



TREES NETWORK

December 2025 Newsletter

Pathways to High School Graduation Parent/Family Meeting

Monday, December 1, 2025 7 PM - 8 PM

Join us virtually on **Monday, December 1, 2025 from 7:00 pm - 8:00 pm** for our monthly family support meeting. Dr. Melissa Holler, Director of Pupil Services with the Allegheny Valley School District and her colleague, Mrs. Becky Dyer, High School Counselor, will be discussing the multiple ways for high school students to graduate. The pathways are a requirement that districts must implement, but there are options and alternatives for students in general education but specifically those in special education. Anyone interested in attending can register for the meeting by contacting Vicki Donne at donne@rmu.edu or Deanna Hiltz at hiltzd@rmu.edu or registering at [Google Registration \(https://forms.gle/crSGRw1FbZPTWP89\)](https://forms.gle/crSGRw1FbZPTWP89) Upon registration, registrants will be sent a Google Meets calendar invitation.



UPCOMING Parent/Family Meeting

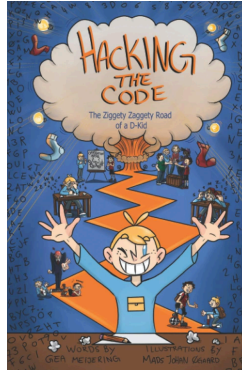
Monday, January 5, 2026 7 PM - 8 PM

Supports Coordination

Mark your calendars for **Monday, January 5, 2026 from 7:00 pm - 8:00 pm**. Let's talk about Supports Coordination (SC). SCs provide case management to eligible people in PA with intellectual disabilities, autism, developmental disabilities, and medically complex conditions. We will learn more about their function, the importance of building a relationship, and planning an Individual Support Plan (ISP). Anyone interested in learning more can register for the meeting by contacting Vicki Donne at donne@rmu.edu or Deanna Hiltz at hiltzd@rmu.edu or registering at [Google Registration \(https://forms.gle/CHQXqB5FSLioE3np8\)](https://forms.gle/CHQXqB5FSLioE3np8) Upon registration, registrants will be sent a Google Meets calendar invitation.

Virtual Book Club for Kids

Starting February 2026



We have picked the book **Hacking the Code: The Ziggety Zaggety Road of a D-Kid** by Gea Meijering for our next book club. **Hacking the Code** is a relatable illustrated chapter book that highlights the journey of Kees, a child with dyslexia whose perseverance, creativity, and friendships help him discover his own strengths. Kees is good at science experiments, fixing things that are broken, making friends, and especially pulling clever pranks. However, due to his dyslexia, his spelling and writing aren't exactly his strengths. One prank goes too far and Kees finds himself punished with the worst assignment ever - writing an essay about the hardest thing he's ever done. Kees must figure out how to tell his story and discover why his way of thinking is something to be proud of.

Join us to read about Kees as he navigates school, activities, and friendships. This book is recommended for children ages 8-12 but is a great read for all ages. We will meet for four weeks **virtually Tuesdays from 6:00 - 7:00 pm. A hard copy of the book will be provided to all participants who register by Wednesday, December 17, 2025.**

Sign up by emailing Deanna Hiltz at hiltzd@rmu.edu

Parent and Family Support Meeting Survey



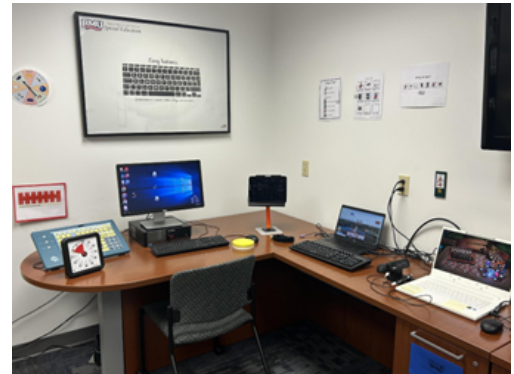
Your experience matters, and we'd love your input! With another successful year of parent and family support meetings behind us, we are planning for the upcoming year and your feedback is essential. Please take a few minutes to complete the survey and share your suggestions and recommendations for future support meetings. To give feedback, please complete the survey here: <https://forms.gle/G5jHVzbeQ6diCAPt8> Thank you for helping us continue to grow and better support our parents, families, community, and educators.

Individual IEP Collaborations and/or Conferences

It is common for parents and guardians of students with disabilities to feel overwhelmed when reading through their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). The RMU Trees Network has set aside hours to virtually meet with individual parents and guardians who have IEP related questions. Let us have an open conversation to help you make sense of your child's IEP and feel more confident in the process. Your questions will guide the discussion and no question is too big or too small. Whether you are new to special education or have been through several IEP meetings, we offer a safe and supportive space to learn and get clarity. Email Vicki at donne@rmu.edu or Deanna at hiltzd@rmu.edu to set up a conference.

Trees Assistive Technology Device Center Open Lab Days

The Trees Network maintains an Assistive Technology (AT) Device Center for use by students and families. AT is any item, piece of equipment, software or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). AT can range from low technology (such as a pencil grip) to high technology (speech recognition software). The AT Device Center hosts Open Lab Days on **Wednesdays from 9:00 am - 3:00 pm**. The Device Center will be open to the public without an appointment. Visitors can explore a variety of AT, including adapted computer equipment, communication devices, and switch-friendly apps and toys. Staff will be available to answer questions; however, individualized support is dependent on the number of participants. Appointments are also available. Come to RMU, **Patrick Henry 333** and check out the various devices. **Please note that the AT Lab will be closed during RMU's winter break from December 15th, 2025 - January 19th, 2026.**



Featured Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming an integral part of education, transforming how students learn and how teachers teach. One of its most powerful uses is in creating personalized experiences. The following AI tools are designed to help students with speech disabilities and for students who are nonspeaking or nonverbal.

- <https://www.monks.com/case-studies/my-first-voice-innovation-generative-ai> - **My First Voice**, an AI-powered platform, transforms children's unique sounds and personalizes authentic speech.
- <https://seamlesscare.ie/empathic/> - **Empathic** app has been developed for nonverbal people. You can add up to three nonverbal users and share Empathic with 20 Companion users. Companion users can check the emotions of the nonverbal person.

- https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.quickpic&hl=en_US&pli=1 - **QuickPic** creates topic-specific displays automatically from photographs to support communication and language learning for nonspeaking individuals.
- <https://www.voiceitt.com/> - **Voiceitt** is a stand-alone app developed to support speech recognition of nonstandard speech, opening the world of voice technology for people with speech disabilities.

Spread the Word about the 50th Anniversary of IDEA



This month, and throughout the year, the RMU Trees Network is proud to honor the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), enacted on November 29, 1975. As we celebrate this landmark legislation, we reflect on the progress made over the past five decades and the lives transformed through access to equitable, high-quality education. However, our work is far from finished. As we look to the future, we must continue to advocate and educate the needs of children and young adults with disabilities. Progress is never guaranteed, and we cannot risk standing still or moving backwards.

Upcoming Events Around the Area

The RMU Trees Network is a member of the Special Needs Consortium, a group of amazing service providers in the Pittsburgh area. The consortium exists to provide a forum where all service providers can network and opportunities can be shared, promoted, and advocated for to increase awareness of resources available to the community. For a full listing of member events, visit their [website](https://www.specialneedsconsortium.org/upcoming-events) (<https://www.specialneedsconsortium.org/upcoming-events>). We hope you will find some of these highlighted events of interest to you.

December 2nd - 12:00PM - 1:00PM Special Needs Consortium Virtual Lunch and Learn

To commemorate the 1975 signing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), join the virtual lunch and learn with an introduction to IDEA by Cindy Duch, The PEAL Center, and IDEA in practice by Nathan Leeman, Rochester Area School District Resource Awareness. Email Mary.Evrard@AlleghenyCounty.us to receive a Teams invitation.

December 2nd - 4th Elf The Musical Trip with Exceptional Adventures

Travel to Toby's Dinner Theater in Columbia, MD to follow Buddy the Elf on his journey to New York. Guests will also enjoy great accommodations with an indoor pool, hot cocoa bar and gift-making. Register here: <https://exceptionaladventures.org/adventures/>

December 8th – A Very Yinzer Christmas Live Show

Presented by Band Together. Benedum Center of the Performing Arts. 237 7th Street, Pittsburgh.

<https://bandtogetherpgh.org/event/live-autism-friendly-open-mic-band-together-clubhouse-36/>

December 14th – Band Together Open Mic and Christmas Party

Registration Required - Reclamation Community Center 2456 Tilbrook Rd, Monroeville

<https://bandtogetherpgh.org/event/live-autism-friendly-open-mic-band-together-clubhouse-37/>

December 14th – 18th Holidays in New York City, NY with Exceptional Adventures

Exceptional Adventures takes you on a scenic train ride to the Big Apple. Guests will enjoy all the holidays have to offer, including The Lion King on Broadway, shopping and delicious dining. Register here: <https://exceptionaladventures.org/adventures/>

December 17th 12:00PM Strategies for SSI, Medicaid, and Special Needs Trust with Fiffik Law Group

Planning for the future of a loved one with special needs involves balancing financial stability with eligibility for essential government benefits. In this webinar, Fiffik Law Group Attorney Kevin Frankel will explore the rules and strategies that help families protect assets, preserve benefits, and plan for long-term care needs. Register here:

<https://www.fiffiklaw.com/event-details/protecting-assets-securing-care-strategies-for-ssi-medicaid-and-special-needs-trusts-2025-12-17-12-00>

January 13th - March 26th (Tuesdays and Thursdays) 4:00PM-6:00PM Open Up Studio

Students will participate in an engaging yoga class, play imaginative games intended to promote mindful social interactions, and make crafts to help support a mindfulness practice at home. This is a smaller group setting with no more than 12 students located in Lawrenceville.

<https://www.open-up.org/club-camp>

DON'T FORGET TO THINK OF YOUR LOCAL LIBRARY FOR EVENTS

- **Allegheny Library Association Programs & Events**
(<https://aclalibraries.org/explore/library-programs-and-events/>)
- **Beaver County Library Systems**
(<https://www.beaverlibraries.org/system-wide-events>)
- **Butler County Federated Library Systems** (<https://www.bcfls.org/libraries>)
- **Washington County Library Systems** (<https://www.washlibs.org/>)
- **Westmoreland County Libraries** (<https://www.wclibraries.org/>)

Council Events

- The Pittsburgh/Allegheny County Local Interagency Coordinating Council (LICC) is a group of families, professionals, and community members who work to improve the delivery of Early Intervention services for young children with developmental delays and disabilities. Their next meeting will be held virtually on Tuesday, January 27, 2026 at 9AM. To register, email strocheck@afit.org.
 - The Allegheny County Local Task Force will meet on Wednesday December 3rd from 6:30 - 8:30 pm. Ms. Melissa Skiffen will be sharing her experiences and insights on Special Education Advocacy, IEPs, and Transitions to Kindergarten. The session will focus on the fundamentals of advocacy and an introduction to parental rights, offering valuable guidance and resources for families. To join, <https://www.ltf3.org/meetings>
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Resources for Parents and Educators

The Network provides resources for parents and teachers and these resources can be found at the [RMU Trees Network Website](https://donne94.wixsite.com/rmu-trees-network) (<https://donne94.wixsite.com/rmu-trees-network>). Information on the Network and the previous newsletters are posted on the RMU website <https://www.rmu.edu/academics/provost/trees>. In each newsletter we provide links to resources related to the topics discussed in our parent meetings and workshops as well as other information that may be helpful to families, schools, and the community. **Below are some links to resources for our upcoming parent/family meeting on the options and pathways to high school graduation in PA.**



- **HUNE: Using an Early Warning System (EWS) to Increase Graduation Rates of Students with Disabilities** - This publication is about using Early Warning Systems (EWS) to increase graduation rates for students with disabilities.
<https://www.pattan.net/Publications/HUNE-Early-Warning-Systems-EWS-to-Increase-Gradu>
- **PA High School Graduation Toolkit** - This Toolkit offers guidance on Pennsylvania's Pathways to Graduation, five alternative avenues for students to demonstrate postsecondary preparedness while satisfying statewide requirements, as well as information on other diploma options for students in specific situations.
<https://pdesas.org/Page/Viewer/ViewPage/56>
- **Statewide High School Graduation Requirements** - Effective with the graduating class of 2023, Pennsylvania high school students have the option to demonstrate their postsecondary preparedness and meet statewide requirements through one of five Pathways to Graduation.
<https://www.pa.gov/agencies/education/programs-and-services/instruction/elementary-and-secondary-education/assessment-and-accountability/graduation-requirements>

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RMU Trees Website (<https://donne94.wixsite.com/rmu-trees-network>)
RMU Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/RMUtrees/>)

