Carla, a high school sophomore, was sitting in Mr. Cheney’s third-period biology class staring at a blank piece of paper on her desk. The students around her were chatting with each other as they cut out pictures from magazines to illustrate categories in a taxonomy. Mr. Cheney looked up, saw Carla, and wondered yet again how he was supposed to teach all 30 students in his class and assist Carla, who has a cognitive disability, to participate in classroom activities. He had planned the activity with Carla in mind, thinking she would enjoy it, but something was not working. Instead of choosing pictures with her classmates and enjoying the chance to socialize, Carla was just sitting there, staring at her paper. Being a part of his class should have given Carla opportunities to learn new things and make friends. It just wasn’t turning out as Mr. Cheney had hoped. What was he doing wrong?

Unfortunately, Mr. Cheney’s dilemma is a common one for many high school teachers. Although teachers may increasingly recognize the benefits of including students with disabilities in general education classrooms and everyday school activities, students are likely to experience these benefits only with appropriate instruction and support (Koegel, Harrower, & Koegel, 1999). High school teachers, who often have large classes, little planning time, and considerable pressure to cover large amounts of course content, may have an especially difficult time providing the accommodations and support students with disabilities need to be successful (Tralli, Colombo, & Deshler, 1996). These teachers need effective ways to help students achieve the academic and social benefits available to all students in general education settings.

**Peer Support to the Rescue**

Peer support programs, such as “peer buddies” or peer tutoring, may offer one way to help students experience these benefits and take an active part in everyday high school life (e.g., Hughes et al., 2000). Peer support programs enable general education students, rather than a classroom teacher or educational assistant, to provide support to students with disabilities. The type of support peers provide to students with disabilities varies, depending on the needs of the students. For example, general education students may help their peers with disabilities complete classroom assignments, learn appropriate ways to interact in social groups, acquire job skills, or participate in extracurricular activities.

Models of peer support programs may also range from informal volunteer programs to formal programs, in which general education students earn elective course credit for assisting their classmates with disabilities for one class period per day (see box, “Peer Support Program”).

**Teachers’ Perceptions of Peer Buddy Program**

What are the perceptions of teachers who participated in the Metropolitan-Nashville Peer Buddy Program? Their views of the advantages and disadvantages of participating in a peer support program may help other high school teachers decide whether peer supports could be practical, effective sources of support for their own students. In addition, teachers already implementing peer supports may find other teachers’ perspectives useful in improving the way peer support is provided in their schools.

To learn what teachers’ perceptions were, we asked high school general and special education teachers to complete questionnaires asking about their experiences participating in a peer support program in their own schools.

**Who Were the Teachers?**

The 26 teachers responding to our questionnaires (13 general and 13 special education teachers) taught in 8 of the 11 high schools in which the Peer Buddy Program was being...
implemented in the Metropolitan-Nashville school district. The mean ethnicity of the student populations of the 8 high schools ranged from: 22% to 71% Caucasian; 24% to 73% African American; 2% to 13% Asian; 1% to 3% Hispanic; and 0% to 1% American Indian. Some of the teachers we questioned were fairly new to the classroom (1 to 3 years experience), whereas others were veteran teachers (15 years’ experience or more). Seventeen of the 26 teachers were female; 18 were Caucasian, 7 were African American, and 1 was Hispanic. All teachers had at least 1 year of experience participating in a Peer Buddy Program in their classrooms, and most had been involved with the program for 4 years or more.

The general education teachers who responded taught a variety of academic or vocational classes, such as physical education, culinary arts, keyboarding, and honors biology. Each teacher had one to five students with moderate or severe disabilities included in at least one of their classes, supported by one or more Peer Buddies.

The special education teachers responding to the questionnaires were responsible for the general supervision of the Peer Buddy Programs in their schools and for the overall support of students with moderate or severe disabilities taking general education classes. In addition, these teachers supervised Peer Buddies who supported students in self-contained special education classrooms and community-based employment training activities.

What Did the Teachers Say?
We analyzed general and special education teachers’ responses to the questionnaires by reviewing each individual response and identifying broad themes found across all responses. Three major themes emerged from this process: (a) benefits of participating in peer support programs for students with disabilities, general education peers, and teachers; (b) challenges teachers faced in implementing peer supports in their schools; and (c) recommendations for others interested in having general education peers support high school students with disabilities. In the following sections, we present what teachers said within the context of these themes and discuss implications that their perceptions may have for practice.

Benefits

For Students With Disabilities
Social Versus Academic Skills. The majority of benefits for students with disabilities mentioned by special education teachers were social-related, such as increased opportunities for interaction with general education peers and acquisition of age-appropriate social skills. For example, some teachers mentioned that their students had often acted inappropriately in social settings before receiving peer supports, but used more appropriate social behaviors after they developed relationships with the general education students who provided them with support.

In contrast, the responses of general education teachers primarily emphasized benefits for students with disabilities that related to academic or functional skills. Their responses focused on students’ “learning useful skills” or being provided with additional opportunities for individual instruction as a result of receiving support from Peer Buddies.

The contrast in perceived benefits between general and special education teachers may indicate that these teachers have differing instructional priorities for students with disabilities. This difference suggests that it may be important for teachers to discuss each other’s expectations for student participation in a peer support program. Students can experience both social and academic benefits as a result of receiving peer supports if the teachers involved work together toward shared goals.

Positive Relationships. Positive relationships between Peer Buddies and their
partners with disabilities were mentioned by general and special educators as an additional benefit. Teachers characterized relationships between Peer Buddies and partners as ranging from helping- to socially-oriented relationships. Several teachers described these relationships as similar to those between students without disabilities. A number of teachers commented that Peer Buddies and partners became friends as a result of their interactions with one another.

Students with disabilities often have limited opportunities to develop typical relationships with their general education peers. Participation in a peer support program can increase opportunities for these students to form peer relationships similar to those between high school students without disabilities. Because the role assigned to the Peer Buddy (i.e., instructional vs. non-instructional) may influence the nature of the relationship that develops between the Buddy and the partner, Peer Buddy roles should be based on the individual needs of the students who will be supported.

Enhanced Personal Growth. Another benefit general and special education teachers reported for students with disabilities was enhanced personal growth. Teachers noted that students who received support from peers seemed more independent and had greater self-confidence as they interacted with Peer Buddies. This increased self-confidence made students more eager and willing to participate in everyday high school activities with their peers, a goal consistent with the intent of current educational legislation (i.e., IDEA Amendments of 1997).

Currently there is much discussion in the field of special education related to developing strategies that help students become more active participants in all facets of school life. Respondents’ comments suggest that receiving peer supports may be an effective, and relatively simple way for students with disabilities to acquire some of the skills needed to become active members of the school community. Peer support may allow students with disabilities opportunities to first observe their general education peers modeling appropriate behaviors and then to “try out” new social and interpersonal skills.

Less Disruption. The majority of special and general education teachers agreed that Peer Buddies assisted and interacted with the students they were supporting in a manner that did not disrupt the classroom routine or draw attention to the students receiving supports. As one general education teacher remarked, “The Peer Buddy worked quietly. The class was not aware of her role.”

Teachers’ remarks suggest that students can receive the supports they need from peers in a manner that neither hampers the ongoing routine of a classroom nor singles students out as “different” from their peers, an important consideration when working with any adolescent.

For General Education Students

Socializing Opportunities for All Students. Teachers commented that having students with disabilities and their Peer Buddies participate in general education classes and activities provided general education students with opportunities to get to know peers with whom they might not have otherwise interacted. Teachers mentioned that as a result of working and socializing with classmates with disabilities, general education students’ perspectives broadened, and the students became more aware of issues related to disabilities.

For example, one teacher said that “often special education students add a different viewpoint and way of seeing” during classroom discussion. Another teacher remarked that his general education students benefited when he was able to “expose the general education students to the students with disabilities and let them help each other.”

Reversed Role Models. Although teachers and administrators typically think of general education students as being role models for their classmates with disabilities, teachers we questioned noted that often these roles were reversed, and students with disabilities served as positive role models for general education classmates.

One teacher, for example, related that the general education students in her classroom benefited from seeing how interested their peer with a disability was in the subject matter and how he carefully used his time to complete assignments.

Increased Diversity. Increased diversity in classes and activities can lead to increased learning and personal growth for students and teachers, alike. Peer supports that allow students with disabilities to become active participants in classes and extracurricular activities may be an effective way to increase diversity and encourage learning about human differences and similarities.

For General Education Teachers

Assistance With Instruction. A benefit for teachers of having peer supports in the classroom may be assistance in providing instruction to students with disabilities. General education teachers appeared to feel overwhelmed at times by the demands of teaching a widely diverse group of learners. Teachers viewed having Peer Buddies available to work individually with students on class assignments or to help students actively participate in classroom and extracurricular activities with peers as a primary benefit of participating in a peer support program.

General education students can provide a variety of supports for their classmates with disabilities in ways that decrease the amount of time teachers spend providing one-to-one instruction. Peer support should be tailored to the

“The relationships between the Peer Buddies and the students with disabilities were great. They enjoyed being with each other. They also did things together outside of class.”
individual learning goals and needs of each student within the context of a particular class (see box, “Supporting Classmates With Disabilities”).

**Professional Growth.** Professional growth may be another personal benefit for teachers who participate in a peer support program. Several teachers remarked that peer support programs, such as the Peer Buddy Program, allowed them to “experience the whole spectrum of teaching all students,” and, for the first time, they realized how students with disabilities could benefit from inclusion in general education classes. Many reported feeling personal satisfaction because they were now helping all their students learn.

**Personal Satisfaction.** Many high school teachers report feeling frustrated by the lack of time available to complete the multiple daily tasks that make up their jobs. Implementing peer supports may allow teachers to experience genuine satisfaction in knowing that the learning needs of all their students are being met and to celebrate the joy of watching young people master new skills.

**Challenges**

**Scheduling and Planning**

The challenges of participating in a peer support program most frequently mentioned by general education teachers related to scheduling and planning. Several teachers expressed concern that more students with disabilities had been enrolled in their classrooms than could be appropriately supported by the number of Peer Buddies available. Some teachers also commented that students with disabilities were regularly pulled out of their classes for other scheduled activities (e.g., community-based instruction), making it difficult to ensure that students received adequate instruction. Related to this issue, some general education teachers reported a lack of clear communication between themselves and special educators concerning the purpose of students being included in general education classes. They commented that they didn’t always understand why a student with a disability was enrolled in a particular class or how the student could benefit from learning the content taught in that class.

If students with disabilities are to be accepted as class members, they must attend class regularly, just as their general education classmates do. In addition, the classroom teacher must be informed of these students’ individual learning goals prior to their inclusion in the class in order to plan and adapt instruction appropriately.

**Peer Buddy Preparation**

Some teachers discussed challenges they faced when Peer Buddies lacked adequate preparation for the support roles they were expected to fill. For example, one teacher remarked that Peer Buddies’ lack of knowledge of course content limited the support they were able to provide. Other teachers mentioned that some Peer Buddies tried to “do too much” for the peers they were assisting. Some teachers noted that problems arose when Peer Buddies did not keep in mind what their role in the class was, and this confusion led to problems. For example, sometimes Peer Buddies failed to monitor their partners’ classwork and did not offer support when it was needed. Finally, frequent absences by some Peer Buddies created problems for teachers and for the students with disabilities who counted on their Buddies for support.

These responses underscore the importance of selecting general education students who are familiar with class content and providing them with clear guidelines on what is expected of them. Although participating general education

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**Supporting Classmates With Disabilities**

The supports that peers provide can take many different forms. Here are some ideas that teachers suggested:

- Teach classroom routines to their classmates (e.g., where to put homework, what to do when you first get to class, or where to find materials).
- Read a test to a classmate and record his or her answers.
- Read or record selections from a textbook for a classmate, paraphrasing as needed.
- Help a student who uses an augmentative communication device explain to classmates how he uses the device to communicate.
- Help a classmate “dress out” for physical education class.
- Model for a student how he or she can ask to join in an activity.
- Teach a classmate how to follow a picture schedule and locate his or her classes.
- Tutor a classmate in a specific skill, such as learning how to read a list of community words.
- Show a classmate how to “surf the Net” to find information for a classroom report.
- Take notes for a classmate during a teacher lecture and spend time discussing the notes and answering questions at the end of the period.
- Help a classmate fulfill her assigned role during cooperative learning activities.
- Get a classmate involved in conversations with other general education students during “free time” at the end of the class period.
- Work with a classmate to create a video report on an assigned topic.
"One student left my class every other day to work off campus in a special program, and it was very difficult to keep him caught up. He missed too much and always felt at a loss."

If students with disabilities are to be accepted as class members, they must attend class regularly, just as their general education classmates do.

If students with disabilities do not have to be A students, involving reliable, interested students is likely to result in successful outcomes.

**Teachers’ Recommendations**

General and special educators offered many suggestions for teachers interested in having general education peers support participation of students with disabilities in general education classes and activities.

- Thoroughly screen general education students wishing to support their peers with disabilities to ensure that students selected have the interests and skills needed to assist their classmates with disabilities. To maximize effectiveness of the screening process, solicit input from all school staff involved in the peer support program (e.g., guidance counselors, administrators, general and special education teachers).
- Develop an active recruitment process to increase the number of general education students available to support students with disabilities. Involve all school personnel participating in the peer support program in recruiting new Peer Buddies. Employ personal contact with individual general education students as an effective recruiting tool. Emphasize recruitment of upper-level (junior and senior) students and remember to recruit both female and male general education peers.
- Establish clear expectations of the support role Peer Buddies are to fill and clearly explain these expectations to Peer Buddies before the beginning of class. Provide Peer Buddies with regular feedback on performance as a support provider and give them opportunities to ask questions and talk about their experiences.
- Remember that Peer Buddies are not educational assistants. Assign support tasks that are appropriate for student volunteers. For example, it would not be appropriate to leave a Peer Buddy in sole charge of a classroom while the teacher left to run an errand.
- Enroll no more than one or two students with moderate or severe disabilities accompanied by one Peer Buddy in a single general education class. This maintains natural proportions of students with and without disabilities and ensures that students who need support receive them.
- Talk with general education classmates before including a student with a disability in the class. Answer students’ questions and clarify your expectations both for the student with a disability and his or her general education classmates.
- Model acceptance of and appropriate interactions with students with disabilities. Encourage the development of age-appropriate relationships between students with disabilities, their Peer Buddies, and other general education students in the class.
- Involve students with disabilities in the same activities as their general education peers. Doing so will help students be viewed as “real” class members and provide opportunities for them to acquire new skills. Provide accommodations and assistance in a way that does not call undue attention to the student with a disability.
- Increase the number of general education teachers providing peer supports for students with disabilities in their classes. To do so, gain administrative backing for the peer support program, provide teacher inservices describing the benefits of such programs to teachers and students, and furnish opportunities for interested teachers to visit classrooms in which peers were supporting students with disabilities.
- Create a newsletter that includes ideas, activities, and stories related to teachers’ and students’ experiences in supporting students with disabilities in general education settings. Use the newsletter as a recruiting tool for involving additional general education students and teachers. The newsletter can also be a way for teachers to share creative strategies for having students support their peers with disabilities.

**Final Thoughts**

As illustrated by Mr. Cheney’s dilemma at the beginning of this article, high school teachers need practical, effective methods of increasing the participation of students with disabilities in their classrooms and in everyday high school activities. The comments of the teachers responding to our questionnaires indicate that having general education peers support their classmates with disabilities may meet this need. Peer supports not only allow students with disabilities to experience the benefits available in general education settings, but also provide valued benefits to their Peer Buddies, their general education classmates, and their teachers. As one teacher remarked, “The Peer Buddy Program is a win-win situation!”

**Additional Resources**


*Metropolitan-Nashville Peer Buddy Web Site (http://www.transitionlink.com/peerbuddy/). This Web site provides an overview of the program, step-by-step guide for implementation of a formal peer buddy program, and links to additional related sites.

**References**


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We wish to thank the teachers and administrators of Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools for their support of and participation in the Peer Buddy Program.

Preparation of this article was supported in part by Grant H158Q960004 from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education and the John F. Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development at Vanderbilt University.


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