

From the Executive Director

Hello TNSTEP Community:

Welcome to Tennessee winter, where the temps range from 19 to 42 to 70. Do I put on my t-shirt and shorts, a light sweater, or my boots, gloves, scarf, and down-filled jacket? We hope you're staying warm, or at least comfortable with today's forecast. We also hope your winter break was lovely, and that you had the opportunity to share some of the holidays with friends and family.

And welcome to our Winter 2023 Newsletter, which is chock full of good information. Inside you'll find articles on the ins and outs of Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs); the challenges children with a dual diagnosis face; a mother's perspective on her daughter's participation in TNSTEP's Step Up to the Plate (SUTP) initiative; and a glimpse into TNSTEP's training workshops on Promoting Student Safety in Today's Schools.

As always, our TNSTEP Team is here for you. Please contact us if you have questions about special education, if you're having an issue in school and need our support, or if you've discovered some terrific resource or program that might be beneficial to other families and students.



Gratefully,  
Karen Harrison  
Executive Director, TNSTEP



## Student Safety in Today's Schools: New TNSTEP Training for Parents, Caregivers, and Educators

TNSTEP is pleased to announce a new training in the area of school safety. Students face unique challenges in today's schools. On top of the sometimes overwhelming pressures from demanding workloads, testing requirements, and navigating their social circles, students are faced with the fears of sudden violence and natural disasters that permeate the news. Our children and youth with disabilities are often more vulnerable in these crisis situations and require more planning and preparation to ensure their safety.

This workshop will cover:

- The need for open and effective communication among stakeholders
- The impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Understanding and identifying trauma
- Behavior supports through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Developing an effective safety plan
- The benefits of One-Page Profiles in providing essential information
- Encouraging positive relationships with School Resource Officers



**A webinar on this topic will be presented on February 21 at 6:00 pm Central, 5:00 pm Eastern. To register for this webinar please go to [bit.ly/creating-safe-supportive-schools](https://bit.ly/creating-safe-supportive-schools).** If you are a parent, caregiver, educator, or student who is interested in making this training available to your school or community, please contact Shuntea Price, TNSTEP Director of West Tennessee and Urban Services at [shuntea.price@tnstep.org](mailto:shuntea.price@tnstep.org) or 901-726-4334.

## How STEP Up to the Plate Helped One Youth Leader Find Her Voice

by Jackie Bennett, RN, BSN

Sometimes it seems that our children with disabilities don't have as many opportunities to shine as their typically developing peers. So, when I learned that TNSTEP was organizing a STEP Up to the Plate group to recruit youth with disabilities, I thought it would be something my daughter, Lily, would really enjoy. The purpose of the STEP Up to the Plate group is to provide opportunities for youth leaders to contribute to TNSTEP activities and share the best ways to communicate and interact with their peer group. Given Lily's love of social media and her past interest in pediatric stroke awareness, I thought she would have a lot to offer the group.

When we learned that Lily had had a stroke before birth, we weren't sure what that would mean for her. We knew she would have disabilities, but the doctors couldn't tell us how severely she would be affected by her stroke. It was difficult not knowing what to expect, but as she grew, it became more apparent that her physical limitations were not as severe as we had feared. It was obvious her learning issues would be a bigger challenge for her. She was willing to make every effort to work hard, but she would need the support of special education services throughout her schooling to achieve her goal of graduating from high school and attending college.

I learned about TNSTEP at a transition resources event for parents that was organized by Blount County Schools. I attended the event because even though Lily was only a freshman at the time, I wanted to start learning everything I could about resources available to help in transition to adulthood. At that time, we weren't sure if college would be an option for Lily, so we wanted to consider other available opportunities. I joined TNSTEP's email list, and it was after Lily's sophomore year that she joined STEP Up to the Plate.

Lily has been a STEP Up to the Plate Youth Council Member for over a year now. The program has given Lily an opportunity to learn responsibility. She has had to learn to keep track of when her next meeting or obligation is coming up, while also working a part-time job. Participating in the group has also given her confidence in speaking with adults. Lily is hardly alone in finding it difficult to communicate with adults - one of the hardest things for all kids to learn is how to advocate for themselves. I've enjoyed watching Lily overcome her shyness and find her voice.

One thing I learned from Lily's participation in STEP Up to the Plate is that what I see as Lily's biggest challenges may not be how she sees them. In finding her voice, Lily was able to express to the group that her biggest challenge is dealing with anxiety and depression. Kids and young adults with disabilities may be more likely to experience these issues, so I was proud of Lily for advocating for mental health while participating in the group.

Lily graduated from high school in December, and has begun classes at Pellissippi State Community College. She has many challenges ahead, but hopefully she will continue to advocate for herself and build on the communication skills that she has developed by participating in STEP Up to the Plate.

*For those interested in finding out more about TNSTEP's Step Up to the Plate (SUTP) initiative, or for those youth who are interested in participating, please contact Ned Andrew Solomon at [nedandrew.solomon@tnstep.org](mailto:nedandrew.solomon@tnstep.org).*

*Jackie and Lily Bennett*





## **Supporting Twice Exceptional Learners in Tennessee**

### **by Jennifer C. Chandler, M.Ed. Gifted Educator and Advocate**

After the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law in 2002, school districts faced unprecedented accountability for test scores and began focusing on underserved populations and low-performing students. “Teaching to the middle” became the norm, and the students in the top 10% became the ones who were truly left behind. In fact, the federal government stopped providing funds for gifted education, and as of the 2022-23 school year, only four states have mandated and fully-funded gifted programs: Florida, Georgia, Iowa, and Oklahoma (Foley-Nicpon & Teriba, 2022). The state of Tennessee is categorized as having gifted programs that are mandated and partially funded by the state (Foley-Nicpon & Teriba, 2022). Ours is one of the very few states that designates the giftedness exceptionality as worthy of a state-level Individualized Education Program or IEP. This means that there are policies in place to ensure districts enact equitable child-find procedures and provide services that are appropriate for these advanced learners.

A twice-exceptional student (or 2e student) has or may have “one or more high ability or talent domains along with a coexisting disability (e.g., ADHD, ASD, SLD),” and many of these students are only identified as having the one more prominent disability (Foley-Nicpon & Teriba, 2022, p. 213). To identify a 2e student, a full comprehensive evaluation should be completed to include, at minimum, an assessment of achievement and cognition or IQ. The state of Tennessee requires a minimum IQ of 123 for the gifted exceptionality but can consider the confidence interval for students who meet key criteria for language, economic, achievement, school, environment, and other factors as marked on the TN Assessment Instrument Selection Form (TnAISF) (TN Department of Education, 2018). There is also a provision to consider the discrepancy between verbal and nonverbal subtests when the higher score is equal to or greater than 130.

There are a set of allowable accommodations for any student that a teacher may choose to try with a potentially 2e student, such as preferential seating, repeating oral directions verbatim, flexible time limits, and taking breaks when working on an assignment or test. More restrictive accommodations should be discussed with the team in an IEP meeting where classroom teachers can share accommodations that are working in their learning environments. Sometimes, well-intentioned adults don’t understand how a gifted student would experience struggles in the classroom. Here are a few reminders that parents and advocates can provide to the IEP Team, if needed.

A person’s IQ measures their potential for achievement (TN Department of Education, 2018). If the actual achievement differs from their potential, there is an opportunity for the team to craft a more supportive IEP by providing additional testing, goals, services, and/or accommodations. Ensuring that a student is provided with FAPE (a Free Appropriate Public Education) means that all IEP components have been put in place to ensure the student’s success.

A person with a high IQ interprets their five senses differently than a typical peer. They literally think “outside of the box” all day long, not just when they’re pulled out for enrichment or served in honors courses. They analyze problems differently and explore solutions in very creative ways. This means that a typical child with a disability and a gifted child with a disability have different needs and require different services and accommodations (Davidson Institute, 2021).

A key characteristic of a gifted learner is that they experience “asynchronous development,” meaning that the child’s advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from their typical peers (National Association for Gifted Children, 2022). The higher the IQ, the more severe the asynchronicity. The uniqueness of being gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling for them to develop at their highest potential (Rivero, 2012).

The gifts and talents of some students may be masked by learning or behavior challenges. These twice-exceptional students may have cognitive difficulties, such as learning difficulties or attention and behavior issues, as well as gifts and talents that need to be acknowledged and nurtured. For example, there are some students whose verbal ability is superior and their visual/spatial acuity is average. Some students have superior math ability as well as characteristics of dyslexia. These students require different support than what is included in a typical gifted IEP or a typical IEP for a disability.

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## Unpacking the Functional Behavior Assessment Process by Jessica Colton, M.Ed. Director of Behavior Services, Project Play Therapy

A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) is an extensive process that involves the IEP team assessing a student's interfering behaviors that limit the individual's participation in the curriculum and/or social opportunities throughout the school day, across settings. An FBA is also appropriate if the individual's interfering behavior poses a risk to safety. From the date the consent is signed, the IEP team has 60 days to complete the FBA and reconvene with the team to discuss the findings.



Ideally, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) conducts the FBA with the collaboration of other members of the IEP team, due to their extensive training in behavior analysis.

However, FBAs can be conducted by other IEP team members including school psychologists, special education teachers, and school administrators. A thorough FBA encompasses four different components:

- **Observations:** Multiple observations of the student will occur across settings. This allows the observer to identify a pattern by looking at what occurs before and after the interfering behaviors. The observer might also interact with the students to experiment with various supports.
- **Data collection:** Throughout the FBA process, data will be collected on identified interfering behaviors. This data can inform the team on the frequency, duration, or severity of the interfering behavior. Additionally, the data can aid in identifying times of day or specific activities when interfering behaviors may occur most often.
- **Interviews:** Interviews can be an instrumental aspect of the FBA and can include the student, parents, teacher, psychologist, counselor, or anyone who knows the student well who might have meaningful insight. Interviews can paint a clearer picture regarding the child's history that could impact interfering behaviors. Interviews can also provide information regarding strategies that have been effective or ineffective in the past, as well as rewards that the individual might be willing to work for.
- **Documentation review:** Documentation review can provide a look into the student's educational history and previous supports. Documents can also reveal crucial information to provide additional context.

Following the four-step process above, the team will analyze their findings and identify why the student is engaging in the interfering behaviors. This is often referred to as the function of behavior. There are four functions to behavior, which include escaping or delaying non-preferred activities or demands, gaining access to attention, gaining access to tangibles, or automatic (i.e., sensory). By analyzing behavior patterns (i.e., what happens before and after the behavior), the team can identify the function and appropriate replacement behaviors, or what the student can do instead of the interfering behavior that serves the same function.

Once an FBA is completed, it can inform strategies that would effectively reduce the interfering behaviors. Effective strategies are compiled into a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). A BIP will include individualized strategies to best support the individual before, during, and after interfering behaviors. However, sometimes a BIP might not be warranted if medical needs cannot be ruled out as the primary cause.

Within the 60-day period, the team will meet to review the findings of the FBA and discuss strategies proposed for the BIP. Once the plan is finalized and agreed upon, the team will add the plan to the IEP and can begin implementation once caregiver consent is provided. Once implementation begins, consistent data collection for interfering behaviors and the accuracy of plan implementation will occur. Data can be requested from caregivers at any point and the efficiency and effectiveness of the BIP should be reviewed at every IEP meeting.

*If you would like additional support or would like to inquire regarding Project Play's behavior services, please contact [info@projectplaytherapy.com](mailto:info@projectplaytherapy.com).*

### *Continued from page 3* **Supporting Twice Exceptional Learners**

By considering asynchronous development along with a comprehensive evaluation, parents can learn more about their child's strengths and specific needs. Promoting a growth mindset at home and in the classroom can support a twice-exceptional student with achieving at their highest level. For more information, please check out the following referenced sources:

National Association for Gifted Children. (2022). Asynchronous development. [nagc.org](https://nagc.org)

TN Department of Education (2018). Intellectually gifted evaluation guidance. [bit.ly/3jXGlnI](https://bit.ly/3jXGlnI)

Davidson Institute. (2021). Gifted, ADHD, or both? [bit.ly/3ZakPuP](https://bit.ly/3ZakPuP)

## CONNECT WITH TNSTEP!

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