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Implementing Peer Supports in the Classroom

Mr. Swanson was a little surprised when John's mother—Ms. Lipsky—crossed out the words "with adult support" from all of John's annual goals at the IEP meeting. As his special education teacher for the past year and a half, he knew that John, a seventh grader, had fairly extensive support needs and would not be able to achieve all of his goals independently. Then Ms. Lipsky began to write in "with support from his classmates" at the end of almost every goal. After all, she reasoned, wouldn't other students make better conversation, lab, and group partners than a special educator or another adult? These were the kinds of supports students naturally exchanged with their classmates, anyway. Ms. Lipsky emphasized that she did not expect John to no longer need help from Mr. Swanson during class. In fact, she commended Mr. Swanson for the ways in which he and the general education teachers adapted class activities for John. She simply wanted staff to encourage John to become less dependent on adults for meeting all of his needs. She also thought it would be important for other students to finally have the opportunity to really get to know John. She had heard about peer support strategies from another parent and thought John might benefit from something similar. Although she didn't voice it aloud, Ms. Lipsky also felt that this just wouldn't happen unless it was written in John's IEP. The conversation at the IEP meeting clearly shifted in a different direction. The team began brainstorming ways peers might be more actively involved in supporting John within his classes, as well as getting to know him at lunch and during other extracurricular activities. By the end of the meeting, the focus of John's academic, social, and behavioral goals had not changed. But a broader range of people were now being considered to support John in making progress toward those goals.

The general education curriculum is rich with potential opportunities for students to access rigorous, relevant learning experiences alongside their peers with and without disabilities. At the same time, shared learning experiences within inclusive classrooms create promising con-

texts for students to access social supports, learn important social skills, meet new classmates, and develop lasting friendships. Since the 1990s, the field of special education has learned a great deal about promoting meaningful participation within inclusive general education classrooms (Kennedy & Horn, 2004; Ryndak & Fisher, 2003; Spooner et al., 2006). It is clear that peers play an important—and perhaps even an essential—role in supporting students with severe disabilities to participate fully in the myriad learning and social opportunities existing within every school. At the same time, the involvement of peers in promoting inclusion must be underpinned by thoughtful planning, support, and facilitation by educators, paraprofessionals, and other school staff.

This chapter focuses on supporting students with and without disabilities as they work together within the context of peer support arrangements. Once support plans are developed, peers are identified, and everyone is oriented to their roles, educators and paraprofessionals must shift their attention to supporting students as they learn together and interact with one another. Students will benefit greatly from receiving ongoing monitoring and feedback as the semester progresses. In this chapter, we 1) discuss initial steps educators and paraprofessionals can take to ensure that peer support arrangements start off on the right track, 2) describe strategies for facilitating social interactions and promoting collaborative work, and 3) provide examples of what peer support arrangements might look like in middle and high school classrooms.

GETTING STARTED

Peer support arrangements usually begin by arranging for students and the peers who are partnered with them to sit in proximity to each other. However, students and peers should still be sitting among other classmates rather than pulled to the periphery of the classroom. In other words, students with disabilities should be brought *into* the social and instructional milieu of the class instead of pulling peers *out* to the side of the classroom to work together. As with every other student in the classroom, these students should be situated in an easily accessible location so that teachers or paraprofessionals can easily check in with and provide needed assistance to the students. When students with and without disabilities first begin working together, an adult should be nearby and available to model support strategies and quietly provide feedback without distracting the class.

Educators often choose to invite multiple peers to work with students with severe disabilities, particularly within academic classes (Carter, Cushing, et al., 2005; Garrison-Harrell et al., 1997). This ensures that support is consistently available when one peer is absent from class, offers peers some flexibility in how they balance providing assistance with completing their own work, expands the number of students who have the opportunity to get to know each other, and more closely reflects the network-based nature of students' interactions during adolescence. When multiple students—usually two—are serving as peer supports, they may all sit together with their partner at the same table or may have their desks arranged close to each other. Within such triadic arrangements, peers should be provided with some initial guidance on when and how to alternate who will provide specific supports. For example, one peer might review key science vocabulary words with her partner



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while the other peer finishes his worksheet from the previous day's class. During times when the teacher lectures, one peer may be responsible for sharing her notes while the other peer periodically summarizes important points. Talk with peers about the ways they should allocate time between completing their own work and supporting their partner.

Typically, an educator or paraprofessional should talk with students and peers at the beginning of each class period to make sure everyone knows what they will be working together on and how students with severe disabilities will participate in certain class activities. For example, peers might be asked to help their partner make choices at various points during a physics lab on inertia, model how to fill in guided notes during a lecture on the food pyramid, use his or her communication book to answer questions during a class debate about an upcoming election, or search for information on the Internet as part of a group project on American poets. A clear routine should be established for when, with whom, and how often students with disabilities and their peers will check in to clarify their responsibilities for the day's class. Some teachers ask the peers to talk briefly with a paraprofessional upon arriving to class; others touch base with the peers whenever the need arises.

As discussed in Chapter 5, students with and without disabilities will benefit from some basic orientation to their roles and responsibilities when they initially begin working together. During the first few weeks of the semester, paraprofessionals or educators should pay extra attention to how participating students interact with each other and the supports they exchange. Because relationships and support patterns often are established very early on in the semester, it is important to establish clear expectations from the outset and to reinforce students for meeting those expectations. In addition, educators must be intentional about ensuring participating students have the supports and feedback they need to be successful in their roles. Peers should feel confident in their responsibilities and know exactly whom to turn to whenever they need help. Similarly, students with disabilities should be comfortable with the types of supports they are receiving, as well as enjoy working with and getting to know their peers.

FACILITATING INTERACTIONS AND FADING ADULT SUPPORT

Thoughtful monitoring and regular feedback by adults are critical components of successful peer support arrangements. When peers and their partners are left entirely on their own, emerging challenges may go unaddressed and students can easily become frustrated or fall behind in their work. At the same time, when adults remain overly involved for too long, it can inadvertently stifle the very interactions and independence these interventions are designed to promote. Neither extreme represents good practice; striking the right balance between encouraging independence and providing a foundation of ongoing support is essential. As addressed in Chapter 3, adults within the classroom should together determine what roles they will assume in supporting students' access to the general curriculum and participation in peer support arrangements. In our experiences with schools, paraprofessionals—and sometimes special educators—have typically assumed responsibility for monitoring and providing feedback to participating students.

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