

# SELF-ADVOCACY AND PERSONAL FUTURES PLANNING

Transition planning involves thinking about goals after high school and developing a long-range plan to get there. This includes having a high school experience that focuses on developing the skills and competencies needed to achieve life goals. It also involves helping the student identify and link with any post-school adult service programs or supports they may need.

There are a variety of person-centered planning tools that can help students develop life and career goals. Tools such as MAPS, Essential Lifestyle Planning, Personal Futures Planning, PATH, and Circles of Support can assist students with identifying the supports and services that can help them reach personal goals. Person-centered planning uses a facilitator to bring together the student and a group of people who know the student best. This group can include family members, friends, neighbors, school personnel, etc. Common themes to all person-centered planning activities include acknowledging the student and family's dreams for the future, identifying obstacles to fulfilling those dreams, and identifying personal strengths and community resources. The planning process should support the student in developing his/her self-advocacy skills.

Self-advocacy means speaking up for oneself. It requires knowledge of personal strengths and needs and rights as a citizen, and involves acting in an assertive manner to make needs known to others.

Self-advocacy includes the following components:

1. Disability Awareness
2. Learning to Advocate
3. Career Planning and Community Connections
4. Participating in PPT Meetings

These components, and a brief overview of the skills necessary to achieve positive self-advocacy outcomes, follow:

## **Disability Awareness**

Whether a student's plans after high school involve work or college, it is important that he/she understand his/her strengths and limitations, know how they affect performance, and be able to communicate this to others. Understanding one's disability is the first step in the process.

In order to help students develop greater self-awareness, they should:

- begin to accept their disability as a description of how they learn or function in a particular environment;
- know what accommodations work for them; and
- understand that their disability designation gives them certain rights to services and protection from discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

## **Learning to Self-Advocate**

State and federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act were passed to give students and adults with disabilities an equal opportunity to education and employment. These laws allow them to access the same facilities and programs available to individuals without disabilities. The ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act also give individuals with disabilities the right to request specialized services, devices, or instructional modifications to help them work and learn. It is an individual's responsibility to take advantage of these laws by becoming a self-advocate.

In order to effectively self-advocate, a student should be able to:

- describe their accommodation needs in terms of making things equal, rather than asking for an unfair advantage;
- develop an assertive style of communication;
- identify barriers to effective communication and include specific self-advocacy objectives in their IEP; and
- Know when they should and should not disclose their disability.

An example of a personal self-advocacy plan is included here. Students should complete this plan prior to participating in their annual PPT meeting.

## My Personal Self Advocacy Plan

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

My disability is: \_\_\_\_\_

My learning strengths are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

My learning weaknesses are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I learn best when: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

The specific classroom modifications I need are: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

I need to develop the following self-advocacy skills: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## Career Planning/Community Connections

A broad network of family and friends is important to help students develop and reach their goals. Friends and family members can help make decisions, assist in obtaining needed services, and identify others who can help with the career-planning process. The wider the network, the better.

In order for students to make a successful transition they need to:

- develop a support network;
- develop mentoring relationships;
- seek out information on person-centered planning tools that can help in planning for the future;
- take career interest inventories;
- have a variety of real, community-based work experiences; and
- identify adult service provider and advocacy agencies.

## Participating in PPT Meetings

Developing the ability to effectively self-advocate involves not only learning new skills, but also seeking out environments to practice self-advocacy skills. **The annual Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting is one of the best opportunities students have to develop their self-advocacy skills.** It is important that students attend these meetings and become active participants in the planning process.

There are a number of things students can do to increase their ability to speak up for themselves at PPT meetings.

- Understand their rights and responsibilities as a member of the Planning and Placement Team (PPT).
- Attend each and every meeting held to discuss and plan their Individualized Education Program (IEP).
- Practice talking about their goals, strengths, weaknesses, and accommodation needs.
- Take an active role in leading or facilitating the PPT.

The following **PPT Self-Determination Checklist** and the **PPT Self-Determination Worksheet** can help students better prepare for their Planning and Placement Team meetings.

## PPT Self-Determination Checklist

Place a check mark next to each activity you will assume responsibility for:

- I will attend my next PPT meeting
- I will participate in the following ways:
  - Introduce myself
  - State the purpose of the meeting
  - Introduce the other PPT members (or)
  - Ask the other PPT members to introduce themselves
  - Ask someone to take notes for my IEP
  - Ask PPT members to report on my academic progress and related services
  - Describe my disability, strengths and weaknesses, and how I think I did in school this year
  - State my transition goals in the areas of employment/postsecondary education, independent living, and community participation
  - Describe my educational program for the coming school year, including goals and objectives, classroom modifications
  - State my concerns/needs and ask PPT members for input
  - Thank everyone for coming
- I will not attend my next PPT meeting, but will make sure my interests, preferences, and needs are taken into consideration by the Planning and Placement Team when they develop my Individual Education Program. I will do this by completing the following activities:

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## PPT Self-Determination Worksheet

Place a check mark next to each activity you will assume responsibility for and fill in the blanks to help you prepare for your next PPT meeting.

- I will attend my next PPT meeting
- I will participate in the following ways:
- Introduce myself

Hi my name is \_\_\_\_\_ . I want to welcome and thank you all for coming to my PPT meeting.

- State the purpose of the meeting

The purpose of this meeting is to:

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- Introduce the other PPT members (or)
- Ask the other PPT members to introduce themselves

Would everyone please introduce themselves?

- Ask someone to take notes for my IEP

Mr./Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ would you please take notes for my IEP?

Thank you.

- Ask PPT members to report on my academic progress and related services

I would like an update on my progress this past year. Who would like to begin?

- Describe my disability, strengths and weaknesses, and how I think I did in school this past year
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As you all probably know, I am receiving special education and related services because I have been identified as having (describe your disability).

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Overall, I think I did \_\_\_\_\_ in school this past year.

My favorite subjects were:

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My least favorite subjects were:

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The vocational evaluation or career exploration activities I participated in were:

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I needed the following accommodations/modifications:

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Assistive technology I used included:

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- ❑ State my transition goals in the areas of employment/postsecondary education, independent living, and community participation

My employment/postsecondary education goals for next year are:

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My independent living goals for next year are:

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My community participation goals for next year are:

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- ❑ Describe my educational program for the coming school year, including goals, objectives, and classroom modifications

My educational goals for next year are:

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- ❑ State my concerns/needs and ask PPT members for input

I am most concerned about:

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I believe I will need the following related services and accommodations/modifications/assistive technology to be successful:

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Does anyone have any suggestions to help me meet my goals?

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- Thank everyone for coming

*Thank you all for coming and participating in my PPT.*

- I will not attend my next PPT meeting, but will make sure my interests, preferences, and needs are taken into consideration by the Planning and Placement Team when they develop my Individual Education Program. I will do this by completing the following activities:

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## Self-Advocacy Curriculum

There are many curricular and community activities that students can take part in to further develop their self-advocacy skills. Two guides were recently developed for the Connecticut Department of Education to assist students in acquiring the knowledge and experiences to become better self-advocates. **“An Educational Journey from Self Discovery to Advocacy”** was created for high school students with disabilities as an instructional tool for the development of self-advocacy skills and transition planning. **“A Student Guide to Understanding Your Rights and Responsibilities under IDEA”** explains students’ legal rights and responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These guides can be downloaded from the State Department of Education’s web site at [www.state.ct.us/sde](http://www.state.ct.us/sde).

In particular, students should be encouraged to:

1. **Develop Leadership Skills.** Leadership training programs are vital to ensure that Connecticut’s youth are prepared for the challenges and opportunities of the future. The **Connecticut Youth Leadership Forum (YLF)** has been operating on the grounds of the University of Connecticut campus in Storrs, CT since 1999. The Youth Leadership Forum is a program of the Governor’s Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. Each year approximately 30 high school sophomore and juniors with various disabilities are selected, through a competitive process, to participate in four days of educational and motivational leadership activities. YLF applications are distributed to every school district in October or November of each year. Applicants must complete a required essay and are selected on the basis of demonstrated leadership skills in their communities and schools. Students who are selected to participate are required to develop a leadership activity to implement in their school or community during the upcoming year. Family members and/or educational staff can assist students with the application process. There is also a videotape, available through the Special Education Resource Center (SERC), which provides an overview of the Connecticut Youth Leadership Forum.
2. **Register to vote.** When students turn 18 years of age, they can further develop their self-advocacy skills by registering and getting out to vote. For a short but thorough course on the history and process of voting in America, see the Freedom’s Answer web site at <http://www.freedomanswer.net/school.curriculum.shtml>. This site also has links to Kids Voting USA which provides an even more in-depth course of instruction on voting.

**3. Join a local self-advocacy group.** Self-advocacy groups can provide young adults with the support they may need to speak for themselves. Some self-advocacy groups tend to have a membership that is disability specific (e.g. CHADD for individuals with ADHD, People First for individuals with Developmental Disabilities). Other groups may focus on a specific legislative issue (e.g. The Olmstead Coalition, which focuses on issues of supported living), or specific gender issues (e.g. The Connecticut Women with Disabilities Network). Some groups are even age specific. The new Connecticut chapter of KASA (Kids As Self-Advocates) is comprised of youth with disabilities ages 12-22 and their friends. The goal of KASA is to spread helpful, positive information amongst their peers on issues related to living with special health care needs, education, employment, etc. Information on the national KASA organization can be found on their website at [www.fykasa.org](http://www.fykasa.org). For information on Connecticut's chapter, students can contact the Connecticut Council on Developmental Disabilities (860) 41-6160 . Students can also use the Internet or call their local Independent Living Center to find an advocacy group to meet their individual needs.