

STEP Up To The Plate Youth Program



Youth Leaders With Disabilities

Building Confidence, Skills, & Connections To Live Their Best Lives After High School

History and Inspiration

For more than three decades, TNSTEP has provided vital support and advocacy training to families with children eligible to receive special education services or educational support through a 504 plan and to young people with disabilities who are transitioning from high school into adulthood in Tennessee.

Making big decisions about higher education, careers, housing, and independence, in general, is no simple task, and is often more complex for young people with disabilities. In an effort to provide direct support to youth on a larger scale, STEP Up To The Plate (SUTP) was put into motion—a program for youth, GUIDED by youth.

TNSTEP's youth specialists spent 2021 getting input from young people and parents in the organization's network and researching disability-focused youth programs led by fellow organizations around the United States, seeking inspiration and building an actionable plan that would make an impact.



SUTP 1.0

Building The Program

As a self-funded program with ambition, STEP Up To The Plate officially launched in 2022 with a small focus group consisting of two teen disability advocates (the first youth council) and four TNSTEP mentors who have personal experience with disability. The program involved monthly discussions led by the youth council members about daily frustrations they were experiencing at school, like bullying, concerns about how their Individualized Education Plan (IEPs) accommodations would be recognized in college entrance exams and in college, and fear that they might not get a job because of their disability.

Mentors helped create activities and development opportunities based on these discussions to help the teens prepare for their educational, career, and personal goals, often incorporating their passions, which boosted their confidence and skills. The council members received interview, public speaking, writing, and video production training, individual transition planning support with team mentors, and stipends for their time. This youth council played a major role in laying the groundwork for the next phase.

Branching Out

2023 brought two grants that allowed SUTP to expand. In addition to the youth council welcoming 6 new members, the program was able to extend its reach to hundreds of high school students. One school district from each of Tennessee's 3 regions was selected for a TNSTEP Youth Tour stop, where mentors and youth council members spoke with students receiving IEPs and 504 Plans about self-advocacy, learning to become more independent, planning for life after high school, the support services TNSTEP provides to youth with disabilities at no cost, and @tnstepyouth, an online community (Facebook and Instagram) that offers youth-focused information, encouragement, and opportunities to get involved.



SUTP 2.0

SUTP Youth Council Mentors launched a statewide search, that doubled as a TNSTEP awareness campaign, to solicit applications from young advocates looking to build leadership skills. Young people between the ages of 16-24, who represent every region of the the state and different types of disabilities, were chosen to participate in SUTP 2.0, a 7-month curriculum that included group growth activities (personal and professional), one-on-one transition planning with mentors, advocacy opportunities, and more!



Growing Forward

After receiving rave reviews from youth, parents, and educators who were impacted by the program in 2023, SUTP is taking it up a few notches in 2024. Last year's youth council is coming back to put their advocacy skills, confidence, and transition training to use by becoming mentors themselves!

As they continue to grow in their own journeys, they will help lead our TNSTEP Youth Tour Events and afterschool Parent Prep Rally events across the state. They will also play a more active role in the content creation for the @tnstepyouth social platforms, transition resources, and other youth outreach. There is currently a waitlist for in-school events, and with additional funding sources, TNSTEP can extend this much-needed program to even more families and youth in Tennessee.

STEP Up To The Plate Youth (SUTP) Program Overview | 2024

SUTP Youth Council Growth Activities and Mentorship Opportunities

- Attend a Growth Activity Titled, "Equity and Inclusion Start With Me"
- Participate/co-lead 2 social events that include round-table discussions on current challenges or successes in members' transition journeys, from agenda to meeting summary
- Provide feedback on relatability and other areas for improvement in TNSTEP's youth materials (presentations, social content, handouts, etc.)
- Develop and create individual or small group advocacy/educational projects to be distributed to Tennessee's vast disability community
- Lead activities and share inspiring self-advocacy stories with students at TNSTEP Youth Tour events across the state
- Assist in the recruitment of the next class of SUTP Youth Council

TNSTEP Youth Tour and Parent Prep Rally Event

TNSTEP Youth Tour events will be held at high schools in counties/districts identified as having limited Pre-Employment Transition resources available, with 1 event per region of the state. These action-packed, 4-hour events will include interactive activities and giveaways created to inspire awareness and action as students begin planning for their lives after high school. A special lunch and memorable introduction to the services TNSTEP and the program sponsors provide youth with disabilities is the icing on the cake! The school events will be followed by Parent Prep Rallies in the evening.

TNSTEP's Parent Prep Rally is all about getting parents on board in the transition planning process. SUTP mentors and youth council members will engage parents in interactive activities and facilitate guided conversations between parents & their children, where students will have dedicated and intentional time to talk about what they learned earlier in the day and start the conversation about what comes next.

TNSTEP and program sponsors will be on hand to answer questions and share relevant information.

Growing SUTP Statewide Through Youth-Focused Content

Working towards independence is a focal point of the SUTP program, and let's face it—content is not "one size fits all." In addition to the excellent resources and content TNSTEP provides parents and caregivers, the SUTP team will continue to produce relatable, easy-to-digest content for its @tnstepyouth social platforms and in-person events, designed specifically with youth in mind. Youth council members and event participants will have ample opportunity to contribute to this ongoing work.

A new high-quality transition planning book is in the works in both print and electronic forms.

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