

ASPIRE

Active Student Participation Inspires Real Engagement

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Funding Sources: Program ASPIRE, Active Student Participation Inspires Real Engagement, is funded by a five-year State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) awarded to the state of Georgia by the United States Department of Education.

Project Cost and Budget Narrative: The project did not have a direct cost to Northwest Georgia Learning Resource System, GLRS. The implementation of the project was distributed among personnel as “other duties as assigned”. The Georgia Learning Resources System (GLRS) is a network of 18 regional programs that provide training and resources to school district personnel, parents of students with disabilities, and other interested individuals to support the achievement, graduation rate, and post-secondary success of students with disabilities. The programs are funded by the Georgia Department of Education, Divisions for Special Education Services and Supports, and are operated in collaboration with Regional Educational Service Agencies and local school districts that serve as fiscal agents for the programs. GLRS programs are funded entirely with federal discretionary funds made available through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA).

Project Description: The ASPIRE initiative supports the development of student self-determination and self-advocacy skills. This is accomplished by teaching students to become active participants and leaders in the development of their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) thereby increasing their roles in making educational decisions based on their strengths, challenges and desired goals. Students participate in weekly self-determination lessons in the Georgia Network of Therapeutic Support (GNETS) classroom and lead their annual IEP meeting.

Staffing Pattern: The ASPIRE initiative was designed to be implemented throughout the state of Georgia with the assistance of GLRS personnel. For this project, Northwest GLRS combined efforts with Northwest Georgia Network of Educational and Therapeutic Supports (GNETS) to implement ASPIRE throughout Northwest Georgia. To date, the staffing used for the ASPIRE project includes one GLRS program specialist, one GNETS coordinator, 14 high school teachers, and 11 middle school teachers.

Population Served:

Number of students:

2016-2017 84 HS students

2017-2018 88 HS students

2017-2018 65 MS Students

Description of project participants/participant selection criteria:

GNETS services are an option to local school systems in the continuum of special education supports that prevents children from requiring residential or more restrictive placement. Specifically, GNETS provides comprehensive educational and therapeutic support services to students who exhibit intense social, emotional and/or behavioral challenges with a severity, frequency or duration such that the provision of education and related services in the general

education environment have not enabled him or her to benefit educationally. These students' behaviors may include but are not limited to, significant, aggressive, self-destructive, atypical, and withdrawal behaviors. GNETS services are implemented with greater intensity and frequency than what is typically delivered in a general education school environment. The project participants consist of the students currently receiving GNETS services throughout Northwest Georgia. During the 2016-2017 school year, participants included the high school population. For the 2017-2018 school year, middle school students, along with high school students, participated in the ASPIRE initiative.

Project Origination: The Georgia SPDG includes GraduateFIRST, a nationally recognized project that utilizes a data-driven intervention framework developed by the National Dropout Center for Students with Disabilities to successfully address barriers to graduation for students with disabilities. Developed and implemented during the previous SPDG (2007 – 2012), the project expanded in 2013 when SPDG personnel partnered with colleagues from the Office of School Improvement to implement GraduateFIRST in Focus Schools identified as needing improvement based on performance of students with disabilities.

In addition, the SPDG expanded its graduation focus with the development of a College and Career Readiness Project that focuses on successful transition planning and improved postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. During Phase I of this project, technical assistance was provided to selected school districts based on data indicating noncompliance related to the secondary transition requirements (e.g. measurable transition goals, assessments, and services) for students aged sixteen and above. In Phases 2 and 3 of the College and Career Readiness Project, the districts implemented Project ASPIRE, a student-led IEP initiative that builds self-confidence, self-determination, and self-advocacy skills which are essential in preparing students for the educational, career and independent living decisions that they will need for adulthood.

Issues Addressed: Numerous studies have found that students who are more involved in setting educational goals are more likely to reach their goals. Drs. Field and Hoffman developed a model designed to guide the development of self-determination instructional interventions. According to the model, instructional activities in areas such as increasing self-awareness; improving decision-making, goal-setting and goal-attainment skills; enhancing communication and relationship skills; and developing the ability to celebrate success and learn from reflecting on experiences lead to increased student self-determination. Self-determination instructional programs help students learn how to participate more actively in educational decision-making by helping them become familiar with the educational planning process, assisting them to identify information they would like to share at educational planning meetings, and supporting students to develop skills to effectively communicate their needs and wants.

This research, in combination with the state of Georgia's ASPIRE initiative, led to a collaboration between Northwest GLRS and Northwest GNETS. The collaboration resulted in a data driven plan of action to introduce explicit self-determination skills-based lessons into the Northwest GNETS program. In partnership with the Northwest GNETS director, the following areas of focus were determined:

The student should be able to

- (1) set learning and behavioral goals
- (2) solve problems
- (3) make decision
- (4) assume responsibility for their choices.

As different options were discussed for the implementation of the ASPIRE initiative it was determined that there was a need to have a GNETS in-house expert that would assist the GLRS program specialist with implementation of ASPIRE throughout Northwest GNETS.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

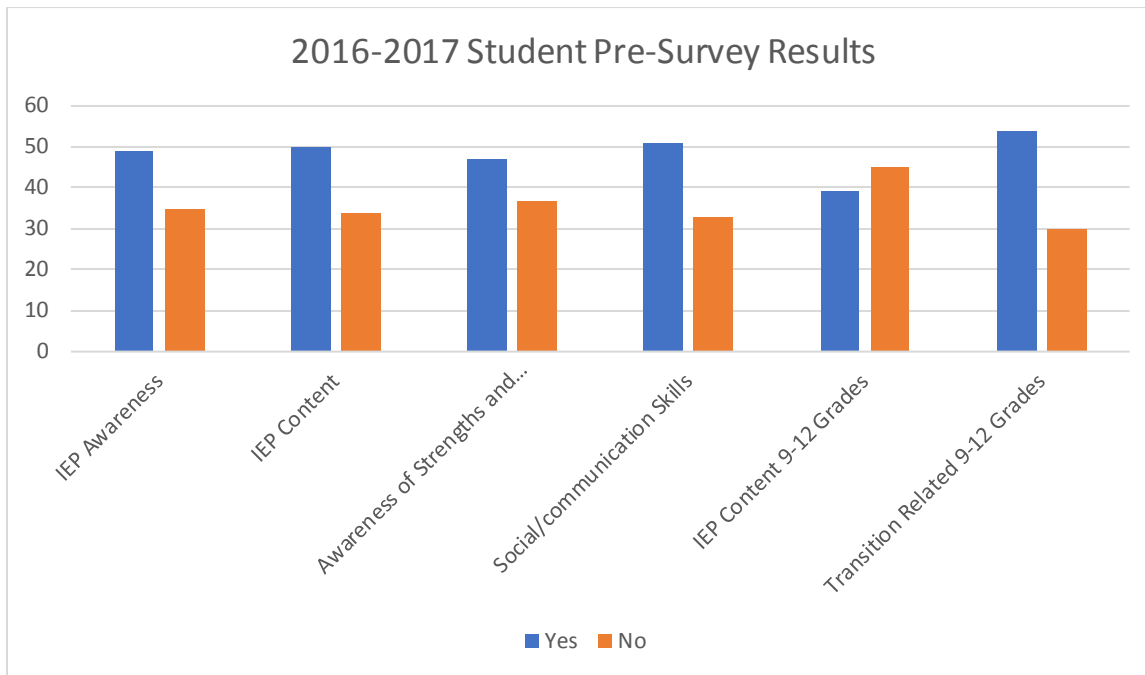
As a part of the ASPIRE program, the students are asked to complete a pre- and post-survey regarding their knowledge and participation in the IEP process. The pre-survey is completed one time at the beginning of the student's initial participation in the ASPIRE program. A post-survey is completed yearly after the student's annual IEP meeting. This data is collected at the GLRS level and is analyzed. The survey focuses on the following key program initiatives:

- 1) I know why individual members are in the IEP meetings and how they help me (IEP Awareness)
- 2) I can name at least one new strength and one new challenge as it relates to my disability (Awareness of Strengths and Challenges)
- 3) I can name a goal(s) that I am working on from my IEP (IEP Content)
- 4) I communicate likes, dislikes, and interests to the IEP team (Social/communication Skills)
- 5) I can identify accommodation(s) and support(s) that are listed in my IEP and how they help me (IEP Content 9-12 Grades)
- 6) I can name my career pathway and one course related to it (Transition Related 9-12 Grades)

It is the hope of the program coordinators that the results show an increase each year in the students' participation in the IEP meeting process.

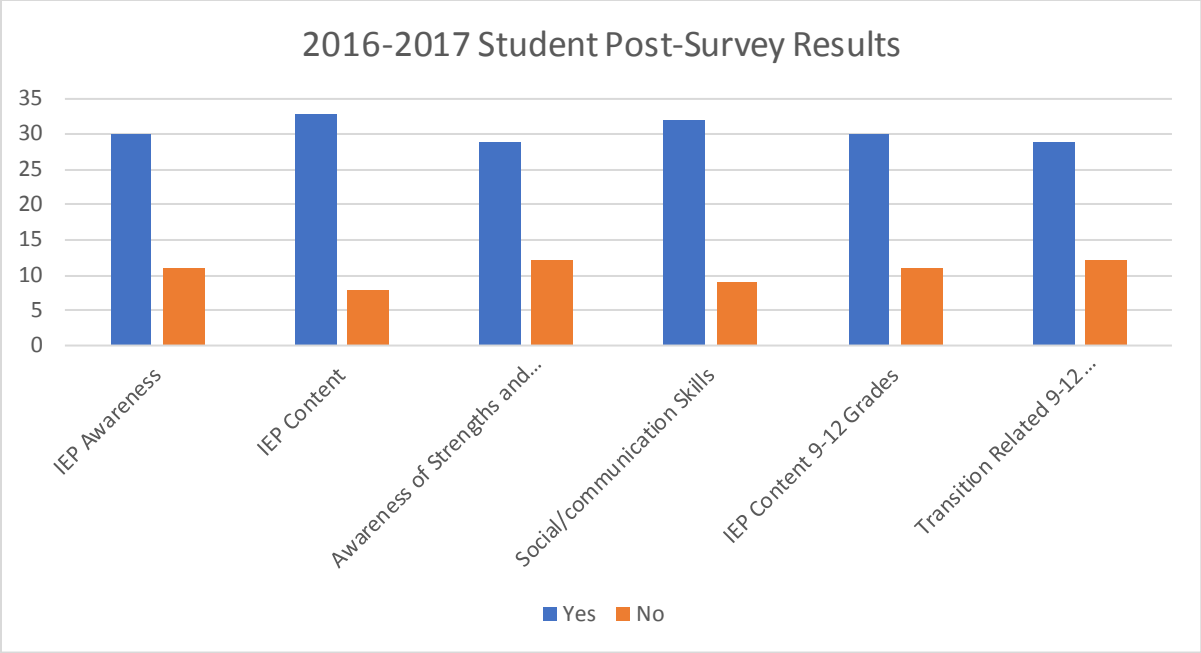
Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

2016-2017 High School Pre-Survey Results - 84 Participants



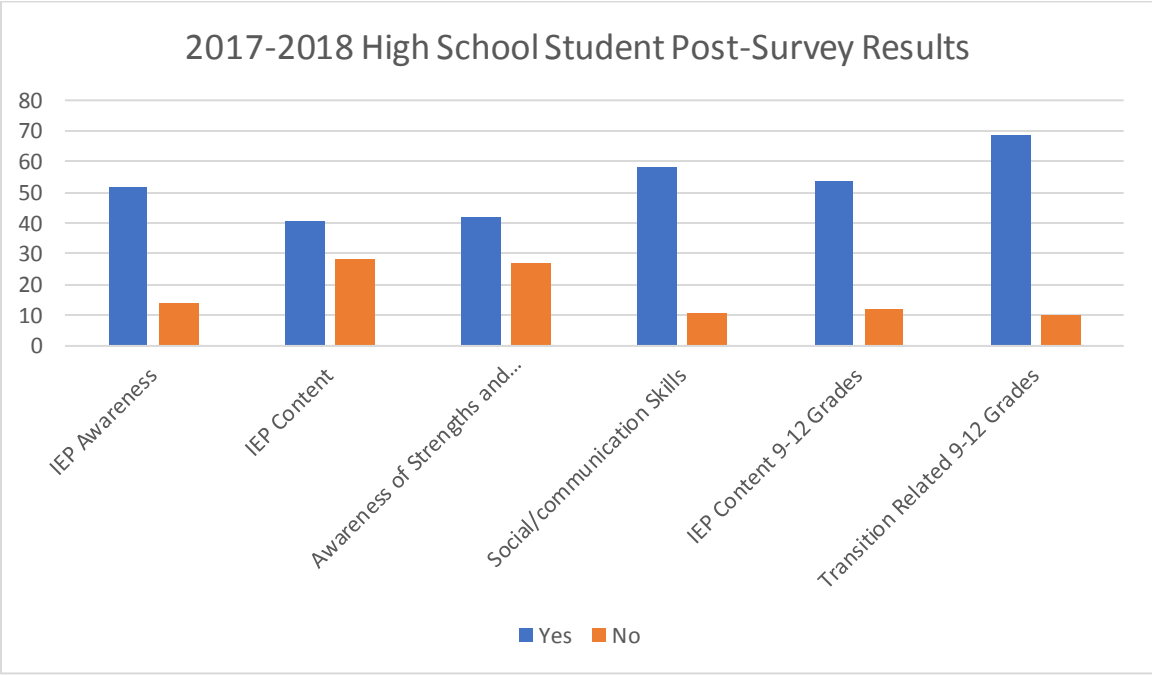
For 2016-2017, 84 out of 84 students participated in the pre-survey. The results show that students were most comfortable with transition planning. This is likely due to a history of students being active participants in this task. Students were least involved in understanding and contributing to their accommodations, supports and IEP content.

2016-2017 High School Post-survey Results – 42 Participants



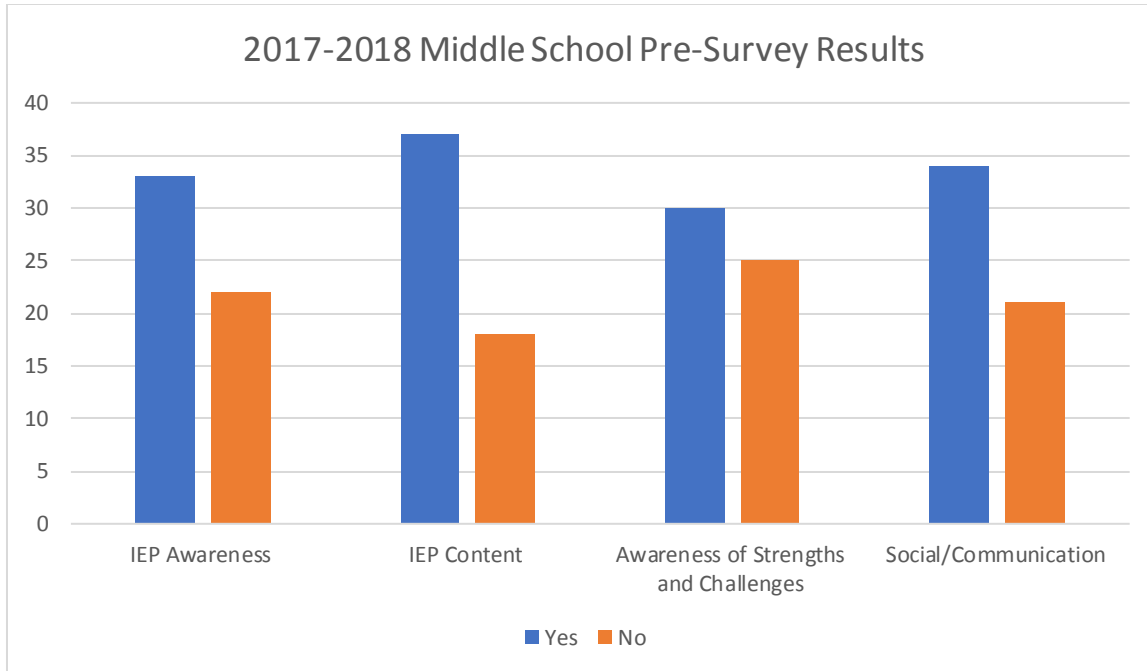
Half of the students participating in the pre-survey completed the post-survey. Of those participating the highest number of positive responses were in IEP content related to naming a goal that is currently in progress. Students demonstrated a lack of active participation in being able to identify awareness of strengths and weaknesses.

2017-2018 High School Post-survey Results – 69 Participants



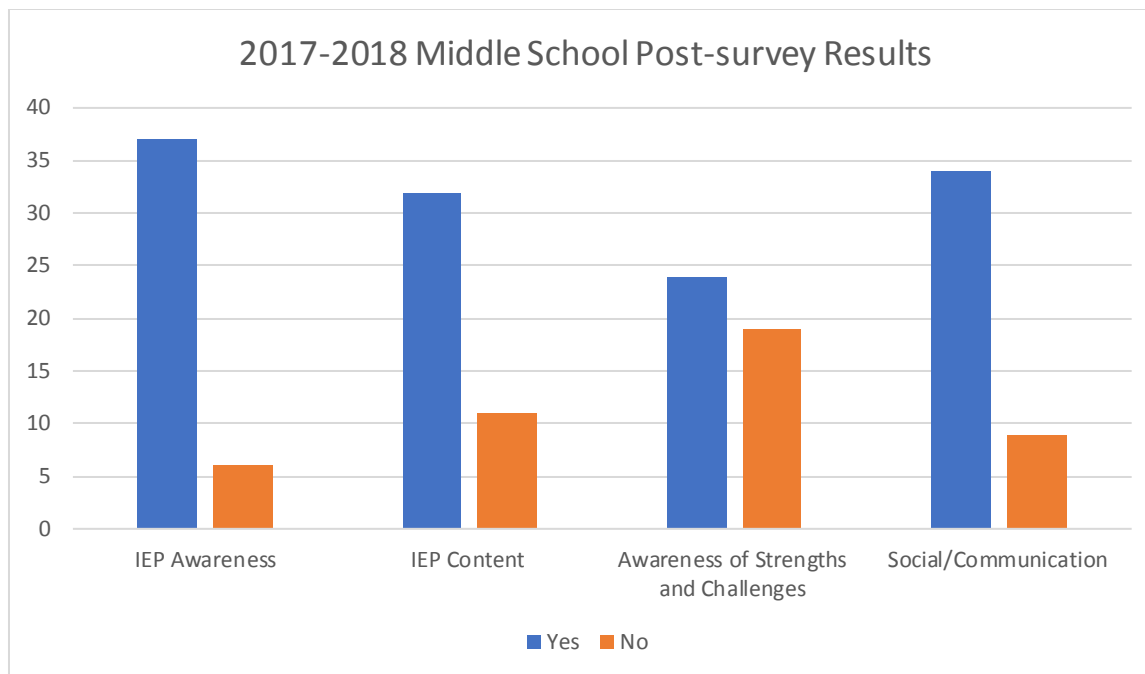
Due to the lack of high school new student participation, pre-survey data is not available to report. Only 69, out of the 88 students enrolled in the high school GNETS program, completed the post-surveys. Data from the completed post-surveys indicated that the students remain comfortable with transition planning. Data shows that identifying goals and having an awareness of strengths and weaknesses continues to be an area of need.

2017-2018 Middle School Pre-Survey Results – 55 Participants



Only 55 of the 65 middle school students participated in the pre-survey due to unknown factors. Unlike the high school students, pretest results show that students at the middle school level are more comfortable identifying goals from their IEP, but struggle to identify their own strengths and weaknesses.

2017-2018 Middle School Post-survey Results – 42 Participants



At the end of the year, students continue to demonstrate the lack of ability to name their strengths and weaknesses. This is a focus area for the upcoming school year. By students identifying their strengths and weaknesses, they are better equipped to discuss their goals and objectives.

Strategies and/or Interventions:

The Northwest GNETS program serves 17 school districts which creates difficulty when effectively planning professional development regarding program implementation. The 2016-2017 school year was the first year of ASPIRE. To streamline the initial roll-out, it was determined that the ASPIRE GNETS in-house expert and the GLRS program specialist would visit each high school teacher to provide one-on-one training. The expectation was set that each teacher would submit one lesson plan focused on self-determination each month to a Google Drive lesson plan bank managed by the GNETS in-house expert. This lesson plan bank was then accessible to the participating teachers to use as a resource for the additional lessons taught throughout the month. In 2017, middle school teachers and new high school teachers were trained in the same manner. Additionally, ASPIRE was presented at the Northwest GNETS full staff meeting prior to the start of the school year. Lesson plans continue to be submitted monthly through Google Drive to the Northwest GNETS in house expert.

Google Drive was used to manage the pre- and post-survey documents and results.

Project Timeline:

- 2016-2017 - 12 high school classrooms
- 2017-2018 - 11 middle school classrooms
- 2018-2019 - 11 Elementary classrooms

Year One (2016-2017)

- GNETS identified in-house expert.
- GNETS in-house expert attended training held by GLRS program specialist
- GNETS in-house expert became familiar with ASPIRE initiatives, gathered resources, and joined information sites
- GLRS program specialist and the GNETS in-house expert worked with the GNETS director and area coordinators to identify participants and a rollout model.
- In July 2016, the following were identified:
 - Goals Aspire will support
 - Current initiatives and plans where ASPIRE could be embedded
 - Schools for implementation
 - Area leaders
- GNETS in-house expert met with the GLRS program specialist in August 2016 to establish a scale up model and implementation plan.
- September 2016 - GLRS program specialist and GNETS in-house expert held an overview informational meeting to introduce the implementation plan to area leaders.
- September 2016 - GNETS in-house expert and GLRS program specialist conducted teacher trainings.
- September through May the GNETS in-house expert monitored lesson plan submission.
- June 2017 – GLRS program specialist and GNETS in-house expert met with area leaders to evaluate the implementation process and review the implementation plan for year 2.

Year Two (2017-2018)

- June 2017 – GLRS program specialist and GNETS in-house expert met and discussed feedback from area leaders. Year 2 implementation plan was reviewed, and necessary changes were made.
- July 2017 – GNETS in house expert and GLRS program specialist presented 2016-2017 survey data at the annual full staff meeting.
- July 2017 - GLRS program specialist and GNETS in-house expert conducted ASPIRE training for all middle school teachers and new high school teachers.
- September through May the GNETS in-house expert monitored lesson plan submission.
- July 2018 - GLRS program specialist and GNETS in-house expert will meet with area leaders to evaluate the implementation process and review the implementation plan for year 3.

Year Three (2018-2019)

- July 2018 – GLRS program specialist and GNETS in-house expert will meet and discuss feedback from area leaders. The year 3 implementation plan will be reviewed, and necessary changes will be made at that time.
- ASPIRE implementation in 11 elementary GNETS classrooms throughout Northwest Georgia.

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project:

Extensive trainings have not been required to carry out the ASPIRE project. There are no additional educational or certification requirements for teachers to act as agents of ASPIRE.

Flexibility and “thinking outside the box” have been key elements in making the ASPIRE program successful in Northwest GNETS. The geographic range of the Northwest RESA territory has made it necessary for trainings to be conducted 1:1 or electronically. Both the GLRS program specialist and GNETS in-house expert have shared research and effective strategies with the middle and high school teachers which have required an increased knowledge in self-determination on their part.

Each year the GNETS in-house expert seeks feedback from the participating teachers and students for ways to improve the program and lessons. Feedback is then discussed with the GLRS program specialist and used to strategize and plan for the upcoming school year.

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

Institute on Disability / UCED states that students with Emotional Behavior Disorders (EBD) have a 43% to 61% high school dropout rate and are three times as likely as other students to be arrested before leaving school. Out of those who graduate, only 10 to 25% enroll in post-secondary education. The Vera Institute of Justice provides an EBD incarceration rate of 43% within five years of graduation. This information clearly provides evidence that a direct focus needs to be placed on students with emotional and behavior disorders.

Current Status of Project:

Within Northwest GNETS, the ASPIRE project has currently been introduced at the middle and high school levels. As a part of the three-year rollout plan, elementary students will begin receiving explicit self-determination skills-based lessons during the 2018-19 school year. Once again, the GNETS in-house expert and GLRS program specialist will travel to each individual teacher and provide 1:1 training for each elementary teacher and any new middle and high school teachers. The current plan is to introduce a Google Classroom next year to add an additional collaborative community element for the teachers. This has been a suggestion that has been received when seeking input on how to make the project better. Additionally, during the 2017-2018 school year, the Arc’s Self-Determination Scale was given as a pre- and post assessment to determine if an increase in self-determination skills were being seen for each individual student. This data is currently being analyzed, but preliminary results show that the ASPIRE program does have a positive influence on the overall self-determination level of students at both the high school and middle school level. The preliminary data also shows that the longer a student participates in the program, the higher their level of self-determination skills.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

The ability for a student to be self-determined is a key predictor in post-secondary success. As students have a greater understanding of their disability, their strengths, weaknesses, and goals for during and after school, they are better prepared to advocate for themselves. Self-empowered

students are less likely to drop out of high school and are more likely to be successful in post-secondary education and in the workforce. One of the key benefits of the ASPIRE program is to create a culture of self-determination for the students served in the Northwest GNETS program. As a NDPS, I have trained teachers on teaching self-determination lessons and focused on transition planning and goal setting to reduce the drop-out rate for students in the Northwest GNETS program.

Lessons Learned:

After analyzing the data, I found a large discrepancy between the completion of pre- and post-surveys. Working with EBD students can often produce inconsistent results, as they are sometimes unwilling to participate in data collection measures. Additionally, there is the possibility that the students simply marked an answer to complete the surveys and that the results are not a true reflection of their understanding of the IEP process. As an educator, it is my goal for students to be successful after they leave the safety net of the school system. It is for this reason, that the Arc's Self-Determination Scale was introduced. The Northwest GNETS in house expert and I sought an instrument that would better reflect the difference that the ASPIRE lessons were making in the lives of the participating students. While it is important for a student to be able to self-advocate in an IEP meeting, it becomes increasingly important that they can communicate with those outside the realm of special education about their needs and abilities.

Another important lesson that I have learned is that teacher autonomy is critical. Every GNETS classroom has a different culture, and the needs of the students are different. Teachers need to be able to design and implement lessons that address the needs of their students. Having a basic lesson plan format for teachers to follow and an online lesson plan bank have given teachers the freedom to design the instruction around the needs of their students.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

Develop a detailed plan of implementation. Keep a focused timeline and create progress check points to determine the fidelity of the project.