Self-Advocacy Instruction: An Evidence Based Practice

What is self-advocacy? If you google this question you will come up with a variety of definitions. But here it is in a nutshell: “self-advocacy is the process of speaking for yourself and knowledge of your rights, wishes, needs, and strengths” (Opening Doors to Self Determination—Planning for Life After High School). This process is an evidence-based predictor that will lead to positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities in employment and post-secondary education.
This process of Self Advocacy doesn’t just happen. There needs to be instruction and guided practice. Consider this research finding: “Years of research on self-advocacy work in the education system tell us that individuals of varying ages and disabilities can learn this skill; however, in order to effectively promote self-advocacy there must be opportunities to practice it.” (Test et al., 2005; Roberts, Ju, & Zhang, 2014).

**Self-Advocacy Instruction: What Data Tells Us**

Along with correlational research on self-advocacy and outcomes, there is data that supports that self-advocacy instruction and practice will impact employment regarding post school outcomes.

Wisconsin PROMISE was a 5 year federal demonstration grant intended to improve the provision and coordination of services and supports for child SSI recipients and their families. Recently they released findings from their work with these students and families. One of the interventions was instruction in self-advocacy. They found a correlation between this instruction and improved employment rates.

- Of the 476 PROMISE youth who completed self-advocacy training, 79% were employed compared to an employment rate of 57% for youth who did not complete self-advocacy training.
- After self-advocacy training, 84% of PROMISE youth reported that their abilities help them handle difficult events, and 97% reported they know what they need, what they like, and where they excel.”

Hartman, Schlegelmilch, Roskowski, Anderson, & Tansey, 2019

[Wisconsin Promise Outcomes Infographic](#)

**#What does Self Advocacy Look Like**

Research indicates that actual instruction and opportunities are needed for students to “become a self-advocate. But what does that “look” like at school, work and in post-secondary education. We asked educators, transition partners and students to share their observations. Below are their reactions:

**In the classroom:**

Self-advocacy in the classroom means the student who needs the support is seeking it out in some way. They could talk with the teacher or a peer, they can email the teacher or a peer, or they can even work out a special signal with the teacher that indicates they need help but is
subtle. It's all about the student getting what they need instead of being passive and watching the world go by all the while feeling helpless. Teachers are pretty extraordinary but they don't possess mind reading powers! The only way for them to know you need something is for the student to ask for it. Examples include:

- students approaching the teacher when they have a question
- students asking for an accommodation or a modified test if the teacher forgot to give it to them
- asking to sit near the front because they can't see
- talking with the teacher about alternate options if they have serious anxiety about presenting in front of the class
- coming to the teacher after being absent to ask for the work they missed
- asking a teacher to read something to them
- asking to spend some extra time working with the teacher on a concept that is giving them difficulty
- using assistive technology available to them
- using strengths to compensate for weaknesses

"Jana Weigandt: Special Education Teacher, North Fond du Lac School District"

**On the Job:**

Self-advocacy is important when looking for a job. It means telling people what you need in simple terms and being able to make sure you get the support you need. "Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)"

**At Postsecondary:**

It means that the student puts themselves front and center with planning and implementing steps to reach their educational/career goals. Students should be able to explain their disability and academic needs and are aware of how to access college disability services. "WTCS Disability Services Committee"

# I know I am a self-advocate when.....

Rhinelander students show us what being a self-advocate means to them.
Meet Mackenzie

Hi, my name is Mackenzie Lange. Currently, I am a senior at New Auburn High School and a student with an I.E.P.

I took Mrs. North's Self-Advocacy class when I was a sophomore and her Employability Skills class as a junior. I learned how to self-advocate by doing a variety of activities. One thing that really helped me to understand myself better was when I was given my I.E.P. to look over. I had to identify the parts of the I.E.P. and what each meant to me. After learning my I.E.P better, I then ran my own I.E.P. meeting. That was powerful for me. I wasn't just a spectator but actually led the meeting. Mrs. North and I had gathered the data together before the meeting and practiced so I was able to tell everyone how I was doing with my goals and what goals I still wanted to work on. Another activity we did in the Self-Advocacy class was making "Dream Posters." I liked doing that as well because it gave me a chance to really think about what I want in life. Sharing our posters with each other was a good experience as well so I could hear what other people's dreams were. I was surprised by some people's posters.

In the Employability Skills class, I had to be a self-starter in order to get our daily chores done in all our school run businesses. We run a vending machine, balloon business, coffee cart and button's business. We are really busy. We are now selling our products in the community which has been good practice in speaking out and marketing our items. We also participated in a Community Outreach day where I was able to go into twenty or so businesses and ask them what a good employee looks like. I learned a lot from that. Many of the business owners were frustrated that kids were always on their phones and not coming into work. I already knew then that I was not going to be that kind of employee.

I signed up for Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (D.V.R) services when I was a junior. I was able to explore some job placements in some of the areas I was interested in working. One placement was at the Barron County Humane Society. I liked handling the pets.

Now, without any help from Mrs. North or D.V.R. I have found my own job at Farm and Fleet. At Farm and Fleet I am currently working in the sporting goods department where I put together fishing poles, crossbows, stock shelves and help customers. Soon enough I am going to talk to my boss about being cross trained where I will be able to work all over the store instead of
just the one department. I currently get paid $11 an hour and get paid weekly. I am confident, that after I graduate in May, I am ready to be on my own and able to keep employment because of the experiences I had in High School. This is my story and I am happy to share it with you.

From Adults: # I know I am a self-advocate when.....

Self-advocacy is a skill and a process that continues to develop across the life span.

The Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities is proud to support an amazing team of self-advocates who have rolled out the Self-Determination Channel. You can watch the trailer here. They encourage you to watch, like, and comment on all the videos.
Self-Advocacy Instruction: Wisconsin Self Advocacy Suite of Resources.

We know the importance of self-advocacy instruction for our students, but where do we start? The Wi TIG grant over the years has created a “suite” of resources to teach self-advocacy and engage students in their transition planning. Check it out on our site: www.witig.org


Self-Advocacy Instruction: “Spotlight” on Wisconsin Self Advocacy Suite Resource: A New Way of Thinking

We would like to put a spotlight on one of our TIG Self Advocacy resources: A New Way of Thinking and the online module at New Way of Thinking.

This curriculum teaches the process of self-advocacy in a unique and engaging way. Here is one of the authors, Pam Jenson, to answer questions about A New Way of Thinking so you can learn more and add this to your self-advocacy instruction with your students.

What was the driving reason behind developing this curriculum guide: A New Way of Thinking?

After interviewing several youths with disabilities, we realized there was a common theme, youth in high school, college and careers continued to struggle with self-confidence and continued to let their disability hold them back from their success. We knew building self-advocacy skills was needed at a much earlier age.

How did you come up with the title: A New Way of Thinking?

We wanted youth to view themselves for the quality, talents and strengths they have therefore needing a new way to think about their disability. We wanted them to truly understand their disability and how it affects them, not defines them. What makes A New Way of Thinking unique is that it is modified from the Pennsylvania Youth Leadership Network so it is youth written and brings in the work of Dr. Amen on automatic negative thoughts.

The guide references the work of Dr. Daniel G. Amen MD, Resources ANTs. Can you define ANTs? Can you explain why this was a foundation for this guide?

ANTS stands for automatic negative thoughts. Steve Gilles, former Transition Consultant at the Department of Public Instruction had researched some of Daniel Amen's work on ANTs. As we worked on the guide, it became apparent we needed something new to interest students. Something that may be fun and interactive and help students understand their disability. This is why the ANTs song was also developed. Dr. Amen was excited about us using his work in this way and enjoyed the song as well.

Listen to the ANTs song HERE.
What is the grade level or group of students that best matches this guide?

The guide is geared more towards middle school students, however students who are just beginning to focus on self-advocacy skills would also benefit from the guide.

What are some of the student outcomes you witnessed in the classrooms that have used this guide?

We have witnessed students increasing their confidence as they work through the lessons. One of their favorite activities is building the ANTs wall and knocking it down! This gives the permission they are looking for to get rid of all that negative thinking of themselves and build a new start.

We encourage you to view the A New Way of Thinking guide and reach out to your TIG Coordinator if you have any questions.

References:


Opening Doors to Self Determination: Planning for Life After High School; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction March 2013

A New Way of Thinking; Developed by Steve Gilles and Pam Jenson; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction September 2013