

# Virginia's self-determination project: Assisting students with disabilities to become college and career ready

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**Abstract.** The Virginia Department of Education's I'm Determined project is a statewide initiative designed to engage students with disabilities as early as elementary school to learn and demonstrate self-determined skills. This article will focus on information and suggested strategies to use with middle and high school students to assist in their transitions to become college and career ready.

**Keywords:** Self-determination, students with disabilities, transition, postsecondary education

## 1. Introduction

The National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) conducted a systematic correlational literature review (Test et al., 2009) and identified self-determination as one of 16 evidence based predictors of post school success for students with disabilities (CEC-DCDT, 2013). Research results indicate that students who are able to demonstrate high levels of self-determination are able to reach better post school outcomes in employment and education (CEC-DCDT, 2013). Self-determination is a critical component of the transition process since students with disabilities' postschool outcomes in the areas of employment and postsecondary education are significantly lower when compared to their peers without disabilities (Hanley-Maxwell, 2012; Wehman, 2013).

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What is self-determination? It is a broad term referring to behavior that comes from a combination of several sub-skills, including decision-making, problem-solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation. We can observe students using the component skills that make up self-determined behavior, and they are teachable (Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Self-determined behavior refers to volitional actions that enable one to act as the primary causal agent in one's life and to maintain or improve one's quality of life (Wehmeyer, 2006). Field and Hoffman have defined it as "the ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself" (Field & Hoffman, 1994).

Adults with disabilities, their advocates and policymakers have supported the development of self-determination skills in students with disabilities (Angell, Stoner, & Fulk, 2010; Test et al., 2004). The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 (IDEA),

amended in 1997 and 2004, requires student involvement in the Individualized Education Program (IEP). Planning must take into account the student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs. To accomplish this, students must have a voice and direct involvement in the IEP process. Additionally, amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 require that individuals with disabilities be involved in the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) (Angell et al., 2010). Including students in planning and decision-making engages them and motivates them to work toward the goals they set.

Before IDEA, the Rehabilitation Act and its amendments (Ryan & Deci, 2002) looked closely at the relationship between self-determined behaviors and motivation. Self-determined behavior is a model of intrinsic motivation; there is a push and pull relationship between the two (Ryan & Deci, 2002). A need for autonomy and locus of control pushes self-determined behavior. When the person behaving in a self-determined manner feels competent and empowered, the behavior is rewarded. Feelings of control and competence increase intrinsic motivation. When the self-determined behaviors are also connected to another person, such as a teacher supporting a student's autonomy, the behaviors are strengthened (Reeve, 2002).

Self-determination promotes student empowerment. When students feel empowered, their self-esteem and confidence in their abilities grow (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). One middle school teacher describes the process as follows: "If students learn these skills early they are going to be adults who make a difference, contribute to their communities, their families, and then pass that on . . ." "Young people build upon an early foundation laid in early childhood and pass through developmental stages that are interactively shaped by psychosocial, biological, and contextual factors" (Whitney-Thomas & Maloney, 2001). Acquisition of self-determination skills begins early, as parents, teachers and peers model and/or teach skills, then provide ample opportunities to practice using the skills (Mithaug, 1996). These elements are viewed as essential for the promotion of self-determination skills in school and the community (CEC-DCDT, 2013).

The national initiative to ensure that young people become college and career ready, aims to prepare youth for life in a global economy. It is imperative that students with disabilities not be left behind or viewed as less capable than other youth. The readiness skills required for both college and careers go beyond core

academics (Guidry, 2012). Youth must be able to apply critical thinking and problem solving skills in the workplace, college classrooms, training programs and the community. They must also possess self-knowledge, self-esteem and leadership skills, as well as the ability to set and attain goals (Darch, 2012). The behavioral expectations for readiness are complementary to self-determined behaviors, and these skills are applicable in multiple settings. Self-knowledge and self-efficacy both depend on how youth view themselves in the present, which influences how they will see themselves in the future (Savitz-Romer & Bouffard, 2012).

This article describes a statewide project, I'm Determined, to assist students with disabilities in middle and high school to obtain the skills necessary to become college and career ready. The focus of the project is implementing and integrating the components of self-determination both in the school and community. The components of the I'm Determined project includes the self-determination skills of choice making, decision making, problem solving, goal setting, leadership, self-advocacy, and self-awareness. Information and strategies on how these skills are incorporated into the daily lives of students with disabilities as they prepare for adulthood are discussed.

## 2. Background of project

The I'm Determined Project focuses on providing direct instruction, models, and opportunities to practice skills associated with self-determined behavior beginning at the elementary level and continuing throughout a student's educational career. In 2004, the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) was asked to develop self-advocacy materials for high school students with disabilities as a result of recommendations provided by the Community Integration Advisory Commission to the Governor. With the collaborative efforts of a team from the VDOE's Training and Technical Assistance Centers, university personnel, and several general and special education teachers, the I'm Determined Project was started. The resources developed are often used in tandem with other school initiatives, and schools have created classes, clubs, leadership training, and mentoring as a result of the project. Though it was created for use with students with disabilities, I'm Determined is not viewed as something that only benefits students with IEPs; developing self-determination skills is desirable for all students. In several schools, teaching self-determination is embraced school wide.

### 3. Intervention strategies

Five primary intervention strategies were developed as part of the project that assist students to cultivate needed self-determined behaviors and promote self-confidence: One-Pager, Good Day Plan, Goal Setting and Attainment, Student-led IEPs and Student-led Conferences, and Lesson Plans based on the core components of self-determination. All intervention strategies discussed can be found on the I'm Determined website: [www.imdetermined.org](http://www.imdetermined.org).

#### 3.1. One-Pager

The One-Pager is a tool to improve communication between the student with a disability and his/her special education and general education teachers. There are four categories on the One-Pager template: Strengths, Preferences, Interests, and Needs (SPIN). The student completes the One-Pager template by identifying personal attributes under each category. The student may complete the template with the help of a teacher, parent, counselor, or mentor. The student then has the option to explain the One-Pager using a Flip Video or similar video recorder. This video clip is added to the One-Pager or shared in other ways. Examples of how the One-Pager is used include:

- One-Pagers sent by students receiving special education services to general education teachers at the beginning of school year to provide further information about them.
- The One-Pager document serves as a guide for the student who wants to participate in his or her IEP.
- An entire 9th grade class creates a One-Pager, and the school posts the One-Pagers on the network for all teachers to access.
- An entire middle school faculty and administration create One-Pagers and post them on the school website for parents and students to view.

#### 3.2. Good Day Plan

A second strategy is the Good Day Plan, which is used to help students with disabilities identify what factors play a role in whether or not they have a good day. The student uses the template to respond to the following four questions: 1) What happens on a good day? 2) Does it happen now? 3) What needs to happen to make it a good day? 4) Who can help me? The student works with a teacher, parent, counselor or men-

tor to identify these factors. Samples of the Good Day Plan and video clips of students and teachers working together to complete the template are located on the website.

#### 3.3. Goal setting and attainment

The Goal Setting graphic organizer is a visual representation of the steps needed to accomplish the goal. The goal goes in the center of the sun. Each sunray is a reason why the student wants to achieve the goal. The two boxes under the sun are steps the student needs to take in order to achieve the goal. In both the One-Pager and the Good Day Plan, the adult ally (teacher, counselor) acts as a facilitator rather than leading the activities.

#### 3.4. Student-led IEPs/student-led conferences

The IEP is a legal document intended to assist students with disabilities in reaching their goals. The IEP is developed by a student with a disability, teachers, administrators, parents and other team members. All students, regardless of age or disability, can be involved in the development of their own IEP. Students who participate in their own IEP meetings often know more about their disability, rights, goals and accommodations. Through this participation, students have the opportunity to practice many skills that will help facilitate their independence, their ability to overcome obstacles, and their ability to lead more self-determined lives.

The first documentary film, *I'm Determined: Student Involvement in the IEP*, allows viewers to join secondary students, teachers and parents as they discuss the innovative and student-centered philosophy of the Self-Determination Project. The second documentary film, *It's all about you! Get to know your IEP*, is a student-to-student program showcasing the benefits of understanding the components of the IEP and the importance of goal setting. Secondary students use their own words to relate personal experiences with IEP development and participation.

Student-led conferences take the concept of student-led IEPs and apply it to the general education setting. Students with disabilities lead the traditional parent-teacher conference. It is used as a time to both celebrate students and the work they have accomplished, and to address any academic or behavioral issues with all the key players at the table. Participation from families has increased greatly with this student-centered approach.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 DOB: \_\_\_\_\_



My Strengths

- What am I good at?
  - Math
  - Listening
  - Soccer

My Preferences

- Where do I want to live?
- Where do I want to work?
- What do I want to do with my free time?
- Other adult choices?

My Interests

- What am I curious about?
- What do I enjoy doing?
  - Music, cooking, friends
  - Farming, shopping

My Needs

- What/Who do I need to succeed?
- Accommodations?
  - Books on tape
  - Planner
  - Copies of notes

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Fig. 1. One-Pager guide.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 DOB: \_\_\_\_\_



My Strengths

- I can see the big picture
- Money Management
- Good listener

My Preferences

- I learn best by listening & seeing, then doing
- I like to move around a lot
- I want to retire on the water and spend my days fishing

My Interests

- Hunting and fishing
- My girls & wife
- My dog

My Needs

- Notes ahead of time
- Sitting near the front of the room
- Visual and auditory directions



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Fig. 2. One-Pager example.

Anecdotal data from various schools report parent participation rates in the high 90 percent range.

### 3.5. Lesson plans (Life Lines)

Young people with disabilities also learn about self-determination when the skills are embedded in the

teaching of content. Lesson plans, called Life Lines, have been developed for the I'm Determined Project. These plans were developed by general and special educators and are aligned with the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL). The plans embed self-determined skills into content at all grade levels. Additional lesson

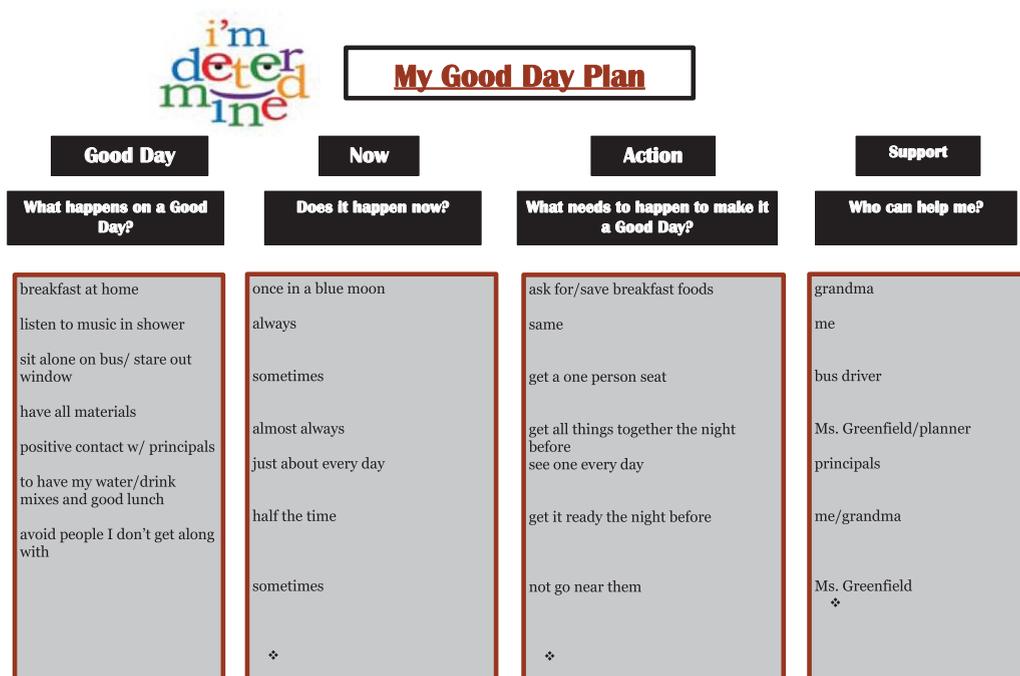


Fig. 3. Good Day Plan example.

plans and activities were developed for the Virginia Self Advocacy website to reinforce diversity and bring disability awareness to more individuals (Virginia Department of Education Self-Determination Project, 2014; Virginia Self Advocacy, 2012).

#### 4. Assessment tools

##### 4.1. Self-determination needs assessment

The Needs Assessment data collection tool is designed to allow educators to identify their top priorities for making positive changes that will result in increased self-determination skills for students with disabilities. This tool can be used to provide individual summaries of educators' perceptions and practices, as well as an overall school view of practices and beliefs.

It is recommended that school personnel first complete the tool individually. It is beneficial to get various perspectives from special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators. They are asked to rate their perceived ranking for each statement and to provide evidence that supports their ranking. Individual educators can use this information to plan for changes within their own classrooms. Additionally, combined and compiled results from all of the indi-

vidual assessments can be used to lead discussions and action plans for schools or districts. Needs Assessments should be re-administered every 12 to 15 months to assess progress and to determine additional goals.

##### 4.2. Self-determination checklists

The Self-Determination Checklists are tools designed to provide information about individual students. In order to obtain and compare information from various stakeholders, a separate checklist is provided for students with disabilities, parents and educators. If schools choose to combine and compile the information from individual checklists, a broader picture of current beliefs and practices can be obtained from these assessments. Self-Determination Checklists can be used as informal transition assessments for individual students.

##### 4.3. Student Rubric for IEP involvement

The Student Rubric for IEP Involvement is designed to assist special education teachers in determining an entry point for student participation in the IEP process. Entry points are based on student strengths, rather than age or disability. Educators should:

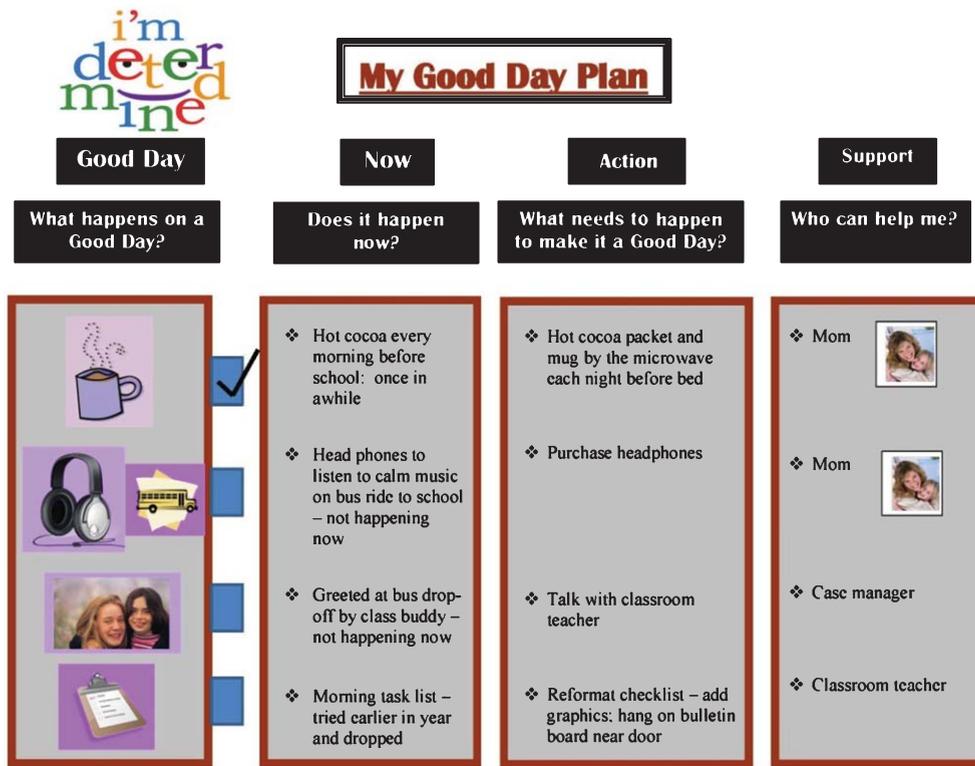


Fig. 4. Good Day Plan with pictures.

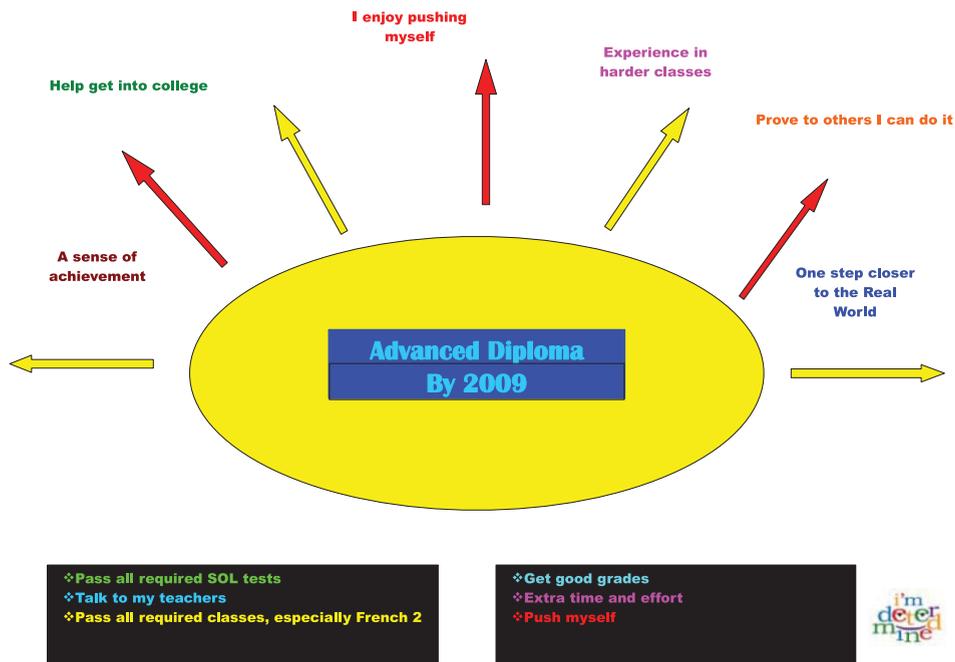


Fig. 5. Goal-setting example.

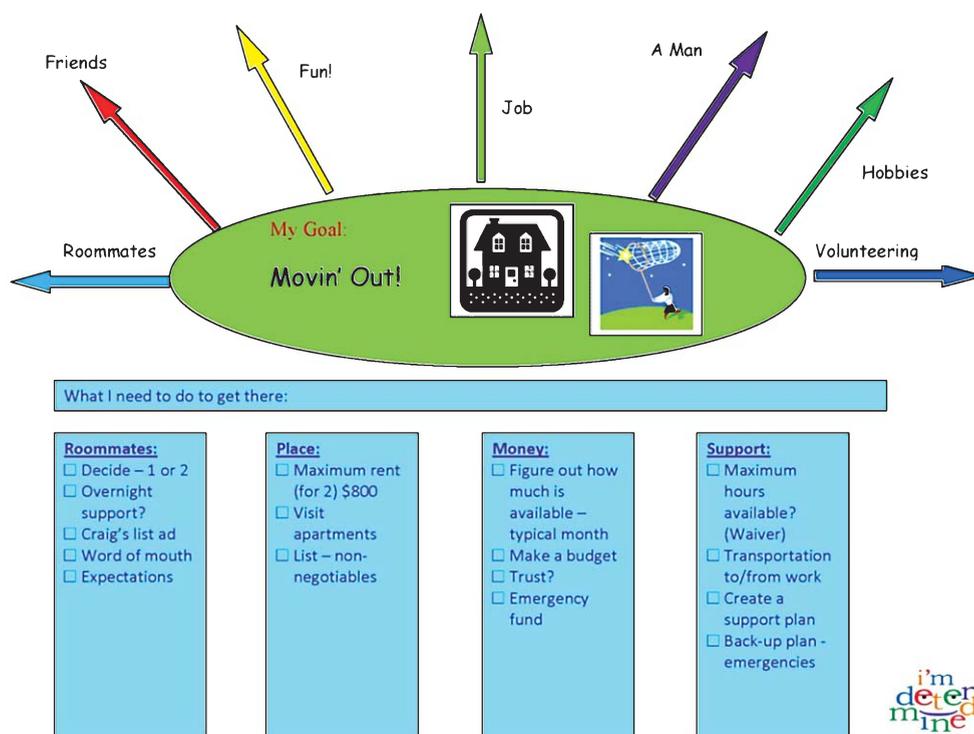


Fig. 6. Goal setting with pictures.

- Have individual students complete the form based on their perceived knowledge/skills in each of the categories.
- Discuss with each student his or her results, and make plans and decisions about increasing their participation in the IEP process.
- Ensure that general and special education teachers, as well as family members, provide direct instruction, models and opportunities to practice these skills before students can be expected to meaningfully increase their participation. The Student Rubric for IEP Involvement should be re-administered every 12 to 15 months to assess progress and to determine additional goals.

#### 4.4. IEP exit assessment

The IEP Exit Assessment is designed for use at the conclusion of the actual IEP meeting. Students, teachers and parents should individually complete their own checklist and then discuss if desired. Students, teachers and parents should use data from these assessments to target areas of need for the next IEP meeting, and evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts to increase student participation in the IEP process.

## 5. Conclusion

The accessibility of the I'm Determined materials and resources make them very user friendly. All templates are downloadable and can be customized to fit the individual student. Everything is taught and reinforced through short video clips. The information and resources offer strategies to ensure students with disabilities gain knowledge about self-determination and have opportunities to practice these skills incorporated into their daily lives.

Outcomes of the I'm Determined Project have shown increased confidence, self-acceptance, advocacy, and leadership skills in students with disabilities, in addition to improvements in communication (Virginia Department of Education Self-Determination Project, 2014). The self-determined skills mentioned most often in an evaluation of the project were: goal-setting, self-awareness/self-knowledge, self-advocacy, choice-making, self-acceptance, and problem-solving. Additionally, it was noted that encouraging student participation in the IEP, goal-setting, the One-Pager, and the Good Day Plan was an effective strategy (Virginia Department of Education Self-Determination Project, 2014).

Students and their success are at the center of the I'm Determined Project. It is clear that students with self-confidence and high levels of motivation are more likely to persist and succeed (Hinton, 2012). Furthermore, the principles and strategies incorporated into the project can transcend beyond formal education, with lasting benefits persisting throughout an individual's life.

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