

# Dare to Dream: Leadership Conferences for Students With Disabilities

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*An Article Published in*

*TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*

*Volume 2, Issue 6, July 2006*

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## Abstract

As a statewide initiative, New Jersey has been hosting teen leadership conferences for students with disabilities. The focus of the conferences is to address skills necessary to be successful in school and for transition to life after high school. The conferences are held throughout New Jersey at universities and colleges. Students with disabilities present keynotes speeches, read poetry, and facilitate workshops for other students like themselves. The benefits of these conferences for the thousands who have attended are innumerable. The teen leaders leave with confidence and a feeling of accomplishment. The attendees leave with valuable information, enhanced self awareness, advocacy skills, and a feeling of belonging. Teachers, parents, child study team members, supervisors, and other school chaperones leave with increased pride and knowledge of their students. This article details the history, constituents, preparation, activities, and outcomes and benefits of the conference initiative.

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## Keywords

self advocacy, transition, leadership

## SUGGESTED CITATION:

Amerman, T., & Carr-Jones, J. (2006). Dare to dream: Leadership conferences for students with disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children Plus*, 2(6) Article 1. Retrieved [date] from <http://escholarship.bc.edu/education/tecplus/vol2/iss6/art1>

## Introduction

“Dare to Dream” is a New Jersey statewide initiative in which students with disabilities come together for a day to share their experiences in life and school. The one day student leadership conferences are led by high school students with disabilities for other high school students with disabilities from throughout the state. In addition to inviting students and teacher chaperones, districts are strongly encouraged to include parents. Other attendees have included adult agency representatives, special education directors, principals, child study team members, and even district superintendents.

The purpose of the conference is to help students develop skills in self-determination. Self-determination has often been cited as a necessary aspect for effective transition planning for students with disabilities (Eisenman, 2001; Wehmeyer, 2002; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Wehmeyer, Agran, and Hughes (1998) identified self-advocacy and leadership skills, self-knowledge, and self-awareness as three of twelve component skills of self-determined behavior. The “Dare to Dream” student leadership conferences emphasize activities that address those critical areas.

## Background

The conferences were borne out of the need for more effective transition services for our students in special education. Due to efforts by New Jersey’s Office of Special Education Programs, transition hit its stride in New Jersey with a major initiative to support students, parents, school districts, and adult service providers. This initiative was the *Partnership for Transition*, a systems change grant that was implemented in the early

1990’s. Through the grant, consortiums of key players were organized to discuss issues of transition from school to adult life. For the first time, stakeholders in the transition process were seated around the same table, by county, to discuss referral to adult services, parent concerns, transportation, and access to resources. Similar concerns that arose during these meetings included lack of student participation in IEP meetings, unrealistic student expectations for adult life, and limited student self-awareness and advocacy skills. Powers, Gil-Kashiwabara, Geenen, Powers, Balandran, and Palmer (2005) found “approximately 24% of the time, students did not sign their IEP” and “less than 7% of the IEPs referenced any type of self-determination education” (p. 56).

From this major initiative grew the concept of student leadership conferences. Teachers reported that conferences piloted through the *Partnership for Transition* were effective and beneficial. It has long been accepted that self-determination and self-advocacy skills enhance the capability of students with disabilities to assume responsibility for their lives and transition effectively from school to adult life (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997, 1998). In addition, researchers of a pilot study designed to teach leadership skills to students with mild disabilities found students’ perceptions of leadership and self-esteem were raised after participating in leadership activities (Imada, Doyle, Brock, & Goddard, 2002). The self-advocacy, leadership skills, and enhanced self-confidence learned at the conferences carried over into the classroom and IEP meetings. After attending a conference, teachers and transition coordinators encouraged students to continue to find out more about themselves, the way they learn, and the supports they can utilize to facilitate learning. The students who partici-

pated in the pilot conferences were energized to share their stories with other students.

The New Jersey student leadership conferences have grown from a gathering of a few regional high schools into a major statewide event attended by over 2,000 students and educators each year. In the spring of 2005, there were eight conferences, with over 200 students from 40 districts who were involved as presenters or keynote speakers. In 2006, three middle school conferences were added to the “Dare to Dream” conference series.

### **Constituents**

In addition to students, parents, and school personnel, representatives from adult agencies often attend each conference. Adult service agencies provide an important link between the conferences and adult life. Representatives of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the Division of Developmental Disabilities, the Division of Disability Services, the Office of Civil Rights, and the Division of Youth and Family Services have attended conferences to provide information and to speak with interested attendees. Through a partnership with each of the State’s twelve Centers for Independent Living (CIL), support is provided for presenter groups through a project called “Promoting Self-Advocacy.” The goals of the CILs and “Promoting Self-Advocacy” are to teach students to: (a) access postsecondary education, employment, housing, recreation, medical and other federal, state, and local community services; and (b) apply self-advocacy, self-determination, and self-help skills and strategies in pursuit of adult independent living goals. Employees from independent CILs support students and teachers who are preparing presentations.

The Transition Coordinators Network (TCN) is another strong participant in the student conferences. The TCN is a grassroots group of teachers and transition coordinators who meet regularly to learn about current issues in transition, to network, and to share program and professional information. The members of the TCN are often influential in recommending and preparing student presenter groups and assume the responsibility of motivating and practicing with their students. Dedicated professionals have always been an important part of the success of the “Dare to Dream” conference series.

### **Preparation**

Preparation for the conferences begins with the conference planning committee. Participants of the planning committee include state education staff, university professors, teachers, parents, and students and adults with disabilities. The team uses feedback from previous conferences to shape future conferences.

Presenter groups are given materials detailing a variety of activities. They can choose from a possible list of topic areas or they can choose to create an original presentation. The four topic areas often addressed are self-discovery, self-advocacy, IEPs, and college/post secondary planning. These effective, interactive workshops can take the form of a panel discussion, theatrical show, role-play, video, hands-on activity, or other multimedia production. Groups, chosen by district teachers, select and practice their topic. The teacher then communicates with a conference coordinator and provides the title of the workshop and a brief synopsis.

Initially, on site technical assistance was available to support districts with conference preparation, but as the number of pre-

senting school groups dramatically increased, the trainings were moved to New Jersey Learning Resource Centers (LRC). LRCs are libraries of materials for special educators, where the workshops for teacher trainings are held. The purpose of the LRC workshops is to provide technical assistance to districts as they prepare for the conferences and to include more school districts in the conferences. Topics in the training include self-discovery, self-advocacy, IEPs, and consideration of post-secondary education. This type of additional training in curricula for self-determination assists teachers in finding a place in the school day to address these topics. The logistics of how, when, and where to teach self-determination and other skills are typically addressed in the LRC training (Test, Mason, Hughes, Konrad, Neale, & Wood, 2004; Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, 2004). Along with the library materials, LRCs provide generous spaces with supplies (and ideas) for the creation and development of classroom materials including laminating machines, die cutters, and assistive technology software.

## **Conferences**

### *Purpose*

The purpose of the “Dare to Dream” leadership conferences is to provide students with disabilities an opportunity to examine concepts of transition and to share their experiences with other students with special needs. As many educators know, students with disabilities have few chances for leadership in traditional high schools. These conferences dare students to see themselves in leadership roles by making major presentations. Not only do these presentations allow students to hear the applause, but they provide significant

experience for their resumes or college applications.

Students are encouraged to bring information gained from their conference experience back to their own districts. As a result, many student participants have made presentations to teachers, parents, younger students with disabilities, and board of education members from their own districts.

### *Location*

The conferences are held on college campuses across the state. Often the support programs for college students with disabilities help with the organization of the day’s activities. Having the conferences on college campuses shows students that they are viewed as young adults. One student recently reported that after attending a conference at a local college, she decided to apply there. She is presently pursuing certification as a special education teacher at that college. This was an unplanned reward.

### *Program*

As students arrive for the conference, they are greeted by New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs personnel. While the teachers check in the groups, students are handed an ice-breaker survey, which requires that they meet someone from another school.

The day begins in a plenary session, where selected adult motivational speakers share the stage with local student keynote presenters. The high school keynote speakers are identified and recommended by teachers, who help edit the speeches and prepare and encourage the students. The keynote addresses are submitted ahead of time to the conference coordinator for review. Keynote speakers have included students classified as having the following disabilities: blindness/

visual impairments, hearing impairments, emotional disorders, autism, learning disabilities, multiple disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, and cognitive impairments. Each student generally works at the neighborhood school fine-tuning his or her speech. Often students who attend the conference for the first time will offer to write a speech for the following year. Figure 1 contains excerpts from past keynote speeches. Following is one of the inspirational messages from a student keynote:

*The answer lies in a common misconception about special education students; that they are intellectually inferior to those in mainstream education,*

*that they cannot do the same work, that they cannot fulfill the same potential. This is certainly not the case. History is full of examples of great individuals who historians believe would today be considered neurologically disabled by our society's standards. Amongst them are Thomas Jefferson, Albert Einstein, Sir Isaac Newton, Steven Spielberg, and countless others. These people did not succeed in spite of their differences, but because of them, because they had a unique outlook on the world that only their differences could give them.*

*(Ari, "Dare to Dream" conference, May 2005, Rutgers, The State University.)*

Figure 1

I was born with Down syndrome. I had intestinal surgery when I was 2 days old. I had open heart surgery when I was 15 months old. I had intestinal surgery again when I was 18 years old. When I was a baby, the doctors told my parents that I may never walk or talk or be able to learn because I had Down syndrome. But, I can walk and talk. And I can even dance! (Heidi, "Dare to Dream" conference, May 2004, The College of New Jersey)

We should all cherish schooling and education because the acquisition of knowledge is one of the most thrilling things someone can experience. It doesn't need to be textbook knowledge, either. It can be the solution of a mystery story, or learning a new dance move, or mastering a new song on the guitar. It's all knowledge, it's all education, and it's all important. (Matt, "Dare to Dream" conference, May 2005, Montclair State University)

I think most important for me, there are people who have helped me understand what it means to have autism. It never stops me from doing things, but sometimes it helps me understand why I become angry and frustrated. Students should learn about their disability. It is not something to be ashamed about. Students should have the experiences that will help them gain confidence in themselves and know that they can accomplish extraordinary things in their lives as I have. (Chris, Class President Ridgefield Memorial High School, "Dare to Dream" conference, March 2002, New Jersey City University)

After the keynote speeches, motivational speakers take the stage. Four recent speakers include an athlete who has been deaf all his life yet tried out for the Olympics; a young man who was born blind in Nigeria and educated in New Jersey; a young, gifted poet with learning disabilities who struggled through high school with his self-esteem and identity; and a young Latino woman with Cerebral Palsy, who was educated in a large, urban city and recently graduated from college with a degree in English. Each speaker told his or her very personal story of challenges and successes, while providing a model for the students in the audience.

The second part of the conference day features breakout sessions led by high school student teams. The creativity of student presentations is truly inspirational. Past workshops have included self-discovery activities, self-advocacy panels, the Individual Education Program (IEP) process, college and post secondary planning seminars, interest and preference instruments, hands-on goal-planning sessions, study skills presentations, and other creative and original topics.

The sessions are hands-on and interactive. One "learning style" activity calls for participants to go to various corners after questions are read. Once in the corner, the students are given a colored card that corresponds to a learning style. For example, a red card represents auditory learning, a green card represents visual learning, and a yellow card represents kinesthetic learning. After repeating this process a few times, the students have a handful of cards. They are asked to identify the color of the majority of cards in their hand and move to the poster in the room of that color. The facilitators then lead even smaller groups. Each learning style group discusses how that learning style affects them as students. The facilitator can also discuss practi-

cal tips for learning and studying that match the preferred style. For example, kinesthetic learners may want to walk and talk as they memorize material for a test, showing the group that recognizing one's learning style can facilitate learning.

Innovative activities are welcomed and encouraged. One such activity is the IEP play, an original work created by the parent of special education children, written in the style of the television show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" Another student group wrote an original musical about self-advocacy and accepting disabilities, while a different student group gave a PowerPoint presentation on study skills.

Following the breakout sessions are lunch and closure. During lunch, students are provided time and opportunity to network with other students from around the state. The conclusion of the conference has taken on a number of transformations including an "open mic" session in which students openly shared their experiences from the day and a talent segment in which students sang, danced, and/or read poetry.

## **Outcomes and Benefits**

The major outcome of the conferences is that students in special education are provided with the opportunity to be leaders, self-advocates, and teachers to their peers. While there has been no formal assessment of student surveys, more than two decades of research supports the instruction of students in the use of self-determination skills that include decision making, self-advocacy, self-discovery, goal setting/attainment, problem solving, self-regulation, and participation in the IEP (Test et al., 2004). In addition, Test, Fowler, Brewer, and Wood (2005) reviewed 25 self-advocacy intervention studies and

found that instruction in knowledge of self and communication, as well as knowledge of rights and leadership skills in some studies, was provided to teach students to increase their participation in their education and transition planning meetings.

Teachers and students offer valuable feedback and anecdotal evidence. Most of their reports are very positive. Teachers comment that students continue to talk about and reflect on what they have seen, heard, and experienced well after the conference. It is not uncommon to hear these conversations begin over the lunch table as students relax and regroup before returning to their schools.

A number of student groups have been motivated to meet again. More than a few groups have gone on to organize self-advocacy and other types of student clubs where they can share ideas about school and home issues and continue discussions about their future. Recently, two clubs were asked to open their doors to non-disabled students who have similar needs and concerns. These student organizations often turn out to be the next cadre of conference presenters.

Another benefit to the students is the location of the conferences. For many students, it is their first visit to a college campus. Although the college may not be in full session, students get a feel for the campus environment. As they hear from disability services advisors and/or current students at the college, they gain a more realistic perspective of the academic challenges they will face and the supports that are available to help them be successful. Students who are undecided about their future often begin to see college as a viable post-school option.

This past year, students were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questions focused on what students felt they needed to know more about in order to participate effec-

tively in their IEP and transition planning meetings. At the conclusion of the conference, students were also asked to comment on what they learned from the “Dare to Dream” experience. Their responses suggest that a one day conference can truly begin to change attitudes and perspectives. This outcome is supported by a compilation of results from twelve studies that showed improved student involvement in participation in their IEP meetings or an increase of scores on a self-determination test after an intervention (Test et al., 2004).

Testimonials from past conferences indicate that a good deal of important learning and thinking goes on during and after the conferences. Most students are surprised to find so many students like themselves with disabilities. Their self-esteem is enhanced as they participate in activities that explore their strengths, interests, and learning styles. They also learn about the importance of self-advocacy and how they are empowered by their rights and responsibilities. As they hear from other students who have succeeded, students gain confidence in themselves - their expectations and aspirations are raised. They learn to put their disability in perspective. It does not define who they are. Some of the reflections and comments from student attendees are contained in Figure 2. Most important of all, from a transition perspective, students begin to see the future as a set of options that they control, not a predetermined set of events. Even students who cannot articulate their learning seem to take something away from the experience. As one student said, “I learned a lot of things, but it’s too many words.” A next phase of the project will be to develop a district toolkit that will assist and encourage teachers and counselors to follow up on this learning.



Figure 2

- There are a lot of people with disabilities like me. I don't feel alone any more.
- I didn't know I was a kinesthetic learner.
- I learned to stand up for myself, to not hide my disability.
- Don't be afraid to speak up in various situations. It's OK to ask questions.
- It's OK to talk about your learning disability. I shouldn't be ashamed of it.
- Having a learning disability doesn't limit me as much as I thought.
- I learned that some people like me, who were in the same boat, graduated college.
- I need to take charge of myself.
- I found out to make sure I know my disability before I leave high school.
- Up to this day, I didn't know about some of the laws that I'm protected by.
- I learned to work with others who are different from me.
- Disabilities are not the easy way out. It's not an excuse. Don't let people judge you because you have a disability.

From all reports, student presenters reap the greatest benefits from the conferences. Preparing for a conference is an exercise in teamwork. Whether they are participating in a student panel or conducting a hands-on activity, students learn that each member of the group has a role to play in making a successful presentation. After their workshops, the joy and pride of student presenters seems immeasurable. Teachers are rewarded by hearing students talk about their workshops, observing new friendships made that day, and listening to the applause and reactions from the audience lauding the students' bravery. Student audience members are

often inspired to respond with thoughtful comments and their own personal anecdotes. Again, teachers report that presenters return to school with greater confidence, pride, and a new sense of status within their school community. These are the groups most likely to "reconvene" and evolve into student organizations.

Perhaps the strongest "data" in support of the conference model is the steady rise in attendance. The conferences have touched the lives of thousands of students, and each year the number of student groups who participate in and present activities for conferences multiplies. Teachers, counselors, transi-

tion coordinators, and parents recognize that the conferences provide a meaningful experience for their students. They support the rare opportunity that the conferences provide for students to spend a sustained and focused amount of time reflecting on who they are, where they are going in the future, and how they might get there. "Dare to Dream" is

more than just the conference title, it is a necessity for all students with disabilities.

The following original poem, written by motivational speaker LeDerick Horne, eloquently reflects the theme and intention of the student leadership conferences:

### ***Dare to Dream***

*Dedicated to all the students with disabilities at the New Jersey Department of Education's "Dare to Dream" Conferences who led workshops and gave inspiring presentations about their struggles and triumphs.*

*We are gathered here today  
to bear witness,  
to bear witness to the union  
of two beautiful people  
Yes, today is the day that we merge  
who you are  
with who you want to be,  
making the vision  
and the reality – one  
An integration  
born of communication  
and made tangible  
by your commitment to yourself*

*Now, I know some of you might be afraid  
but don't let cold feet  
stop you from jumping the broom,  
from taking the first step,  
from beginning a journey  
that will transform your life*

*Yes, I know some of you might be afraid,  
But you see, it's my job  
- to show you that better days are coming*

*Yes, it's my job  
- to be Harriet Tubman like  
with my movements and verse  
So if I have to steal a way*

*just for us to make a way, well then Star  
I'll be the first one with his hand in the cookie jar  
of self-advocacy,  
I'll use these sticky fingers  
to pick-pocket the pocket of  
self-determination,  
    And if I got to grand-theft-auto  
    the Mercedes-Benz  
    of a quality-education,  
well then they might as well leave the doors unlocked  
and the keys in the ignition  
'cause I'm gone in 60 seconds  
and aint' NOTHING, and I mean NOTHING  
standing in my way  
You see, it's my job  
to unlock doors  
unshackle minds  
break through glass ceilings  
motivate, inspire, and challenge you,  
-I'm here to challenge you*

*And so I dare you,  
- I dare you to sit in your seat  
and not feel moved  
by the testimonies of these brave souls,  
who come before you as examples of excellence*

*I dare you,  
- I dare you to look in the mirror  
without imagining,  
see yourself as yourself  
A diamond, that might need a little polishing,  
but whose beauty has always existed*

*I dare you,  
- I dare you to step,  
bounce, and move to your own rhythm  
excite minds  
in time  
we'll redefine the system  
I write lines  
designed to embrace and kiss,  
plus supercharge like imports strapped with nitrous,*

*this is a revolution  
a fight for inclusion  
segregation is no solution  
Brown vs. Ed is how I'm provin'  
we deserve the best  
nothin' more and nothin' less,  
every child gets left behind  
when all we focus on are tests*

*And so I dare you,  
- To judge yourselves by a different standard,  
to lift as you climb,  
to fight like gladiators  
to become master and commander  
of your own beautiful minds*

*But above all else,  
I dare you to dream – dare to dream y'all*

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