



Enhancing Students' Self-Advocacy Skills for Employment Success

Many of us advocate for ourselves daily. We ask for help at work, request a class change in school, or declare we are ready to move out of our family's house. Advocacy skills are practiced from an early age. The Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (2023), or WINTAC, defines self-advocacy as an "individual's ability to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate, or assert their own interests and desires."

For students with disabilities, self-advocacy instruction needs to be direct and intentional. Educators, such as teachers and school counselors, play an essential role in the direct instruction of self-advocacy at school. Educators are in a position to equip students with disabilities with the tools, knowledge, and skills to make decisions, understand their rights, and communicate their strengths, interests, and needs.

Self-Advocacy and Competitive Integrated Employment

Self-advocacy skills can translate to work. Strong self-advocacy skills can promote increased success in competitive integrated employment. In fact, instruction in self-advocacy is one of the five Pre-employment Transition Services categories outlined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to help prepare youth to succeed in the workforce. NTACTION: C (2015) highlights self-advocacy and self-determination skill development as promising practices for post-school outcomes like employment and an important part of transition programming.

Advocacy is an essential skill! Employees with disabilities often need to take charge of their experience at work by:

- Understanding and communicating strengths, preferences, interests, and needs to current or potential employers.
- Asking for help and information from colleagues, supervisors, or human resources staff
- Disclosing their disability when they need an accommodation.
- Asking for additional or different duties at work
- Seeking out and requesting employment support from agencies like Vocational Rehabilitation

Strong self-advocates and employees know themselves, understand their needs, and know how to get what they want (Greenely, 2022). Educators can help students with disabilities better prepare for the workforce by enhancing their self-advocacy skills.

Activities for Enhancing Students' Self-Advocacy Skills

Schools are charged with preparing all students for post-school outcomes, including competitive integrated employment. Developing strong self-advocacy skills that can be translated onto a worksite aligns with this charge. Educators play a vital role in the instruction of self-advocacy skills.

Self-advocacy skills can be broken into four categories for instruction, (1) knowledge of self, (2) communication, (3) knowledge of rights, and (4) leadership (Test et al., 2005). Below are activities to implement within classroom instruction, individual sessions, or small groups to aid in developing self-advocacy skills needed for future employment success.

- Encourage students to actively engage during their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting and eventually lead their IEP. Meaningful participation in an IEP and other meetings can begin as early as elementary school.
- Connect students to peer mentors who exhibit strong self-advocacy skills and can provide suggestions, modeling, and feedback.
- Help students learn about available employment accommodations they can request by reviewing resources like the Job Accommodation Network (Jan).
- Practice advocacy skills through the use of scripts, social stories, and role-playing scenarios.
- Support students in obtaining work-based learning and paid employment while in school. This allows students to practice self-advocacy in an authentic work setting.
- Educate students on their rights and responsibilities, and how these look similar and different in school vs. work.
- Instruct students to accurately self-assess and monitor their growth in self-advocacy.
- Encourage students to go after leadership opportunities within the classroom and school. Create additional opportunities by establishing “project manager” roles within group activities, lead facilitators for counseling groups, or teacher for the day in classrooms.
- Conduct formal and informal age-appropriate transition assessments and review the results with students to help them better understand their strengths, preferences, interests, and needs.

When implementing activities and strategies for enhancing self-advocacy, reach out to the family to ensure cultural awareness and responsiveness in teaching these skills. Each family and culture have different expectations and roles around advocacy. Work together so students are building needed employment skills while respecting family and cultural values.

Building self-advocacy skills is critical to student development and future competitive integrated employment success. Students, families, and educators work collaboratively to embed instruction and opportunities to practice these skills within the school, home, and community.

References and Resources

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