When Helping Students Means Teaching Them How to Get Help

(Guest Blog – Tessa Dodson)

Tessa Dodson, Senior Writer of Classrooms.com, explores the need for students to develop the learning behaviors of seeking and using support from others. She suggests actions teachers can take to build these skills and mindsets. Instructional coaches can explore the benefits to students and teachers of building these empowered learning capabilities. These are skills we want students to carry with them.

Support looks different at every stage of a student's education. As students move through middle and high school, they can gradually take a more active role in recognizing when they need help. Educators are often very good at recognizing when students need help. But if adults always identify the need, locate the resource, and initiate the support, when does the student learn to do those things?

I have seen this development from two very different perspectives. During my time as a teacher's assistant in middle school, I noticed how naturally students relied on the adults to meet their needs. Later, as a college student career coach, I saw them working through a different kind of independence. These experiences made me think more about when students actually learn to recognize that they want help and take the first step toward getting it.

Why Support Matters as Students Become More Independent

Research has found that students who experienced positive

teacher support showed lower levels of study-related burnout and higher levels of study engagement. I find this interesting because it points to the value of consistent guidance and assistance from teachers as students work through academic and day-to-day challenges.

In high school, educators often have many opportunities to provide more structured support. As teachers see the same individuals regularly, it is easier for them to notice changes in academic performance or behavior. From here, counselors, families and other educators can bring different perspectives to the situation.

Teacher-to-teacher communication is also particularly useful as students move between classrooms and grades, giving the next educator more context for supporting the student. When students go to college, that direct educator handoff is often less available. That makes it especially important for students to practice identifying their needs and finding support before leaving high school.

Educators need to gradually step back and give learners more responsibility for working through challenges and seeking assistance. At the same time, they should remain available to guide them through the process.

Building Help-Seeking Skills Through SEL

Help-seeking skills are easiest to build when students have room to practice them. Social-emotional learning (SEL) gives educators an effective framework to help learners develop these capabilities.

SEL's framework comprises five key areas, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Several of these

competencies directly support the different steps of seeking help. Self-awareness helps students recognize when they need assistance, while social awareness includes recognizing the people and resources around them, which helps them see where that help can be found.

Students also benefit from relationship skills that help them communicate their needs. When it comes to evaluating choices, responsible decision-making helps them consider their options and decide how to use the support they receive.

Together, these competencies can guide learners along the student learning continuum, gradually moving them toward greater confidence in seeking support.

Let Students Explain the Need First

When students encounter difficulty, it is important to give them space to identify and explain what they need before offering a solution. Describing the problem can help them understand their own learning while giving teachers a clearer picture of where support is useful.

- Give students time to describe the part of a task they find difficult.
- Encourage them to separate what they understand from what remains unclear.
- Ask them to identify what they have already tried.

Practice Finding the Right Resource

Students would benefit from learning how to identify where appropriate help can come from, whether that is a teacher or another school resource.

- Introduce students to different sources of academic and personal support.
- Help them recognize which resources suit different needs.

- Provide them with opportunities to consider their options before directing them to one.
- Encourage them to use more than one resource when appropriate.

Build Question-Asking into Routines

Knowing where to seek help is only part of the process. Students should also practice explaining what they require and formulating specific questions.

- Encourage them to prepare questions before seeking assistance.
- Ask for specific descriptions of where they are struggling.
- Build question preparation into classroom routines.
- Give them low-pressure opportunities to practice communicating their needs.

Give Students a Role in Follow-Up

Students can also learn to consider whether the support they received actually helped and what they can do with it. Building in a reflection process builds student agency by helping them make decisions about their own learning.

- Provide opportunities to apply the guidance independently.
- Encourage reflection on what they learned from the support.
- Have them consider what they might try if a similar challenge comes up.
- Set up a system for checking progress.

In my experience, reflection is often where the learning becomes more personal. Students begin to see which kinds of support work for them and become more prepared to make similar decisions on their own.

Why Students Still Need Support Along the Way

The need for meaningful support does not disappear as students become more independent, in part because so many students still do not fully know where to turn for it.

Building independence, then, is about helping students recognize when they need assistance. It also helps them make good use of available support. A study of over 1,000 high school students found that 40% regularly hesitated to admit if they were confused or did not know something. That gap serves as a reminder that recognizing the need for help doesn't come naturally to most students. It's a skill they have to practice, the same way they practice any other part of learning.

Preparing Students for Independence

Findings from higher education research suggest that students benefit academically when they seek help to address their learning needs. By the time they reach college, they may have plenty of resources around them. However, they must take more responsibility for accessing them.

Earlier practice gives students a foundation for doing more of that work themselves. They already had opportunities to recognize when they are stuck and who to turn to for support. When they transition to a different environment, these experiences can make seeking help feel like a familiar part of learning.

Empowering Students to Move Forward

With Confidence

The move toward greater independence starts well before students leave high school. Educators can help them prepare by giving them more opportunities to take an active role in their own learning, decisions and problem-solving. Taking small steps can build confidence and help learners take greater ownership of what comes next.

Thanks Tessa. Readers can contact Tessa at: tessa@classrooms.com