



Self-advocacy

[This section is adapted from Alberta Learning, *Unlocking Potential: Key Components of Programming for Students with Learning Disabilities* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2002), pp. 41–44].]

Self-advocacy refers to taking action on one's own behalf. Being able to self-advocate increases the ability to consider options and make choices that affect one's future. This, in turn, contributes to positive outcomes for students in Knowledge and Employability courses. Students need to learn strategies for problem solving and setting goals. They need to recognize, accept and understand their strengths and needs, and take responsibility for themselves. Learning and practising self-advocacy in the junior high school years is important for success in senior high school and beyond. By the time they are in senior high, students need to take increasing responsibility for their learning. Self-advocacy is especially important for students in Knowledge and Employability courses who also have learning disabilities or other special needs.

Barriers to Self-advocacy

Students may not self-advocate effectively for many reasons. For example, they may:

- be unable to clearly describe their abilities, needs and the conditions that best promote their learning, either because of language difficulties, poor social skills, lack of practice or lack of knowledge of themselves as learners
- not know who to contact to get help, what to ask for or how to best use supports
- not have been directly taught appropriate self-advocacy skills and/or do not have someone to coach them through situations where they might need to self-advocate
- have limited confidence in their abilities and as a result, they may be reluctant to ask questions in class or request extra assistance
- be passive in their approach to their education, feeling that their future is beyond their control—this includes relying on their parents and teachers to advocate for them
- be discouraged because they have encountered people who do not understand the level of ability required in Knowledge and Employability courses.

Facilitating Self-advocacy

Given these barriers, students need support to learn and practise self-advocacy. The following strategies contribute to the development of self-advocacy. In addition, materials in the Student Workstation and resources like *Make School Work for You* actively engage students in learning and practising skills needed for self-advocacy.

Involve students in making decisions about their education.

- Provide opportunities for making plans and choices. Student input and involvement should increase as they proceed through school.
- Involve students in evaluating their performance. The Knowledge and Employability Studio contains numerous reflection and self-assessment tools that students can use to examine their learning. Incorporating metacognition and self-reflection leads to an increase in long-term self-monitoring and personal responsibility for learning.
- Help students prepare for meetings, conversations with instructors or other situations in which they may be involved in planning their educational futures. Model and role-play appropriate interactions.

Help students understand their learning strengths and needs.

- Help students determine their own strengths and areas of need by involving them in self-reflection and self-assessment tasks, such as completing needs assessments and learning preference checklists. See [Know Your Strengths Inventory](#) and [Uncover Your Challenges Inventory](#) for tools that students can use to identify preferences, strengths and needs.
- Provide specific feedback that helps students understand how they learn best; e.g., “You seem to remember better when you get a chance to see the information.”
- Teach students strategies to monitor their own learning. This is an important first step in being able to identify and describe the kinds of adaptations, accommodations and strategies that will help them be successful in class as well as the workplace.
- Assist students in learning to describe their thinking. Describe your own thinking and encourage students to talk about their thinking. Rephrase their ideas to highlight their learning strengths and needs.
- If the student has a learning disability, talk with him or her about the concept of learning difficulties and how this relates to his or her specific learning needs.

Model and teach appropriate self-advocacy skills.

- Begin early by discussing learning strengths and needs with students, as well as observations on how they learn best. Involve them in conversations about program planning. Even if they just listen, they are learning about collaboration and problem solving.
- Explicitly teach students specific skills needed for self-advocacy, such as asking for what you need. These skills need to be demonstrated, role-played, practised and evaluated. Provide extensive guidance in the middle school/junior high years with greater expectations for independence in the high school years.
See [Self-advocacy Checklist](#) for a tool students can use to assess their self-advocacy skills.
- Help students prepare and organize themselves. Self-advocates need to be informed and organized in order to be effective.
- Encourage students to think of advocating as a “work in progress.” Each experience improves their communication and collaboration skills. Provide opportunities for students to reflect on the self-advocacy skills they are developing throughout the school year.
- Discuss the importance of students recognizing their limitations and seeking support as required. Stress that there are others who can help if students ask.
- Encourage students to listen to and consider the perspectives of others. Discuss why it is important to build understanding and relationships.
- Recognize that some students may be reluctant or uncomfortable approaching teachers for help. Consider establishing a regular check-in time (e.g., five minutes after class once a week) or providing a communication tool that students can use to initiate contact.

Help students set appropriate and realistic goals.

- An important part of educational decision making for students in Knowledge and Employability courses is setting appropriate goals. Students should be actively involved in this process and taught ways to make goals tangible and realistic. One strategy is to make goals SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely.
- Follow up with students to review their success in achieving their goals. Self-monitoring and evaluation are important for developing realistic goals.

Support students’ success.

- Help students to celebrate their successes. Increasing students’ self-confidence can help them be better self-advocates.

- Create opportunities for students to experience new and challenging things. Students learn skills for requesting assistance and using positive strategies when they encounter problems or unfamiliar situations.
- Ensure that parents understand the importance of self-advocacy and know strategies they can use to support their child's self-advocacy skills outside of school.

Know Your Own Strengths Inventory¹

Name: _____

Date: _____

A. List four successful experiences you have had in the last 12 months:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

B. List four everyday things you do well:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

C. List two things you could teach someone else:

- _____
- _____

D. List 10 positive words to describe yourself:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

E. List two things that really matter to you:

- _____
- _____

F. List two things you can do for yourself that will always make you feel good:

- _____
- _____

G. List two people who you can count on for help and support:

- _____
- _____

1. From Alberta Learning, *Make School Work for You: A Resource for Junior and Senior High Students Who Want to Be More Successful Learners* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2001), p. 84.

Uncover Your Challenges Inventory²

Name: _____

Date: _____

	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Not yet
1. I come to school every day.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I come to class on time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I come to class with the materials I need.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I come to class prepared, e.g., textbook read, assignments complete.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I leave my worries outside the classroom door.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I can follow written directions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I can follow spoken directions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I understand the new ideas the teacher presents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I can focus my attention in class.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I contribute to class discussions.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I take accurate and detailed notes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. My notebooks are organized and complete.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I am clear and concise when writing.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. My written work is accurate, legible and organized.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I finish assignments within time limits.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. I know when and who to ask for help.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. I can sit still for long periods of time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I do not distract or chat with others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. I remain calm and focused during tests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. I do well on tests.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. From Alberta Learning, *Make School Work for You: A Resource for Junior and Senior High Students Who Want to Be More Successful Learners* (Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2001), pp. 82–83.

Uncover Your Challenges Inventory (continued)

A. To get more feedback about my in-class behaviour I could talk with:

B. Do teachers ever mention a specific in-class behaviour to you? For example, “Don’t chat with your neighbours,” or “You need to bring a pencil everyday.” Write these comments down even if you don’t like them or agree with them—there may be helpful information in this feedback.

Self-advocacy Checklist

Name: _____

Date: _____

- I know what learning strengths and difficulties I have.
- I can describe my learning strengths and difficulties to my teacher and others.
- I understand what kinds of skills and knowledge are learned in Knowledge and Employability courses.
- I can explain these skills and knowledge to others.
- I ask for help when I need it.
- I ask questions in class when I don't understand.
- I have started to take on more difficult tasks in school.
- I am proud of myself and don't let others tease me.
- I keep my calendar, binder and notebooks organized.
- I have learned new ways to study for tests.
- I make an effort to build good friendships.
- I have a tutor for the subject(s) that I find difficult.
- I am learning new strategies and using accommodations.
- I use tools and strategies to reflect on my learning.
- I set goals for myself and monitor how well I'm achieving my goals.
- I am involved in making decisions about my education and my future.
- I have thought about post-secondary education and/or careers I might be interested in.
- I have thought about what I need to do to get the post-secondary education or career I want, and what help I might need.
- _____
- _____
- _____