

Fall 2014 Summary

Peer Partner Project

Research Partners • Vanderbilt University
and the University of Wisconsin-Madison



A note from Drs. Asmus and Carter and The Peer Partner Project Team

Thank you for being part of the Peer Partner Project (P3). Perhaps you are a high school student who took part in a peer support arrangement or a peer network. Or a parent who generously shared information about your child's strengths, skills, activities, and friendships. Or maybe an educator who collaborated with our team to implement new support strategies and help us capture the outcomes. Whatever your role, we share our deepest gratitude for your investment of time and effort. This project holds such potential to benefit students and schools across the country!

Since 2011, our Peer Partner Project has focused on studying best practices for supporting the social inclusion, learning, and general education participation of high students with intellectual disability and/or autism spectrum disorder. We looked at three approaches for supporting these goals:

- 1) primarily adult supports,
- 2) peer support arrangements, and
- 3) peer networks.

In the first group, we learned about the academic and social support students with disabilities receive from

paraprofessionals, special educators, and other staff. In the second group, we learned about the impact of peer support arrangements which occurred in inclusive classrooms. These strategies involve teaching 1-3 peers to provide assistance to their classmate with disabilities in general education classroom activities. The students all receive ongoing guidance from special education staff as they worked together. In the third group, we learned about the impact of peer networks, which involved forming a social group of 3-6 peers and a student with a disability. The networks were facilitated by school staff, met weekly at lunch or some other time during the school day, and sought out times to connect with each other socially throughout the week.

In this summary, we share early findings from this research project and share our future plans. If you have any questions or would like additional information about this project, see the last page for our contact information.

*With Gratitude,
The Peer Partner Project Team*

In this Summary

- Findings from our research
- Where we are sharing our findings
- Additional questions to answer



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What are the Goals of the Peer Partner Project?

- To learn how best to support inclusive experiences for youth with severe disabilities;
- To understand the impact and acceptability of peer support arrangements and peer networks compared to relying primarily on adult-delivered support; and
- To suggest best practices for improving the social connections, learning, and inclusion of students with disabilities.

What are Peer Networks?

Peer networks are intentional social groups formed for a student with a disability in order to foster friendships and social participation. Each network is facilitated by a teacher, coach, paraprofessional, or other member of the school staff. As part of the group, the students meet weekly to “hang out” and participate in some type of enjoyable, shared activity (e.g., eating lunch, playing a game). The students also look for other opportunities to connect with one another at other times of the school day to build relationships and a sense of belonging.

What do peer networks involve?

- Gathering peers who might be interested in getting to know a student with severe disabilities and others in their school.

“I made a lot of friends. It was really fun.” -STUDENT WITH A DISABILITY

“[He] and I really got along well inside and outside of class.” -PEER SUPPORT

“Interactions between students were wonderful and inspiring to observe.”
-FACILITATOR

- Introducing the students, helping them learn more about one another, and providing opportunities and support to spend time together each week.
- Having students meet weekly to engage in a fun activity, plan interactions throughout the week, and brainstorm ways of encouraging stronger school and peer connections.

What impact did peer networks have on peer relationships?

Students with disabilities who were part of a peer network substantially increased their interactions with peers and developed a number of new friendships. In fact, these students made an average of five new friends over the course of the semester, far more than students who were not part of an intentional peer network.

What did students with disabilities say about peer networks?

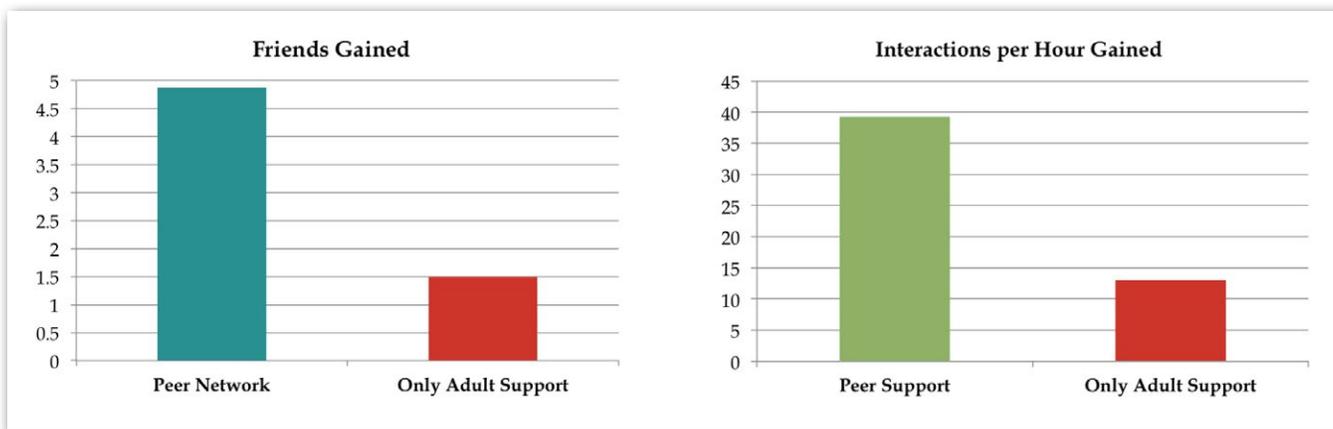
Students with disabilities consistently said they enjoyed spending time with peers and considered members of the network to be their friends.

What did peer network members say?

The peers agreed with the students with disabilities. They too said they enjoyed being part of a network, indicated they would encourage others students at their school to get involved in similar ways, and shared that they would like to be involved again the future. Moreover, almost all of the peers described their relationships with the students with disabilities as a friendship.

What did adults who facilitated these peer networks say about their involvement?

The teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff involved in this part of the project felt effective in their roles and were motivated to continue using this strategy with other students. Overwhelmingly, they reported enjoying their participation in the project.



What are peer support arrangements?

Peer support arrangements involve one to three peers without disabilities providing ongoing social and academic support to classmates with disabilities within the general education classroom. All the students receive feedback, support, and encouragement from a special education staff member.

What do peer support arrangements involve?

- Identifying students with disabilities who might benefit from learning alongside their classmates without disabilities;
- Inviting peers from the same classroom to learn to provide some of the social and academic supports students with disabilities might need;
- Creating a “peer support plan” outlining how students, their peers, and a paraprofessional might work together during different types of classroom activities (e.g., lectures, small groups, labs, independent seatwork);
- Arranging for students and their peers to sit next to each other to provide social and academic support; and
- Fading back adult support as students gain more confidence and independence working with one another.

How did having peer supports impact a student’s academic engagement in the classroom?

Students with disabilities who received support from peers in their general education classes were much more

academically engaged than students who worked primarily with paraprofessionals or other adults.

How did having peer support impact a student’s interactions with peers in the classroom?

These students also interacted substantially more often with their classmates without disabilities—about both their work and social topics—over the course of the semester. For example, they had nearly five times as many peer interactions toward the end of the semester compared to the beginning when they worked primarily with paraprofessionals.

What did students with disabilities say about peer support arrangements?

All of the students with disabilities said they liked working with their peers as part of these support arrangements. Moreover, they regarded these peers as friends.

What did peer supports say?

Similarly, almost all of the peers indicated they enjoyed being part of this project and viewed this support model to be both beneficial and acceptable.

What did educators say?

General and special educators alike considered peer support arrangements to be effective and a fairly easy way to support students academically and socially in inclusive classes.

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345

General Education
Peers, 165 General
Educators, and 109
Special Educators in
23 Schools across
2 States

168

Families of Students
with Disabilities

168

Students with
Disabilities



Further Questions to Address

As we continue this area of work with schools, we hope to address of the following questions:

- Are some students more likely to benefit from peer support and peer network strategies than other students?
- Are there ways to further enhance the impact and feasibility of these approaches?
- How can these strategies be implemented throughout an entire school or district?
- What factors should be considered when selecting students and peers for these support models?

Thank You!

Moving forward, we will continue analyzing the data we collected to answer the questions outlined above. We thank you for your willingness to be a part of this research study. And we look forward to sharing future findings with you. Most of all, we are grateful for your investment in the lives of young people with and without disabilities in our communities.

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