

## Become a Self-Advocate

by Travis Frank



Travis Frank

**SELF-ADVOCACY** is one of the biggest transitions teenagers *need* to make. This is the point where they make decisions about what they need and how they plan to get it. The point where mom and dad are their last line of defense and they start to learn what really matters. I found this out firsthand when in seventh grade I had a pretty inactive advocate. I took charge and started talking to my teachers about how they could help me do better. This was sometimes ineffective, so I did the next best thing: I started carrying a copy of my IEP. This proved somewhat effective; though this was only a taste of what true self-advocacy was, it got me ready for what was to come in high school.

My advocate, who was the head of the Special Education Department, had tried this method of planning with only one other student and had success. There was paper after paper showing my strengths and weaknesses as well as my goals. This program showed me where I wanted to be and made me think of how I could get there. The next step was to help me plan my own meeting in which I would have control of the whole meeting. I would start, introduce, and conduct the meeting. This was not as hard to plan as it sounds, but it does take an ability to control adults when they argue.

Taking charge was the best thing I have ever done. I now have full power over my school life. I see my advocate when I feel that there is a need for change in my IEP, and



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I don't rely on him for simple things like more time for homework. I have been able to spread my wings, so to speak—and to think ten years ago I couldn't read, seven years ago they didn't even think I could make it to grade level, three years ago I met grade level, and now my teachers say my reading and writing skills may be near honors level.

When you take charge of your life you find that no wall is too big to jump, no wall is too strong to break down, and no wall will ever stand

in your way. I can't count the ways self-advocacy has helped me or what the best part really is. Instead, I leave you with this: I was at least three grades behind at the start of sixth grade, meaning I only had the reading skills of an eight-year-old. And yet I sit here speaking on behalf of all special-ed kids who have been told "you'll never do anything" or "you're not smart enough."

Yes, you can, and yes, you are. The only way you fail is when you stop fighting, when you give up and stop trying. You need to show that teen spirit of never knowing when to quit and say, "help me" or "get out of my way." To the parents, teachers, and everyone else trying to help these kids, you too must never give up. And you must keep watch over the kids' progress, being ready to stop anyone trying to hurt that progress. If you fight then we will help and in doing so we will one day shine through, leaving all who said "no, you can't" in our wake. ●

**Travis Frank** will graduate from Amphitheater High School in Tucson, Arizona, in June 2010. The student member of the Amphitheater Coordinated Transition Strategies team, Frank was awarded the 2009 Arizona Youth and Young Adult Secondary Transition Services Award for his outstanding service to Arizona's students with disabilities. Diagnosed with ADHD, ODD, and dyslexia when he was in elementary school, he started leading his IEP meetings in the ninth grade and has been "in charge" ever since. Frank has been accepted to Central Arizona College for the fall 2010 semester. His goal is to get his degree in Athletic Training.