



FOCUS on Results

Guidance & Technical Assistance from the Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services

September 2005



Office of Special Education and Early Intervention Services

Accountability

Assessment

Curriculum & Instruction

Dispute Resolution

Early Childhood

IEPs & IFSPs

Personnel

State & Federal Policy

Transition

Other

This **FOCUS on Results** document examines the value and impact self-determination can have on the lives of persons with disabilities. Self-determination is the understanding and ability to act on personal strengths and limitations.

Key Ideas:

- Self-determination requires an understanding of one's strengths and limitations and a belief in oneself as capable and effective.
- Students who help choose their school activities are more motivated to perform those tasks.
- Adults support student self-determination by: modeling self-determination, encouraging exploration, and listening attentively and encouraging others to do so as well.

Self-Determination: What Is It? Why Is It Beneficial? How Is It Best Taught?

by Sharon Field

How can individuals with disabilities have more successful outcomes when they reach adulthood? How can caring adults ensure that students with disabilities feel respected as they play an active role in their transition from school to adult life? One answer that has emerged in special education and disability services over the past 15 years is self-determination.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, special education and disability services began to focus on self-determination. Parents, individuals with disabilities, educators, and disability-related service providers were searching for strategies to help individuals with disabilities achieve more successful adult outcomes. Advocates for the civil rights of persons with disabilities also became involved. The slogan "nothing about me without me" captures the essence of the self-determination movement.

The following questions and answers are designed to clarify the essential meaning of self-determination.

Q. What is self-determination?

A. Individuals who are self-determined have "a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs" that help them "engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. Self-determination requires an understanding of one's strengths and limitations and a belief in oneself as capable and effective. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take

control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society" (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward and Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 2).

Q. Who needs self-determination?

A. All individuals need skills related to self-determination in order to succeed. However, these skills are especially important for individuals with disabilities. Individuals with disabilities often face more barriers to self-determination than do other individuals in our society.

Q. Why are these skills important for students with disabilities?

A. Individuals with disabilities often have to deal with many people who exert control or influence over major decisions that affect the quality of their lives. Decisions such as where to live, what kind of work to do, and how to spend leisure time are personal choices that ALL individuals have a right to take part in making.

Self-Determination Affects Employment and Adult Living

Q. What research and data support the use of self-determination?

A. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that students with learning disabilities who had higher self-determination scores in their last year of high school were more likely to: have expressed a preference to live

FOCUS on Results Is Available Online

Now you can save time, and help Michigan save money, by reading FOCUS on Results—and all Center for Educational Networking (CEN) publications—in electronic format.

If you have access to the Web and would like to receive email updates when new issues of FOCUS on Results are available, send a request to info@cenmi.org or visit www.cenmi.org and click on "Services" then "Subscribe to publications."

Subscribe to e-FOCUS on Results, and you will also receive periodic quick tips and updates on breaking education news.

Meanwhile, don't forget to check www.cenmi.org often to learn about news and events of interest to the special education community.



GATA 05-04

outside the family home, have a savings or checking account, and be gainfully employed one year following high school. Of the youth in their study who were employed, Wehmeyer and Schwartz found that those who were more self-determined earned an average of \$4.26/hour, while their peers who were less self-determined earned an average of \$1.93/hour.

Wehmeyer & Palmer conducted another follow-up study (2003) with young individuals with cognitive disabilities (mental retardation or learning disability) one and three years after graduation. These studies found similar results to those reported above related to employment and independent living outcomes. Sowers and Powers (1995) showed that self-determination instruction increased the participation and independence of students with severe disabilities in performing community activities.

Self-Determination Relates to Academic Success

Additional data suggest that increased self-determination also relates to academic success. Houchins (1998) found a positive correlation between scores on self-determination assessment and academic achievement scores for students who were incarcerated (jailed in juvenile detention). Sarver (2000) found a positive relationship between scores on self-determination assessment and grade point average for post-secondary students with learning disabilities. Finally, research has indicated that children who help choose school activities show enhanced motivation to perform tasks related to those activities and are more likely to achieve their goals (e.g., Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Realon, Favell, & Lowerre, 1990; Schunk, 1985).

Self-Determination Links to Better Mental Health

Evidence also suggests that increased self-determination is linked to better mental health. Bruno (2000) conducted a study of the effects of the Steps to Self-Determination (Field & Hoffman, 1996) curriculum on depression indicators in sixth grade students. A school counselor in a general education sixth grade classroom delivered the curriculum. The Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) (Kovacs, 1992) was used as a pre- and post-test measure.

Bruno found a statistically significant decrease in depressive features of children at risk for depression on The Children's Depression Inventory after children participated in the Steps to Self-Determination curriculum. In addition, he found that the number of children at risk for depression in the treatment group decreased significantly from pre-test to post-test, while the number of children at risk for depression in the control group increased from pre-test to post-test.

Q. How do you teach self-determination and apply the skills that will lead to success?

A. Field and Hoffman (1996) identified five steps to self-determination: 1) know yourself and your environment, 2) value yourself, 3) plan, 4) act and 5) experience outcomes and learn. These steps can be taught through the use of a variety of methods and materials. Several curriculum strategies are available to help students develop more skills related to each step. Some of the strategies focus specifically on the individualized education program (IEP) process, while others are more general in nature.

When designing self-determination lessons, adults need to provide support for the learning process. For example, teachers do not expect students to learn math or acquire reading skills simply by putting a task in front of them and watching whether or not students can complete the task. Instead, teachers provide instruction and then allow students to apply their learning. At that point, teachers provide feedback, guidance, and coaching to ensure that students learn from their experiences. The same type of support should be offered to help students learn knowledge, skills, and beliefs related to self-determination.

How Can Students Practice Self-Determination?

One key to helping students become more self-determined is to allow them to learn by doing. Students need opportunities to act in a self-determined manner and learn from their experiences. Participating in the IEP process provides an excellent opportunity for students to practice self-determination skills. Research has shown that when students receive instruction to help them prepare for their IEP

meetings, they make three times as many comments in their meetings as students who do not receive instruction (VanReusen & Bos, 1994). Greater student involvement can result in many positive changes in the IEP process. One teacher said, "If I get meaningful involvement from the student and parent at the IEP meeting, the rest of the year seems to flow from there."

The IEP process provides only one place for students to apply self-determination skills. School, community, and home environments provide many additional opportunities for students to practice being self-determined. For example, students can:

- Explore a wide variety of options for employment or leisure activities and with support, learn to identify likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses regarding these options.
- Make choices about classes they will take.
- Decide the way they will demonstrate what they know and can do in classes by choosing from a variety of assignments or testing methods.
- Participate in family decisions about activities or vacation plans.

Q. Does Michigan have any good models for teaching and applying self-determination?

A. Many school districts in Michigan have implemented programs to support student self-determination. For example, Ingham Intermediate School District (ISD) has designed K-12 study groups in several school districts to develop a coordinated continuum of self-determination instruction that fits each grade level. At Copper Country ISD, education and rehabilitation providers have teamed up to develop the Student Training on Mentoring Peers program (S.T.O.M.P.). Saginaw ISD has focused

its self-determination instructional efforts at the middle school level. More information on these programs and others can be found on the Real Life Examples page of the Wayne State University Center on Self-Determination and Transition Web site at www.coe.wayne.edu/selfdetermination.

Q. What can adults do to support student self-determination?

A. The adults in a student's life play an important role in supporting the development and expression of self-determination. Adults can help students increase their ability to be more self-determined by:

- **Modeling self-determination.** Adults should demonstrate the steps toward self-determination. Words are important, but actions speak louder than words! Adults should be clear about the actions they take and why they are taking them. Help students learn to advocate for themselves by modeling self-advocacy. Make the experience more powerful by talking with youth about the choices adults make, including why adults are making the choices they do, how adults are putting their choices into action, and what adults are learning from their efforts toward self-determination.
- **Encouraging exploration and reflection.** Students need to learn about the options available to them in order to make the informed choices that lead to self-determination. By exploring a variety of options, and reflecting on personal reactions to those options, students will learn what they like and don't like and develop a greater understanding of their personal strengths and weaknesses. Exploration involves a certain amount of risk, but this risk

Examples of Curriculum

Examples of widely used self-determination curriculum can be found in the *ChoiceMaker* series (Martin & Marshall, 1995), *Next Step* (Halpern, Herr, Doren & Wolf, 2000), *Steps to Self-Determination* (Field & Hoffman, 1996; Hoffman & Field, in press) and *Take Charge* (Powers, Ellison, Matuszewski & Turner, 1999).

Reviews and further information regarding self-determination instructional materials are available in *A Practical Guide to Teaching Self-Determination* (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer, 1998) published by the Council for Exceptional Children or at the Web site for the Self-Determination Synthesis Project at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, at www.uncc.edu/sdsp.

Sharon Field, Ed.D.
College of Education,
Wayne State University
469 College of Education
Detroit, MI 48202
Phone (313) 577-1638
Fax (313) 577-3606



GATA 05-04

Statement of Compliance with Federal Law

The Michigan Department of Education complies with all Federal laws and regulations prohibiting discrimination and with all requirements and regulations of the U.S. Department of Education.

Compliance with Title IX

What Title IX is: Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is the landmark federal law that bans sex discrimination in schools, whether it is in curricular, extra-curricular or athletic activities.

Title IX states: "No person in the U.S. shall, on the basis of sex be excluded from participation in, or denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any educational program or activity receiving federal aid."

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) is in compliance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, as amended, 20 U.S.C. 1681 et seq. (Title IX), and its implementing regulation, at 34 C.F.R. Part 106, which prohibits discrimination based on sex.

The MDE, as a recipient of federal financial assistance from the United States Department of Education (USDOE), is subject to the provisions of Title IX. MDE does not discriminate based on gender in employment or in any educational program or activity that it operates.

The designated individual at the Michigan Department of Education for inquiries and complaints regarding Title IX is:

Roberta E. Stanley, Director,
Office of Administrative Law and
Federal Relations, Michigan
Department of Education,
Hannah Building, 608 West
Allegan, P.O. Box 30008,
Lansing, Michigan 48909,
Phone: (517) 335-0436, Email:
stanleyr@michigan.gov.



GATA 05-04

can be minimized by encouraging students to explore in small steps and to anticipate and plan for potential consequences. Students also need adults to provide appropriate support.

- **Listening attentively.** One of the most empowering experiences is being listened to and understood. By listening to what students say about their hopes, dreams, preferences, and experiences, adults can help them clarify and have confidence in what they know about themselves and their world.
- **Encouraging others to listen attentively to students.** Adults can also help support the development and expression of self-determination by encouraging all of those who play a role in students' lives to show respect for students' opinions. For example, adults can insist that students be invited to participate in their IEPs and other school conferences. Once there, adults can make sure questions are addressed to them and that their input is taken seriously.

Conclusion

Self-determination can have a positive impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities. Students with disabilities who are self-determined are more likely to engage in goal-directed autonomous behavior that can lead to successful outcomes. Allowing students with disabilities to help choose school activities can enhance their motivation to perform those tasks and goals. By modeling self-determination, encouraging exploration and reflection, listening attentively, and encouraging others to listen, adults help students develop self-determination skills.

References

- Benz, M., Lindstrom, L., and Yovanoff, P. (2000). Improving graduation and employment outcomes of students with disabilities: Predictive factors and student perspectives. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 509-529.
- Bruno, D.G. (2000). The effects of a self-determination intervention on youth explanatory style and depressive features. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.
- Field, S., & Hoffman, A. (1996). *Steps to self-determination*. Austin, TX: ProEd.
- Field, S, Martin, J., Miller, R., Ward, M. & Wehmeyer, M. (1998). *A practical guide to teaching self-determination*. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.
- Halpern, A. S., Herr, C. M., Doren, B., & Wolf, N.K. (2000). *Next S.T.E.P.: student transition and educational planning*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.
- Hoffman, A. & Field, S. (in press). *Steps to self-determination (2nd edition)*. Austin, TX: ProEd.
- Houchins, D.E. (1998). The self-determination of youth with and without disabilities who have been adjudicated. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.
- Kovacs, M. (1985). The Children's Depression Inventory (CDI). *Psychopharmacology Bulletin*, 21, 995-1024.
- Martin, J. E., & Marshall, L. H. (1995). ChoiceMaker: A comprehensive self-determination transition program. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 30, 147 - 156.
- Powers, L.E., Ellison, R., Matuszewski, J., Turner, A. (1999). *Take charge for the future*. Portland, OR: Oregon Health Sciences University.
- Realon, R. E., Favell, J. E., & Lowerre, A. (1990). The effects of making choices on engagement levels with persons who are profoundly mentally handicapped. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation*, 25, 248-254.
- Sarver, M.D. (2000). A study of the relationship between personal and environmental / factors bearing on self-determination and the academic success of university students with learning disabilities. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Florida, Gainesville.
- Schunk, D. H. (1985). Participation in goal setting: Effects on self-efficacy and skills on learning disabled children. *The Journal of Special Education*, 19, 307-316.
- Sowers, J., & Powers, L. (1995). Enhancing the participation and independence of students with severe physical and multiple disabilities in performing community activities. *Mental Retardation*, 33, 209 - 220.
- Van Reusen, A. K., & Bos, C. S. (1994). Facilitating student participation in individualized education programs through motivation strategy instruction. *Exceptional Children*, 60, 466-475.
- Wehmeyer, M.L., & Palmer, S.B. (2003). Adult outcomes for students with cognitive disabilities three-years after high school: The impact of self-determination.
- Wehmeyer, M. L. & Schwartz, M. (1997). Self-determination and positive adult outcomes: A follow-up study of youth with mental retardation or learning disabilities.





State Board of Education

Kathleen N. Straus, *President*
John C. Austin, *Vice President*
Carolyn L. Curtin, *Secretary*
Marianne Yared McGuire,
Treasurer
Nancy Danhof, *NASBE Delegate*
Elizabeth W. Bauer
Reginald M. Turner
Eileen Lappin Weiser

Ex-Officio

Jennifer M. Granholm,
Governor
Michael P. Flanagan,
*Superintendent of
Public Instruction*

FOCUS on Results is produced and distributed through an IDEA Mandated Activities Project for an Education Information Network, known as the Center for Educational Networking, awarded by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to the Eaton Intermediate School District (ISD). The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Michigan Department of Education, the Michigan State Board of Education, the U.S. Department of Education, or Eaton ISD and no endorsement is inferred. This document is in the public domain and may be copied for further distribution when proper credit is given. For more information or inquiries about this project, contact the Michigan Department of Education, P.O. Box 30008, Lansing, MI 48909.

This document was printed 25,000 times at a per piece cost of .08 cents

Download copies of *FOCUS on Results* at www.cenmi.org/Products.asp



GATA 05-04

RESOURCES

Self-Determination Web Sites & Downloads

**Real Life Examples page of the Center on Self-Determination and Transition,
Wayne State University**
www.coe.wayne.edu/selfdetermination

Center for Self-Determination
www.self-determination.com

**Self-Determination Synthesis Project,
University of North Carolina-Charlotte**
www.uncc.edu/sdsp

**Self-Determination for Middle and High School Students,
National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
Institute on Community Integration
University of Minnesota**
www.ncset.org/topics/sdmhs/

**Self-Determination for Postsecondary Students
National Center on Secondary Education and Transition
Institute on Community Integration
University of Minnesota**
www.ncset.org/topics/sdpse

Michigan Special Education Web Sites

Center for Educational Networking (CEN)
www.cenmi.org

**Michigan Department of Education (MDE)
Office of Special Education/Early Intervention Services (OSE/EIS)**
www.michigan.gov/ose-eis