

"What's Good Is Good"

By Diane Loomis, GMU T/TAC

"... A Philosophy of Teaching" that Extends to General Education

At school sites active with the *I'm Determined* Project for several years, Self-Determination is becoming an ingrained educational philosophy. Kendal Swartzentruber, a special educator at Montevideo Middle School in Rockingham County, thinks that "Self-Determination has almost become a philosophy of teaching in the way that we ask questions and the way that we open up kids being able to say what they want and what they need and having their own voice."

In addition to the benefits to special education students, the pluses to general education students and teachers have not been overlooked. At Christiansburg High School in Montgomery County, special educators starting the project invited their general education colleagues to join. According to special educator Gayle Schlosser, the general educators asked, "Why are you doing it for special ed students? Why can't we do it for everyone? ...They felt like so many students in high school were really unfocused...they were just going through the paces of high school...So, we thought...we can expand this...and instead of just encouraging special ed students, we can talk about goal setting (for all students). We gave them all copies of the Self-Determination posters...The posters were in general ed classes and just put all over the building."

The *I'm Determined* project posters prompted general education teachers at Franklin County High School to ask special education teacher, Janet Osborne, to promote disability awareness at her school. "The choir teacher wanted me to give a presentation on people...(with) musical ability, as well as disability ...The general ed kids are becoming interested." Likewise, a physical education teacher at the high school, who is a member of the *I'm*

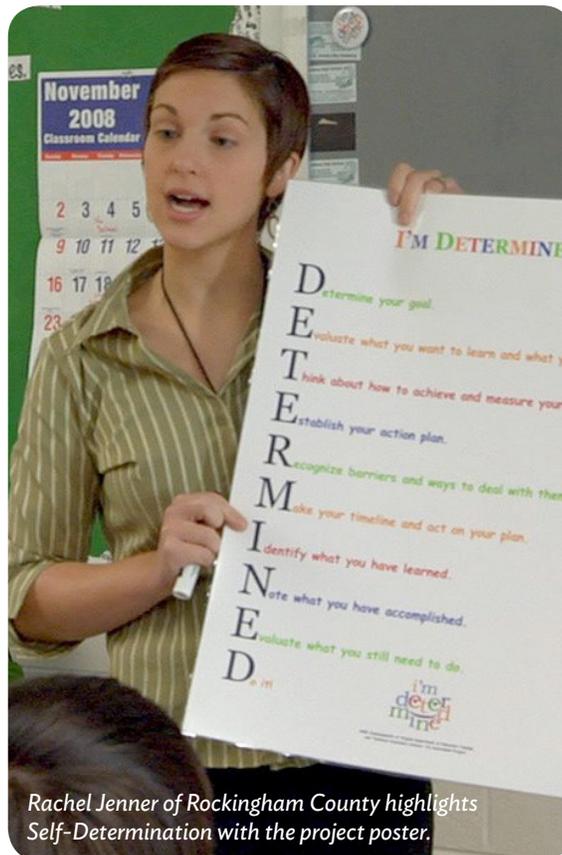
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Determined team, has drawn from self-determination lesson plans. The lessons teach students how to recognize their strengths, how to speak up for themselves, how to be polite, and how to treat others. Students in English classes at the high school have read novels with self-determination themes and teachers have adapted lessons developed through the *I'm Determined* project for use in the English curriculum. Osborne reflects, "For the most part, our administrators back us and are understanding how this information can be used in the different curricula without compromising preparation for SOLs." Franklin County High School will offer a new course on Self-Determination skills, which will be open to all students at the high school. Osborne continues, "I feel that everybody has strengths and weaknesses. Some are struggling, they may not have a whole lot of guidance, and their social skills aren't very strong, yet they don't have what we would classify a disability."

Susan Spaulding, Language Arts Department Chair at Bailey Bridge Middle School in Chesterfield County, calls self-determination a metacognitive tool: "I don't believe that self-determination... is a separate entity...It's a metacognitive tool as students do what they do in English, in science, in social studies, in life."

When this general education teacher learned of the *I'm Determined* project, she thought, "What's good is good; it doesn't matter if they're special ed or not." So now, in her 7th grade English classes, she employs both the philosophy of self-determination, as well as tools developed through the project. Her general education students assemble portfolios from all

their subjects and invite their parents to student-led conferences. They have created *Good Day Plans*, and then used personal details for content as they learned to write expository essays. Her students watched *Gifted*



Rachel Jenner of Rockingham County highlights Self-Determination with the project poster.

Hands: The Story of Ben Carson and “talked about what a self-determined person he was and the obstacles he overcame...And what’s amazing is when we discover it in literature or we discover it in writing and they say, ‘Oh, Mrs. Spaulding, this is just like our Self-Determination’ or ‘This is just like a Good Day’...(or) ‘Boy, that’s not a Good Day for him.’ ...It’s wonderful when the kids make the connection ... it’s becoming a way of life for them.

... I don’t think they feel in control of much of anything of their lives before they get their license...but we talk about how they are in control of the choices that they make, that every choice has a consequence and sometimes it’s a good consequence.” Spaulding cautions students against developing feelings of entitlement, but instead advocates for a sense of accountability. “(Self-Determination) has worked really, really well here with me.”

Teachers at some schools have expressed reluctance to join the *I’m Determined* Project on the assumption that it would mean more work on top of an already full curriculum. But Spaulding doesn’t regard the *I’m Determined*



content as yet another thing to do: “It wasn’t something additional on our plate. It was how we could get them to eat what was on their plate.”

Goal-Setting Glamour

A few schools are using Self-Determination tools to get a jump on newly required academic and career plans for all middle and high school students. Mary Jane King of Christiansburg Middle School in Montgomery County has been approached by a guidance counselor at her school about how she has accomplished this for students with disabilities. King says the counselor is aware that the *I’m Determined* project may have developed practices that will be useful for the development of academic and career plans for all students.

Montevideo Middle School has begun the process of developing academic and career plans for all its students by using tools from the *I’m Determined* project. Staff made goal cards with the *I’m Determined* logo. They presented a goal-setting lesson, discussed goals of students and teachers, and then had seventh graders complete goal cards on iPads.

At Montevideo, staff took the *I’m Determined* tools and made them their own by putting the Mustang school logo on the *Good Day Plan* template and tweaking the template to increase its appeal to seventh graders. They did the same for the *One- Pager*, making it into what they saw as a more fun version of the standard template. They plan to use the new version for the students in their school, placing videos in the center. Staff say that the students enjoy the goal-setting activities so much that they ask to meet to discuss it more frequently than the planned once-a-month meetings.

Further glamorizing the activity of goal-setting, Montevideo



Amber Flores in Chesterfield County shows how goal-setting can be exciting.

invited a sports hero to appear on their morning news to discuss how he set and achieved his goals. The quarterback at James Madison University, fresh from victory over a rival school, was a very big hit among the middle school students.

Kasey Shane, Principal of O. B. Gates Elementary School in Chesterfield County, states that in formulating the school’s own goals for the next three years through their strategic management plan, there has been discussion of expanding use of the *I’m Determined* tools to the general education population. The *One-Pagers* and the student-led conferences are practices under particular consideration for all students.

Braids are Chic

“Braiding” initiatives together where there is conceptual overlap may help when schools adopt several promising initiatives. Dr. Michael Gill, Principal of Bailey Bridge Middle School in Chesterfield County, says of *I’m Determined* and *Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports*, “...I do think (PBIS) marries very well with...Self-Determination because it speaks to consistency and speaks to students being accountable for their own actions...We absolutely have seen positive progress and I will tell you that our failure rate...may have been under one percent. So is this the only thing contributing to that? No, I don’t think it is, but I certainly do believe that it’s a factor.”

The PBIS team at Turner Ashby High School in Rockingham County uses the *One- Pager* for new students entering the school. The student makes a *One- Pager*

during that first week, and it gets sent to all the new student's teachers. Bailey Bridge Middle School has used the *Good Day Plan* and goal-setting as school-wide resources for their *PBIS* program.

Gill continues, "I think sometimes...there's the feeling of 'Oh, it's just one more thing, oh, it's just one more thing.' But if you can show that there is an interrelation, that's what we try to do."



Girls, Brains, and Wednesday Warriors

The *I'm Determined* project has inspired new organizations and creative new projects and activities that promote self-determination for all students.

At Burnt Chimney Elementary School in Franklin County, special educator Julie Realmuto is enthusiastic about *Girls OnThe Go*, an afterschool program that grew out of the *I'm Determined* project. Girls who are identified as at risk for bullying or poor decision-making later in middle school are taught how to become more positively self-determined.

Susan Spaulding has started *Wednesday Warriors* at Bailey Bridge Middle School. The Warriors meet every Wednesday morning to fight the "battle of the binder." Students bring in everything from their lockers, including all of their binders. The teachers provide resources to help students organize. The students make friends, sometimes they bring doughnuts, and they have fun. Spaulding recalls, "I had one boy who came every Wednesday...The next year when he moved to the 8th grade, he said, 'I still need to do this. I still need to be self-determined.'"

Dr. Liliane Burns, psychologist at O.B. Gates Elementary School, draws from the *I'm Determined* tools and its philosophy of empowerment when she explains test scores to her young charges. Rather than point to deficits, she emphasizes strengths that emerge from testing. Students leave sessions with her with greater self-awareness about how they can use their unique abilities to grow as self-determined young people. "I can tell you that every child walks away from my testing requesting to come back because...they feel good about it...Every child who walks into my room is proved smart. Every child has an ability to show."

Burns and Assistant Principal Giuliana Brink have created *Brain Week* at Gates for all students. Burns explains, "Brain Week is about...teaching kids the basic neurology of learning...and what you can do to grow new branches on

your nerves...You can shape your brain to be the way you want it to be... And it's not just a special education kind of intervention; it's an intervention for all students. But what's nice is that the kids who are in special education become the ambassadors. They become the ones (who) specifically have most information about the brain."



The ideas of self-determination may even find their way outside of schools. Franklin County Special Education Director, Gwen Adkins, remembers a mother whose son graduated from high school where self-determination was taught. He blossomed in high school and did so well at college that the mother asked Adkins for information about the *I'm Determined* project. The mother felt it could be useful in the community, in particular with the young people at her church.

In the words of Gates Elementary general educator, Samantha McMillian, "... I would love to see...more training with general ed teachers. I think that's probably where we're very much lacking. This works and it works both for the general ed teacher and for the special ed teacher. It works for both sets of students. But I think that because of...SOLs and the various demands from the county ... you're hesitant to try something like that in your room...I would love to see more videotaping of classrooms...where children are able to help set their own goals, where they are working with their peers in general ed classrooms. I think it's important that the teachers who are coming out of college now have that mindset ...It needs to be the direction in which we're going."



Micki Paulson builds Self-Determination skills early with her Rockingham County students.

(The *I'm Determined* project is collecting data on the effect of the project in schools where it is being adopted. At this writing, researchers have held interviews throughout the state with 35 professionals affiliated with the project. The project would like to thank the schools and professionals cited above for their willingness to be a part of this ongoing data collection.)