

ADVOCATING FOR SELF-ADVOCACY

HOW TO ENCOURAGE SELF-ADVOCACY IN YOUR CLASSROOM

WHAT IS SELF-ADVOCACY?

TEXTBOOK DEFINITION

Self-advocacy is a skill that helps people communicate their needs and ensure that their needs get met. It helps people have a voice and choices.⁵

In the school setting, self-advocacy can help students take charge of their own educations, which can lead to increased motivation, engagement, and achievement.¹²

The skill has four components:¹¹

- » knowledge of self
- » knowledge of rights
- » communication
- » leadership

Why do we need a guide?

Students can clearly benefit from self-advocacy, but unfortunately, many of them are unequipped to actualize the skill in the classroom. Teachers can help students by providing clear formal instruction in self-advocacy, which is necessary for students to learn and implement the skill of self-advocacy.

What informs this guide?

This guide is informed by research into the academic literature on self-advocacy and related concepts, published self-advocacy guides, and from interviews with public school teachers.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Self-advocacy can occur in a variety of fields!

But it is particularly useful in the classroom.

But formal instruction from teachers can expand the benefits of the skill.

Children learn about self-advocacy in many settings. Informally, parents and caregivers can be great resources.

A Brief History

Self-advocacy was conceptualized in 1974 during the People First movement. This movement brought the voices of people with disabilities to the forefront and argued that they should be able to decide what is best for themselves.

But while self-advocacy began in this context, the skill is not limited to those with disabilities.

SELF-ADVOCACY MATTERS

BENEFITS

Without self-advocacy, students can have difficulty

- » making decisions
- » working towards goals
- » developing and maintaining relationships

The effective use of self-advocacy has been linked to
higher graduation rates «
utilization of resources «
stronger relationships «

Its benefits extend beyond high school as well
transition to college «
employment «

HOW DOES THIS WORK?

Self-advocacy allows students to have self-determination.

- » Self-determination is the belief that you can take control and make decisions in your own life. When students have self-determination, they are empowered to make decisions. This can prevent students from falling into a learned helplessness mindset.

It helps teachers better understand the needs of their students.

- » This is especially true for quieter students or students who might otherwise go unnoticed.

It puts students in charge of their own learning

- » Students are more motivated to learn when they are in control and when they feel empowered to make decisions.

Each of self-advocacy's components also have distinct benefits which are explored below.



You really need to know your students ... everyone's going to be different.

—Middle School Special Education Teacher

KNOWLEDGE OF SELF

DEFINITION

Knowledge of self means understanding your own interests & needs, strengths & weaknesses, and preferences & learning styles.

Why knowledge of self matters^{1, 10, 13}

- » Helps students self-regulate
- » Leads to a better understanding of interests and strengths
- » Guides students in setting goals and action plans
- » Informs how students interact with others
- » Makes students feel
 - LESS** defensive, self-blame, rumination
 - MORE** happiness, forgiveness

As a teacher, you should

- » Demonstrate your own self-knowledge, including weaknesses
- » Show students that you want to know more about them
- » Recognize when students are gaining or demonstrating self-knowledge

Strategies for the Classroom

- » Give students surveys that gauge interests and pre-existing skills
- » Use literature, film, pop-culture to show examples of knowledge of self
 - › How can it help characters?
 - › How can a lack of self-awareness be damaging?
- » Talk to students about grades they received
 - › **Student data** can be helpful in showing students weaknesses they might not have considered
 - › Provide clear feedback along with the grades
- » Create opportunities for students to follow their interests
 - › Design projects tailored to student strengths

Knowledge of self is about

OWNERSHIP not blame.
—High School English Teacher

While data is important for self-knowledge it's important to remember the following advice:

“The data's not going to tell if a kid is shy or quiet or if they are always angry.”
—Middle School Math Teacher



KNOWLEDGE OF RIGHTS



Why it matters?^{3, 14}

- » Knowledge of rights helps protect students from rights abuses by teachers, school administrators, and members of the community
- » Helps students be engaged and informed citizens, which remains beneficial even after graduation

DEFINITION

Knowledge of rights requires that students know what their rights are as students and as citizens.¹⁴ Moreover, it requires that students understand the differences between rights and responsibilities.

Strategies for the Classroom

- » Tell students they have a right to a quality education
- » Let students know different types of accommodations that you can provide
- » Point out additional resources available to students
- » Combat discrimination when possible, and remind students that are legally protected from discrimination
- » Use historical and current examples of how leaders have worked for the expansions of rights
- » Remind students of their responsibilities in and out of the classroom
- » Provide opportunities for students to exercise freedom of speech and expression

“ You **DESERVE** to
be **SUCCESSFUL.**

—High School English Teacher

COMMUNICATION

DEFINITION

This component of self advocacy refers to the ability of students to communicate effectively.



With good communication students can:^{2, 9}

- » Make their needs clear
- » Strengthen relationships with peers, teachers, and people outside the classroom
- » Negotiate and compromise
- » Become better listeners
- » Learn to say no

Strategies for the Classroom

- » Provide opportunities for students to practice speaking assertively
 - › Organize students in pairs and groups to give the different contexts to practice
 - › Allow time for students to discuss answers among themselves
 - › Create an environment in which students **do not fear making mistakes**
- » Encourage different kinds of communication, including asking for help, providing and receiving constructive criticism, and non-verbal communication
- » Ask students probing questions when they are not communicating clearly
- » Give students the opportunity to present in class & elaborate on their answers

Challenge:



There are kids whose names don't automatically pop in my head. And that's a problem because I don't call on them.

—Middle School Math Teacher

While not intentional, this can limit opportunities for students to practice communication. Try having your roster out when calling on students to participate, keep track of who speaks, or try using a random name generator.

“ Everyone
has a **ROLE**.
—High School English Teacher

LEADERSHIP

DEFINITION

Leadership is a skill that enables students to work with and for others. It requires students to understand the different roles and dynamics in a group to be able to function as a part of that group.¹¹

LEADERSHIP REQUIRES^{6,7}

- » Decision making
- » Preparation
- » Organization



LEADERSHIP PRODUCES

- » Self-management
- » Independence
- » Confidence

Outside of the classroom, leadership is a necessity for advocacy at the systems level, making this component of self-advocacy one of lifelong importance.

Strategies for the Classroom

- » Let students work in groups with distinct roles for each student
- » Have opportunities for leadership within the classroom
- » Take advantage of out-of-the-classrooms opportunities like student government & extracurriculars

Challenge:

“ Some students have
no interest in leading.
—Middle School Science Teacher

Solution:

Remember that leadership comes in many forms! Give smaller opportunities for leadership in addition to larger ones. Also try to have students work in a variety of different group sizes.

Leadership training must be accompanied by the right environment, one that respects students and gives them the opportunity to make meaningful choices.

RESOURCES

Other Self-Advocacy Guides

- » ME!: <http://bit.ly/MEguide>
- » Self-Advocacy Instruction: <http://bit.ly/SelfAdvocacyInstructionGuide>
- » Stepping Forward: <http://bit.ly/SteppingForwardGuide>

Additional Resources

- » The Benefits of Self-Advocacy (Goucher College): <http://bit.ly/Andrews-2018Goucher>
- » More on Student Rights (ACLU): <https://www.aclu.org/blog/juvenile-justice/student-rights-school-six-things-you-need-know>

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