

Information on Supported Decision-Making for HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATORS

What is supported decision-making?

Supported decision-making (SDM) is the process of empowering individuals with disabilities to make decisions as an alternative to guardianship when they reach the age of majority. Students may need support from others to make informed decisions about their future. A supported decision-making arrangement can be helpful for individuals with disabilities, or people whose first language is not English, who face complex decisions and need support to help them understand and exercise their rights

This is a process we would like high school educators and administrators to understand so they can offer information to the student and family about their options as the student approaches the age of majority.

What can I do as an educator to support this process before the age of majority?

As an educator or administrator your role is to encourage the student and their family to consider supported decision-making and other alternatives to guardianship. It is an educator's responsibility to prepare students to make the best decisions possible. The following activities can empower and teach students to make decisions about their future:

- Ensure students are informed about Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination;
- Engage students in problem solving activities that encourage them to think critically about their decisions;
- Offer opportunities to students as part of transition services in the IEP to learn key information about important decisions such as: where to live, what services to access, career choices, medical care, legal rights and processes and financial management;
- Explain the Transfer of Rights and the Individual Education Program (IEP) process to the student;
- Encourage students to take on key roles in their IEP meeting and the creation of their summary of performance to demonstrate an active awareness of their strengths and needs as well as necessary accommodations;
- Support students to develop effective strategies to communicate and negotiate preferences and choices;
- Counsel students on ways to make the best decisions and show them the costs and benefits to each of the options before them.

When should I start to discuss these issues with my students?

Throughout their education careers, students should be actively involved in the decision-making process. If we begin to involve students at a young age, they are more aware of their support network and their ability to make decisions on their own or request support from someone they trust. As an element of post-secondary transition, students should be taught to make education and other decisions on their own. More formal discussion of supported decision-making and other alternatives to guardianship should begin no later than the 9th grade.

What are ways to encourage parent involvement?

Parents have had many years of being the primary decision-maker for their child and this may be a big

change. No later than the 9th grade as transition planning begins, teachers and parents should encourage students to be active participants in making decisions about their education. Parents and students can begin to learn and work together towards increased decision-making responsibility for students as they approach adulthood. While parents should still plan on providing support at the level the student asks for, the goal is to encourage parents to take less responsibility and for students to take more responsibility for their education and other life decisions.

After turning 18...

What is the role of the adult student in the supported decision-making (SDM) process?

When the student turns 18 they have the right to make their own education and other decisions unless that right is taken away by an order of guardianship. Similarly, students who are 18 and over, including students with disabilities, have the right to determine the people who make up their education support network. The student's role is to identify these individuals and seek their guidance regarding education matters, as needed.

How is the supported decision-making process different from guardianship?

Supported decision-making can be used as an alternative to guardianship. In guardianship, a guardian is appointed by the court to make decisions on behalf of the student. In supported decision-making students seek assistance from adults they trust to help them in making key decisions in their lives, however, the student makes the final decision.

Who can be a member of the supported decision-making network?

Students may choose to include their parents or may choose to establish a broader supported decision-making network of adults the student trusts. Students choose these people based on their trust in that individual. Students will rely on the members to support them in making education decisions. Supported decision-making network members should support students in making education decisions but they do not make decisions for them.

What documents are needed to begin a supported decision-making process?

Vermont is in the process of creating forms necessary for the supported decision-making process. These forms can be found at <http://www.gmsavt.org/>

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The Vermont Supported Decision-Making Partnership

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