

# Peer Network Strategies to Foster Social Connections Among Adolescents With and Without Severe Disabilities

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Schools are inherently social enterprises. Amidst the overarching emphasis on helping students learn important curricular content and academic skills, schools also provide numerous opportunities for students to develop relationships with their peers, both in and outside of the classroom. Whether through working together in small groups, eating lunch with peers in the cafeteria, hanging out between classes, or participating together in extracurricular activities, students can benefit immensely from the friendships they forge with their schoolmates (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Through these interactions with peers, students learn age-appropriate social skills, access emotional supports and practical assistance, and are encouraged to get involved in various school and community activities. Perhaps most importantly, friendships with peers foster a sense of belonging, enhance satisfaction with school, and contribute to improved quality of life. Not surprisingly, schools are now encouraged to promote relationships right alongside rigorous, relevant learning opportunities (Carter & Draper, 2010).

Peer relationships become particularly prominent—and often more challenging—during adolescence. As students move through middle and high school, these relationships take on heightened importance and students begin to affiliate with one another in new ways and in diverse contexts. For example, interactions and affiliations among adolescents increasingly occur within groups of peers (e.g., cliques, crowds) and away from the close supervision of adults (e.g., during lunch, at the lockers, before and after school). It is during these secondary school years, however, that friendships become especially elusive for students with an intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities (see box, “What Does the Research Say About the Social Relationships of Students With Disabilities?”). Many factors can limit the opportunities students with and without severe disabilities have to meet and get to know one another, including the scarcity of inclusive learning oppor-

### **What Does the Research Say About the Social Relationships of Students With Disabilities?**

Although conversations among youth about what makes school enjoyable often center on friendships and time spent with peers, the peer relationships so important to adolescent development are often elusive for students with severe disabilities. Drawing upon a nationally representative sample of students with disabilities between the ages of 13 and 16, Wagner, Cadwallader, Garza, and Cameto (2004) reported that less than one quarter of students with an intellectual disability, autism, or multiple disabilities frequently saw friends outside of school; less than half of these students frequently received telephone calls from friends; and less than three fifths of these students participated in a group activity at any time during the prior school year. Other descriptive studies suggest that even when students with severe disabilities participate in inclusive classrooms and other school activities, they may have few interactions with their classmates and report feeling lonely or disconnected from their peers (e.g., Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008; Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram-Fuller, 2007). Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of schools taking active steps to create meaningful opportunities for students with severe disabilities to meet, spend time with, and get to know their peers without disabilities.

tunities, the presence of complex communication challenges, and the prominent involvement of adults in supporting students with severe disabilities across the school day (Carter & Hughes, 2013).

Educators and researchers have long wanted effective and feasible approaches for encouraging social relationships among students with severe disabilities and their schoolmates. Although there is no “recipe” for making these connections, much is now known about creating contexts within which students with and without severe disabilities are more likely to develop friendships with one another (Carter, Bottema-Beutel, & Brock, in press; see box, “Creating Contexts for Friendships to Emerge”). Several elements seem especially salient to this work:

- Students often need help making initial introductions. In many schools, students with and without severe disabilities have few opportunities to meet one another and may be reluctant to initiate new relationships on their own without encouragement and guidance.
- Friendships typically are forged around shared interests. Connecting students who already have something in common with one

another—but may not yet know it—can spur initial conversations and help students recognize points of natural connection.

- Friendships develop over time. Structuring regular opportunities to interact provides the repeated encounters students need to get to know one another well.
- Selecting enjoyable social activities (versus only instructional or tutorial activities) increases the likelihood students will have fun as they spend time together.
- The quality of interactions can be enhanced when students learn socially appropriate conversational and communication skills. Although friendships can form even when students lack strong social skills, strengthening such skills can bolster interactions and create greater reciprocity in emerging relationships.
- Thoughtful facilitation by school staff can help students navigate challenges that sometimes arise. For example, peers without disabilities may benefit from guidance on how to communicate with someone who uses a communication device, respond to unfamiliar behaviors, or connect socially with their partner during other times of the school day.

## Creating Contexts for Friendships to Emerge

Friendships can certainly take many different forms during adolescence. Some relationships are long lasting and extend outside of school or after graduation; others are more short-term and context-specific (e.g., school, church, neighborhood friends). Some peers are considered to be best friends (or even BFFs); other friendships might lack the same depth but are nonetheless important to youth. Although not every peer network leads to the development of new friendships, they quite often do. Peer networks put students with and without severe disabilities in a place where they have the opportunity to choose one another as friends; indeed, the simplest definition of a friend is this: you choose me to be your friend and I choose you back (Reinders, 2011). Facilitators of peer networks should look for opportunities to encourage reciprocity, mutual enjoyment, and valued roles (Carter, Swedeen, & Kurkowski, 2008).

## The Promise of Peer Networks

Over the past 3 years, our team has been working with more than 21 high schools in two states to implement and evaluate peer network strategies as an avenue for enhancing the peer relationships, school participation, and friendships of students with severe disabilities (Carter & Asmus, 2010-2014). Peer networks offer a promising and practical approach for building social connections among students with and without severe disabilities in middle and high schools (Haring & Breen, 1992). A *peer network* involves establishing a cohesive group of three to six peers who meet formally and informally with a student with severe disabilities with initial guidance and ongoing support from an adult facilitator. At weekly network meetings, participating students converse with one another, participate in mutually enjoyable activities, practice appropriate social-related skills, and plan times to connect with each other throughout or after the school day. Over the course of the semester, students consider ways to expand the network or further increase the focus student's involvement in extracurricular and other school activities. Although a school staff member initially leads these network meetings, his or her prominence ideally fades over time as students assume greater responsibility for handling meeting activities.

Adolescent peer networks build upon highly effective peer-mediated intervention approaches developed at

the preschool and elementary levels. Yet, they differ from classroom-based approaches primarily in their implementation beyond the classroom (e.g., at lunch, transition times, advisory periods, before or after school) and their emphasis on social versus academic outcomes. Peer networks are

designed to be especially responsive to the elements essential to fostering adolescent friendships. For example, peer networks provide a structured context for students with and without severe disabilities to meet one another, share common interests, and connect regularly within secondary schools that often are quite segregated. Networks are built around fun social activities, provide rich opportunities to learn and practice social skills with peers, and ensure adequate (but not overwhelming) adult support is available to students as needed (see box, "Case Study: Building Connections for John").

## Ten Steps for Launching and Maintaining a Peer Network

How can educators implement peer networks successfully in secondary schools? As with any educational

### Case Study: Building Connections for John

Ms. Hatty, a special educator at Northbrook High, noticed that the students in her classroom were neither connected to the larger student body nor participated in schoolwide events. She approached her principal to discuss an idea for connecting her students to others within a peer network. Ms. Hatty e-mailed a few other staff at her school who seemed to be "kid magnets" and asked if they would be interested in helping create a more inclusive school environment, specifically for John, a freshman who had multiple disabilities. Mr. Smith, a sociology teacher and the boys' track coach, said he would "give it a go." He and Ms. Hatty spoke with John's mom and John to ask their thoughts about who to involve and what information to share with others. A girl from John's art class, her friend, and two boys from the track team—who were also involved in the school play—were intrigued by the network idea and they all decided hanging out together during first hour lunch each week with John sounded fun. Mr. Smith usually got the group started with a game in his classroom or magazines for the students to find common topics to talk about. John's sense of humor—expressed through the use of his communication device—began to shine bright. Toward the end of the semester, John could be seen giving and receiving high-fives in the hallway and his name could be heard echoing in the hallways. Mr. Smith checked in with students outside of the lunch meeting to make sure things were going well and Ms. Hatty regularly asked John how his group was going when he was in her classroom. Although the group was going well, one of the peers thought things should go a step further. The students exchanged cell numbers and planned to attend opening night of the school play together to see two other members of the group perform. They planned to meet up in the lobby before the play to get seats together and go for ice cream across the street afterward.





practice for students with disabilities, peer network strategies should be individually tailored to meet the unique needs of participating students. However, there is a flexible set of steps educators can follow when designing, implementing, and sustaining peer network strategies.

### **1. Gain Support From School Administrators and Fellow Educators**

Ms. Hatty knew strong buy-in from principals and other school staff (e.g., both general and special educators, school counselors, paraprofessionals) could impact the degree of adoption and success of peer networks at her school. Administrators who affirm the importance of fostering positive peer relationships among students can be instrumental in sharing that commitment throughout the school. They may also have recommendations for staff who could serve as network facilitators and suggestions for settings within which peer network meetings might take place. Other teachers, club leaders, and school counselors in the school can also be important allies in identifying and inviting peers without disabilities who might benefit from

invested in doing, rather than as a tangent. Next, explain how networks can address the social-related individualized education program (IEP) goals of students with severe disabilities by promoting social, communication, and leisure skill acquisition; increasing school inclusion; and expanding access to important supports (Carter, Sisco, Chung, & Stanton-Chapman, 2010). For peers without disabilities, involvement in a peer network may increase their understanding of disability, appreciation of diversity, and capacities as an advocate, as well as help shape the school culture to be more accepting of differences (Copeland et al., 2004). Finally, the potential long-term community impact when students with and without severe disabilities have meaningful opportunities to get to know and spend time with one another should be emphasized (Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007).

### **2. Identify Students With Disabilities Who Would Benefit From a Peer Network**

Peer networks focus centrally on developing social connections and encouraging the formation of friendships. Thus, they are particularly relevant interven-

tions or prefer to meet peers through other avenues.

Although our project has focused specifically on adolescents with severe disabilities, students with less extensive disabilities might also benefit from the peer network interventions described in this article. For example, students with Asperger syndrome disorder or emotional/behavioral disabilities often have few positive social relationships during secondary school (Carter & Hughes, 2013). Talking with these students about their own goals and preferences related to having a peer network is essential. Students with high-incidence disabilities often prefer not to share with peers information related to their disability. Creativity and care in what to share and how to share it will then be especially important.

### **3. Find a Strong Peer Network Facilitator**

Virtually any adult in a school could serve as a peer network facilitator. Although special educators and paraprofessionals may be the first staff members who come to mind when considering potential network leaders, other staff in the school should not be overlooked. School counselors, social workers, general educators, related service providers, coaches, and club leaders often have relationships with large numbers of students without disabilities and may have an easier time identifying peers to be part of a student's peer network. Other school staff also may be able to identify peers who have interests in common with the focus student. This is one of the reasons Ms. Hatty approached Mr. Smith to be the facilitator of John's network: he knew lots of students at the school.

Other factors are also important to consider when identifying potential network facilitators. First, facilitators should be committed to the goal of fostering friendships among students with and without disabilities and should recognize the importance of supporting students in ways that emphasize reciprocal (rather than strictly helping) relationships. Second, they should have a knack for seeing and making connec-

## **Peer networks offer a promising and practical approach for building social connections among students with and without severe disabilities in middle and high schools.**

being part of the peer network for a student with severe disabilities.

During initial meetings with administrators and faculty, it can be helpful to emphasize the potential benefits of these support strategies for all participating students as well as how relatively easy it is to establish and maintain a network. Some schools already have mission statements emphasizing themes surrounding the importance of fostering community, a sense of belonging, and/or positive peer relationships. Anchoring your efforts to the overarching mission of the school can help others see this as part of what the school is already

tions for students who know few of their schoolmates, have limited relationships with their peers, or have limited involvement in school activities outside of the classroom. Students with educational goals related to strengthening their social and/or communication skills may also benefit from these strategies. Just as Ms. Hatty discussed the idea with John beforehand, it is essential that educators ask the student with a disability whether he or she is interested in participating in such a group. Although most students with severe disabilities in our project have eagerly participated, some students may already have rich social connec-

tions among students. In other words, they should be able to build bridges among participating students by regularly highlighting the interests, activities, and experiences students have in common. Third, facilitators should have some familiarity with the student with severe disabilities around whom the peer network is being established. Knowing the interests and strengths of a particular student, the ways in which he or she communicates best with others, and the factors that could set the occasion for behavior challenges enables the facilitator to effectively communicate relevant information to peers and navigate potential roadblocks. Finally, facilitators should have the availability to meet with the peer network on a regular basis. Although facilitating a peer network takes relatively little time once it is up and running (e.g., 20 to 30 minutes per week), the work initially required to invite students and orient them to their roles can require an upfront investment in time.

#### **4. Select and Invite Peers Without Severe Disabilities**

The success and durability of a peer network will be intimately linked to the peers who are invited to participate. Although there is no single approach for selecting and inviting peers, we consider it important to begin by asking the focus student with severe disabilities about the peers whom he or she would like to have involved. When students have few existing friendships or limited involvement in inclusive activities, they may struggle to offer suggestions. In such cases, school staff can be key in selecting peers who can accomplish the goals of the network.

One approach is to select peers on the basis of shared activities. For example, the facilitator might consider inviting peers who are already involved in the same classes, clubs, lunch periods, or other school activities as the focus student with severe disabilities. This ensures participating students have regular opportunities to connect with each other outside of network meetings. For example, a student with

autism who is passionate about anime, action movies, sports statistics, or computer games might be connected with students who collect comic books, a videography class, the baseball team, or a gaming or technology club. Second, facilitators might look for peers who are already part of an established network of friends. For example, Mr. Smith invited a peer from John's art class who subsequently invited her own friend to join the group. In this way, the student with disabilities becomes a part of an existing peer group.

#### **5. Determine the Timing and Logistics of the Network Meetings**

Participating students—in collaboration with the network facilitator—should jointly determine the time and location of weekly network meetings. Groups can meet at almost any approved noninstructional time within the school day. Although lunch is perhaps the most commonly selected context for network meetings because of its flexible structure and inherently social nature, groups can also meet during advisory periods, homerooms, selected school clubs, as part of peer buddy programs, or before or after school. Each setting has logistical benefits and drawbacks that should be considered. For example, although cafeterias are highly social contexts, noise levels and crowded seating can sometimes make it difficult for participating students to hear one another and sit together as a full group; thus, groups deciding to meet during lunch may be better off meeting in a classroom or courtyard rather than a busy cafeteria.

Most groups strive to arrange weekly meetings to ensure students have frequent opportunities to spend time with one another throughout a semester. Because community-based trips, block scheduling, and other school activities can sometimes make this consistency difficult to accomplish, the importance of scheduling regular gatherings cannot be overemphasized. Another important consideration is to

determine a time when peers have few other competing social or academic activities that might draw them away from the peer network. Meetings themselves need not be lengthy. In fact, most peer networks plan for 20 to 25 minutes of meeting time, most of which is spent participating in a social-focused activity.

#### **6. Orient Students to the Peer Network**

The first meeting of the peer network is a time to orient students with and without disabilities to the goals and activities of the peer network. Specifically, the goals of this orientation meeting are to clarify the purpose of the network, facilitate introductions among participating students, discuss activity ideas for future meetings, share suggestions for other peers at the school whose involvement might be encouraged, and answer questions. When students do not already know one another well, “ice breakers” or other introductory activities can be incorporated to help students learn about each other's interests, strengths, and communication approaches. The facilitator then covers any number of additional topics relevant to the success of this specific peer network, such as:

- A general overview of the social-related goals of the focus student.
- Description and modeling of basic communication and social support strategies.
- Emphasis on the importance of maintaining privacy/confidentiality and using respectful language.
- Ideas for how to interact with someone who uses different communication modes.
- Suggestions for how students might connect with one another outside of meetings.
- Guidance on when to seek assistance from the facilitator.
- Any other expectations specific to being part of this peer network.

Toward the end of the initial meeting, students and the facilitator all compare their schedules to identify a

**Figure 1. Checklist for Peer Network Orientation Meeting**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Location:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Facilitator:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Students attending:** \_\_\_\_\_

Address the following topics with students during the meeting. Support the student with a disability as needed, highlighting common interests and communication preferences.

Completed	Topic/Activity
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Introductions and background:</i> Have students introduce themselves, share their strengths and interests, and participate in a fun introductory activity as desired.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Discuss goals:</i> Share the overall goals of social group (e.g., to get to know each other and to connect throughout the school day) and the role of the facilitator.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Address any support and communication strategies:</i> Explain and model any strategies effective for conversing and/or working with the student with a disability.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Address confidentiality:</i> Discuss the importance of maintaining privacy and using respectful language.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Other expectations:</i> Review any other expectations related to the network.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Schedule social contacts:</i> Review class schedules to find natural opportunities for students to connect and identify ways to purposefully seek each other out.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Schedule regular meeting:</i> Schedule a time and place that works for the peer partners, the student with a disability, and the facilitator.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<i>Discussion and questions:</i> Discuss what students are excited about, any concerns, questions, and what they hope to gain from this experience.

**Reflections on the orientation meeting:**

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common day and time that works best for future network meetings. Figure 1 provides a sample checklist that can be used during the initial orientation meeting.

An emphasis on strengths and a respect for confidentiality is absolutely essential during every meeting, including the initial orientation. Asking students and their parents what is okay (and not okay) to share with peers is especially important. Moreover, we have found that it is not usually necessary to share specific information about a student’s disability, their actual IEP goals, or other private information. For example, Ms. Hatty explained that John loved spending time with his

peers and is getting better at using his communication device, and that one goal of the network was to increase the opportunities he had to do so at school.

**7. Hold Regular Network Meetings**

The primary goal of weekly meetings is for students to develop and deepen their relationships with one another through enjoyable conversations and shared activities. In addition, students discuss their social connections throughout the rest of the week and brainstorm ways to enhance the quality of their social contacts during and outside of regular meeting times. Most

peer network meetings involve the following segments (in various configurations): arrival and informal conversations, participation in a shared activity, discussion of weekly social contacts, and feedback from the adult facilitator. For example, a peer network meeting at lunch might involve an opening period when students are getting their meals and arriving to the meeting location (e.g., a particular lunch table, an empty classroom, the courtyard); a time when students play a game, converse about an upcoming school event, or plan a future after-school activity; and a wrap-up discussion of when students plan to connect socially with each other between meetings.

The artful facilitation by adult leaders during these regular meetings is especially critical. Initially, the role of the adult is to help schedule network meetings, remind students to show up at the right time and location, provide ideas for shared activities, and make sure the focus student with severe disabilities is actively engaged in interactions with peers. Facilitators can look for opportunities to make social connections by:

- Modeling for peers how to initiate and continue conversations with someone who communicates differently.
- Highlighting the strengths of the focus student.
- Helping students recognize the interests and experiences they have in common.
- Prompting students to use particular social and communication skills.
- Redirecting students' comments toward other group members.
- Suggesting adaptations to activities that promote participation of the focus student.
- Helping peers understand the communicative intent of certain behaviors.
- Identifying ways students might connect with one another throughout the week.

As students become more familiar with one another and comfortable within the group, the facilitator gradually encourages students to take a more active leadership role in the group.

### **8. Encourage Connections Outside of Weekly Meetings**

Outside of meetings, students look for times between classes, at lunch, before and after school, or during other periods when they can connect socially. Sometimes these connections involve brief greetings in the hallways during passing periods or a text message after school. Other times, they may involve more sustained activities such as hanging out during a break between classes, working together during study hall, eating lunch together, sitting next to

one another at a pep rally, attending a club meeting together, going to the mall after school, or—like in John's network—going to the school play. When the facilitator is not a member of the special education team and the focus student requires extensive support throughout the school day, it may be necessary to share information with special educators and paraprofessionals about when students anticipate connecting with one another. Similarly, because students with severe disabilities rely so heavily on others for transportation, communicating with families about the development of the peer network can be critical to having social relationships extend beyond the school day.

### **9. Invest in Ongoing Reflection Efforts**

Adolescent relationships often take unexpected twists and turns. Therefore, it is important to regularly reflect on the process and outcomes associated with peer network interventions. One key role of the network facilitator is to ensure students are enjoying their participation and that the network is accomplishing its intended purpose. Occasionally interviewing students about their experiences within the network, collecting data on weekly social contacts or school participation, and periodically reviewing progress on social-related goals each represent potential avenues through which facilitators might gauge the success of the network. Conversations with parents and other school staff can also provide insights into the nature of students' relationships. Ms. Hatty knew friendships had formed when she learned the students were trying to get together outside of the school day.

It is important to emphasize that not every peer network will be a resounding success. Although many of the groups we have coached have flourished, others have struggled. Scheduling consistent meetings can be especially challenging amidst crowded and fluctuating high school schedules, adolescents are sometimes prone to forget about coming to scheduled meetings, particular students may not

initially (or ever) hit it off with one another, or facilitators might struggle to identify shared activities that work well for all of the students in the group. For every challenge, however, multiple solutions likely exist. Therefore, it can be advantageous to discuss any difficulties with others at the school who know participating students well.

**The primary goal of weekly meetings is for students to develop and deepen their relationships with one another through enjoyable conversations and shared activities.**

### **10. Maintain the Peer Network Over Time**

It may take as many as six weeks or more before a peer group becomes truly cohesive and a facilitator can begin fading back active leadership of network meetings. As networks strengthen, attention should turn to how best to maintain the network over time. In many middle schools and most high schools, students' schedules change dramatically from one semester to the next. Although it may be advantageous to introduce new peers into the network each semester, students may want to maintain connections even if not actively involved in weekly meetings (see box, "Case Study: Building Connections for Adam").

- Have students exchange new schedules so they can "drop by" the student's class or plan to meet up during passing times.
- Let other staff, including school counselors, know about students who would like to continue to connect.
- The facilitator can act as a liaison to connect the student's family to students who would like to continue developing a relationship outside of school or help exchange telephone numbers or e-mail addresses.



### Case Study: Building Connections for Adam

Adam, a sophomore at Southway High School, worked at the school's coffee cart each morning. Although he had lots of opportunities to interact with his peers while taking drink orders and making change, these "business" interactions rarely turned social. His case manager, Mr. Todd, noticed this and decided to try a more intentional way to connect Adam and his peers socially. Mr. Todd approached the chair of his department and the building administrator to discuss implementing a peer network for Adam. The group decided it might be helpful to reach out to Adam's guidance counselor, Ms. Cannell, to see if she would be willing to facilitate the peer network. She was admired by students at the school and was a "natural connector." Adam was excited to hang out with more students when Ms. Cannell and Mr. Todd asked him if he'd like to be in a peer network. Mr. Todd and Adam shared relevant information with Ms. Cannell, including Adam's interests, strategies for conversing with him, and signs that he might be getting overwhelmed.

Ms. Cannell, forever the strategist, thought carefully about possible peers. First, she talked with a paraprofessional who worked regularly with Adam to see if there were peers who greeted or otherwise showed interest in getting to know him. Next, she checked in with Adam during lunch to get his input, making sure to mention the peers the paraprofessional had suggested. Using this information, Ms. Cannell invited a well-connected student who loved camping and BMX biking (just like Adam), a student new to the school who was struggling to find her own niche at Southway, and two others whom Adam had mentioned. They all said yes. The students compared their schedules with a copy of Adam's schedule that Ms. Cannell printed out to find times throughout the school day that they could see Adam in the hall to say hi or walk with him to class. Tuesday lunches worked best for everyone to meet.

The Tuesday meetings began, and the group often played board games or cards after eating their lunch. During the first few meetings, Ms. Cannell needed to model how peers could keep a conversation going with Adam and she sent e-mails on meeting days to remind everyone to show up. Because one of Adam's individualized education program (IEP) goals was to use texting to interact with others, the group exchanged cell phone numbers and texted occasionally throughout the week. This turned out to be a great way for Adam to more comfortably share with peers, and the students quickly recognized and enjoyed Adam's sense of humor. Over time, the group grew more comfortable around one another, they attended a school assembly together, and one peer made plans to hang out with Adam after school on Mondays. At the end of the semester, the group decided to stay in touch over the summer via Facebook. One peer was graduating and invited the group to her graduation party. Ms. Cannell reported at the end of the semester that Adam continued to work at the coffee cart but was now looking up, smiling, and talking with customers who approached rather than avoiding eye contact and social interaction.



- Set up a Facebook group to keep students no longer able to make the meeting time abreast of other activities the group plans.

### Concluding Thoughts

Social relationships matter in the lives of students with disabilities, just as

they do for any adolescent. Students with disabilities can become a part of a shared community of friends with thoughtful planning and initial adult guidance, along with information and opportunities for general education peers to gather consistently to get to know the student with disabilities and

vice versa. As we have observed these networks in action, we have seen social-related interactions of students with disabilities increase, new friendships develop at school, and time enjoyed together with peer partners. Peers who participate in the network also report confidence in and a willingness to continue their role, state they would encourage others to take on this role, and most importantly, indicate they consider the student with a disability to be a friend. Using peer network strategies to foster friendships among students with and without disabilities provides a practical and effective method to increase the opportunity that high school will be remembered as a time of shared experience, forged friendships, and memorable interactions for all students.

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