



STEP AHEAD NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2022

From the Executive Director

Hello TNSTEP Community:

After a winter with more snow than Tennessee typically gets, spring is here. The signs are everywhere – blooming trees and flowers, gardeners getting their hands dirty in the best possible way, and students itching to wrap up the 2021-22 school year as summer break approaches.

Although our calendars begin in January, I have often thought that spring represents the “new.” Here at TNSTEP, we have lots of “new” things happening. As you may have already noticed, we’ve created a new logo! We’ve hired a new development director, Scott Denton, who will be sharing the work we do with families and youth, and hopefully inspire individuals, agencies, and grantors to invest in our efforts. We’re launching new social media campaigns and enhancing our TNSTEP U online offerings. We’re developing new workshops, trainings, and webinars to inform families and educators in Tennessee, regionally, and nationally about best practices in a variety of special education topics. And we’re exploring new ways to deliver information to and support the families we serve - an ongoing priority of ours!

In this Spring 2022 issue of our Newsletter, you’ll read about the importance of encouraging and supporting the youth “voice,” recent legislation around special education issues that may impact your family or someone you know, and a new grant that’s intended to help School Resource Officers better understand the needs and behaviors of students with disabilities.

At our TNSTEP offices, spring and summer are the months we develop new resources and plan for the coming school year. We’d be thrilled if you’d drop us a line at information@tnstep.org to let us know what topics are on your mind. Our goal is to provide beneficial information to families and youth in an easy to understand and use format. We hope to hear from you!

Gratefully,

Karen Harrison

Executive Director, TNSTEP

PS – My family members are my inspiration and my greatest supporters. So, for this issue I’m sharing photos of my mom, my husband, and my sweet Sarah! Please stay safe and keep smiling!



ANNOUNCING: OUR NEW NAME AND LOGO!



You’ve probably noticed our team slowly introducing a new name for our organization. For more than 30 years, we’ve identified as Support and Training for Exceptional Parents, aka STEP, Inc.

While our mission of supporting families of children with disabilities hasn’t changed, we carefully and intentionally decided to rebrand with the goal of putting Tennessee first, literally, in all of our messaging. Our hope was that it would make our services easier to find by the families who need us most.

As you’ll notice, the signature star remains in our new logo, because ensuring a brighter future for children with disabilities remains our #1 priority!





Encouraging and Supporting the Youth Voice

by Ned Andrew Solomon

When TNSTEP staff conduct our Youth Readiness Days and Ready4Life trainings for middle and high schoolers with disabilities, the first thing we talk about is the importance of, and challenges to, speaking up for yourself. This is purposeful. We want to make sure, early on, that the youth understand that using their “voice” is essential. To reinforce this, our trainings include numerous times when the participants have to do just that: stand up in front of the room, address their peers and any adults present, and speak their minds on a particular subject. The first time all they have to do is state their name, mention one thing they’re passionate about, and then explain in a few words why they’re passionate about that thing.

Later they’ll get up and tell us one thing they’ve accomplished that’s made them proud, or that other people have appreciated about them. And, before the training day is over, they’ll come up front again and tell us one thing they’d like to work on to become a more independent individual, as they venture into adulthood.

This practice throughout our time with them is beneficial and can be illuminating. Many times, teachers approach us during a break or following the workshop to say, “I never knew that about Tony!” or “Felicia is always so hesitant to speak out loud. I can’t believe she got up there and did that!” It helped, of course, that each time they got up they received a small gift, like a TNSTEP measuring tape, squeeze ball, or a fidget toy of some kind. No, we’re not above bribery!

Before we depart for the day, we encourage the teachers to try to find a time, at least once a day, when their students are prompted to respond to a question. It’s even better when they can tell the students at the end of the previous day what the next day’s question will be, so the students have time to prepare and be more confident in their responses. *So much of developing the skill to speak up is about confidence.*

We know that few of these students are planning on a career in public speaking, but they are going to have to speak up, countless times throughout their lives, unless they’ve decided to let their parents – and reality check: those parents will not be around forever – speak for them. The worst part about other people speaking for us is that the “speaker” may not know what we really want, or sometimes even more importantly, what we don’t want. *The bottom line is the world needs to hear from the person who’ll be living the life of their choosing.*

Nothing Changes

The #1 Takeaway we want youth to understand about the importance of learning to speak up is that if they don’t speak up, *nothing changes*. If there’s something going on in their lives – in school, with their friends, at home, in their jobs – that they aren’t happy about, they need to speak up and let someone know – hopefully a trusted friend or an adult that can do something about it – or nothing will change.

If they’re hired for a job at \$6 an hour and three years later, after doing the best job they can, they’re still making \$6 an hour, they need to speak up and advocate for themselves. If they don’t speak up, nothing will change, especially not the size of their paycheck.

If someone is taking advantage of them or mistreating them, they need to speak up and let someone know, or nothing will change, and the mistreatment will continue. These are tough situations to speak up about, but it’s our job, as parents and other adults in their lives, to encourage them to so that negative things can change, and positive things can take their place.

Barriers to Speaking Up

We know, because we were young once too, that there are barriers to speaking up for ourselves. We also know that there are plenty of full-fledged adults out there who aren’t confident speaking up for themselves and continue to be stuck in situations that are less than great. We know that sometimes it’s that lack of confidence or the fear of a negative reaction and being treated worse if they do speak up. How many employees don’t ask for a raise because they’re afraid of calling attention to themselves and ticking off their boss for asking for what they deserve? How many kids don’t speak up about being bullied, because they’re afraid the bullying will increase, or they won’t be taken seriously?

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Encouraging and Supporting the Youth Voice

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But sometimes it's just because they haven't practiced speaking up enough. We as parents and adults bear some of the responsibility for that. Traditionally, people with disabilities have encountered low expectations. Those with intellectual disabilities often encounter the presumption that they won't be able to work or enjoy the big life experiences that typically developing people do. That's got to change. Everyone deserves to be asked questions like, "how do you want to spend your day?" or "what do you want to do after high school?" or even, "what would you like to eat for dinner?" The more we, as parents and other allies of youth with disabilities ask these and other questions, the more practice our youth will get in thinking about and providing appropriate and meaningful responses.

Speaking Up Doesn't Have to Mean "Speaking"

While we're on the subject of "speaking up," we're not just talking about verbal output. Just because a person doesn't "speak" in the traditional way, it doesn't mean they can't "communicate." Babies don't use words, but they communicate all the time, with sounds, gestures, facial expressions, cries of distress and bursts of laughter. A person can communicate by writing something down, nodding or shaking their heads to yes/no questions, with the help of an interpreter, or, like Stephen Hawking, through an augmentative communication device. Gina Lynette, a past STEP employee, communicated with a high school student whose ed assistant swore she couldn't "respond" to questions, by providing her with cards with pictures on them. It turned out this young lady had a lot on her mind and was eager to share it with someone willing to "listen."

"Nothing About Me Without Me"

Our Takeaway #2 for youth is to live by the philosophy of "nothing about me without me." This phrase has been a vital rallying cry for persons with disabilities, ever since Valerie Billingham uttered it in reference to patient inclusion in their care. We encourage youth to not just attend their IEP (Individualized Education Program) meetings, but to actively participate. The bottom line is, if decisions are being made about your life – what you'll do, where you'll go, where you'll live and who you'll live with, how you'll spend your days – you need to be present, speak up in whatever way you can, and be involved in those decisions. We don't mean that young people shouldn't take advice from parents, adults, or other people. We all do that, as we look for trusted allies who have had similar experiences in their lives, who can share what they learned, and the mistakes they made. We mean that they must be part of the process. They must be present. They must express their opinions and make informed choices. If it's about them, they need to be there. Otherwise, they'll be living with someone else's vision of how to live their life.

Ned Andrew Solomon provides communication support for TNSTEP, and expertise in the area of transition to adulthood. He and his wife Gina have raised four children, three with developmental disabilities, to adulthood.



NEW TNSTEP STAFF MEMBER: SCOTT DENTON

Scott Denton joined the TNSTEP team as Director of Development on April 14. Scott has worked as a nonprofit executive and fundraising consultant for 30+ years, serving diverse organizations including service agencies, history museums, urban parks, and independent schools. Scott's experience includes serving for five years as Director of Development at A Very Special Place, Inc., an agency in Staten Island, New York that provides comprehensive services for people with developmental disabilities and their families.

"I am delighted to join TNSTEP," Scott said recently. "I have worked on behalf of many worthy causes during my career," and my greatest personal satisfaction has been serving on behalf of people with disabilities."

Scott's fund development expertise includes annual campaigns, community relations, individual and corporate solicitations, grant research and proposal writing, and special events. "I look forward to working closely with the board of directors, staff members, and volunteers as TNSTEP begins its next exciting chapter serving families of children with disabilities."

Training School Resource Officers to Support Students with Disabilities and Their Families

**by Shuntea Price, West Tennessee Regional Director TNSTEP and
Karen Harrison, Executive Director TNSTEP**

TNSTEP is pleased to announce a new project, a grant contract between the State of Tennessee, Department of Children’s Services (DCS) and TNSTEP. This initiative will address the impact school officers have on the lives of children and youth, in particular those with disabilities, while taking into consideration the needs of families, school resource officers (SROs), school safety teams, school administrators, and the community. Through training and skill-building activities, participants will gain an understanding of the role of SROs in schools, and the need to promote positive interactions. Additionally, families will be provided information on the role of SROs and how to share information about their children with these officers to help provide effective supports, with a focus on families of children with disabilities and youth who have been dually impacted by disability and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

The project is based on principles set forth by DCS through the Building Strong Brains Tennessee/Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) initiatives. Adverse Childhood Experiences, like witnessing a divorce; domestic violence; the incarceration of a parent; or experiencing sexual, physical, or verbal abuse have been shown to negatively impact the architecture of the developing brain, which is shaped by the interaction between genes and experiences. Community factors can also contribute to ACEs, including conditions that exist in school that affect how students with disabilities and those with social, emotional, and mental health issues, who also exhibit challenging behaviors, are treated when there’s not a clear understanding of their needs. The goal is to discover ways to effectively support all of these youth to become healthy, happy, and productive adults.

TNSTEP’s partnership in this effort is to help communities provide safe, stable, and nurturing environments where children can develop the social, emotional, and behavioral skills they need to secure long-term health, succeed in school and life, and contribute to the shared future in Tennessee. We will engage educators and those individuals within schools such as SROs who have a direct impact on the development of young children during sensitive times of brain development, and teenagers who are shaping their behaviors related to interactions with authority figures that will follow them into their adult lives. We hope to fill an identified gap in the training of families, SROs, school safety teams, administrators, and the community, related to understanding the impact of school authority figures on the lives of children and youth with disabilities, while working toward promoting positive interactions that will contribute to the overall health and well-being of children and families.

Toward a positive school culture

As the project kicks off, we recently conducted a training in East Tennessee for seven SROs. The discussion questions included: What are ACEs? What does disability look like? How does Implicit Bias affect actions and responses? What is being trauma-informed? It turned out to be a valuable learning experience for the SROs, and for us. What stood out was their attentiveness throughout the presentation. It appeared that much of the information shared with the group was “new” information to most of them, and they were sincerely invested in utilizing this info in their respective roles.

The information provided seemed to influence their understanding of the way children behave and interact with authority, specifically children with disabilities, and even more so, those with hidden disabilities, such as autism. Some expressed a desire to give their input at IEP meetings to help provide a positive and safe learning environment, by building trust between students, schools and SROs. This was music to our ears!

One of the officers expressed the concern that there was some confusion around where and how SROs are used. He felt that both school leaders and parents should work together to promote the proper role of law enforcement within a school setting. We couldn’t agree more!

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SROs at TNSTEP’s recent training in East Tennessee

Special Education in the Tennessee's 112th General Assembly

By Brian Keller, General Counsel, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities

The Tennessee legislature is officially done for the year. They're also done for the two-year-long legislative session. So next year will be a fresh start with a whole new slate of bills on everything from naming lakes to special education. The 113th General Assembly is sure to take up one of the hottest topics in the 112th General Assembly: student behavior. Let's look at two bills from the last couple of years to see how they might impact students with disabilities.



SB230/HB16 – Sponsored by Sen. Joey Hensley (R-Hohenwald) and Rep. Scott Cepicky (R-Culleoka), this bill passed last year, called the Teacher Discipline Act. This bill is designed to make it easier to place students in an alternative placement. The bill requires local school districts to adopt a policy that sets up a very specific system that allows a teacher to formally request the removal of a student. It allows principals to respond to that request by taking any number of disciplinary actions against the student, including moving to an alternative placement or suspension. There is no carveout for students with disabilities or with behavior plans in accordance with their IEP. According to the text of the bill, a teacher could request the removal of a student with a disability who has a behavior intervention plan in place. The principal must comply with federal law in responding to the request but must also inform the student and their parents about the request and reasons for the request. This bill took effect in 2021, and we're beginning to hear stories about it being used in districts across the state.

SB2101/HB1934 – Sponsored by Sen. Mark Pody (R-Lebanon) and Rep. Jay Reedy (R-Erin), this bill is called the Teacher Assault bill. While this bill didn't pass this year, the sponsors made very clear that they intend to bring it back in the 113th General Assembly. Tennessee code currently applies an extra criminal penalty to someone who assaults a first responder – police officer, EMS, or firefighter – or nurse who is responding to a 911 call. This bill would add teachers in the course of their everyday work to the list of first responders who receive that extra protection. The bill makes knowingly causing bodily harm, or knowingly causing physical contact which “a reasonable person would regard...as extremely offensive or provocative” (examples listed include spitting or throwing things) a criminal misdemeanor offense. Serious bodily harm, or the use or threat of using a weapon, becomes a felony. Many members of the disability community expressed concern that the bill specifically described the behavior of many students with disabilities. Disability advocates voiced that pulling the response to that behavior out of the well-established school discipline process and putting it into the criminal justice process would disproportionately harm students with disabilities.

The sponsors of both bills describe conversations with teachers who are struggling to manage student behavior and are leaving the profession over it. They talk about principals who ignore the needs of teachers, and teachers who feel isolated and unsupported. We hear stories from the disability community about having to fight for behavioral supports like Board Certified Behavior Analysts, effective functional behavior assessments, and behavior intervention plans. Our education in future legislative sessions will focus on getting teachers, students, and administrators access to evidence-based and effective behavioral supports so that everyone involved is set up to succeed.

The Council on Developmental Disabilities offers easy-to-understand information about disability issues and policies. You'll learn about legislation, policy changes, resources and new ideas, and find lots of ways to get involved and help shape the policies and programs that matter to you. If you'd like to subscribe to the Council's weekly policy updates, visit tn.gov/cdd/engage-with-us/subscribe-to-council-updates.



Training School Resource Officers to Support Students

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What's next?

TNSTEP is currently working on refining its current material to incorporate feedback into the development of future presentations, and soliciting school districts and parent/family groups to schedule workshops. Upcoming trainings include a Family Engagement webinar, "What Families Need to Know to Work Together with SROs for Student Success," on June 7 2022, and a presentation at the SRO Conference in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee in June.



L to R: Shuntea Price, Karen Harrison, and

We are scheduling district trainings now to engage families and provide in-service for officers! Please contact Project Director Shuntea Price for information or to schedule a virtual or in-person training session. Shuntea can be reached at **901-726-4334** or shuntea.price@tnstep.org.

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