



FOCUS on Results

Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education

June 2012**In FOCUS***LINKS Peer to Peer program*

The LINKS Peer to Peer program is an evidence-based practice with benefits for both LINK peers and students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The STatewide Autism Resources and Training (START) Project works with school districts to implement the LINKS Peer to Peer program.

This **FOCUS on Results** document was authored by Amy Matthews, Ph.D., (Director of START) and Maureen Ziegler, Ed.S. (Autism Education and Intervention Specialist for START). The document examines the history and success of LINKS Peer to Peer programs in Michigan.

For more information on START, please visit www.gvsu.edu/autismcenter.

This **FOCUS on Results** document includes:

- A look at how LINKS Peer to Peer programs create positive outcomes for both students with ASD and their non-disabled peers. **Page 1-5**
- A description of the impact the LINKS Peer to Peer program is having from the perspective of a district and a parent. **Pages 6-7**

This **FOCUS on Results** document addresses:

Curriculum and Instruction

Peer to Peer Support Programs Change Lives for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorders and Their Peers

by Amy Matthews, Ph.D. and Maureen Ziegler, Ed.S.

As a speech and language pathologist working with elementary students in a peer support program, Heather Stanton-Rudy knows the benefits of peer-mediated interventions, especially for independence and socialization skills. But the real impact of peer support hit home when her son Trevor, a 7th grade student at Charlotte Middle School, was connected with two peers from the high school.

"I am a true believer in peer to peer, and I am still amazed at the changes we have witnessed in just three short months," Heather said about her son's experience.

"Trevor began attending general education classes every day for most of the day. Before he connected with peers, he would attend general education classes 20-50 minutes per day and then only when accompanied by a staff member," she said.

Recently, Trevor has been observed approaching and talking with classmates, and Trevor's ability to express himself at home and at school has increased. In these few short months Heather has seen amazing changes, and she can't wait to see what next year will bring.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurobiological disorder with varying degrees of impairment in communication skills; social interactions; and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior. The "autism spectrum" refers to the continuum of symptom severity and expression that individuals with ASD can experience.

How ASD is manifested and how severely it affects one's life is unique to each individual. ASD is a lifelong disorder. However, individualized interventions and educational programs can lead to significant growth and improved quality of life for individuals with ASD.

Historically, ASD was misunderstood and rarely identified. Today, the prevalence rate has increased to one in 88 children. Data from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) indicate that in 1990, 1,203 children between the ages of 3 and 26 identified with ASD were receiving special education supports and services; by January 2011, 15,976 children



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were receiving supports and services in Michigan under the ASD category of eligibility.

Highly effective K-12 educational programming and social support is essential for students with ASD. The consequences of low expectations and lack of engagement in the general education community are significant. To date, the long-term outcomes in terms of independent living, community integration, and employment for students with ASD, including those achieving at grade level, are shockingly poor (www.nlts2.org).

However, student engagement and outcomes improve when students have individualized education program (IEP) goals aligned to state standards in general education, and when they have access to general education settings and typical social and communication models (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010).

What is necessary for this level of school involvement is not the "readiness" of students with ASD to participate in the general education community, but preparation of the general education and special education community, along with the student body, to understand the unique characteristics, needs, and contributions of students with ASD.

Peer-Mediated Interventions for Students With ASD

"Peer-mediated approaches have long been utilized to improve the learning outcomes and social interactions of students with and without disabilities..." (Carter & Kennedy, 2006, p. 285).

Educational programming for students with ASD should

include goals for improving social competency with both adults and peers (National Research Council, 2001) and peer-mediated interventions are well-documented as an evidence-based practice for students with ASD (National Standards Project, 2010).

The state of Michigan is fortunate to have a comprehensive, well-formulated peer to peer support model, called the LINKS Peer to Peer program, which has been implemented, promoted, and supported by educators, parents, and students for many years. The purpose of peer to peer support programs is to provide increased opportunities for students with ASD to access the general education curriculum and general education students.

"As students with severe disabilities increasingly are spending more of their school day in general education classes alongside their classmates without disabilities, peer-mediated strategies are being recognized as an especially promising vehicle for promoting full participation and success in school" (Carter & Kennedy, 2006, P. 285).

Peers model typical academic and social behavior in educational environments throughout the school day and provide support for students with ASD to promote independence and socialization. Peers, in return, gain increased skills in organization, responsibility, problem solving, decision-making, and accountability (Carter, Cushing & Kennedy, 2009).

In addition to these benefits, the LINKS Peer to Peer program addresses the requirements to reduce the number of special education eligible students served in separate learning

environments (State Performance Plan Indicator 5). Peer to peer support allows students with ASD to have regular access to the general education environment and curriculum through peer modeling and mentoring, which leads to greater academic and social success across their school day. Peer programs have the potential to increase access for a large number of students who previously had few opportunities in general education settings.

Kick-off in Clarkston Schools

The LINKS Peer to Peer program was first implemented by Clarkston Community Schools in 1990, and it is an example of a comprehensive peer-mediated program to provide students with ASD the opportunity to engage with general education peers across the school day. Students with ASD observed and learned typical social, communication, behavior, and academic skills through the modeling and participation of general education peers.

The LINKS Peer to Peer program was designed to promote successful integrated opportunities for students with ASD through the active teaching and support of general education students to serve as peer models and supports for students with ASD. This program was implemented school-wide in several elementary buildings, two middle schools, and the high school in Clarkston with demonstrated success.

The program emphasized treating students with dignity, having a systematic problem solving approach, providing social learning opportunities, and acknowledging peers for their contributions to the building.

In the past several years, staff and administrators from schools across Michigan have received training from staff at the STatewide Autism Resources and Training (START) Project to replicate the LINKS Peer to Peer program model.

At this time, there are more than 200 peer to peer support programs supporting students with ASD across the state.

These programs operate at both a small and large scale for students from the elementary to the high school level. Many districts run highly successful programs and have received awards for their work, such as the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB) Education Excellence Award.

Implementation of the LINKS Peer to Peer program involves school staff commitment and training, recruitment and training of general education peers, ongoing problem solving with students and school staff, and regular celebration of the LINKS Peer to Peer program students. At the elementary level, general education students receive training to provide friendship and support through a reverse inclusion model or with students with ASD in their own classrooms. At the secondary level, general education students may take an elective course to learn skills to become a LINK for a student with ASD. Subsequently, each student with ASD is supported by several general education peers over the course of a school day in both classroom and non-classroom environments.

Peers Supporting Students With ASD Reap Benefits

Peer to peer support programs affect outcomes for students

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More information about the evidence-based practice literature supporting peer-mediated interventions is available at the National Professional Development Center website through the "Evidence Based Practices."

with disabilities and can also impact a number of outcomes for typical peers. Several studies have described benefits for students without disabilities who serve as peer supports such as improvements in academic competence, increased awareness and greater understanding of disabilities, and the development of new skills (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2009).

Parents of peers have noted that their children demonstrate a greater sense of responsibility at home and in school, a sentiment echoed by the children themselves. Additionally, at-risk students and students with other academic and behavioral issues serving as LINKS learn to utilize their differences as strengths in supporting students with ASD.

Benefits to at-risk students serving as LINKS can include decreased behavior referrals, increased grades, and increased attendance (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997).

Researchers have also found that when involved in peer support programs, peers adopt accepting and positive attitudes toward their peers with disabilities (Farrell, 1997) and positive interactions with students with disabilities improve as contact increases. Additionally, peer attitudes are more positive in schools that are better integrated, as opposed to schools where inclusion efforts are not well-supported. Peers do appear to be interested in having information and training about disabilities and about strategies to facilitate interactions with their classmates with disabilities.

Michigan's Vision of Peer to Peer Support

Through training and technical assistance, the START Project, has observed numerous positive changes in students, peers, educators, and school communities through the implementation of peer to peer support. It is START's vision that

The LINKS program has the potential to establish a platform where ALL students and faculty come together to provide alternative solutions and approaches in education that can genuinely address the diversity in our schools and bring about a sense of belonging for all learners.

—Marjorie Mayberry
Team Leader, Programs for Students with Autism
Clawson Public Schools



all students with ASD will have access to a peer support program from elementary through high school.

A model of support for K-12 would allow students with ASD to have access to both general education environments and peers early in their school career and throughout all grade levels. Peers learn how to interact, problem solve, and accept differences in an authentic way.

Ultimately, this type of intensive involvement in a meaningful program has the potential to change school climate and outcomes for all involved. The results for students with ASD and peers are clearly demonstrated to educators and parents through increased involvement in general education.

Peer support should not end when students graduate or move to a post high school program. Interaction with peers and natural supports need to continue into employment, college, housing, and social and recreational activities to improve quality of life and overall outcomes for students with ASD.

START Project staff are launching a peer to peer social network system to allow students to maintain contact after

leaving high school and make connections with other students around the state.

For example, students with ASD who are planning to attend college can connect with students who will attend the same college and were peer supports at high schools around the state. Individuals who were once peer LINKS can work side by side with adults with ASD as natural supports in various employment settings.

ASD is lifelong, and social and community engagement is needed for a lifetime. Students need to start school as active members of their school community, engaged with peers and the general education environment.

Experience tells us that if peers are enlisted to understand the learning and social needs of their fellow students with ASD, they will readily step forward and offer assistance and friendship.

The LINKS Peer to Peer program is true character education and authentic teaching through real world experience in their school environment. The results are a winning outcome for both groups of students, as well as the school community, that doesn't end at graduation.

Student Perspective

I think it would greatly benefit the world if everyone got to work in a program like LINKS for at least a semester. If high school students did, I think we would all be a lot more understanding, accepting, and kind.

—LINK Peer

My peer LINKS have helped me. We need you to help the rest of us who don't have someone to depend on. Become a friend to the friendless, a teacher to those willing to learn, a hope to those who have given up, and a light in a world of shadows. Simple actions can mean everything. Give us not pity: give us someone to depend on and lead us through this strange world.

—Student with ASD



Michael Caine is the Special Education Director of Haslett Public Schools.

LINKS Peer to Peer Program Brings Meaningful Experiences

A District's Perspective on Peer to Peer Support

By Michael Caine, Haslett Public Schools

In January of 2011, Haslett High School formally launched a LINKS Peer to Peer program to provide peer support to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) as they are integrated into the general education setting.

The hope at the time was that this model of support would provide greater opportunities for the students with ASD in the high school to grow socially and benefit from their typically developing peer models.

Surpassing this goal, the experience has led to marked and genuine growth for students with ASD and their peers, both within the culture of the entire school setting and beyond the walls of the traditional school building.

Upon reflecting on the impact of this program, Bart Wegenke, the Principal of Haslett High School, made the following observations: "As a result of our students and staff participating in the Haslett High School LINKS Peer to Peer program, our students with ASD have been successfully assimilated into our school environment which is focused on a culture of respect, responsibility, and success. Barriers have been broken, and friendships have been made. Our recent school-wide data suggests a decline of all bullying incidents school wide."

The Haslett LINKS Peer to Peer program began in January 2011 with eight peers supporting two students with ASD. This year 32 peers supported five students

with ASD. It is anticipated that there will be four to five students with ASD in the program for the 2012-2013 school year. The LINKS Peer to Peer program teacher, Lisa Basore, indicates that interest in the program is high and she has more peer applicants than the program can accommodate.

Through the use of lunch time meetings, school newspaper articles, and daily announcements, the message about the program was initially introduced into the school setting. Now, students are drawn to involvement in the program by what they see in the hallways, in their classes, and on the t-shirts promoting autism awareness worn by their friends. As stated by Principal Wegenke, "Bottom line: It's cool to be a Haslett High School LINK!"

The impact and value of this program has now extended beyond the walls of the school. Earlier this month, Lisa Basore received the following email from the mother of a student with ASD: "I have to tell you that last night was amazing for both Katie and me. Katie was so excited to go out with her friends from Haslett High School on her own.

"I didn't worry about Katie at all because I knew she was in good hands. It was just so amazing to me that Katie was with peers her own age doing what other teens do. She has never had the opportunity to do this before. Katie was beaming when she came home."



LINKS Peer to Peer Program Has the Power to Change Lives

A Parent's Perspective on Peer to Peer Support

By **Andrea Gruber**

To say that the LINKS Peer to Peer program is an important component of an inclusive education would be an understatement. The LINKS Peer to Peer program offers guidance, companionship, and support through the bonds of natural friendships that adults cannot begin to understand or emulate.

My son, Marc, had the privilege to benefit from the LINKS Peer to Peer program throughout his educational career in the Clawson Public Schools.

From the early age of third grade, Marc never had to worry about being alone. Peers, who valued him as a friend and cared about his well-being, always surrounded him. Eating lunch and participating in gym classes, school trips, and special events found Marc surrounded by his friends who enjoyed his companionship and marveled at his achievements. He was never bullied or belittled because his friends had his back. He was one of them...a bit different, but one of them nonetheless.

These very same LINK students followed Marc through middle school and high school, always looking out for his best interests, always including him the way only peers can. Teachers seldom interfered. Marc never ate alone. Marc had friends "visit" him at his locker. Marc never walked the halls alone. Marc belonged

in ways most typical people take for granted. He was happy. He belonged.

In high school, being a LINK student took on a different meaning. No longer part of a class, the responsibilities and engagement took on a more mature role. High school found Marc totally engrossed in school activities—assisting with the basketball team, attending school dances and other social functions—Marc was one of the guys and always enjoyed the camaraderie of his friends.

The skills learned through the LINKS Peer to Peer program became even more important because they had to be used in natural settings. Somehow, it worked. Marc had an incredible high school experience with little interference from adults.

By the time Marc graduated, he was known by everyone in his class. He was seated alphabetically in the auditorium and walked across the stage a solo act, just like all the other seniors. Family and friends cheered from the sidelines.

Today, Marc is still in regular contact with three LINK graduates. He relishes the time they spend together and the fond memories they share. I cannot say enough good things about this program. It enhanced every aspect of Marc's life.

Andrea Gruber is the parent of a student with ASD in Clawson Public Schools.





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FOCUS Highlights

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurobiological disorder with varying degrees of impairment in communication skills; social interactions; and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior.
- By January 2011, 15,976 children were receiving supports and services in Michigan under the ASD category of eligibility.
- Access to the general education curriculum and environment with solid academic goals, social and communication models, and natural learning opportunities allow for higher engagement and greater long-term success (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010).
- Michigan promotes and supports the LINKS Peer to Peer program. The program is designed to increase opportunities for students with ASD to access the general education curriculum and general education students.
- The LINKS Peer to Peer program affects outcomes for students with ASD and their non-disabled peers.

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