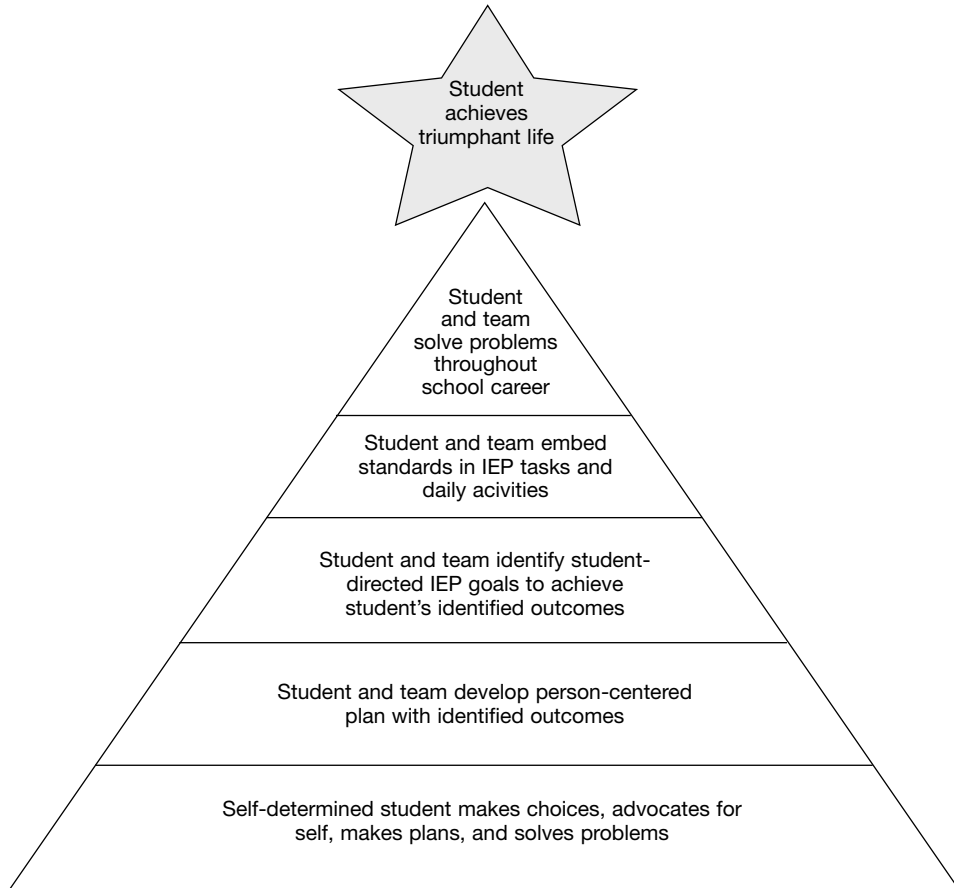**Excerpted from *Getting the Most Out of IEPs: An Educator's Guide to the Student-Directed Approach* by Colleen A. Thoma, Ph.D., and Paul Wehman, Ph.D.**

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Figure 7.2. Essential elements from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (PL 108-446) and No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (PL 107-110) that result in a sound student-directed educational plan. (*Key:* IEP, individualized education program.)

Teach Self-Determination Across the Age Range

Figure 7.2 demonstrates that self-determination is the key building block for students to meaningfully identify their desired personalized educational outcomes. Early on in their education, many students experience school as a place where they must do whatever the teacher tells them. Then, as if by magic, they enter high school, where they are expected to suddenly make choices and identify personalized career, living, transportation, and recreation/leisure goals. In other words, with no previous experience in making plans or setting goals, students suddenly have to direct a complex process in which they have to make a long-term plan for their own lives. It seems a bit much to ask students to move from total compliance to full self-determination simply by virtue of changing school buildings. Instead, we have to teach the component skills of self-determination throughout the student's school career.

At each age, the student will have more opportunities to make choices, make plans, implement plans, solve problems, and advocate for him- or herself. Across the age range, from elementary through high school, students need multiple daily experiences to acquire the skills that result in self-determination. Table 7.3 demonstrates how teachers can offer students frequent opportunities in everyday tasks across the age range to learn the component skills that result in self-determination. Without daily practice in the component skills that result in self-determination, students may not be able to make good decisions regarding their life plans.

Table 7.3. Tips and activities for teaching self-determination skills to students of all ages and ability levels

Offer choices of pencils or crayons (for younger students) when writing, locations to complete independent work, snack, recess activities, order of seatwork, and so forth.

When students make a nonpreferred choice by accident, allow them to problem-solve to make a new choice.

Begin by offering choices between two preferred items or activities, then gradually offer choices between less desired preferences.

Begin with two options and gradually increase number of options presented.

Honor student choices even when the teacher knows the student prefers a different option.

For students with limited verbal communication skills, choice making can also result in an increase in communication skills.

Assign small projects that require students to construct everyday items from common home and school supplies (e.g., construct a car out of toilet paper rolls, construction paper, and pencils).

Have students list the pros and cons of playing outside versus inside during recess.

Have students decide how to organize their daily schedules.

Have students decide how long to engage in a school or play task.

When students make a poor decision, help them identify why it was a poor decision and what they could do differently the next time.

Talk through your own decisions to model decision making for students.

Have students talk about their decisions and how their plan worked out for them.

Develop a picture sequence to show how to make a decision, and practice this sequence many times a day.

(continued)

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Table 7.3. *(continued)*

Set up problems by withholding items, hiding items, or locking items away that students need to complete projects.

Ask for help from your students when solving your own problems in the classroom.

Allow students to experience problems when making choices and decisions, then guide them through the problem-solving steps.

Set simple daily and weekly goals with students and the class as a whole, develop a plan to meet goals, and review progress toward the goals.

Allow students to try new things and reinforce them for taking the risk.

Teach students about risks and safety regarding risks.

Give students tasks where they can lead other students (e.g., keeping track of playground items, completing the lunch count and taking it to the office).

When students succeed, point out the skills they have and the actions they took that led to their success.

Help students identify their strengths and preferences.

Provide many opportunities to complete meaningful tasks for the school and community.

Let students develop their own learning targets and modules.

Show each student his or her individualized education program (IEP) and explain it.

Involve younger students in IEP decisions by offering choices of skills they want to learn.

Prior to the IEP meeting, ask students to identify three to five personal strengths to share at the meeting.

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