

Promoting Self-Determination Among Students With Disabilities:

A Guide for Tennessee Educators



This guide was produced by Project Support & Include at Vanderbilt University—one of seven projects across the state funded by the Tennessee Department of Education to provide training and technical assistance to schools as they address the academic, social, and behavioral needs of students. This brief was authored by Benjamin Cabeza, Lauren Magill, Abbie Jenkins, Erik W. Carter, Steven Greiner, Lindsay Bell, and Kathleen Lynne Lane. 04/2013

As students move through school toward adulthood, they are expected to assume greater responsibility for managing their own behavior, to play a more prominent role in planning for their future, and to become increasingly independent. Indeed, an important focus of schooling is on equipping students for the eventual roles and responsibilities of adulthood. Conversations about preparing students well for these future roles often turn to the topic of promoting self-determination.

WHAT IS SELF-DETERMINATION? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Self-determination is broadly defined as having abilities and opportunities to steer one's life in a direction that contributes to a personally satisfying life.¹ Equipping students with the skills, attitudes, and opportunities to play an active and prominent role in their learning and planning for the future is now considered a best practice in the field of special education. Research suggests students with disabilities who are self-determined may:

- Be more academically successful and engaged in schoolwork²
- Contribute actively to their educational and transition planning³
- Experience more postsecondary involvement⁴
- Report higher quality of life and more positive experiences in early adulthood⁵

OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Although promoting self-determination is an increasingly prominent theme of federal policy initiatives, best practice recommendations, and conference gatherings,

relatively little is known about whether and how educators are addressing self-determination within the school curriculum. During the spring of 2012, we surveyed administrators across the state of Tennessee to (a) learn how schools across Tennessee are currently addressing self-determination within the curriculum, and (b) find out what schools might want—in terms of training, information, or other resources—to do this well. We sent survey invitations to administrators working in almost half of all Tennessee schools. Primarily, we sought answers to the following questions:

- To what extent is self-determination prioritized in elementary, middle, and high schools?
- What opportunities do students with and without disabilities have to learn the skills and attitudes that may enhance their self-determination?
- Where in the already crowded curriculum might these skills be addressed?



For more information about the technical assistance project funded to support schools in your region, please see page 14 of this guide. A full report of the findings from this project is available by request and can be found in Carter, Lane, Jenkins, Magill, Germer, and Greiner (in press).



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We created two versions of the survey—one referenced “students” in general, the other referenced “students with disabilities” specifically. In all other respects, the surveys were identical. Because we were interested in whether self-determination was viewed similarly for students with and without disabilities, half of all administrators were randomly selected to receive one of the two versions. Although the survey could be completed by *any* administrator at the school, we asked that only one survey be completed. We received surveys back from 333 schools (37.8% of all invited schools). In this guide, we highlight basic findings from the survey and provide strategies and resources to expand practitioners’ knowledge of self-determination values and practices.

SURVEY DESCRIPTION

We asked administrators to rate the importance of seven component skills associated with self-determination:⁶

1. Choice Making
2. Decision Making
3. Problem Solving
4. Goal Setting and Attainment
5. Self-Advocacy and Leadership
6. Self-Management and Self-Regulation
7. Self-Awareness and Self-Knowledge

These items were drawn from a national survey of special educators⁷ and had been explored in prior studies involving teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents.⁸ We included these seven skills because they are associated with the self-determination construct and can each be addressed by instructional efforts.

Each of the next seven sections includes a definition and description of one of the skills, as well as examples of strategies educators, paraprofessionals, and other school staff can use to promote the use of this skill. In addition, we report descriptive findings from our survey in graphic form. For each skill, we asked administrators:

1. How important do you think teaching this skill is compared with other instructional priorities for your students [with disabilities]? (1= *low importance*, 6 = *high importance*).
2. How often does your staff teach this skill to students [with disabilities]? (1= *never*, 6 = *often*).

The graphs in each section display the percentage of administrators providing each response. For the first question, we combined the responses in the following ways: *low importance* (rating of 1 or 2), *medium importance* (rating of 3 or 4), and *high importance* (rating of 5 or 6). For the second question, we combined the responses in the following ways: *never* (rating of 1 or 2), *sometimes* (rating of 3 or 4), and *often* (rating of 5 or 6).

We then asked administrators to indicate whether each of the seven self-determination skills from the previous section was typically taught to students [with disabilities] in the following curricular areas and activities:

- Science classes
- Math classes
- Language arts classes
- Social studies classes
- Physical education classes
- Related arts classes
- Elective classes
- Vocational classes and programs
- Special education classes
- Extracurricular activities

Finally, we provided administrators a list of 20 potential professional development avenues and asked them to rate how likely they thought their school staff would be to draw upon each source of resources, information, and/or training for learning about fostering self-determination for students [with disabilities] *assuming each was actually available*. This information can suggest possible avenues through which training and information sharing might be offered to educators.

TEACHING CHOICE-MAKING SKILLS



Teaching students to identify their interests, express preferences, and make choices; structuring instructional activities to provide students the opportunity to select preferences

WHAT ARE CHOICE-MAKING SKILLS? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Choice making involves giving students opportunities to choose instructional activities, partners, and schedules. In each instance, students should be allowed to choose among several options based on their preferences. Giving students the opportunity to make choices enables them to develop skills of demonstrating control and responsibility in their environment.⁹ Incorporating choice making into the daily activities of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities has been associated with a higher level of task engagement and a lower level of problem behavior.¹⁰

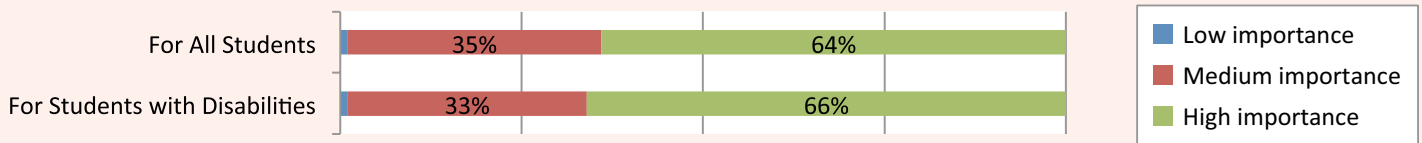
Example Strategies for Educators

- Provide two or three learning activity options and allow students to make a choice based on their preferences. As students become more proficient with making choices, they can be given more options to choose from. For example, in a physical education class, a student could select from a variety of activities (e.g., kickball, jumping rope, or running) for a 30-minute period of free exercise time.
- Allow students to choose how they will demonstrate mastery of a specific curriculum topic (such as cultural awareness). For example, a list of choices could include a written report, poster presentation, slideshow, collage, native meal, dance, or customs overview.
- When appropriate, give students choices about how they will carry out particular learning tasks, such as where they complete their afternoon assignment or with whom they work.¹¹
- Model the choice-making process to help students better understand how to make choices on their own. For example, a teacher could model how she chooses what to eat for lunch given select cafeteria options by thinking out loud and then have students make their own choice.
- For students who have difficulty making choices independently, give advance notice of the options they will need to choose from, visuals of the available options, or more information about each option.

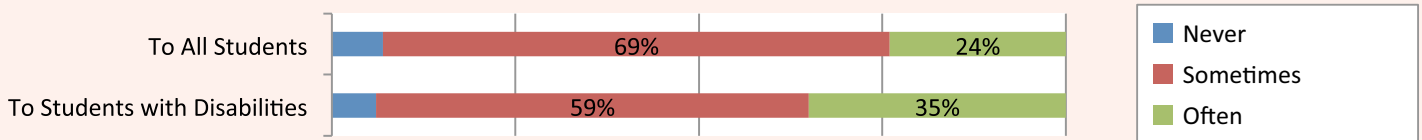
TEACHING CHOICE-MAKING SKILLS TO STUDENTS

According to Tennessee administrators:

How important is teaching this skill, compared to other instructional priorities?



How often does your staff teach this skill?



TEACHING DECISION-MAKING SKILLS



Teaching students to make effective decisions and providing them with opportunities to participate in making decisions about their education and post-school life

WHAT ARE DECISION-MAKING SKILLS? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Decision making involves analyzing a situation to determine possible outcomes, choosing the best scenario for yourself at that particular time, and following through with your decision. Students who are more self-determined will consider how their decisions affect themselves and others. Decision making is especially important at the secondary level, when students are considering future career and postsecondary pathways they will take in adulthood. Decision making involves consideration of all alternatives, positive and negative consequences, and what is the best for oneself. This collection of skills is important for everyday life situations—both in and out of school—where students will be faced with the need to make wise decisions.¹²

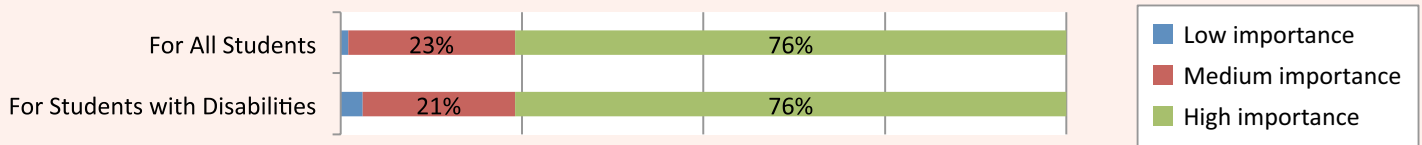
Example Strategies for Educators

- Incorporate opportunities to make decisions based on the full list of options, the costs and benefits of each option, and analyzing any bias present in picking various options.¹³ For example, talk with students as they decide what they want to do after high school. Options might include finding a job, going to college, and/or volunteering.
- Encourage students to adopt the process of stopping what they are doing, thinking about the decision options they have, and acting upon the most appropriate option.¹⁴ Teachers or counselors could allow students to practice using this process in “real world” situations, such as deciding whether or not to engage in an argument with someone. Before acting on their emotions, students should decide whether it would be most appropriate to defend their perspective or walk away from the situation.
- Teach students how one decision can have multiple impacts, such as deciding whether or not they should volunteer with a school club or community organization. While the decision may allow them to gain valuable skills and experiences, it may result in them having less time for friends.
- Teach “group-think” decision activities based on role-plays, stories, and videos when students are first developing this skill. These activities allow students to practice decision making in a safe environment.

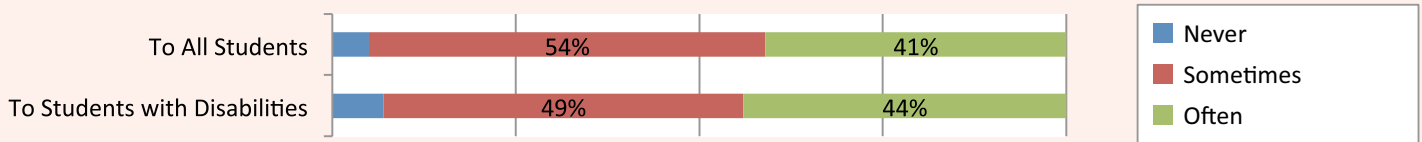
TEACHING DECISION-MAKING SKILLS TO STUDENTS

According to Tennessee administrators:

How important is teaching this skill, compared to other instructional priorities?



How often does your staff teach this skill?



TEACHING PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS



Teaching students to systematically solve problems and providing them with opportunities to participate in problem-solving activities

WHAT ARE PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Problem solving refers to the capacity to identify a problem, generate possible solutions, evaluate the effect of each alternative, and ultimately choose the best option.¹⁵ Often, students use problem-solving skills during activities, tasks, or situations that do not have an obvious or pre-determined solution.¹⁶ Problem-solving skills are especially useful as students encounter situations requiring independence and competence in school and community activities. Further, these skills can assist students in community-based and work settings, where they often are expected to engage in tasks independently. Problem solving can also help students navigate social difficulties with peers, teachers, family members, or other members of the community.

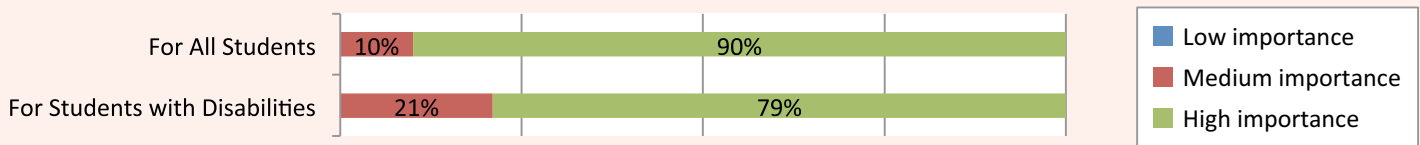
Example Strategies for Educators

- Help students develop the ability to find an appropriate solution when faced with a challenge. For example, if a student forgets her homework, cheating or lying would be inappropriate solutions and could potentially result in negative consequences. However, using free time to complete the assignment again would be a better solution with more positive outcomes.
- Have students reflect on the way they solved a challenging situation and make adjustments for future situations so they may enhance their problem-solving skills. For example, after participating in a group activity, talk to the students about their role in the exercise and whether they worked well with others.
- Present and explain a limited number of solutions for younger students or students who struggle with solving problems effectively. For example, if a student leaves a necessary book at school, the student’s parent might present possible solutions, including asking to borrow the book from a friend, calling the school to retrieve the book, or checking the local library.
- Teach students conflict resolution strategies for times when issues arise with their peers, coworkers, family members, or teachers. For example, if a student becomes frustrated with another teacher in the building, brainstorm ways the student could address the issue with that teacher in appropriate, respectful, and mutually beneficial ways.

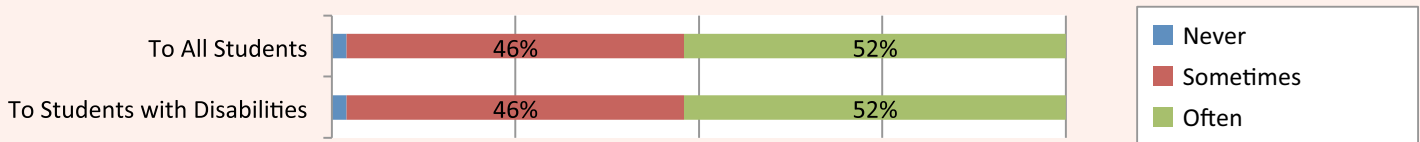
TEACHING PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS TO STUDENTS

According to Tennessee administrators:

How important is teaching this skill, compared to other instructional priorities?



How often does your staff teach this skill?



TEACHING GOAL SETTING AND ATTAINMENT SKILLS



Teaching students to set and track goals, participate in goal-setting activities, and develop plans to achieve goals

WHAT ARE GOAL SETTING AND ATTAINMENT SKILLS? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Goal setting and attainment skills require students to identify something they wish to work toward and develop a plan to reach that particular objective. When learning how to set and attain goals, students should be faced with challenging yet feasible objectives that are aligned to their likes and dislikes. Learning how to set and attain goals may enable students to better understand and work toward what is most important to them. The attainment of these goals may be encouraging to students as they seek direction and independence in school and life endeavors.¹⁷

Example Strategies for Educators

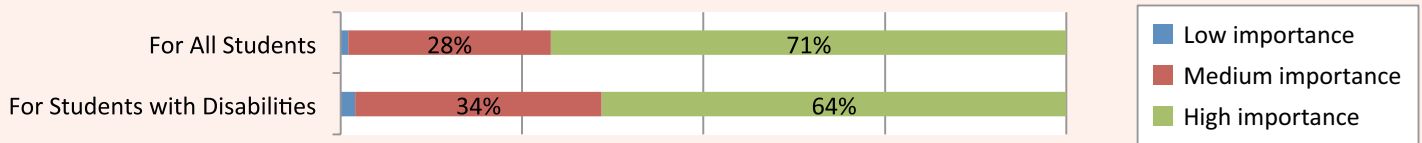
- Work with students to develop plans that include steps to reach a goal and any necessary resources. It is important to support students in considering the process of reaching the goal and not narrowly focusing on only the end result.
- Help students set manageable and realistic goals that can be met in a short time period (e.g., a single class period, a day at school, or over the weekend). For example, a student might set a goal of reading a certain amount of pages in a 30-minute block of silent, sustained reading. The student can learn to track progress and adjust her goal over time.
- Display students' academic and personal goals publicly and positively, and have frequent discussions about the progress being made to reach the goals.
- Encourage students to set goals they might find less interesting or preferable (e.g., academic or organizational goals) in order to encourage the development of their work ethic.



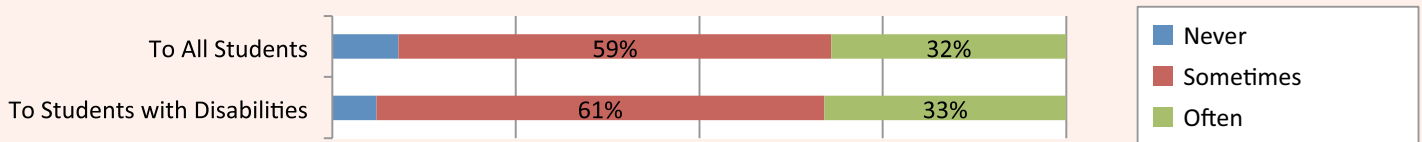
TEACHING GOAL SETTING AND ATTAINMENT SKILLS TO STUDENTS

According to Tennessee administrators:

How important is teaching this skill, compared to other instructional priorities?



How often does your staff teach this skill?



TEACHING SELF-ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS



Teaching students to know and stand up for their rights, to communicate effectively and assertively, and to be an effective leader or team member

WHAT ARE SELF-ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Self-advocacy and leadership skills involve having the ability and confidence to stand up for oneself, as well as having the knowledge of what to advocate for in achieving one’s goals. The ability to lead requires students to be assertive and negotiable, communicate effectively, and utilize interpersonal skills.¹⁸ These skills are important as students seek to promote their interests and goals in post-school employment and community involvement. As students communicate with peers and community members, their self-advocacy and leadership skills may assist them in being understood and supported by others. Further, learning to work in teams, either as the leader or a cooperative member, may be beneficial in school or work settings.

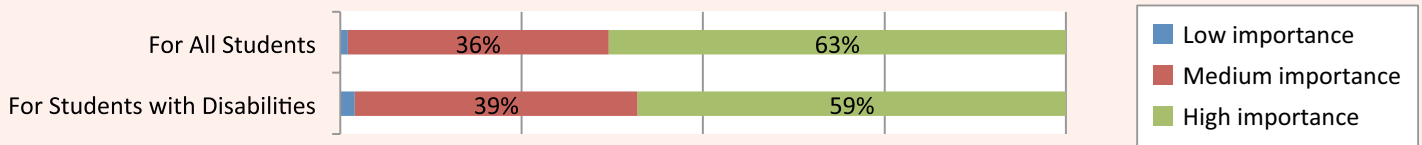
Example Strategies for Educators

- Design role-play situations where students practice advocating for themselves in a safe environment. These situations should reflect encounters students will likely face in everyday community and employment settings. Examples may include ordering a meal at a restaurant, volunteering for a community event, sending an email message, or interacting with co-workers.
- Encourage students to advocate for their own preferences, desires, or opinions when appropriate. For example, if a student has a different opinion than the rest of the class, encourage her to speak her mind. It may also be beneficial for students to practice these skills in advance of participating in IEP and transition meetings.¹⁹
- Model differences between acting assertively and acting aggressively so students gain an understanding of socially appropriate interactions. Teaching students interpersonal communication skills may allow them to successfully voice their opinion without offending others.
- Pair students with an older student or adult “mentor” who has similar interests, strengths, or limitations. This older person may be able to offer advice and anecdotes from previous experience where they exercised self-advocacy and leadership.

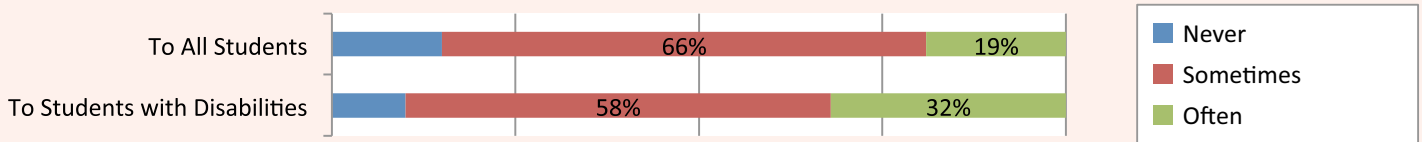
TEACHING SELF-ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS TO STUDENTS

According to Tennessee administrators:

How important is teaching this skill, compared to other instructional priorities?



How often does your staff teach this skill?



TEACHING SELF-MANAGEMENT AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS



Teaching students to monitor and evaluate their own behavior, select and provide their own reinforcement, set their own schedule, and to self-direct learning through strategies like self-instruction

WHAT ARE SELF-MANAGEMENT AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Self-management and self-regulation skills involve students monitoring and assessing their own behavior, time management, and learning. These skills build upon students' competencies in the development of choice making, decision making, problem solving, and goal setting.²⁰ As students progress through school and prepare for life in the community, they should turn less to teachers and others first and instead become more self-directed. By learning to manage and regulate their daily activities, students may achieve more positive and productive outcomes, such as academic success, job retention, and employer satisfaction.

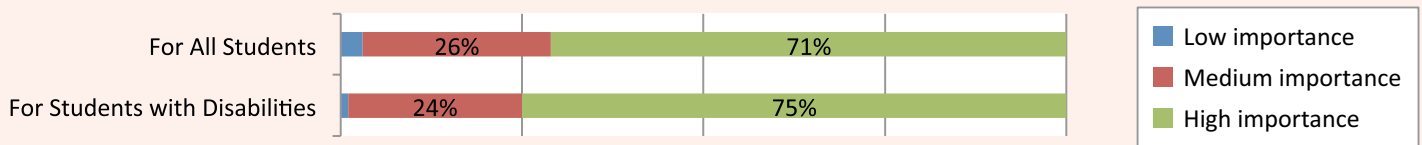
Example Strategies for Educators

- Help students learn how to reflect on their behaviors by having them create a journal of their daily academic, behavioral, and social goals. This allows students to explicitly set their own daily and weekly goals. Students should be encouraged to effectively manage and regulate their own behavior to meet these goals.
- Offer supportive feedback when students are correctly self-managing their learning or social behaviors. When students are struggling to manage themselves, offer limited support until they are able to independently correct their actions. For example, if a student is continuously talking to her neighbor during an assignment, offer reminders of the importance of staying on-task and not preventing others from learning.
- Provide instruction to students on how they should deal with various behaviors and emotions, such as anger or sadness. Develop a procedure with individual students so they can appropriately calm down when upsetting situations occur without interrupting instruction or distracting others.
- Support students in directing their own academic progress and instruction by reflecting on their learning preferences, academic strengths and areas for growth, and academic goals.

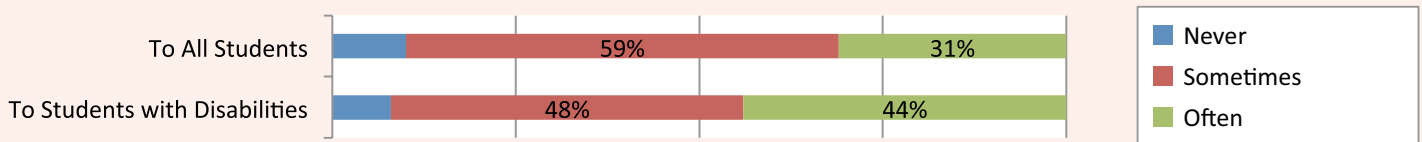
TEACHING SELF-MANAGEMENT AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS TO STUDENTS

According to Tennessee administrators:

How important is teaching this skill, compared to other instructional priorities?



How often does your staff teach this skill?



TEACHING SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE



Teaching students to identify their own strengths and limitations, to identify their own preferences, interests, and abilities, and to apply that knowledge to their advantage

WHAT ARE SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE SKILLS? WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Students who possess self-awareness and self-knowledge recognize their own strengths, limitations, and abilities. Moreover, they can apply this understanding to improve on their previous experiences and accomplishments. Students should gain increasing awareness about how they best learn, communicate, and appropriately deal with their emotions.²¹ When faced with difficult situations in school, professional, or family settings, they may utilize these skills to focus on their strengths and achieve success.

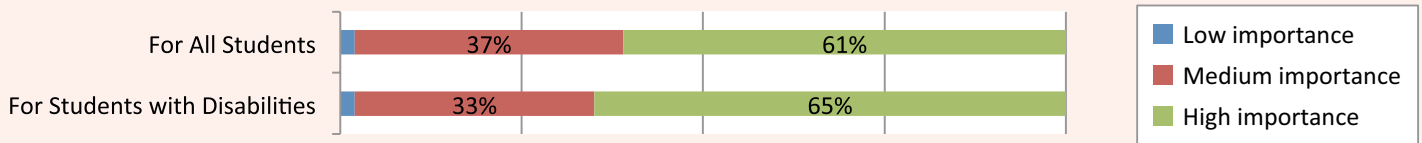
Example Strategies for Educators

- Emphasize to students that everyone has their own abilities and unique personalities. To help students understand how people can be different, design a class activity where students role-play as if they were someone else to accept various perspectives, prejudices, and stereotypes often held by others.
- Have students reflect on their strengths and limitations and write these down in a journal. Then talk individually with students to brainstorm ways to maximize their strengths and minimize their limitations in school, interactions with peers, future employment settings, and community activities.
- Look online to find activities and questionnaires that identify personality (e.g., analytical versus empathetic) and learning (e.g., kinesthetic versus visual) strengths and preferences. Set up stations around the class where students can practice different learning and activity styles.
- Provide case studies on situations students may encounter in and out of school. For example, analyze a narrative in which a student noticed others becoming frustrated with her. Work together to determine what actions on the student's part may have caused the other students' reaction. Have students reflect and write down how they would handle this situation and how this hypothetical encounter would make them feel.

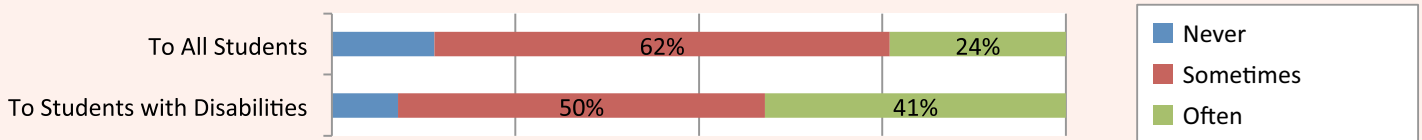
TEACHING SELF-AWARENESS AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE SKILLS TO STUDENTS

According to Tennessee administrators:

How important is teaching this skill, compared to other instructional priorities?



How often does your staff teach this skill?



SELF-DETERMINATION ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Where within the curriculum are self-determination skills being taught? The left column lists the various learning environments provided to administrators. The top row lists the seven component skills associated with

self-determination. Each cell of the table shows the percentage of Tennessee administrators who indicated each skill was taught to students with disabilities in each environment at their school.

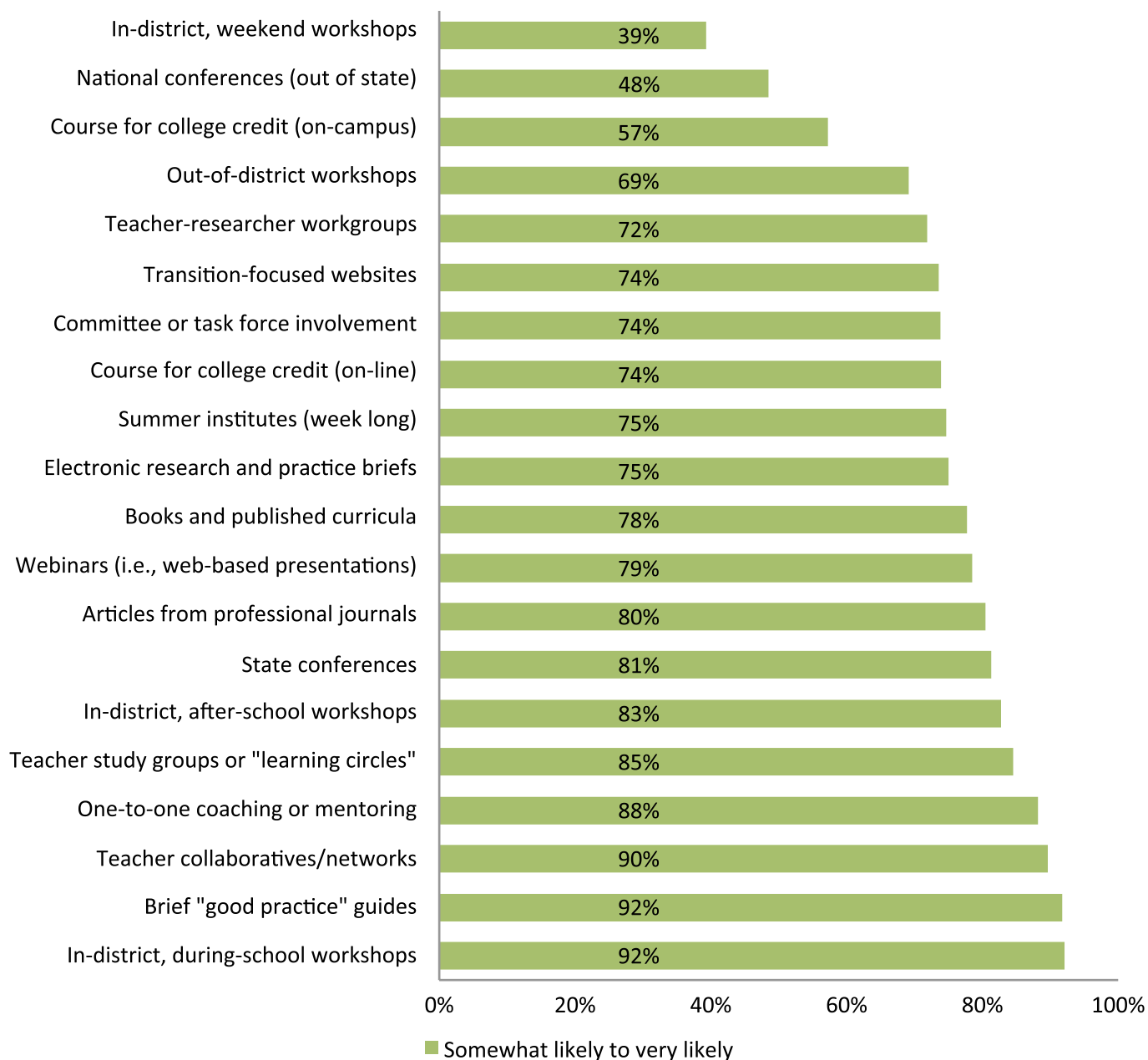
Learning environments	Choice Making	Decision Making	Problem Solving	Goal Setting & Attainment	Self-Advocacy & Leadership	Self-Management & Self-Regulation	Self-Awareness & Self-Knowledge
Science classes	66%	69%	94%	44%	24%	57%	39%
Math classes	67%	74%	95%	58%	27%	60%	38%
Language arts classes	77%	77%	73%	64%	41%	60%	49%
Social studies classes	75%	76%	74%	52%	46%	56%	48%
Physical education classes	76%	71%	59%	73%	54%	74%	65%
Related arts classes	82%	74%	65%	61%	46%	68%	63%
Elective classes	75%	69%	71%	64%	53%	59%	58%
Vocational classes and programs	69%	78%	76%	74%	56%	64%	61%
Special education classes	78%	84%	85%	78%	61%	77%	68%
Extracurricular activities	73%	64%	57%	64%	63%	66%	59%

Note. Percentages reflect only those schools offering this course (e.g., elementary/middle schools may not offer vocational or elective classes).

SELF-DETERMINATION PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AVENUES

How might educators and other school staff learn more about how best to promote self-determination among students with and without disabilities? Administrators rated each of 20 potential professional development avenues based on the extent to which they thought their school staff would draw upon this source of resources,

information, and/or training for learning about fostering self-determination for students [with disabilities] *assuming each was actually available*. Below is a graph displaying the percentage of administrators who rated each avenue as being *somewhat likely to very likely* (i.e., rating of 3, 4, or 5) to be drawn upon by their school staff.



ONLINE RESOURCES

- *The National Gateway to Self-Determination* - www.ngsd.org
- *Casey Life Skills Assessment* - caseylifeskills.force.com
- *I'm Determined* - www.imdetermined.org
- *iTransition* - pepnet.org/itransition
- *National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center* - www.nsttac.org
- *Youthhood* - www.youthhood.org
- *Zarrow Center for Learning Enrichment: Self-Determination Materials* - www.ou.edu/content/education/centers-and-partnerships/zarrow/self-determination-assessment-tools.html

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ENDNOTES

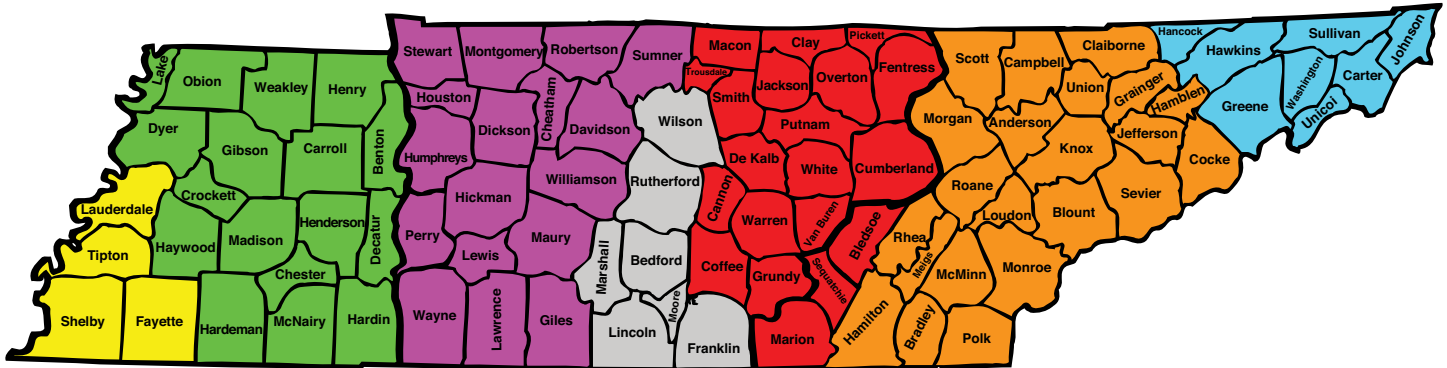
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CI3T TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECTS BY REGION: 2012-2015

The Tennessee Department of Education has provided funding to seven projects to provide training and technical assistance to schools as they address the academic, social, and behavioral needs of students within comprehensive, integrated, three-tiered (CI3T) models of prevention. To locate the project assigned to your region, see below.



UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS (RISE):

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