



From Barriers to Belonging

Promoting Inclusion and Relationships Through the Peer to Peer Program

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Most memories of school focus on friendships and time spent in the company of peers. Whether working collaboratively on a class project, enjoying lunch together in the cafeteria, playing with friends at recess, participating in extracurricular programs, or hanging out between classes—the social dimensions of schooling are often among the most enjoyable. However, students' relationships with their peers offer much more than mere fun. Such social connections can also make important contributions to school engagement, academic learning, sense of belonging, and overall well-being (Carter et al., 2014).

Peer relationships are just as important for students with autism, intellectual disability, and other developmental disabilities. Through their interactions with peers across the school day, students develop new skills, encounter new perspectives, access needed supports, find camaraderie, develop social capital, learn prevailing norms, and elevate their future aspirations (Biggs & Carter, 2017). Yet friendships can be limited for these students. For example, only 29% of high school students with autism and 42% of students with intellectual disability reported that they got together with friends at least once per week during the past year (Lipscomb et al., 2017). Instead, so much of their school day is spent among paraprofessionals, special educators, and other adults.

What would it look like for schools to expand opportunities for students with and without disabilities to meet, learn alongside each other, and spend time together throughout the school day? How might barriers of attitude, awareness, and access be addressed in more intentional and widespread ways? And how might peers without disabilities become involved in supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities in classrooms, cafeterias, and clubs that make up everyday school life? This article describes a time-tested and replicable schoolwide approach for creating meaningful social opportunities and fostering a school climate that is supportive of inclusion.

The Peer to Peer Program

The Peer to Peer program is a schoolwide peer partner program that invites peers without disabilities to learn more about



Peer to Peer provides a formal pathway for ensuring students with and without disabilities can meet, support, enjoy, and befriend one another throughout the school day.

their fellow schoolmates with disabilities and to actively participate in supporting them socially and academically throughout the school day. Although the program can be tailored based on the culture and needs of a particular school, core features include recruiting multiple students to serve as formal peer partners (often called "LINKs"); equipping them with relevant knowledge and skills through initial or ongoing trainings; partnering them with students with developmental disabilities who would enjoy and benefit from their support; creating regular opportunities for students to spend time together in classrooms, cafeterias, extracurriculars, and other school activities; and engaging peers in group problem solving and advocacy. In other words, Peer to Peer provides a formal pathway for ensuring students with and without disabilities can meet, support, enjoy, and befriend one another throughout the school day—all while receiving needed guidance and assistance from school staff. Moreover, the program addresses a number of common barriers to inclusion by creating shared activities, arranging individualized support, addressing peer attitudes, and reducing reliance on one-to-one paraprofessionals.

Peer to Peer was first launched in 1990 within a small Michigan school district. Concerned about the social isolation of many students with autism, a small group of special education staff began identifying and training peers to serve as role models, academic supports, and interaction partners to the students they served. Over the past 30 years, hundreds of schools have begun adopting and adapting the approach to meet the needs of their students with and without disabilities. Presently, more than 700 schools offer the program in Michigan alone. These schools collectively involve more than 3,000 students with developmental disabilities

and 14,000 peers. Since 2001, the launch and growth of the program in Michigan has been supported by START (Statewide Autism Resources and Training), a state-funded project focused on making systems-level changes to improve the educational programming and quality of life for students with autism and other developmental disabilities. Through our work with hundreds of schools and thousands of educators over multiple decades, we have learned quite a lot about the process of designing and implementing these programs. We have also seen firsthand the impact these schoolwide programs can have on students and the climate of a school (see sidebar "Potential Impact of Peer Partner Programs"). In the remainder of this article, we present nine steps for consideration related to launching an effective program. Free implementation manuals, fidelity checklists, and other program resources related to each of these steps are available online at <https://www.gvsu.edu/autismcenter/>.

Aspects of a Successful Program

Although Peer to Peer programs can be tailored to reflect the goals, culture, grade levels, and resources of a particular school, they should incorporate the nine components outlined next. We illustrate these areas in a vignette accompanying each section.

Step 1: Securing School and District Support

A strong foundation of support is essential to the success of Peer to Peer. A core team is needed to plan, launch, and maintain the program. This group might include special educators, guidance counselors, school psychologists, social workers, or others invested in expanding inclusive

Potential Impact of Peer Partner Programs

Scores of studies have documented the impact of focused peer-mediated interventions (e.g., peer support arrangements, peer networks, lunch bunches, peer tutoring) on the social relationships and learning of individual students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (e.g., Bene et al., 2014; Watkins et al., 2015). Schoolwide peer partner programs, like Peer to Peer, provide a structure for extending these individualized intervention approaches to multiple students with disabilities throughout their school days (Carter et al., 2013). Studies find that peer partner programs can enhance the friendships and skill development of students with disabilities, improve the attitudes and expectations of peers, and impact school climate related to disability (e.g., Copeland et al., 2004; Hughes et al., 2001; Leigers et al., 2017). Most Peer to Peer schools collect their own program evaluation data to understand the impact on their local participants. On end-of-year surveys, peer partners regularly report learning new advocacy skills, deepening their self-awareness, developing problem-solving skills, becoming more responsible, and improving their understanding of disability and diversity. As future neighbors, coworkers, and community leaders, their early encounters with disability are likely to shape their long-term attitudes, commitments, and career pathways. Likewise, students with disabilities have reported new friendships, participating more in class, and encountering greater understanding from their schoolmates. End-of-year parent surveys often address the ways their children experience a stronger sense of belonging, enjoy going to school more, or attend more after-school activities. Some participating schools have even documented modest increases in attendance and grades for participating peer partners and students with disabilities as well as decreases in overall behavioral referrals.

practices at their school. We recommend a minimum of three to five members. Most schools designate one or two program coordinators as having primary responsibility for overseeing program implementation (see Step 6). Although initial planning meetings should take place weekly, later ones can be thinned to monthly or quarterly.

School administrators set the vision for their schools and can be powerful voices in support of inclusive practices and new initiatives (Crockett et al., 2019). Principals will want to know the purpose of the program, its structure, its resource needs, its staff requirements, and its anticipated impact on participating students. They can help publicize the program, navigate scheduling and logistical issues, brainstorm emerging challenges, and allocate any needed resources and planning time. At the district level, permission will be needed to establish any new elective course associated with the program.

Because Peer to Peer promotes inclusion throughout the school day, broad awareness and buy-in is essential. Short presentations at faculty meetings can promote familiarity of the program among teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff. Teachers can be encouraged to recommend peers for involvement and to include students with developmental disabilities in the classes, clubs, and other programs they lead. The support of families is also invaluable. School staff can create brochures, web pages, or other resources that explain the goals of Peer to Peer and spread the word at open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and elsewhere. Examples are available in the downloadable implementation manuals. Most schools require parental permission for students with disabilities and peers to become involved.

Assistant Principal Vogus was excited about pursuing Peer to Peer at Sherman Middle School. She felt certain such a schoolwide

initiative could create new opportunities for students with and without autism to meet, learn alongside each other, and get to know one another. Students with significant disabilities were being served primarily in special education classrooms and made few friends beyond their classmates. She brought the idea to her school's leadership team, and they discussed its alignment with the school's mission, logistical considerations, resource and staffing needs, and potential allies within the school. They shared their initial ideas at the first school faculty meeting, soliciting the input, endorsement, and involvement of staff.

Step 2: Designing Your Program

At the outset, the core planning team will need to determine (a) the structure of the program, (b) how students will spend time together, (c) which students will be involved, and (d) what the program and its participants will be called. Promoting inclusion and relationships are prominent themes throughout Peer to Peer programs. But the pathways to these pursuits can vary across schools. For example, most secondary schools adopt a credit course that enables peers to spend designated time each day with their schoolmate with autism or other developmental disabilities. This state-approved course also incorporates curricular and experiential elements addressing the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of peers. In elementary schools, opportunities for shared experiences are usually embedded throughout the day (e.g., classes, lunch, recess) in less formal ways apart from a course.

Regardless of the structure, teams should consider carefully how students will spend time together (i.e., called the “medium of exchange”). In other words, shared activities over time provide the context through which new friendships are forged and sustained (Carter et al., 2014). To accomplish this, staff identify activities across general and special education classrooms, school clubs, cafeterias, field trips, and school-sponsored events that students can take part in together on a regular basis (see sidebar “Examples of Activities Students Participate in Together Through Peer to Peer”). When appropriate, selecting activities that integrate the common interests of participating students can enhance motivation and engagement. For

example, teachers can survey or interview students about their interests, ask for input from parents or paraprofessionals, review recent individualized education programs (IEPs), or provide a menu of options from which students can choose. Moreover, it is important to identify activities that will work well for students with complex communication challenges or significant intellectual disability. Special educators who work most closely with these students can provide input on the activities, modifications, and adaptations that would enable meaningful participation.

Students with autism or intellectual disability have been the primary participants within Peer to Peer programs. However, students with other developmental disabilities who have goals related to social and communication skill development, peer relationships, or independence can certainly benefit from the structure and support these programs provide. Likewise, the experience should be available to peers without disabilities who may benefit from the shared experiences, relationships, and learning opportunities the program facilitates. Although qualities such as having strong social skills, personal interest, good

attendance, adaptability, and persistence can be valuable, the selection of peers is more art than science. There is no single profile of a successful peer partner. Avoid focusing only on high-achieving students and females (Schaefer et al., 2016), as many often-overlooked students (e.g., students who are themselves struggling academically or behaviorally) may shine when given this opportunity. Depending on the program's goals and resources, teams should discuss how many (and which) students to involve at first and the total number of peers needed. We recommend that at least two peers be connected to each student with disabilities per period of the school day.

Finally, teams should decide what to call the program. Peer to Peer and LINKs are perhaps the most recognized program names among Michigan schools, as these names are associated with state-approved courses. Other schools, however, might choose to select names that are more personalized. Students and staff should select a name that is age appropriate, communicates the focus of the program, and resonates with students. When the program was first developed in Michigan, peers were referred to as LINKs because they helped link the student with

disabilities to all aspects of school life. Other schools may refer to them as peer partners or peer buddies (e.g., Copeland et al., 2004; Leigers et al., 2017).

A core planning team met weekly to prepare for the launch. They opted to start small, focusing first on their six students with autism and a small cohort of peer partners. They began by identifying informal contexts in which students could spend time together as they sought district approval for an elective course. They brainstormed activities that would be interactive, give valued roles to everyone, and be enjoyed by tweens and teens. Most importantly, they asked students to share their own perspectives on what would be fun and motivating. For example, students suggested working together in the school store, playing games over lunch, creating posters for an upcoming pep rally, and volunteering together on a service project. When the elective course was approved, students also attended inclusive classes together. They called their program Sherman LINKs and created brochures to share with students and their parents.

Step 3: Inviting Students

The reach and impact of the program depends on having a diverse group of participating peers. Because Peer to Peer is voluntary experience or an elective class, it is important to ensure students throughout the school are aware of this opportunity. Schools can spread the word by posting flyers, making schoolwide announcements, distributing brochures, presenting in classes and clubs, setting up a display table, holding an informational session, writing articles in the school paper, involving guidance counselors, and personally inviting students. When sharing about the Peer to Peer program, staff should emphasize the reciprocity of the experience; the opportunities to develop new skills, meet new people, and gain new experiences; and the expectations associated with the role. If your program incorporates a credit course, make sure it is displayed prominently in the course catalog. As the program grows, peers who are already involved will be among your best recruiters! Although a new program might begin with just 10 to 20 peers, a thriving program is likely to have 50 or more peer partners depending on its size.

As peers are identified, attention then turns toward pairing them with specific

Examples of Activities Students Participate in Together Through Peer to Peer

- Academic, elective, related arts, and career or technical education classes
- Lunch, recess, breaks, and before or after school
- Local and out-of-state field trips and community-based instruction
- Intramural and competitive sports
- School clubs and extracurricular programs
- Sporting events
- Dances, plays, chorus concerts, and other fine arts programs
- Volunteer and service-learning experience (e.g., Habitat for Humanity, food banks)
- Hanging out on the weekends (e.g., movies, laser tag, shopping)
- Prom or other school dances
- Overnights at each other's houses
- Going to the gym or exercising
- After-school and summer jobs
- Summer camp experiences
- Connecting through texting or social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook)

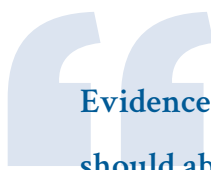
students with developmental disabilities. Each student might develop a network of a dozen different peers with whom they spend time across the school day (e.g., two peers per class and other peers during noninstructional times). Course schedules usually drive these choices—peers are linked to students based on a common class, lunch period, or extracurricular club. Within these shared activities, research on friendship formation can also be helpful to consider (Carter et al., 2014). Students who have interests, passions, or experiences in common may be more likely to really connect or click with one another. Moreover, the input and preferences of students with disabilities can be insightful if a goal is the development of longer-term friendships.

The team promoted Sherman LINKs during the morning announcements and by posting flyers on bulletin boards. They also encouraged general educators, club leaders, and school counselors to personally encourage the involvement of students they thought would be successful in this role or benefit from the experience. Interested students were told about the roles they would have within the program and were asked about their own motivations for getting involved. Moreover, students were asked to commit to at least one full semester to ensure consistency. By the end of the month, 25 peer partners had volunteered.

Step 4: Equipping Students

Students will benefit from training regarding their roles and responsibilities within Peer to Peer. This initial investment can increase the confidence and competence of participating peers, particularly if they have little prior experience with disability. Such students may benefit from learning about appropriate language, disability etiquette, basic support strategies, and the ways that social and class participation can be impacted by disability. Orientation sessions take place during the first week of school (or sometimes in the summer) and are led by a member of the leadership team. Common topics include the following:

- General information about the students they will be getting to know and supporting
- An overview of the disabilities they might encounter and common misconceptions



Evidence of cooperation and reciprocity should abound; postures of helper and hierarchy should be minimized.

- Approaches for supporting their schoolmates effectively and appropriately
- Effective strategies for encouraging social and communication skill development
- Ways of providing encouragement and constructive feedback
- The importance of honoring confidentiality and being respectful
- Specific expectations related to being part of the program
- Guidance for contributing to case conferences focused on participating students
- Introductions to school staff available to assist them and the student

These sessions typically combine presentation, videos, activities, and discussion. In some situations, students with developmental disabilities participate by sharing about their interests, strengths, needs, and preferred supports. Many schools also meet with peers at least monthly to check in, provide additional training, and offer encouragement. For students enrolled in a credit course, the class curriculum provides additional opportunities for learning and growth.

Of course, the topics addressed during trainings can vary based on the structure of the program, the students who are involved, and the activities they will do together. Elementary students may know very little about autism or other developmental disabilities and will benefit from receiving more introductory information and examples. Moreover, the supports they provide are likely to be more socially focused (e.g., playing together at recess, eating lunch) or context bound (e.g., working together during a reading group, partnering on an art project). Secondary students can often provide a greater range and depth of academic, social, and behavioral supports—both in and beyond the

classroom. For example, they might work alongside a student in science class, accompany someone during community-based instruction, or provide companionship at an after-school event. These students could benefit from accessing resources through the Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (<https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules>). Asking about students' past experiences and what they already know can help in determining what topics to address. In addition, our project website includes downloadable implementation manuals for both elementary and secondary school levels.

Mr. Aimsley, a special educator, and Ms. Riggs, a school psychologist, jointly organized a two-part orientation for peer partners. At the first meeting, Ms. Riggs focused on general information that would be relevant to all peers—the overarching goals for the program, background about autism spectrum disorders, strategies for providing respectful support, and the roles peer partners should and should not assume. The peers role-played several different scenarios and had a group discussion about the differences between being a “friend” and being a “teacher.” The second training involved smaller groups of peers who were all supporting the same student with autism. Mr. Aimsley provided more individualized guidance on how best to encourage the participation, social interactions, and learning of the student whom they would be supporting. All of the peer partners also came together monthly for additional information, guidance, and encouragement.

Step 5: Determining Student Roles

A Peer to Peer program establishes natural contexts for students with and without developmental disabilities to spend time together within and beyond the classroom. Although peers play a vital role in creating access to learning

opportunities and school activities, they are not teachers or instructional assistants. Evidence of cooperation and reciprocity should abound; postures of helper and hierarchy should be minimized. Like classmates, peers offering support within a general education classroom might share materials, assist with an assignment, collaborate on a group project, encourage the student's contributions, or converse about their work. Like schoolmates, peers offering support within an extracurricular club might discuss topics of shared interest, offer emotional support, share a joke, or collaborate on an activity. And like friends, students and their peers might eat lunch together, have fun on the playground, meet up at their lockers, hang out in the courtyard, or share a seat on the bus ride home. It is through these ordinary, inclusive avenues that students with disabilities access opportunities that build new skills and develop new relationships. Because peers are prone to adopt the roles they see modeled by paraprofessionals and special educators, it is important that program leaders regularly emphasize the roles peers should and should not assume. When peers are uncertain what to do in a particular situation, they are encouraged to ask teachers or paraprofessionals for guidance. Peers should never be placed in situations without support, and educators should regularly check in. Moreover, peers should never address behavior challenges, personal care needs (e.g., bathroom use, dressing), or feeding; such roles are best left for adults to address.

The roles of peers varied based on the students they supported and the contexts in which they participated. In general and special education classrooms, teachers primarily determined when students worked together and the ways peers could best assist. During noninstructional times, like lunch and recess, the students decided together—with oversight from adults—the activities they would do. Regardless, all peers were asked to commit to being attentive and respectful toward the student, having a good attitude, arriving on time, following through on their responsibilities, completing any assignments, being an ambassador for inclusion at the school, and attending all trainings.

Step 6: Determining Staff Roles

Peers will support students with disabilities across a wide range of school activities. As a result, most teachers, related service providers, administrators, and other school staff (e.g., librarians, cafeteria or office workers, bus drivers, custodians) are likely to have at least some interaction with Peer to Peer throughout the school year. Within inclusive classrooms, general educators may offer guidance as students work together, identify collaborative activities students can work on together, and implement needed accommodations and modifications. Special educators might provide supplemental training to peers, arrange for them to provide support in resource or self-contained classrooms, determine when and where peer-mediated support may be more advantageous than adult-delivered support, and grade Peer to Peer course assignments (e.g., journal entries, reflection papers).

Paraprofessionals might model relevant support strategies, provide encouragement and feedback, and facilitate social interactions. Finally, related service providers (e.g., occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech language pathologists) might identify relevant skills that could be modeled or reinforced by peers, indicate ways that specific therapies can be naturally embedded within shared activities, or suggest adaptations to activities or materials that facilitate inclusion. All of these individuals will benefit from receiving information about Peer to Peer, opportunities for collaborative planning, training relevant to their roles, and access to assistance should any challenges arise throughout the semester. Presentations at faculty meetings and recognition of participating teachers can promote buy-in among staff.

Most of the responsibilities for running Peer to Peer, however, will be assumed by the designated program coordinator. Most often this has been a special educator, but it could be an ancillary staff member, such as a social worker. Their role is to oversee student recruitment, provide training for peers and staff, manage schedules for students and peers, arrange case conferences, serve as teacher of record, and keep administrators abreast of the program. Although these activities can be delegated to others, the coordinator is accountable

for ensuring completion. In some schools, this teacher is given an additional prep period; in others, a half-time staff position has been allocated to Peer to Peer.

As the Sherman LINKs program grew the team revisited how they would distribute responsibilities among participating staff. Mr. Aimsley served as the program coordinator by tracking the attendance and assignments of peer partners enrolled in the Peer to Peer course, codesigning the peer training, and helping to identify appropriate shared activities for participating students. Ms. Eilson, the school social worker, scheduled and facilitated case conferences. Ms. Riggs focused on peer recruitment and assisted with peer training. Ms. Brown, the speech language pathologist, facilitated lunch bunches and other peer network groups. Three paraprofessionals facilitated peer support arrangements for students with autism attending general education classes. Finally, in her administrator role, Dr. Vogus made sure sufficient time and training were available to participating school staff. Together, these team members promoted the program to school staff and students to encourage everyone's buy-in.

Step 7: Holding Case Conferences

Supporting meaningful inclusion and peer relationships is not always easy. Some of the students whom peers come to know have complex communication needs, challenging behaviors, or significant cognitive impairments. Occasionally, challenges will emerge that require imaginative, group-generated solutions. Peer to Peer programs use “case conferences” as a pathway for navigating these difficulties and ensuring consistent check-in times. These monthly meetings bring together the multiple peers who partner with a particular student. A basic agenda includes (a) sharing of positive experiences (e.g., successes, breakthroughs, “aha” moments), (b) discussion of current concerns (e.g., challenges, frustrations), and (c) brainstorming of potential solutions (e.g., supports, instruction, additional activities). Although a teacher is present to provide input, the meetings are led by peers and tap into their creativity and knowledge of the student. The discussion

Figure 1 Abbreviated items from the Peer to Peer Program fidelity checklist, secondary level

Staff Preparation (from 10 items)	
A core team is involved in implementing the program	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
The program is included as part of the school improvement plan	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
The core team and coordinator observe other <i>Peer to Peer</i> programs	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Sensitivity and awareness training are provided at the building level for teachers and staff	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Program Development (from 7 items)	
Materials to explain and support the program are developed and disseminated (e.g., program brochure, permission slip, application)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
A parent/community awareness night is planned to promote the program and offer parents active roles	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
A course syllabus is developed for the elective <i>Peer to Peer</i> course	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Program Implementation (from 14 items)	
Over 80% of students with autism spectrum disorder in the building are part of the <i>Peer to Peer</i> program	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
All students in the building have the opportunity to become peer partners, including at-risk students	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Peer partners are supported to be participants and friends, rather than teaching assistants or helpers	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
“Medium of exchange” activities are developed for students with disabilities and their peer partners to build common interests	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Case conferences with students with disabilities and peer partners are organized and scheduled for the semester (minimum 1 time per month)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Data are collected on the effectiveness of the <i>Peer to Peer</i> program from at least two groups of participants (e.g., students, peers, staff, parents)	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No

Note. Full checklist available at <https://www.gvsu.edu/autismcenter>

culminates in a stronger plan for supporting the student with developmental disabilities in various school activities. Meetings typically last 15 to 20 minutes in elementary school and 50 to 60 minutes in secondary schools. In some cases, students with disabilities attend these meetings in order to practice problem-solving and self-advocacy skills. Because case conferences address sensitive topics, parents must give permission for their children with disabilities to be involved in *Peer to Peer*, and these meetings are written into students' IEPs. Peer partners are also provided training related to their

participation in case conferences and the importance of confidentiality (see Step 4).

Mr. Aimsley and his colleagues were stumped as to why Levi was now refusing to go to physical education. Although Levi could not speak verbally, his self-injurious behavior and eloping made it clear something had changed since spring break. After trying multiple intervention strategies—all of which were unsuccessful—they convened a case conference to ask for insights from his peer partners. A solution was quickly suggested by Levi's friend Tom. "Ask Levi's mom to send him to school with shorts. No one here wears sweatpants after spring break!" Unaware of this unwritten rule among middle schoolers,

Mr. Aimsley called home. The next day, Levi skipped to the gym without incident while wearing his green Sherman shorts.

Step 8: Reflecting on the Program

Ongoing evaluation should be embedded throughout every school's *Peer to Peer* program. Adopting a data-driven approach can help you capture the program's impact and identify areas in need of further refinement. For example, teams should reflect on their implementation of *Peer to Peer* using either the available elementary or secondary program checklists (see

Figure 1 for example items; the full checklist is available at <https://www.gvsu.edu/autismcenter>). Regular observations are perhaps the most direct way of understanding the quality of students' relationships and peer-delivered supports. Occasionally, staff should observe students spending time together in classrooms, cafeterias, clubs, and other school settings. Are they interacting regularly, reciprocally, appropriately, and enjoyably? Are they actively engaged in expected activities? Are students with disabilities demonstrating new social, communication, independence, and self-determination skills? Are peers providing supports in helpful and fitting ways?

In addition, regular feedback can be sought from Peer to Peer participants. Using interviews or surveys, students with disabilities can be asked about (a) the supports they receive from peers, (b) their enjoyment of school, (c) other activities they would like to try, and (d) whether

they would like to continue receiving support from peers. Likewise, peers can be asked about (a) the nature of their new relationships, (b) the strategies they feel are and are not working well, (c) the ways they are being impacted by their involvement, and (d) additional assistance they would find helpful. For peers enrolled in a Peer to Peer course, their journals or other class assignments can provide insights into how they are benefiting from the program (see sidebar "Letter From a Student's Current Peer Partner to His Future Peer Partner").

Program leaders should also solicit input from other school staff who work with participating students. For example, staff can be asked about (a) the ways in which they feel the program is impacting students and peers, (b) the extent to which the program is working well within their classroom or program, (c) their ideas for better supporting the student with disabilities and their peers, and (d) their

suggestions for other peers who might benefit from involvement. Finally, parents can be asked about (a) the impact they are seeing at home, (b) whether interactions are spilling over beyond the school day, and (c) their recommendations for strengthening school-home communication. Example findings are described in the sidebar "Potential Impact of Peer Partner Programs."

The team met each month to review their progress and to problem-solve occasional challenges (e.g., students needing additional support, barriers to greater inclusion, recruiting more peer partners). They used the secondary school implementation checklist to evaluate their program and set goals for the next semester. They also understood the importance of being able to tell a story about the difference Sherman LINKS was making and the directions it should go moving forward. Through surveys of students, peers, parents, and school staff, they identified a number of ways that the relationships, attitudes, and experiences of students with and without disabilities were changing as a result of the time they spent together. They also considered and prioritized the recommendations made by each of these key stakeholders.

Letter From a Student's Current Peer Partner to His Future Peer Partner

To Richard's next LINK,

If you've never met Richard, I think you ought to know a few things about him. He really likes video games, and if he has down time, he likes to make random objects fight as if they're a video game. He doesn't like mint gum, only fruity! But, he loves air-filled foods! Hershey Air Delight is his favorite candy bar. Richard really likes to go at his own pace when it comes to everything, especially walking.

I really recommend staying with Richard for a whole year, because he doesn't just trust anyone. He has to get used to you and has to learn that he can trust you. Richard is awesome at British accents and pulling out random facts out of the blue. Although, sometimes, Richard gets very, very sidetracked and likes to not pay attention to what his teachers are doing. Just know it's okay to remind him to pay attention every so often. Sometimes he gets a little annoyed with being reminded, but don't take it personally.

Richard rarely gets mad. He's such a kindhearted, funny guy. If anyone is upset, Richard is the one who wants to cheer them up and make it all okay again. I really hope that you and Richard become awesome friends. . . . But, in the end all I really ask of you is to be very patient and calm with Richard.

It may get frustrating having to remind him to stay on task and to find papers he loses. Just remember, that's what you're there for: to have his best interest in mind and help him out where he needs it. Please, also don't take this class as a blow-off; it's not just fun and games. It takes dedication and heart.

From, Sue

Step 9: Maintaining and Growing the Program

After successfully establishing Peer to Peer at your school, attention quickly turns toward sustaining and growing the program. Focus on celebrating its myriad successes. Many schools formally recognize peers who have been outstanding in their roles, students with disabilities who have experienced noteworthy accomplishments, and staff who have been especially supportive and inclusive. Such recognition can come through annual banquets, "Person of the Week" awards, stories in school papers, district blogs, announcements on social media, and many others. Showcase the program by establishing a webpage, creating T-shirts, issuing media releases, or hosting a float in the homecoming parade.

The core program team (see Step 1) can be instrumental in reflecting on the program and suggesting ways to expand its reach and impact. For example, programs launched at one school could be expanded to other schools in the district, programs focusing on a small group of students (i.e.,



Students with and without developmental disabilities have much to gain from ongoing opportunities to learn, laugh, and enjoy life together within inclusive classrooms and other school activities.

individuals with autism) could be expanded to serve other students, and programs that begin in self-contained classrooms could be expanded to support access to general education courses, extracurricular programs, or after-school activities. Although the materials needed to launch a Peer to Peer program come without cost, fundraising can help support expansion or extras. These extra resources can help offset any costs associated with staff time, professional development expenses, or fun activities for participating students. Peer to Peer programs can apply to local grant programs, approach the Parent-Teacher Association or a local civic group (e.g., Rotary, Optimist), hold fundraising events (e.g., bake sales, fun runs, penny wars), or use other creative approaches.

The end-of-year banquet provided a wonderful time for celebrating the success of the program and its impact on the overall climate at Sherman. Securing district approval for the Peer to Peer course was enabling even more students to get involved. The following year, the team planned to expand the program to all of their students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. With student input, the team found additional ways to showcase the program schoolwide (e.g., Sherman LINKs T-shirts, graduation cords to honor students' participation, creation of a quilt). The students also organized several fundraising events to raise money to support a field trip each semester. Not surprisingly, Dr. Vogus became an especially vocal proponent of the Peer to Peer model among administrators at other schools in the district. She was convinced the program was furthering the school's goal of being a community of inclusion and belonging for every student—no exceptions.

Concluding Thoughts

Students with and without developmental disabilities have much to gain from ongoing opportunities to learn, laugh, and enjoy life

together within inclusive classrooms and other school activities. Programs like Peer to Peer provide a powerful and practical pathway for expanding the impact of peer-mediated interventions to students with disabilities across their entire school day. Moreover, they prepare the next generation of young people for future roles as neighbors, coworkers, and friends to their peers with disabilities. We encourage you to consider how the approaches being used across Michigan—and described in this article—might be adapted and adopted within your own district and state. We are hopeful that you, too, will experience the substantial impact of shifting from exclusion to belonging.

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