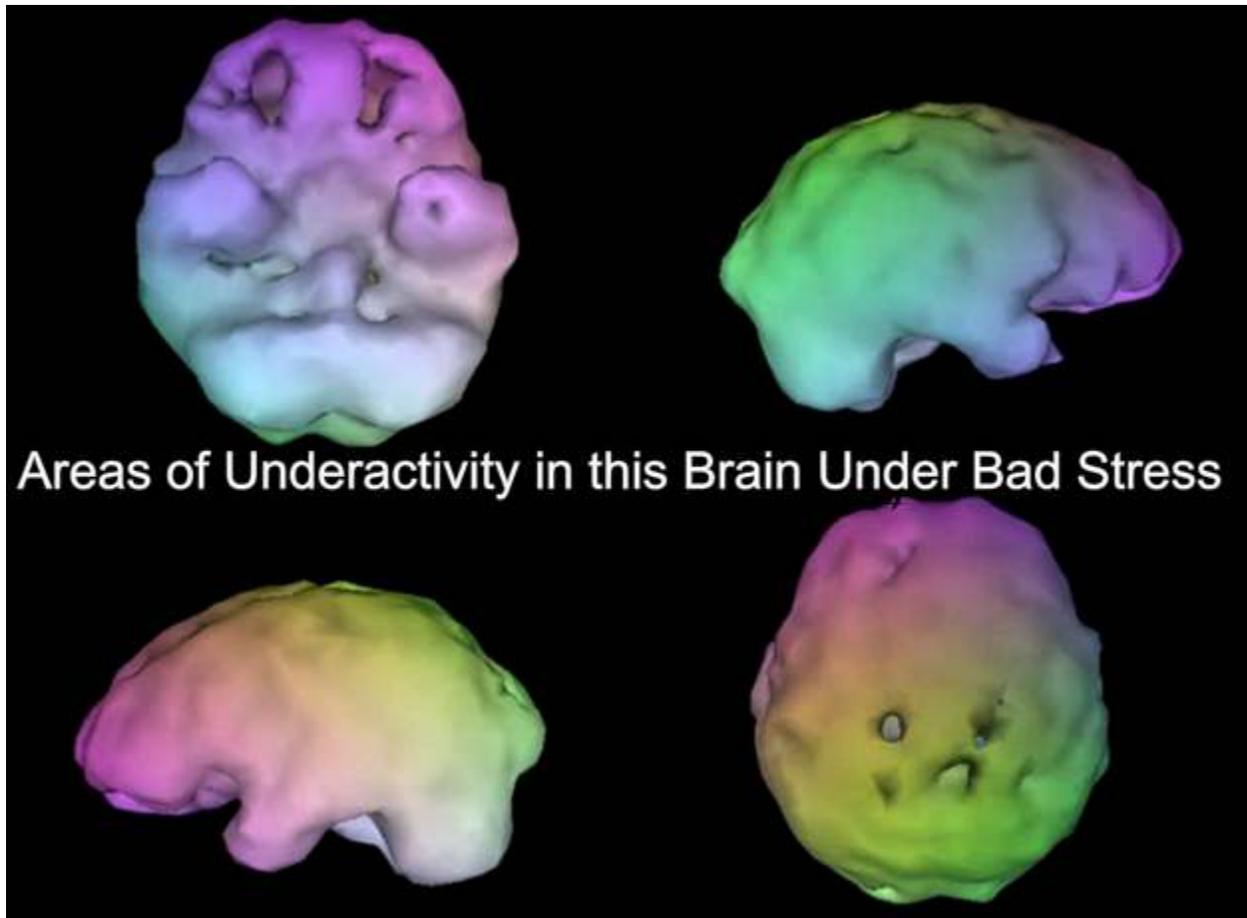
Understand the Real Problem

Here's a student for you. A boy who is eight years old seems kind of scattered and impulsive. He forgets a lot of what he hears. When teachers ask the student to get organized, he fools around. In class he's unable to predict the next sequence of tasks. He doesn't reflect on his behaviors. His older brother has many of the same symptoms and they both came from poverty. The teacher is pretty sure that he has what? What's your diagnosis?

Many teachers would have written down ADHD or ADD. What you should know is that for a lot of students who have these kinds of symptoms, it's easy to label someone but unless you actually are a medical doctor or a psychiatrist, you might get surprised by it.



Here you're looking at a healthy version of the brain. Actually this is my own brain using SPECT technology. You're seeing four different views of it. The bottom is on the upper left hand corner and then the right hemisphere is on the top right. Left hemisphere lower left and then the top of the brain on the right. Here is what you should know. This brain looks like it's pretty healthy because smooth surface shows even activation in the brain is standing alone. Now check out the same brain when I am stressing out like crazy.



What you now see is my brain doesn't look so good. This is actually very similar to what you'd see in a student who has serious ADHD. All of this happened from stress. Let's go back to the student we introduced.

Possibilities for this student include:

- If he grew up poor, it means greater likelihood of increased chronic stress disorders.
- Stress disorders mimic the exact same symptoms of ADHD.
- Impulsivity, poor memory and achronica (which is a Greek word to mean out of sync with time).

As long as he keeps being labeled as ADHD, he will never get the intervention that he needs.

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Interested in what happens next? It takes just a little less than an hour to get pumped up by his message. [Watch or Listen Now!](#) Turn it on in your car, while you're cleaning, or traditional-style at your computer.

For over two decades, Dr. Eric Jensen has synthesized brain research and developed practical applications for educators. Dr. Jensen has authored over thirty books including Teaching with Poverty in Mind, Tools for Engagement, Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind, Turnaround Tools for the Teenage Brain and Different Brains Different Learners. Jensen is a member of the invitation-only Society for Neuroscience, the President's Club at Salk Institute of Biological Studies and the New York Academy of Sciences. He co-founded the first and largest brain compatible academic enrichment program now held in 14 countries with over sixty five thousand graduates.

Dr. Eric Jensen gives two thumbs up to Fast ForWord to build cognitive capacity