

TNSTEP Meeting Attendance Protocol



TNSTEP staff often receive requests to attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings with families. TNSTEP's mission is to provide information to parents and family members to help them increase their skills to become their child's best advocate. Because our mission is to help build parent capacity, we have established a process for responding to families' requests for support at a meeting.

There are many disability organizations in Tennessee, and each one provides services uniquely based on its mission and the guidelines of the sources that fund it. We aim to support families and professionals in understanding the TNSTEP service delivery model, making it easier for them to access the wide range of support and training we offer. The ten-member TNSTEP team is committed to fulfilling the mission of TNSTEP, which is **"to empower parents through information, training, and support to become effective partners with professionals in planning appropriate educational programs for their children with disabilities."**

Our model for meeting this mission is based on our belief that parents possess unique information about their children's development, nature, and needs. Our goal is to ensure that parents receive the information they need regarding special education rights and responsibilities so that they can speak up for and with their children and youth with disabilities. Important information about our support services:

- **Educational Workshops:** Recognizing that this type of empowerment is a process, not an overnight event, TNSTEP encourages families to learn what the law requires school systems to provide for their children through the *Introduction to Special Education BASIC Rights Workshop*.
 - The workshops are offered "live" across Tennessee, "virtual" or through our YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/TNStep.

As parents, we recall attending an IEP meeting where we struggled to understand the terminology, the plans discussed, or our rights to participate in the process. The BASIC Rights Workshop, followed by training on understanding the IEP, which is now made available via YouTube on the TNSTEP website www.tnstep.info, provides a wealth of information that will help increase your confidence in your ability to speak up for your son or daughter in meaningful ways.

Through the 35+ year history of TNSTEP, many families have shared how powerful this information was for them!

- **Strategy Planning:** The TNSTEP staff assists parents by building on their knowledge and helping them plan for participating in their child's IEP meetings in ways that make a difference. TNSTEP staff enable families and students to:
 - Understand special education and how to determine the services your child needs.
 - How to have high expectations and express those expectations at a meeting.
 - How to be an effective member of the educational planning team.
 - How to communicate your ideas.
 - How to use your rights in meaningful ways when there is disagreement on needed services and supports.

Thousands of family members have successfully navigated IEP meetings by learning their rights and receiving planning assistance from TNSTEP team members.

- **Mentoring Support at a Meeting:** We recognize that there are situations where a family may need someone to assist them in using the skills they have learned, so TNSTEP staff attend IEP meetings with families who have tried to apply what they have learned but have experienced barriers. Some families may experience disability or have other special circumstances requiring more intensive one-to-one assistance, and TNSTEP staff are available to meet those needs.
 - Staff members determine whether to attend meetings with families based on the issue's urgency, the steps the family has already taken, and other relevant factors.

We want children and youth with disabilities to have positive educational experiences and receive the services and support needed to help them acquire the skills to be productive, independent adults to the maximum extent possible.

- **Connections to Other Agencies That Serve Families:** We continually seek ways to expand our capacity to serve families. We work in partnership with other disability organizations and community projects to connect families with the support available through these organizations and projects. One project that trains advocates to attend meetings with families is the Volunteer Advocacy Project (VAP). There are no specific criteria for obtaining a VAP advocate to attend your meeting; however, they typically do not participate in IEP meetings that address discipline or behavior issues. Remember, it takes time to establish a connection with an advocate, and VAP advocates are unavailable in all areas of the state. TNSTEP does not have any oversight or management responsibilities for the VAP advocates. If you have questions about the VAP project or to request a VAP advocate, please visit <https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/services/project/volunteer-advocacy/>

Are we advocates for children's and families' rights? YES!

Will we support you in your advocacy efforts? YES!

Our commitment is to provide training, information, and support to families. If you have any questions regarding TNSTEP services, please get in touch with the services director in your area. <https://tnstep.info/direct-contacts/>