

Brain Injury Awareness Month: What is BrainSTEPS and our IU 17 Team

Jim Rinehimer

Every 9 seconds, an individual in the United States sustains a brain injury, according to the Brain Injury Association of Pennsylvania. A brain injury affects how a person thinks, acts, and feels. The symptoms and impacts are wide-ranging and can change everything in a matter of seconds. Brain injuries can have profound and lasting effects on individuals.

Brain injuries, whether acquired through accidents, sports-related incidents, or medical conditions, can significantly impact cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning. Fortunately, there are resources available to support students in their recovery and educational success, one of the most notable being the BrainSTEPS program.

At BLaST IU 17, we have a dedicated BrainSTEPS team that provides brain injury-related consultation and training support to our 19 school districts in Bradford, Lycoming, Sullivan, and Tioga counties. Our team leader is Jim Rinehimer, and our team members are Ethan Lee and Dana Vermilya.

BrainSTEPS (Strategies Teaching Educators, Parents, and Students) is a unique program dedicated to supporting students with Acquired Brain Injuries (ABIs). ABIs include traumatic brain injuries and concussions, as well as non-traumatic brain injuries. A new brain injury that occurs at some point AFTER a child is born can be referred to BrainSTEPS.

Developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Health in 2007, BrainSTEPS is jointly funded by the PA Department of Health and the PA Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education via the PaTTAN Network. BrainSTEPS aims to ensure that students who have experienced brain injuries receive the specialized support they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. This comprehensive program operates within a multidisciplinary framework, involving collaboration between educators, healthcare professionals, families, and community members. Through a network of trained BrainSTEPS teams, comprising professionals with expertise in brain injury and education, the program offers consultation, training, and resources to schools across Pennsylvania. BrainSTEPS monitors students annually until high school

graduation for new issues that can emerge as the brain develops over time. And beyond.

The signs and symptoms of a brain injury fall into four categories: 1) cognitive/thinking; 2) physical; 3) emotional; and 4) sleep. Examples include symptoms such as headaches, difficulty concentrating or remembering information, changes in behavior or mood, fatigue or sleep disturbances, and sensitivity to light or noise.

If you are a parent, educator, school counselor, school staff member, or healthcare provider, you can make a student referral to BrainSTEPS. Referrals can be made through the BrainSTEPS website: <https://brainsteps.net/>. For more information, click the BrainSTEPS link, IU 17 BrainSTEPS, or reach out to the BrainSTEPS IU 17 team. Please look for our new BrainSTEPS awareness poster that should be displayed in the front office of all public school buildings in PA.

Brain injuries pose unique challenges for students, but with the right support, they can overcome obstacles and thrive in school. By raising awareness about BrainSTEPS and referring students to the program, we can provide consultation and training to ensure that every student with a brain injury receives the educational support they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.