No matter what researchers say is “best practice” for high potential learners, in most public-school districts in the United States, gifted students are not in special schools, classes, or cluster groups. Instead, they are in our heterogeneous classrooms where teachers work hard, with limited time and resources, to differentiate the curriculum and instruction. Despite our best efforts, many high potential students spend too much time waiting to be challenged, to learn something new, and to interact with like minds. Many slog along day after day, unaware that their route to graduation can and should be significantly different from that of their peers.

As a high school English teacher, I discovered that the kids who had to work hardest each day were often those with below-grade-level skills. On the other hand, the brightest kids could whiz through the curriculum without breaking a sweat. That didn’t seem fair. I wanted each of my students to work hard; learn something new every day; occasionally risk failing at something they found difficult; and then succeed when supported in their efforts. Gifted learners, like all other learners, can only grow when they are stretched.

But how can we know whether our students are appropriately challenged at any particular point in time? The answer, of course, is the learners themselves. No one knows better than they what is going on in their heads and hearts as they sit in our classes, complete assignments, and interact with us and their peers. When given the insights and tools they need, students are better able to self-advocate—to tell us when, where, and how they want their education to be differentiated.

No matter what your role—regular classroom teacher, teacher in a school designed for gifted learners, coordinator of gifted programming, school counselor, or administrator—you are in a position to encourage and support learners’ self-advocacy.

“Self-advocacy is the process of recognizing and meeting the needs specific to your own learning ability without compromising the dignity of yourself or others.” (Brinckerhoff, 1994)

Just because learners have high potential doesn’t mean they necessarily have the maturity, tact, insights, or skills to ask for what they need. There are four requisites to successful self-advocacy.

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students’ self-advocacy
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1 Students need to understand themselves as unique individuals. They may be aware they are different, but they often lack the self-reflection or even the vocabulary to describe the ways they feel different. We can help them identify their strengths and weaknesses; attitudes and interests; and passions and frustrations—all parts of their unique learner profile.

2 Students need access to programming matched to their individual learner profiles and geared toward their academic, personal, social, and emotional readiness. Without an appropriately challenging curriculum, gifted learners may not develop the persistence, study skills, and self-efficacy we desire for all our students.

3 Students need support as they grow toward autonomy and take charge of their own educations. While it's important for all people to self-advocate, in the educational system it is most critical for outliers, those whose abilities fall outside the norm—the students who struggle with grade level work as well as those who have already mastered it. Without encouragement, neither is likely to let us know they need something different.

4 Students require specific, direct, and intentional instruction in self-advocacy. Surveys of students in my workshops confirm what I had guessed. We don’t do enough to share the information, insights, and strategies that gifted learners need in order to self-advocate. They must be taught about:

• Their rights and responsibilities
• Their learner profiles
• Available options
• Ways to connect with adults who can support their goals

Over 85% of the 600+ teens that I surveyed reported that their teachers had not advised them to self-advocate. That’s not surprising. The prospect of gifted students speaking up for themselves can seem daunting; even problematic. That little voice in our head whispers:

“They’ll ask for something we can’t offer them.”

But addressing students’ needs is often about compromise. Our discussions can focus on what they need, but also on what alternatives we can realistically provide.

“We don’t have time.”

While it's true that educators will need to reallocate time to get self-advocacy started and to support student initiative, in the long run, it is far more efficient and effective when students learn to take the lead.

“We've never done it before.” aka “We don't do that in our district.”

This implies that students/education/life/communities don’t change and that whatever worked (or sometimes hasn't worked) in the past is good enough. Yet change is inevitable and just as we expect students to grow and adapt, teachers and schools must be willing to do the same.

“If we do something different when one kid asks, we’ll have to do it for everybody.”

Not if we match the program to the student, using the data (numerical and anecdotal) to understand and address their specific need. On the other hand, it is not unusual to find that what begins as a solution for one student paves the way for other students with similar needs.

Our role must be to create and sustain a partnership with our students. We must find ways to tell them, “There is something you can do right now to change tomorrow or next week or next month or next year. You can self-advocate by speaking up for yourself, asking for what you need.” By sharing the process of self-advocacy, we can help our learners better navigate the educational system and adapt it to meet their specific needs.

It is easier for students to find their voice and take charge of their education when teachers recognize and affirm their differing abilities and let them know that the system can be adjusted to meet their needs. We must be prepared to solicit and respond to student input and create classrooms where they feel safe in suggesting alternatives. We can’t assume that they will think to self-advocate without learning how to do so and we can’t assume that they know we welcome their assertiveness. We have to say so loudly and clearly.

We can start with a few relatively simple steps:

• Post your own version of Galbraith and Delisle’s (2015) 10 Tips for Talking to Teachers in your classroom and share it on the first day of class, ensuring that all students know you are open to discussion.
• Use a simple method to allow all students to score their perceived challenge level of their current work. For example, a small set of check boxes (see below) on the top of the homework page or the last question on an exam gives you a timely update on

NAGC PreK–Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards

Standard 4: Learning Environments

4.1. Personal Competence. Students with gifts and talents demonstrate growth in personal competence and dispositions for exceptional academic and creative productivity. These include self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, confidence, motivation, resilience, independence, curiosity, and risk taking.
who is struggling and who might need greater challenge.

| Easy | Just Right | Hard |

- Send letters/emails to all students and their families during the first week of classes outlining the differentiation that will take place in your classroom and inviting student participation in the process. Letters can be easily customized for each individual student, including those with disabilities who have Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), gifted students with Differentiated Educational Plans (DEPs), and those at grade level. See the example below, created by a fifth grade teacher in a heterogeneous classroom. The list of strategies can be adapted to match whatever differentiation techniques you use.

Nothing is more reassuring to parents than the knowledge that this year’s teacher is aware of their child’s abilities and will work to address them. Additionally, an invitation to help their child learn to self-advocate encourages parents to let the student take the lead.

Empowering our high potential learners to self-advocate is not just another new educational initiative. It must be an on-going effort that ensures all children know how to make the education system work for them, no matter which initiative is currently trending. Speaking up for themselves is how empowered learners throughout history have attained the education they deserve. However, most gifted children will not work through these steps on their own. Parents can help, but we educators are the first line of defense for students, making sure that each has continuous and systematic support. Direct teaching of self-advocacy ensures that everyone has access to all that they need to succeed.

The value of self-advocacy is not necessarily in propelling students to achieve eminence. It is about empowering students to believe in their own abilities, discover their own aspirations, and seek the path that is right for them.

Sample Letter from a Teacher Advocate

Dear <Mr. and Mrs. Mendez>,

As <Ethan’s> teacher my goal is to provide quality instruction tailored to the developmental level of your child. I am constantly monitoring and adjusting my instruction, activities, and assessments to meet the needs of all students in my classroom. During this school year, <Ethan> will experience challenges at his achievement level in each subject. The following is a list of the strategies I use to encourage academic growth for all students.

- Pretested mathematics units
- Compacted curriculum for faster-paced instruction
- Tiered assignments promoting higher level thinking and depth of knowledge
- Cooperative learning groups tailored to student interests
- Literature circles and independent, self-selected reading at students’ levels
- Writers’ workshop, individualized for pace and interest

I am aware that <Ethan> is in the Gifted Programming Talent Pool and that in the past has received enrichment and acceleration in <math.> I plan to offer him <a compacted unit with additional enrichment whenever he demonstrates mastery on the chapter pretest.> Please encourage <Ethan> to let me know if this is providing an appropriate challenge in <math.> If you and <Ethan> have other ideas about how his needs could be better met this year, please help <Ethan> use the 10 Tips for Talking to Teachers, printed on the back of this letter.

Happy learning!
Mrs. Churchill

References
Gaibraith, J. & Delisle, J. (2015). When gifted kids don’t have all the answers: How to meet their social and emotional needs. Free Spirit Publishing.

Editor’s Note: This article is excerpted and adapted from The Power of Self-Advocacy for Gifted Learners: Teaching the 4 essential steps to success by Deb Douglas © 2019. Used with permission of Free Spirit Publishing Inc., Minneapolis, MN; 1-800-735-7323; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

imathination
provide opportunities for teachers to recognize students’ mathematical potential and talent beyond recall and computation. THP

References

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