



THE ADVOCACY LAB

The Advocacy Lab™ Pilot at The dePaul School for Dyslexia

December 2025 – January 2026

PURPOSE & OVERVIEW

A transition-based SEL and self-advocacy workshop designed to help 7th–8th graders articulate how they learn best and what helps them succeed as they prepare to move into high school.

Using the Dear Younger Me and Dear Teacher letters from the More Than Behavior™ Framework, students are guided from reflection to confident self-expression — turning insight into action and self-advocacy.

RATIONALE: WHY IT MATTERS

- Students with ADHD, dyslexia, and other learning differences often experience school transitions as especially challenging—moving from supportive, familiar settings into larger environments that may not fully understand their learning needs.
- *The Advocacy Lab™* gives them the language, confidence, and emotional framework to explain how they learn best — before the transition happens.
- Through structured reflection and writing, students connect self-awareness with real-world communication skills, strengthening resilience, agency, and independence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Advocacy Lab™ forms the fourth stage of The Happy Core™ Framework, a multi-tier developmental model integrating emotion regulation, metacognitive awareness, and self-determination.

Each stage corresponds to a core developmental skill:

Stage	Developmental Focus	Core Process	Representative Program
1. Recognize	Emotional awareness and self-perception	Naming internal states	The Secret Society of G.O.A.T.™
2. Regulate	Physiological and emotional regulation	Body–mind integration	The Happy Core™ / Homework Hero™
3. Understand	Cognitive-emotional insight	Translating behavior into needs	More Than Behavior™ Letters
4. Advocate	Expressive self-determination	Communicating needs effectively	The Advocacy Lab™

This progression aligns with constructs in **emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995)**, **executive function development (Zelazo & Carlson, 2012)**, and **self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000)**—culminating in the student's ability to act as an informed advocate for their own learning.

OBJECTIVES

The *Advocacy Lab™* aims to:

1. **Foster self-awareness** of cognitive and emotional learning patterns.
2. **Strengthen** students' capacity to translate internal experiences into **adaptive communication**.
3. **Facilitate** early development of **advocacy skills** critical for secondary and postsecondary transitions.
4. **Reduce anxiety** related to academic performance and self-concept by **reframing learning differences through an empowerment lens**.

IMPLEMENTATION DESIGN

Structure: Two 45-minute classroom sessions (ELA, SEL, or counseling integration)

Participants: Middle to high school students (ages 13–16), particularly those transitioning from specialized to mainstream environments.

Facilitators: School counselors, psychologists, or trained educators.

Session 1 – Reflective Self-Exploration ("Decode")

Students complete a structured self-reflection questionnaire derived from "*Dear Me*" and "*Dear Teacher*" letters. Prompts guide exploration of strengths, challenges, sensory and emotional regulation, and cognitive style. Students then compose a preliminary "*Dear Future Teacher*" letter, articulating personal learning insights.

Session 2 – Translating Reflection into Advocacy ("Do")

Using the *More Than Behavior™* automated empathy-letter framework, students receive a generated Dear Teacher letter based on their questionnaire. Through guided comparison and discussion, they identify differences between self-perception and external translation. Each student concludes by formulating a concise "Advocacy Snapshot" summarizing effective strategies and preferred supports.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES & CASEL ALIGNMENT

Self-Awareness: Identify learning preferences, triggers, and strengths.

Self-Management: Recognize strategies for focus and emotional regulation.

Social Awareness: Understand how communication builds empathy.

Relationship Skills: Practice respectful ways to express needs.

Responsible Decision-Making: Plan and communicate support strategies effectively.

RESEARCH & EVALUATION — NEXT STEPS

Quantitative:

Pre/post measures of student confidence and self-advocacy readiness.

Teacher observation rubrics assessing clarity and independence.

Qualitative:

Student reflections ("What helps me learn best?") and teacher feedback on advocacy clarity and classroom carryover.

Goal:

To establish preliminary evidence that structured reflection and empathy-based language support smoother transitions and stronger student voice for dyslexic and neurodiverse learners.

FRAMEWORK REFERENCE

Part of The Happy Core™ Framework

Feel Seen. Recognize your story.

Build Focus. Turn emotion into action.

Be Understood. Translate feelings into language.

Be Heard. Advocate for yourself and apply your strengths.

The Happy Core™ Framework integrates neuroscience, emotional literacy, and narrative-based tools to help students move from awareness to autonomy.

PILOT PARTNERSHIP

Host Site: The dePaul School for Dyslexia, Clearwater, FL

Timeline: January - February 2026

Facilitators: Kristin Schleicher, M.A. Psychology ·

Collaborator: Katie McLain - Director of Admissions - The dePaul School for Dyslexia,

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS



METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The *Advocacy Lab™* is delivered within a trauma-informed and neuroaffirming framework emphasizing psychological safety, student agency, and confidentiality.

Letters are generated through controlled automation processes ensuring privacy compliance (FERPA/COPPA) and avoiding diagnostic or pathologizing language.

DISCUSSION

Preliminary pilot implementations suggest that structured self-advocacy experiences—particularly those incorporating narrative and emotional translation—enhance both teacher empathy and student self-efficacy. The *Advocacy Lab™* bridges the cognitive and affective dimensions of executive functioning, allowing students to externalize metacognitive insight in a form accessible to educators.

By embedding reflective writing within the school setting, the model operationalizes the often-abstract goal of “student voice” into a measurable, teachable process.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Further evaluation will examine pre/post measures of self-advocacy confidence, teacher perception, and student anxiety reduction. Expansion is planned across three contexts:

1. Middle-to-High School Transition Programs
2. College Readiness & Accessibility Offices (Dear Professor / Dear Advisor Letters)
3. Parent & Coach Licensure Extensions (Dear Parent Letters)

CITATION FOR POSTER / PROCEEDINGS

Schleicher, K. (2025). The *Advocacy Lab™*: A Framework for Developing Self-Understanding and Self-Advocacy in Neurodiverse Learners.

Presented as part of the poster presentation

“Building Bridges: Empowering ADHD Kids in School Settings,
International ADHD Conference, Kansas City.