



**Statewide Advocates Influencing Leadership (SAIL) is a community-driven coalition and training project focused on fostering leadership and advocacy among people with disabilities across Pennsylvania. Our group is designed by and for individuals with disabilities, ensuring that the support we provide is both relevant and impactful.**

**Created in partnership with PA REV UP**



# 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. In the 2022-2023 school year, more than 66% of children with disabilities were in general education classrooms for 80% or more of their school day, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. This reflects a commitment to inclusive education practices aimed at integrating students with disabilities into mainstream educational environments as much as possible. In spite of these advancements, many of these students face academic, social and emotional challenges in the school environment.

## Barriers to High Quality Inclusive Academics

- 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.
- Over the past decade, Pennsylvania schools have been forced to shoulder most of the escalating costs of special education 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.

## Social Challenges

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

## Student Mental Health

- Mental health challenges among students continue to be a pressing issue. According to a 2023 survey conducted by the American Health Association, nearly 70% of students reported experiencing "overwhelming anxiety," and approximately 60% reported higher-than-average stress levels ("Mental Health Survey Among Students," 2023). Unfortunately, school counselors and support services have faced severe cuts in staff time and resources, exacerbating the situation ("Impact of Resource Reductions on School Counseling," 2023).
- 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.

## Inadequate Emergency Preparedness

- 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.

## 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.



# Primary and Secondary Education for Pennsylvanians with Disabilities Recommendations

## **Inclusive Academics**

- 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.

## **Improving Social Belonging**

- **Revise Curriculum:** Integrate inclusive teaching practices and a curriculum that includes disability history and culture.
- **Foster Inclusive School Policies:** Support the development of school-wide policies that promote inclusion, such as anti-bullying measures and accessible extracurricular activities, to ensure that students with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of school life.

## **Addressing Student Mental Health**

- There should be at least one counselor per 1000 students. Require a percentage of initial and continuing education credits to be disability related.

## **Audit school's emergency response procedures for students with disabilities**

- 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.

## **Improving Transition**

- Ensure students have self-awareness and self-advocacy skills
- Incentivize schools that have at least one full-time transition counselor

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