

STEP AHEAD NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2020



Social distancing together—
Karen with her mother,
Dorothy Ashby, and daughter,
Sarah

From the Executive Director

Hello STEP Friends:

We are hoping that all our STEP families are healthy, safe, and continuing to “weather” this very unusual time. We know that just surviving school closings and transitioning to learning (and working) at home was a challenging shift. Our STEP Team are experiencing many of these same realities and are working hard to provide families and caregivers information you can use to make the best decisions for your child and family.

Thankfully, our staff members have remained healthy and able to work, continuing to provide important information and resources while making ourselves available to answer any questions you might have about your child’s special education services and rights through this COVID-19 reality. Please keep your questions coming and let us know what you need.

We recognize that many issues and decisions are still up in the air and changes in policies and procedures are ongoing. In light of this, beyond this Summer Newsletter edition, we will work hard to keep you informed and up-to-date through emails and social media. Please know, as always, we are here for you, and ready to assist you in helping your child make meaningful progress that will lead to that awesome life we all want for our children.

I’m hoping you find some time for some summer fun, too!

Karen Harrison

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Each school year, school teams must put into place an IEP for each eligible student that includes their Present Levels of Educational Performance (current ability and level of functioning), meaningful goals, and services and supports to meet those goals. One key factor is **determining placement** (where services will be delivered), and must be in the **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**. Remember, this is a team decision and parent input is essential. Although schools may be giving parents choices (i.e. classroom and/or virtual) about where services are delivered, the fact remains that schools must offer an IEP that is calculated to infer benefit and assist the student in making meaningful progress toward their IEP goals. STEP will be providing more tips and strategies for families to use as they prepare for their children’s IEP meetings this school year.

Tennessee’s Department of Education recently announced \$5 million in grants to school districts specifically to support students with disabilities. These funds are meant to help local districts address the needs of these students through compensatory services, due to extended COVID-19 related school closures. **Compensatory Services** should be provided to a student, when necessary, to help the student retain the position he or she would have otherwise occupied had services not been delayed or postponed, in order to be provided a free appropriate public education (FAPE). For additional information, visit <https://bit.ly/TDOE-Update-Coronavirus>.

Avoiding the Summer Slide as You Prepare for Next School Year

by Shuntea Price, STEP West Tennessee Regional Director

“Summer slide” is the learning loss many students experience when schools are closed during summer vacation. Children with disabilities are some of the students most impacted when school is not in session. The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly closed schools for millions of students nationwide, with little warning. As a result, this “Covid-19 slide” – the learning loss experienced by students during this unprecedented period – has been especially disruptive for students with disabilities. Some parents say their children with disabilities received little to no instruction during the school closures, and that the online learning offered did not meet their needs.

The question to be answered is, “Was my child denied a free appropriate public education (FAPE) as a result of school closures due to COVID-19?” This will be the topic of many upcoming IEP meetings. Multiple sources, including Matt Cohen, attorney and founder of Matt Cohen & Associates, in his Guidance for Parents on Education Rights during School Closure, reiterate the guidance from The United States Department of Education that, “if a school district ***continues to provide educational opportunities to all students***, it must provide equal access to students with disabilities.”

STEP is leading an effort to work with parents, advocates, and disability organization leaders to provide easy-to-use guides to prepare parents for discussions about compensatory education, how to assess a student’s current levels of performance, and writing meaningful goals in the fall to ensure the educational needs of students with disabilities are met. These are some things you can **do now** to prepare for IEP and 504 meetings in the Fall:

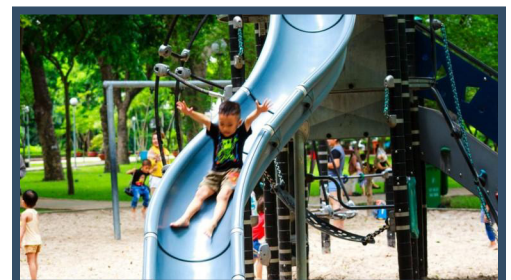
- Determine if your school continued to provide education services during the school closure.
- Document any services and instruction your child received *during the school closure* – whether live, by telephone, or virtually. Keep a log of any work provided by the school, like worksheets or assignments.
- Write down any progress, lack of progress, or any regression you have seen during this time out of school.
- Think about what skills your child was working on mastering before school closed. How close were they to mastering those skills on their IEP? Write that down along with where they are **currently** with those skills.
- Be sure to think beyond just academics; capture the behavioral and social-emotional needs of your child and any behavior and social skills regression they may have experienced.

Through recording this information you will be better prepared to participate effectively in your next IEP meeting. You will be able to show your child’s progress or regression, and what effect that had on mastering their IEP goals. For example, you might say at your next IEP meeting, “I have put together data and work samples from Sam’s time out of school and would like these factors to be considered as we make IEP decisions about what he needs this school year.”

As we all adjust to a “new normal,” here are some of Cohen’s recommended strategies to help you keep track:

- Don’t assume that the school will decide that the loss of services justifies any compensatory education.
- Start collecting data immediately and keep copies of all work.
- Keep a detailed log of all direct time spent with school staff (dates, times, duration), including teachers, one-on-one aides, para-professionals, and other related-services providers.
- Keep a log of any problems with technology, including the child’s and parent’s ability to use it, as well as any tech glitches that interfered with online work. This will help you in the event meetings can’t be held in person. You can say, “I want to let you know that a telephone conference call would work best because my Internet is not stable,” or “the ZOOM platform is one I am very familiar with.”

STEP Guide to Back to School 2020 will be coming out soon with more helpful tools and resources.



NEW! FACEBOOK LIVE: SUPPORT and TRAINING for EXCEPTIONAL PARENTS

From talking with families we hear their latest concerns, and they don't always pertain to special education. Sometimes it's just about basic survival. STEP's 30-minute Facebook Live sessions for individuals and families will address these issues.

Hosted each time by a STEP Team Member and a professional with expertise, we will provide a space for you to hear about tips on topics such as mental health and well-being.



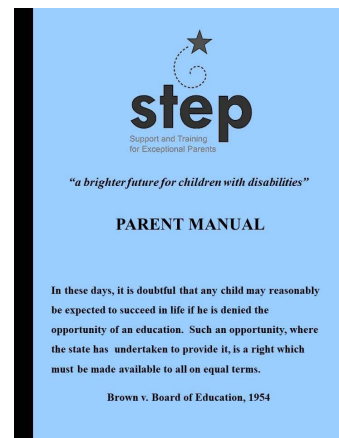
Know that you are not alone!
Recharge yourself by STEPing away for 30 minutes and becoming part of a group. No sign up will be necessary—
LIVE Tuesday, July 14, 3:30-4:00 EST (2:30-3:00 CST).

NEW! UPDATED STEP PARENT MANUAL

Known to most people as the "Blue Book" because of its blue cover, the STEP Parent Manual contains info on the federal laws and state rules pertaining to special education, 504 plans, and privacy. It includes template letters and agency contact information.

STEP believes it is important for families and individuals to know the legal basis for special education, so that information can be applied in meetings with schools, to ensure that students have the best opportunities for success in their educational careers.

The updated Parent Manual can be found at tnstep.org.



A FEW TIPS FOR LEARNING AT HOME

None of this is easy. As parents of children with disabilities ourselves, we intimately understand the challenges of this pandemic time, especially in the area of home education. None of us planned for or were prepared for this, and few of us have the room in our schedule or the confidence in our teaching abilities, to pull this off.

That said, we do have a few ideas for making this experience a little easier, and hopefully, more successful. Here are a few suggestions for facing this unique challenge:

- Try to keep to a routine, but be flexible
- Create a "learning space"
- Schedule breaks for them and for you
- Take time for discussions about your children's concerns
- Choose quality educational content from trusted sources
- Above all, take your time—we may be in this situation for awhile

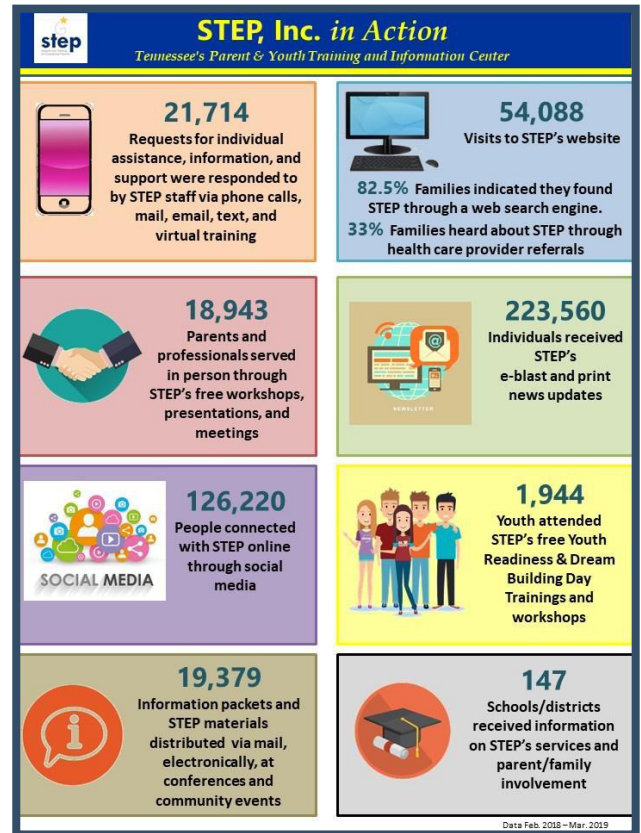
**Please feel free to contact STEP if you have difficulties in any of these areas.
We are here for you.**

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

Each fiscal year, STEP, like any other organization that gets federal dollars, is required to report on its yearly data and progress. Thanks to Lisa Gosnell, STEP's Research, Data and Information Coordinator, we are able to keep track of what we've accomplished.

We are proud of these numbers, because it means we are serving Tennessee well, and that lots of students and their families are benefiting from our services and resources.

Here are some of the stats from October 1, 2018 through September 30, 2019.



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