

Self-Advocacy Is a Curriculum

Students do not absorb self-advocacy from being advocated for. Four strands, each teachable, each goal-able.

KNOW

Self-knowledge

Naming your strengths, your needs and how you learn best, in your own words.

In class: I focus best with my noise-reducing headphones and written instructions I can re-read.

RIGHTS

Knowing your rights

Understanding what the IEP is, what accommodations are listed, and that asking for them is legitimate.

In class: Extended time is in my plan. Using it is not an advantage; it is access.

ASK

Making the ask

Requesting accommodations and help, appropriately and persistently, across settings.

In class: Could I have the written version of those instructions? It is in my plan and it helps me start faster.

LEAD

Leading the plan

Contributing to, then leading, IEP meetings: the strongest predictor habitat for adult self-determination.

In class: By grade 10, the student presents their own strengths and priorities slide at the annual review.

My Voice Cards

Scripts students practice when calm and use when needed. Rehearsal makes the ask automatic.

Asking for my accommodation

Direct, brief, no apology. The plan is the permission.

Say: "I use extended time for tests. How should I arrange that for Friday?"

When something is not working

Name the barrier, suggest one fix.

Say: "I cannot follow the video without captions. Could we turn them on?"

Explaining my learning

One sentence of strength, one of need.

Say: "I am strong at ideas and discussion; I need extra time to get them on paper."

In my IEP meeting

The student's agenda item, prepared in advance.

Say: "The accommodation that helps most is... The one I never use is... What I want to work on next is..."

Self-Advocacy Goal Frames

Measurable frames for each strand. Personalize content, keep the condition-behavior-criterion skeleton.

Self-knowledge goal

Given a strengths inventory, [student] will identify [N] personal strengths and [N] effective supports, updated quarterly.

In class: Jordan will name three strengths and two supports that help, reviewed each quarter with the case manager.

Accommodation-use goal

[Student] will independently access [accommodation] in [setting] in [X of Y] opportunities, per teacher log.

In class: Priya will use her agreed seating and movement breaks without prompting in 4 of 5 classes weekly.

Request goal

When facing a barrier, [student] will request help or an accommodation using [modality] in [X of Y] observed opportunities.

In class: Marcus will ask for instructions in writing in 3 of 4 opportunities across two classrooms.

Meeting participation goal

[Student] will [attend/contribute/lead a section of] their IEP meeting, preparing [artifact] in advance.

In class: Aaliyah will present her own priorities slide at the annual review, drafted with support beforehand.

Building Voice Into the IEP Cycle

Self-advocacy grows from routines around the plan, not just goals inside it.

Before the meeting

- The student knows what an IEP is, in age-appropriate terms.
- The student completed a strengths-and-preferences activity that feeds the present levels.
- At least one goal reflects something the student said they want.

In the meeting

- The student attends for at least part, with a prepared contribution.
- Adults speak to the student, not only about them.
- Accommodations are reviewed WITH the student: kept, changed or dropped by evidence.

Between meetings

- Accommodation use is logged, so 'never uses it' becomes a conversation, not a surprise.
- Asking for help is taught and praised as a skill, never treated as weakness.
- Self-advocacy moments get noticed and named across classrooms.

Self-Advocacy: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

Why student voice is an evidence-based investment, not a feel-good extra.

■ Self-determination instruction works

Meta-analysis shows interventions teaching choice-making, goal setting, self-management and self-advocacy are effective across grade levels, disability labels and settings.

● It pays forward

Self-advocacy and self-awareness are among the traits most associated with postsecondary success for students with disabilities, where the legal support structure changes and the student becomes the system.

■ Structured beats incidental

Randomized evidence favors explicit tools and structured discussions over hoping advocacy emerges. It is teachable content with rehearsal, feedback and real opportunities.

■ The honest caveat

Much of this literature relies on self-report measures and varied intervention quality, and effects on distal outcomes are harder to isolate. Pair voice goals with real decision-making power, or the skills have nowhere to live.

Evidence base

Burke, K.M. et al. (2018). A meta-analysis of interventions to promote self-determination for students with disabilities. Remedial and Special Education.

Ju, S., Zeng, W. and Landmark, L.J. (2017). Self-determination and academic success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education: a review. Journal of Disability Policy Studies.

Dawson, S.J. et al. (2023). Increasing self-determination for students with disabilities using the Ask.Explore.Connect discussion tool. Journal of the International Society for Teacher Education.