

Student Involvement and Self-Determination

It can be difficult to help young adults focus on long-term goals with the many options available. Schools can help students to succeed beyond high school by instructing them in the skills they will need to reach their post-high school goals.

To become contributing adult members of their communities, students need:

- Academic skills
- Problem solving skills
- Social skills
- Ability to plan and execute goals
- Ability to manage physical and health needs
- Knowledge to access resources

Many of these skills will be developed through the general school curriculum and school activities, but some students may need individually designed opportunities to develop these skills. That is one of the ways that exceptional student educators and parents help students successfully transition to adult life. Effective student involvement begins with self-determination strategies.

Teaching students about their rights, and how to responsibly exercise them, are important skills for their adult lives. To facilitate student involvement, self-advocacy skills are important. The following outlines some successful strategies for self-advocates.

SELF-ADVOCACY

Self-advocates know their own strengths and needs. They ask questions assertively and seek assistance appropriately, without being too demanding or helpless. Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) no longer protects students' rights when they leave high school, it is important that the transition process plan for students to learn about their rights and how to express their preferences, concerns, and conclusions about school and adult options. Asking questions and expressing thoughts and ideas is an excellent way to develop and practice self-advocacy skills.

Students can exercise self-advocacy skills by:

- *Knowing their rights*
 - Bill of Rights
 - IDEA
 - Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- *Learning how to exercise their rights by:*
 - Expressing their preferences and interests to the transition IEP team.
 - Expressing their needs and desires with colleges and service agencies.
 - Expressing their views through the political process.
 - Explaining their accommodation needs.

- Serving as board members of community organizations.
- Joining committees that plan school activities.
- *Being responsible*
 - Making their own decisions and learning from them
 - Managing job searches and/or work
 - Managing financial resources
 - Following through on commitments
- *Appropriately asking for help or support*
 - Understanding their disability and learning how to request assistance to achieve the desired help.
 - Learning where to get the help they need

Some processes used in the transition years can develop and improve students' self-advocacy skills.

- Student Centered Planning
- Student Led IEPs—Students are encouraged and prepared to lead part, or all, of their IEP planning meetings, including introducing participants, reviewing current progress, and discussing transition goals, annual goals and objectives, needs for additional assessments, and coordinating activities.
- Career Portfolios or other techniques that build self-esteem and confidence. Career Portfolios organize information about a student to reflect career interests and document student accomplishments.
- Community-Based Vocational Experience—Off-campus vocational experiences can build confidence, aid with career decision-making and provide opportunities to practice self-advocacy skills.

Supporting students as they learn about themselves, determine the course of their lives, exercise their rights and responsibilities, and create opportunities to practice self-advocacy skills, prepares young adults to be contributing members of their communities.