

## Transcript: Supporting Students on their Self-Advocacy Journey

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Lawrence – Welcome to TalkLD, a podcast of LD@school. Our aim is to engage you, our audience, in a lively conversation aimed at educators as we talk to educators about the issues facing LD students in your classroom. I'm your host Lawrence Barns. Join me as we talk LD.

Hi and welcome to TalkLD. Today we'll be looking at a topic that has, for me as a parent of a student with an LD, something I've experienced firsthand. It's a hot topic right now; it's the whole topic of self-advocacy amongst students. We're going to cover the topic from two distinct viewpoints today. Later on, I'm going to have a panel of students that will talk to you as educators about their personal experiences with self-advocacy, the ups and downs of it in the classroom, and the impact it's had on their own learning cycles. First though, my guest to begin the day, Jenessa is Department Head of Special Education and Student Success at York Mills Collegiate. Jenessa, welcome to TalkLD.

Jenessa – Thank you very much. I'm happy to be here.

Lawrence – And we're pleased to have you. So Jenessa, just to get us on some common ground to begin this discussion, could you kind of give me your personal definition of self-advocacy for students.

Jenessa – Yes, I've given it lots of thought because I have to define it with students often. So for me, how I describe it for them is, self-advocacy is asking for support and feedback. So it's not just asking for help, but it's also asking for how you're doing on things and how are things working.

Lawrence – Okay. And I guess Jenessa, as I say, I'm a parent. My guy is actually at George Brown College now, so I've been through this from that perspective. Let's talk a little bit about it in the school process because what we're really talking about, I think, as I experienced, is that changeover as you go from an elementary process where the student tends to be advocated for by their parent to high school where suddenly it's in their own hands.

Jenessa – Mmhmm.

Lawrence – Is that the first time they're experiencing working with you when you're starting to help students through this process?

Jenessa – Well they do get a little bit of support during the middle school years, so when they go from elementary to middle school. The idea is that the resource teachers and their teachers are encouraging them to start to take on the role of self-advocating, but definitely by high school it's very important that they start to develop those skills, and the goal is that by the time they get to grade 12, they need very



little support advocating for their needs. But the first thing that most of the students need is to be able to identify what they need to ask help on. So what are the issues that they're having, and that seems to be the biggest struggle for most students. Once they understand what their issues are or what they need help with, then it's easy to come up with strategies to get them to get the support. But where they really have some difficulty is being able to identify what is, okay I can't read, but why can't I read? And what do I need in order to be able to read better.

Lawrence – Okay, so let's look at that process in a little more detail. So the student comes in and, of course, in the old days we used to talk about dyslexia; it's not a word we use so much anymore. How do you as an expert help them on that discovery path?

Jenessa – Well we can, there's a lot of different things we can do. We can sit down together and talk about what happens, so what's the issue. So often a student will say 'I just don't wanna do the work' and so we break it down: 'Well, why don't you want to do the work?' 'Well, it's because I don't really understand what I'm reading.' So then we go back and we try to take a look at what processes they're using to do the reading. Are they using any reading strategies? Are they just sort of trying to get through the text to the best of their abilities? If I'm not able to identify what their issues are or they can't identify it, then we can do tests. There's assessment tests that we do to be able to really pinpoint, like what grade level are they reading at and a little bit more identify what are the struggles. But once they understand what the issue is then we can go forward from there to start to ask where they can get extra support. What kind of, usually by high school it's usually assistive technology that's going to help bridge the gap if there's any to be bridged.

Lawrence – And what about Jenessa, obviously you're a specialist within the system so to speak, what about your role with other teachers? How does that play out?

Jenessa – Well, I do a lot of educating of the teachers. So in both the schools I've been at, I do a lot of professional learning communities where we meet at staff meetings and I explain to them first of all, what is a learning disability, because learning disabilities and ADHD are very invisible and oftentimes teachers will say 'Well that kid's just lazy. He just doesn't want to try. He just doesn't want to do the work.' But when I speak with them and we break it down, it turns out that they're doing lots of work but getting very limited results. And so it's sort of explaining to the teacher, walking the teacher through what the student's trying and what the results are and then getting feedback from the teacher because by the high school level I'm not an expert at all in the curriculum.

Lawrence – Mmhmm.

Jenessa – It's starting to well surpass me, especially you know when you get to grade 11 and 12 calculus. I can't do the work at all, so I really need to work with the teacher in order to understand what it is, what gaps are there that then the teacher can help support them in bridging. And then I can come in with strategies – time management strategies or organization strategies or, you know, insert like some assistive technology if that's going to fit and help bridge the gap there.



Lawrence – Okay. So, let me ask you a question. Again, my personal experience, but when I talk self-advocacy with students and other teachers and certainly with parents...

Jenessa – Mmhmm.

Lawrence - ..one of the things that comes up constantly, I see the word time and time again, is shyness of the student to approach the teacher. How do you start to build the confidence in a student to go and have this conversation with their teacher because that, to a lot of them, seems to be the biggest stumbling block, is even to go in and ask initially.

Jenessa – Yes, absolutely. And it depends on how open the teacher is. So that's a lot of feedback I get from students is 'That teacher is not approachable.' 'I can't go up to that teacher and talk to them.' And that's a definite challenge. Plus, they're developmentally at a stage, especially the grade 10s, where they're extremely self-conscious about who they are and that being different is very, you know, no one wants to be different at all from their peers. So it's a very big fear for them to overcome, and so it ranges. There definitely is a range. There's some students that I can't get even into the resource room to have conversations about self-advocacy and other students will come and have no problem. I usually start to approach it by telling them that I'm their lawyer. So, if they come to me and they have a problem...

Lawrence – That's going to be costly though, isn't it?

[Laughs]

Jenessa – I know. If they come to me and tell me what their issue is we can work together and we can come up with the words that the student is comfortable using that I know from my experience as an adult and a teacher will be best received by the teacher. So, for example, coming up two days after the assignment's due and saying, 'Oh, by the way Mr. Smith, I need more time,' definitely the teacher is going to have a reaction. So the student and I can talk about, well why is the teacher going to react that way? And you need to expect that that's going to happen, so what words can you use to soften the blow and see if there's any room for him to understand that those days you were actually working on the assignment but you were either off-track or you misunderstood the instructions or you weren't able to access the resources that you thought you were going to be able to, and what you can do moving forward with Mr. Smith in order to prevent that situation from occurring again. And so we'll really break it down and then if the student's still feeling really hesitant to go and approach Mr. Smith then, as the student's lawyer, I will take it upon myself to approach Mr. Smith and say, this is the conversation I've had with the student and this is what he needs. So how much wiggle room do you have to give that student another chance? And most of the teachers are very willing, so long as they understand the context, right?

Lawrence – So, having been on the parental side of this, there's a tough handover for a parent and obviously this podcast is aimed at educators so I want to talk about it from the educators' perspective, how do you help parents understand this process of letting go? Because, particularly through the early years of these kids in school, we've been very hands-on, you know, we get involved with the IEP, we



know everything that's going on. We're talking to their teachers, we are the advocate. And then, as you get into the high school environment we're trying to change that. So what can educators do to help parents through that transition?

Jenessa – Well first of all, the kids themselves do it. I've come to many parent-teacher meetings where the student is sitting next to the parent and the student is rolling their eyes constantly. 'Ah, God, he's gonna embarrass me. This is so embarrassing. My parent is here.' So there's that kind of, that's a natural part of being a teenager. You need to have that separation from the parent. So parents come to me and say, 'Well my kid won't tell me what's going on at all. What's going on at school? I have no idea.' So I think the student definitely takes a big role in making that separation, which is good, which is definitely natural. But then I talk to parents about the difference between what elementary, middle, and high school, how the public schools are under the Education Act so we are obligated to disclose a kid's exceptionality to all of the teachers and the teachers must all work together to create the IEP and provide support. But when the student goes to post-secondary, the post-secondaries are under a different law, the Human Rights Law, and unless the student, him or herself, reveals what their exceptionality is, the school is not allowed by law to find out any information about their disability. So the student really has to, and the parent certainly can't be the one to go around talking to the university about it.

Lawrence – Mmhmm.

Jenessa – So the student needs to be the one to do it, so we work together, the parents and I, about how to encourage, have those conversations with their kid about approaching Mr. Smith and asking him for what they need.

Lawrence – Ya, and it's obviously a very tough time for a parent because you are letting go in that adolescent sense as well; there's so much more going on. So, let's just talk a little bit more in detail about this conversation with you and other teachers because, again, from the outside looking in, there seems to be a very mixed bag of teachers; some get it, some less go.

Jenessa – Mmhmm.

Lawrence – How do you help all of your colleagues to kind of be receptive? Because again, the kids are taking a risk when they approach a teacher, the power position is the teacher's, not theirs.

Jenessa – Mmhmm.

Lawrence – So, how do you help your colleagues to maybe soften that social side of the way they're dealing with these kids? Because they can read the signals quick and run for the hills, right?

Jenessa – Absolutely. Well, I have to say, I've been really lucky with the teachers I've worked with, and most of them are very receptive. The only times I've had real issues is when the student is lacking the communication skills, which can be even part of the LD, to be able to articulate clearly what it is that's happened, what they've tried, and what they need. And so because the teacher is not as patient or as aware of the situation misreads the student's non-verbal communication or even choices of words as



being lazy, disrespectful, not caring, you know, there's a whole list. And so that's when I come in as the advocate on the student's behalf and try to work with them. But, you're right, the teacher has the power, and there has been a couple situations where I've had to then go back to the student and say, you know you're having a really tough time with this teacher, but it's actually a very good experience for you because you're going to meet this same person again in your life. This isn't the first or the last time you've met someone who is rigid and who is unwilling to bend, so you're going to have to work within the parameters that that teacher has given you. And if they say that it's late and they're going to not accept it then let's work on a list of how to work on your end because the teacher's not going to budge. So let's talk about what you can do – what do you have control over and what can we work together on to try to find some support.

Lawrence – And I guess that in and of itself is a powerful lesson because, as you say, you're not always going to get that great reception, right.

Jenessa – No, no.

Lawrence – And life's not always that way inclined.

Jenessa – Yup.

Lawrence – Jenessa, just as we sum this part of the podcast up, I'm just interested in what you'd love other teachers to know. Not necessarily what your peers with that specialist knowledge, but the general high school teachers, and how can they truly assist these kids with their self-advocacy needs?

Jenessa – I think it's asking the student more questions. To not just take the superficial response as the response, but to continue to probe with more questions like 'Why are you having difficulty with this? What is going on?' And to take a little bit more time in finding out more so then they can know where their role is and their place in supporting the student.

Lawrence – Jenessa, thank you very much for your time.

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Lawrence— This concludes Part I of our podcast on self-advocacy for students. Please join us again next week when we will have a panel of students in studio with me to discuss their own experiences. Thanks for listening to TalkLD, until next time. Goodbye!

