

# **Effect of a Self-Advocacy Intervention on the GPA of Students with Disabilities**

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*An integrated program to teach self-advocacy techniques to students with disabilities was implemented in one Louisiana School District. Students (171) with mild disabilities were exposed to explicit instruction in self-advocacy skills. Student's GPAs were compared from one semester in the 2018-2019 school year and one semester in the 2019-2020 school year. The results indicated a statistically significant positive difference in GPA's between students who received the intervention and those who did not. The effect size of the intervention was considered small (.21).*

*Keywords: Self-Advocacy, Special Education*

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) aims to ensure that transition services needed for successful post-school employment and education are provided to students with disabilities. Between 1990 and 2016, the dropout rate has declined from 12.1 percent to 6.1 percent (Snyder et al., 2019). While school graduation rates steadily climb, students with disabilities remain almost three times as likely to drop out of high school as their nondisabled peers (Snyder et al., 2019). As graduation rates for students with disabilities continue to increase, effective transition services become a critical component of measuring accountability for children with disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

Students struggle to meet post-school goals due to a lack of self-advocacy skills (McConnell et al., 2012). Self-advocacy is the individual's ability to effectively recognize and articulate one's needs and rights (Holzberg et al., 2019). Self-advocacy strategies equip students with the skills needed to facilitate transition and access their accommodations in their post-school endeavors (Holzberg et al., 2019). Ten nonacademic behaviors are associated with post-school success for students with disabilities (McConnell et al., 2012). Those behaviors include: (a) knowledge of strengths and limitations, (b) actions related to strengths and limitations, (c) disability awareness, (d) employment, (e) goal setting and attainment, (f) persistence, (g) proactive involvement, (h) self-advocacy, (i) supports, and (j) utilization of resources (McConnell et al., 2012).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite many students with disabilities setting goals to pursue postsecondary education, students often do not achieve those goals (Holzberg et al., 2019). In the 2011 *National Longitudinal Transition Study-2* (NLTS-2), 89.9 percent of students with disabilities surveyed indicated goals to complete postsecondary education (Sanford et al., 2011). However, only 40.1

percent of those students achieved that goal (Sanford et al., 2011). Student's GPAs may be one reason they are unable to meet these postsecondary goals. Students also struggle to meet post-school goals due to a lack of self-advocacy skills (McConnell et al., 2012). There is a lack of research regarding the effects to which a self-advocacy program may have on students with disabilities increasing their GPAs.

### **Research Question**

To what extent does explicit instruction in self-advocacy skills effect students with mild disabilities' GPAs?

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between GPAs of students with disabilities who received explicit instruction in self-advocacy and those who did not.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Self-advocacy interventions are necessary for students with disabilities to increase confidence and independence in accessing accommodations (Holzberg et al., 2019). Lacking the skills needed to self-advocate has a detrimental impact on all students with disabilities (Holzberg et al., 2019). Like curriculum-based assessments determining present levels of performance in academic areas, assessments identifying the nonacademic skills students need to master are critical to the likelihood of post-school success (McConnell et al., 2012). Self-advocacy strategies equip students with the skills needed to facilitate transition and access their accommodations in their post-school endeavors (Holzberg et al., 2019). Explicit instruction of self-advocacy skills must be provided to students so that students select appropriate accommodations and can effectively articulate their needs to teachers (Prater et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of self-advocacy instruction on student academic success. The study reinforces the need for schools to provide direct instruction

in self-advocacy. General and special education teachers should collaborate to teach students with disabilities to self-advocate in deliberate ways throughout their schooling (Prater et al., 2014). Without knowledge of these ramifications, schools cannot develop initiatives to teach essential nonacademic behaviors needed for success of students with disabilities.

### **Literature Review**

Students must have knowledge of their strengths and limitations in various settings and be able to make decisions in response to this knowledge (Rouse & Hallam, 2006; McConnell et al., 2012). Disability awareness was also critical to being effective self-advocates (McConnell et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2019). Holzberg et al. (2019) found disability awareness to affect the success of students in postsecondary education. McCarthy (2007) eloquently writes about the experiences of students quest to self-advocate. She provides a narrative of the struggles involved in this process. Students must understand and be able to explain their disability to others (McConnell et al., 2012). Further, students must understand the impact their disability has on them (Holzberg et al., 2019).

Students with disabilities must be skilled in setting and attaining goals, which requires breaking long-term goals into smaller, concise goals with action plans for implementing those goals (McConnell et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2019). Persistence was an essential behavior for students with disabilities (McConnell et al., 2012). Employing a variety of strategies in response to completing a challenging task was necessary for their attainment of goals (McConnell et al., 2012). Holzberg et al. (2019) found that students do not utilize their resources because schools are mandated to provide necessary support to students with disabilities (Holzberg et al., 2019).

Consequently, students do not actively seek out their accommodations, which was detrimental to post-school success (Holzberg et al., 2019). Students with disabilities must use

support networks available to them to find solutions to obstacles they may face (McConnell et al., 2012).

Students with disabilities must have strong knowledge of their rights and responsibilities and be able to advocate for themselves (McConnell et al., 2012). When those in the student's immediate support group cannot help with a specific task, students need to seek out additional resources for assistance (McConnell et al., 2012). Awareness of their rights and accommodations were imperative for success if students with disabilities were to succeed in more demanding educational settings (Holzberg et al., 2019).

### **Impact of Instruction in Self-Advocacy Skills**

Instruction in self-advocacy provides students with action plans for responding to the challenges students with disabilities will face in post-school endeavors (Holzberg et al., 2019). Instruction in self-advocacy skills increases students' performance and participation in the classroom (Prater et al., 2014). When taught to self-advocate, students are more likely to request accommodations when they are needed (Prater et al., 2014). Self-advocacy instruction increases students' confidence in having successful outcomes in class and this often transfers to higher GPAs. Zhang et al. (2019) reported positive outcomes for participants in a self-advocacy program including higher GPAs for students with disabilities.

While teaching students to self-advocate will take additional time and require more effort on the part of the special education and general education teachers, self-advocacy instruction will greatly benefit students, both academically and personally throughout their life (McCarthy, 2007; Rouse & Hallam, 2006; Zhang et al., 2019). Educators can give students control over their education by teaching students to understand their strengths and needs, to identify accommodations that are necessary for them to be successful, and to request those

accommodations in an appropriate manner (Prater et al., 2014). As a result, students will assume more of the responsibility for their education, resulting in higher academic outcomes (Prater et al., 2014).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data within this study were conducted in Slidell, Louisiana at Slidell Junior High School (SJH). SJH was a junior high school in the St. Tammany Parish Public School System that educates students in the seventh and eighth grade. Of the 843 students that SJH services, 171 are students with disabilities. Of the school's total population of students with disabilities, students who spent more than forty percent of their day in the general education setting were selected to participate in a self-advocacy initiative.

### **Measures**

Before beginning the intervention, the researcher gathered archived school data from the 2018-2019 school year to determine the percentage of students with disabilities who had failed one or more classes during the first quarter of school. Those percentages were compared to the percentage of students with disabilities who had failed one or more classes during the first quarter of the 2019-2020 school year. The program would show potential for success if the percentages had decreased from the year before.

### **Procedures**

The self-advocacy initiative aimed to provide intervention in self-advocacy skills that were needed for post-school and career success. The initiative aimed for students to:

- Take ownership of their learning with knowledge of their strengths and limitations through disability awareness.

- Routinely monitor their own academic progress and set goals for their own educational growth.
- Develop strong communication skills that would enable them to maintain positive relationships with peers and educators.

Students received the instruction twice a month through their physical education classes. Rather than presenting the initiative as a required intervention, the initiative was advertised as a student organization that students were hand-selected to participate in. Students received invitations to participate and were given regular incentives to maintain motivation and willingness to participate. The course was designed to provide students with time to self-monitor their grades, a mini- lesson on a self-advocacy topic or skill, a portfolio task to provide teachers with data, and a challenge that would be completed outside of the class. Each challenge encouraged communication between students and teachers. Lessons and challenges from the first quarter can be seen in Figure 1. The year-long curriculum overview can be viewed in Appendix A.

### Figure 1

#### *Self-Advocacy Curriculum Overview, First Quarter*

<b>Lesson 1: Self- Advocacy through E3</b>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define Self- Advocacy</li> <li>• Purpose, Goals, Outcomes,</li> </ul> <p>Rationale</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule, Routines,</li> </ul> <p>Challenges, &amp; Incentives</p>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Info Sheets</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give parents self-advocacy letter.</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 2: IEP Basics &amp; Accommodations</b>	

<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define IEP.</li> <li>• IEP teams &amp; IEP Authority.</li> <li>• Accommodations Defined, Dos &amp; Don'ts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Interest Survey □ Grades Self-Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce yourself to your IEP Authority. Discuss convenient times to discuss IEP needs. Fill in your IEP Authority Info Label and complete reflection.</li> <li>• Ask a teacher to describe how an accommodation is implemented in their particular class.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lesson 3: SJH Resources</b></p>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Resources</li> <li>• Online Resources</li> <li>• Classroom Resources</li> <li>• People to Know</li> <li>• Characteristics of Resourceful People</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource Utilization Plan</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize a school, online, or classroom resource and complete a reflection.</li> <li>• Introduce yourself to a faculty member who will be a beneficial resource to you. Complete a reflection.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lesson 4: Organization in Junior High</b></p>	

<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agenda Utilization</p>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Organization Plan</p>
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Student ID storage Backpack and</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Folder</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Labelling</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Habits for Success BEWARE of binders &amp; lockers.</p>	<p>• Grades Self- Reflection</p> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <p>• Utilize your agenda and have teachers sign off for at least one week. Complete a reflection.</p> <p>• Select and implement one organization goal.</p> <p>Complete a reflection.</p> <p>• Label all folders, notebooks, etc. with your name, the class subject, and teacher's name.</p>

The data were analyzed using charts and graphs to determine if a visual difference was apparent between the scores from one year to the next. The data were then analyzed using a Mann-Whitney U test to determine if there were differences in the GPA of students with disabilities from one year to the next after the intervention took place. The Mann-Whitney U test was selected because the data contained extreme outliers which could not be ethically removed, the data were not normally distributed as reported by the Shapiro-Wilk test, and the data violated homogeneity of variance ( $p = .001$ ).

### Results

During the 2018-2019 school year, there were 161 total students with disabilities at SJH. Of this population, 30.4 percent of students had failed at least one course, 15.5 percent of

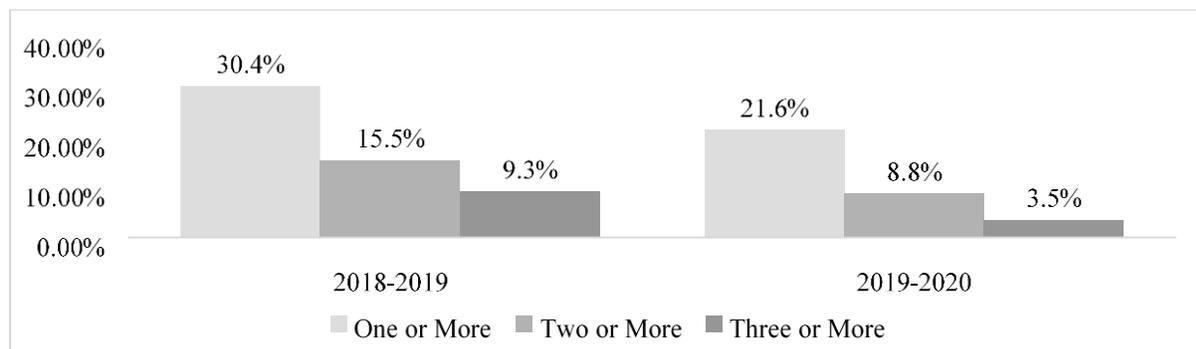
students had failed at least two courses, and 9.3 percent of students had failed three or more courses.

In the 2019-2020 school- year, participants were given explicit instruction in self-advocacy skills to develop non-academic behaviors and habits that were essential to post-school and employment success. Participants were given instruction twice a month during their physical education classes. In addition to instruction, the school utilized funding from the PBIS committee to provide participants with consistent positive reinforcement for their commitment to the initiative.

During the first quarter, students had participated in four of twelve workshops for their year. After the first quarter, there was a decrease in the number of students with disabilities who had failed one or more courses. During the 2019-2020 school year, there were 171 total students with disabilities at SJH. Of this population, 21.6 percent of students had failed at least one course, 8.8 percent of students had failed at least two courses, and 3.5 percent of students had failed three or more courses. Results are displayed in Figure 2.

### Figure 2

*Percentage of Students with Disabilities Failing One or More Courses after the First Quarter*



A Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were differences in student GPAs between one year and the next once an intervention took place. Distributions of the GPA scores

for 2018 to 2019 were similar, as assessed by visual inspection. GPA scores were statistically significantly higher in 2019 ( $Mdn = 87$ ) than in 2018 ( $Mdn = 85$ ),  $U = 763,991.500$ ,  $z = 4.871$ ,  $p = .000$ , using an exact sampling distribution for  $U$  (Dineen & Blakesley, 1973). An effect size was calculated using Cohen's  $d$  and is considered small (.21).

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of self-advocacy instruction on student success. While school graduation rates steadily climb, students with disabilities remain almost three times as likely to drop out of high school as their nondisabled peers (Snyder et al., 2019). Students struggle to meet post-school goals due to a lack of self-advocacy skills (McConnell et al., 2012). Self-advocacy strategies equip students with the skills needed for post-school success (Holzberg et al., 2019). Data from this study reinforce the importance of providing direct instruction in self-advocacy skills. These data show there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups. This shows that the intervention did have a positive effect on student GPAs, therefore, the null hypotheses must be rejected. The effect size of this intervention was considered small for this sample; however, higher effect sizes are harder to achieve for academic measures (Kraft, 2018).

When given explicit instruction in self-advocacy skills, students were enabled to develop the non-academic behaviors essential to student success. The study reinforces the need for schools to provide direct instruction in self-advocacy. General and special education teachers should collaborate to teach students with disabilities to self-advocate in deliberate ways throughout their schooling (Prater et al., 2014). Without knowledge of these ramifications, schools cannot develop initiatives to teach essential nonacademic behaviors needed for success of students with disabilities.

**Limitations**

There was one limitation of this research concerning generalizability. Data were only collected from one school in one city. Further, participants were only selected from one school and all come from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Overall, generalizability regarding the findings of this study are not possible unless the study was replicated. Another limitation of the student included the length of the study. Instruction was only provided to students for one quarter of the school year. The success of the year-long curriculum was yet to be determined. A final limitation is the use of one measure to determine the curriculum's success. Analysis of multiple data sources, including academic data, discipline data, standardized assessments, etc. would provide more thorough depiction of the initiative's success.

**Implications**

Assessments identifying the nonacademic skills students need to master are essential to the likeliness of post-school success (McConnell et al., 2012). Schools and educators can develop action plans for providing direct instruction in self-advocacy. Explicit instruction in self-advocacy skills must be provided to students so that students select appropriate accommodations and can effectively articulate their needs to teachers (Prater et al., 2014). Future studies should focus on this topic, using the same methods in order to confirm and support the results as outline here. Future studies should also use a control group when possible or a single-case design method. Future studies should also use multiple locations and report demographics of students for generalizability purposes.

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<https://doi.org/lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.3233/JVR-181001>

## Appendix A

### Self-Advocacy Curriculum Overview

<b>Lesson 1: Self- Advocacy through E3</b>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define Self- Advocacy</li> <li>• Purpose, Goals, Outcomes, Rationale</li> <li>• Schedule, Routines, Challenges, &amp; Incentives.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Info Sheets</li> <li>• Permission Slip □ Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have parents fill out and sign the permission slip.</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 2: IEP Basics &amp; Accommodations</b>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define IEP.</li> <li>• IEP teams &amp; IEP Authority.</li> <li>• Accommodations Defined, Dos &amp; Don'ts</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Interest Survey □ Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce yourself to your IEP Authority. Discuss convenient times to discuss IEP needs. Fill in your IEP Authority Info Label and complete reflection.</li> <li>• Ask a teacher to describe how an accommodation is implemented in their particular class.</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 3: SJH Resources</b>	

<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School Resources</li> <li>• Online Resources</li> <li>• Classroom Resources</li> <li>• People to Know</li> <li>• Characteristics of Resourceful People</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource Utilization Plan</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize a school, online, or classroom resource and complete a reflection.</li> <li>• Introduce yourself to a faculty member who will be a beneficial resource to you. Complete a reflection.</li> </ul>
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**Lesson 4: Organization in Junior High**

<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agenda Utilization</li> <li>• ID storage</li> <li>• Backpack &amp; Folder Labelling</li> <li>• Habits for Success</li> <li>• BEWARE of binders &amp; lockers.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization Plan. □ Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize your agenda and have teachers sign off for at least one week. Complete a reflection.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select and implement one organization goal. Complete a reflection.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Label all folders, notebooks, etc. with your name, the class subject, and teacher's name.</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 5: Communication is Key</b>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication Skills</li> <li>Self-advocating with teachers</li> <li>Maintaining Positive Relationships with Teachers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintaining Positive Relationships with Teachers Analysis</li> <li>Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop self-advocacy goals. Initiate one self advocacy goal. Complete the reflection.</li> <li>Participate in your annual IEP. Your goal should be to offer any type of input at least once. This can be asking/ answering a question, offering insight, or elaborating on a topic.</li> <li>Deliver IEP goals, obtain signatures, discuss accommodations.</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 6: Mindset Matters</b>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Growth Mindset vs. Fixed Mindsets</li> <li>Talent vs. Grit</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Growth Mindset Contract and Plan</li> <li>Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss areas for improvements with at least two teachers.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lesson 7: Disability Awareness</b></p>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disability Research: Facts, Characteristics, Accommodations, Self-Help strategies</li> <li>• Advocating &amp; discussing disabilities.</li> <li>• Mindset &amp; Disability.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disability Awareness Research</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete Disability Research Assignment. Find at least 8 facts, characteristics, and/or helpful strategies.</li> </ul> <p>Complete self-reflection.</p>
<p><b>Lesson 8: Learning Styles</b></p>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Styles</li> <li>• Assessing Current Accommodations</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Styles Assessment</li> <li>• Current Accommodations Analysis</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p>

	<input type="checkbox"/> Discuss the results of your learning styles survey and current accommodations analysis with your IEP Authority and family.
<b>Lesson 9: Reading, Writing, Math, Study Skills</b>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Identify strengths and needs</li> <li>• Tips for Success</li> <li>• Goal Setting</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic Goals Action Plan</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review your academic goals with your teachers.</li> </ul> <p>Revise goals as needed based on teacher input.</p>
<b>Lesson 10: Behavior &amp; Self- Regulation</b>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Identify strengths and needs</li> <li>• Tips for Success</li> <li>• Goal Setting</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavior &amp; Self- Regulation Goals Action Plan</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review your behavior/ self-regulation plan with a teacher or a disciplinarian. Revise based on input if needed.</li> </ul>
<b>Lesson 11: Social Skills &amp; Conflict Resolution</b>	

<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills</li> <li>• Identify strengths and needs</li> <li>• Tips for Success</li> <li>• Goal Setting</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Skills &amp; Conflict Resolution Goals Action Plan</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review your social/ conflict resolution goal with a teacher or a disciplinarian. Revise based on input if needed.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lesson 12: Wrap Up Self- Assessment</b></p>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2019 reflection</li> <li>• 2020 goal setting</li> </ul>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post- Assessment</li> <li>• Annual Reflection &amp; Goal Setting.</li> <li>• Grades Self- Reflection</li> </ul> <p><b>Challenge(s):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share your 20-21 goals with a family member and one faculty member.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Lesson 13: Celebrating Success</b></p>	
<p><b>Learning Outcomes:</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Award Ceremonies</p>	<p><b>Portfolio Tasks:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> E3 certificate</p>