

# **PROJECT REPORT**

To: Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council

From: Center for Public Representation, in collaboration with consultant Emily Berheide

Re: Report on Decision-Making Project with Transition-Aged Students at Medford Public Schools, Massachusetts

Date: December 15, 2021 (Revised)

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## 1. PROJECT ABSTRACT

**To promote alternatives to guardianship and Supported Decision-Making for youth, the project created an innovative, replicable decision-making workshop that was piloted as part of a school district transition program.**

For Supported Decision-Making and other guardianship alternatives to be considered viable options for youth with disabilities, they and their support networks must be fully invested and believe in the value of youth making their own decisions. However, many transition aged youth (ages 14 to 22) rarely have the opportunity to *practice* decision-making. Without practice, decision-making remains abstract and can feel out of reach.

The project promoted meaningful youth engagement and leadership by empowering transition aged youth to make their own decisions and providing a facilitated opportunity to practice decision-making as part of a workshop in a school district transition program. Guided by facilitators, youth learned from each other about the process of decision-making and choice. Through practicing decision-making and peer learning, youth became familiar with areas of their lives where more support or coaching may be needed. Youth left the workshop understanding that there are networks of support and tools like Supported Decision-Making that can support them in developing independence and exercising choice in the areas of their lives that are important to them. The workshop included education about Supported Decision-Making, which was explored in the real-world context of practicing decision-making about issues that mattered to the participants. Educators actively participated in the workshop and benefited from supporting youth in making their own decisions as informal supporters or coaches. Youth gained experience with the customized supports that can help to maximize independence and autonomy.

School transition programs are a promising space for delivering this workshop because there is a natural opportunity for replication in other school districts that are prioritizing transition educational opportunities grounded in concepts of empowerment and self-direction. The workshop was delivered at the Transition Program in Medford Public Schools in Massachusetts. The project staff had a pre-existing relationship with staff in this district and has already worked with staff to embed values of self-direction, self-advocacy, and empowerment.

## 2. PROJECT SESSIONS: Activities, Goals, and Observations

Medford Public Schools agreed to allow CPR to conduct the Decision-Making Workshop as part of the summer curriculum and into the fall. The Decision-Making curriculum was offered in two classrooms for students of different ages at the high school – the transition program for students 18-22 and a class of students ages 14-18. The students and their families in the two classes are highly racially and ethnically diverse. The sessions offered so far include (1) Lead the Way Activity; (2) Self Directed Scavenger Hunt; (3) Would You Rather? Exercise; (4) Design Your Own Obstacle Course; and (5) Vision Boards.

**Overall goals:** The goal is to create more opportunity for self-initiation and for students to practice their own decision-making and to observe peers doing the same. The foundation of decision-making is to self-initiate decisions. By creating more opportunities for self-initiation, rather than situations where students are told what to do and how to do it, students are learning foundational skills and seeing themselves as decision-makers. Each of the sessions is designed to provide these opportunities for students, and discussion by facilitators allows for students to draw these connections and begin to see themselves as decision-makers.

### A. SESSION ONE: LEAD THE WAY ACTIVITY

**Activity:** Each student had an opportunity to lead their classmates somewhere around the school. There were no limitations as to where they could go or what they could do.

1. Ask the students for a volunteer to lead the rest of the class to a place they want to visit in the school. Thank the student who volunteers.
2. The volunteer leader takes the rest of the class on a self-guided trip to an area in the school that the volunteer picks.
3. The first volunteer leader passes the leadership role on to the next volunteer, and that continues until all the students have an opportunity to lead.

**Goals:** Practice simple form of self-direction, decision-making, and leadership in an environment in which students feel comfortable. By leading peers and their teachers, students had an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and initiative.

**Observations:** Students made this activity their own – running, laughing, and exploring. Teachers were unsure whether students would be able to complete this activity, but students

showed incredible knowledge of areas of the school teachers did not realize they had. One student took his group to see the fish in the 3rd floor science room during the "Lead the Way" activity. He knew exactly where he wanted to take his group and what he wanted to show them, demonstrating great self-initiation and self-direction. Another student took his class to the swimming pool, which teachers were unaware he knew about. Teachers also observed that some students who they thought would never have taken an opportunity to lead did lead their class. Students demonstrated their ability to have an idea, plan for it, and execute the plan.

**Student Feedback:** One student said, "I liked being in charge." Another student said he liked walking and talking with friends. Another young woman said, "I liked showing her the way." Another classmate said, "I liked making the decisions."

## B. SESSION TWO: SELF-DIRECTED SCAVENGER HUNT

**Activity:** Each student had the opportunity to design their own scavenger hunt and to go and find the items they decided on!

1. Ask for 5 volunteers (**self-initiation and leadership**).
2. Ask the 5 volunteers to pick any spot in the room and to make sure there is plenty of distance between them.
3. Ask the other students to pick which volunteer's group to join. (**independent decision-making**).
4. Explain how the scavenger hunt will work and give a visual example.
5. Each student make a list of 5 to 10 things they want to find inside or outside the building on school grounds. They can either write down the list themselves or ask someone else to write it down for them. (**independent decision-making**).
6. Each of the five teams decide which student is going to go first in finding their scavenger hunt items (**self-initiation and independent decision-making**).
7. When each person finds an item they are looking for, they check it off their list **OR** bring the item back with them, if it is something like a leaf or stone from outside that is okay to take (**independent decision-making**).

**\*\*\*This could provide a good opportunity to talk with each person about why they decided each item was ok to bring back or not ok to bring back.**

**\*\*\*Staff shadow each pair of partners and provide assistance when students want help.**

**Goals:** The goals of this activity are for students to continue to build on their self-initiation and independent decision-making skills.

**Observations:** Students demonstrated excellent initiative, had creative ideas, and developed their lists from scratch in five minutes! Students included things on their scavenger hunt lists that were interesting and unexpected, such as a glass door and strawberries. One student who was not initially initiating with her peers drew a picture of a flower, and teachers helped her find one. Teachers were surprised with what the students came up with for their lists and even themselves learned new things about the school building.

**Student Feedback:** Several students said they liked finding the items they put on their scavenger hunt, such as a purple flower, the gym, and a guitar. Having the opportunity to generate their own ideas was clearly a memorable experience for them, as they still recalled some of the items on their scavenger hunt list two months after they completed this activity.

### C. SESSION THREE: "WOULD YOU RATHER?" EXERCISE

**Activity:** In this session, students participated in an exercise called "Would You Rather?" For this class, the younger group of students used a space called the "Living Lab," which includes home-type spaces, such as a kitchen and a bedroom. Four stations were set up, with the first labeled "Career/Job," the second "Home," the third "Meals/Cooking," and the fourth "Just for Fun." The stations were labeled with simple posters that included relevant pictures. Each student also had their own copy of the questions that were asked, so that they could refer to them, and the questions were also shared with their families as part of a packet of materials to take home. Students were divided into small groups of 2-3 and rotated through the stations, with the assistance of teachers.

*Questions posed:*

#### **JOBS/CAREER**

Would you rather be a **dancer** or an **auto mechanic** who fixes cars?

Would you rather be an **actor** in a movie or **work in a restaurant**?

Would you rather **work with children** or a **work in a flower shop**?

Would you rather help make a **new video game** or **work in an office**?

Would you rather have a job where you work **outside** or in a **hospital**?

Would you rather work in a **coffee shop** or in an **ice cream shop**?

### **HOME**

Would you rather live in a **blue house** or a **yellow house**?

Would you rather **take a bus** or **walk home**?

Would you rather live near **the ocean** or **the mountains**?

Would you rather have your **own bank account** or **have someone else take care of your money**?

Would you rather **live on your own** or **with your family**?

### **MEALS/COOKING/CHORES**

Would you rather eat a **fruit salad** or a **green salad**?

Would you rather bake a **cake** or a **pie**?

Would you rather **wash the dishes** or help with **yard work** at home?

Would you rather go **grocery shopping** or **cook dinner for your family**?

### **JUST FOR FUN!**

Would you rather be the **president of your class** or **help Mr. Mike** in the office?

Would you rather be on the **track (running) team** or the **swim team**?

Would you rather go to a **movie with friends** or see your favorite **band or singer** in a live concert?

Would you rather ride in a **boat** or a **motorcycle**?

Would you rather have someone give you **flowers** or **balloons** as a gift?

Would you rather meet the **President of the United States** or meet your **favorite actor or singer**?

If you could be an animal, would you rather be a **dog** or a **bird**?

**Goals:** The goals of this game were to get students thinking about their preferences and consider new possibilities they had not thought of or tried before. Even though each question gave two choices, students could also choose neither of them or come up with their own choice or idea. The intention was to get the students thinking on their own about what they like and want to do.

**Observations:** Not only were most students very decisive about which options they would choose, but they also demonstrated significant insight and reasoning as to WHY they selected one choice or another. For example, one student immediately chose to work in a coffee shop,

rather than an ice cream shop, because he had experience working in a coffee shop at school. Another student chose to ride on a motorcycle, rather than a boat, because they did not like the water. The choices also prompted conversations about finances (careers, home life, and skills that are needed to live independently. This was a good opportunity to see how clear students were about what they wanted in their lives. This activity also opened up ample opportunities for follow-up conversations with students and parents about how students can explore these and other new activities.

**Student Feedback:** Students enjoyed talking about their interests. One student indicated he enjoyed talking about cooking. Several other participants said they liked learning about activities and making choices. Another student said she liked talking about where she wants to live.

#### D. SESSION FOUR: DESIGN YOUR OWN OBSTACLE COURSE

**Activity:** Each student had the opportunity to design their own obstacle course from a variety of materials and then teach their classmates how to navigate it.

1. Explain the activity – Ask the students if they have ever participated in an obstacle course before. Explain they are going to be able to set up an obstacle course however they want and then give instructions to their teachers and classmates about how to go through it. Do not give a specific visual model of what an obstacle course should look like. Show them the materials they can use – *e.g.*, rackets, balls, scarves, orange traffic cones, jump ropes, soccer balls, etc.
2. Divide into two groups
3. Ask for a student volunteer in each team to begin by deciding which materials they want to use in their obstacle course (**self-initiation**).
4. Student volunteer designs their own obstacle course and selects music to be played during it (**independent decision-making**).
5. Student volunteer teaches their team how to do their obstacle course (**leadership**).
6. Team members do the obstacle course.

7. Continue to rotate so all students have an opportunity to design their own obstacle course.

**Goals:**

1. Each student makes their own decisions about how to design their obstacle course
2. Each student makes their own decisions about how participants navigate their obstacle course
3. Each student shows leadership in teaching their team how to navigate the obstacle course they designed

**Observations:** Students far exceeded expectations on this activity. In their explanation at the beginning of the activity, the facilitators chose not to visually demonstrate what an obstacle course is, which allowed the students to be more creative and think “outside the box” when designing their own course. Students put a lot of consideration into deciding where to set up the obstacle course. One student led his class to a gymnasium that had gymnastics equipment. Although the class was unable to actually use the space due to COVID restrictions, the student demonstrated ingenuity in choosing that space, given it had so many items already set up that could be used to create an obstacle course in an ideal situation. Again, the students were decisive and clear in what they wanted to do, what music they wanted to choose, and how they wanted the course to be completed. Project staff provided no prompting and coached the teachers to do the same. One group decided to conduct their obstacle course with one person as the “lead” directing the other students to conduct activities in a particular order. Project staff discussed how this demonstrated some of the skills necessary in work – following directions, making decisions, and giving instructions. A key was to give each student as much time and space as they needed to consider what materials to use, so that they could create something that reflected what they wanted to do. One student who is a talented dancer and performer incorporated theatricality into his obstacle course and used the materials in unexpected and creative ways – e.g., he instructed the participants to put the traffic cones on their heads like hats and to dance around while swirling the scarves. One student chose not to design a course and in our debrief discussion we discussed how this was a decision also and demonstrated his clear understanding of his own preferences.

**Student Feedback:** Several students said they liked making and doing the obstacle course and being creative. One student particularly liked “making a challenge” for her peers and teachers. Another student said he liked being able to loudly express himself. Students also really enjoyed having their teachers participate in the course they had designed.



## E. SESSION FIVE: VISION COLLAGES

**Activity:** Each student created their own vision collage.

Materials

- A variety of magazines
- Poster board
- Scissors
- Glue sticks

1. Invite students to answer the following questions, so they can begin to think about what they may want to include in their vision collages
  - **What kinds of things do you enjoy doing and what are you naturally good at doing?** These could lead to your future career!
  - **What do you want to learn more about?** For example, you may want to learn to play a musical instrument or get better at making art, or take an acting class, or learn more about computers and technology, or learn to drive a car, or learn many other things....
  - **What do you want your home to be like?** Do you want to live with your family or with friends or on your own?
  - **What kind of relationships do you want in your life?** Students were allowed to interpret this question the way that they wanted, with some focusing on friends, parents, girlfriends, boyfriends, or other relationships.
2. Explain the activity of creating a collage and the goals (see below).
3. Let the students choose which magazines they want to use to find pictures for their collage. **(independent decision making)**
4. Students look for pictures or words they like and cut or tear them out of the magazines **(independent decision making)**
5. Students glue pictures onto their vision collages
6. Students who are not finished have the opportunity to continue working on these in the following class

**Goals:** A vision collage gives students the opportunity to choose pictures or words from magazines that inspire them and make them imagine what their future will look like. In order to make decisions about your life and what you want for your future, it is important to create a vision of what's important to you.

**Observations:** This session was offered on September 9, 2021. Every student's vision collage was uniquely their own. Each student independently decided what pictures they wanted to have in their collage. Students had the experience of creating something in their own way, with no right or wrong answer, and describing what they wanted for their futures.

**Student Feedback:** Students reported that they enjoyed selecting and cutting out pictures, learning more about their classmates, and sharing their ideas with others.

## F. SESSION SIX: PRESENTING VISION COLLAGES

**Activity:** Students had the opportunity to present their Vision Collages, if they wanted to.

1. Ask for two volunteers. **(self-initiation)**
2. Invite students to divide into two groups by choosing which volunteer they want to join.
3. Ask the students to identify the most important people in their lives and then write the names of those people down on index cards. **(thinking for yourself)**
4. The student who presents their vision collage first pass out their index cards to the other members in their group.
5. Each student has the opportunity to share their vision collage. During the student's presentation, the other students and staff play the role of the person identified on the index card they were given. For example, if another student got an index card with the name of the presenter's mother or brother on it, they would ask questions or provide support like as though they were the presenter's mother or brother.
6. Students engage with the presenting student as he/she explained what they included on the vision collage and what they envision for their future.
7. Rotate student presenters, so that each student who wishes to present their vision collage has the opportunity to do so.

**Goals:** The primary goals of this activity included having students become more comfortable speaking about what they want in their lives and experience being actively listened to by others. This activity also served to stimulate ideas and conversations about courses or jobs that the person may want to pursue, based on the interests shown in their vision collages.

**Observations:** This session was offered on September 23, 2021. This activity was a creative way for students to express what they are interested in and what they want to do in their lives. One student filled her vision collage with pictures of make-up and models who had beautiful hair and brightly painted fingernails. This led to a conversation about whether she would like to take classes in the cosmetology program at the Medford High School. Another student had photos of video games and technology on his poster. This sparked the idea that he may want to learn Scratch programming, which is a basic programming tool to make video games and is provided for free through the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Several students put places they wanted to visit, like New York City, which generated discussion about independent living.

**Student Feedback:** Several students said they liked sharing their posters and ideas they had with others. They liked being seen for who they are and explaining why they picked particular components of the college with others. Some of the students particularly liked acting out the role of the presenting student's supporter, be it a mother, sister, brother, or friend.

## G. SESSION SEVEN: MAKING LIFE DECISIONS AND SUPPORTED DECISION-MAKING

**Activity:** Students were given life situations and asked what they would decide in those situations. The group discussed the decisions after each question. The facilitator also shared with students about Supported Decision-Making and discussed the differences between Supported Decision-Making and guardianship.

1. Ask students to volunteer to be a group leader (**leadership**)
2. The remaining students decide which student leader they want to join.
3. Once students divide into smaller groups, then each student chooses a card with a question about a life decision with several choices on it (see examples below).
4. Each student then decides what they would do in that situation and shares with the group which option they chose and why. (**self-advocacy**)

5. Each group discusses each question and other students share what they would decide in this situation.
6. Continue giving each student a turn to choose a card and answer what they would decide.
7. Come back together as a group and share about what Supported Decision-Making is, how it relates to supported decision-making, and how it is different from guardianship. Connect it to how using Supported Decision-Making makes can make students feel – *e.g.*, in charge, a leader in their own life, etc.
  - See <https://www.waremass.org/supported-decision-making> and <https://supporteddecisions.org/resources-on-sdm/> for more information and resources

*Situations written on cards:*

You have a painful toothache. You go to your dentist. The dentist says you have 2 choices.

1. I can pull your tooth out and the pain will be gone after it heals. OR
2. You can leave your tooth in and rinse your mouth out with a salt solution, which may help it get better.

Do you have questions for your dentist? What would you decide to do?

You want to get a dog (or whatever your favorite animal is). You ask your mom if you can get one. Your mom says...

1. You have to save up the money and pay for it on your own  
OR
2. You can wait and see if you get it for your birthday

You want to get a cell phone (or whatever else you want, like a driver's license), but your parents say no. Would you...

1. Accept that they said no and hope that they change their mind some day
2. Try to get them to change their mind by reminding them every day
3. Make a list of why you want to get this item and why it would be helpful for you to have this and give the list to your parents

A family member gives you \$100. Would you...

1. Spend the money right away on something you've really been wanting

2. Save some of the money and spend some of the money
3. Save all of the money

You got hired to work in a restaurant. Your boss assigns you to do the same task every day that you don't like to do. But there are a lot of other jobs in the restaurant that you would love to do. Would you...

1. Do the job anyway, because your boss asked you to do it
2. Ask your boss if you could try out some of the other jobs that you like to do
3. Quit your job and look for another one

You apply to work at a Flower shop and at Home Depot. You get offered both jobs. What would you do?

A friend asks you to help plan their birthday party. Would you say...

1. Yes
2. No
3. I'm not sure yet

A family member (not your parents) invites you to take a trip with them to New York City for a long weekend. Would you decide to do?

**Goals:** The goals for this activity are for students to have the experience of deciding for themselves what they would do in different situations and to learn more about the process they use to make decisions. Further, the process of explaining a decision and the reasons for making it helps reinforce and strengthen the decision-making process.

**Observations:** This session was offered on September 30, 2021. Students appreciated making their own decisions with respect to each question. For example, most students made the decision that they would, at least initially, use the salt solution if they had a tooth ache. This led to a discussion about the empowerment that comes from being one's own decision-maker about decisions about one's own body. It also led to a conversation about how a person's first decision may not be their last – e.g., if the infection came back, a person may change their mind about not getting the tooth pulled. Students also discussed the importance of getting all the information they need to decide what decision is right for them. For example, the question about whether or not to agree to help a friend plan a birthday party led some students to ask whether this meant spending their own money on the party.

After the question and answer session, the facilitators led a discussion about Supported Decision-Making, including what it means and how it can allow people to be their own decision-

maker in their lives, just like they had done in this activity. The group discussed how the students might have people they trust help answer questions and think through situations. The group also that the meaning of guardianship, which is one court-based way someone else can get the legal right to make decisions for another person.

**Student Feedback:** One student said, “I liked making life decisions.” Another student said she liked talking about what and where she wanted to go in her life and explaining her choices to others.

## H. FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS

Mrs. Goldberg, the teacher for the 14 to 18-year-old student class participated in the last three of the student sessions. Her feedback focused on the activities involving vision collages

- Mrs. Goldberg shared that it was inspiring to see students create and decide what to include in their vision collages. She said the vision collages helped her to learn more about her students interests and desires for their futures. She gave an example of one student’s vision collage sparking a new conversation about whether the student wanted to enroll in the cosmetology program at Medford High School. Mrs. Goldberg appreciated the open format that allowed students to not limit their vision collages to only those goals that they had identified and written down at the beginning of the activity. She saw it as affording more freedom to her students in freely expressing themselves and making decisions about their own future. For example, one student wrote down flowers on her vision questionnaire as an interest, but she did not pick out pictures of flowers when it came to her vision collage. Instead, she chose pictures of foods and drinks that she likes. This suggested that the student’s vision of her future may be more complex that she initially expressed.
- Mrs. Goldberg shared that it was valuable for her students to be able to share with everyone the vision collages and talk about the images they selected. She said often, in school, students are asked to complete certain assignments, but then there is no follow up or sharing of their work with others.
- The Facilitator and Ms. Goldberg talked about incorporating vision collages every quarter so students can continue to think about and refocus on what it is they want to do. We also discussed how important mindfulness is and that it to develop awareness of increased opportunities for students to make their own decisions throughout the school day.

Mrs. Campbell is the transition teacher for the 18 to 22-year-old student class.

- Mrs. Campbell and the Facilitator discussed the value of students having real life experiences and opportunities to make decisions about what kinds of jobs they want to apply for, how they want to live, and how they want to be supported. These real-life experiences provide opportunities for conversations with students about the decision-making process, including possible outcomes of their decisions.
- Mrs. Campbell and the Facilitator also discussed the importance of recognizing that everyone typically learns through actually making decisions and then evaluating whether or not it resulted in what they wanted. Decision-making is a skill that one learns with practice, including making mistakes.

### 3. PARENT WORKSHOP SESSIONS ON “SUPPORTING YOUR CHILDREN TO MAKE THEIR OWN DECISIONS” & “SUPPORTED DECISION-MAKING”:

A total of three sessions were offered for parents, with two focusing on how to support transition aged youth in decision-making (July 28, 2021, and August 2, 2021) and one focusing specifically on Supported Decision-Making. The goal was to create a space for parents to consider their child’s decision-making, to prompt families to see their children as decision-makers capable of expressing their own preferences and making choices, and to expand knowledge regarding Supported Decision-Making.

#### **Facilitator Notes**

- I. Project staff introduce themselves and share information about the Decision-Making project happening with the students in the Medford high school transition program.
- II. Parents introduce themselves and share what interested them about coming to this session
- III. Questions for the parents
  - How did you learn to make decisions?

- What kinds of decisions do you remember making for yourself as you became a young adult that stand out to you?
- How did it feel?
- What opportunities can you see for your child to make more of their own decisions as they become adults?
- How do you think this will feel for your child?
- How will this benefit your child?

**\*\*\*Making your OWN decisions creates EMPOWERMENT, INDEPENDENCE and LEARNING opportunities!**

- Has your family had any discussions about adult guardianship for your child? Have you thought about alternatives to guardianship?
- Do you know about Supported Decision-Making? Do you know about other alternatives to guardians? Do you know how such alternatives are different than guardianship?

#### **IV. Questions and Answers**

**Observations:** A total of seven parents attended these sessions. The parents in attendance were from both transition age classes. Diverse communities were represented among the seven, including parents who spoke English as a second language and/or were people of color. The conversation with the families spanned a number of topics related to independence and decision-making. All parents expressed a vision for their child's independence, and different families were at different points in their experience of seeing their child as capable of making their own choices.

The sessions served as opportunities for collective problem-solving. For example, at one session, a parent solicited input from the group about how to get their child to make more choices and express a true preference. In this session, a father shared that one student typically always chooses the second option of the two she is presented with. The families and CPR offered a number of suggestions for creative ways to offer choice, including tapping into that particular student's artistic talents.



Parents also discussed their other goals for their children outside of decision-making, including the development of social skills that may assist them in preparing for work. Parents also discussed what was needed to plan for the time when they would no longer be available to support their children and how to promote decision-making in that context. The facilitators connected the work in the workshop with the larger discussion around guardianship and SDM. This parent training series reinforced some key factors to consider in future educational initiatives. Parents often want to give their children more freedom and independence and appreciate the abstract idea of using supported decision-making rather than guardianship. However, years of worry and fear as to what will happen to their children without strong parental involvement in their lives can prove to be a barrier to families fully embracing supported decision-making in practice. Parents often conflate involvement with control. Both people with disabilities exploring decision-making and their supporters need help and coaching. Parent and caregivers need multiple opportunities to receive that support, through coaching and training, so that they can build their trust in the student's ability to build decision-making skills over time and to learn about the many safeguards that can be put into place without guardianship and/or control.

#### 4. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING FOR TEACHERS

On Wednesday, October 20, 2021, Emily Berheide, CPR consultant, provided a professional development training titled, *"Increasing Student Decision-Making Opportunities in their Educational Experience."* The teachers involved in the decision-making project, Mrs. Goldberg and Mrs. Campbell, as well as Charlotte Heim, Medford's Transition Specialist, participated in this training. The intention of the training was for participants to explore the following key principles to promote decision-making for transition-aged students and to develop strategies to incorporate these ideas into students' educational experience.

##### **Key Principles**

- **Self-initiation** - You should have opportunities to initiate what it is you want to do
- **Thinking for yourself** – You should have opportunities to come up with your own ideas, consider and weigh options, and decide for yourself what you want to do. We all benefit from self-reflection, and we get better at it the more we practice it. Creating the time, space, and support to make this happen is essential.
- **No right or wrong** - You should be supported to be creative, without there being any right or wrong way to do things
- **Share and discuss why a decision was made** – You should have opportunities to share with others how you reached a particular decision. It helps you take ownership of that

decision and helps make others see you as a decision-maker in your own life. It can also provide peer support and an example to others who are exploring decision-making for themselves.

The training began with an experiential activity designed to give participants the opportunity to engage in the above key principles, which are principles teachers should instill in their students. The teacher participants were given a wide variety of art materials and a large piece of foam board. The facilitator invited them to create an imaginary place in whatever way they wanted, using each of the above key principles. They thought about what they wanted to create, and they experienced being able to work on a project in their own unique way with no right or wrong way to do it. They made decisions about what materials to use and had time to think through how they wanted to design their imaginary places. At the end of the activity, each shared why they made the design the way they did and what it meant to them. We discussed how having the freedom to decide for themselves how to do the activity showcased their own unique self-expression and why these key principles are important to the students they support in their classes.

Next, we watched the trailer for the *"Peanut Butter Falcon"* movie, in which Zack, a young man with Down syndrome runs away from his care home to make his dream of becoming a wrestler come true. We discussed all the ways in which Zack was making his own decisions and how those decisions led him to have the kind of life he wanted to be living.

The facilitator then invited participants to write down ideas and strategies for how their own students could have more opportunities to engage in the above key principles. Each of the principles were written on a large post-it poster and spread around the room. Participants walked around the room and wrote down their ideas on each poster. Afterwards, the ideas were discussed as a group.

Finally, participants were invited to choose the strategies that they wanted to start incorporating into their classrooms. Below are the strategies Mrs. Goldberg, Mrs. Campbell, and Mrs. Heim wrote down for their students and will be starting to implement in the upcoming weeks.

- **Slowing down** - Giving students more time to think through and make their own decisions during projects and activities.
- **Student-led activities** - Giving students more opportunities to lead activities and/or classes.
- **Students' sharing their IEP presentations** - Giving students their opportunity to share the presentations they develop for their Individualized Education Program (IEP)

meetings with their classmates, so they could learn from each other and develop confidence in themselves and presenting.

- **Student-planned community trips** – Giving students the opportunity to decide where they want to go in the community and to plan all parts of the trip, *e.g.*, when and where to get the bus, other logistics, etc.
- **Student purchases in the community** – Giving students increased opportunities to decide how to use their money on community trips.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Piloted with Medford Public Schools’ transition program, this project created tools and a framework that provided concrete opportunities for transition age youth to practice decision-making, self-advocacy, and leadership skills. It also empowered families to support the self-determination of students and encouraged teachers to set higher expectations for the youth with disabilities they support. All three of these components have been specifically identified by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) as among those that are critical to successfully supporting student and youth with disabilities in transitioning to postsecondary education and employment.<sup>1</sup> This project can serve as a concrete example to other school districts in Massachusetts and beyond about how to approach this kind of education initiative. As we move away from perceiving transition aged youth with disabilities as automatically incapable of making their own decisions and towards respecting that they have their own goals, ideas, and ways of living their life, we can support them in reaching their true potential.

This project also focused on educating families, students, and teachers on Supported Decision-Making, an alternative to guardianship that was also explicitly recognized by OSERS in its transition guide. As OSERS has stated, students approaching the age of majority need not be placed under guardianship in order for their family to remain involved in educational decisions. Because guardianship “places significant restrictions on the rights of an individual,” less restrictive alternatives, including Supported Decision-Making, should be considered.<sup>2</sup> These project activities successfully advanced the MDDC’s efforts to meet its State Plan Objective to

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<sup>1</sup> See U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, *A Transition Guide to Postsecondary Education and Employment for Students and Youth with Disabilities*, at pp. 14, 34, 36-38. (rev. Aug. 2020), available at <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/policy-guidance-transition-guide-postsecondary-education-employment-students-youth-disabilities-august-2020/>.

<sup>2</sup> See *id.* at 38

encourage family members and people with developmental disabilities to pursue alternatives to full guardianship.<sup>3</sup>

To encourage and promote adaption and replication, project staff developed this report, with workshop facilitation tools, that can be disseminated to transition teams across the state and nationally. The primary Massachusetts target audience for the workshop facilitation tools are Massachusetts Interagency Transition Teams. These multi-disciplinary regional teams are facilitated by a group of neighboring school districts. The teams include representatives from the key agencies and stakeholders that interact with transition aged youth, including Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, Department of Developmental Services, provider groups, and educators. With continued MDDC support, training could be provided to a Massachusetts Interagency Transition Team that provides education about guardianship alternatives and promotes the decision-making workshop model and other tools. The trainers should include self-advocates with experience using guardianship alternatives and, if there is interest, an individual who participated in the workshops.<sup>4</sup> Technical assistance could be provided to any of the Massachusetts Interagency Transition Teams or team members who seek to develop and implement a decision-making workshop using the workshop facilitation tools.

The workshop facilitation tools will be disseminated in other contexts that have a broad reach, including through Center for Public Representation's Supported Decision-Making website<sup>5</sup> and at The Arc of Massachusetts' annual Transition Conference. The tools will also be promoted through the Center for Public Representation social media platforms, shared widely with partner organizations and existing networks, and promoted at additional trainings on guardianship alternatives and Supported Decision-Making.

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<sup>3</sup> See Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council, 2021 State Plan, Objective 4.3, *available at* <https://www.mass.gov/media/2349626/download>.

<sup>4</sup> See Massachusetts Advocates Standing Strong, Supported Decision-Making, Programs & Resources, *available at* <https://www.waaremass.org/supported-decision-making>.

<sup>5</sup> See Center for Public Representation, Supported Decision-Making website, *available at* [www.supporteddecisions.org](http://www.supporteddecisions.org),