



The Women and Girls Foundation launched the Training Regional Advocates to Influence Leadership (TRAIL) program in 2020, in collaboration with Dr. Josie Badger. The goal of the program is to develop a statewide legislative advocacy training program for people with disabilities. TRAIL supports advocates with disabilities in learning strategies to make systemic change.

Recommendations represent the ideas of TRAIL members and do not represent those of the Women and Girls Foundation or any partners. For additional information please contact Dr Josie Badger at Josie@JBadgerConsultingInc.org

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Primary and Secondary Education for Pennsylvanians with Disabilities

Students with disabilities have had the legal right to public education since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1973 and the promise of integration Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in 1975. [17.7%](#) of students receive Special Education Services. In 2018-19, more than 64% of children with disabilities were in general education classrooms for [80%](#) or more of their school day. In spite of these advancements, many of these students face academic, social and emotional challenges in the school environment.

Academics

- Being called out of class or multiple hospitalizations can lead to missing school work and academic support.

Social challenges

- Being called out of class for services can lead to social isolation and being singled out.
- Bullying is still a major problem for children of all ages.

Funding

- Over the past decade, Pennsylvania schools have been forced to shoulder most of the escalating costs of special educating due to meager increases in state aid, according to a report from the Education Law Center and PA Schools Work. But, in schools with adequate resources, academic achievement for children with disabilities averages close to the results for all students.

Student Mental Health

- Mental health challenges among students are a growing concern. A 2018 survey by the American Health Association found that almost 67% of students reported experiencing "overwhelming anxiety" and almost 57% reported higher-than-average stress levels. Sadly, staff time and resources have been drastically cut for school counselors and support services.

Transition

- Transition out of school is not simply a written plan in a student's Individual Education Plan. Transition in secondary education is the road map for the student's life beyond the classroom. This plan, and more importantly, these activities and opportunities are the vision of the student's life beyond the classroom.

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Policy Recommendations



Increase number of school counselors

- As the number of police and guards have increased in schools there has been a similar decrease in the number of counselors. This change has moved from a proactive to a reactive approach, often negatively impacting at risk and marginalized youth.
- There should be at least one counselor per 1000 students.

Require a percentage of initial and continuing education credits to be disability related

- With the increases in classroom size and full integration of students with disabilities, teachers are often serving students without ongoing support. This can detrimentally impact the education of each student.
- By requiring initial and ongoing educational opportunities relating to students with disabilities and accommodations, teachers and staff may be able to integrate the best practices in their classrooms with less stress.

Audit school's emergency response procedures for students with disabilities

- Students with disabilities are often the last to be considered during emergency planning. There is often inadequate planning around evacuating students with disabilities leaving them more vulnerable and increasing the risk to teachers when there is not a plan in place.
- Annually schools should review their emergency response procedures, including those for students with disabilities.
- General education and special education teachers and professionals should work together to develop plans for different emergency situations for students with varying disabilities. These plans should be included in a student's IEP or 504 plan and practiced at the same regularity as other emergency drills.

Paid Family and Medical Leave

- The pandemic has taught us about the importance of family care. Families need to be able to care for loved ones when they are ill and children who cannot attend in-person learning.