



Special Connections

A newsletter connecting our Special Kids, Families and Schools

Learning about Self-Advocacy/Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities: An Editorial Review

Having disabilities can mean a life framed with differences. All people have strengths and challenges, but for a person with disabilities the challenges can take greater emphasis on their lives than for others. So, helping children with disabilities to see themselves as a “person first” and balancing their strengths and challenges is a critical part of their life development. This life development begins first in the family environment, and then continues to the school environment and social environments, and, then as students mature and age, the work environment becomes an important focus. Parents are a child’s first advocates, and as a child develops, additional advocates and advisors play integral roles in the child’s life. But, as with all children, parents and other significant adults in the child’s life must begin to “loosen the apron strings” so that the child may become his/her own person. For students with disabilities, this requires a concentrated plan of action. As the first group of children educated by the Federal Law 94-142 has reached adulthood and more lifespan research is being conducted, an increasing emphasis in education, both formally and informally, is “self-determination”, or “self-advocacy” for students with disabilities.

Self-determination is a continuing skill that is important for all types of disabilities and at all ages. Debbie Wilkes, Director of Instructional Developmental Programs and Assistive Technology for the Richardson ISD, believes that emphasis on self-determination starts at the pre-school level and elementary level, and begins with the family unit. Her advice to educators is to be honest with families about a child’s disability. Honesty, she stresses, builds understanding with the family and assists them to better assist their child in the first steps of self-determination.

Most of the literature and guidelines on self-determination is directed to high school and college-age students. Even so, parents and educators of young children can still use this information. It, however, should be adjusted to match the age and maturity of the child in order to integrate conversations on self-determination topics as a part of regular interactions with children. As parents and educators begin focusing on self-determination skills and awareness with children from an early age and continuing to adulthood, Ms. Wilkes emphasizes that it is important

to remember to ‘talk with, rather than talk at’ children and young adults.

In addition to an interview with Ms. Wilkes, three sources of information, available on the Internet and in print, were reviewed for this article. The sources are The National Center for Learning Disabilities, Fact Sheets, www.ld.org; Mysteries of Your Learning Disability, Scott L. Crouse, Ph. D., an on-line manual for students at www.hopkins.k12.mn.us/pages/North/LD_Research; and Advocating Change Together, educational materials to promote self-advocacy and disability rights for persons with developmental disabilities. All of the sources had similar steps in learning skills of self-determination.

Acceptance and Understanding – It is important for children with disabilities to learn and accept their strengths and challenges. If students can learn to accept their disability, they can focus on what they need to match their learning styles. Dr. Crouse and the National Center on Learning Disabilities have a series of questions for teens to ask themselves. Accepting themselves, learning to compensate for difficult areas, and accepting responsibilities for successes and failures are major steps in the ability to be a self-determined individual.

Setting Goals – Setting realistic goals starts with a self-assessment of strengths and challenges, hobbies, and work interests, and then developing these into short-term and long-term goals for school, work, and activities

Communicating in Different Environments – Teens can be taught skills to participate in ARD meetings and other conferences with adults that will help them play an active role in their learning and in other areas affecting their future. School, home, work, and social environments differ and necessitate different sets of skills, behaviors, attitudes, and responses. Teamwork, listening, negotiating, compromise, accepting and differentiating rules are learned skills.

Support from Others – Students need to know that adults support them, which adults to go to for different types of support, and where to get specific support. They also must learn to accept their own responsibility in identifying needed supports and the fact that it is okay to need special help.

The information from the National Center for Learning Disabilities advises teens (and other readers) “taking steps to be self-determined is a learning process.” With this in mind, we, as parents and educators, should remember that continual learning in self-determination and self-advocacy skills is extremely important for children with disabilities.

Contact Information:

Should you have any questions regarding your child and/or special education services, you may contact the Diagnostician or High School Support Specialist at your child's campus.

There may be times when you need to contact the district's special education office.

The contact information is as follows:

Jane Flinn, Director of Special Education
10300 Jones Road, Houston TX 77065
Phone: 281-897-6416
Fax: 281-897-6403
Email: jane.flinn@cfisd.net -or-

Nadine Fidler, Assistant Superintendent
Phone: 281-897-6416
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Email: nadine.fidler@cfisd.net

ChildFind

The Cy-Fair ISD provides support services for students with disabilities residing within the district. Through Child Find efforts, eligible children, birth to 21, may be identified for needed services. Anyone who has a child or knows of a child who may qualify for services should call the Special Education Department (281-897-6400) or the child's home campus for information.

Education Service Center

The state of Texas is divided into 20 regions served by Education Service Centers. Our Education Service Center is Region 4 and is located in Houston. Region 4 has staff trained in special education who may be a resource to parents. The telephone number of the special education department at Region 4 is 713-462-7708.

The February issue will have an update on the Reauthorization of the Federal Law "Individuals with Disabilities Education Act."

The Parent's Role in Teaching Student Self Advocacy

By Ginger Sewell

Self advocacy is a critical skill that empowers our students throughout their lives. We can teach our children to express their interests, learning styles, strengths and challenges, likes and dislikes by first accepting them for who they truly are. Then we can ask specific questions, listen carefully and encourage our children to express themselves openly and honestly in the family setting by saying things like, "Let's list some ways that you". Asking open ended questions like "How?" and "Why?" allow our children to begin to advocate for themselves. Our children develop the verbal communication skills at home that they will need at school to explain how their disability impacts their lives and what accommodations they might need. These are life skills that we all need to live independent and successful lives. Communicate with your child.

Ginger Sewell is the parent of a young adult with a disability and a former Director of Special Education. Currently an educational consultant, she is the recipient of both the Parent of the Year and Professional of the Year awards from the Learning Disabilities Association

The Texas Education Agency has a reference manual, **ARD Committee Decision-Making Process for the Texas Assessment Program**, for the 2004-2005 Testing Year. The guide includes definitions of TAKS, SDAA II, and LDAA.

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), is an assessment that measures a student's mastery of the state-mandated curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in mathematics at Grades 3-10 & Exit Level; in reading at Grades 3-9; in writing at Grade 4 and 7; in English language arts at Grade 10 & Exit Level; in science at Grade 5, 10, and Exit Level; and in social studies at Grade 8, 10, and Exit Level.

The **State-Developed Alternative Assessment II (SDAA II)** is an assessment that measures the academic progress of students receiving special education services enrolled in Grades 3-10 and receiving instruction in the TEKS in mathematics, reading, and writing/English language arts for whom TAKS, even with allowable accommodations, is not an appropriate measure of academic progress.

A **Locally Determined Alternate Assessment (LDAA)** is a locally assigned assessment used to measure the learning of a student receiving special education services whose ARD committee has determined that both TAKS & SDAA II are inappropriate. Because there is no state-mandated or state-approved list of appropriate LDAAs, the ARD committee should choose an assessment that most closely aligns to the instruction the student is receiving in the TEKS or the IEP. The entire manual can be accessed from the TEA website at www.tea.state.tx.us/studentassessment.