

A Virginia State-Directed Project

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## Summary of Interview Data 2010-2011

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**Purpose**

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The Virginia Department of Education's *I'm Determined* project is a state-directed project, the purpose of which is to increase self-determination skills of students with disabilities. The project is important for students with disabilities because those with higher levels of self-determination are more likely to experience greater postsecondary success in adult lives. (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997,1998; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Sowers & Powers, 1995).

Self-determination skills include such competencies as self-knowledge, self-advocacy, goal-setting, decision-making and problem-solving. The project uses certain interventions to promote greater self-determination among students with disabilities. Among them are student participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, goal-setting, direct instruction to develop self-determination skills, Good Day Plans (Appendix A) that make explicit what a student needs for success day-to-day, and One-Pagers (Appendix B) for succinct communication about what is important about oneself.

In the 2010-2011 school year, there were 21 Virginia school divisions actively participating in the Virginia state-directed *I'm Determined* project. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) appoints a statewide coordinator, and staff from its Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T/TACs) provide technical assistance to *I'm Determined* programs throughout the state. VDOE funds a networking conference and a website and provides funds for *I'm Determined* expenses at participating schools.

While those involved enthusiastically report on changes in students and in schools as a result of participating in the *I'm Determined* project, little data has been collected to confirm the project's impact. The following summary represents an attempt to understand how the project has developed and to codify accomplishments at schools that have adopted *I'm Determined*.

**Formative Evaluation Questions**

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In January 2010, VDOE leadership expressed interest in knowing answers to the following questions:

1. How has the project affected students?
2. How has the project affected teachers?
3. What was successful?
4. What did the programs do? How did they do it?

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5. Did relationships change? Did they improve?
6. How much time at schools has been devoted to self-determination?
7. Are students gaining new skills? How do we know?
8. Are students gaining the core competencies of self-determination as outlined by the project?
9. Do skills that students develop as a result of the program transfer to other situations?
10. How do teachers develop new skills related to self-determination for students? Parents?

## Participants

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During the 2010-2011 school year, a team of evaluators set out to answer these and related questions. Members of the team interviewed 35 teachers, school administrators, and parents, representing nine of the most developed *I'm Determined* program sites in Virginia. School division leaders familiar with the programs recommended the school sites at which participants were interviewed. Interview participants represented a variety of roles and levels, including special education teachers, general education teachers, administrators, a counselor, and a psychologist. They represented school levels Pre-K through 12.

<b>Participants in Study (Chesterfield, Franklin, Montgomery, Rockingham Counties)</b>						
	<b>SE Teacher</b>	<b>GE Teacher</b>	<b>Administrator</b>	<b>Parent</b>	<b>Counselor</b>	<b>Psychologist</b>
<b>Pre K</b>	5					
<b>Elementary</b>	6	2	3	2		1
<b>Middle School</b>	4	2	2		1	
<b>High School</b>	4		1	1		
<b>Total</b>	19	4	6	3	1	1

## Procedure

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The 35 participants were interviewed on their perceptions of the impact of the *I'm Determined* program at their school sites. Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and the interview data was organized and coded using the qualitative research software program, NVivo 9. The data-gathering effort received research approval from the Human Subjects Review Board at George Mason University and followed all appropriate research guidelines.

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**What is the Educational Philosophy of the *I'm Determined* Project?**

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The *I'm Determined* project promotes a philosophy of empowerment for students with disabilities. Teachers, administrators, students, and parents at program sites adopt this philosophy with conviction. All thirty-five participants at all nine sites were aware of the philosophy of self-determination for students with disabilities and repeatedly affirmed its power to change students' lives for the better.

Self-determination has almost become a philosophy of teaching in the way that we ask questions and the way that we open up kids to being able to say what they want and what they need, and having their own voice.... I think it's the essence of what education is supposed to be. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

... If they learn these self-determination strategies early and they learn this confidence early, then they are going to be adults who can make a difference, who can contribute to their communities, contribute to their families and then pass that on. (Middle School General Education Teacher)

**What Do the *I'm Determined* Programs Do and How Do They Do It?**

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Participating sites adapt the philosophy of self-determination to fit their particular schools. The programs look different at each site. However, all of the schools from which interviews were taken adopt student participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, beginning as early as elementary school. Traditionally, school personnel and parents meet independently of students to write IEPs. The *I'm Determined* project brings students to the forefront and encourages them to participate in or lead this planning conference that directly affects them. More than half of these *I'm Determined* school sites use the tool of the One-Pager. More than half teach goal-setting. About a third of the participants create Good Day Plans with students. Other activities include before- or after- school student clubs to promote the principles of self-determination; direct instruction in lessons to develop self-determination capabilities; family events; use of literature; a separate credit course on self-determination; relationship building activities; disability awareness activities for the general education population; a field trip; Youth Summit; a career fair; and academic and career plans for all students within a grade.

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What the statewide *I'm Determined* project has not done is provide a formula for how to increase self-determination of students with disabilities. Nor has it imposed a timetable for accomplishment. It has provided tools to assist, professional development, a website, funding, and the opportunity for participating schools to network. It has extended maximum creativity and flexibility to sites, allowing for work within existing school constraints.

Participants at a majority of the sites reported getting started by attending either county, statewide, or T/TAC training events or conferences, where they learned the basics of the *I'm Determined* project. Several heard about the project through colleagues who were special education teachers or administrators. Certain schools among the first to participate were invited into the program. Once exposed to the concepts of self-determination, participants took the ideas and began implementing the principles in schools without extensive continued support. Student participation in IEP meetings was most often the first intervention implemented.

### **How has the *I'm Determined* Project Affected Students?**

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Participants in this data-gathering study discussed the impact of the *I'm Determined* Project on their students with disabilities. The student gains they saw are summarized as follows:

#### *Impact on Students with Disabilities*

##### **1. Increased Confidence**

Increased confidence among students with disabilities was noted at more than three-quarters of the sites.

These students showed that they have the capabilities, and the process of the self-determination activities and lessons allowed them to be advocates for themselves. And in the process of doing that, they gained confidence. You could see the confidence building in these students. And students whom you knew previously [who] may have been ones that struggled in school, didn't like school, found that they were able to succeed, and not just at a minimal level, but succeed with confidence. And so, I've been nothing but impressed. (Middle School Principal)

Many of them talked about regional conferences that they had attended and statewide conferences that they had attended...It was the overall feeling of

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camaraderie that they got out of it. I got the sense that when they returned, although they had already built confidence going in, since they had been selected to go,...they had a feeling of self-worth, pride, and they were eager to get back to school and... show their stuff, so to speak. (Middle School Principal)

### **2. Goal-Setting**

More than half of the projects cited goal-setting as a skill students with disabilities develop as a result of the *I'm Determined* program.

One kid... wanted to read so badly... and last year he came in and was still not really reading. But he persisted, "I really want to improve on my reading." So... we kept on... even when he said he didn't like stuff... I just remember him doing his IEP at the end of the year, and reading it all through, reading the whole thing word for word. So I just think when you make it known that this is something you want to get better on, and you let other people know that, that just makes you work all the harder. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

### **3. Self-Advocacy and Self-Acceptance**

Participants from many sites specifically mentioned increased self-advocacy skills. Some schools report huge gains in self-advocacy skills among students with disabilities.

#### *Self-Advocacy*

I can think of probably 200 instances in the last couple of years because kids... know what they're entitled to and they know how to do it. (High School Special Education Teacher)

Self-advocacy has gotten awesome. (High School Special Education Teacher)

The kids will speak up now. Some days at school if he's getting stressed, he'll go to the guidance office. If he needs to take a break from that class, he'll get a pass from the teacher, flash his card to let them know that he's going to see the guidance counselor and that he'll be back in a little bit. Realizing that he has the power to say, "I need to take a break," he can do something about it, versus just sitting there. Before he wouldn't do that. His grades are phenomenal. He's in all the general education classes now, and he is the one who has worked hard to get there. (Parent of High School Student with a Disability)

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*Self-Acceptance*

It was power for them to feel comfortable, to know that lots of people deal with the same kind of things, that they're not going to outgrow it [a disability], but there are wonderful ways to work around it and be successful with it... We felt like it demystified things; it made it safe for them to ask... We felt [with] their peers, they've been so safe talking about those kinds of things. (High School Special Education Teacher)

"It's o.k." Teachers at two sites, as well as one parent, used the words "It's o.k." to express that students have gained a large measure of self-acceptance.

I think the *I'm Determined* program across the board gives kids a feeling of ownership and a feeling of "It's ok" - that's the best way I can put it- "It's ok that I have some struggles" and "It's ok; I can get through those. I can figure out a way around it." It gives them that sense of empowerment. (Elementary School Special Education Teacher)

**4. Technology Skills**

Students (and teachers) use technology to their increasing advantage as a result of the *I'm Determined* project. Students give PowerPoint presentations in IEP meetings and use Smart Boards. One group of high school students made a comprehensive video of everything they had learned about self-determination. Their superintendent viewed the video with approval. One middle school administration promoted goal-setting through morning television segments and access to iPads for goal-setting for all seventh grade students.

We went in the class and said, "You want to be part of a project where we're gonna use this really cool new technology?" (Middle School Administrator)

**5. Preparation for Life**

A significant number of those interviewed indicate that the self-determination skills students develop are, in a way, preparation for life. Choice-making, goal-setting, self-advocacy, public speaking and leading meetings, knowing what one is good at and what one is not—all these are life skills they believe should repay students many times over.

**6. Control**

Participants note a greater sense of control among students involved in *I'm Determined*.

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At one middle school, the program brought rising middle school students to their new school in the summer to meet teachers and administrators, meet students with disabilities in the upper grades, gain familiarity with the facility, and have fun with team-building activities. These activities were meant to minimize fears and increase feelings of control. The special education teacher leading these self-determination activities said, "Self-determination is, in my opinion, allowing you to take control of your life. You have the control so you are less afraid of how things are going to turn out."

They show their goals, their Good Day Plan, how they've improved in classes, [and] some areas they still need to improve on. They are in control and that, to me, is what self-determination is about. Especially in middle school, I think they don't feel in control of much of anything of their lives before they get their license, before they can do things on their own. But we talk very much 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. (Middle School General Education Teacher)

**7. Public Speaking**

I had the chance to attend... a conference here locally in which some of the students presented to the adults what they had gleaned out of the process. [They] not only had the ability to articulate what they had learned from the process, but, just as importantly, had the confidence to sit there and talk to a room full of people, most of whom they had never met before, in suits and ties, which can be very intimidating for anybody, and to do it with perfect articulation. That to me spoke volumes. (Middle School Principal)

**8. Improved Behavior**

Giving them that voice and having them start to become aware of their behavior issues and their emotional issues, I think, was a huge step in having them start to initiate healing, if they chose... because, unless they make that choice, it's not happening when you're working with students with...oppositional defiance or emotional disabilities. (High School Special Education Teacher)

**9. Other Impact on Students with Disabilities**

Participants described other gains of students as a result of the *I'm Determined* project. Those gains included greater openness about accepting help, leadership skills,

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knowledge about disabilities, knowledge about rights, knowledge about what is needed for college, more students considering college, students brainstorming with each other about how to meet goals, students holding each other accountable for behavior and for meeting goals, better relationships between special education students and general education students, more responsibility, organizational skills, and early self-determination skills assisting with transition because of greater self-knowledge and earlier establishment of agency linkages.

### **Impact on General Education Students**

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The reach of the *I'm Determined* project extends beyond students with special needs. Almost all of the schools where interviews were taken reported that general education students were influenced by the *I'm Determined* project, as well.

At one high school, all incoming freshmen complete One-Pagers. All new special education students transferring into the school do them as well. At another high school, where general educators and special educators have worked together to implement inclusive practices, the general educators have adopted innovations brought into the school by their *I'm Determined* program. They have begun to view students in a more holistic manner and have practiced goal-setting with them.

At yet another high school, the *I'm Determined* posters drew attention to self-determination and prompted general education teachers to ask their special education partners to present in content courses during Disability History and Awareness Month. A general education teacher at that school employed self-determination lessons to teach all students to recognize their strengths, how to speak up for themselves, how to be polite, and how to treat others appropriately. English students read novels with self-determination themes. This high school has adopted a new course on self-determination skills for the 2011-2012 school year that will be open to all students, not just students with identified disabilities.

"What's good is good," says a middle school English teacher, who shows that good education practices can benefit all students. She employs both the philosophy of self-determination and tools developed through the project with her students in general education. These students assemble portfolios from all their subjects and invite 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.

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## **How has the Project Affected Communication and Relationships?**

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The *I'm Determined* project has influenced communication and relationships in many ways.

### **1. Teacher/Parent**

Relationships and communication between teachers and parents have improved as a result of the project. Parents view their child as being more capable than they did prior to the project and they are more willing to work with teachers toward common goals for the child. One school regards the relationships formed with parents through Family Night and from repeated outreach to families as the greatest benefit of their *I'm Determined* program.

An elementary school eases the teachers' communication burden by scheduling student-led IEPs shortly before Standards of Learning (SOL) tests. Parents come to the IEP meeting and learn there, among other things, what the child needs to study in preparation for SOLs. A special education teacher at the school says the practice obviates the need for "50 telephone calls."

Technology tools of the project help communication between teachers and parents at several sites. Parents at one preschool are charmed by One-Pagers that affirm the strengths and the uniqueness of their child. An elementary school uses the flip camera to make videos to send home to parents and to create a record of student progress over the course of the school year.

When students develop greater self-control, teachers may begin to regard themselves as advocates as much as authority figures. Teacher-parent relationships may change as parents are less intimidated by an advocate than an authority.

The relationship between parents and teachers is much different for me... I don't own the students' stuff anymore... When I first started working with students with emotional disabilities and behavioral issues, I would own their behavior...If they got in trouble, it would really affect me and I would feel responsible for them. I felt like I was in trouble...When I would talk to the parents, I think that [it] was hard for me to separate. And this... puts it back on [the students].... (High School Special Education Teacher)

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**2. Teacher/Student**

Teachers describe forming relationships that encompass the whole person of both the student and the teacher.

We saw some great conversations and some great relationships forming because kids felt like teachers cared about them as a person and not simply about an English grade or science project. (High School Special Education Teacher)

My relationship--I think that it's easier... I work with students who often really struggled with relationship...Opening that door of communication... it's difficult... to talk to a student about their disability, which is emotional. (High School Special Education Teacher)

More collaborative relationships have developed. When there is a problem, a teacher may more likely approach the student first, rather than a parent, to work out a solution. Teachers and parents alike find themselves listening more.

Sharing in each other's goal-setting has helped break down barriers between students and teachers. Team-building activities prior to the fall opening of school resulted in more personal relationships between students and teachers.

Relationships between general education teachers and students with disabilities have also sometimes improved. General education teachers who attend student-led IEP meetings have been surprised at the capability of the students. In one school, this led to greater inclusion in a particular general education teacher's classes.

**3. Student/Parent**

I think the most powerful thing to see is when they watch the video, they've participated in the [IEP] conference, and the parents go for the tissues. You know then, yes, this is what the parent needed to become aware of who their child is or who their child has become. It's great. They were babies and then they go off to school and you miss what happens in between. But when parents watch that and they see their own child speaking [about] what their needs are... When I see them sniffing, start crying, and that's when they get the tissues, I know that

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we've made a difference for that family. And now, maybe they can talk about some things that maybe they couldn't talk about before. (Elementary School Principal)

The One-Pager also is responsible for opening up communication between students and parents. When the two complete the exercise together, parents learn more about their child as the child communicates about themselves to the parent.

**4. Student/Student**

Participants at three sites described improved relationships between students. Students who sit in on each other's IEP meetings hold each other accountable for meeting goals. Students brainstorm with and learn from each other in goal-setting discussions.

They learn a lot from each other [about] what's working... One student wanted to improve in weight lifting and so he was talking about the things he was doing-- going to the gym regularly, the diet he was following-- and we talked about what would happen if he hadn't done that, if you had set this goal but you really hadn't done anything. I think they learn a lot in talking and listening to others. (High School Special Education Teacher)

Participants at two sites where inclusion is a guiding principle describe how relationships between general education students and special education students have grown with increased contact. Teachers wonder if general education students viewing student-led IEP meetings will want to conduct student-led conferences when they have conferences of their own.

Sites report greater communication from students in general as a result of the project.

I think it also opens up conversations for kids and it gives them that ability to converse about things that they've never been asked to converse about before... It gives them that ability to... have a conversation about themselves. It might not necessarily be just about their disability, but just about themselves and what works for them. (Elementary School Special Education Teacher)

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**5. Teacher/Teacher**

Participants at half of the school sites described increased communication between special educators and general educators. More co-teaching and inclusion activities have resulted from increased communication. Special educators are showing general educators the tools of the *I'm Determined* project and sharing a philosophy that is applicable to all students.

One elementary school principal thought the program benefits all: "It has just been a great partnership between the parents and the students and the school. It's really strengthened that partnership between those three stakeholders."

Participants also conceded that communication is lacking. Participants at three sites thought communication with other professionals in the school building could stand improvement. One principal thought that those not involved in the program were unaware of the good things that were happening. One middle school special educator put it like this:

Our communication needs to improve as far as letting the whole faculty know not only what we're doing, but why and where this is coming from, instead of just saying this is what we're doing and then trying to get the faculty on board just through emails...As far as the general education teacher population goes, I think they know what self-determination is. I don't think there are that many teachers who are individually implementing the ideas of self-determination in their class with the knowledge that, or with the intent that, they are doing it solely for self-determination. They might be teaching character building; they might be teaching responsibility. But they're not doing it under the auspices of self-determination.

**What Additional Impact has the *I'm Determined* Project had on Teachers?**

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Student-led IEPs have changed everything. I mean, I cannot imagine my job [going back to the old way]...I can't imagine. (High School Special Education Teacher)

I think it's really powerful for a general education teacher, even, to sit at an IEP meeting and listen to the student talk about what they need. If a student says, "I benefit from having my tests read out loud," or "I benefit from getting copies of

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notes," [it] is more powerful and... teachers are more inclined to be more helpful... when they hear it coming from the student rather than just a parent... It's certainly affected our special education program and the teachers in that. But I think on even a bigger level, [it has affected] general education teachers as well. (High School Special Education Teacher)

**What Additional Impact has the *I'm Determined* Project had on Parents?**

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I first noticed the parent reaction at the first student-led conferences. The parents are pleasantly surprised and very, very proud. The kids, many of them, dressed appropriately... very professional. They were all organized and the parents just sat with these eyes wide, going, "Who are you and what have you done with my child?"... they were just amazed at what their children can do. I tell the kids that "Parents are going to know what you can do. There's no going back from this, you know." I have pictures and videos of parents in tears sitting at the conferences with their children who have never, never shown this kind of confidence before. I wish I could write a book one day... (Middle School General Education Teacher)

**What Additional Impact has the *I'm Determined* Project had on School Administrators?**

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Six administrators were interviewed. Two are special educators by background, and these two leaders have been passionate forces behind the adoption and growth of the principles of *I'm Determined* in their schools. The other administrators come from general education backgrounds. Of those with a general education background, one principal understood the project in great detail and lent the project her strongest support. The remaining three conceded they were not intimately involved in the project, but all supported it and understood the philosophy, and all principals were proud of what had been accomplished by the program in their schools.

Asked why more of their administrator colleagues did not reach out for the *I'm Determined* project to become established in schools, two believed a lot of administrators do not know about the project. One of the principals thought that, even in his school building, all teachers did not know of the good things going on at different levels within the school, including what was happening as a result of the *I'm Determined* program.

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One school division leader believed that some administrator colleagues know about the project, but do not promote it on the expectation that it will increase the workload for teachers. Another reason reported for not adopting the project is preference for an education paradigm of adult control and leadership as opposed to greater student self-control.

**Are Skills Students Develop through the *I'm Determined* Project Transferring to Other Situations?**

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This question was posed at half the sites and answered by eight participants. Two were hopeful, but not sure, that self-determination skills were transferring to other situations. The remaining six who commented on the question were sure that students were transferring self-determination skills outside of the classroom.

We thought it was really encouraging when our partner community college told us that they could see a difference between our students and other students in the county [who] had not been involved in Self-Determination. They said, "Your students feel comfortable telling us what they need... They feel comfortable asking for the services they need and they know what accommodations they are entitled to and aren't entitled to at the college level."(High School Special Education Teacher)

I've seen my students start to apply for jobs and colleges, and the skills are definitely transferring there. (High School Special Education Teacher)

I can remember they would come back [to my class] and they would say, "Ms. XX, I wasn't doing really well on this so I made myself a Good Day Plan"...and "Are we gonna have a student-led conference next year?" And I said, "Well, I don't know. You'll have to be determined and talk to your teachers about that..." I actually do have one who has now gone, [who] is in the 9th grade, who still does the same thing using those organizational tools. (Middle School General Education Teacher)

I know they are going home, from what I hear from their parents, and sharing... with their families. (Middle School General Education Teacher)

They're trying to be independent with their home, too. (Elementary School Special Education Teacher)

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Definitely... the goal setting mentality is going to transfer to all other aspects of their life ... I hear a lot of kids talking... "Oh, I've got to do this if I want to get into this high school credit class; I've got to do this if I want to get into college." It's giving them [a] much longer time horizon for thinking ahead. (Middle School Principal)

Hopefully they've become strong enough to self-advocate for what they want. But there are certain kids who don't have their language to do that and don't have the means to really get it across... If teachers aren't listening to what students have to say, I'm not sure it's always happening. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

**Has the *I'm Determined* Program had an Impact on Attendance, Graduation Rates, or Behavior?**

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This question was addressed at four schools. Three of these schools, two middle schools and a high school, also had adopted Effective Schoolwide Discipline (ESD). The fourth school, an elementary school, did not have ESD, but the principal revealed that the school was near to closing the achievement gap between special education and general education students. This was a school committed to inclusive practices. The thinking at that school was that anything that empowers students helps to close the achievement gap.

It was unclear which of the interventions had resulted in which improvements at the middle and high schools. Participants at these schools were unsure whether or not there had been an impact on attendance, but they definitely had seen a large decrease in discipline referrals.

It is kind of hard to disaggregate what grade increase or referral decrease is tied to... We're in our second year of ESD... I can't say that... any one thing in particular is responsible for lower failure rates, higher retention, lower referrals... 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. (Middle School Principal)

Attendance, I'm not sure that I've seen a difference. I think the way we deal with discipline, I've seen a lot of difference. For example, this student... has her heart set on being a nurse... We've talked about how if she wants to really do this, she's going to have to take some more difficult classes that require sitting in class for longer periods of time...and not... skipping 20 minutes of it... Without *I'm Determined*, I might not have

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been asking the question, "What do you want to do when you're out of school?" I might not have known that she wanted to be a nurse and that she wanted to take these classes in the future... I think it's definitely helped in how we deal with discipline. (High School Special Education Teacher)

The Good Day Plans come up a lot. I know that with our principals, when they pull kids who are frequent flyers, they... have their Good Day Plan ready and they say, "All right, let's figure out what went wrong..."(Middle School Special Education Teacher)

That's really hard to determine whether they're directly a result [of the *I'm Determined* Program]. I don't think I could say that with confidence that anything was directly impacting those things. (High School Special Education Teacher)

I don't know about attendance, but discipline, certainly...In our ID [intellectual disabilities] program, I would say that behavior has greatly improved because...it places the responsibility on the child instead of on anybody else. So when any behavior happens, the language that is used is, "Are you making a good choice? What can you do to change that? You are the one who determines the outcome..." And that language alone... when we use it consistently is powerful because kids say, "I have the power to make a positive change in the situation." And our three classroom rules are very simple. It's "I will be respectful, I will be responsible and I will be the best I can be." When they take ownership in that and say "That's what I want to be"... the behavior decreases ten-fold. (Middle School Principal)

### **How Much Time has been Devoted to *I'm Determined*?**

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At most sites, teachers embed the philosophy of student empowerment into their daily work. Thus, it is not possible to truly calculate the amount of time devoted to a program that permeates instruction. Those sites that use tools such as Student-led IEPs, One-Pagers and Good Day Plans report more time devoted to them during the start-up period, and less time required as the use of those tools becomes routine.

However, when directly asked to provide an estimate of the amount of time devoted to self-determination, participants gave varied answers:

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Elementary School: An after-school program offered weekly in the spring; a career fair for all students that is one full day; student participation in the IEP, which has become routine and does not take much time, except to model how to present in the meeting.

Elementary School: Family Night planning and delivery was the biggest new addition requiring time from the *I'm Determined* program at one school. Staff receive emails related to the goals of the program consistently from their Assistant Principal.

Middle School: A few hours of preparation before IEP meetings

Middle School: Some time is devoted to IEP preparation in the two weeks prior to IEP meetings. Much teacher time has been devoted to planning a transition and self-determination field trip. Staff at this school meet once a marking period to discuss transition, and discussions include self-determination. Time devoted to self-determination at this site was described by a teacher as "pretty extensive."

High School: One special education teacher devotes 20-30 minutes 2 or 3 times a week to self-determination, which amounts to approximately 90 minutes per week.

High School: One special education teacher reports that self-determination is 1/5 of the curriculum for that teacher's class, which amounts to approximately 90 minutes per week.

It is worth noting that the above two high schools where teachers set aside 90 minutes a week specifically for self-determination were also the schools that reported "huge" increases in self-advocacy and were among those sure that self-determination skills were transferring beyond their classrooms.

### **Are Students Gaining the Core Competencies as Outlined by the Project?**

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The *I'm Determined* project has identified certain core competencies that self-determined people often possess. Those core competencies participants discussed, from most frequently mentioned to less frequently mentioned, were: Goal-Setting, Self-Awareness/Self Knowledge, Self-Advocacy, Choice-Making, Self-Acceptance, Problem-Solving, Internal Locus of Control, Self-Efficacy, Self-Instruction, and Self-Regulation. Efficacy Expectations is the one core competency identified by the project that was not mentioned by those interviewed.

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Participants are not consciously using the core competencies as categories for developing self-determination skills. They are organizing instruction and activities that promote core competencies, but they are not expressly thinking about the core competencies, as outlined by the project, and ensuring that these competencies are developed by students. When asked about core competencies, one teacher was very conversant- she could give examples of students having developed those competencies. This teacher was from a school that originated the lessons to teach the core competencies.

### **What has been Most Successful?**

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Participants at half of the sites answered this question. In addition to believing that “all of the interventions” have been successful, those that were singled out for success, in order of perceived impact, were:

1. Student Participation in the IEP
2. Goal-Setting
3. One-Pager
4. Parent Involvement/Family Nights
5. Good Day Plan
6. Direct Instruction through Lessons

Other tools or interventions that were cited as having produced positive results were student-led conferences, videos, Virginia Youth Summit, All About Me Books/My Life Plan Books, *I'm Determined* posters, and literature to support self-determination.

The thread of success running through all of the programs is that student empowerment produces changes that benefit all stakeholders in the education of students with disabilities. A school culture and philosophy of self-determination not only reflects the impact of the programs but also promotes further success.

### **What Barriers to Implementation Do the Programs Face and What Solutions Have They Devised?**

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#### Barriers

1. Time

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Time to devote to the development of self-determination skills is the barrier most often cited. Academics take precedence, and teachers responsible for content area instruction often cannot see how they can teach self-determination as well.

Scheduling is another barrier. General education teachers of students with learning disabilities or emotional disabilities are reluctant to let students leave class for self-determination activities. If self-determination is taught in an after-school program, it is often impossible to get everyone there whom the teachers want to reach.

**2. Lack of support**

While almost all of the most developed sites have administrators who are very supportive, administrators and/or general education teachers at other sites do not completely “buy into” the project.

Administrators sometimes try to protect their teaching staff from additional work and incursions into staff time. Administrators themselves can feel overwhelmed keeping track of and approving new initiatives, however deserving.

**3. Lack of awareness about the *I'm Determined* project**

Many administrators do not know about the project. Teachers not specifically involved with the *I'm Determined* program may not realize what is happening within their school.

**4. Parents**

Parents can be reluctant to have their children attend their IEP meetings.

**5. Limited *I'm Determined* material for Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K)**

Pre-K teachers would like self-determination resources specifically for this age group.

**6. Money**

Some participants wished for small amounts of money to pay for additional expenditures, such as lunch get-togethers with students or more resources for special events.

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*Possible Solutions to Barriers*

In addition to identifying problems, participants shared solutions they devised or were considering to overcome barriers.

**1. Time**

When special educators have students in self-contained classes, they can spend more time specifically promoting self-determination skills. However, when teachers wishing to facilitate self-determination have to pull students out of general education classes, this becomes more difficult. The strategies teachers have developed are:

- a) Encourage colleagues to integrate self-determination ideas into lessons in content areas. This has been done in English and physical education. Concepts of self-determination have also been employed in psychological testing.
- b) Offer a program before or after school. For example, an elementary school offers an after-school program for at-risk girls to help them become more self-determined. A middle school teacher meets with students before school once a week to work on organization skills. A high school has created a self-determination club that meets after school.
- c) Offer a new course on self-determination skills open to all students.

**2. Lack of Support**

When administrators or colleagues did not initially show support for self-determination efforts, participants “started small” and did what they could within their control. The positive effect on students became obvious and that attracted more participation and more support over time.

...being patient and giving it time and when you have success with something, people see that and want to have the same, and so they grab on to it. (Middle School Special Educator)

One administrator said that finding overlap between different initiatives and “marrying” them was helpful to gain administrative support. Conceptual overlap was seen for both Effective Schoolwide Discipline and *I'm Determined* and duplication of effort was reduced.

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**3. Lack of Awareness**

One participant suggested that T/TAC give a presentation for their faculty in order to increase awareness about the aims of *I'm Determined*.

**4. Parents**

When parents were reluctant to have a child participate in the IEP meeting, one school compromised for the first meeting. They arranged for the student to come only to the beginning of the meeting that year. In subsequent years, no more reluctance to have students at IEP meetings was expressed by parents.

**5. Limited *I'm Determined* material for the Pre-K population**

Even though few self-determination lessons have been published for Pre-K, teachers at one school focused simply on giving and honoring choices by young children. They effectively used the flip cameras and One-Pagers in meetings with parents and as an introduction for a child moving up to the next grade level. Pre-K teachers expressed interest in coming to the statewide networking meetings.

## **The Impact of Leadership**

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About two thirds of the sites reported that their building administrators were in strong support of their *I'm Determined* program. One third said they enjoyed support from the central office as well.

They love it. They're very supportive- all the way up. Superintendent just saw a video we made on self-determination and loved it. (High School Special Education Teacher)

They know we're doing good work. (High School Special Education Teacher)

[You can tell that the administrator's "buying into" it] by how well the staff is "buying into" it.(Special Education Director)

Administrators were reported to be extremely supportive at schools where the entire school, or at least the entire special education faculty, had become involved with the project. Principals at two of these schools were intimately familiar with details of the project. It's "like another child" was the way one teacher described one administrator's passionate support.

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But participants from two high schools where the *I'm Determined* project was very rooted did not indicate especially strong support from building administrators. One thought that the more the administrators knew about the project, the more supportive they became. Teachers from these two high schools and one middle school did, however, tell of strong creative leadership in their region from the first statewide coordinator of Virginia's *I'm Determined* Project, from VDOE's Training and Technical Assistance Center (T/TAC) for that region, and from subsequent T/TAC staff there. Strong projects had strong leadership from some source.

Lack of substantial support from the leadership may reduce numbers of project participants in schools. It does not, however, deter teachers entirely from establishing an *I'm Determined* program. One Pre-K coordinator worked formerly in middle school, where she was involved with *I'm Determined*. At her new school, where she now works in Pre-K, the *I'm Determined* program does not especially enjoy the support of her new school principal. However, this leader has achieved participation in the *I'm Determined* program by all of her Pre-K teachers.

A general education teacher in middle school is a leader within her building, and she, along with a special education colleague, assures continuation of the *I'm Determined* program in her classes. The program, however, has not spread significantly beyond those classrooms.

### **Interface with Other Initiatives**

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Participants reported positive interface with other initiatives and education philosophies. More than half of sites participate in Effective Schoolwide Discipline (ESD). At two schools, they are separate programs. But at three sites their ESD programs have incorporated some of the *I'm Determined* project philosophy and tools. For example, at one middle school the ESD effort has incorporated use of goal-setting and Good Day Plans.

...Instead of... two separate programs..., we really have tried to work together. We have an Effective Schoolwide Discipline team...with the addition of our special education teachers on our *I'm Determined* team. So, they work together. (Middle School Principal)

One of the first things we did when we started integrating self-determination- ESD had only been around for about a year- is we made a big Venn diagram saying, "What is ESD's role? What's Self-Determination's [role]? What's similar?" so that we do not reinvent the wheel... ESD is a systematic approach: it's about cataloging behavior, positive or negative, and figuring out how to affect the school's structure in the

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future...*I'm Determined* is much more focused on the student as an individual in saying, "What can we do for each one of these students to make them successful in character building ways, generally?" (Middle School General Education Teacher)

We're in our second year of ESD. And I do think it marries very well with... self-determination because it speaks to consistency and speaks to students being accountable for their own actions. (Middle School Principal)

The *I'm Determined* project also overlaps with inclusive practices, with transition planning and with academic and career planning for all students.

### **If You had the *I'm Determined* Program to Do All Over Again, What Would You Change?**

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Participants at almost half the sites said they would not change anything. The same number wished for more time to devote to self-determination. Three said, with perfect hindsight, they would have done more, gone faster with the program, yet most believed that proceeding slowly allowed success to build the effort naturally.

I wish there was more time in a day so that you have more time do these things. But, it wouldn't change very much. (Elementary School Special Education Teacher)

I'm the English Department chairman. I think if we had it to do over again, if I had known what it was going into it, I would have trained all of my English teachers in it from the very start. Because I think that our classroom is the sort of like the hub of the wheel... Reading and the writing is so integral with... being self-determined. I would have loved getting books in the classroom about it and then spreading it. (Middle School General Education Teacher)

Do a better job within our own building of spreading the word about this initiative so that others are more likely to continue it. (Middle School Principal)

Our communication needs to improve as far as letting the whole faculty know not only what we're doing, but why and where this is coming from. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

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A lot of us as classroom teachers feel that we don't have enough time to devote to the development of the program. We think, "Ok. We've got all these responsibilities already towards students. How do we bring this in and integrate it in a way that's effective?" So, having the time to do that... If we could somehow start over, it would have been awesome to have a week of workdays to sit down and brainstorm, "Ok. These are ways we are going to do this. These are the kind of the systems to get the ball rolling, rather than flying by the seat of our pants." (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

I'll have freshmen again next year, and I think starting on the new batch, I'd start focusing more on what the different words are- the vocabulary aspect of self-determination- before I get into the student-led IEPs. (High School Special Education Teacher)

I would try to do a little bit more of an introduction before we went into the student-led IEPs. It worked fine; I just would like to give my students a little bit more background prior to going into that. One-Pagers are a really good jumping off point for full PowerPoint IEPs. (High School Special Education Teacher)

### **What Advice would You Give to New Programs?**

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Participants at more than half the sites gave exactly the same advice: Start small and build.

Be patient and realize that it's not all going to happen right away. That's the advice that I got: Take one little tidbit of something that you are motivated to do and do that first and then build upon that after you have success... The first step was just committing to doing the IEPs really well. And then adding something else, and adding something else. Once other people are part of it, it really just takes off. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

It's a time-consuming process. You have to get faculty buy-in; you have to get student buy-in. There are all kinds of things that go on behind the scenes that nobody recognizes [must] happen. So just take it slow, because the worst thing that you can do is speed through it to get the façade of a project and have no foundation for it to work. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

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You need to get parents involved. You need to explain. Do a presentation where they can see the video. Talk to them (without scaring them) about how important self-determination is as their child moves to the higher grades and eventually to college.... Especially [in] middle school, they're not thinking about college. They are kind of living in the moment of middle school and all the issues that come around middle school... In today's world, it's much more competitive and it's harder to get into schools, and students just need to really prepare themselves. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

### **What Provides the Motivation to Continue with the Project?**

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Educators involved with the *I'm Determined* project report a range of effects that provide motivation to continue.

Why are we enthusiastic about this? It's just a really cool thing to be a part of. It's really powerful to see the students taking ownership of their own education. And you don't feel like you're having to drag them through, and you're not having to give them goals that you want them to reach. You're giving them the tools to set their own goals and then helping them come up with what they need to get there. So, that definitely inspires enthusiasm. I actually think it's a little less work for teachers. If I'm writing -- if the student's helping me write-- the IEP, then I don't have to sit there and try to think back and go through all my paperwork and figure out... accommodations, because the kid's sitting right there, saying, "I need these accommodations," or "This is what I want to do." So, there's nothing to be non-enthusiastic about. (High School Special Education Teacher)

The communication that's opened up between parents and administrators and also general education teachers. I haven't seen a lot of negative from that. So if it works, I try to keep doing it. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

The students... They won't let me go back to the other way... So even if I tried, it's not going to happen for the ones who have already done an IEP; they're all about doing their next one. Seeing that they're motivated is enough motivation for me to keep doing it... (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

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The success that you see. As soon as you see the students start to take ownership... and ask if they can do more, then you keep going. (High School Special Education Teacher)

When students can go and talk to their teachers, it shows that they're interested in doing well and... having a better outlook in the long-term, both in relationships, academics and eventually, jobs...I think it creates a lot of hope. In the past, the percentage of students being successful at the collegiate level has been pretty low. I think as we see more and more students becoming better advocates for themselves, knowing who to go to, how to maneuver themselves in school, I think teachers see a more positive outlook for students. (Middle School Special Education Teacher)

Works, I mean, it makes my job enjoyable. (High School Special Education Teacher)

## **Summary and Discussion**

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The VDOE *I'm Determined* project promotes an educational philosophy of empowerment for students with disabilities. Distinct from prescriptive education interventions, it allows for creative application of this central concept at individual schools. It is not a program to be assessed for fidelity of implementation, but rather for the extent to which young people evolve from dependency toward knowledge and skills of self-determination. The project has produced an extremely enthusiastic group of teachers and other school personnel who see immediate benefits for students, families, and themselves when students with disabilities begin to take responsibility for their own lives.

The project "sells itself," and any move in the direction of self-determination for students has a positive benefit that others see and wish to amplify. Thus, it makes sense that the more school personnel who become aware of the philosophy and acquire some tools for supporting student self-determination, the better. The *I'm Determined* tool that is most prominent is Student Participation in the IEP. Rather than being passive recipients of adult assessment and direction in Individualized Education Program meetings, students as young as elementary age are becoming key players in these meetings about themselves. Setting goals and learning self-determination skills that support attainment of goals has been another big gain as a result of this project.

Communication has increased among all stakeholders as a result of the *I'm Determined* Program. Students, teachers, parents, administrators and other school personnel have all

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increased their communication with one another in ways beneficial to those in each role. General educators have begun to see the benefits of self-determination for those without disabilities, as well as those with disabilities. The project may wish to look at how the gains of the programs are communicated throughout school buildings, beyond the classrooms of those directly involved with the program.

The project may wish to continue on the same course of welcoming teachers at new sites who hear of the program and want to become a part of it. The project has had success gaining a foothold in schools, and then growing, bringing attitudes of administrators along with it as the program's benefits become obvious. Or, since many administrators may not know about the project, efforts may be made to increase the visibility of the *I'm Determined* Project among school administrators in Virginia, highlighting the payoffs, and underscoring that the project has not resulted in burdens of time and new responsibility that teachers are unwilling to bear. How the *I'm Determined* Project can interface with other initiatives, such as ESD, may help administrators to view *I'm Determined* as a philosophy that fits with existing school structure, and is therefore easier to adopt. However, the passion of teachers and students, more than administrative regard, is the force driving the adoption of *I'm Determined*.

A few Virginia school divisions presently promote self-determination through a full cluster of an elementary, middle school, and high school. It stands to reason that the more the project encourages school divisions to do this, the more the philosophy will permeate the school career of a student, and the deeper it will take root as an attitude, an expectation, and a set of skills for success. Promotion by school leadership brings more people into the fold, and at a faster rate. The project may wish to consider how to identify leaders within school buildings and invite them to be part of the team initiating *I'm Determined* at new sites. But, the *I'm Determined* philosophy and interventions can and are being used by individual, motivated teachers with positive results, even if school leaders are not especially involved.

Families are very big stakeholders in successful life outcomes for children. A limited number of parents were interviewed in this study, but those few conveyed strong support for what they saw happening for their children at these schools. And, some teachers indicated that students were "taking the program home," and trying to become more self-determined in family life. After all, the home environment is shaping a child for all of the twelve-plus years that a child could conceivably be receiving the message of self-determination in school. The project may want to look at how to further engage parents as self-determination partners throughout the formative years of their children.

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Questions remain about “How much time must be devoted in the school curriculum to have a lasting impact on self-determination skills?” and “How deep is self-determination really reaching into students’ lives?” Schools have addressed the first question by viewing self-determination as a philosophy that permeates instruction throughout the school day. Yet, teachers at high schools that report devoting a definite amount of time each week specifically to self-determination are also those that were sure that the self-determination skills developing in school are transferring to other situations. Perhaps these teachers can show others how they used a distinct block of instructional time for self-determination. Direct instruction through lessons on self-determination appears to happen infrequently. While tools of the project, such as the One-Pager and the Good Day Plan, are concrete and successful activities for promoting the goals of the project, are they sufficient for developing skills to be self-determined? What is sufficient?

Once the *I'm Determined* philosophy takes hold at a school, it appears likely that students and teachers will sustain these new ways they have learned to do business. Teachers on this project who work with students with disabilities are devoted to the well-being of their students. That commitment would be difficult to shake even if outside resources of money and technical assistance were eliminated. Likewise, students are learning their rights and getting clearer views of themselves, internalizing the expectation into adulthood that they are becoming the leaders of their lives and acquiring skills to increase their chances for successful lives.

### **Limitations of Present Study and Future Plans**

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This study is intended to be the first part of continuing evaluation for the Virginia statewide *I'm Determined* project. The investigators intentionally studied first how the project has been implemented at its most developed sites. This approach likely results in data skewed toward success. It would be helpful to gain a more complete picture of the *I'm Determined* program by visiting schools where the project has been adopted, but has not developed as fully.

Especially since this is a project with the goal of student self-determination, the perspective of students at schools with *I'm Determined* programs is critical. Research approval now exists to interview students, and the student voice should be solicited in future data-gathering. Since many school personnel highlighted the importance of parents and families to successful self-determination, the role of parents and families deserves greater attention in future endeavors, as well.

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There were three high schools in this study reporting significant investment in developing self-determination skills among students with disabilities. Researchers could request interviews with students who have graduated from these high schools, their families, and perhaps other significant people in their lives for case studies on how training in self-determination has or has not had a lasting impact on the postsecondary lives of these young adults.

Enough qualitative data has been collected that the context exists for devising quantitative instruments for collecting numerical data. Instruments would need to be carefully constructed and piloted to ensure that data accurately reflect conditions at *I'm Determined* sites.

Because there is no central compendium of what the active *I'm Determined* sites are accomplishing, it is recommended that the statewide project develop this listing as part of its internal record-keeping. This would aid in continuing evaluation of the efforts in the schools.

Two of the researchers for this study are affiliated with the *I'm Determined* program in some way, and thus were positively inclined toward project goals at the outset. A third researcher did not have prior knowledge of the program and provided balance against researcher bias.

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**Appendix A: Good Day Plan ([www.imdetermined.org](http://www.imdetermined.org))**

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**My Good Day Plan**

<b>Good Day</b>	<b>Now</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Support</b>
<b>What happens on a Good Day?</b>	<b>Does it happen now?</b>	<b>What needs to happen to make it a Good Day?</b>	<b>Who can help me?</b>
<div style="border: 2px solid brown; height: 300px; width: 100%; background-color: #e0e0e0; position: relative;"><span style="position: absolute; top: 5px; left: 5px;">❖</span></div>	<div style="border: 2px solid brown; height: 300px; width: 100%; background-color: #e0e0e0; position: relative;"><span style="position: absolute; top: 5px; left: 5px;">❖</span></div>	<div style="border: 2px solid brown; height: 300px; width: 100%; background-color: #e0e0e0; position: relative;"><span style="position: absolute; top: 5px; left: 5px;">❖</span></div>	<div style="border: 2px solid brown; height: 300px; width: 100%; background-color: #e0e0e0; position: relative;"><span style="position: absolute; top: 5px; left: 5px;">❖</span></div>

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Summary of Interview Data 2010-2011

**Appendix B: One-Pager ([www.imdetermined.org](http://www.imdetermined.org))**

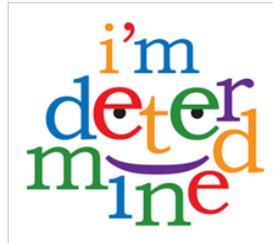
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Name:  
Address:

Date:

My Strengths

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My Interests

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My Preferences

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My Needs

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