Supporting Student Self-Determination

Implementing OAR 581-015-2325 Requirements

The Regulatory Mandate

OAR 581-015-2325(2): *Beginning no later than the first IEP at or after age 14, or earlier when the IEP team determines it is appropriate, the IEP team must annually consider and, where appropriate, include age-appropriate, documented activities and goals designed to build the student's capacity to understand and exercise procedural rights and self-determination.*

A Civil Rights Perspective

Considering a student's self-determination needs is not merely about documenting a goal or checking a box; it is about ensuring students experiencing disabilities and disabled students possess the skills to function as equal citizens.

Advocacy is Access

If a student cannot articulate their learning needs or inform the team when an accommodation is ineffective, the educational program cannot be truly "appropriate."

Transfer of Rights

The IDEA mandates the transfer of procedural rights to the student at the Age of Majority (age 18 in Oregon). If we have not systematically prepared the student to exercise those rights, the system has structurally set the student up for failure.

The Research Basis

Decades of research confirm a direct correlation: students who possess high levels of self-determination achieve significantly better post-school outcomes in **employment**, **independent living**, and **community inclusion**.

Conversely, when students are passive recipients of their education – when the IEP is done *to* them rather than *with* them – data shows increased rates of dropout and disengagement.

What is Self-Determination?

Before the IEP team can support it, they must define it correctly. It is often misunderstood as simply "making choices" or "independence."

The Definition

Self-determination is acting as the **"Causal Agent"** in one's own life.
- *Plain Language:* A causal agent is someone who makes things happen in their life, rather than having things happen to them.

- *The Goal:* The student does not need to do everything *alone* (independence), but they must be the one *causing* the action to happen (volition).

The Framework: Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

To build this capacity, IEP teams should focus on the three basic psychological needs mandated by research. If the educational environment does not meet these needs, student agency will decline.

Basic Need	Definition	The Compliance Implication
Autonomy	The need to act with a sense of volition and willingness. It is the feeling that one's actions align with one's self.	**Avoid Control:** IEP goals should not be about "compliance with staff directives." They should be about the student initiating action to meet their own objectives.
Competence	The need to feel effective in one's interactions with the environment and to experience opportunities to exercise capacities.	**Scaffold, Don't Rescue:** Accommodations should enable access, not remove the challenge. Over-supporting creates "learned helplessness," which undermines this goal.
Relatedness	The need to feel connected to others, to care and be cared for, and to belong to a community.	**Cultivate Belonging:** Students cannot advocate for themselves in environments where they do not feel safe or valued. Inclusive practices are a prerequisite for self-determination.

The "Consideration" Process (Assessment)

The OAR requires the team to "consider" self-determination needs annually. Consideration of these needs would be appropriately documented within the student's statement of Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP).

To meet the requirement of "considering" self-determination needs, the IEP team needs a structured way to identify gaps. ODE suggests the Causal Agency Framework, which breaks self-determination down into three distinct, teachable areas.

Volitional Action (The "Want")

This area measures the student's ability to act based on their own preferences, values, and interests, rather than simply complying with external demands. It assesses whether the student has developed a sense of personal identity and whether they can articulate their needs to others. For students with significant communication impacts, this looks like the team effectively interpreting and honoring the student's non-verbal indicators of preference.

Guiding Questions for the Team:
- *Does the student have a clear vision for their post-school future, or are they currently echoing the preferences of their parents/guardians?*

- *Can the student identify their specific disability-related needs (e.g., "I get overwhelmed by noise") without adult prompting?*
- *Does the student initiate tasks that interest them, or do they wait for instructions before starting any activity?*

Agentic Action (The "How")

This area focuses on the strategic behaviors and executive functioning required to achieve a goal. It moves beyond "knowing what you want" to "knowing how to get there." It assesses whether the student can self-regulate, manage time, and problem-solve when they encounter an obstacle. A student with high volitional action but low agentic action often appears "motivated but disorganized."

Guiding Questions for the Team:
- *When the student encounters a barrier (e.g., a difficult text, a conflict with a peer), do they have a strategy to resolve it, or do they shut down?*
- *Does the student know exactly which accommodations they have a right to access, and do they know how to request them respectfully?*
- *Can the student break a large goal (like "passing History") into smaller, manageable steps (like "turning in the missing essay")?*

Action-Control Beliefs (The "Belief")

This is the psychological engine of self-determination. It assesses the student's belief that their actions actually matter. Many students with disabilities develop "learned helplessness," the belief that no matter what they do, the outcome is controlled by teachers or "the system." If a student does not believe their effort links to the outcome, they will not use the skills they have.

Guiding Questions for the Team:
- *Does the student believe their personal effort is linked to their success (e.g., "I passed because I studied"), or do they attribute it to luck or teacher bias (e.g., "The teacher just likes me")?*
- *Does the student possess the confidence/empowerment to request a change in their environment (e.g., asking to move seats to see better)?*
- *Does the student feel they have permission to fail and try again, or do they avoid trying new things for fear of making a mistake?*

Documenting Consideration: The PLAAFP

The "Unbreakable Chain" of Evidence

OAR 581-015-2325 requires the team to "consider" self-determination needs. The **Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP)** is the correct place to document this consideration.

A well-written PLAAFP statement creates an "Unbreakable Chain" to the goal. It must contain:
1. **Data Source:** How do we know this? (e.g., survey, observation, interview)

2. **Strength:** What does the student already do well? (Asset-based)
3. **Need:** What specific skill is missing? (The gap)
4. **Impact:** How does this affect their transition or access to education?

Below are three example PLAAFP statements. **Note how each statement sets the stage for one of the implementation options that follow.**

Example A: Strategic Needs

(Connects to Option 1 that follows: SDLMI Goal)

The Student Profile: The student knows what they want (high Volitional Action) but lacks the executive functioning or problem-solving skills to get there (low Agentic Action).

Functional Performance / Self-Determination Skills: Based on the Causal Agency Inventory completed on 10/15, [Student] demonstrates a relative strength in **Volitional Action**; they can clearly articulate a desire to graduate and become a welder. However, data indicates a significant need in **Agentic Action** (strategic planning). During the last quarter, when [Student] encountered academic barriers (e.g., missing 3+ assignments), they initiated a solution (asking for help or checking the grade portal) in 0 out of 5 observed instances, instead engaging in avoidance behaviors.

Impact of Disability: [Student]'s specific learning disability in executive functioning impairs their ability to break multi-step problems into manageable actions. Without specialized instruction in a problem-solving framework (SDLMI), [Student] will continue to rely on adult prompting to remediate grades, limiting their readiness for post-secondary training where such prompting is unavailable.

Example B: Expression Needs

(Connects to Option 2 that follows: Student-Led IEP Goal)

The Student Profile: The student attends meetings but is passive, often due to communication barriers or anxiety.

Functional Performance / Self-Determination Skills: Review of the previous IEP meeting minutes and student input survey indicates that [Student] acts as a passive participant in educational planning. While [Student] shares preferences freely in 1:1 settings with trusted staff (e.g., expressing a love for animals and quiet spaces), they contributed verbally 0 times during the last annual review and relied on the case manager to explain their strengths.

Impact of Disability: [Student]'s Autism Spectrum Disorder affects social communication, specifically regarding self-advocacy in group settings. This limits the IEP team's ability to design a truly person-centered program because the student's authentic voice is not driving the

decisions. To ensure the Transfer of Rights is meaningful at age 18, [Student] requires opportunities now to practice communicating their vision and needs in formal settings.

Example C: Advocacy Needs

(Connects to Option 3 that follows: Rights & Advocacy Goal)

The Student Profile: The student is academically capable but assumes high school supports will automatically exist in college/work.

Functional Performance / Transition Skills: On the "Post-Secondary Readiness Assessment" administered on 11/02, [Student] demonstrated a strong understanding of their diagnosis, accurately defining "dyslexia" and identifying their current accommodations. However, when presented with a workplace scenario, [Student] was unable to identify how to access those accommodations outside of high school. [Student] incorrectly stated that "the college counselor will send my IEP to my professors," indicating a lack of understanding regarding the shift from IDEA (entitlement) to ADA (eligibility/access).

Impact of Disability: While [Student] has the academic skills for college, this gap in **Action-Control Beliefs** (knowing their rights) poses a risk to retention. If [Student] does not understand the procedural requirement to self-disclose and request accommodations under the ADA, they may face barriers in higher education without the legal mechanism to resolve them.

Implementation: Documented Activities & Goals

Evidence-based practices move beyond general advice to specific instruction. The OAR requires "documented activities and goals." Goals must be measurable (i.e., they must be observable, include conditions, and contain criteria), ensuring the student isn't just "exposed" to the concept but actually acquires a skill.

The following interventions are supported by systematic reviews (e.g., Lindsay et al., 2021) and provide the data necessary for compliance.

Option 1: The Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI)

Best for

Students who struggle to connect daily tasks to long-term outcomes, or who rely heavily on adults to solve problems.

The Strategy

SDLMI is not a curriculum; it is a teaching model that shifts the locus of control to the student. Instead of the teacher identifying the problem ("You are missing three assignments"), the teacher guides the student through a cyclical 3-phase process:

(1) *Set a Goal* ("What do I want to learn?"),
(2) *Take Action* ("What is my plan?"), and
(3) *Adjust Goal* ("What have I learned?").

The critical shift here is that the student, not the teacher, identifies the barrier and selects the strategy.

Guiding Questions for the Team:
- *Who is currently tracking the student's missing work: the student or the case manager?*
- *When the student gets stuck, do we provide the answer, or do we provide a framework for them to find the answer?*

Sample Goal (Connects to Example A: Strategic Needs):
Timeframe: By [Date of Annual Review]... **Condition:** ...given a weekly academic planning session and the SDLMI graphic organizer... **Behavior:** ...[Student] will identify one academic barrier (e.g., missing materials, difficult vocabulary) and select one strategy to overcome it... **Criterion:** ...in 4 out of 5 weekly opportunities... **Measurement:** ...as measured by the student's self-monitoring log and teacher review.

Sample Service
Specially Designed Instruction in Self-Management Strategies

Option 2: The "Whose Future Is It?" / Student-Led IEP Approach

Best for
Students with limited engagement in the special education process or students who feel "done to" rather than "partnered with."

The Strategy
This intervention treats the IEP meeting as a "lab" for practicing self-advocacy. It moves beyond tokenism (e.g., the student simply attending) to meaningful leadership. The student receives direct instruction *prior* to the meeting on how to describe their strengths, their disability impact, and their vision. For students with significant communication needs, this may involve pre-recording a video or preparing a "About Me" slide deck using assistive technology.

Guiding Questions for the Team:
- *Does the student understand what an "IEP" is, or do they just know it as a meeting where adults talk about them?*
- *Is the meeting format accessible to the student? (e.g., Are we using jargon? Is there a visual agenda?)*

Sample Goal (Connects to Example B: Expression Needs):
Timeframe: By [Date of Annual Review]... **Condition:** ...given a template for a slideshow/portfolio and 3 coaching sessions prior to the IEP meeting... **Behavior:** ...[Student] will create and present a "Vision and Strengths" presentation to the IEP team... **Criterion:** ...that includes at least 3 personal strengths and 1 specific accommodation need... **Measurement:** ...as measured by the IEP meeting checklist and notes.

Sample Service
Specially Designed Instruction in Functional Communication

Option 3: Rights & Advocacy Training

Best for
Students approaching the Age of Majority (18) or preparing for college/workforce entry.

The Strategy
Many students leave the K-12 system believing the world will automatically accommodate them because "that's how school works." This intervention explicitly teaches the difference between the **entitlement** nature of IDEA (success-oriented) and the **access** nature of the ADA (equity-oriented). Students learn the specific vocabulary required to request "Reasonable Accommodations" in workplace or higher education settings, where the burden of disclosure shifts entirely to them.

Guiding Questions for the Team:
- *Can the student explain their disability in one sentence to a future employer or Disability Services office?*
- *Does the student understand that in college/work, no one will come to them to ask if they need help?*

Sample Goal (Connects to Example C: Advocacy Needs):
Timeframe: By [Date of Annual Review]... **Condition:** ...given scenario-based instruction on post-secondary rights... **Behavior:** ...[Student] will distinguish between IDEA and ADA protections and write a mock script requesting a reasonable accommodation... **Criterion:** ...scoring at least 3/4 on the Self-Advocacy Rubric... **Measurement:** ...as measured by student work samples.

Sample Service
Specially Designed Instruction in Post-Secondary Transition