

The Winston School Director of Special Education shares insights at third Conversation Series 'How to Advocate for and with Your Child'

The Winston School's Director of Special Education, Jeff Kozlowski is a trusted guide for students with learning differences seeking to navigate school and prepare for life. A 10-year veteran teacher, mentor and chief advocate, Kozlowski recently spearheaded the school's third Conversation Series panel presentation "Advocating for and with your Child."

Kozlowski was joined by San Diego Unified School District psychologist David Evans, parent Randi Pisapia, senior student Matthew Maichen and 2009 graduate and Humboldt University freshman, Richelle Aries (via Skype). Kozlowski outlined seven key elements of child advocacy, which were supported by examples from the panel and audience:

1. Listen: The first step to teaching advocacy skills is listening, not only to their words, but also their voice, actions, emotions, moods, and interests. When we listen to all aspects of a child, we empower them to feel heard. According to Aries who has dyslexia, listening, or the lack thereof, was a major stumbling block in her early self-advocacy efforts. "I was in 8th grade and all of my services were taken away. I wasn't being heard – it was a terrible feeling. You can't hear me, you can't understand, if you did you would give me what I'm asking for. It was the most frustrating thing that ever happened to me. What helped me persevere was the people at Winston – I couldn't have thrived as well anywhere else."

2. Help students understand themselves and their learning styles: Maichen, who is on the autism spectrum, said he is continually learning how he best functions and learns. "I've had some troubles this year but over the years I've learned that if I said something and didn't just shut myself off in pride that I could get some help and could manage it. I came forward to Mr. K (Kozlowski) and we worked out ways to manage the work."

3. Create the expectation for self-advocacy at school and at home: Maichen's mother Marianne said, "Early in his education I had to fight tooth and nail because the school wouldn't address the fact that he is high functioning on the autism spectrum. However, when kids get older I believe a parent really has to sit on their hands at some point. A lot of kids get to college fail in advocating for themselves when they've had a strong advocacy program leading up to it. At some point I had to sit back and purposely let Matthew fight and learn from his own battles."

4. Help students determine what they want versus what they need: Aries said when she started the IEP process she didn't know what she needed let alone what she wanted. "I really liked the idea of not going to class – so often times I didn't go to class because I thought I knew it. It was a pretty bad idea." Kozlowski confirmed that she strongly advocated for her reasons on why she shouldn't have to go to class and was effective but, in the end they made a compromise.

5. Gauge when to celebrate progress and when to challenge a student to rise to the next level: Pisapia said her son Tom wanted to transition to college by attending another school and she didn't know if this was the right move. "He is popular with the kids and the growth that he's had in the last couple of years is amazing. He came to me saying he didn't want to go to college without the big high school experience. Jeff Kozlowski said this is a great thing and it was a sign of maturity. The growth he's experienced since this has been amazing. It was the right choice."

6. Discover and refine our empathy: Evans, a case worker for non-public schools across the county including The Winston School said listening is a key factor. "I come into an IEP meeting and I may just know that student from the paperwork in front of me. That tells a small portion of the story. I need to listen to the parents, the child and the school. I work as the liaison and step in after the decision has been made about who is going to pay. My role is to make sure that this student is receiving exactly what they need from this different type of school that the district has said 'yes, we need to fund.'"

7. Help each individual find his/her compass: The formal process of transition planning along the way is important. However, guiding each child towards critical life traits such as courage and confidence may be even more important. Aries' mom, Bonnie Dunnum said, "I encouraged Richelle to embrace her learning disability. If you go through life saying 'I have this hardship' then nothing good comes of that. Nothing that is worth it in life is easy. You have to find the motivation to do it. No matter how horrible a learning disability is, the student will be much stronger when they learn that battle."

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