

Outcomes for LINKs: Benefits to High School Peers

Imagine an intervention that can improve outcomes for students of all skill levels. This article explores how Peer to Peer, an intervention designed for students with autism and related disabilities, extends benefits to other peers in the school.



Peer to Peer is a school-wide program where peer supports or LINKs, are provided with information and taught skills to support their peers with ASD and other disabilities, all while building authentic friendships.

Through Peer to Peer, pairs or small groups of students participate together during classes and social experiences. This structure assures students with and without disabilities gain skills and develop relationships while receiving guidance from educators (Ziegler et al., 2020).

When students with disabilities participate in peer support programs, they are more academically engaged, and make more progress on social goals (Carter et al., 2016). Peer supports also benefit. They develop valued social relationships, increase self-perceptions, and report improvements in their knowledge about and attitudes toward disability (Travers & Carter, 2021). Because they have opportunities to teach skills to others, they may also enhance their own engagement and learning (Carter & Kennedy, 2006).

For more information about developing a Peer to Peer program in your high school, please visit the [START Peer to Peer website](#) or the [Secondary Peer to Peer Program Playbook](#).

"Peer to Peer isn't one more thing, it is the thing"

START LINK Outcomes Study

The START LINK Outcomes Study, conducted in 2012-2014, involved 204 peer LINKs from eight high schools representing a range of rural, suburban, and urban settings in Michigan (Owen-DeSchryver et al., 2022). School staff reported academic and behavioral data for LINK students during the semester before they participated in the program and then compared it to the first semester they were a peer support. Four of these high schools also provided data for the second semester where students served as LINKs.

Outcomes for all LINK Students

Data for the 204 LINK students showed LINKs had higher GPAs and fewer absences after only one semester of participating as a peer support. The average GPA for all students before becoming a LINK was 2.88, while the average GPA after their first semester as a LINK was 2.95. Attendance also improved. Students averaged 7 days absent before becoming a LINK and 4 days absent in their first semester as a LINK.



Expanding the Recruitment of LINKs: It's not just for Honors Students

One important aspect of this study is the focus on outcomes for peer LINKs who had low GPAs, poor attendance, or a history of behavior problems. This subgroup of students may be overlooked by educators who might instead orient to students who are high-achieving. We found exciting, positive outcomes found for this subgroup of students.

Academic Outcomes for LINK Students with Low GPAs



GPA INCREASED

On average, the GPAs of students with low GPAs increased and continued to increase through their second semester as a LINK.



In this study, 43 of the 204 peer LINKs had initial GPAs below 2.0.

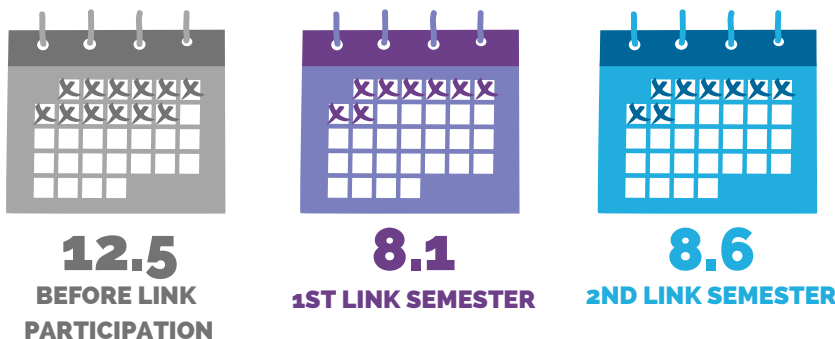
More than half of these students showed improvements in GPA in the first semester they participated as a peer support, while GPAs decreased for only 5% of students.

On average, the grades of LINKs with low initial GPAs moved from a D+ to a C over two semesters.

Attendance Outcomes for LINK Students with Low GPAs

ABSENCES DROPPED

On average, absences for students with low GPAs decreased by 4 days and remained lower through their second semester as a LINK.



LINK students with low GPAs averaged 12.5 days absent in the semester before they began in the Peer to Peer program.

In both the first and second semesters of being a LINK, absences decreased to about 8 missed school days.

Outcomes for LINK Students with Behavioral Concerns

Out of the 204 peers in this study, 32 students had 1 or more behavioral referrals in the semester prior to being a peer support and 11 of these students had two or more behavioral referrals. Overall, behavioral infractions decreased when these students participated as LINKs. They averaged 1.5 behavioral referrals before becoming LINKs, .8 behavioral referrals in the first semester as LINKs, and .1 behavioral referrals in the second semester.

BEHAVIORAL REFERRALS DROPPED

89%

of students with 2+ behavioral referrals before becoming a LINK had

0 BEHAVIORAL REFERRALS

during their second semester as a LINK.

For students who had 2 or more behavioral referrals in the semester prior to becoming a LINK, we saw similar reductions.

Of the students whose second-semester data was provided, 89% ended their second semester as a LINK with 0 behavioral referrals.

A Call to Action

"Historically, the practice of recruiting students with a specific social and academic profile has been commonplace. While honor roll students, athletes, and other established student leaders enhance Peer to Peer programs, it is critical to have a broader view.

Seek out and include all students, including those who may be considered to be behaviorally, socially, and/or academically "at risk." These students have the capacity to become amazing peer supports and will rise to meet high expectations...Peer to Peer may just be the "one thing" for these LINKs as well." (START, Pillars of Peer to Peer, [Secondary Peer to Peer Program Playbook](#)).

References

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Acknowledgment

This document provides an update to START's original Outcomes for LINKs. This revised version includes data from three additional high schools in Michigan, incorporates updated research, and expands on data found in START's recently published article: The Reciprocity of Peer-Mediated Interventions: Examining Outcomes for Peers.