



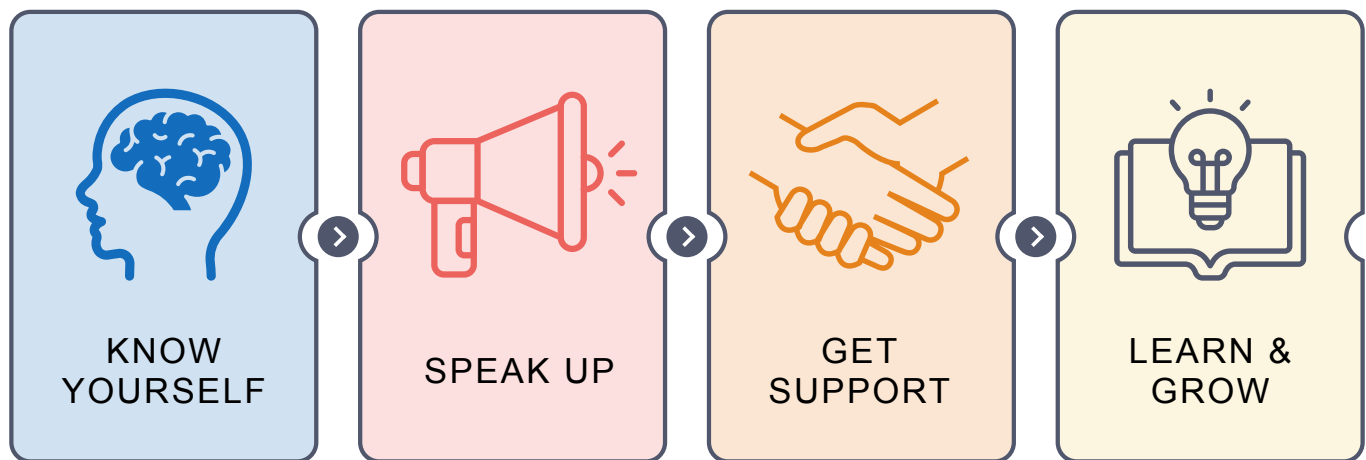
Empowering Student Voice to Support Whole-Person Wellness for Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

What is Whole-Person Wellness?

Whole-person wellness is an approach that views students as complete individuals, rather than focusing solely on diagnosis or performance. It recognizes that learning and wellbeing are influenced by multiple, interconnected factors, such as emotional and mental health, physical comfort, cultural context, and lived experiences. By considering the whole person, educators can better provide support to meet their students wherever they are in their educational journey. Focusing on whole-person wellness allows schools to create environments that support academic growth, emotional safety, and overall wellbeing (Kester & Langevin, 2021).

What is Self-Advocacy?

Self-advocacy is a person's ability to understand and communicate their needs and strengths. In the school setting, self-advocacy involves recognizing what helps learning and participating in decisions that affect one's education. Self-advocacy does not require students to disclose personal information about disability status or areas of difficulty. Instead, it emphasizes self-knowledge and the ability to express what is needed. When students are supported in self-advocating, they are more likely to develop increased self-esteem, independence, and meaningful access to learning (Molinari-Sanders & Joles, 2020).



Working Together: Advocacy & Wellness

Self-advocacy and whole-person wellness share a reciprocal relationship. When students are able to self-advocate, they can communicate needs, express emotions, and set boundaries. This helps reduce stress and promotes greater engagement in learning. Proactively supporting whole-person wellness creates conditions in which students feel safe and empowered. When students feel regulated and respected, they are better equipped to take reasonable risks, self-reflect, and communicate effectively. Together, self-advocacy and whole-person wellness support student participation and success in the educational setting (Moravcik, 2024).

ASSERT in the Classroom

ASSERT is a student-centered framework that breaks advocacy into objective steps educators can teach and reinforce. It supports students in reflecting on their needs, evaluating options, and practicing advocacy in ways that feel safe and meaningful. By emphasizing choice and gradual independence, ASSERT helps students gain confidence and develop lifelong skills for navigating academic and social contexts.



Analyze “Self-Advocacy”

Self-advocacy looks different for each student and across settings. Begin by defining what self-advocacy means for the individual learner. Key areas to consider include:

- **Service Provision:** The student helps identify goals, brainstorm strategies, and take responsibility within the classroom.
- **Education:** The student understands their needs/preferences and communicates them to teachers and staff.
- **Social:** The student shares information about themselves, connects with peers, and initiates interactions.



Select Targets

Using the areas listed above, help the student identify where they want or need to self-advocate the most. Prioritize areas that are meaningful, motivating, or currently challenging.



Where does the student want more independence or control?

Spot Opportunities

Guide students to reflect on situations where communication was difficult or broke down. Reflection builds self-awareness and helps students understand why certain situations feel challenging.



Educators can guide this process using open-ended, nonjudgmental questions, such as:

- “What was hard about that situation?”
- “What do you wish had gone differently?”
- “What might help next time?”



Examine Options

Support students in identifying possible self-advocacy strategies and potential barriers. Research highlights a “fact versus fear” phenomenon, where fear of social consequences can interfere with effective advocacy.



Creating a personalized self-advocacy toolbox can be helpful. Examples may include:

- Asking a trusted adult or family member for help
- Using scripts, visuals, or written communication

Rate Options

The student identifies strengths and limitations of their options and then prioritizes their best choice. This process increases metacognitive awareness by helping students understand what works best, where, and why.

Try Best Options

The student practices self-advocacy in a safe, supportive environment (such as with a trusted teacher, therapist, or caregiver), beginning with small steps and celebrating all attempts, as each success builds confidence, self-awareness, and independence.

Note. Adapted from Singer & Mogensen (2021).

From Insight to Action

Supporting self-advocacy and whole-person wellness in the classroom requires educators to recognize barriers and respond with intentional support.

Potential Roadblocks

- **Social Anxiety:** Fear of being misunderstood or misinterpreted may limit participation and peer interaction.
- **Communication Barriers:** Difficulties expressing thoughts, feelings, or intentions, especially when alternative communication systems are not consistently supported, may increase isolation.
- **Fear of Judgement:** Inconsistent adult responses to advocacy attempts can negatively impact student wellness and future willingness to self-advocate.
- **Unclear Rights:** Limited understanding of educational rights and available support may create additional barriers to effective self-advocacy.

Strategies to Try

Strategy	Guidance
Explicitly Teach Self-Advocacy	Self-advocacy skills may not develop naturally and often require direct instruction. Educators can explicitly teach students how to ask for help and express needs by modeling self-advocacy language, like: <i>"I'm feeling __, so I'm going to ask for __."</i> Additional supports may include role-play, scripts, and guided practice.
Normalize Accommodation Use	Accommodations are not special treatment. Educators can help normalize their use by openly discussing how different supports help students learn in many ways. Modeling the use of tools, like timers or check-ins, reinforces that asking for help is a strength and an appropriate learning strategy.
Build Emotional and Bodily Awareness	Whole-person wellness emphasizes recognizing internal states. Teaching students to identify emotions, stress levels, and physical cues, like hunger or fatigue, supports self-understanding. Tools such as feelings charts, regulation scales, and body scans can help pair awareness with actionable strategies.
Collaborate with Students on Goal Setting	Self-advocacy increases when students feel ownership over their learning. Involving students in goal setting and Individualized Education Program (IEP) discussions allows them to practice sharing preferences, selecting accommodations, and reflecting on what strategies are helpful. Using student-friendly language supports understanding and engagement.
Support Physical Wellness in the Learning Environment	Whole-person wellness includes addressing physical needs that impact learning. Offering movement breaks, flexible seating, and sensory-friendly tools demonstrates respect for bodily signals and provides individualized alternatives to sustained periods of activity.

Main Takeaway

Educators must honor all communication attempts. This includes recognizing the additional barriers faced by students who do not rely on verbal communication and ensuring access to multiple modes of self-advocacy. Collaboration with speech language pathologists (SLPs) can support Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users by developing quick-access advocacy phrases that promote safety and autonomy. **Valuing all forms of communication (AAC, writing, digital tools, gestures, etc.) reduces barriers and creates meaningful opportunities for growth.**

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