LINK Peer-to-Peer Program Cultivates Relationships, Positive Culture at Saginaw High School

In a reading support class at Saginaw High School, the air hangs a little heavy.

The students take turns reading aloud about marijuana’s effects on the brain. Their hands cup their chins, their voices unsure. A few sigh and nearly give up after struggling with a difficult word.

Then it’s Royce Peters’s turn.

The words start coming out of his mouth softly but eagerly. Occasionally, he hesitates. This is when fellow students JoeDel Lowe and Lakia Hamilton step in.

If it’s a word they’re sure he knows, Lowe and Hamilton prod him. “Royce, you know this,” they say. Or, simply, “Say it.” And he does.

When he finishes reading his section, Peters smiles and Lowe matter-of-factly says, “Good job.” The three students pack up their belongings and leave early, heading to Peters’s next class.

Peters is 15 and a sophomore at Saginaw High. He also has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and is one of six students with disabilities who participate in the school’s LINK program. This peer to peer program provides students who have ASD with the opportunity to interact with general education students throughout the day. At Saginaw High, students with other disabilities also participate.

In 1990, the LINK program was created at Clarkston Community Schools under the direction of Maureen Ziegler, who was a teacher consultant for the district. At the time, peer to peer programs presented an innovative way of approaching special education, particularly when peers were embedded in programs that supported students with ASD.

Years later, when Ziegler joined Statewide Autism Resources and Training (START), she brought a blueprint for starting peer to peer programs across the state. Following Clarkston’s success, START began implementing the LINK program in other schools and now provides training for staff and administrators in more than 400 schools across Michigan.
Thirty-two students participate in Saginaw High’s LINK program, which is now in its second year. The other two public high schools in the city, Arthur Hill High School and Saginaw Arts and Sciences Academy, have also implemented the program, says Margie Mayberry, a START consultant. Mayberry helped implement the LINK program in all three schools.

Saginaw High was primed for the program, says Mayberry, because the school was already running a peer-mentoring program that paired incoming freshmen with seniors.

In the LINK program, a student with a disability is paired with two peer mentors, referred to as LINKs, says Teri Lieber, a Family Life Educator and elective teacher who mentors the students. Each trio is comprised of one general education student, one student considered “at risk” for dropping out, and a student with a disability. The three students accompany each other throughout various school experiences.

Being a LINK goes beyond helping a student in class. Peters’s LINKs find creative ways to address his needs, making astute observations on how he prefers to communicate along the way. They have also become his friends and behavior role models.

Peters, who has been mostly non-verbal, has a more unique form of ASD than any other student who has gone through general education at Saginaw High School, says Lieber.

Before, Peters didn’t initiate conversations and walked between classes silently. One of the few people he interacted with regularly was his para-educator, Irene Gomez. He didn’t interact much with other students.

“When a student has an adult that accompanies him everywhere, he’s not approachable to other students,” says Mayberry. “The opportunities for natural engagement with peers are significantly limited.”

Now, if Peters notices something new in the hallway while walking to class, he asks his LINK what it is and won’t stop until he receives an answer.

Peters’s LINKs are beginning to understand him better. They often share what they’ve learned with Lieber and each other.

During a recent conversation with several other LINKs, Tey’Ariana Marshall, 17, says that Peters sometimes starts singing a cartoon theme song but won’t give an answer when she asks what he’s singing.

Another LINK, Kalifah Sharper, also 17, cuts in.

“He will if you ask him,” she says. “Like, have you ever heard him say, ‘Hey, what’s that?’ If you talk to him like he talks to you and if you won’t look at him directly, he’ll tell you exactly what he’s doing.”
Another student murmurs understanding, filing away this nugget of information for future use.

Prior to Saginaw High, Peters was exposed to limited academic learning opportunities. He transferred between several schools and briefly attended Millet Learning Center, which serves students with low-incidence disabilities. When he reached high school age, his mother, Felicia Peters, wanted him to go to school alongside typically-developing students. Peters started at Saginaw High as a ninth-grader.

During one of Mayberry’s first meetings with Felicia Peters, school administrators, and the initial group of LINKs, she was surprised by several questions the students asked. From the get-go, she says, their questions cut right to the heart of the matter. They called out and scrutinized every perceived obstacle: What will Peters do after high school? Will he get a job? What does he do after school? He loves to run, so who can get him on the track team? And, most importantly, who’s going to be in charge of helping him get a girlfriend?

“They don’t see the obstacle. They don’t see any barrier,” Mayberry says. “So they candidly bring up the questions that need to be addressed—that few people, few educators, ask.”

Felicia Peters says she’s seen more maturity and growth in her son. He now sometimes greets people he knows with no prompting, and he even talked about the LINK program in front of hundreds of attendees at a START state conference. “A couple years ago, I wouldn’t have been able to get him in a room with that many people,” she says.

The LINKs get just as much out of the experience as Royce Peters does.

In a study of 122 LINK students from four Michigan high schools, START found academic and behavioral improvements. Overall, LINK absences decreased from an average of 5.39 days before becoming a LINK to 4.11 days in the first semester after becoming a LINK. Average GPA increased slightly in the same time frame from 2.99 to 3.17.

Out of 29 LINKs with a low GPA (below 2.5), almost 80 percent showed improvements in GPA during their first LINK semester, according to START data. Twelve LINKs with behavioral issues also had fewer referrals and detentions on average.

LINKs learn responsibility, accountability, and that someone actually needs them, says Shannon Rammler, an English and Academic Intervention teacher who was also instrumental in implementing the LINK program at the school.

The program has also had a school-wide impact. In a city that has struggled with crime, high unemployment, and low achievement, most of Saginaw High’s students could be considered “at
risk.” But due in part to the LINK program, the school’s climate and culture have dramatically changed, says Principal Ramon Roberts.

Throughout the school, students have been performing better and behaving better—even the freshmen, who are usually the toughest to deal with because they’re still transitioning from middle to high school, says Roberts.

When Roberts greets visitors, he always asks what they’ve heard about Saginaw. Then he asks if Saginaw High falls in line with that stereotype.

Visitors have to admit that it doesn’t.

Roberts says he was initially hesitant to implement additional programming because of the pressure to focus on programs that directly impact students’ test scores and achievement. What he didn’t realize, though, was that the LINK program would have an indirect positive effect on students’ grades and test scores.

“It has dramatically changed our culture, which has had an impact on our student achievement,” he says. “We’ve experienced some great success over these past two years across the board in terms of our achievement data, certainly our discipline data, our graduation rate data, dropout rate data. All of it has seen significant increases, and I have no doubts that it’s due to the LINK program.”

Article printed from Forward Focus: http://focus.cenmi.org

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