



Key points:

- **Advocacy term has grown from representing someone else to include speaking for oneself**
- **All children could benefit from such training**
- **Need is particularly great for students from groups that historically have been marginalized**

Center to foster self-advocacy for people with intellectual, developmental disabilities

Historically, the term "advocates" referred to those who spoke or acted on behalf of others, including those who represented people with disabilities.

In recent years, however, people with disabilities have claimed that term for themselves, saying they prefer to speak and act in their own behalf.

On Sept. 15, in recognition of that trend, the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities at the Department of Health and Human Services announced a \$2 million effort to create a National Resource Center for Self-Advocacy.

At press time, the center did not have a website, and efforts to learn when it would go live were unsuccessful.

"The Developmental Disabilities Act was created to ensure that individuals with developmental disabilities and their families participate in the design of ... community services, individualized supports, and other forms of assistance," according to the Administration on Disabilities, of which AIDD is a part. "The National Resource Center for Self-Advocacy will support opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to strengthen their skills and voice for this important self-advocacy role."

In fact, the award will go to [Self Advocates Becoming Empowered](#), a group from Florence, S.C., that, as its name implies, is run by people with disabilities.

"SABE is thrilled to lead this initiative while engaging a diverse group of partner organizations to strengthen self-advocacy skills," according to a statement from SABE President Tia Nelis. "We see this important work as expanding on civil rights movements by supporting the voices of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

Applauding a selection

At one level, everyone needs to learn to advocate for themselves, according to Ruthie-Marie Beckwith, executive director of [TASH](#), one of the partnering groups to which Nelis referred.

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For example, "all students would benefit from having specific training in how to approach a teacher to question a grade you received on a paper," she said.

Likewise, all children need to learn "how to be assertive and explain to people your own point of view without become aggressive or derogatory in doing so."

Certain children, however, including migrant children, children from minority groups, and children with disabilities, have a particular need for such training, she said.

"Those groups of people have traditionally in our society been disenfranchised and marginalized," Beckwith said.

Thus, she said, self-advocacy programs focus on those groups "to make sure they have the opportunity to cultivate their own voice and express their needs."

That's why the new center matters to special educators, she said.

"[Transition is] one of the things that is part of the IDEA mandate," she said. "Part of that process needs to include young people developing the skills and capacities to represent themselves in all aspects of their lives, and that process really begins in high school."

And that's why the choice of grantees is so important, she said, because it illustrates the point AIDD is trying to make.

"Personally and as an organization, we are delighted that SABE has been selected as the grantee," she said. "The fact that it is led by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities is of tremendous significance."

[Mark W. Sherman](#), a Washington bureau correspondent, covers special education issues for LRP Publications.

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