



Helping Students Help Themselves by Shara Bumgarner, Head of School

The boy timidly entered the admissions office with his head slightly bowed and his hands in his pockets. He was small for his age and seemed reluctant to be visiting at all. It didn't take long to understand his apprehension. As we asked him to tell us about himself, his strengths and his school experience, we jotted down his comments.

- “Nothing is easy at school.”
- “I'm not good at school.”
- “I don't like school.”
- “I can't do that, but my brother can.”

You might think these comments came from a sullen teenager, bored with school and with a petulant attitude. Sadly, it was a first grader – six years old – already comparing himself to others and feeling defeated about school.

Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon experience for our admissions team at The Joy School. Children frequently come to their interviews defining themselves only in terms of their learning differences and disabilities, often starting with “I'm dyslexic” or “I have ADHD”.

Knowing What's Really Important

The Joy School prepares students with learning differences to return to traditional classroom settings by enabling them to reach their academic and social potential in a safe, supportive environment. In simpler terms, we take kids who are struggling, we fix what we can fix, we give them strategies for the rest and then we send them back to traditional learning environments. While this is the typical path for most of our students, *this is not the ultimate benefit of attending The Joy School.*

Most students who visit The Joy School are struggling in some way. However, all students are more than their disability. One of the School's most important jobs is helping them realize that.



Continued on page 2

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Continued from page 1

The most important outcome is the fundamental transformation of how students view themselves, understand themselves and advocate for themselves. Our students who mainstream to traditional schools no longer think of themselves as less smart than their peers or as a diagnosis. Rather, they exhibit three traits that have the greatest impact on mainstreaming readiness: self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-advocacy.



Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to see both your strengths and weaknesses. Every human has both, yet when kids spend a seven-hour school day (plus homework, therapy or tutoring) focusing on their weaknesses, it is no wonder they lose sight of their strengths! When so many things are difficult for a student, it's not too hard to understand why he believes everything is going to be difficult. As early as the initial interview at TJS, we start helping kids pay attention to their strengths and differentiate what is truly difficult for them and what is not.

In the case of our first-grade visitor, he stated he was not good at rhyming. As it turned out, rhyming was a breeze for him,

until we used words with sounds he had difficulty pronouncing. He didn't have a rhyming problem; he had an articulation problem! Armed with this new information, he left with one less thing on his "can't do" list after just one hour at TJS.

Of course, just telling a student he is capable doesn't always have an impact. Many older students are reluctant to believe positive feedback. For those students, tracking their performance and showing them actual data is necessary. Believing in themselves is essential before students can take risks, try new things and face greater challenges, like mainstreaming!

Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance comes when students are aware of their differences, yet are also comfortable talking about those differences without feeling inadequate. Their descriptions of themselves become matter-of-fact rather than negative. These students talk about their diagnoses, therapies and even medications without fear of judgment or ridicule.

A child who is embarrassed to have dyslexia may resist extra help like using a laptop or special software to write a paper. Once a student stops seeing dyslexia as an overwhelming obstacle or stigma, she will view remedial instruction and assistive technology as simply part of the package.

One of the unique benefits of attending The Joy School is that every student has a diagnosed learning disability or learning difference. This helps students realize how very common differences are among all people. Everyone has both strengths and weaknesses, and their unique makeup is just that—unique—not better or worse. This translates to understanding that even those who seem to have it all together likely struggle in some way. Knowing this can lead to improved sibling and peer relationships.

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Andrea Dorr, TJS Math Learning Specialist and Zoe, TJS alumna at her mainstreaming ceremony

When students can accept their differences without feeling bad about themselves, they are much more likely to be able to accept support and use strategies that will help them find success in school.

Self-Advocacy

Self-awareness and self-acceptance enable students to exhibit self-advocacy, which is the ability to recognize what they need and ask for it in appropriate ways. It is not demanding all possible accommodations allowable, but requesting reasonable accommodations that enable them to do their best, whether at school, on the baseball field or in the workplace.

For example: a student may ask for a quieter place to work with fewer distractions—not because her diagnosis entitles her to such, but because she knows from experience that she is easily distracted and will be more productive if distractions are limited.

Self-advocacy is not declaring an inability to be successful if accommodations are not provided, i.e. “I cannot work in a noisy environment”. Rather, it is aiming to meet or exceed the same expectations established for peers, teammates or coworkers, by identifying what it will take to perform in the best possible way.

Self-advocacy also enables students to request simple courtesies that may or may not be official accommodations, but also facilitate success. A student who recognizes that he functions better in the morning than after lunch might ask the counselor to schedule his core classes in the morning, with less rigorous courses in the afternoon. Ultimately, self-advocacy for students is about taking responsibility for their own learning without depending on adults or diagnostic paperwork to speak for them.

As Director of the Learning Success Program at St. Pius X High School, where many TJS eighth graders go on to begin their high school careers, Dr. Charlis Powell has seen this self-advocacy first-hand, stating, “Joy School students have an understanding of their responsibility for their own learning, and that can be one of the most important indicators of success in high school and in college.”

Transformation

One of my greatest rewards as Head of School is seeing the transformation that occurs in students during their journey at The Joy School and beyond. It is difficult to capture exactly what happens, but my best description of former students who come to visit is: They are whole. They are solid in their awareness of who they are. They are comfortable in their own skin. Their learning disabilities, learning differences and diagnoses do not change. The change is in the students themselves. And that is the ultimate outcome of The Joy School experience.

Continued on page 4

Self-Advocacy Brought to Life

Continued from page 3

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A Letter From a TJS Middle Schooler to An Administrator

Dear Mrs. Williams,

I have grown to notice something odd with my schedule. I see that my last class is Ms. Crawford's class but my advisory is in Mrs. Benstock's class. I would like to know if I can have my advisory in Ms. Crawford's class. It would be so much easier if I have advisory in Ms. Crawford's class because I don't have to start my homework, then shut down my computer, then put my computer in my bag, then go to my locker and get my backpack, then try to put my binder in my backpack, then walk to Mrs. Benstock's class, then unload all the stuff I just packed, and then I get on my homework. See how this makes no sense at all? If I have advisory in Ms. Crawford's class, then I wouldn't have to do all the stuff above. Also Ms. Crawford's class only has three people in their advisory, unlike Mrs. Benstock's advisory which has five, so it would be equal. Please think about it and write back.

Andrea Dorr

TJS Math Specialist - A Teacher's Perspective

I taught Zoe in middle school and then tutored her all summer to prepare for high school.

As I watched her work this summer, I realized we had met our goal. I saw her solving multi-step equations and referring to her notes before asking questions. Then I realized something: This is it. Zoe knows and utilizes her strategies. She can do it really well! She's going to be successful despite her learning differences because she is prepared.

Once school started, Zoe reached out to talk to me about her schedule. Her algebra class was at the end of the day, and she was afraid she would be too tired after cross country and a full school day to do her best. She wanted help talking to her counselor about these concerns. She was advocating for what she knew she needed!

I can't describe the feeling I had. Her hard work and ability to ask for what she needed blew me away. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to really help children who might not have made it. I'm humbled and honored.

Beth Hearn

An Alumni Parent's Perspective

Prior to attending The Joy School, Harrison was a quiet, introverted child who mostly kept to himself and had few friends. He was adept at being invisible to teachers and administrators. Within a few weeks at The Joy School, Harrison actually enjoyed going to school. He had a wonderful circle of friends who remain friends to this day. I believe the teachers at TJS not only understood his challenges, but also exhibited a respect for the individual differences that make Harrison who he is. This respect allowed and encouraged Harrison to be brave enough to begin to advocate for himself.

Years later as a senior in high school, Harrison struggled with the rigors of the college preparatory program. Being somewhat disillusioned with academia, Harrison decided that after graduation he would go to welding school and ultimately become a welding inspector. A few days before welding school started, Harrison told me he did not want to go to welding school and he regretted that he had not tried to go to college. Not only did he want to go to college, he wanted to go to college out-of-state and far away! Harrison advocated for himself despite his parents' apprehension. After meeting with a college admissions counselor who coached Harrison through the application process, he enrolled at Mitchell College in New London, Connecticut. While Harrison's first semester has been challenging academically, he had the courage to play rugby (a completely new experience for him) and was elected one of two Freshman Student Senators. As his mother, I advise you to be careful of what you wish for. Self-advocacy has led to an independent spirit that he found at The Joy School years ago! 📌