



# THE FORUM

The Tri-State Area School Study Council Newsletter

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Summer 2025

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## TRI-STATE AREA SCHOOL STUDY COUNCIL

*Seeking ways to increase organizational capacity in schools through problem solving, technical service, and staff development so all students will be better prepared to make contributions to both our democratic society and the world community*

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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## Welcome Back!

### Welcome to the 2025–26 School Year

On behalf of the Tri-State Area School Study Council, welcome to a new and exciting school year! We are looking forward to partnering with you throughout 2025–26 to provide meaningful opportunities for professional learning, collaboration, and support.

This year, Tri-State is proud to offer a variety of programs and events for our member districts:

- **Principals Leadership Academy / Western Pennsylvania Principals Academy**  
It is back by popular demand. In partnership with the Fox Chapel Area School District and with support from the Grable Foundation, we are pleased to launch *Cultivating Collaborative Partnerships to Promote Student Achievement*. This Act 45–approved program is designed for school and district administrators. Registration details can be found through the Eventbrite link in this newsletter.
- **Annual NCAA Update – October 15**  
In collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh Athletics Department and with the support of the Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League, Tri-State will once again host this highly regarded event. The NCAA Update provides athletic directors, coaches, guidance counselors, principals, and district leaders with timely insights and the latest developments in college athletics.
- **Attracting, Hiring, Retaining, and Rewarding the Best People**  
This fall, we will also host a session focused on talent development, including strategies for building strong mentorship relationships within your staff. More details will be shared soon.

These are just a few highlights of what's ahead. As always, we welcome your input on how Tri-State can best support your district's needs. Please feel free to reach out and let us know how we can partner with you to strengthen teaching, learning, and leadership across our region.

The start of a school year is an exciting time for students, educators, and leaders alike. We at the Tri-State Area School Study Council and the University of Pittsburgh look forward to working with you in the year ahead.

Warm regards,

Bart Rocco,  
Executive Director of the Tri-State Area School Study Council

Thank you to the law firms who contribute to *The Forum* newsletter each issue:

- **Andrews & Price**, *Special Education Alert*
- **Tucker Arensberg Attorneys**, *Education Law Report*
- **Weiss Burkardt Kramer LLC**, *In Brief: School Law Update*  
(Located on pages 4-5 of *The Forum*)

## 2025 Dr. Samuel Francis Workshop

### 2025 Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium & Special Education Workshop: A Day of Timely Insights and Critical Discussions

June 18, 2025 | Regional Learning Alliance

On June 18th, the Tri-State Area School Study Council, in collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, hosted the 2025 Dr. Samuel Francis School Law Symposium and Special Education Workshop. Continuing its tradition of providing essential professional development, this year's symposium brought together over 100 school leaders, administrators, and legal counsel. The event, held at the Regional Learning Alliance and online via Zoom, provided a vital platform for engaging with today's most pressing legal issues, with attendees praising the sessions as exceptionally relevant and practical for navigating the evolving landscape of school law.

The day featured a robust agenda of concurrent sessions, allowing participants to tailor their learning experience to their specific needs.

#### Navigating the Complexities of Special Education

The special education track offered critical guidance on ensuring compliance and protecting student rights. The sessions explored the complex **"Intersection of Title IX & Special Education"** with Christina Lane, proactive strategies for **"Avoiding Claims of Disability Discrimination"** from Patricia Andrews, and a comprehensive **"Pennsylvania IDEA Part B Overview"** delivered by Dr. Carole Clancy. Later, Lynne Sherry and Kelly Perkovich examined the link between family and education law in **"Classroom to Courtroom,"** a session that shed light on how domestic legal matters can impact school responsibilities. David Mongillo prompted a forward-looking discussion by **"Speculating on Special Education"** and the future of student services in a changing federal landscape.

#### Addressing Current and Emerging Issues in School Law

The school law track provided a thorough review of recent developments. Carl Beard delivered his essential **"School Law Update 2025,"** followed by a timely session on parental rights with Matthew Hoffman and Christopher Voltz, which addressed the delicate balance between instructional freedom and parental oversight. Jocelyn Kramer and Annemarie Harr Eagle offered strategies for resilient leadership in **"Times are Tough but So Are You."** Afternoon topics included a look at federal executive orders with Richard Ting, a comprehensive guide to **"Employee Discipline A to Z"** from Patrick Fanelli, and a dive into modern free speech issues in **"Sex, Censure, and Cyber Crime"** with Megan Turnbull and Rebecca Heaton Hall.

The day also included a dedicated session on professional ethics, with **Dr. Joseph Dimperio** leading the indispensable annual review of the **"Rules of Professional Conduct for Lawyers-2025."**

Tri-State extends its deepest gratitude to the incredible slate of professionals who volunteered their time and knowledge: Patricia Andrews, Carl Beard, Dr. Carole Clancy, Dr. Joseph Dimperio, Annemarie Harr Eagle, Patrick Fanelli, Rebecca Heaton Hall, Matthew Hoffman, Jocelyn Kramer, Christina Lane, David Mongillo, Kelly Perkovich, Lynne Sherry, Richard Ting, Megan Turnbull, and Christopher Voltz.

The 2025 symposium was a resounding success, fostering a rich environment of learning and collaboration. Tri-State is proud to continue the tradition of Dr. Samuel Francis by equipping educational leaders with the knowledge and tools they need to serve their students and communities effectively and legally.

We look forward to seeing everyone again in 2026!

# Women's Law Project

## New Toolkit Helps Administrators Support Lactating Students

*Author: Jennifer Pitt and Sujaya Rajguru*

State and federal law requires that schools must ensure pregnant and parenting students are protected from discrimination and can access lactation accommodations, but many administrators are unsure how to provide the necessary support. In August 2025, the Coalition for Lactation Friendly Schools (CLFS) launched a free toolkit to provide practical guidance to Pennsylvania-based school administrators.

CLFS was founded in 2018 in Pennsylvania to address barriers parenting students face accessing appropriate space and time to pump milk (and/or feed their babies) at school. CLFS's mission is to champion the rights of parenting students and help them achieve their lactation goals in every educational setting. CLFS members from stakeholder organizations and from the community carry out this mission through advocacy and education about regulatory guidance pertaining to lactation and the need for clear school policies.

In 2023, CLFS initiated a statewide policy scan to assess the extent to which Pennsylvania schools provided policies specific to lactation rights on their websites.<sup>i</sup> With support from the Women's Law Project,<sup>ii</sup> 656 school websites were reviewed. The result of this research was alarming. Nearly all of the 248 public high schools, 160 charter high schools, 150 school districts, 71 trade/apprenticeship schools, and 27 intermediate units failed to publish policies articulating a student's right to lactation accommodations.

With this research in mind, CLFS created a practical tool to share with Pennsylvania schools. The toolkit, *Lactation Support for Students: A How-to-Guide for Schools*, covers lactation-specific legal requirements, best practices for implementation, cost considerations and offers troubleshooting tips. For schools and districts needing support to establish or enhance their own lactation policies, the toolkit offers sample policies and a model policy template. The appendix provides breastfeeding resources and photos of lactation spaces to help schools envision space allocation in their buildings.

The legal requirements to protect the rights of lactating students in schools are articulated in Title IX, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act, the Pennsylvania Fair Educational Opportunities Act, and the Pennsylvania Freedom to Breastfeed Act. Beyond the legal obligations, schools investing in robust policies to support students' lactation needs are helping protect students' access to education while advancing critical public health goals: Breastfeeding is associated with a lower incidence of common infections in infants and reduced risk of painful conditions in the parent like mastitis and breast engorgement, which can cause student absenteeism. Providing necessary accommodations on site promotes student retention, decreasing the risk a student will feel forced to choose between going to school and achieving their breastfeeding goals. In turn, breastfeeding promotes healthy infant growth and development, contributing to school-readiness for the next generation of students.

Thanks to the Gender Justice Fund's generous support,<sup>iii</sup> CLFS will distribute print copies of the toolkit to a sampling of Title IX Coordinators in Pennsylvania. To request a free digital copy or learn more, contact the Coalition for Lactation Friendly Schools at [coa.lac.schools@gmail.com](mailto:coa.lac.schools@gmail.com) or Women's Law Project at [info@womenslawproject.org](mailto:info@womenslawproject.org).

<sup>i</sup> Desai, Nymisha. "New Research Shows Pennsylvania Students Need Better Access to Lactation Policies." *The Forum: The Tri-State Area School Study Council Newsletter*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2024, p. 6.

<sup>ii</sup> WLP is a nonprofit public interest legal organization working to defend and advance the rights of women, girls and LGBTQ+ people in Pennsylvania and beyond.

<sup>iii</sup> This project was made possible through the support of the Gender Justice Fund, an organization dedicated to ending all forms of gender-based oppression through trust-based philanthropy and by amplifying community-led systems change.



[www.womenslawproject.org](http://www.womenslawproject.org)  
[infopitt@womenslawproject.org](mailto:infopitt@womenslawproject.org)



## Commonwealth Court Casts Doubt on Immunity in Sexual Abuse Cases

By: Ira Weiss, Esq.



The issue of sovereign immunity is on the table as the result of a decision of the Commonwealth Court. In L.F.V., a Minor, by Her Legal Guardians Kimberly Varano and Joseph Varano, and Kimberly Varano and Joseph Varano in Their Own Right v. South Philadelphia High School and Philadelphia School District, the Commonwealth Court ruled that in the case of student-on-student sexual abuse the case against the School District could proceed in spite of the fact that no district employee or agent was involved with the abuse.

### What is Sovereign Immunity?

Under the English Common Law, the King enjoyed complete immunity from suit. This immunity was upheld in Pennsylvania for centuries. That changed in 1973 when the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in Ayala vs Philadelphia Board of Public Education ruled that the doctrine of sovereign immunity was abolished and directed the Pennsylvania State Legislature to enact legislation permitting suits against governmental entities.

**In response to this ruling, the Legislature approved the Political Subdivision Tort Claims Act (PSTCA), 42 Pa.C.S. 8542, et seq. The PSTCA protects governmental entities, including school districts, from certain legal actions through the doctrine of sovereign immunity. As enacted, there were eight (8) exceptions which could give rise to suits against governmental entities.**

These exceptions include (1) negligence related to the operation of an agency's vehicle, (2) a dangerous condition of streets, (3) a dangerous condition of sidewalks, (4) a dangerous condition of real property, (5) the care, custody, or control of personal property, (6) the care, custody, or control of animals, (7) a dangerous condition of trees, traffic lights, and street lights, and (8) a dangerous condition of steam, sewer, water, gas, or electric systems. In 2019, the Legislature added a ninth exception (9) sexual abuse conduct "which constitutes an offense enumerated under [42 Pa.C.S.] 5551(7) (relating to no limitation applicable) if the injuries to the plaintiff were caused by actions or omissions of the local agency which constitute negligence." There is also no damage cap for cases under this exception as compared with the \$500,000 cap in the eight other exceptions. When read together, the school district is liable if "the injury was caused by the negligent acts of the local agency or an employee thereof acting within the scope of his office or duties with respect to "conduct which

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## Tax Assessment Updates: CLRs & Lawsuits

By: Elizabeth Sattler, Esq.



Tax assessment season has arrived! Last year, Allegheny County adjusted its tax assessment appeal process to a prospective system. This year, the window for 2026 tax assessment appeals opened on July 1, 2025, and will close on September 2, 2025. This brings Allegheny County in line with its surrounding counties, notably Beaver and Washington Counties.

### Reductions in the CLR

#### Allegheny County:

The Common Level Ratio, known as the "CLR" has been adjusted for 2026. In Allegheny County, the CLR decreased from 52.7% in 2025 to 50.14% in 2026. This means that if a property owner purchased a property in 2026, it theoretically should be assessed at approximately 50% of its purchase price, to reflect the value as if it was sold in the base year (2012). While this is not an insurmountable reduction, it indicates that property values are rising; and the 2012 base year values continue to erode.

#### Beaver County:

Beaver County conducted a county-wide reassessment, certifying values in 2025. Upon completion of a reassessment, the CLR is 100%. The CLR for 2026 was reduced from 100% in 2025 to 77.11% in 2026. Due to the significant reduction, our office anticipates many owner-initiated tax assessment appeals seeking an assessment reduction based on the new CLR. Our office has already advised our districts regarding this reduction and remains steadfast in our defense of their tax bases.

### Reassessment Litigation

In 2024, Pittsburgh Public Schools ("PPS") initiated a lawsuit against both Allegheny County and County Executive Sara Innamorato, seeking to compel a county-wide reassessment, and arguing the current base year system fails to guarantee the constitutional right to uniformity in taxation. The Court dismissed the case at the pleading stage, and PPS appealed to the Commonwealth Court. Both parties will file briefs in the fall.

Relatedly, in the winter of 2025, an individual property owner filed a lawsuit against the County of Allegheny and Chief Executive Sara Innamorato, also seeking to compel a county-wide reassessment. Plaintiff argued the 2012 base

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## Commonwealth Courts Casts Doubt, continued

constitutes an offense enumerated under section 5551(7). This language was widely interpreted to mean that to have liability under this exception, the conduct had to be committed by a school district or one of its employees.

### The L.F.V. Case

In L.F.V., the Commonwealth Court denied the District's Preliminary Objections to the Complaint and ruled that the case could proceed even though the abuse was committed by students. While there have been several cases that seemed to suggest that a district could be held liable even if the conduct was not committed by an employee, this case has created a very low bar for plaintiffs to clear to get the matter before a jury.

### Impact

By endorsing a negligence standard, the case presents challenges to school districts. This analysis is far short of the "deliberate indifference" standard that applies in Title IX or Section 1983 cases. The negligence standard, taken together with removal of the damage cap and the extension of the statute of limitations to a claimant's 55th birthday, greatly expands the financial exposure of a school district. These factors make it likely that insurance coverage will not be available or, if available, will be very difficult to afford.

Because negligence involves foreseeability, there is a burden on school personnel to take necessary steps when made aware of threats, both in person and on social media, as well as responding to "talk" in schools even when the conduct relates to student-on-student matters. Training is absolutely necessary to ensure that a school district can demonstrate it has taken reasonable steps to train its staff in these areas. Additionally, policies should be reviewed with legal counsel to ensure that student-on-student conduct is addressed adequately. With a negligence standard, the conduct of any teacher, administrator or employee in failing to take steps to prevent such abuse can be attributed to a school district under the vicarious liability legal standard applicable in any negligence case.

**WBK is prepared to assist in training and policy review to help school clients to take proactive steps in this area. ♦**

## Tax Assessments, continued

year system does not accurately reflect market fluctuations that have occurred over the past 13 years in her neighborhood; and has resulted in non-uniform assessments.

The Plaintiff purchased a home in 2021, and the School District filed an assessment appeal of her property in 2022, seeking an increase in assessment based on the application of the existing common level ratio of her 2021 sales price. The School District prevailed, and the Plaintiff's assessment was increased to a value above most of the neighboring properties, which Plaintiff argues is unconstitutional. This case is pending in the Court of Common Pleas, and the parties are exchanging documentation in anticipation of a trial.

**The attorneys at WBK will continue to keep clients abreast of developments and remain ready to answer questions regarding tax assessment appeals and related issues.♦**

## WBK Happenings

- Attorney Turnbull will also be presenting at the 2025 PSBA School Law Workshop. The Workshop is scheduled for October 20th and will be held at Kalahari Resort in the Poconos. Attorney Turnbull will discuss labor & employment issues.
- On October 21, 2025, Attorney Annemarie Harr will be providing student services updates to attendees at the 59th Annual National Association of Pupil Services Administrators Conference being held in downtown Pittsburgh.
- Attorney Harr will be presenting on the topic of Restraints and Reporting Requirements at the Exceptional Children Conference being held at Central Penn College in Summerdale, PA on October 24, 2025.
- Attorneys Harr and Ira Weiss will be collaborating to teach a fall course at the University of Pittsburgh titled Competent Management of Student Services.
- Attorney Jocelyn Kramer will be presenting on public sector employee discipline at the ACBA's Labor & Employment Law Symposium on November 13, 2025 in Pittsburgh.
- We are pleased to announce that Weiss Burkardt Kramer has been named a 2026 Best Law Firm in the United States by *Best Lawyers* in their Best Law Firms awards. In addition, the firm has been named a Tier 1 firm in Pittsburgh for Education Law and a Tier 1 firm in Pittsburgh for Municipal Law Best Law Firms award. Tier 1 recognition is reserved for the highest scoring firms during the annual review process.
- Attorneys Ira Weiss and Jocelyn Kramer have been named as *The Best Lawyers in America* in the publication's 2026 edition.

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This issue of In Brief: School Law Update is meant to be informational and does not constitute legal advice. Should districts want legal advice on any matter, they should contact their legal counsel or request a legal opinion from Weiss Burkardt Kramer LLC.

# Green Building Alliance

## Green Building Alliance Now Providing No Cost Green Professional Operations & Maintenance for Schools (GPRO for Schools) Training

*Author: Destiny Knetzer, Director of Education & Events*

Looking to improve the energy efficiency of your schools, lower your utility costs, and reduce illness and absenteeism caused by poor indoor air quality in your building and classroom spaces? Through a generous grant from The Grable Foundation, Green Building Alliance (GBA) is now offering Green Building Professional (GPRO) Operations & Maintenance for Schools training at no cost. With a focus on preventative maintenance, GPRO for Schools is specially designed to equip PreK-12 facility and custodial teams with practical, actionable, and affordable strategies for reducing energy and water use, and improving IAQ. GBA provides personalized guidance on improving HVAC systems, ventilation and air filtration; cleaning products; chemical use; pest management; products and finishes; and more.

Poor IAQ can cause respiratory infections resulting from poor ventilation; allergic reactions to off-gassing from cleaning products, finishes, and other chemicals used in schools; illnesses related to the presence of mold or other contaminants; and higher rates of asthma; all of which contribute to absenteeism and impact learning outcomes. GBA's expert staff can bring virtual or in person GPRO for Schools training to your facility and operations teams. To learn more about this free program, reach out Destiny Knetzer, GBA Director of Training & Events, at [destinyk@gbapgh.org](mailto:destinyk@gbapgh.org).



## Lead Like Lasso: In Review

### Tri-State Brings Back 'Lead Like Lasso' to Inspire School Leaders

Back by popular demand, the Tri-State Area School Study Council hosted the highly acclaimed "Lead Like Lasso" workshop on August 12th. Following a successful debut in February, the event returned to welcome 70 school administrators and leaders to Avonworth High School for a day of inspiration, connection, and science-based leadership strategies drawn from the beloved TV show.

Facilitated by the esteemed team from Thriving YOUNiversity, the workshop guided participants through the core principles of the "Lasso Way." The session was a deep dive into people-first leadership, exploring how empathy, optimism, and fostering a true sense of belonging can transform a school's culture. Through a dynamic mix of collaboration, self-reflection, and clips from the show, attendees discovered practical strategies for motivating their teams and leading with confidence and compassion.

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with attendees leaving energized and equipped with new tools. Many expressed a renewed sense of purpose and a clear vision for fostering a more positive and supportive school culture. Participants highlighted several key takeaways, including the importance of creating "Moments of Genuine Connection" (MOCs), the power of being "curious, not furious," and the freedom that comes from adopting the "goldfish" mindset of not dwelling on mistakes. One attendee described the workshop as "truly the best professional development I have been able to be a part of."

The success of this event would not have been possible without our outstanding partners. Tri-State extends its sincere gratitude to Dr. Jeff Hadley, Superintendent of Avonworth School District, and his entire staff for graciously hosting the event and creating a welcoming environment. A special thank you also goes to the incredible facilitators from Thriving YOUNiversity for sharing their expertise and passion.



# Principals Academy of Western Pennsylvania



## SCHOOL LEADERSHIP COURSE 2: CULTIVATING COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS TO PROMOTE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Designed to equip school leaders with the tools to foster  
& sustain partnerships with families, community stakeholders,  
& staff to enhance teaching and learning, promote equity,  
& improve student achievement

### DATES

10.22.2025  
11.13.2025  
12.18.2025  
1.8.2026

### TIME

All sessions  
will be held  
from 9 a.m.  
to 3 p.m.  
Breakfast  
and lunch  
are included.

### LOCATION

Locations will  
vary. Registered  
districts will have  
the opportunity  
to host sessions.

### COST

Through the  
generosity  
of the Grable  
Foundation,  
participant cost  
has been cut  
to \$299\*.

### COURSE TOPICS

- Session I: Introduction to Collaborative Leadership
- Session II: Building Trust & Effective Communication
- Session III: Aligning Partnerships with School Improvement
- Session IV: Sustaining Long-Term Collaborative Partnerships

### REGISTRATION



Scan the  
QR code to  
register or visit  
<https://bit.ly/FCASDSL2>

After Eventbrite registration is complete, participants will receive a link for payment.

### MORE INFO

For information about  
scholarships, please email  
Melissa Wiest at [melissa.wiest@fcasd.edu](mailto:melissa.wiest@fcasd.edu).

### HOST



### IN COLLABORATION WITH



Tri-State Area  
School Study Council

### SUPPORTED BY



### INSTRUCTORS

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Dr. Bart Rocco, Ed.D.  
Dr. Bille Rondinelli, Ed.D.

### CREDITS

By popular demand, a second  
Educational Leadership Academy  
course has been added & approved  
by PDE. 50 PIL/Act 45 Hours

*The Forum is a publication of the Tri-State Area School Study Council. Comments and suggestions for future topics are welcomed. Tri-State can be contacted at [tristate@pitt.edu](mailto:tristate@pitt.edu)*

*The information in **The Forum** is for the general knowledge of the reader.  
For more specific information, rely on the advice of your solicitor.*